

SAM DORSEY AND HIS
**DIRTY
DANCING**

BY **PERIE WOLFORD**
SAM DORSEY AND GAY POPCORN: BOOK 2

“SAM DORSEY AND HIS DIRTY DANCING” by PERIE WOLFORD

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“SAM DORSEY AND GAY POPCORN” series: BOOK 2

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SAM DORSEY AND HIS DIRTY DANCING

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INTRODUCTION

You're reading SAM DORSEY AND HIS DIRTY DANCING, book 2 in the SAM DORSEY AND GAY POPCORN series. The series channel popular movies and TV shows, so expect a lot of references to classic movies of the 80es and 90es. But don't worry this is not a fan fiction! The stories are 100% original and all the references are made only as a tribute.

This book, SAM DORSEY AND HIS DIRTY DANCING, channels the classic 1987 Dirty Dancing film. Also you might find references to Sex and the City television series.

Enjoy the dance!

CHAPTER 1

I am flying.

Above my head, the solid expanse of the clear blue sky is highlighted by the fierce, unhindered light of the sun which casts cheerful rays onto the rugged mountaintops down below. Beyond the mountains I can just barely make out the deep and serene waters of a lake, bordered on its shore by lush rainforest vegetation. Soon enough, the thick foliage of the forest thins out to reveal a vibrant meadow teeming with flowers so myriad and beautiful it nearly takes my breath away.

I marvel at the beauty of it all as I gaze dotingly from several-hundred feet above. I am flying but not on an airplane. Neither am I on a balloon or a paraglider or any other form of an airborne vehicle. No, it's just me, flying. But I don't realize how weird that is because I'm sleeping and it's a dream.

I do not have control over this dream. I simply watch and listen as the steady spring-time breeze does its job of slowly nudging me along in this weird state of anti-gravity.

I am aware of a soft, rhythmic song playing directly into my ears, though I don't have my headphones on. It cancels out the cadence of nature, which I can only assume is echoing all around me. I know the song. Poppies in the field by The Teardrop Explodes. A recommendation from Mitch, and I gotta say, I don't hate it.

I close my eyes for the briefest of moments and ruminate in the smooth, rich sounds of the vocalist as he croons with reckless abandon.

The parachutes in my bag

I'm throwing it over to you

The parachutes in your hands

But don't ask me what to do

The poppies are in the field

But don't ask me what that means

The poppies are in the field

But don't ask me what that means

The trippy song is very befitting of my situation at the moment. Drifting through the air is an exhilarating experience, liberating in many ways. I feel weightless, as if there is no division between me and the vast landscape spread out before me. Nothing in the world could possibly hold me back or tie me down. I feel so free! This is amazing!

The world and I are one.

But if you think that I stopped having wet dreams, you're wrong! Wait for it...

My euphoric dream suddenly takes a turn for the worse and starts hurtling me toward the hard green patch of earth several miles down below. I fall down!

Ahhh... Ohhh... Uhhh...

Here you go!

I jolt awake with a start, slowly coming to the sad realization that I am neither careless nor free. I'm just some loser with ejaculate all over his bed sheets. Shit! It happened again! It's getting ridiculous at this point. I mean, my dream wasn't even erotic!

Groaning, I disentangle myself, stand, and start stripping the bed. I bundle the sheets in my hands and make my way to the door. Normally, my mother does my laundry for me, but seeing as my little episodes are way too frequent, not to mention embarrassing, I've taken to cleaning up after myself.

The phone rings and I jerk my body awkwardly to the left to reach for it. In doing so, my leg collides with my bedside lamp, sending it tumbling towards the floor dramatically, almost as if in slow motion. I clutch the sheets tightly in my hands and watch as it shatters with a sad, tinkling sound akin to that of a furniture sigh.

Trying to avoid shards of glass, I tip-toe forward and pick up the phone.

"Hello?" I say dutifully, though I know it's Mitch calling to wish me a happy birthday. My actual birthday is two days from now, but that happened to coincide with my cousin's wedding so we had to reschedule. I didn't want to risk celebrating it post facto, because that's what my family did last year, and it didn't work out well, me having all of that birthday drama there was. So I decided that celebrating it in advance would probably work better. Now though, as I'm looking at the shards of glass littering my bedroom floor, I'm getting the feeling I might be wrong.

"Happy birthday!" Mitch chirps cheerfully. I can feel his smile through the phone. There was a time when a smile from him was as rare as the ability to solve a Rubik's cube without peeling off the stickers, but now they just ooze out of him like the juice of one of those oranges he's always

eating. He makes happiness look so easy. It is as if it takes no effort on his part to be ceaselessly perceptive, caring, and kind, all on all a perfect boyfriend.

I, on the other hand, am none of those things.

“Thanks,” I say, trying to sound happy. Nothing good ever happens on my birthday, but unlike in the past, this year I actually have something to lose.

Mitch immediately picks up on my anxiety, just as I knew he would.

“What? What happened?”

“Nothing... I’m fine.” It sounds like a lie, even to my own ears.

“Come on, spill,” he urges gently.

I sigh heavily and pick my way through the glass to plop down onto my sheetless bed.

“It’s nothing. I just broke my Startling comics lamp.”

“And you’re worried about what’s gonna happen next?” he guesses accurately.

“I guess so,” I admit, toying with the edge of the soiled sheet crumpled in my lap.

“So, the lamp didn’t make it huh?” I glance over at it. He helped me pick it out a few months ago. Heck, it was practically a gift since I was about ten dollars short. Now it’s nothing more than another mess for me to clean up.

A spike of longing passes through me as I think back to the early days of our relationship. Yes, we had a wonderful time over summer, but since Mitch has always dreamed of going to Film Academy, his parents decided to move to Boston so that he could enroll in a preparatory school centered around arts and media to up his chances. Said city is only about an hour away from my hometown of Newton, but it may as well be overseas for the amount I get to see him.

Of course, neither I nor Mitch would break up over something so trivial, especially considering that I plan on majoring in film after high school too. Unfortunately, my parents aren’t as supportive as Mitch’s (at least where my career choice is concerned) and without them handling my tuition payment my chances of getting into Film Academy are slim to none. We’ve been fighting over that for a while now, but that’s a whole different story.

As far as my sex life with Mitch goes, it’s pretty much nonexistent. After he moved away, there weren’t many chances for us to see each other or even talk on the phone, but to be fair, before Mitch moved to Boston, we pretty much had the whole summer for ourselves and still, nothing happened, and not for lack of opportunities. For instance, in early June we spent an entire week camping with my family in the woods by the lake, during which Mitch and I spent *hours* hiking.

just the two of us.

in the middle of the wilderness.

Alone.

And it's not like I'm not attracted to Mitch. Mitch is hot! It's just...I don't know, I feel like it's not the right time or something.

I wanted it, or at least I thought I wanted it. But when push came to shove, something just clicked in my head and I suddenly couldn't escape the feeling that it was wrong. I don't mean that sex between two guys is wrong, no! I'm perfectly comfortable with the idea of two guys having sex. Just thinking about it gives me a boner. But there was something about Mitch, or me, or the moment. Something was wrong. I can't put my finger on it but it just didn't work the way it was supposed to work. I don't know why really.

Or maybe I'm just chicken. Either way, Mitch, being the person he is, is totally cool with waiting for me to feel comfortable. The thing is, I don't really know if I ever will feel comfortable. I just really don't wanna think about my hesitation and what it might mean for our relationship. I'm pretty sure I'm not gonna like the answer if I do.

Mitch and I make a bit of small talk after that, but our conversation is over rather quickly. Mitch has to get ready for school, and I have to pack for my trip. Before he hangs up though, he assures me that everything is going to be just fine today, and I believe him. Mitch has never lied to me.

If only I could say the same for myself.

So I'm actually pretty glad I woke up early today since it allows me to slip out of the house unnoticed. Lately I've been kind of avoiding my parents, even though I love them and I know they wish me well. But we have our differences. And frankly, I hate being dependent on them. I just have to break free and do my own thing. This is *my* life after all. I'm the one who should be in control of it, not my parents.

However, when I get ready to hop into my car and beat it, I notice that the front tire has gone flat. Now, last year, I would've been completely devastated and beyond help right about now, but luckily, Mitch taught me how to change a tire while he was still here. I'm a little rusty, but I manage to get the spare on, climb in, hit the accelerator, and pull out of the driveway in less than twenty minutes. Not as fast as Mitch would've done it, but still, not too shabby.

Relaxing slightly, I ease myself into my forty-five minute drive out of the city.

Today is Friday and I'm skipping school and heading out to Crest Hollows mountain resort. The place is surrounded by mountains, and forest, and there's this beautiful lake there too, but I'm not going there for a vacation. I'm working there actually. I've been spending all of my weekends (and a few school days) there for the last three months. It definitely helps with the whole, "asserting

my independence” thing, but considering my friends Melissa and Kenan are also working there, it’s also a lot of fun.

Since it’s technically a ski lodge, and winter is pretty much done for, you’d think that business would be coming to a standstill, but nope; the beautiful scenery and luxe accommodations ensure that business is booming—which translates into more tips for me!

There is a downside, however.

Come tonight, the *entirety* of my family will be checking in to the lodge. I mean of all the places across our great and beautiful nation, my hard-headed cousin, Janine, decided that Crest Hollows resort three weeks past peak season is the ideal location for a wedding reception. Go figure.

From what I gather, she is holding the reception in the same dining hall as this Sunday’s Dance-Off. Same time too. So the guests of the wedding are gonna unwillingly become the audience for the dancing event. This, I assume is one of the reasons management gave her a totally smokin’ deal on the venue and the rooms. And the thing is, Janine a huge cheaposaurus. And apparently so is her hubby-to-be, Mark. Or maybe he is just following her instructions on that one. I mean, knowing Janine, I wouldn’t be surprised. She is extremely pushy.

The thing is most of our relatives live here in my home town and it would have been very expensive for them all to travel to the town where she currently lives, which is a good two-and-a-half hours car ride away. Also, the town where she lives now is a small town. From what I hear, they don’t have a lot of hotels there. They have about one motel and that motel is about two stars tops. So Janine had a choice between only inviting a select group of people, and missing out on an opportunity to receive the wedding gifts from the rest of them that way, or accommodating them all in her own house and the houses of her husband’s side of the family. That would mean, of course, that she would have to feed them and cover all the expenses. And as good as I know Janine, I’d say she’d rather put her hand into a pot with boiling water than do something like this.

So, naturally, she decided she’d rather have a wedding ceremony here, in our home town. Mike’s side of the family is apparently smaller, much smaller, so it would actually be cheaper for the few of them to travel here than for our big-ass family to travel there. But that’s enough about Janine. Let’s talk about something that’s been bugging me for a while now, something important.

Or shall I say, *someone*.

I pull off of the freeway and merge with the minimal backwoods traffic and smile contentedly as the familiar shape of the resort starts peeking out from beneath the trees. I’m extremely happy to be skipping school today, not because I’m struggling in class or anything. Truth be told, I’m actually pretty smart (don’t tell the football team about it though). But there’s one thing about school that was making me wanna skip it lately.

Jake still has feelings for me.

At first I was kinda flattered that someone I pined after for so long had feelings for me, but now that I'm with Mitch, all that Jake's thinly-veiled admiration does is put a strain on our already complicated friendship.

That being said, we've gotten a lot closer since Mitch moved away. It has even progressed to the point where he has taken to skipping football practice to hang out with me, much to his father's dismay.

Jake's father is a very influential man, and he has a pretty clear vision of his son's future. Jake is the only heir to the multimillion-dollar empire, and as such, he'll be expected to play football for some hot-shot university for four years before being drafted into the NFL.

Jake, however, is more of an artist than a football player. Not that he's not a great player, he's exceptional! but where Mitch truly and wholeheartedly loves the sport, Jake is pretty indifferent. He would much rather become a photographer, but his father would never agree to that. "Low class" I can practically hear him scoffing. The elder Timbers is kind of a tyrant to say the least. I'm a little scared of him too, to tell you the truth. I've only met him once though. But that was enough for him to make quite a vivid impression on me. And because of the whole "Daddy issues" thing, I can't really deny Jake a chance to spend time with me.

I mean, it's not as if I dislike the guy. He's a really good friend and all of the things I used to love about him are still true, even if I no longer think about him in that way (well, I try not to think about him in that way). Plus, I feel bad for him. His dad would pop a capillary if he found out his son is gay, while mine already treats Mitch like a part of the family. How is that fair?

So, Jake started having lunch with me and my little bundle of friends, meaning Melissa and Kenan, of course, and over time we just grew more and more comfortable with each other. I mean, I've shared more things with him than I have with Mitch and Melissa; and that's saying something.

The problem is, I haven't told Mitch yet.

I'm not cheating on him, of course. I would never do that. It's just...complicated. Plus considering the bad blood between the two of them and the limited time I have with Mitch, I never want to bring up the friendship and spoil our time together. Naturally, I feel pretty guilty about withholding information, but that guilt has recently intensified due to a particular incident...

It was a couple of weeks ago and Jake asked me to help him with calculus because his dad was getting onto him about his grades. Of course, I agreed to help. I didn't want to go to his house and risk any kind of encounter with his father (even though the chances of him being home at any given time are slim). And I didn't want to invite Jake to my house either. It just wouldn't feel right having another guy in my room, especially knowing good and well that the two of us have a little bit of romantic history, if you can call it that. So I decided we should meet in the school library instead. That is pretty much neutral territory, right?

The only problem is that in the afternoon hours we were completely alone in there—well except for those days when my friend Emily was staying late finishing one of her many books—but even when Emily *was* there it didn't stop Jake from flirting with me. And I'm no expert on flirting, but I'm not stupid, I know for certain that's what he was doing.

He would always sit right next to me, making sure our thighs touched, constantly trying to make eye contact—he has these beautiful ocean-y blue eyes that belong on the cover of GQ or something—and he would repeatedly bite or lick his lower lip, which is something that drives me crazy, as I'm certain he full well knows.

One day he even put his hand over mine. It seemed like it was an accident, but I'm sure that it wasn't. He just left it there, warm and soft, hovering just above my skin like a whisper or a promise. Emily happened to be walking by at that particular moment. She didn't say anything about it, but she definitely noticed. She always does.

“Oh, I was just heading home,” she said. She was looking right at us and Jake made no attempt to remove his hand, nor did I move mine out from under his.

“Okay, see you tomorrow,” I mumbled.

“See you,” she said, not unkindly.

I pulled my hand from under Jake's and pretended that it never happened.

I'm not sure what I am supposed to say to him. I can't ask him to stop flirting with me, can I? What if he told me that he wasn't doing any of those things intentionally? I can only *assume* that he has a crush on me, even though my assumption is strongly supported.

I tell myself that I'm keeping my assumptions secret to spare Mitch's feelings, but the enormous amount of guilt I feel speaks otherwise. When it comes down to it, I'm just selfish. It's what's weighing on our relationship.

But it's not the *only* thing.

This morning Mitch said the words, “I love you,” and not for the first time either. I haven't been able to say it back. I want to; I can feel the rightness of it in my heart, but every time I go to say it it's like I'm choking on desert sand. I don't know. I just can't do it. Mitch hands out his love and smiles and kindness to me like they are nothing more than the endless streams of soda spilling out from the machine in a sleazy burger joint. To me, those things are special. They're *sacrifices*. Little pieces of myself that may seem insignificant on the surface, but are truly indicative of my state of mind. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I want to be whatever it is Mitch wants me to be, which I imagine is an adoring more kind and loyal version of myself, but molding myself comes with a whole new set of problems.

That's what this weekend is all about. I really need a breather. It's my birthday after all. I'm allowed to have one weekend to sort out my priorities, right?

I mean, I've been so damn *good* this past year. I've been good my whole life actually. I've been a loyal friend to Melissa, constantly comforting her and trying to cheer her up after her horrible break-up with Tom Riley, and to Kenan, unceasingly telling him that he too will have a boyfriend one day. I've also been a good son, and I've been a good boyfriend to Mitch. I mean, as I've just gone to great lengths to tell you, I am by no means perfect, but I'm trying to be. I do absolutely everything in my power to make Mitch feel happy and appreciated. I actually do that for most of the people in my life, now that I think about it...

I tap my fingers to the rhythm of the song blasting from my crappy stereo as I pull into the parking lot at the resort and silently promise myself that I will deal with all of these problems as soon as my weekend retreat is over. For now, all I want to do is forget they even exist.

So, I arrive at Crest Hollows. It's a beautiful place, as I've already mentioned. Looking at it, I can practically quote passages from the brochure:

"At the eastern end of the range, the mountains begin quite dramatically with an escarpment jutting up from the valley. The western boundary is far less certain, as the mountains gradually decline in height and grade down into the rest of the plateau."

"When you plan a vacation at Crest Hollows prepare to experience a wonderful array of mountainside luxuries which will undoubtedly thrill and delight."

"Detail oriented, dedicated staff members are available around-the-clock to fulfill your vacation needs, while an impressive list of amenities are laid out before you for both convenience and comfort."

Sounds like a dream, doesn't it?

The main complex of the resort, which includes two dining halls, numerous spas, a huge swimming pool, and an administrative wing, is sitting at the foot of a mountain and overlooking the lake on one side and a dense copse of pine trees on the other. Scattered downhill from the main complex are the various kinds of suites, and of course stuff like gazebos, a couple of golf courses, meadows, the lake, the boat house, etc.

I park my car in the employees' parking lot and get out of it. I draw in a lungful of fresh mountain air, luxuriating in the thick scent of pine. Above my head the sun is shining brightly in the clear blue sky.

I make my way across a big green meadow which is dotted with wildflowers of many different varieties. On the other end of that meadow are the employee suites. Each employee suite contains three comfy beds, a sitting room with a TV and a plush couch, as well as a bar, not that we ever use the bar, and of course, an off-shooting shower cabin.

I share my suite with Melissa and Kenan. We all have jobs in the dining hall. Mainly we work as waiters and sometimes as dishwashers, and occasionally doing whatever the chef tells us to do. The job is not the most dignified job in the world, but it pays well, and it totally beats fast food!

Walking into the suite, I hear the same argument I've been listening to for the past two weeks; the Eric debate.

"No he didn't! You're making stuff up, can't you see?" Melissa responds to whatever ridiculous postulation Kenan just made.

"I'm not making anything up!" Kenan huffs. "He was *looking* at me, and not in the way a regular guy would be looking at me."

By "regular" he means straight.

"That guy is clearly intelligent," Kenan adds. That's the term he uses to deem someone gay.

"He's not gay!" Melissa shouts.

I roll my eyes dramatically, but secretly, I find their banter amusing.

"I need to take a shower. It's getting hot out there," I say and head for the bathroom. We're so used to each other by now that we don't even bother to say hello.

"Sam, tell this idiot that he's totally wrong, would you?" Melissa says, turning to me. I continue my plight to the bathroom without a word, locking myself in once I get there.

Melissa doesn't hesitate to knock.

"Sam? Open this door!"

"I'm taking a shower."

"So what? Open the door," she persists.

"I can't, I'm naked," I lie. I'm not really naked. I just want to avoid getting involved into that stupid argument again. I'm not a good liar and I don't lie on a regular basis, but this one is justifiable, or so I think. It's a small lie and it's for the good.

"Nothing I haven't seen before," she says, "now open the door!"

"I'm not gonna," I say, turning on the water.

"Sam!!!"

"I can't hear you!" I shout in a sing-song-y voice.

A couple minutes later Melissa lays off my case and the two of them return to their childish argument.

Meanwhile, I take a good look at myself in the mirror. I fix my hair. I look okay I guess. My eyes are clear, my hair is done, and I don't have any zits for whatever reason. I brush my teeth meticulously and shave that little hint of a mustache off of my upper lip before applying my new cologne. I bought it in the local gift shop after getting my latest paycheck last week. I like having things that I bought with my own hard-earned and well-deserved money. Also I think it smells nice even though it's kinda cheap. Then I change into my uniform, a white-collared shirt and black slacks, and survey my reflection again, musing over each tiny detail of my appearance until I am satisfied.

I like being tidy and I take my job very seriously, but that is not actually the reason why I've just spent twenty minutes in front of a bathroom mirror. The actual reason is Eric.

Eric is the fourth dining hall worker on our team. Obviously he's not living with us in our three-person suite, but he *is* the same age as all of us. He goes to Westwood High in the outskirts of my hometown. None of us has ever seen him before coming to work here. Hence; fresh meat!

Eric is shorter than me, but more fit and rather on the slender side, which I like. He has beautiful blond hair, short and styled in a way that perfectly suits his round face, accompanied by striking aqua-colored eyes and the kind of skin tone most people can only get from frequent trips to the beach. In other words, he's a total dreamboat.

"I bet you a hundred dollars, he's gay," Kenan yells.

"Well, I accept the bet," Melissa gushes. "Get ready to lose a hundred 'cause he's *not* gay!"

I shake my head, disgusted. They are being completely ridiculous now. How can you bet on something like that? Eric is a person, not a thing. *But* if I had to bet a hundred dollars on it myself, I'd say that he's gay.

Melissa and Kenan both think that Eric was flirting with them, but the thing is, at the risk of sounding conceited, I think he's actually flirting with me.

Eric's flirting is not as blunt as Jake's, but it's there nonetheless. For instance, whenever Eric and I stay late to wash dishes he's always careful to make sure our fingertips meet at every opportunity and then studying my face to see if I notice. And the look he gives me whenever our bodies brush together in the narrow hallway...yeah, definitely flirting.

It's things like that, subtle things, that give away his true colors. Plus, he mentioned that he's never had a girlfriend before, and doesn't really want one. I think we "intelligent" people are all pretty familiar with that line.

"Sam, get out, I need to use the shower!" Melissa shouts and starts banging on the door. Glad that they've stopped fighting, I vacate the bathroom willingly and make my way towards the main complex. It's time to get to work now. It's almost noon and people are getting hungry. Lunch service is about to start.

This time of day the dining hall is filled with smells of fish and bacon being fried in the kitchen. After hours of hiking and exertion out in the open air, people want their food fried, and they want it now. Which is where our efficient little crew comes in.

We greet them, seat them, and take their orders. Then, we rush into the kitchen and grab the pre-prepared meals and deliver them to the appropriate tables. The job is not particularly complicated, but it requires the level of skill nonetheless. Over the first couple of days I worked here, I dropped and smashed against the floor about fifteen plates and ten glasses. Now though, I think I'm finally getting the hang of it.

CRASH!

Shit! I must've spoke too soon. No wait, it's not me. It's gotta be the birthday curse rearing it's ugly head. Well, I just need to man up and pull myself through it. One broken dish is not the worst thing that could happen.

I pick up the broken pieces and retreat into the depths of the kitchen.

"Sorry," I say to Chef Alan. He's a 45-year-old man with a very kind face, married with kids, very fatherly and understanding. He is also not without a sense of humor; all in all, a great man. He is not angry with me, of course, but I am.

"It happens," he says, knowingly. "Just take another one."

I take another dish and go back to the dining hall again. There are a lot of orders to take. Birthday curse or no birthday curse, people are hungry!

The good thing is that the dining hall is quite spacious and beautiful. There's lots of fresh air too because the hall opens up into the outside terrace, from which you can clearly make out the trees, and behind them, the clear blue waters of the lake. It's quite stunning. I really can't complain.

So I work.

There are about two hundred guests enjoying the resort at any given day during the springtime and there are only four of us to handle all of the customers. Lucky for us, we have a system. We divide the tables evenly, take turns with the difficult customers, I'm talking VIPS and families with dozens of small children, and we clean as we go along.

Towards the end of my shift I cast one last glance over my section to be sure I haven't missed anything and my eyes catch on a familiar sight.

Ugh. Why *today* of all days?

I scrunch my eyebrows together and saunter on over to the table Jake has occupied all by his lonesome.

"What are you doing?" I ask, giving him a look.

He looks up at me. There is no surprise on his face and not a single facial muscle of his twitches at the sight of me. He knew I was going to be here.

“I’m trying to get something to eat,” he says with a sly grin. “What does it look like I’m doing?”

“I mean how did you get here?” I amend. I’m not exactly in a joking mood.

“Well, I got into my car, merged onto the interstate, and then about 48 minutes later I turned left at the sign that said Crest Hollows,” he says, deadpan.

“Jake!” I shout.

He just smiles.

“I don’t know what you want me to say, Sam. I’ve been spending every other weekend here since I was like seven. I’m a regular.”

“What are you talking about? This is the first time I’ve seen you around,” I say exasperatedly.

“Well, maybe you just weren’t paying attention,” he mocks.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Come on, sit down,” he smiles, avoiding my question. “Have lunch with me.”

I shake my head and sigh, but sit down nonetheless. There is no way I’m gonna get the truth out of Jake anyway. He is a skillful liar. I mean, he’s been in the closet for so long now that I guess it just bleeds into other parts of his life too.

But he is happy to see me. I can see it in his eyes.

“What are you really doing here?” I ask again, softening.

“Vacationing,” he says plainly toying with the edge of his menu. “A good friend of my father’s is a stockholder here. We’ve had a cabin reserved for our family for ages.”

“And...?” I prompt. What I really want to know is why it so happened I stumbled into him this particular weekend, my birthday weekend.

“And I wanted to be here for your birthday. What did you think?” he dons a mockingly pained expression. “You didn’t even invite me. I thought we were friends.”

I can’t help but crack a grin at his display.

“I’m sorry,” I say truthfully. “I was preoccupied by some other things.”

“Oh,” he says good-naturedly. “And what, dare I ask, would they be?”

I remain silent.

“Aww, come on! Don’t leave me hanging.” He grins.

I bite at my bottom lip anxiously and decide to tell him the truth, well part of it anyway.

“I want to go to the Film Academy in Boston next fall,” I tell him. “I’m saving up for tuition.”

He takes a second to digest the news, but no emotion shows on his face.

“Okay...” he begins. “But why can’t your parents pay tuition or something? You said they wanted you to go to college, right?”

“The college of their choosing, which Film Academy is not,” I say. “They want me to major in something respectable, like economics. They would gladly pay for something like that, but definitely not film school.”

He nods. I know he can relate. “That’s great, man. I mean, you should follow your dreams.” He lowers his gaze.

It’s moments like this that make me feel for Jake the most. When he’s vulnerable; no doubt thinking himself weak for not being able to defy his parent’s whims like I am.

Well, my parents are nothing like his. If I was in his place, I probably wouldn’t be very brave either. I put my hand on his hand and give it a little squeeze. He looks up at me and I try to convey it through my eyes that it’s okay and there is nothing he should feel ashamed about. Words would be no good here. Words would only humiliate him. So I have to make do just with my facial expressions. I think I’m doing a good job though because he seems to relax a little and his smile reappears.

“How much money are you making here exactly?” Jake asks after a small thoughtful pause. I cringe. It must be painfully obvious that I’ll never make enough to cover tuition working here even in a million years.

“Not enough,” I admit. “There’s actually another way I was hoping to get the money I need.”

“What is it? Oh wait...” he looks at me with a widest grin I’ve ever seen on his face. “You don’t mean...”

I nod.

“The Dance Off? No way!”

“I can dance just fine, thank you,” I proclaim at his chuckle.

“Okay, okay, don’t be mad,” he says, struggling to work his facial features into something calm. “I just never thought of you as a dancer. And I certainly didn’t think you would be *good* at it.”

“I’m good,” I say simply and I actually am. I never expected to be though, so I understand Jake’s surprise. It came as a surprise to me as well.

It was Melissa who put me up to it. She’s been attending dance classes since she was four, and she’s really gifted too. Basically, she heard about the annual Dance-Off months before we started working here and wanted to apply. That’s actually how she found out that the resort also had job openings. After we were all sitting pretty with our new-found jobs, Melissa also proposed the idea of one of us being her dance partner.

Naturally, Kenan refused right away. I can’t imagine Kenan on the dance floor really. He’s just not built for it. I, on the other hand, have a perfect body for dancing (or so I hear), but no experience doing so. I mean, I like to dance when I’m on my own and when nobody’s looking, but I never thought about dancing in public, let alone participating in a professional competition. That would require a skill that you only get with years of practice. But seeing as Melissa convinced me that her experience would be more than enough, taking into account that it’s extremely hard to say no to Melissa, I agreed, eventually. So yeah, turns out, not only am I a pretty decent dancer, I also enjoy it quite a bit.

I also had some pretty good motivation. The grand prize of the Dance-Off is no less than fifty-thousand dollars!

Of course, the winning couple would have to split the money between the two of them, but still 25,000 dollars is more than enough to pay for a year at the Film Academy, which in addition to helping me fulfill my dream, would also put me (potentially) in a dorm with Mitch!

It just sounds too good to be true.

Jake seems to think so too.

“But are you actually any good?” he asks with a grin.

“I’m am not a bad dancer!” I protest. He squints at me.

“Show me.”

We’re in Jake’s room now and I use the term “room” lightly. It’s actually more of a fancy loft; spacious, and dripping with expensive imported furniture. It makes my own accommodations seem like exactly what they are; servant’s quarters. Jake pushes the overpriced furniture out of the way and frees some space in the center for us to work with.

Almost immediately it becomes clear that I am outclassed.

“I didn’t know you danced,” I say, clicking my heels together nervously. He’s almost better than Melissa.

“I’ve done ballet since I was five. It was my mother’s idea,” he explains.

“Ballet, ah?” I say, bemused. I can’t believe his father let that happen. I thought sports were the ultimate priority.

“My dad was okay with it when I was younger. He wouldn’t be okay with it now, of course,” he spins gracefully, as if to emphasize the point. “But there’s a lot of stuff I do that he doesn’t have to know about,” he adds with a wink.

“Oh,” I manage. What does one say to such things?

“I’ve been practicing on my own a lot,” he continues. “and I still have a great relationship with my ballet teacher. She knows how my father is, so she keeps our lessons secret.”

“I see.” I watch as he chooses a cassette from his collection and inserts it into the boom box.

“Okay, now show me some of *your* moves,” he grins and turns the volume all the way up.

Oh my God, it’s that Solomon Burke song “Cry To Me.” I only know about it because my parents like it a lot; it’s like “their song” actually. I can’t believe Jake even has it.

“Go!” Jake commands with a little shove. Then, he casually leans against one of the walls and locks eyes on me, making me feel all sorts of uncomfortable.

Okay, alright, I can do this. I tell myself. Just listen to the music, Sam. Just concentrate on the music...

When your baby leaves you all alone

And nobody calls you on the phone

Ah, don't you feel like crying?

Don't you feel like crying?

Well here I am my honey

Oh, come on you cry to me.

I listen to the rhythm and start feeling the music. I try to forget about Jake watching me, to forget about the awkwardness, and just relax into the sweet familiar melody.

As my body starts moving, I am suddenly reminded of Melissa’s dance class from last week. She gives complimentary lessons to the Crest Hollows guests Saturday mornings at 11. It’s a good way to earn a few extra bucks. Kenan teaches guitar for that same reason, and Eric and I, we both help Melissa with her class whenever one of us is up for it. She’s great on her own but she still needs a male partner to make an especially dazzling impression.

That particular morning Eric was her partner and I was just watching them.

“One, two, three, four! Stomp those grapes and stomp some more!” Melissa commanded to the submissive crowd, a crowd of mostly elderly ladies.

“One, two, three, four! Listen to the music!”

The poor grannies tried to replicate her simple moves but even that was a task beyond their power.

“Move your caboose and shake it loose! One, two, three, four! Come on, ladies!” She hollered at them. (I’m not even exaggerating, those were her exact words)

At the end of the lesson, Melissa and Eric showed some master class moves to the wonder-struck audience, making them clap like crazy.

The two of them look good together. Eric is as good of a dancer as Melissa is. And he is so cute. He’s *very* cute actually. Watching him put his hands over Melissa’s waist made me want to be in her place suddenly.

It’s the touch of Jake’s hands that snaps me back into reality.

“You’re not bad,” he says and lays his hands down on my waist. I’m not sure if that is considered crossing the friendship line or not, so I just let him do it. “But you’re a little stiff in the hips,” he explains. “It’s ruining your performance.”

I look back and see him dancing behind me. He is doing the same moves I’m doing, but he is swinging his hips a lot more actively, or more passionately I should say, and his hands, still firmly planted on my hips, are trying to get me to do the same.

“Relax,” he says.

But I can’t relax.

I can feel the heat of his body against my skin. My heart starts pounding.

“Dance is the ultimate way of expressing yourself, your feelings, your passions, your fears. It’s all about what you feel inside,” he murmurs. “You’ve gotta dance like there’s nobody watching.”

Yeah, right.

Also, dancing is a vertical expression of a horizontal desire. That’s what Robert Frost said anyway.

“I’m a little uptight in that area,” I admit briskly.

“I see that,” he smirks. “You are afraid of yourself. You are afraid of your body and it shows most when you’re dancing.”

I roll my eyes. “Okay, so what do I do?”

He gets closer to me and whispers in my ear, "Let go of your control, Sam. *Relax...*"

His breathing in my ear does nothing to help me relax though. If anything it gives me goosebumps. My mind is already on alert because of his body's extreme closeness to mine.

I'm about to start analyzing it all again, but then I take a deep breath and do as Jake told me. I let go of control. I shut out my inner monologue and concentrate on the music instead. I let Jake's hands lead me. I can practically feel the music in my bones, like a flower opening up all around me.

"Yes! That's what I'm talking about," he says gleefully.

When you're all alone in your lonely room

And there's nothing but the smell of her perfume

Ah don't you feel like crying

Don't you feel like crying?

We keep dancing. I begin to lose all sense of reality, and the more I do, the better the dancing gets. My muscles are driven not by my mind but by the passion I feel deep within my soul. The feeling, it's almost euphoric.

You don't ever have to walk alone, oh you see

Oh come on, take my hand and baby won't you walk with me?

Oh ya

I feel Jake's hands move up the sides of my body, enveloping me. For a moment, I let myself sink into the embrace. I feel Jake's heartbeat thumping erratically against my skin.

That's when the alarm bells start ringing.

"Okay, I think I got it," I blurt out, pulling myself out of his grasp.

"I think you did," he says evenly, turning the volume down. "I could still teach you a thing or two," he says.

I won't meet his gaze.

He coughs. "I mean if you want me to."

I turn and give him a doubtful look. No, I'm not questioning his ability to teach me. He is a great dancer, I'm sure. It's just that this kind of learning is unsafe, especially the letting-go-of-control part.

I need control. Control is the one thing that keeps me out of trouble; it keeps me from making mistakes.

“I mean, if anything could up your chances in the game, it’s this,” he adds, taking a bottle of water from the counter. He drinks some of it and then offers it to me.

I take a sip of the water and ponder my options. I think it’s pretty safe to say that Jake wants to “up his chances in the game” too, and I really don’t think I should let him.

But I do need help.

Also, it’s okay for one friend to help another one if he can. I mean I helped Jake with Algebra. Why can’t I allow him to help me with dancing? I’m sure Mitch would understand since I’m doing it partially so that I can be closer to him.

“Sure,” I say finally. I look pointedly at my watch and pretend to be surprised at how much time has passed.

“I gotta go,” I tell him. “My family is having a little get-together in the dining hall. We’re celebrating my birthday, sort of.”

“I thought your birthday was on Sunday.”

“Yeah, but it’s Janine’s wedding that day, so we had to reschedule.”

He nods. “So, just family?” he raises one eyebrow.

Actually no, we are having a get-together with my friends as well, after the family function. I invited Melissa and Kenan, of course. Also Eric... I didn’t expect having to invite Jake too. I didn’t even think I would see him this weekend. But he looks so damn *hopeful*...

“No, actually,” I blurt. “Melissa’s gonna be there, and Kenan, and another kid from the wait staff.”

Jake nods, looking at me expectantly.

“You can come if you want to,” I finish, eyes cast downward like a remorseful child.

“I’d love to,” he says brightly, his grin clearly announcing that he’s gotten his way.

I escape from Jake’s cabin just in time to take a quick cold shower before my birthday dinner. As the cold water touches my flushed skin, making me flinch, it helps clear my head. I know what game Jake is playing at, of course. And I know exactly what he wants from me. But as I told him before, I’m in a relationship with another boy. It doesn’t seem to bother him a bit though.

But it sure as hell bothers me.

I should never have allowed him to get so close, both physically and emotionally. It already feels like I’m cheating even though we’re just friends.

I'm not gonna let him get any closer though. Enough is enough. Jake has manipulated me in the past, but I've learned my lesson, or at least I hope I have, and the next time he crosses a line with me I'm gonna lay down the rules. I'm not gonna jeopardize my relationship just to spare his feelings.

I step out of the shower, dry myself with a towel, and take out a clean white shirt from the closet, slipping it over my head with a sigh. The shirt I was wearing before is all sweaty and gross now with Jake's smell all over it. I shove it into the laundry basket with more force than is necessary. I wish whatever feelings I have for Jake could be washed away just as easily as the smell of him on that shirt, but, unfortunately, such a washing machine has yet to be invented.

I'm already late. I take one final glance at myself in the steam-clouded bathroom mirror before leaving our suite and hurrying towards the main complex.

Three hours into my celebratory feast and people are still eating. They are also mingling and chatting with each other and being just generally too cheerful for my liking. I sulk by myself in a corner, watching the interactions with contempt.

I greeted each and every one of my relatives when dinner started and got wished happy birthday numerous times, which is a bad thing. I also got told that there was a birthday gift left for me at the gifts table, which is a good thing. Then I apologized for my wearing the uniform and politely informed them that I was working here now and tonight wasn't an exception. It was a little bit humiliating, but, mostly, people thought that it was a good thing, me trying to be independent, so they encouraged it. Then it was me, Melissa, Kenan, and Eric taking their orders, serving them, and waiting on tables the same way we always do. Birthday or no birthday, people are hungry. People are always hungry.

I wasn't looking forward to this dinner at all and now, as it is happening around me, I just want to be done with it. But as it is not over yet, I'm just trying to make it go as smoothly as possible.

I am steering clear from my parents' table though. I acknowledged them in the beginning of the evening, of course, and they wished me a happy birthday. They also told me that there was a birthday present waiting for me at the gift table and I thanked them. Then, I graciously and respectfully began to ignore them.

Whatever gift they have prepared for me, I'm sure that it's not the tuition payment. I'm gonna have to get the money myself, meaning I have to win the competition, but I need a lot more practice. Plus, I have yet to master the jump-lift element and I only have two days left to do so. The thought of it practically suffocates me.

Somewhere along the line, the focus of the evening slides from me and my birthday to Janine and her fiance.

I almost don't even recognize her when I go to take her order. She looks about ten years older than her nineteen years, and I have to refrain from calling her Ma'am.

But though she may have changed physically, on the inside she's exactly as I remember; brash and loud-mouthed. Her tongue has no boundaries, I swear. I am forced to run through all of her standard questions: *Do you have a girlfriend yet?* and *Why don't you have a girlfriend yet?* and *Do you want me to set you up with one of my friends?* It takes all of my willpower to not roll my eyes at her.

It actually takes me a solid ten minutes to convince her that Melissa is not my girlfriend and that I don't "have the hots for her." Bleh!

She is also quick to inform me that Melissa is a catch and I better snag her before one of those cute waiter-boys does. I glance over at the boys in question. I know for sure that Kenan is gay and I'm pretty sure Eric is too. So the joke is on you, dear cousin.

I hold my tongue though, filling her and her beloved's orders as quickly as I can before retreating to the waiter's station.

"Oh, come on, he is so gay!" Kenan says. He and Melissa are at it again. "Look at him!"

"Yes, look at him! He is obviously not gay! Stop saying that he is," Melissa retorts. "Yes, he is a little shorter than other guys, but that doesn't make him gay."

Eric *is* short, somewhat petite really. Somehow it makes him even more attractive. I mean he would fit in my arms so nicely, not that I want him there, and his voice is a little high-pitched too. But Melissa is right, none of that makes him gay.

"Let's confront him then," Melissa suggests, snapping me out of my reverie. "Let's just ask him."

"Ask him if he's gay?" Kenan asks, bewildered.

"Yeah! What's the big deal?"

"Don't you think it's a little bit inappropriate to ask somebody that? It's kinda personal," Kenan sputters.

"You're just scared!"

"I don't want to embarrass the guy. You don't know how difficult it is to talk about those things sometimes. You gotta be subtle," Kenan responds, looking to me for support. I raise my hands into a neutral position and back away. I want no part in this.

I head away from them and make my way into the kitchen. The majority of orders have been served by now, even desserts and cups of coffee. I just want to make myself scarce.

And I think I know just the place.

There's a distant secondary supply closet in the back of the main supply room. They keep spices in there, among other things the kitchen staff rarely uses. It's a perfect little hiding spot, but when I open the door, hoping for some solitude and seclusion, I practically stumble right into Eric.

His eyes are wide and frightened and his mouth is tense, as if ready to defend. The epitome of the term, busted.

The look is punctuated by a bottle of liquor in one hand and a lit cigarette in the other.

"Come in and close the door!" he whisper-shouts after he realizes that I'm not Chef Alan.

I do come in. He shuts the door behind me.

"I don't think you're supposed to be smoking in here," I say blandly and sit down on one of the empty boxes. He takes another box and blocks the door with it before sitting down himself. I knew this space was small, but it seems even smaller now that there are two of us in here.

"Well, you're not gonna tell anybody, are you?" he draws.

"No," I sniff. I'm not a snitch and he knows it.

"Nobody has to know then. I've been smoking here for the past four weeks anyway. And nobody has ever noticed. I don't think people even remember that there's a room here."

I think he might be right about that. I only stumbled upon this place because I was asked to do some minor inventory for the kitchen (you know, like finding lost forks and counting the butter knives) and it was on the blue-prints.

"What is it?" I ask, pointing to the bottle in his lap, though I can guess the answer.

"Jack Daniel's," he answers, his words slurring just a touch.

"Where did you get it?" I think I know the answer to that question as well.

"Can you keep a secret?"

"Sure," I say, reflecting on my time spent in the closet, the metaphorical one, not the one I'm in right now.

"I kinda took it from the box in the back corner," he admits.

"So you stole it." I give him a frosty look.

"It's just a bottle of Jack Daniel's, Sam. Chillax!"

"But what if somebody finds out? You'll get fired," I counter.

"Nobody's gonna find out," he says again.

“What makes you so sure?”

He glances at me from underneath lowered lashes and says, “This is not the first one I’ve taken...It’s like the third or fourth bottle. Nobody noticed before. And even if they do notice, they’d have to catch me to prove it was me, right?”

“And they are not gonna catch you because...?” I ask with a small grin.

“Because I’m good,” he shrugs and takes a sip. “You want some?”

I take a look at the bottle. I rarely ever drink, just a sip here or there at functions, maybe a beer or two at parties, which, let’s face it, I don’t go to a lot of. I’ve certainly never tried hard liquor.

“What the hell...” I mumble and take the bottle from his hands. Our fingers touch as I do so and I catch him glancing at me at the same time.

My heart starts racing and I feel a distinctive urge to take a sip of that amber liquid. I gulp it and flinch. It’s strong! It’s much stronger than wine and I don’t think I’ve ever tasted anything like this. I mean it’s so repulsive! How on earth did Eric drink four bottles of this?

My stomach turns and I feel like I’m about to puke, but I restrain myself and try to soften my demeanor instead. I really don’t want to embarrass myself in front of Eric.

But he’s already grinning.

“You’re not much of a drinker, are you?”

“Does it show?” I ask, voice cracking.

“Nope,” he says graciously, though we both know he’s lying.

“I learn fast,” I say and force down another mouthful.

“Good.” He smiles up at me deviously.

We fall into an awkward silence, or rather, *I* do. Eric seems perfectly at ease.

I have no idea what the two of us might have in common, so I let the silence fester.

I almost jump when he finally says, “You don’t remember me, do you?”

Thoughts start racing in my head as I’m frantically trying to figure out what he means. I would have remembered him if I met him before Crest Hollows. I mean you don’t forget a boy like that, at least I wouldn’t.

I squint back at him questioningly.

“We went to kindergarten together,” he says and leans back. “Don’t you remember me?”

What? There is no way we...And then it hits me.

“Potty-Pants Eric?” I blurt out. He winces.

“One and the same.”

“Sorry,” I tell him. “I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.”

“I’m over it,” he says. “But don’t say it again though, okay?”

“Deal,” I agree. “So, wow! I mean... You’re Eric!”

“And you’re Sam,” he chuckles.

I smile. But he knows what I mean. The chances of the two of us ending up working together at the same resort at the age of seventeen were pretty slim, and yet, here we are, sitting in the closet together, drinking Whiskey .

“I don’t remember much of that time,” I say honestly. “I just remember you getting me into a lot of trouble.”

“*Me?* That’s certainly not how I remember it,” he protests. “I’m afraid it wasn’t me getting you into trouble, Mister. It was quite the opposite.”

“No way!” I object. “I was a perfect gentleman.”

“You may be the wallflower right now but you weren’t back then,” he fixes me with a look. “You were always looking for an adventure; a superhero, on your way to save the world. And I was always your sidekick. The two of us would usually end up either getting ourselves hurt or punished by Miss Hoover.”

“I don’t remember any of that,” I shake my head. It’s so weird to listen to Eric tell me things about my life. And there I was thinking that the two of us had nothing in common!

“One day we were pretending to be pilots,” Eric continues. “We used a big cardboard box as a plane and a staircase as a runway. Our “plane” crashed pretty badly. You bumped against the wall and there was blood and everything. You even had to be hospitalized, I think.”

“Yeah, it was my birthday,” I say, as the memory attached to one of the photos I keep stashed in my desk back home comes rushing back. “What happened after that?”

“I don’t really know. My family moved to another house and I switched schools. I haven’t seen you since,” he gives my shoulder a friendly punch. “So, what you’ve been up to the past...thirteen years?”

“Not much,” I say, suddenly embarrassed. “You know, the usual... Family, school, a lot of studying.”

He looks at me slyly, “Where did Adventurous Sam go?”

I've been asking myself the same question a lot here lately.

"He grew up, I guess."

He nods to that.

It's an undeniable fact that you grow up; you get wiser and obtain responsibilities. The problem is, I'm not 41, not even 31. I'm turning 17.

"Well, maybe we met again for a reason," Eric says finally. He hands me back the bottle and I take another sip.

Our eyes meet in the small confined space of the closet. His eyes are so beautiful now that I see them up close, but I can't hold his gaze.

"That's cool! Where did you get it?" Eric breaks the silence, angling my hand to get a better look at the bracelet I'm wearing. I smile, imagining the conclusion Melissa would draw from this incident.

"It's a gift from my boy..." the words escape my mouth before I even realize it. "From a very good friend!" I amend lamely.

I glance down at the object in question. It's a stylized 8 mm film strip twisted periodically and coated in resin in order to form a bracelet. It undoubtedly took several months for Mitch to finish it. The thought sobers me up.

"I like movies, I mean filmmaking," I sputter. "I want to go to the Film Academy next year, but I don't have enough money for the tuition yet."

"What about your parents? Aren't they gonna help you out with that?"

"No." I say simply.

He nods once before launching into a speech about his own parents, whom eventually seem to turn into "the man."

When he finishes up, we realize that it's time to come out of the closet (no pun intended) before people start wondering where the two of us went off to.

We emerge from the closet; first me, then Eric several minutes later. I don't want anyone, namely Melissa and Kenan, to find out that we've just spent the last half hour together.

All of the guests, my family included, are gone now. All I see are meticulously cleaned tables and a slightly sweaty Melissa.

"Where have you been?" She asks. I can sense that she is not happy about being left to do all the cleaning herself.

“Nowhere,” I lie. “I just needed a breather. Where’s Kenan?”

“He had to go. He had an upset stomach or something. He wanted me to tell you that he was sorry that he couldn’t stay for the afterparty thing.”

“Oh,” I nod. “Okay.” It’s not as if I really wanted to celebrate anyway.

“I can’t stay either,” she adds. “Sorry but my mom just called and she wants me to come home tonight—something about helping with one of her orders. I have to drive all the way back into the city now and come back in the morning.”

“Oh...okay.” I know Melissa’s mother quite well. I know that she, much like her daughter, doesn’t take no for an answer. She’s also a wedding planner, meaning she has frequent “love emergencies” that she’ll drag anyone at her disposal into. “Go then. You shouldn’t keep her waiting.”

“I don’t want to but...” she looks down at the floor.

“It’s okay. I’ve met your mother, Mel. I know how she is. Go.”

“Are you really not mad at me?”

“It’s okay,” I repeat. “Really.”

“Okay then. I’ll see you tomorrow,” she gives me a hug. “I know it’s gonna be hard without me and Kenan but try to have fun, okay?”

“Sure,” I mutter unconvincingly.

“What the heck...?” Melissa pulls away from me. Her gaze glued to someone behind my back. I can’t see who it is, but I have one very good guess.

“What is *he* doing here?” Melissa is not the biggest Jake fan.

“Oh, I kinda invited him,” I say, turning to see him lingering by the entrance.

“You invited him to come here, to Crest Hollows?” Melissa gives me a look.

“No! he was already here,” I rush to explain. “I stumbled upon him this morning...and I let it slip that I was having a party and I couldn’t *not* invite him. That would be rude.”

“Okay,” she says, finally. “He’s lucky I can’t stay.”

“I think he is aware of that,” I grin.

She rolls her eyes. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

She saunters out of the dining hall, passing Jake on her way out. I think he says hello to her, but she doesn’t say anything back. Rude!

Jake shrugs it off and makes his way toward me.

“You made it.”

“Yeah,” he says and hands me a decorated box with a blue ribbon on it. It’s not big, but it’s not small either. I’m immediately overcome with curiosity.

“Happy birthday, I guess,” he says, smile dazzling as usual.

“Thanks,” I say with genuine happiness. “You didn’t have to.”

He nods. “Just little something I wanted you to have. You can open it after I leave.”

“You’re not gonna stay?”

“No, I can’t. My parents are here. My mother decided she wanted to have a family dinner last minute and I can’t skip it. I don’t see a lot of them as it is.”

“Oh, that’s okay,” I say. Feeling a bit like one of those catchphrase-repeating dolls.

“So, you’re not mad at me, are you?”

“No, of course not.” I fib. I didn’t plan on Jake to be here in the first place, but, to tell you the truth, I do feel a little disappointed.

“Good,” he bites his lip. “I gotta go now.”

There’s this little awkward pause where neither of us know what to say or do next. It would have been awkward to hug or shake hands since our relationship doesn’t fall into any of the standard categories. And without it there’s this empty moment that just feels kinda awkward.

“Okay, happy birthday again and I’ll see you tomorrow,” Jake finally says.

“Thanks... See you,” I watch him leave with a pang of regret.

I look down at the box in my hands. It’s not heavy. A token of Jake’s affection, no doubt. I want to know what it is, and at the same time, I don’t.

Eric saves me from having to decide.

“Hey, what’s up?” he asks, tugging off his apron.

“It looks like it’s just the two of us,” I say. “Melissa and Kenan couldn’t stay. And this was from Jake, my friend, who came to say that he couldn’t stay either.”

“Oh,” Eric says, clearly trying to avoid voicing his pity.

“It’s okay if you have something else to do. I don’t mind if you leave.”

“I don’t have anything else to do.” He gives me one of his wicked looks. “Actually I think we could have a pretty good time, just the two of us.”

He takes out that bottle of Jack Daniels again.

“Besides, we have unfinished business,” he says with a wink. I smile.

I can feel that there is a lot of alcohol in my blood as it is, but, oddly, I want more. What the hell, it is my party!

“Okay,” I say. “So do you want to stay here or go somewhere?”

“Go somewhere... I know just the place.”

The place that Eric had in mind is actually perfect. In three months of working at the resort, I have never once been to the open-air movie theater.

The screen is faceted into the ground at the bottom of a hill, thus making it perfectly viewable from the top, a pretty spacious grassy knoll with room for hundreds of people to comfortably sit or lie down.

Eric and I manage to find a pretty isolated spot uphill and settle on the ground. It’s just getting dark now and the screen is shining bright, making the picture clear and enjoyable. You can hardly hear the movie (King Kong in case you were wondering) from here, but I don’t mind. I means we can actually talk.

At first we swap opinions about the movie and make fun of it and stuff. Since I know this movie by heart, it’s easy for me to expertly point out the goofs; like when Kong is lying in the hold of the Tanker and Jessica Lange’s scarf falls on him and it suddenly appears to be the size of a very large table cloth.

“I like this part,” Eric says as King Kong jumps from one of the Twin Towers to the other. I point out that you can see the wires attached to him as he lands and Eric smiles. Then, he lies down on the ground in front of me, using my legs as a cushion.

He starts saying something about the movie, but all I can think about is how cute he looks in the dim light reflected from the screen and how soft his voice sounds. His hands are so small and delicate. Suddenly I’m overcome with the desire to kiss him. But even with the alcohol roaring through my veins, I know that that would be a disastrous idea.

I glance down at the bottle. There’s barely anything left in there. I know that I should probably stop drinking it now, but I don’t. Instead, I tip it back and finish it off. And I feel good about it too. I feel *great* actually.

After the movie ends, I suggest we go for a walk. We spend good fifteen minutes wobbling between the trees as it was my idea to make our way towards the lake straight through the tree line. Not a great idea, I gotta admit. I didn't count on my legs being so shaky. Eric is not holding up too well either. So we stumble and fall every other step, laughing and supporting each other the whole way.

We stop in a small clearing and decide to take a breather. I can see the lake through the trees now. It is well-lit in the moonlight, and completely deserted. On the other side of the tree line I can see the lights of the main complex peaking through the branches and tree trunks. We can hear voices coming from that direction, but they are distant and muffled. We are completely alone out here.

Eric lights a cigarette and I suddenly want to take up smoking.

"Give me one," I say. My voice sounds weird, but I don't really care about it.

He chuckles. "That's the adventurous Sam I remember." He hands me the pack. After about two minutes of trying to get one cigarette out of it, I finally succeed.

I stick a cigarette into my mouth. Eric, who has been chuckling all along, is now laughing out loud. He approaches me and pulls the cigarette out of my mouth, turning it around before sticking the other end back in.

"There you go," he says, handing me a lighter.

"Are you trying to make fun of me?" I ask indignantly. It took me whopping two minutes to take a cigarette out of a pack. How much time does he think it's gonna take me to work the lighter?

"Okay, okay," Eric chuckles. "I'll do it."

He puts the flame to the end of my cigarette as I'm trying not to move. Although my efforts are definitely less effective than they would have been if I was sober. Eric is skilled at lighting cigarettes though, so he manages to light it even with all of my wobbling.

"Now inhale," he says, watching me closely.

I take the semi-sweet smoke of tobacco into my lungs. It's a very weird and unusual sensation, for sure, but it's not painful as I imagined it to be.

Then it scorches my throat and I start to cough, loudly, bringing Eric's laughter upon myself once again.

"You knew it was gonna happen?" I ask between coughs; my voice is all rough and jagged.

"Everybody coughs the first time," he says. "It's gonna get better the second time around, I promise."

I have to trust him on this one. After all, he was right about the Jack Daniels. So I inhale again and this time I cough less. The third drag goes almost smoothly.

“I told you it was nice,” Eric says. He picked up on the fact that I started enjoying the feeling of a cigarette between my fingers. It does make me feel kind of grown-up. I wonder what else I’ve been missing out on.

And then it hits me.

There is one thing that I haven’t tried alright. Sex!

If Mitch was here right now, I promise there would have been no hesitation on my part. Eric *is* here though...

I approach him slowly, trying not to stumble along the way. He doesn’t avert his eyes, just reaches out and takes the cigarette out of my mouth. He sticks it into his own mouth and inhales. He does it almost professionally, if that term can be applied to smoking. He takes one last drag, drops it to the ground and puts it out with his foot.

“See,” he says. “We are being responsible.”

We both laugh at that. Yes, we have just enough common sense left not to set the woods on fire. That’s about it though. There’s such a heavy shroud of haze covering my mind right now that I barely understand what I’m doing. I think there are only the primitive instincts left of what used to be my consciousness. I don’t think I can stop myself from kissing Eric at this point.

And as that thought hangs in the air, I find myself making one jolting move towards him. Surprisingly, I manage not to bump heads with him as my lips find his.

I think the mere thought of kissing him was enough to set my body into motion. And it was a motion alright. I think I caught Eric completely off-guard. His lips are not moving and he is dumbfounded. It takes him a second to figure out what’s happening and react to it.

He shoves me hard in the chest and almost sends me flying. I’m surprised that I manage to keep myself standing. Eric is looking at me indignantly. No, not indignant... furious!

Terror floods my veins. Fuck! Looks like Melissa was right.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he shouts.

I mumble something incoherent in response.

“Are you a faggot? Are you a fucking faggot?” The rage that I catch in his eyes sobers me up instantly. I get ready to defend myself, however weak my case may be. He is definitely going to beat me up.

He leaps towards me and I shut my eyes, getting ready to receive a punch, but he stops himself just inches away from my face.

“Answer me!” he yells. “Are you a fucking queer?” Okay, I’m so scared now that I’m about to wet my pants.

“Answer!” he repeats. Some of the spit from his mouth lands on my face. There’s nothing else I can do now but answer his question.

“Yes!” I shout, heart pounding erratically. Anger has momentarily leached away my terror. “I’m a fag! I’m queer! I am!”

He is taken aback with my strong reaction, but only for a second. Emboldened, I use that second to plant another kiss on his lips.

He is as surprised by it as I am, but then the rage comes. I can see his fist clenching, ready to land a blow. I was imagining his small cute hands touching my skin just half an hour ago, but I didn’t think it’d be by the way of crushing my jawbone.

Then, to my surprise, his anger melts into amusement.

“Well, so am I,” he says and bursts out laughing.

My stomach sinks. What? Was it all a joke?

“Sorry,” Eric says through his laughter. “I just had to do it. The expression on your face was priceless.”

“Oh.” I turn so that he can’t see my face.

“Sorry, sorry,” he says and comes closer. “It was an opportunity I couldn’t pass up.”

“You’re a little fucker!” I shout, giving him a shove, desperately trying to mask my relief with anger.

“I’m sorry. Don’t be mad with me.”

I look at him. He is smiling adorably, as if he doesn’t have a care in the world. I can’t tell if I find it infuriating or endearing. Probably both.

After a long, sulking moment I shake my head and smile. He comes closer, eyes locked on mine. The smiles gradually fade away from both our faces as we just keep looking into each other’s eyes.

And then he leans in to kiss me.

This time his lips are alive and moving, exploring mine with a passionate fervor that I’ve never quite experienced before.

Alas, I am only able to enjoy the kiss for about a couple of seconds before I feel a strong physical urge that doesn’t leave any room for kissing.

I pull away from Eric as quickly as possible and manage to take a few steps in the opposite direction before I hurl.

I hear Eric laughing behind my back.

“And that is how you know you had a wonderful time, my friend.”

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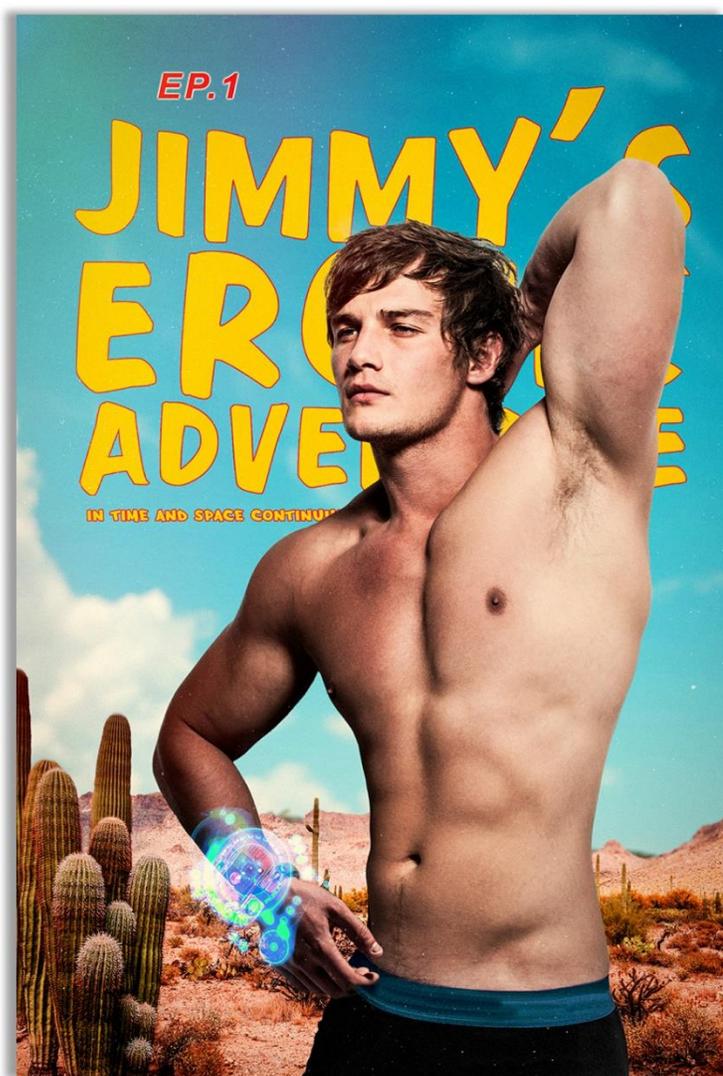


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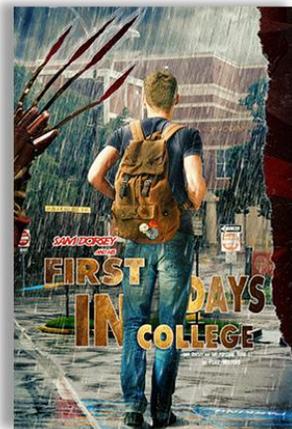
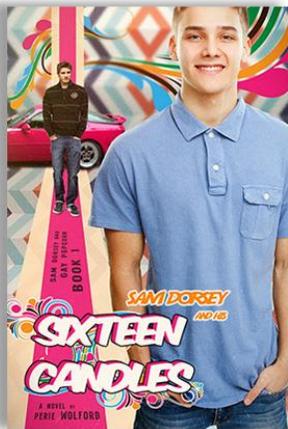
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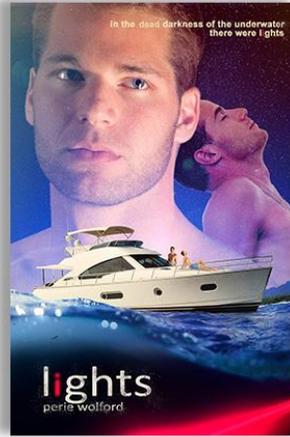
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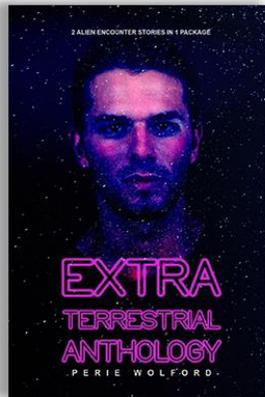
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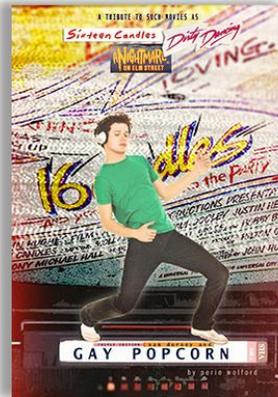


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