

“No parties.” I made Sara promise as we sat on the train together heading to Penn Station - recalling the nightmare of a party from the previous weekend, with the whispering and stares when Evan and I walked in together. It was the hot topic of the night, and I couldn’t get away from it, regardless of how much I tried.

“We can’t stay out late anyway,” Sara replied. “We’re borrowing Amanda’s car first thing in the morning to drive to Cornell. You have a meeting with their coach at noon, so she knows we’re laying low tonight. I think she wants to take us to some café near her place to listen to this musician or something.

“Besides, Amanda’s not the partying type. She prefers to be influenced by nature, if you know what I mean.”

I knew exactly what she meant as soon as I met Amanda. She was very sweet, but definitely moved at her own pace. At times, her ethereal responses and fluid gestures sent Sara and I into restrained fits of laughter - trying to laugh quietly, while pressing my mouth shut, was almost painful. So, Friday night in Amanda’s company was definitely... enlightening.

“Are you going to let Jared know you’re here?” I asked Sara while we drove Amanda’s vintage Volkswagen to Ithaca.

“I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“I like how we left it,” she replied casually. “Besides, I’m sure he’s getting ready to go somewhere for spring break.”

Her answer intrigued me, but I decided to leave it alone.

Once we arrived on campus, we probably couldn’t have seen him if we wanted to. It was a packed afternoon of tours and meetings. It was a lot to take in, and I was exhausted by the time we left to drive four hours back to Rutgers.

“Evan is supposed to meet us at Amanda’s at eight,” Sara stated eyeing the clock. “I hope we make it there before he does. I have no idea what he’ll talk to Amanda about if he has to sit there with her. He may decide to leave and go back to Connecticut if he has to wait too long.”

“She’s not that bad,” I laughed. “She is very... introspective.”

“Whatever,” Sara huffed. Baffled, she added, “I can’t believe we’re related. I can’t believe I used to play dolls with her.”

We arrived at Amanda’s apartment before Evan, to my relief as well as Sara’s. Evan took charge of the plans for Saturday night taking us to the bar where the band he and his brother saw in October was playing again. I’d never been in a bar before, so I tried to prepare myself by assuming that it would be like a high school party, only... older and louder.

The bar was not what I had imagined to find in the city. It was a dark, basement level place, with a small flight of cement stairs leading down to the entrance. I’d envisioned the red rope with the flashing lights and the discriminating bouncer at the door like I’d seen in too many movies.

Evan approached the broad-chested guy at the top of the stairs, while Sara and I waited a short distance away on the sidewalk. He didn’t have to fend off the large crowd of want-to-be patrons as in my vision. The guy checked the ID’s of the few people who sought admittance, nodded them in, then went inside after hearing whatever Evan had to say.

“Evan, how are you?” a muscular man with a shaved head bellowed, jogging up the stairs. He shook Evan’s hand while firmly patting his arm with his other.

I couldn’t hear what Evan said, but he nodded towards us. The muscular guy glanced in our direction and nodded in return. Evan waved us over, and we followed the guy around the corner, where he let us in a side entrance.

“Thanks Joe,” Evan said, shaking his hand again.

“No problem. Have fun,” he offered, barely noting our presence.

The room was dark, with a slight red glow from the neon beer signs on the wall. The tight square space was sparsely populated, making it easy to find a tall table near the small platform that was intended for a stage. The band's equipment was already set up, awaiting the musicians.

"Who was that?" Sara asked, referring to Evan's connection.

"A friend of a friend," he stated, without explaining more. Sara gave me a curious glance.

A waitress in a short skirt and revealing top came over to our table.

"Can I get you something to drink?" she asked.

Evan looked to me and Sara - we shook our heads.

"We're all set, thanks," he told her, then asked, "Is Sam here?"

"He's in the back."

"If you see him, can you tell him Evan's here?"

"Sure," she replied, before walking away.

Sara and I looked at each other with the same puzzled expression.

"Sam?" Sara mouthed, holding her hands up, questioning.

When Evan turned to us again, she quickly dropped her hands and smiled at him.

"Evan," Sara inquired, intrigued by his demeanor, "how often do you come here?"

"I've been here a few times," he replied casually.

"Starting when? When you were twelve?"

I laughed at her sarcasm. Evan smiled, realizing how this must have appeared to us.

"My brother was in a band last year, while he went to a private school in Connecticut," he explained. "He used to play here every so often, and I'd come with him when I was here during breaks. We got to know the owner, along with a few other guys who work here, and they let us in to check out the bands whenever we're in the city."

"Jared was in a band?" Sara confirmed, sounding impressed.

“Still is actually. Not the same one, but they’re still pretty decent. I’m surprised you didn’t see him yesterday.”

“We were too busy,” I told him, knowing Sara was kicking herself right about now.

The bar filled in around us while we waited for the band to start. Being in this bar was nothing like a high school party. No one really paid attention to us first of all, and then the music was much better live. When the band came on-stage, they sent an energy throughout the room that captured everyone’s attention.

More people entered the bar, eventually crowding the front area of the stage. We remained at our table listening to the singer’s passionate bellows, accompanied by the guitar player’s fast paced riffs, and drummer’s high energy beats that got the crowd jumping. At some point, we lost Sara to the sea of people jumping with their hands in the air. Every so often, I’d see her red hair bobbing up and down.

Evan moved his stool closer, and wrapped his arm around my waist, while slightly nodding his head to the beat of the thumping bass. When the set was over, the crowd dispersed to the bar, but my ears kept humming. Sara made her way back to us, sweaty and still bouncing. I noticed there was someone behind her.

“This is Zac,” she announced. “Zac, this is Emma, and Evan.”

“Hi.” I awkwardly greeted the well-built guy, with blond hair that stuck up all over the place. Then I observed his facial piercings and tattoos on his forearm and gave Sara a stunned glance. She smiled wildly.

“Zac played in the band that was here last night,” she explained. “He goes to NYU. It’s too bad we go to school in California, huh?”

“Yeah,” I nodded, trying not to laugh.

“I’m meeting up with the guys from this band and some of my band-mates. We’re going to a friend of ours’ party around the corner. You interested?”

Sara pleaded from behind him with big eyes. Evan looked to me, I shrugged in acceptance.

“Sure,” Evan replied. “Let us know when you’re leaving, and we’re ready.”

Sara mouthed, “Thank you,” while she practically jumped up and down behind Zac. She went off with him when he spotted a few of the guys he was waiting for.

“You really want to go to this?” Evan questioned apprehensively.

“Why not? It’s practice, right? Anyway, Sara *really* wants to go, so we have to. We can’t leave her alone with Zac.”

Evan laughed.

Sara skipped back to our table to talk to us.

“Where’s Zac?” I asked.

“He’s in the back, talking to the guys from the band. But listen, we’re freshmen at USC, and we went to high school together in Montana, where we lived next door to each other our entire lives.”

“Montana?” I questioned incredulously.

“It was the first state that came out of my mouth,” Sara shrugged.

“Do I have a story?” Evan asked.

“No, you can be whoever you want,” Sara said dismissively, looking around for the guys. I had to laugh as I watched her jitter around with her face lit with excitement.

“Sara, I didn’t realize you were so crazy,” Evan noticed. Sara just smiled in return and hopped away to find her new friends. “Did you know she was like this?”

“Yes,” I stressed. “It’s one of the reasons we’re best friends. It’s not like she can be this way in school. This is how we are when we’re somewhere else.”

“We?” he questioned with raised eyebrows.

I bit my lip and smiled, not sure if I wanted to reveal any more.

“I can’t imagine *you* like *that*,” he said, motioning toward Sara.

“I’m not,” I corrected. “I’m more laid back and quiet. Someone has to make sure she doesn’t get us into too much trouble. But we make up stories all of the time, although, we’ve never been from Montana before.”

“Interesting,” he chuckled.

“Do you want a story?” I offered.

“I’m not sure if I could pull it off,” he admitted.

“Well, I can’t be dating a junior in high school.” I grinned. “At least pick a college.”

“How about I don’t go to college? I decided to travel after high school instead,” he offered.

“Ooh, good one,” I admired. “Makes you sound so... intriguing.”

He let out a short incredulous laugh.

Sara floated back to us.

“They’re ready to go,” she announced. I stood to follow Sara.

Evan caught up, grabbing my hand. We were introduced to the rest of Zac’s friends, and their names escaped me the second after they introduced themselves. It didn’t matter; they weren’t going to remember me either.

We followed the eclectic group of guys, with their expressive tattoos and piercings, a few blocks to an apartment building where their friend lived. It felt like we went around and up for the longest time before we heard the music coming from the top floor.

Pillars of candles were strategically placed to let off a mellow light, and soulful rock music filled the small studio apartment that spilled onto the roof where most people gathered. This was definitely not a high school party.

“Zac wants to introduce me to the other guys in his band,” Sara told us with a grin. “I’ll find you in a while.”

We located a cooler with beers, wine and energy drinks. Evan and I each grabbed a can of the syrupy caffeinated beverage and walked out into the fresh air. It was a cool evening, but it was too incredible on the roof not take advantage of the view.

“What do you think?” Evan asked.

“It’s different,” I observed, then considered his question and added, “I’m not nervous, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“No,” he replied. “You’re different at parties now. I guess you’ve been practicing.”

I laugh at his observation. “I live with Sara on the weekends – how could I not practice?”

“What else has changed?” he inquired.

I searched the sky, thinking of what had changed since he left, besides my weekend freedom, invisibility at home, and emerging social status.

“Well... now you can kiss me whenever you want,” I recognized with a grin.

He smiled, pulling me closer to him to take advantage of his new privilege.

Evan and I stayed on the roof and sat on a couple of reclining lawn chairs, talking. We discussed my visit to Cornell and California, which he did hear about from Jared, along with other events that happened during our separation. I completely lost track of the time, and didn’t realize people had been slowly trickling out, until I heard a gleeful shriek from inside.

“Sara?” Evan questioned.

“Yeah,” I confirmed.

We entered the small open space to find Sara and Zac mesmerized by a video game on the large screened television. Sara was jumping around in place, frantically pushing buttons and maneuvering the small joystick. Zac laughed at her exuberant frustration while he skillfully maneuvered his player through the maze.

“Ha,” he declared, “I won.”

“You suck,” Sara snarled.

“Did everyone leave?” I asked, noting the handful of people still present, which basically consisted of the guys we followed here from the bar, along with a few girls.

“Em, I think it’s around three in the morning,” Sara noted.

“It is?” I confirmed in awe, not realizing the night had slipped by so quickly.

“Ready to go?” Evan asked Sara.

“Yeah,” she responded hesitantly. “You go ahead downstairs. I’ll be there in a minute.” She pressed her lips together, trying not to smile as we exchanged knowing glances.

Sara came bounding out of the front door a few minutes later with a ridiculous smile on her face. I wanted to ask her a thousand questions, but held back, not sure if she’d want to answer them in front of Evan.

“I’m sleeping on the couch tonight,” she announced while we climbed the stairs to Amanda’s apartment.

My heart stopped, realizing what she was suggesting. I stared at her with enlarged eyes, scrutinizing her devious grin. Evan searched my face for approval of the sleeping arrangements. I couldn’t breathe, forget about look at him. What was she thinking?!

“Are you serious?” I whispered when she and I squeezed into Amanda’s bathroom to brush our teeth, and to change into our sleeping attire.

“Em, it’s not like you’re going to do anything,” she huffed. “Besides, you’ve been without him for three months, you deserve this time together.”

“What if I snore?” I blurted in a panic.

“You don’t,” she assured me. “You do have crazy nightmares, but he already knows that.”

“Are you really freaked out?” she questioned after rinsing out her mouth.

“Just a little nervous,” I admitted.

“He’s not that kind of guy,” she comforted me. “Especially after you told me what he said about kissing you. He may have to worry about you actually.”

“Sara!” I snapped, slapping at her arm as she chuckled.

Sara contorted her mouth to keep from laughing, and my face flared with heat when we exited to find Evan awaiting his opportunity to use the bathroom. He glanced at us suspiciously before entering.

“Good night.” She smirked, retreating to the couch.

“Good night,” I whispered nervously, walking into Amanda’s spare bedroom.

Evan found me staring at the bed with its deep purple comforter and two pillows when he entered

“What are you doing?” Evan inquired, wearing a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt.

“I’m not sure,” I admitted. “I’ve never slept in the same bed with anyone before, so I’m trying to figure out which side I want.”

He let out a quick laugh that disarmed me.

“Oh,” I acknowledged, “you think I’m funny?”

“Yeah,” he smiled, closing the door. My lungs froze mid-breath at the sound of the door clicking shut.

Without thinking about it, I slipped under the covers on the side closest to the door, and lay on my back, trying to breathe at an appropriate pace. Evan walked around to the other side of the bed. The cool air rushed in when he lifted the comforter and he slid beneath. My pulse quickened as I continued to stare at the ceiling. His leg brushed against mine and I forgot to breathe again.

“I can’t believe it’s almost four in the morning,” Evan noted. His voice startled me out of my anxiety. I turned my head to face him. He was propped on his elbow, with his hand supporting his head.

“Are you tired?” he asked. I was afraid to answer, not sure if one answer would be an invitation, and the other would be a rejection.

So I shrugged before offering cautiously, "I'm getting there," hoping that was the right response.

"What time do you have your meeting with the coach tomorrow?"

"Two," I answered quickly. Was he honestly just having a conversation with me?

"I can wait for you, and we can go back on the train together, if you want?" he suggested.

"Sure." He really was just *talking* to me. Now, I wasn't sure if *I* was relieved or insulted.

"Are you tired?"

"I'm getting there," he repeated with a grin. "Should I set the alarm?" He was going to go to sleep?

"No, I think we should be fine," I tried to say casually. My heart was pounding, trying to cope with the sudden disappointment.

Evan turned off the light and quietly said, "Good night." Good night?

Now, I definitely was not tired. I stared at the dark ceiling with the rhythmic thumps in my chest - very aware that Evan was lying less than a foot from me. How was I ever going to fall asleep?

My eyes adjusted to the dark with the glow of the streetlight seeping in through the shade. I tried to glance next to me without moving my head when I heard him breathing. Was he already asleep? I couldn't stand it any long, and rolled on my side to face him.

"Hi," he whispered from his pillow, facing me.

"Hi." I grinned, the thumping transitioning into a quickened patter.

"Not tired, huh?"

"Not really," I admitted, taking slow, exaggerated breaths.

Evan reached over with his right hand and ran his thumb along my cheek. I closed my eyes, soothed by the tingling his touch left behind.

I opened my eyes and was met by his dark blue gaze, observing his lips curl up slightly. I moved to him without hesitating. He met me in anticipation. We urgently moved together, releasing quick excited breaths. I gripped his shirt in my hand along his back, and moved my body closer to his. He tightened his hold around my shoulder, with his other hand under my head, pressing me against him. I let out an audible breath as his lips ran along my neck. I rolled on top of him, and moved my lips along his jaw to his ear, inhaling his scent and tasting the subtle saltiness of his smooth skin. He inhaled sharply, then rolled so that he was over me. I wrapped my leg around his thigh and pulled him down onto me, frantically finding his wet lips. I gripped his back, feeling his muscles flex as he held his weight above me. Then without warning, he pulled away and fell onto his back, letting out a long breath.

I lay there confused, breathing quickly while my heart raced.

“What?!” I whispered. “Did I do something wrong again?”

Evan let out a quick breathy laugh. “No. We just need to breathe a second, or else you’re going to kill me.”

I looked at him curiously.

“I’m trying to be good,” he explained, taking in my bewildered expression. “I don’t want to move too fast. So, I need to not get carried away.”

“Oh,” I sighed, already missing the intimate connection as the tingling trickled away.

“It’s not the same for a guy.” He tried again to help me understand. “We get to a point where it’s... difficult, and I’m trying to avoid that. I’m not rejecting you.” He moved next to me and wrapped his arm across my stomach, nuzzling into my shoulder to inhale my hair that was sprawled on the pillow.

“Do you understand?” he whispered in my ear.

“I think so.”

I did for the most part. I didn't want to rush either, but it was so hard to pull away from something that felt so amazing.

"I like the way you make me feel," I whispered, "and it's hard to know when to stop. I don't want to make it difficult for you, and I'm not looking for more either. I'll try to be more... restrained."

His quick breath of laughter brushed along my neck. I lay with my eyes closed, listening to the rhythmic sounds of his breath next to me until it lulled me to sleep.