

**BETWEEN
THE
BLISS
AND ME**

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CHAPTER ONE

Graduation day definitely wasn't the right time to tell Mom I'd lied to her about my college plans. But it's not like I could have kept it a secret much longer.

I just wish the reveal hadn't been at my grandparents' country club. My dad's parents. Ever since he left when I was a toddler, we've been the Holman quartet, gathering awkwardly at major holidays and life events.

We were having lunch after the graduation ceremony, the quiet so thick I could hear Grandpa's nose whistle while he chewed his prime rib. Mom shifted next to me, impatient to leave, but we were in this for the long haul. My grandparents would be ordering dessert. They always did. And insisted everyone else order it too, because they'd be paying.

How can you not love someone who insists you eat cake? Somehow Mom managed.

When our desserts arrived, Grandma handed me an envelope. Inside was a schmaltsy *for my granddaughter on her graduation day* card, and when I opened it, a check fluttered to the linen tablecloth. Mom looked at the amount and choked on her cheesecake. That was a lot of zeros.

“Grandma, Grandpa, this—this is . . .” I stammered.

I didn’t look at Mom. I could feel her disapproval without needing to see it on her face. My stomach churned.

“I know you said you’d pay for school, but you can’t just write me a check for thirty thousand dollars. Can you?”

“Why not?” Grandma asked, truly puzzled. “It’s our money, Sydney. We want you to have it. But this isn’t for tuition. I’ve set up a trust for that. This is just for books or groceries or clothes. For rent, if you want to get an apartment with some friends. Or if you want to go to Mexico for spring break.”

I felt something loosen in my chest, like a spool of thread unwinding. I’d been saving for college since I was old enough to work. I knew how expensive all of the things Grandma had just named were. And even though Grandma and Grandpa had agreed to pay my tuition, I’d been expecting to pay for everything else. My bank account just hadn’t grown quite enough to actually cover it. I’d been planning to work all summer to try to catch up.

Visions of sitting poolside flashed in my mind.

“Thank you, guys!” I jumped up and squeezed Grandma in thanks, maybe with a little more enthusiasm than she would have liked. She smoothed her neatly pressed dress and smiled at me with tight lips. She hated it when I called them “guys.”

I hugged Grandpa too.

“I wish your father were here to see you,” he said quietly.

My smile slipped. I tried not to think of my dad. My memories of him were hazy. And not just because he’d been surrounded by a near-constant cloud of smoke, cigarette and otherwise.

When I returned to my seat, Mom was still glaring at the check that sat on the table between us.

“Why would Sydney need this much money when she’s got a full scholarship to Rutgers and is living at home?” she said. Her voice was icy.

Grandma and Grandpa both looked at me expectantly. My stomach turned to lead.

“I’m, um . . .” I took a deep breath and started over. “I’m not going to Rutgers, Mom. I’m going to NYU.”

Her eyes narrowed. “What do you mean? Rutgers gave you a full academic scholarship. NYU didn’t offer a dime!”

I nodded, swallowing hard against the lump of fear in my throat. “I know. That’s why Grandma and Grandpa offered to pay. So I didn’t have to settle. So I could go to my dream school and not have to work overtime for the rest of my life to pay off loans like you did.”

I didn’t add that I was also counting down the days until I could move out of our apartment. Out from under her watchful eye and her overprotective wing.

Mom threw her napkin on the table. “You went behind my back?”

There was nothing to say. Obviously, I had. But Mom turned her fury on Grandma and Grandpa instead.

“You two are unbelievable,” she said through clenched teeth. “Don’t you think it’s irresponsible to give that much money to a child? With her . . . history?”

I stiffened. My dad might have been a drunk and an addict, but I was way more responsible than that. I’d spent my life proving to her that I wasn’t like him. It was insulting that the thought would even cross her mind.

But Grandma and Grandpa brushed off her concerns. Grandma literally waved a hand in Mom’s direction.

“Let’s not discuss that today,” she said. “This is a celebration.”

Mom stood, grabbing my elbow to haul me up beside her. “Not anymore. We’re leaving.”

I pulled my arm from her grasp. The country club members around us were looking on curiously, no doubt judging my Forever 21 dress and Mom’s fake pearls. But Grandma seemed impervious to their judgment as she stood to kiss me goodbye.

“Congratulations, Sydney,” she said. “You’ll do wonderfully at NYU.” She leveled her gaze at Mom.

I stepped between them to kiss Grandpa’s papery cheek.

“I love you, sweetheart,” he said.

“Thank you again!” I called over my shoulder while Mom pulled me toward the door.

Her anger crested as she marched to the car. Fury practically radiated off of her.

“I just don’t understand, Sydney,” Mom said. She slammed the door. “We’ve worked toward Rutgers for so long and now you just want to forget it? What about all our planning?”

Mom and I had never made any decision without a pros-and-cons list and a lot of discussion. We were organized to an obsessive degree. Our budget spreadsheet was taped to our refrigerator. We kept a shared online calendar detailing where we’d be at every moment. Every one of her binders and notebooks for nursing school had been meticulously organized. Setting up my bullet journal every month was my happy place.

“I planned for NYU too,” I said calmly, even though my heart was racing. “I picked my classes and housing. I figured out how to pay for it. I just didn’t do it with *you*.”

She opened her mouth and then closed it, blinking back tears. That had come out harsher than I’d intended. But her sadness hardened quickly and shifted to anger.

"You just want to take the Holmans' money like it doesn't matter that you didn't have to work for it?" she said. "That you didn't *earn* it?"

I rolled my eyes. "So many people's parents or grandparents pay for them to go to college. Why do I have to struggle just because you did?"

Mom pinched the bridge of her nose. This was a familiar argument. We'd had it when I first got my acceptance letters and she decided where I'd be going.

"I'm not saying you should struggle," she said. "I'm saying it's important to take ownership over your successes. If you let the Holmans pay for college, then it's not yours, Syd. It's theirs too. And after spending the last eighteen years allowing them be a part of your life, of them constantly giving me advice and judging the way I was raising you, I was . . ." She paused. "I was really looking forward to having some autonomy."

"So this isn't really about me at all," I said with a smirk, finally understanding. "You just want Grandma and Grandpa out of *your* life."

She turned to face me. "No, sweet. I want you to go to school and live your life. Now you have to be accountable to *them*."

I shook my head. "I was always going to be a part of their lives. I'm sorry you don't like them, that you don't love them like I do, but they paid for me to go to private school for thirteen years so that I could even dream of going to a school like NYU. Not going feels like a slap in the face to all of us."

I sounded confident, but my throat was tight. She couldn't take this away from me. Not after all the planning I'd done. All the dreaming.

"Sometimes it's better to struggle to reach your dreams," Mom said. "You appreciate it more when you work for it."

"I've worked every summer since I was twelve," I grumbled. "I appreciate it, believe me."

She was quiet, but her eyes were watery. "I'm sorry you had to do that," she finally whispered.

"I'm not asking you to apologize," I said. "*I'm* sorry. For not telling you about NYU. And that Grandma and Grandpa are difficult, and that they're in your life because of me."

Mom reached out for me, awkwardly hugging me across the armrest. "I wouldn't change that for anything in the world."

"Remember that at Thanksgiving," I said with a laugh. It got a smile.

"Let's go home," Mom said, turning the car on. "I have to be at the hospital at six tonight."

She wasn't over it, that much was clear. Moving to New York instead of living at home was going to take some convincing. But it had been a long day, and there was an entire summer ahead to work on that. It would probably take me that long.

WHILE MOM CHANGED into scrubs, I texted my best friend, Elliot, to tell him I was finished with lunch.

Come to band practice, he wrote back. I need your help with something.

I cringed. Elliot was an incredible musician, but his band-mates were usually mediocre at best. He'd had a revolving door when it came to bass players, especially. So unless he needed me to sing lead while he trained a new member, I avoided his basement band practices.

But Elliot was a year younger than me, and this was our

last summer together before I left for school. I could make an exception this time.

I changed out of my graduation dress and looked for my favorite pair of jeans. I knew I'd put them on top of my dresser with the T-shirt and bra I'd planned to change into. But the shirt and bra were on the floor, and my jeans were nowhere to be found.

I knew where to look. Under my bed, my cat, Turkey, had created a nest. This was a habit of hers—and the reason I usually kept my door closed when she was home alone.

Turkey meowed angrily as I scooped her up and pulled my jeans out. They were warm. And covered in fur.

"You little thief," I said. I kissed the soft fur between her ears before setting her on my bed. "You have, like, six cat beds. Why do you have to steal my clothes?"

Turkey ignored me as she curled up on my pillow.

Once I was dressed, I put in my earbuds and pressed play on The Playlist—my dad's favorite music. Hundreds of hours' worth. I'd found it on a flash drive buried in the junk drawer when I was twelve and downloaded the songs onto my phone. It was the only remnant of him I had, and that's only because Mom seemed to not know it existed.

When I listened to it, there were fleeting moments where I thought I knew what kind of guy my dad was. He was a kid in the eighties who loved pop music by male singers but wasn't afraid to put Whitney Houston and Bonnie Raitt on a mixtape. He was an angst-ridden teenager in the nineties who listened to Pearl Jam and Nirvana and, later, My Chemical Romance and the Killers. He embraced old-school hip-hop from the eighties and R & B from the turn of the millennium. He loved soul and Motown, swing and big band. There was at least two hours' worth of New Orleans blues and jazz.

And, of course, there was the occasional nod to his New Jersey heritage with Bruce Springsteen and Bon Jovi. But just as I thought I'd put a finger on him during a long run of Stevie Wonder, Ray Charles, Al Green, and Otis Redding, he'd switch to the Cure and Blondie and Talking Heads.

The current song in my ears was Sam Cooke's "Bring It on Home to Me," which always brought back flashes of what was either a memory or a dream. I couldn't really be sure which.

I pictured my dad in front of an upright piano, his back to me as I sat on the floor. I could feel the vibration of the music when I pressed my hands against the hardwood. Dad was no Sam Cooke, but his voice was soft and soothing as I swayed along with the music.

A moment later, Dad was sitting next to me on the edge of my bed.

"Hey, kid," he said. His brown eyes were kind, not glassy or clouded with intoxication.

I didn't have many photos of him, and they were all more than fifteen years old, but the image I had of him in my head was clear, accurate or not. He was average height, not much taller than me, and thin, almost scrawny, with dark blond hair that he kept short to control the curl. He had an easy smile and a square jaw that looked like mine.

I wasn't surprised to see him. When I was a kid, after my real dad left us, this version of him was my imaginary friend. Plenty of only children have imaginary friends, so that's not weird. (Right?) We had tea parties and played board games. I'd put on recitals, singing my heart out for an audience of him and my stuffed animals.

But as I got older, I kept imagining him. I kept talking to him. Because talking to this imaginary version of my dad was as close as I'd ever get to the real thing.

Sometimes the pain of missing him felt like an actual hole through my chest. How was it possible to miss someone I didn't even know?

"She's being impossible again," I said. I didn't bother to remove the earbud. Imaginary Dad could hear me just fine.

His smile was sympathetic. "I know your mom is tough sometimes, but she does it out of love."

Even my imagination couldn't help trying to forgive Mom.

But even with Dad's music in my ears and his invented sympathy tempering my anger and guilt, I could practically feel the tension through the wall between Mom's bedroom and mine.

It was a small apartment; there wasn't really space for arguments. It was too likely Mom and I would run into each other on our way to the bathroom. Our tight quarters forced reconciliation.

But this time, even though we'd both apologized, the matter wasn't settled. And there was no way to change that when we were both convinced that we were right.

So instead of pretending everything was fine, I headed to Elliot's house.

I COULD HEAR the music before I even reached the front porch. It wasn't good.

I didn't bother knocking because no one would be able to hear me over the noise anyway. Elliot's mom was sitting at the kitchen table, noise-canceling headphones over her ears, a book in front of her. When I tapped her on the shoulder, she jumped.

"Sorry, Mrs. K," I said loudly as she removed the headphones and pulled a foam earplug from one ear. Doubling up today. That wasn't a good sign. "How long has this been going on?"

“Feels like forever,” she said wearily. “But really just the last hour. They still have an hour to go before our neighbors are allowed to complain. Thank God for the homeowners association.”

I waved as she put her headphones back on and steeled myself to enter the basement. Elliot had padded the walls with foam, and carpet covered the floor and ceiling, but that didn’t make the music sound any better.

Elliot was keeping pretty good time on bass. Even though he’d only been playing for a few weeks, he seemed to have a decent feel for the instrument. It looked like his fingers might be a little weak for the strings, though. His usually pale skin was red with the effort. His neon pink hair stuck to his forehead with sweat.

The guy on drums, Arlo, was sweating through his T-shirt and still not keeping up. He winced every time he messed up too, so it was obvious. As if Elliot’s glare wasn’t enough of an indicator. Or the lack of an actual beat.

And the lead guitarist, Maddie, wasn’t keeping up with anyone. The chords she was playing, even to someone who had never so much as plucked a string, were audibly off-key. She could sing, though, and lent a credible air to their attempt at covering an early Beatles song, one of the up-tempo, peppy ones, at an alarmingly slow pace. I couldn’t figure out which song it was until the new guitarist turned around from where he was modeling how Maddie *should* be playing and she started singing the refrain.

Midcentury pop music was never meant to be played that slowly. It highlighted the flaws in the songwriting.

The new guitarist, a tall, dark-haired guy with a hint of shadow along his sharp jaw, was admirably attempting to keep up with the off-sync time of Elliot and the drummer. I

perched on the arm of the couch and pretended to be looking at my phone while discreetly admiring him.

Don't bother, I heard in my head. *Musicians aren't worth the trouble*. Inner-conscience Sydney was right. My dad was a musician, and look how he'd ended up: broke and alone. I imagined him playing trumpet on street corners, the only people hearing his music on their way to somewhere better.

That hadn't stopped me from dating musicians at first. When Elliot started the band my sophomore year, his drummer and I started dating. I joined the band in order to be around him more, which he found "clingy," and quit. And broke up with me.

After that, Elliot made me swear not to fall for any of the other guys who joined. I quit the band, but none of the new guys had wanted to go out with me anyway. Or even make out with me.

But this one . . . I'd have trouble keeping my promise for him. He looked so happy while he was playing, grinning like a kid at recess. When Arlo and Maddie screwed up, he just played louder to cover their incompetence. At one point, he closed his eyes as if he was focused so intently on the music, he had to block out everything else. Or maybe he was just trying not to laugh at how terrible they sounded. With his eyes closed, though, I had free rein to ogle the hell out of him, and, God, was he ogle-worthy.

When I finally tore my gaze away, Elliot was shaking his head at me. I stuck my tongue out at him.

Mercifully, the song ended, and Elliot announced that they would take a break while he massaged his fingers. I could see the blisters on them from across the room.

Elliot waved the new guy over to me while Arlo and Maddie headed outside to vape. And probably to make out.

“Syd, this is Grayson,” Elliot said. “He’s playing with us until Maddie gets stronger. And he’s attempting to save us from ourselves.”

As I caught Grayson’s eye, we shared a conspiratorial smile that made butterflies take flight in my stomach.

“Great!” I managed to say without laughing. “How’s he going to do that?”

“You may have noticed Grayson can actually play?” Elliot said.

I nodded slowly, trying not to appear overly enthusiastic. “Yeah, but anyone’s better than Rhythmless Nation out there.” I jerked a thumb toward the back door, where Maddie and Arlo stood.

Grayson turned a laugh into a cough, but I caught it. My chest swelled with pride.

Elliot ignored it. “And it gives me the chance to play bass,” he continued, “which, apparently, is my destiny since no bassist in all of New Jersey wants to be in my band.”

“I don’t understand,” I said, tearing my eyes from Grayson’s chiseled cheekbones to Elliot’s rounded baby face. “You actually play drums and guitar well—like, professional-level well. Why do you have to play bass and let those two destroy whatever chance you had at being a band people might actually want to listen to?”

“Because,” he said, pausing as if that were explanation enough. “Maddie and Arlo only know how to play guitar and drums, so I had to fill the missing spot. Why *not* me?”

Calling what they did “knowing how to play” was being generous, but that wasn’t the point I wanted to make at the moment.

“Because you already play, like, five other instruments! And annoyingly well!” I said.

It was exhausting having this argument for the twentieth time, but I didn't understand how it could be so easy for him. Just like it was for my dad, who played piano, trumpet, and guitar. Professionally. It should have been in my genes, but I'd never had the patience to learn even one instrument. I took piano lessons for two years and barely made any progress. I worried too much about being perfect, which just made me impatient and angry. My piano teacher quit after I threw one too many temper tantrums.

There would have been years of playing terribly in my future if I wanted to be as good as my dad or Elliot. So I gave up and stuck to singing.

But that didn't stop me from being jealous of people who could play an instrument—or multiple ones. And sometimes my jealousy came out as anger.

Elliot just shook his head sadly. "Never mind."

I looked to Grayson for help, focusing on his deep blue eyes. "Do you play five instruments too? Do I need to go join Maddie and Arlo in the dunces' corner?"

Grayson chuckled and shook his head. "Not really. Just guitar. A little bass."

Elliot snorted.

"Don't let him fool you," he said. "Grayson's going to . . ." But he stopped and waved a hand as if he was in agony. "No, you tell her. I can't. It hurts too much to even say the words out loud. I'm too jealous."

I looked back at Grayson. "Tell me what?"

"I'm going to Juilliard," he said, ducking his head shyly.

My mouth dropped open. I searched his face for a hint that he was lying, but his expression stayed neutral. He didn't start laughing or even let his lips twitch.

"No! People don't actually go to Juilliard," I said.

He tilted his head. "What do you mean? Of course they do. About eight hundred of them every year."

I was incredibly gullible, but I wasn't going to let myself look like an idiot in front of this guy. Except he still wasn't laughing.

"Are you serious?"

He didn't answer. He just pulled out his phone and started scrolling through his emails until he found the one he wanted. And then he held out the phone to me.

Dear Mr. Grayson Armstrong, the email read. It is the admission committee's pleasure to welcome you to the music program at The Juilliard School for admission in the fall semester of 2021. Welcome to the class of 2025!

I stopped reading after that. "Oh," I managed, trying not to focus on the heat that had risen to my cheeks. "Um, congratulations?"

Grayson suddenly burst out laughing, a deep, resonant sound that made the flush in my cheeks spread downward.

His laugh trailed off as he reached out and put his hand on my shoulder. "Don't worry about it," he said. "I'm still having trouble believing it myself."

He dropped his hand after only a second, but I could still feel its weight and warmth as he asked me where I was going to school.

"NYU," I answered. I couldn't keep the grin from my face.

"Oh, awesome! We could hang out when school starts," Grayson said.

Somehow, I managed to squeak out, "Or before then, even."

He nodded normally, as if I hadn't just sort of asked him out. Or maybe that kind of thing happened to him every day. When you're that hot, it must be at least a weekly occurrence.

But just then, Maddie and Arlo walked back in, saving me from making a bigger fool of myself. Arlo's amber skin had a tinge of pink, and Maddie's Dresden Dolls shirt was slightly off-center. They'd definitely been making out.

The band, if you can call them that, went back to practicing, with Elliot and Grayson gently coaching the couple through the songs. I curled up in one corner of the couch, pretending to look at my phone as I snuck glances at Grayson. I only caught him looking back once, but he also could have been looking past me, trying to read the clock.

"I better get going before El's mom comes down and turns the hose on us," Grayson said when I pointed at my wrist to signal that it was six o'clock. "At least that's what she threatened to do last week."

I watched him head for the basement stairs. He waved at me before turning the corner. I turned back to Elliot with a dreamy smile.

"Don't," he said, flipping his neon hair from his eyes. "He's got a girlfriend. They've been together for, like, two years, so it's not going to happen."

My heart burst into flames. "Why?" I beseeched the basement ceiling. "But we had a connection, I'm sure of it."

Elliot grinned. "Yeah, I'm sure you did," he said.

He'd heard me say that too many times since we'd met in his freshman year. Initially, I even thought Elliot was hitting on me because he kept complimenting my outfits, but when I tactfully tried to turn him down, he less tactfully told me he was "as gay as a flamingo on Fire Island." In my defense, his hair was a very normal dull brown back then.

"Grayson," I sighed. "What a great name."

Elliot just rolled his eyes.

"Hey, why did you even ask me to come over, if not to

introduce me to my future husband?" I asked as I flopped onto the couch.

His face brightened. "I want you to sing so Maddie can focus on playing first. Do you think you can step in for a little while she works with Grayson?" My grimace betrayed my reluctance, so he added a "Please?"

Singing was fun, an escape, but I couldn't let it be a passion. I joined the choir and the Madrigals for my college applications, not to practice. I also joined the yearbook and film clubs, so my interests would seem diverse. I turned the lyrics I wrote into poems so they served a practical purpose: I could submit them to the literary magazine. A few of them even got published.

For four years, my focus was on crafting my résumé to be the perfect candidate for a school like NYU. So I could study something that would get me a job outside of Plainville, New Jersey, that paid enough money so I wouldn't struggle like my mom did.

Singing was not a career. Music was not a future. My dad's fall from promising musician to deadbeat was proof of that.

I wanted a future. I wanted a good job, health insurance, marriage, kids, pets—I wanted all of it. And music wasn't going to get me there. But I could help Elliot out . . . if it meant being in close proximity to Grayson.

"Okay," I said.

"Thank you!" he cried, throwing his arms around me. "Let's try something now."

I nodded. "Acoustically, though," I whispered. "So your mom doesn't murder us."

He strummed the first few chords. I tried to ignore the rush of adrenaline. But I couldn't help smiling as I started to sing. I could try to lie to myself, but the truth was: I loved it.

WAYS TO CONVINCE MOM TO LET ME GO TO NYU:

- Lie and say I got a scholarship
Problem: she'll want to see proof
- Agree to live at home
Problem: I have to live at home
- Agree to come home every weekend
Problem: I have to come home every weekend
- Tell her I'll pay back Grandma and Grandpa once I have a job
Problem: I may never make enough money to pay them back
- ... ?