

six months earlier

shouldn't be reading the notes.

Hailey trims a rose and passes it to me. As I attach the note to the stem with sparkly pink ribbon, I read it. I can't help it. This one's a little over-the-top, but it's still sweet. I give it to Olivia and she drops it in the classroom-specific bucket.

"No way! You guys . . ." Olivia snorts, laughing hard as she turns the card over in her hand. I guess she's reading them, too. "I can't tell who wrote this but . . . poor boy. This is so cheesy."

Someone's attempt at heartfelt poetry makes its way around the circle. Alexis falls back against my bed in hysterics. Kaitlyn and Hailey double over on my rug. Eventually, I join in.

"This is mean. Let's not read them," I say, hiding the rose in the middle of the bucket, wanting to protect this anonymous

guy who put his heart on the line for some girl in his calculus class named Jessica.

Olivia grabs the stack of cards in front of me and starts thumbing through them. “God, who are these people and how do we not know any of them?”

“We’re not losers?” Alexis offers.

“It’s a big school,” Hailey counters.

“Okay, back to work. The flowers are wilting.” Kaitlyn’s still laughing as she snaps back to her role as the leader of our Valentine’s Day fundraiser. “Olivia, since you like the notes so much, switch places with Samantha.”

Olivia shakes her head, and her ponytail goes flying. “No way. I like my job.”

“I’ll switch. My hand’s getting tired anyway,” Hailey says, and the two of us trade spots.

I grab a rose out of the bucket and pick the scissors up off the floor. The instant I slide my fingers through the handles, this thought hits me out of nowhere, and before I have time to react I feel my brain sink its teeth in and latch on tight, already preparing to fight me for it. My hand starts trembling and my mouth goes dry.

It’s just a thought.

I let the scissors fall to the floor and I shake out my hands a few times, looking around the circle to be sure no one’s watching me.

I’m in control.

I try again. Rose in one hand, scissors in the other, I squeeze

my fingers together, but my palms feel clammy and my fingers are tingling and I can't get a solid grip. I look up at Kaitlyn, sitting directly across from me, watching her face twist and blur as a wave of nausea passes over me.

Breathe. Find a new thought.

If I cut it once, I'll keep going. I know I will. I'll move on to the next rose, and the next one, and I'll keep cutting until there's nothing left but a huge pile of stems, leaves, and petals.

After that, I'll massacre those syrupy sweet, carefully written notes. Every single one of them.

God, that's so twisted.

Then I'll take the scissors to Olivia's ponytail and cut right through that hair tie.

Shit. New thought. New thought.

"I need a glass of water," I say, standing and hoping none of them notice the sweat beading up on my forehead.

"Now?" Kaitlyn asks. "Come on, Samantha, you'll hold everything up."

My legs are wobbly and I'm not sure I can trust them to get me downstairs, but somehow the scissors are gone and the banister is in my hand instead. I head straight into the kitchen and run my hands under the water.

The water is cold. Listen to the water.

"Are you okay?" Paige's voice breaks through the chatter in my head. I hadn't even seen my little sister sitting at the counter, doing her homework. That's when I spot the knife block, full of knives. And a pair of scissors.

I could slice right through her hair.

I take big steps backward until I slam into the refrigerator. My knees give out and I slide down to the floor, gripping the sides of my head, burying my face in my hands to make it dark, repeating the mantras.

“Sam. Open your eyes.” Mom’s voice sounds far away, but I obey her words, and when I do, the two of us are nose to nose. “Talk to me. Now.”

I look over at the staircase, wide-eyed.

“Don’t worry,” she says. “They won’t find out. They’re upstairs.”

I hear Mom whispering to Paige, telling her to take a bag of chips up to my room and keep my friends distracted.

Then she grabs both of my hands so hard, her wedding ring digs into one of my knuckles. “They’re just thoughts,” she says calmly. “Say it, please.”

“They’re just thoughts.” I can echo her words but not the steadiness in her voice.

“Good. You’re in control.” When I look away from her she grips my arms harder.

“I’m in control.”

She’s wrong. I’m not.

“How many thoughts does the brain automatically deliver in a single day?” Mom moves on to facts to help me center myself.

“Seventy thousand,” I whisper as tears splash onto my jeans.

“That’s right. Do you *act* on seventy thousand thoughts a day?”

I shake my head.

“Of course you don’t. This thought was one in seventy thousand. It’s not special.”

“It’s not special.”

“Good.” Mom pinches my chin and lifts my head, forcing me to look at her again. “I love you, Sam.” She smells like her favorite lavender-scented lotion, and I inhale it, feeling a host of newer, prettier thoughts overpowering the darker, scarier ones. “Whatever you’re thinking, it’s okay. It doesn’t mean *anything* about you. Got it? Now tell me.”

The two of us have been here before. It hasn’t happened in a long time, not like this, but Mom slips right into her assigned role as if it’s second nature. She’s well trained.

“Scissors,” I whisper, dropping my head to my chest, feeling dirty and sick and humiliated. I hate telling her these awful thoughts, but I hate the thought spiral even more, and this is my ticket out. I’m well trained, too.

“The roses. Olivia’s hair and . . . Paige . . .” Mom doesn’t make me finish. She wraps her arms around me and I grab ahold of her T-shirt, sobbing into her shoulder, telling her I’m sorry.

“You have nothing to be sorry for.” She pulls away and kisses my forehead. “Now stay here. I’ll be right back.”

“Please don’t,” I beg, but I know she won’t listen. She’s

doing what she has to do. I dig my fingernails into the back of my neck three times, over and over again until she returns. When I look up, she's crouched down in front of me again, holding the scissors flat in her hand.

"Take them, please."

I don't want to touch them, but I don't have a choice. My fingertip connects with the cold metal and I let it slide over the blade, lightly, slowly, just tickling the surface. When I feel the handle, I curl my fingers through the holes. Mom's hair is dangling in my face.

I could cut it. But I would never do that.

"Good. It's just a pair of scissors. They triggered a few scary thoughts, but you won't act on them because *you*, Samantha McAllister, are a good person." Her voice sounds closer now.

I drop the scissors on the floor and give them a hard push to get them as far away from me as possible. I throw my arms around Mom's shoulders, hugging her hard, hoping this is the last time we go through this but knowing it isn't. The anxiety attacks are like earthquakes. I'm always relieved when the ground stops shaking, but I know there will be another one eventually, and again, I'll never see it coming.

"What am I going to tell them?"

My friends can't know about my OCD or the debilitating, uncontrollable thoughts, because my friends are normal. And perfect. They pride themselves on normalcy and perfection, and they can't *ever* find out how far I am from those two things.

"Paige is sitting in for you on rose duty. The girls think

you're helping me with something in the kitchen." Mom hands me a dish towel so I can clean myself up. "Go back upstairs whenever you're ready."

I sit alone for a long time, taking deep breaths. I still can't look at the scissors on the far end of the kitchen floor, and I'm pretty sure Mom will hide all the sharp objects for the next few days, but I'm okay now.

Still, I can hear this one thought hiding in the dark corners of my mind. It doesn't attack like the others, but it's frightening in a totally different way. Because it's the one that never leaves. And it's the one that scares me most.

What if I'm crazy?

now

more than anything

Lane three. It's always lane number three. My coaches think it's funny. Quirky. A *thing*, like not washing your lucky socks or growing a rally beard. And that's perfect. That's all I want them to know.

I step up to the top of the block and twist at the waist, shaking out my arms and legs. Squeezing my toes tight around the edge, I look down at the water and run both thumbs over the block's scratchy tape three times.

"Swimmers, take your marks." Coach Kevin's voice echoes off the clubhouse walls at the far end of the pool, and when he blows his whistle, my body's response is purely Pavlovian. Palm over hand, my elbows lock as I press my arms into my ears and throw myself forward, stretching and reaching and holding the position until my fingertips slice through the surface.

And then, for ten blissful seconds, there's no noise at all except the sound of water *whooshing* past my ears.

I kick hard and lock in my song. The first one that pops into my head is a happy tune with catchy lyrics, so I start my butterfly stroke, throwing both arms over my head in perfect synchronization with the beat. Kick, kick, throw. Kick, kick, throw. One, two, three.

Before I know it I'm touching the opposite end of the pool, doing a tight turn, and pushing hard off the wall. I don't look up or left or right. As coach says, right now, at this moment in the race, no one matters but you.

My head leaves the water every few seconds, and when it does, I can hear the coaches screaming at us to get our chins down or our hips up, to straighten our legs or arch our backs. I don't hear my name, but I check myself anyway. Today, everything feels right. I feel right. And fast. I increase the tempo of the song and kick it into gear for the last few strokes, and when my fingertips connect with the edge of the pool, I pop up and steal a glance at the clock. I shaved four-tenths of a second off my best time.

I'm breathing hard as Cassidy gives me a fist bump from lane four and says, "Damn . . . you're gonna slaughter me at county this weekend." She's won the county championship three years in a row. I'll never beat her, and I know she's just being nice, but it feels good to hear her say it anyway.

The whistle blows again and someone dives off the block

above me, signaling my turn to exit. I pull myself up out of the water, peeling off my swim cap as I head for my towel.

“Whoa! Where on earth did that come from?” When I look up, I’m eye to eye with Brandon. Or, more accurately, eye to *chest* with Brandon. I force myself to keep looking up, past his thin T-shirt and to his eyes, even though the temptation to check out the way his shorts hug his hips is almost more than I can resist.

During my first summer at the club, Brandon was just an older teammate with an insanely fast freestyle who always put up the most points in meets and taught the little kids to swim. But for the last two summers he’s returned from college as a junior coach—my coach—and that makes him strictly off-limits. And even hotter.

“Thanks.” I’m still trying to catch my breath. “I guess I just found a good rhythm.”

Brandon shows me his perfect teeth, and those crinkles next to his eyes are even more pronounced. “Would you do that again at county, please?”

I try to come up with a funny comeback, something that will keep him smiling at me like this, but instead my cheeks get hot while he stares at me, waiting for me to reply. I look at the ground, chastising myself for my lack of creativity while I watch the water drip from my suit, forming a puddle underneath my feet.

Brandon must follow my gaze because he suddenly gestures

at the row of towels strewn across the wall behind him and says, “Stay there. Don’t move.”

A few seconds later he’s back. “Here.” He wraps a towel around my shoulders and slides it back and forth a few times, and I wait for him to drop the ends, but he doesn’t. I look up at his eyes and realize he’s staring at me. Like . . . maybe he wants to kiss me. And I know I’m looking at him like I want him to, because I do. It’s all I think about.

His eyes are still locked on mine, but I know he’ll never make the first move, so I take one brave step forward, then another, and without overthinking what I’m about to do, I press my dripping wet suit against his T-shirt, feeling the water soak it through to his skin.

He lets out a breath as he balls the ends of the towel in his fists and uses it to pull me even closer. My hands leave his hips and find his back, and I feel his muscles tense beneath my palms as he tips his head down and kisses me. Hard. And then he pulls on my towel again.

His mouth is warm and he parts his lips, and oh my God, this is finally happening, and even though there are people everywhere and I keep hearing the whistle blow and the coaches calling out behind me, I don’t care, because right now I just want to—

“Sam? You okay?” I blink fast and shake my head as Brandon releases the towel and I feel it fall slack at my sides. “Where’d you go, kid?”

He’s still standing two steps away and not even the slightest

bit damp. And I'm not a kid. I'm sixteen. He's only nineteen. It's not that different. He adjusts his baseball cap and gives me that ridiculously adorable smile of his. "I thought I lost you for a second there."

"No." You did the exact opposite of losing me. My chest feels heavy as the fantasy floats up into the air and disappears from sight. "I was just thinking about something."

"I bet I know."

"You do?"

"Yeah. And you have nothing to worry about. Push yourself like *that* at county and keep swimming year-round, and you'll have your choice of college scholarships." He starts to say something else, but Coach Kevin yells for everyone to take a spot on the wall. Brandon gives me a chummy pat on the shoulder. A coachlike pat. "I know how badly you want this, Sam."

"More than you could possibly understand." He's still two steps away. I wonder what would happen if I *really* opened up my towel and wrapped him up in it.

"Sam. Wall!" Coach Kevin yells. He points at the rest of the team, already gathered and staring at me. I squeeze in next to Cassidy, and when Coach is out of earshot, she elbows me and whispers, "Okay, that was cute. That thing with the towel."

"Wasn't it?" I shoot her a surprised look. At the beginning of the summer, Cassidy called him "Coach Crush," but over the last few weeks she's become increasingly irritated with me for not giving up.

"I said it was cute, not that it means anything."

“Maybe it does.”

“Sam. Sweetie. Really. It doesn’t. He grabbed your towel and dried you off a bit. But that’s it. Because he has a girlfriend. In college.”

“So?” I lean forward, trying not to make it obvious that I’m looking for him. He’s over by the office, drinking a soda and talking with one of the lifeguards.

“So. He has a girlfriend. In *college*,” she repeats, stressing the last word. “He talks about her all the time, and it’s obvious to everyone except you that he’s totally in love with her.”

“Ouch.”

“Sorry. It had to be done.” Cassidy piles her long red hair on top of her head in a messy bun and then grips my arm with both hands. “I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know.” She comes in closer. “Look around, Sam,” she says, gesturing to a long line of our teammates. “There are plenty of fish in the fancy-private-swim-club sea.”

I look around and see boys in tight Speedos with solid abs and muscular arms, their skin tanned by the Northern California sun, their bodies lean and solid after three months in the water, but none of them are anywhere near as flawless as Brandon. Even if I did find one of them remotely attractive, what’s the point now? Summer’s nearly over.

Cassidy tilts her head to one side, pouting dramatically. She brings her fingertip to my nose and sighs. “What am I going to do without you, Sam?”

My stomach clenches into a tight fist as she voices a thought

that's been haunting me since the first day of August. Like all my summer friends, Cassidy has never known me outside the pool. She has no idea who I am when I'm not here, so she doesn't know how backward she has it.

"You'll be fine," I say, because it's true. Me? I'm not so sure.

My psychiatrist nailed it back in June, when I practically floated into her office and announced that I'd taken my last final. She strode over to the minifridge, poured sparkling apple cider into two plastic champagne flutes, and said, "To the triumphant return of Summer Sam" as we clinked glasses.

But it's coming to an end. In two weeks, I'll be back in school, Cassidy will be in L.A., and Brandon will be at college. I'll be missing them, along with my early morning dives into lane number three.

I'll be Samantha again. And more than anything, I'll be missing Sam.

five of us

“You look fantastic,” Mom says as I step into the kitchen. I’d better. I spent the last hour putting myself together for the first day of school. I left my hair down and ironed it straight. I’m wearing a sheer top over a white camisole, skinny jeans, and the wedges I begged Mom to buy me. My eyes are lined, my lips defined, and my foundation is effectively masking the stress-induced breakout on my chin.

“Thank you.” I hug her tight, hoping she knows I’m not thanking her for the compliment alone. It’s for everything she’s done for me this summer. For coming to all my swim meets and cheering so loudly, she’s hoarse every Sunday night. It’s for all those late-night talks, especially over the last week when Cassidy left for L.A., Brandon went back to the East Coast, and

the first day of school began to loom over me like an ominous storm cloud.

Mom's wearing that encouraging smile she always plasters on when she knows I'm nervous. "Stop looking at me like that, please," I say, fighting the urge to roll my eyes. "I'm fine. Really."

My cell phone chirps and I pull it from my pocket to check the screen. "Alexis wants a ride to school today."

"Why?" Mom asks as she fills a bowl with cereal for Paige. "She knows it's against the law to drive with passengers in your first year." Of course Alexis knows the law, she's just surprised I'm following it since most people don't.

I text her back, telling her I can't give her a ride because if my parents found out, I'd lose my car. I hit SEND and flip the phone around so Mom can read the screen. She gives an approving nod.

I shove the phone back in my pocket and hitch my backpack over my shoulder. "Have a good day, sixth grader," I say to Paige as she spoons a big bite of cereal into her mouth.

As I head for the garage, I'm still texting back and forth with Alexis, who's begging me to change my mind. I finally drop the phone into the cup holder as I pull out of the driveway, ending the discussion without ever telling her the real reason I won't pick her up today. Or any time in the near future.

Earlier this month, on my sixteenth birthday, Dad took me to the DMV to get my license, and when we got home a few hours later, there was a used Honda Civic parked in our garage. It was totally unexpected, and it meant so much more

than regular transportation to me. It meant Mom, Dad, and my psychiatrist thought I could handle it.

I was dying to show off my new car, but Alexis, Kaitlyn, Olivia, and Hailey were all out of town on their respective family vacations, and Cassidy was grounded, so I just drove around by myself for the rest of the afternoon listening to music and enjoying how the steering wheel felt in my hands.

But every once in a while, I'd glance down at the odometer, fascinated by the way the numbers changed. I felt this strange charge whenever the last digit hit the number three.

When I finally pulled into the driveway that evening, the last digit was resting on a six, so I backed out again and drove around the block a few times until the odometer stopped where it belonged. And now I have to do that every time I park. I'm not about to let Alexis and the rest of my friends in on my secret, so I'm happy to have the law as an excuse to drive alone.

As I pull into the student lot, the odometer is on nine, so I have to drive all the way to the far end by the tennis courts before I can park on a three. As I cut the ignition, my stomach turns over violently and my mouth feels dry, so I sit there for a minute taking deep breaths.

It's a new year. A fresh start.

The anxiety eases as I walk through campus. Avery Peterson squeals when she sees me. We hug and promise to catch up later, and then she returns to Dylan O'Keefe and grabs his hand.

He was my obsession for the first three months of freshman

year, starting when he asked me to the homecoming dance and ending when Nick Adler kissed me at a New Year's Eve party a few months later and promptly replaced him.

A few steps later, I spot Tyler Riola sitting with his lacrosse buddies at a table on the far end of the quad. He had my undivided attention for the first part of sophomore year, until I started dating Kurt Frasier, the only guy who wasn't a one-sided fixation. I liked Kurt. A lot. And he actually liked me back, at least for a few months.

Kurt was hard for me to shake, but Brandon finally took center stage in my mind when summer started. I picture him in his Speedo and, as I turn the corner, I wonder what he's doing right now.

I stop short. That can't be my locker.

The door is wrapped in bright blue paper and there's a giant silver bow tied around the middle. I run my hand across it. I can't believe they did this.

I glance up just in time to see the crowd part for Alexis. As usual, she looks like she just stepped off the cover of *Teen Vogue*, with her long blond hair, striking green eyes, and perfect skin. I can hear her high heels tapping on the concrete as her designer sundress swings with each step. She's holding a giant cupcake with purple and white frosting.

Kaitlyn is on her right, looking equally pretty but in a completely different way. She's exotic-pretty. Sexy-pretty. She's wearing a tight-fitting top with thin straps, and her dark wavy hair is cascading over her bare shoulders.

Hailey peels away from the pack and speeds toward me with her arms spread wide. She throws them around my neck and says, “God, you have no idea how much I missed you this summer!” I squeeze her tighter and tell her I missed her, too. She looks amazing, still tanned from her summer in Spain.

Olivia’s now within arm’s reach, so I grasp big chunks of her newly dyed jet-black hair with both hands. “Okay, this is totally working for you!” I tell her, and she pops her hip and says, “I know, right?”

As my friends close in, all the people around us stop what they’re doing to gather in a little tighter. Because that’s what happens when the Crazy Eights do *anything*. People watch.

We started calling ourselves that back in kindergarten, and it kind of stuck. There were eight of us until freshman year, when Ella’s family moved to San Diego and Hannah transferred to a private high school. Last year, Sarah landed the lead in the school play and started hanging out with her new drama club friends. And we were down to five.

That’s when I started to realize that friendships in odd numbers are complicated. Eight was good. Six was good. But five? Five was bad, because someone’s always the odd girl out. Often, that’s me.

“Happy birthday, gorgeous!” Alexis says, bouncing in place as she gives me the cupcake.

The smile on my face grows even wider. “My birthday was two weeks ago.”

“True, but we were all talking about how much it must suck

to have a summer birthday. None of us even got to celebrate with you.” I’m surprised Alexis hasn’t mentioned this earlier. I saw her twice last week, and both times we talked about the spa day her mom is planning and the new convertible she’s getting for *her* birthday.

“This is so perfect, you guys,” I say, holding up the cupcake and then pointing to the bow on my locker. “Seriously. Thank you.”

There’s a chorus of *You’re welcomes* and *We love yous*. And then Alexis steps forward. “Hey,” she whispers. “Sorry about all the texts this morning, but I have to talk to you about something and I was hoping to do it in private.”

“What’s up?” I try to make my voice sound light, but the second she said the words “I have to talk to you,” my stomach twisted right back into that tight knot I’ve been trying to loosen since the parking lot. Those words are never good.

“We’ll talk about it at lunch,” she says. And just when I was starting to feel like this was the best first day of school ever, I’m now dreading lunch.

Kaitlyn steps in to hug me. “Are you shaking?” she asks.

Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.

“Too much coffee this morning, I guess.” The warning bell rings and I turn to my locker and start dialing the combination with trembling fingers. “I’ll see you guys later.”

Once the Eights are gone, the rest of the crowd takes off to first period. I set the cupcake on the empty shelf and grab the door to steady myself.

Taped on the inside of my locker door, I see all the photos and mementos I've saved over the last two years. There are pictures of the five of us dressed up in the school colors for spirit week, and the four of us surrounding Kaitlyn when she won homecoming princess last year. There's a copy of the noise ordinance we got when Alexis's parents left town last Halloween and we threw this epic party people talked about for months afterward. Scattered around, covering any sliver of paint, are my ticket stubs. It's an impressive, eclectic collection—ranging from bands no one's ever heard of to names like Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, and Justin Timberlake—thanks to Olivia's dad, who owns an indie record label and always gets us seats in the VIP section.

I use the small mirror to check my makeup and whisper, "Don't. Freak. Out." Then I close the door and stare at the wrapping one more time, letting my fingertip trail across the surface, running my thumb across the silver bow.

"That was really nice." The voice is so faint, at first I wonder if I'm hearing things. I turn to see who spoke, but her locker is blocking her face.

"Excuse me?" I hope she didn't see me pathetically fondling the bow.

"You have really nice friends." She swings the door closed and walks over to me, pointing at the wrapping paper. I almost reply "Not always," but I catch myself. It's a new year. A new start. And today, I do have really nice friends.

“How’d they get your locker open?”

“They all know the combo. It’s kind of a birthday tradition. We’ve been wrapping each other’s lockers since middle school. This is only the second time they’ve wrapped mine, but you know, those were big birthdays. Thirteen and now . . .” I reach for the silver bow again. “Sixteen.”

Why am I telling her this?

I look around, realizing that the corridors are now empty. “I’m sorry. Do I know you?”

“Apparently not.” She points to the end of the row. “My locker has been there since freshman year, but we haven’t formally met or anything. I’m Caroline Madsen.”

I take her in, starting with her feet. Brown hiking boots. Baggy, faded jeans. An unbuttoned flannel shirt that might be considered cool if it belonged to her boyfriend, but I’m pretty sure that’s not the case. Underneath it, her T-shirt reads, WHAT WOULD SCOOPY DOO? That makes me laugh to myself. I continue up to her face. Not a stitch of makeup. A purple-and-white-striped ski cap, even though it’s the end of August. In California.

“Samantha McAllister.” The final bell rings, signaling that we’re both officially tardy on the first day of school.

She tugs on her shirtsleeve, uncovering an old, beat-up watch. “We’d better get to class. It was nice to meet you, Sam.”

Sam.

Last year, I asked the Eights to call me Sam. Kaitlyn

laughed and said that's her dog's name, and Olivia said it's a guy's name, and Alexis declared that she would never, *ever* go by Alex.

I watch Caroline round the corner, and by then, it's too late to correct her.