

## To My Sister, With Love.

This is not my story. This is not even about me at all. This is about them- Sam and Lara, the happy bride and groom, swaying slowly to the song on the dance floor.

I chose that song, you know. *It was his favorite.* She didn't even know that. She thought it was a "lovely song."

I also chose the wedding gown she was putting on, the cake flavor, the decoration they had for the reception venue, and everything. Why? Because I had to take care of her, it was *my* job as her big sister to make sure today went perfectly, and drowning myself in all those activities and preparations was the only way I knew I would survive today.

Waking up today was the hardest decision I had to make. Part of me kept wishing this was a dream and I would wake up, and none of the last couple of months happened—the relationship, the proposal, the...wedding.

As they continued to dance, my eyes clouded with envy as I watched him watch her. She beamed with joy as her eyes radiated with pure excitement. You could tell she was so in love with him. *Who wouldn't be?* His eyes traced in adoration at the contours of her face. His gaze, a tapestry of love and longing, speaks volumes without uttering a single word, and it felt like she was a masterpiece in his eyes- the embodiment of all his dreams and desires.

I could tell what she felt because I'd felt that way, too, when he'd looked at me. Somehow, he also made me feel like we were the only ones in the room, and somehow- I don't know how he did it- he made time stop. And now she gets to feel that way every day for the rest of their lives together. *She* gets to sleep beside him every night. *She* gets to wake up beside him every morning. *She* gets to make love to him, feel his touch on her body, his lips on her, and the symphony of whispered words shared between them. *She* gets to feel his intimate embrace. And I was NOT okay with that.

Every glance they shared pierced my soul, reminding me of what I could never have. Jealousy, a cruel companion, cast a shadow over my joy, leaving me yearning for a love that was not meant to be—a love I would never have again.

Suddenly, the air felt tense, and I could not breathe. I downed my wine in one gulp as I excused myself outside. *Few more hours for this...charade,* I reminded myself, taking slow breaths as I sat on one of the chairs, *and I would be on the next flight to wherever.*

"There you are." I heard behind me as I turned. It was Aunty Bose, my father's sister. "Is everything alright?" she asked, concern on her face.

I forced a smile, trying to portray the character of the excited big sister who did not care her baby sister was having a wedding before her. "I'm fine, Aunty. I just came for air." I half-truthed.

"It's a little stuffy in there, eh." She agreed, but the concern was still on her face. "But...is that all?"

I scoffed, avoiding eye contact. "I don't think I understand."

She heaved, taking a seat beside me.

"Do you want to hear something crazy?" She started. "You know, I always thought you and Sam were an item, or what do you people call it?" My eyes widened. "Oh, yes! You can imagine my surprise when I discovered he was actually Lara's boyfriend."

"What?! Aunty, w-wha...why...would you think that?" I stuttered.

"Why wouldn't I? He was always at the house to see you, and I could tell he was very fond of you, following you everywhere. Who wouldn't think you were boyfriend and girlfriend? You know you people never tell me anything..."

"...because there was nothing to tell, Aunty." I cut in. "Sam was- *is* one of my closest friends. We have been friends since our first year in the University, so it made sense we were always together. And when he started dating Lara, well, all that stopped."

"But..."

"But nothing, Aunty." I feigned a smile. "Besides, today is *not* about me, remember? It's about Lara..." I paused. "...and sure, Sam."

"And you?"

"And...me what? I am *absolutely* fine. I planned this wedding, remember? Everything was my idea, and I made sure today would go perfectly. And thankfully, it is." I inhaled, mentally trying to keep my cool. "So, let's not ruin anything by speculating untrue or imaginary things. Okay, Aunty?"

“And now, ladies and gentlemen,” The MC announced, interrupting whatever comeback Aunty Bose had. “If we would invite the maid of honor, the bride's sister, to come on stage for her speech.”

I got up, straightening my floral gown.

“That’s my cue,” I told her, my fake smile still on. “See you inside.”

All eyes fell on me as I came in, scanning the room packed with family, friends, and colleagues. I noticed the couple had stopped dancing and were seated in the booth reserved for them. The room was quiet as everyone waited expectantly for me. My legs trembled as I got on my feet and went to the stage. Every step I took felt like I had bricks tied to both my legs as they got heavier and heavier. I could also feel my hands shaking around the wine glass I held tightly as I loosened my grip for fear of shattering the glass. Nervous sweats almost streaked down my face, ruining my makeup.

I also saw him holding her hands, slightly stroking them as he had stroked mine, too. I bet he’s also whispering sweet “I love you” to her, making her heart flutter with every word, as mine had, but I had never admitted.

My eyes met and held hers as she smiled brightly and looked at me with pure happiness. I forced a smile back, nodding, willing myself to get through this part of the event without breaking down. I focused on just her; I couldn’t dare look at him, at least not now- my heart could not take it.

“I...” I paused, clearing my coarse voice as I kept my hands steady on the mic. “I remember when Lara told me she’d met my friend Sam at a book signing event, my first reaction was, ‘Surely it’s got to be another Sam because the Sam I know has never picked a book in his life!’” Laughter erupted from the crowd as I went on. “What started as an unconventional friendship between my friend and my little sister turned into something...special. Little did she know that that one event was just the beginning of a beautiful relationship with the person she would spend the rest of her life with.” My heart ached as I continued.

I took a deep breath. “Ever since our mother passed away 15 years ago, I’ve not only taken the role of the overprotective big sister, I’ve also stepped in as a mother to Lara. Her well-being, happiness, and satisfaction have always been my priority, so finding all that in Sam was a gift to all of us. I would go the extra mile, do anything for her, and even move mountains to ensure she’s happy. And that’s how much I love her...”

“...I love you too.” I could hear her say softly as she gently wiped her eyes with her thumb.

“And...Sam,” I started, daring to look up at him—big mistake. Our eyes locked for a second, and emotions flooded through me. *I cannot do this*, I thought to myself.

I closed my eyes, inhaling deeply.

*Sam, I cannot think of you without thinking of how many times we got in trouble in the university that we were almost even expelled. We had really good times...and bad times. You saw me in my highest and lowest moments and were there for me through it all.*

*Sam, you were one of my closest friends for many years until that one drunken night we blurred the line, and it turned into a sexual relationship none of us was mentally prepared for. We made it work for months; heck, it was almost perfect until you...You, Sam, fell in love with me. I still remember you pouring your heart to me and confessing your love. And I also remember saying I was not ready for a relationship, but the truth was, I was scared, Sam. I did not want to ruin our many years of friendship by getting into a relationship I thought would not be worth it and then breaking up and losing you forever.*

*But I still lost you, though. You ruined it already, didn't you? You just...moved on. And of all the people to start a relationship with, you picked MY sister. There are more than a thousand women out there, but you chose the one person you knew I could not hurt. I love you, Sam, I really do. But I love my sister more.*

*I don't know if you started this to get back at me or hurt me, but you made it work, and it was the worst feeling ever. And then, she'd fallen hard for you, but that was not a surprise; you were easy to love. From your cheesy jokes to how you gave people your attention when they talked. To the way you smile so genuinely, your eyes sparkle. To how every word that comes out of your mouth sounds like soft wool on the skin- so tender, yet so mighty in its significance. To the electrifying effect your touch causes and how it leaves people begging for more.*

*I told myself I could deal with that and get over you, but then you proposed to her within six months. I stayed up every night wondering if you even loved me like you claimed. If the conversation we had on my balcony that night eight months ago meant anything to you.*

*The truth is, Sam, I love you. I don't know when it started or how I developed these intense feelings, but I know you're all I've thought about these past months, and seeing you with Lara happy and in love has brought conflicting emotions for me.*

*I love Lara so much, too, and I was willing to let you go and genuinely be happy for you, but again, Sam, you had to ruin it, didn't you? Two nights ago, you came to me with regrets and were willing to walk*

*away from this wedding, Lara, and everything! You were ready to throw it all away if I would admit I was in love with you. I allowed myself to be swayed and to get carried away by your charms all over again, and we had sex- no, we fucked- right there on that same balcony without a care in the world. I would hate myself forever because, for a split second, I forgot the daughter of who I was and the promises I made my mother on her sick bed always to love and protect my baby sister and put her first. Yes, asking that of a 12-year-old was selfish, but who would say no to their dying mother?*

*Remembering how much you made Lara happy and how long she had looked forward to today, I told you that sleeping with you was a mistake, and I convinced you to get on with the wedding. Letting you go all over again was the hardest decision I ever made, but I could not do that to Lara- I could not break her and cause her that embarrassment. Yes, it was a terrible thing to do, and yes, I know you'd never love Lara the way you loved me, and a sick part of me is contented with that, but nothing a few months of couple therapy wouldn't fix.*

*I could make this speech all about how screwed up and terrible you are and how I think my sister is making a grave mistake getting married to you today, but you make her happy, Sam. You make her sooo happy, and I cannot even deny that. I take my share of the blame for being part of the problem, so I am just going to insert myself out of your lives until you can get over me and I can finally fall asleep without crying over you.*

*I have not told Lara I am leaving yet, but this is something I have to do. I would probably take a year out of the country to detox, recuperate, and maybe- just maybe- I would find love, too.*

I opened my eyes, exhaling loudly.

"And Sam," I repeated. "My best friend and now my...Brother, I am so happy to welcome you into our family. You make my sister very happy; everyone can see how much you love and cherish each other. Today, as you embark on this beautiful journey of marriage, I have no doubt that you will continue to be the loving and caring husband that Lara deserves. Cherish every moment together through the vicissitudes of life, and always remember the love that brought you here today." Tears rolled down my cheeks as I willed myself to be strong.

"So let's raise our glasses to Sam, the man who has captured Lara's heart and will continue to love and be there for her. May your love grow stronger with each passing day. And To Lara, the beautiful bride with the sweetest soul. May every day remind you of the beauty of today. I love you both." And I meant every word of that.