

How do you move forward when  
everything you love  
is on the line?

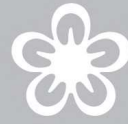


# YOU'VE REACHED SAM

DUSTIN THAO







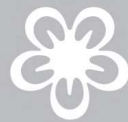
**YOU'VE  
REACHED**

**SAM**

DUSTIN THAO



WEDNESDAY BOOKS  
NEW YORK



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TO MY PARENTS, GRANDMA, AND DIAMOND



## PROLOGUE

The second I close my eyes, the memories play, and I find myself back at the beginning.

A few leaves roll in as he enters the bookstore. He wears a denim jacket, with the sleeves pushed up, a white sweater underneath. It's the third time he's come in since I started working here two weeks ago. His name is Sam Obayashi, the boy from my English class. I've been staring out the window throughout my shift, wondering if he'd come in again. For some reason, we haven't spoken to each other yet. He just browses the store as I ring up customers and restock the shelves. I can't tell if he's looking for something. Or if he likes that feeling of being inside a bookstore. Or if he came to see me.

As I move a book from the shelf, wondering if he knows my name, I catch the glint of brown eyes through the gap, looking back at me from the other side. We're silent for a moment too long. Then he smiles, and I think he's about to say something—but I shove the book between us before he has the chance. I grab the crate beside me and hurry to the back room. *What's wrong with me? Why didn't I smile back?* After scolding myself for ruining the moment, I gather some courage to go back out and introduce myself. But when I return from the back room, he's already gone.

On the front counter, I find something that wasn't there before. A cherry blossom, made of paper. I turn it over in my hands, admiring the folds.

*Did Sam leave this here?*

If I hurry outside, I might still catch him. But as soon as I rush out the door, the street vanishes, and I find myself entering a noisy café on the corner of Third Street, nearly two weeks later.

Round tables pop up from a wooden floor as teenagers crowd around them, snapping pictures and drinking from ceramic cups. I'm wearing a gray sweater, slightly oversized, and my brown hair is pinned back and brushed smooth. I catch Sam's voice before I see him, behind the counter taking someone's order. The swoop of dark hair. Maybe it's the apron, but



he appears taller from behind the register. I head for a table on the other end of the café, and set my things down. I take my time as I spread out my notebooks, summoning up courage to approach him, even if it's only to order my drink. But when I look up from the table, he's there beside me, holding a steaming cup.

"*Oh—*" I'm startled by his sudden presence. "This isn't mine."

"Yeah I know, you ordered this last time," Sam says, setting it down anyway. "A honey lavender latte, right?"

I stare at the cup, at the busy counter, and back at him. "Should I pay up there?"

He laughs. "No. I mean, it's on the house. Don't worry about it."

"Oh."

A silence between us. *Say something, Julie!*

"I can make you something else instead," he offers.

"No, this is fine—I mean ... *thank you.*"

"No problem," Sam says through a smile. He slides his hands into his apron pockets. "Your name is Julie, right?" He points to his name tag. "I'm Sam."

"Yeah, we're in the same English class."

"Right. Have you done the reading yet?"

"Not yet."

"Oh good," he sighs. "Me neither."

Some silence as he stands there. He smells faintly of cinnamon. Neither of us knows what to say. I look around. "Are you on a break?"

Sam stares back at the counter, rubbing his chin. "Well, my manager isn't in today, so I guess you could say that." He adds a smirk.

"I'm sure you deserve it."

"It would be my fifth one today, but who's counting?"

We both laugh. My shoulders relax a little.

"Is it okay if I sit here?"

"Sure..." I slide my things out of the way, letting him take the chair beside me.

"Where did you move here from again?" Sam asks.

"Seattle."

"I hear it rains a lot there."

"It does, yeah."

I smile as we sit together, talking for the first time, about school and the classes we're taking and little things about ourselves—he has a younger brother, likes music documentaries, and plays the guitar. From time to time, his eyes dart around the room, as if he's nervous, too. But after a few hours, we're both laughing like old friends. Outside the sun lowers itself, turning his skin almost golden in the window light. It's hard not to notice. It isn't until a group of Sam's friends come through the door, calling his name, that we both look up and realize how much time has passed.

A girl with long blond hair puts an arm around Sam's shoulders, embracing him from behind. She glances at me. "Who's this?"

"This is Julie. She just moved here."

"Oh—where from?"

"Seattle," I answer.

She stares at me.

"This is my friend Taylor," Sam says, patting her arm that's still around him. "We're all about to see a movie. I get off work in an hour. You should come."

"It's a psychological thriller," Taylor adds. "You're probably not into that."

We look at each other. I can't tell if she's being rude.

My phone vibrates on the table and I glance at the time. It feels like I've woken from a daydream. "That's okay. I should probably head home."

As I get up from the table, Taylor slides into my seat, making me wonder if they're together. I wave good-bye, but before I go, I head to the front counter. When I think Sam isn't looking, I pull a paper flower from my bag and place it beside the register. I spent a week watching tutorials on how to fold a cherry blossom like the one I found at the bookstore. But the steps were too hard to follow for my untrained hands. A lily was easier.

I zip my bag and hurry out the café door, and suddenly I'm on the front porch of my house, staring out at the lawn. The early morning dew still hangs on the grass. Sam's car pulls up with the window down. He texted me the night before.

Hey. This is Sam. I just got my license!

Do you want a ride to school tomorrow?

I can pick you up on the way if you want

I climb onto the passenger seat and shut the car door. A pleasant scent of citrus and leather hits me. *Is that cologne?* Sam moves his denim jacket as I buckle myself in. A USB cable connects the stereo to his phone placed inside the cup holder. There's a song playing in the background, but I don't recognize it.

"You can change the music if you want," Sam says. "Here—plug your phone in."

A shock of panic hits me and I squeeze my phone tight. I don't want him knowing what I listen to yet. *What if he doesn't like it?* "No this is fine."

"Oh, you like Radiohead too?"

"Who doesn't?" I say. It's a quiet drive through neighborhood streets. We exchange glances from time to time, as I think of things to say. I look at the backseat. A suit jacket hangs from the grip handle. "Is this your car?"

"No, it's my dad's," Sam says, lowering the volume. "He doesn't work Thursdays, so this is the only morning I get to drive it. I'm saving up to buy my own, though. That's why I'm working at the café."

"I'm trying to save up, too."

"For what?"

I think about it. "College, I guess. Maybe an apartment, after I move or something."

"Where are you moving? You just got here."

I'm not sure what to say.

Sam nods. "So it's a *secret*..."

I smile at this. "Maybe I'll tell you another time."

"That's fair," Sam says. He looks at me. "How about next Thursday?"

I hold back a laugh as we turn into the school parking lot. Even though the drive doesn't last long, Thursdays are becoming my new favorite day of the week.

The memory changes again. Lights dance across a gymnasium floor and music blares as I step through an archway made of silver and gold balloons. It is the night of the school dance and I don't know anyone here. I'm wearing the new dress my mom helped pick out, dark blue satin that flows out at the waist. With my long hair pinned up, I hardly recognized myself when I looked in the mirror. I wanted to stay home, but my parents forced me to go out and make friends. I didn't want to disappoint them. I spent the

last hour standing against the cold cement wall, watching the floor fill with people dancing and laughing. I check my phone from time to time, pretending I'm waiting for someone, but it's just an empty lock screen. Maybe this was a mistake.

Something keeps me from leaving. Sam mentioned he might be here tonight. I texted him a few hours ago but he hasn't responded—maybe he hasn't checked his phone yet? When the music slows down and the crowd disperses, I leave my spot at the wall and make my way through the dance floor, searching for him. It takes me a while, but the moment I see him, my heart drops. There he is, with his arms wrapped around Taylor, slow-dancing. There's a sinking feeling in my stomach. *Why did I come here?* I should have stayed home. I shouldn't have texted him. I turn away before anyone sees me, and rush toward the gym doors.

The night unfolds around me as the loud music muffles, letting me breathe easier. The parking lot, lit up by a few streetlamps, seems so still compared to the dance floor. It's misty out tonight. I should head home before it turns into rain. I think about texting my mom to pick me up, but it's too early. I don't want her asking me what's wrong. Maybe I'll walk home and sneak into my room. My heels are starting to hurt, but I ignore the pain. As I make my way down the parking lot, the gym door swings open behind me, followed by a voice I recognize immediately.

"Julie—"

I turn around and it's Sam, looking more serious than usual in a black suit.

"Where are you going?" he asks.

"Home."

"In the rain?"

I don't know what to say. I feel like an idiot. So I force a smile. "It's just a little mist. I'm from Seattle, remember?"

"I can give you a ride if you want."

"That's okay. I don't mind walking." My cheeks are warm.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, don't worry." I want to get out of here. But Sam doesn't move.

I try again. "Your date is probably waiting for you in there."

"What?" He stutters a little. "Taylor isn't my date. We're just friends."

There's so much I want to say, but the knots in my stomach keep me from speaking. I shouldn't feel this way. Sam and I aren't even together.

"Why are you leaving so early?"

I remember him under the colored lights, his arms around Taylor, but there's no way I can tell him the truth. "School dances aren't really my thing. That's all."

Sam nods and slides his hands into his pockets. "Yeah, I know what you mean. They can be pretty lame."

"Does anyone have a good time at these things?"

"Well, maybe you haven't gone with the right person."

My breath catches as I take this in. Even from outside the gym, we can hear the music through the walls, melting into another slow song.

Sam stands at the door, rocking back and forth on the heels of his dress shoes. "Do you not like ... to dance?"

"I don't know ... I'm just not very good at it. And I don't like people watching me."

Sam looks around us. After a moment, he smiles a little, and holds out a hand. "Well, no one's watching us now..."

"*Sam*—" I start.

His familiar smirk appears. "Just *one* dance."

I hold my breath as Sam steps forward and takes my hand, pulling me close to him. I never imagined my first dance would be like this, the two of us swaying outside in the school parking lot. His face is slightly dewy from the mist, and I inhale his familiar sweet scent, resting my cheek against his chest. As I move my hands onto his shoulders, he notices something.

"What's this?"

The paper cherry blossom. It's tied around my wrist with a ribbon.

My cheeks feel warm again. "I didn't get a corsage. So I made one myself."

"I gave this to you."

"I know you did."

Sam smiles at this. "You know, I wanted to ask you to the dance tonight, but I was worried you'd say no."

"What made you think that?"

"Because you never texted me. That day we met at the bookstore."

I squint at him, thinking back. "But you never gave me your number."

Sam drops his head, chuckling to himself. “What’s so funny?” I ask, slightly annoyed, as he takes my hand. He plucks the cherry blossom from my wrist, and begins unfolding it. I start to protest, but fall silent when it’s just a sheet of paper in his hands. Inside is a note with Sam’s name and number.

“I never thought to open it...” I say.

“I guess that’s my fault.”

We both laugh at this. Then my smile fades.

“What’s wrong?” Sam asks.

“It’s ruined now.”

The paper is torn and wet from the mist.

“Don’t worry,” Sam says. “I can make you another one. I can make you a thousand more.”

I put my arms around him as we continue our slow dance in the parking lot, listening to the music through the gym wall, as the mist swells around us like clouds before it shifts and fades into a clear night sky, and the memory changes again.

Clothes fly out the second-floor window as I run onto the lawn that’s covered with my father’s things. My parents have been shouting for the past hour, and I can’t stand to be in the house anymore. I always knew things would end eventually, but I never expected it to happen so soon. *Where else can I go?* I asked Sam to come pick me up, but he isn’t here yet. I feel the neighbors watching me from their windows. I can’t wait around any longer. I turn down the block and start running until everything disappears behind me.

I don’t even know where I’m going. I keep running until nothing looks familiar. It isn’t until I reach the edge of town, where the farm grass stretches toward the mountains, that I realize I forgot my phone. A pair of headlights shine down the empty road. As I move out of the way, the car slows to a stop in front of me and I realize it’s Sam.

“Are you okay?” he asks as I climb into the passenger seat. “I showed up at your house but you weren’t there.”

If I remembered my phone, I would have sent him my location. “How did you even know where to find me?”

“I didn’t ... I just kept looking.”

We sit in his car with the engine humming for a long time.



“Do you want me to take you home?” Sam asks eventually.

“No.”

“So where do you want to go?”

“Anywhere else.”

Sam starts driving. We circle through town until we lose track of time. Shop lights turn off one by one as the roads begin to darken. With nowhere else to go, Sam turns into a parking space of a twenty-four-hour minimart, and shuts off the car. He doesn't ask me anything about what happened. He just lets me rest my head against the window glass and close my eyes for a moment. Before I drift off, the last thing I remember is the fluorescent light of the minimart sign, and Sam laying his denim jacket over me as I fall asleep.

I wake up on the grass at golden hour. Sunlight warms my cheeks as I push myself up and look around. The trees are full of hand-folded blossoms, hundreds of them, tied up with long strings, swaying in the breeze like willow. Once I'm on my feet, I notice a trail of petals leading toward the sound of a guitar playing in the distance. I follow the sound, passing through a curtain of paper blossoms, and remember where I am. Our secret spot at the lake. The place we've met a hundred times before. The moment I break through the trees, and catch the sunlight shimmer across the water, I find him there waiting for me.

“Julie—” Sam calls my name as he sets his guitar down. “I wasn't sure if you were coming...”

“I wasn't sure if you'd still be here,” I say.

He takes my hands. “I'll always be here for you, Jules.”

I don't question this. At least, not right now.

We sit near the lake and stare out at the water. Clouds move slowly across a pink sky. Sometimes, I wish the sun would never set, so we could stay here, enjoying each other's company, talking like we always do, laughing at inside jokes, pretending like nothing could ever go wrong. I look at Sam, and take in his face, his beautiful smile, his black hair that sweeps across his forehead, his tan skin, and wish I could freeze this moment and hold on to it forever. But I can't. Even in a dream, I can't seem to stop time. The clouds are thickening above us, and there's a strange tremble beneath the earth. Sam must have noticed this, too, because he rises to his feet.

I grab his hand. “*Don’t go yet.*”

Sam looks at me. “Julie ... if I could stay with you, I’d never leave.”

“But you *did* leave.”

“I know ... I’m sorry.”

“You never said good-bye...”

“That’s because I never thought I had to...”

Out of nowhere, a wind sweeps in from behind us, as if it’s come to take him away from me. Behind the trees, the sun starts to fall, casting shadows across the water. It isn’t supposed to end like this. This was just the beginning. Our story has barely started. My heart pounds inside my chest. I squeeze Sam’s hand harder to keep him from leaving.

“*This isn’t fair, Sam—*” I start, but my throat catches, as I feel tears forming behind my eyes.

Sam kisses me one last time. “I know this wasn’t part of our plan, Julie. But at least we had this time together, right? I want you to know ... if I could do it all over again, I would. Every second of it.”

*If the ending is this painful, I don’t know if this was worth it all.*

My grip loosens as I think about this. “I’m sorry, Sam...” I say, stepping back. “But I don’t think I can say the same...”

Sam stares at me as if he’s waiting for me to take back my words. But there’s no time left. Sam starts to disappear before me, dissolving into cherry blossom petals. I stand watching as the wind picks up and pulls them through the air. Before he’s completely gone, I reach out to grab a single petal and hold it tight against my chest. But somehow it slips through my fingers and vanishes into the sky. Just like the rest of him.