



Destiny Falls

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DESTINY FALLS

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SHAW HART

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BURNED

DESTINY FALLS

*

This story starts with a funeral.

Sutton Tate's whole life just got turned upside down. Her mom is dead, leaving behind nothing but an apartment full of memories and a letter with a bucket list of things she hopes Sutton will do in the next year.

The first thing on the list? Spend the summer with a great-uncle that she's never even heard about in the tiny town of Destiny Falls, Michigan.

She's reluctant but it's just going to be a few months. She'll work at the Mystery Cabin, the tourist trap that her uncle owns, make a little bit of money and try to connect with the last bit of family that she has left on this earth.

Then she gets to Destiny Falls and it's nothing like she expected.

Her uncle is keeping her on her toes, there is always something to do around the shop, and the Cabin's handyman, Teller, just might be the man of her dreams. Throw in the sleazy mayor's son and some new girlfriends, and Sutton just might have a summer that she'll never forget.

When the summer is over, will Sutton give up her dream of being an executive in Boston? Or will she have finally found the one thing that she can't walk away from?

ONE



Sutton

THIS STORY STARTS WITH A FUNERAL.

My mom's to be exact.

Just thinking that thought still makes me flinch. I swallow hard, trying to erase the image of her pale, lifeless form, dressed in her prettiest dress, the one that I picked out two days ago, lying in the casket only a few hours earlier.

She had brain cancer, stage four, and by the time they had caught it, there was nothing that we could do to save her. She had never even told me that she was sick. By the time I was done with my last semester of graduate school and had come home, it was too late.

I remember walking into our apartment, so thrilled to be home for a few weeks before I headed out to the East Coast to find a job. I had walked in and stopped short, shocked at the sight of my mom sitting in her favorite chair in front of the TV. She had lost so much weight, was so gaunt, her skin so pale, that it almost looked translucent.

She had given me the news then and I had spent my first night back home crying on her shoulder. A week later and I was practically living in the hospital with her. A few days after that and she was gone.

"I'm so sorry for your loss, dear."

I'm startled out of my thoughts and I turn to see Mrs. Merkle, one of our neighbors, standing there with a pitying look on her face. Normally that look would have my spine snapping straight and my chin lifting in anger. I hate when anyone feels bad for me, but I've known Mrs. Merkle for my whole life and I know that she loved my mom as much as I did. She's just as miserable and heartbroken at losing her as I am.

"Thanks, Mrs. Merkle."

She wraps her frail arms around me, the blue veins stark against her pale skin. I should probably take comfort in her. In her familiar lavender and vanilla perfume. In her sweet southern voice.

I don't feel anything though.

The church is filled to the gills with my mom's friends, coworkers, and neighbors. That was the thing about my mom. She was so sweet and optimistic that it was impossible not to like her. She made friends as easy as some people breathe. I wish I could be more like that, more like her.

Her funeral and burial have been completed, and the pastor at the church was nice enough to let us hold the reception here. There is no way that all of these people would be able to cram into Mom's and my tiny apartment.

Mom and I have never been rich. She had me when she was sixteen. A teenage mistake, although she never once said that or treated me as such. She always made me feel loved and wanted. I might not have grown up with a lot, but I had a mom who loved me, who was always there for me.

My dad was from the nicer side of town and he had been a few years older than my mom. His rich family had turned their noses up at my mom when they first met her, and learning that she was pregnant with their son's baby, their grandchild, didn't seem to change the way that they treated her or how they looked down on her. It was expected that he would marry

someone from another wealthy family, not someone like my mom and so he abandoned her and me.

He was never in my life. Not even when I was a baby. I had tried to reach out to him once but was shot down. Hard. I'll never forget how he had stared down his nose at me when I showed up on his doorstep. He had told me to get off his property and slammed the door in my face. I guess his illegitimate child was an embarrassment to his real wife and kids. I never tried to reach out to him again.

My mom had worked as a receptionist for a local doctor's office for as long as I can remember. The pay was modest, but it kept a roof over our heads and food on our table.

Mom never went to college. Even if she could have afforded it or gotten scholarships, what would she have done with a toddler in tow? Childcare is crazy expensive and she couldn't afford it after her parents disowned her.

My grandparents were really old school. Having a kid out of wedlock was an embarrassment and something to be ashamed of. Having one when you were still a kid yourself was even worse.

I think that's why it was important to both of us that I get my degree. Maybe it was growing up poor but I was always driven to succeed. I worked my butt off in high school to be able to get a scholarship and to get into a top-tier university.

I graduated with honors and got accepted into Wharton Business School for my MBA. I just got my degree and was all set to interview for a position with a company that I interned with last summer but I came home to be with my mom before I started the next chapter of my life.

That was weeks ago. I was supposed to already be in Boston, working at my new fancy job and living in my new apartment. Instead, I'm still in California.

I've got a few weeks to box up our lives here before I have to move back out east and try to find another job. Luckily my

college professors know of a few places that are hiring and they're willing to write me letters of recommendation.

Just a few weeks to sort through everything. A few weeks to grieve before I'm just supposed to move on with my life.

It doesn't seem like nearly enough time.

Whole lifetimes don't seem like enough time to ease this ache in my chest. To fix my broken heart.

Some churchgoers brought in casseroles and crockpots filled with food and Dr. Barton, my mom's boss, hands me a plate. His watery brown eyes are sad and I can see him studying me and trying to determine my mental state. I wonder what he sees. I wonder if he can tell that I'm close to losing it.

I don't know him as well as Mrs. Merkle but he's always been nice to me and good to my mom. He hired her when she was just seventeen. He let her bring me to work with her when I was young and he always invited us over to his place for the holidays. He was like the grandparents that you see on TV, the one that I never really had.

"How are you doing, Sutton?" he asks me.

His voice is brittle and more wobbly sounding than I remember. He's getting up there in years and I know that my mom mentioned that he might retire soon. I wonder if he'll do it now instead of hiring and training a new front counter girl.

"I'm alright, Dr. Barton. How are you doing?"

"Oh, I can't complain," he says, sounding weary.

I don't have it in me to make small talk right now, so instead I just take a bite of the macaroni and cheese on my plate. My stomach revolts but I force myself to swallow it down. I can't remember the last time that I had something to eat. I've been by my mom's side for her final days and then too busy making arrangements to be bothered to think about feeding myself.

"You know, your mom was really proud of you. She would go on and on about how well you were doing in school and

how you got that internship at that fancy investment firm in Boston last year. She loved you very much,” he says, his kind eyes meeting mine and I swallow down another bite of macaroni and cheese.

My throat burns and I know that I need to get out of here soon. I absolutely hate crying in front of other people but I know that I won't be able to keep the tears at bay for much longer.

“Thanks, Dr. Barton. For everything,” I say quietly but I can still hear the crack in my voice.

I swallow hard, setting my plate aside and nodding once at Dr. Barton before I turn to leave. I see Mrs. Merkle out of the corner of my eye but I just need to be alone. I beeline for the church's front door, keeping my head down until I'm outside.

I take deep breaths as I try to get my emotions under control. I just need to make it a little bit longer. Just a few more minutes and then I'll be back at our apartment. I can fall apart then.

My car is parked right out front and I hurry to dig my keys out of my purse. My hands are shaking so bad that it takes a few tries for me to fit the key into the lock and open the door. Pinpricks sting the back of my eyes and my throat burns as I collapse into the driver's seat.

I start the car, turning on the headlights and I look up. My eyes lock on the fresh plot of dirt in the cemetery behind the church and I can't contain the sob any longer.

My mouth opens on a cry and the tears spill over the brim of my eyes. My shoulders shake with the strength of my cries and it feels like I'm folding in on myself. The ache in my chest spreads, numbing my arms and legs before it spreads to everywhere, leaving me an exposed nerve.

What am I going to do now? How do I move on from this?

I try to push those thoughts from my head. I don't have an answer for them. I just want to get home. If I can just make it

home, I can curl up in a ball and cry. Forget about the world and hopefully crash for a few hours.

I brush my cheeks of a few stray tears and take a deep breath. The apartment isn't far from here but with the late-night traffic, it will probably take me close to half an hour to get home. I'm about to shift into reverse when there is a knock on my car window.

I jerk in my seat, my head swinging to take in the stranger standing there. He's wearing a dark suit with a black and white paisley tie. He looks to be in his mid-forties and I recognize him from inside the church. I just thought that he was a friend of my mom's, one that I didn't recognize.

I buzz my window down a crack and he gives me a small smile.

"Miss Tate. I'm Art Lawrence. Your mom's lawyer. I'm so very sorry for your loss," he says, his voice low and smooth. In his defense, he does actually look sorry, but I don't want to deal with this right now. I just want to go home.

"I was hoping to catch you so that we could schedule a good time to go over her will," he says.

"Her will?"

"Yes. She did leave everything to you, but there are still some things for us to go over. Can you come by my law offices in the next few days?" he asks, taking a business card out from his pocket.

Lawrence, Melton, and Pritchard is printed on the top of the card with an address downtown listed below.

"Yeah, I can come in tomorrow. Maybe around noon?" I ask and he nods.

"That's perfect. I'll see you then, Miss Tate."

He waves once before he backs away from my car and heads over to a newer model Audi. I watch as he starts it and glides out of the parking lot. I shove the card into my purse as

I shift my old Malibu into reverse and putter out of the lot after him.

By the time that I get back home, the sun has set fully and the moon is really the only light. I don't remember the neighborhood being this bad but most of the streetlights are broken or burned out. I don't know how I didn't notice how old and worn the building looked either.

The bricks are faded and chipped in some spots. I head up the front steps, tripping before I remember that they're uneven and cracked in some spots now. The bulb over the front door is dying and it's so dim that I have to use my phone to figure out where the keyhole is.

The old wooden staircase is sagging in the middle of almost every step and I keep close to the walls. The last thing I need is to fall through the steps.

I make it up to the second floor and pass by Mrs. Merkle's door. I need to figure out a way to get her out of this place. It's not safe for her to live here. I don't think it's safe for anyone to live here.

I unlock the apartment door and her scent hits me. It's like a slap in the face but it's also comforting. For just a second, I can pretend that she's still here. That I'm coming home and she's going to pop out from around a corner to make sure that I made it home alright.

Then I remember and the itchy feeling starts behind my eyes once more.

I leave the lights off. I know this place like the back of my hand and I can find my way to my old bedroom even in the pitch black. Even after I left, my mom never changed anything. Too sentimental, I suppose.

I make my way through the small living room and kitchen area and into the hallway. My room is off to the right but as I stop between our two doors, I find myself turning to the left and pushing into her room.

I haven't been here in a few days. My mom was transferred to the hospital and passed there, so when I walk inside and see her bed, all I remember are the times that we curled up there and watched movies.

I kick my shoes off and crawl on top of the mattress, grabbing one of her pillows and wrapping my arms around it as I hold it to my chest. It smells like her and I close my eyes, letting the tears slip free.

Memories assault me.

That time that we both caught the flu and laid in this bed for days. We had watched bad daytime TV and taken turns holding each other's hair back. I remember that time that Bobby Flynn dumped me right before senior prom. My mom had gone out and bought junk food and we had spent the night lying here in bed, pigging out and crying to sad movies.

My mom was my best friend. She was my rock, my confidante, my whole fucking world.

And now she's gone.

And I'm here.

Alone.

TWO



Sutton

IT'S JUST before noon when I pull into the parking lot of Lawrence, Melton, and Pritchard Law Firm. It's an older non-descript brick building not far from where our apartment is and I wonder if that's why my mom picked them to officiate her will.

I park close to the front door and take a minute to myself. The AC in my car is working overtime, trying to keep me from melting. It's sweltering out, a heatwave even for summer in California.

My eyes are still swollen and red-rimmed from my crying session this morning. I pull out my compact and flip down the visor but after I get a second look at myself, I decide that no makeup is going to be able to fix what hours' worth of crying has done. Besides, I have a feeling that I'm not going to make it through the rest of the day without shedding a few more tears.

My black knee-length dress, one that I wore for my internship just a few months ago now hangs loosely on my frame and I know that I need to try to eat something today before I lose any more weight. I don't have the funds to buy a whole new wardrobe right now.

I turn off my car and grip the straps of my purse as I head inside and check in with the receptionist. I'm the only one in

the lobby and while I should be used to being in business settings, I'm on edge.

"Miss Tate," Mr. Lawrence, the lawyer from last night, says as he approaches me.

His hand is outstretched, a gentle smile on his wrinkled face and I stand, shaking his hand.

"Right this way," he says, leading me down a hallway to an office at the end.

He grabs some papers before he takes a seat behind his beat-up wooden desk and I take a seat across from him. My fingers twist together in my lap and I swallow around the lump in my throat as he moves to get everything in order.

"I'm so sorry for your loss. I didn't know your mom very well. I only met her a few weeks ago to help her with her will, but she seemed like a really nice woman. And she sure was proud of you."

"Thanks," I say but the word sounds hollow even to my own ears.

Mr. Lawrence nods, not seeming to know what to say. He grabs a pair of reading glasses and slides them on, clearing his throat as he slides some papers across the desk to me.

"Her will is pretty standard. She left all of her jewelry, car, and her apartment to you. Everything inside the apartment is free for you to do with as you see fit."

I look over the papers that he passed me. The legalese is somehow comforting and I switch to business mode as I read over the documents.

It is a standard will and everything looks to be in order. Mr. Lawrence has been patiently waiting for me to finish and he gives me a kind smile as I set the last paper aside.

"She also left you this," he says, sliding two envelopes across the desk toward me.

My mother's familiar writing is on the front and my stomach drops like a rock when I see it, knowing that this is the last thing that I'll get from her. My name is on one and I flip to the second to see the name Stanley Tate written on it.

I have no idea who Stanley Tate is. He must be a relative but it's strange that I have never heard her or my grandparents bring him up.

I tuck the letters into my purse, along with my copy of the will. I'll have to read them later, when I'm alone.

"Is that all?" I ask Mr. Lawrence.

I'm eager to get back home where I can curl up on the couch and cry. I need to figure out what I'm going to do about the apartment and all of our belongings. The plan is still to move to Boston and get a job at a law firm there. I had planned on doing it right after college but that got pushed back.

"That's it. Please let me know if you need anything else from me."

He passes me a business card and I slip it into my purse with the other papers. I shake his hand one last time and then follow him back to the lobby.

It feels even hotter when I step back outside and I hurry over to my car. It doesn't take long to drive back to our apartment building and I jog up the stairs, careful of the sagging ones. Mrs. Merkle is at the mailboxes and I wave at her as I pass. I can tell that she wants to say something but I'm just not in the mood for chit-chat right now.

I unlock the apartment door, dropping my keys and purse on the entryway table before I grab the envelopes and head over to the couch.

I had been so eager to read it on the drive home but now that I'm sitting here, I can't bring myself to open it.

I flip the envelope over in my hands. These are the last words that my mom will ever say to me and that thought has a fresh round of tears spilling from my eyes.

I set the letters aside and grab the old quilt off the back of the couch, curling up on my side as I start to sob.

I must doze off because when I wake up, it's dark in the apartment and I'm starving. I flip on a lamp, grabbing some aspirin on my way to the kitchen. My head is pounding, probably a side effect from crying and not eating or drinking all day.

I chug a glass of water with the pills and poke my head into a few cabinets. There is not a lot of choices. My mom wasn't eating much toward the end and I haven't had much of an appetite since I've been home.

I sigh as I open the fridge and see that it's just as empty. There is a pizza place around the corner and I shut the fridge door, deciding to just order takeout.

The letter is still on the coffee table and it feels like it's taunting me. I know that I'll have to open it eventually.

After I have something to eat, I promise myself, heading down the hall.

I slip into the bathroom and strip, cranking the water to the hottest it will go before I step under the spray. The pipes protest and it takes a minute for the water to really warm up.

My mom's shampoo and body wash are still on the shelf in the shower and I reach for it, smiling sadly as her familiar scent wraps around me. The hot water helps to ease my headache and by the time I'm dressed in my pajamas, a towel wrapped around my hair, the pizza is here.

I thank the delivery boy, tipping him before I lock myself back in my apartment. I inhale two slices right away, grabbing a third and another glass of water before I head back to the couch.

It's time.

I'm usually not one to put things off. I'm a rip-the-band-aid-off-fast type of girl, so I knew that I wasn't going to last long.

I wipe my hands off and take a deep breath as I reach for the envelope with my name on it. The other one, Stan's, remains a mystery, but I'm hoping that she'll give me some insight in my own letter.

My hand shakes slightly as I slip my finger inside the envelope flap, ripping it open. Inside, there are two sheets of paper. It's her stationery, the one that I got her for Christmas last year.

The memory of me teasing her when she opened it slams into me and I smile. She's the only person I know who still uses stationery and I had joked that I had to look all over Los Angeles to find it for her.

Her flowy cursive handwriting greets me and I take another deep breath as I start to read.

MY DEAR SUTTON,

I'M SO sorry that I didn't tell you earlier that I was sick, sweetie. I know that you will be upset about that, and the fact that I kept it from you, but there was nothing that you could do for me. By the time we caught it, there was nothing that anyone could do to stop it.

I WANT you to know that I'm so very proud of the woman that you have become. You're so strong, Sutton. So strong and beautiful. I couldn't have asked for a better daughter. You're going to do great things. I just know it.

I KNOW that you think that you're alone, but there is something that I need to tell you.

YOU HAVE *one family member left. A great-uncle named Stan.*

HE'S *Grandpa Lorne's brother. They had a falling out when they were younger and he was cut off from the family but I found him a few months ago and reconnected with him. I told him all about you and he's looking forward to meeting you. I'll let him tell you his own story. I left his letter with the lawyer. I'd like you to give it to him.*

HE'S LONELY, *I'm sure like you are right now. I'd like you to get to know him before you go on to Boston to start your new life.*

HE LIVES *and works in Destiny Falls, Michigan. He has some tourist stop there. A place called the Mystery Cabin. It's cute. I visited it and him a few months ago and I think that you would like it there.*

I KNOW THAT RIGHT NOW, *you don't want to go. I know you, Sutton. You've been focused on this plan of yours for so long and when you get your mind made up, it's almost impossible to change it. But I want you to do something for me. Or I guess, two things.*

THE FIRST IS *to let the past go. I know that you've been let down. By your dad, by your prom date, by other kids in school, but you need to find a way to forgive them or to at least move past it. Not every man is evil. Not every man will let you down. Don't close yourself off before you have a chance to find him.*

THE SECOND THING IS A LIST. *I think they call it a bucket list.*

IT'S NOT LONG, *but I've been thinking a lot about life lately. There are things that I regret not doing and I don't want you to feel the same. So do the things that I never did. Add to the list. Chase your dreams, Sutton.*

PLEASE DON'T BE SAD, *sweetie. I know me saying that isn't going to change anything, especially not right now. I just wanted to remind you.*

YOU WERE MEANT *for great things. I'm sorry that I won't be there to see you get married and start a family, but I promise that I'll be watching from wherever I am.*

I LOVE YOU, *Sutton. More than anything.*

MOM

I SET the first paper aside, my mind racing with questions, but I want to finish reading before I let those thoughts take over.

I flip to the bucket list and scan the items.

BUCKET LIST

Spend the summer at the Mystery Cabin getting to know your great-uncle before you head to the big city. You can even help out at the gift shop!

Do crazy things. Go skydiving, zip-lining, swim with sharks.

Dye your hair. Not black or something. Go bold. Blue or pink.

Go skinny dipping

Adopt a pet (even if it's just a fish, although I always imagined you getting a dog)

Go out on dates

Fall in love

THE LIST ISN'T VERY LONG but it does mess with my plans. Spend the summer in Destiny Falls, Michigan?

I don't want to. I don't want to go meet some family member that I've never even heard of before. I don't want to waste three months of my life in some small town, working at some tourist trap.

But I also don't want to let my mom down. She would do anything for me. Can I really not do the last things that she's asked of me?

It's not like I've found a job yet in Boston or an apartment. I was supposed to interview at the same financial company that I did my last internship at, but I can put it off, I guess. At least for a few months.

I lean back against the couch cushions, staring up at the ceiling as I try to debate what to do.

Where do I go from here? Do I follow my plan, or spend three months fulfilling my mother's dying wish?

Well, when I put it like that...

Looks like I'm going to Destiny Falls.

THREE



Sutton

FOUR DAYS in the car have left me feeling antsy. It took me two weeks to pack up our apartment and sell off whatever I didn't want to take with me.

I ended up selling my car and keeping my mom's vintage Volkswagen Beetle. It's entirely impractical, especially for winters in Boston, but I couldn't let it go. I guess I'm too sentimental. Maybe this could even count as my something crazy on the bucket list, although I don't think that it was what my mom had in mind.

I just drove over the Mackinac Bridge and my phone GPS says that I'm close. Destiny Falls is a tiny town just over the bridge and along Lake Michigan. I looked it up before I emailed my uncle and told him that I was coming. He had responded by saying *okay*.

That was it.

Just one word to hearing from a long-lost great-niece out of the blue.

His response was lackluster and made me think that he didn't really even want me to come out to see him. I should have expected it.

An image of my dad with a similar response to my arrival hits me and I'm just reminded that people will only let you

down. Any hopes that I had from him being different from all the other men in my life, for getting along with him, had died after that but at least the town looks nice.

It's right along the water with a charming lighthouse and a hidden waterfall somehow farther inland which is how the town got its name. I drive down Main Street, admiring all of the quaint little shops that line the street.

The Mystery Cabin is a few miles away from the center of town, nestled in the woods. I turn into the driveway, easing my way over the gravel and a few small potholes and pulling up out front next to an older black truck.

My bug is packed full but I leave all of my luggage in the car as I climb out and stretch. My whole body is tense, sick of being cramped up in the car for the last four days. I look around, taking in the Mystery Cabin, my new temporary home, for the first time.

It's an older looking A-frame house. It's been a while since I've seen a house like this and while it looks like it might need a new roof soon, there is something also kind of enchanting about it.

There's a small balcony on the second floor, right above the bright red door, and there is some wood stacked up on the side. It's got kind of a modern camping vibe to it and I'm surprised to find that I like it.

The sign on the roof is a little dirty but the rest of the property actually looks well taken care of. There are a few cars parked off to the side in the gravel parking lot and I wonder if I should have parked over there instead.

A sign points me to the gift shop and I decide to head in that direction. It feels good to walk and I stretch my arms out, trying to loosen the knots in my back and shoulders.

It's beautiful out. The sun is just starting to set and there's a gentle breeze blowing in from the water. You can see the lake from here and I take a moment to enjoy the view. The

bridge is a little ways off, stretching out in the distance. The lighthouse blocks part of it from view, but it's still nice.

“Welcome to the Mystery Cabin!” A scratchy old voice booms out and I jolt, my head jerking to identify the person who said that.

There, standing on the small porch underneath the welcome sign, is my great-uncle Stan. I recognize him from the picture that was up on the Mystery Cabin's website.

He's wearing the same suit, the same old-timey top hat as in the picture as well. His cane tap, tap, taps against the wood porch as he makes his way over to me, a slightly predatory gleam in his eye, like he's wondering if I'm going to be an easy mark.

“Hi,” I say, unsure if he knows who I am.

I guess I should have figured out how I was going to introduce myself before I got here. I'm saved from having to say it though.

As soon as he gets within three feet of me, his eyes widen and then harden slightly.

“Sutton,” he states, his voice flat and I'm thrown off by his attitude.

I guess this isn't going to be the friendly family reunion that I had planned out in my head.

“Yeah, hi,” I say awkwardly.

His eyes dart behind me to the car packed full of my belongings, then land back on me.

“Where's your mom?” He asks bluntly and I realize that he doesn't know.

That explains why he wasn't at the funeral, I guess.

“My mom—”

My voice cuts off, the words lodging in my throat and I have to pause, blink back the tears, and clear my throat before

I can get them out.

“My mom, well, she passed away.”

He might be an old grouch but he cared about my mom. I can see the news hit him, the sadness covering him like a blanket. He looks away from me, but not before I see the hint of a sheen of tears in his eyes.

Maybe he's not so bad after all.

“She left me a letter and told me about you. She wanted me to give you this,” I whisper, digging his letter out of my purse and passing it to him.

He takes it and I can see his fingers shaking slightly. He makes no move to open it in front of me, so I continue on.

“She asked me to come here in her letter. She wanted me to spend the summer here with you. She said that I could work in the gift shop. I guess I assumed that she had talked to you about all of this.”

I had just said that I was on my way to Destiny Falls in my email, but now that I'm here, I'm wondering if I should have mentioned that my mom died and that I was coming to stay and work for him for the summer. Maybe it wouldn't be so awkward right now if I had.

“She did. A while ago. I thought that you had said no.”

“I didn't. I didn't even know about you or this place until after she was gone.”

He grunts, eyeing me skeptically before he nods and turns back toward the cabin.

“This is the Mystery Cabin. I also own the Pines Motel and Cabins,” he says, pointing off to the forest. “It's just beyond those trees.”

“Can I stay there? I didn't really think about lodging when I drove up here.”

“You can stay here with me. The cabins and motel are for paying customers.”

I roll my eyes at that but don't try to argue with him or offer to pay to stay there.

"I'll get Teller," Uncle Stan says before he disappears inside the cabin.

"Who the hell is Teller?" I mumble, trailing after him.

"I am," comes a deep voice and I startle again.

What is it with the people around here?

I have to squint but then I see the man. He's kneeling behind some exhibit, a toolbox by his feet.

"Uh, hi, I'm Sutton, Stan's great-niece," I say, taking a step into the room.

It looks like it's a hardware store in here and I wonder if this is one of the attractions of the Mystery Cabin.

"Ah, Marianne's daughter," Teller says, standing and wiping his hands off on his jeans.

He steps closer to me, into the light and I swallow when I get my first glimpse of him. He's wearing a plain black T-shirt that's tight, straining around his biceps and across his chest. Blue jeans are half-tucked into a pair of work boots. Shaggy black hair frames a rugged face that has my panties dampening.

My body's reaction both shocks me and pisses me off.

I've never had much interest in the opposite sex and certainly never felt such a strong pull toward a guy before and I can't figure out what it is about Teller that has me feeling like this. I swore off men until I was settled into a good job and was self-sufficient after my prom date stood me up. I hadn't even wanted to go to prom but my mom had convinced me that I would regret not going.

It pisses me off too because this isn't how this is supposed to go. Falling in love and dating are not in my plans right now.

My future is what's important right now. I need to stick to the plan. I can worry about guys later, I remind myself.

Flashbacks of my prom date standing me up, of my dad slamming in the door in my face, of the childhood bullies who picked on me and told me that no one would want me because we were poor hit me and the walls that I keep around me harden.

His blue eyes are locked on me and I get the feeling that he can see more than I want him to. His smile though is friendly and I find myself relaxing.

“Yeah. Did you know my mom?” I ask him.

“I met her once. She came out here to see the Mystery Cabin and Stan last year. She didn’t stay long but she seemed like a really nice lady. Is she with you?” he asks.

“No, I... she passed away a few weeks ago.”

Those words still aren’t getting any easier to say and I have to look away after I say them.

“Shit. I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“Thanks,” I say, clearing my throat.

“Teller! There you are,” my uncle says as he joins us. “This is my great-niece, Sutton.”

“I know. I just met her,” Teller says with a teasing grin.

My uncle Stan just glares at him, tipping his hat back a little.

“We have the next group set to go through in fifteen minutes. Show Sutton around before then. She’s going to stay here. She can have the attic.”

“The attic?” Teller asks and I get a sinking feeling in my stomach.

“Yes. You’ll have to clean it up a little bit,” Stan warns me and I give him my fakest smile.

“Sounds great.”

I think both men know that I’m lying but I’m too tired to care. It’s a free room. I suppose that I can’t really complain all

that much.

“Great. You start at the gift shop tomorrow morning. Food is in the kitchen or you can go downtown. We open at nine a.m. Be downstairs and ready by eight forty-five.”

With that, my uncle turns and heads out front to greet the next group of suckers who are here for his tourist trap. I look over to Teller, hoping that maybe he’ll say that Stan is just having a bad day and normally he’s a lot nicer than this, but he doesn’t look surprised by his attitude.

My stomach sinks as I picture spending the next three months here.

“Right this way,” Teller says and I try to force a smile but I don’t think I’m fooling him.

I don’t think that I’m fooling anyone.

FOUR



Sutton

“SO, THIS IS THE MYSTERY CABIN,” Teller says, launching into what sounds like a rehearsed speech.

It feels like he’s done this a hundred times and I try to pay attention as we head down the hallway.

“According to legend, in the early 1960s, a few surveyors were exploring Michigan’s Upper Peninsula one day when they realized that none of their equipment was working properly.”

He pauses for dramatic effect and I just give him a blank stare. He grins at that and continues.

“They ran some tests and found out that the problem apparently only happened in a circle about five hundred feet in diameter. Behold: a mystery spot right here in this Cabin!”

He tries to interject enthusiasm at the end but I give him a skeptical look out of the corner of my eye. Teller just gives me another grin, flashing me a row of straight white teeth.

“Anyway,” he continues. “Over the years, hundreds of thousands of visitors have stopped at the Mystery Cabin to experience a place where ‘gravity does strange things.’”

He actually does the air quotes around that last part and part of me wonders how anyone could fall for this.

“While you can take the guided tour, Stan has also installed other attractions on this special spot. You can play miniature golf on the right side of the property,” he says, pointing out the window as we pass by. “There’s also a maze built into the woods over there and there is even a zip line out back.”

Teller leads me farther down the hallway, past what appears to be a kitchen and an office and I look around at some of the old pictures hanging haphazardly on the wall.

“Any questions about the Mystery Cabin?” Teller asks as we head toward the back of the cabin.

“A few,” I mumble when I see what appears to be a stuffed Chupacabra on a side table.

Teller just laughs at that. I want to tell him that I’m not joking but he stops suddenly as my uncle leads the group of tourists past us.

Stan seems like a different man when he’s in front of the crowd. He’s charming and a true showman when others are around.

He spots me out of the corner of his eye and I swear that his smile dims. Maybe it’s the lighting or an effect of the Mystery Cabin.

He probably just hates me.

Stan leads the tourists into a room, the door slamming shut behind them.

“That’s the entrance to the gravity-defying part of the Mystery Cabin,” Teller explains. “Your room is upstairs.”

I follow after him and he leads me past the gift shop and down another hallway. This one is shorter and leads into a kitchen.

“This is Stan’s place, the living quarters.”

The kitchen is pretty outdated with one of those old refrigerators with the lever on the front and a peeling linoleum

floor. One of the cabinets is missing a door and I frown when I see the dirty dishes stacked into the sink. I hope Stan doesn't expect me to clean up after him. I'm more than happy to help out around here but I don't want to pick up after him all of the time.

"The living room is right through here," Teller says, pointing to the right and I take in the old flannel fabric sofa and the worn-looking recliner. At least the TV looks new.

The stairs are up ahead and I nod when Teller points to the door next to them and tells me that it's Stan's bedroom. The stairs creak under our feet but seem solid as we head up to the second floor.

It's dusty up here and the air smells a bit stale, but it should be easy to fix. The second floor has two doors. Teller points to one and tells me that it's a small bathroom with a bathtub, which is nice, but it looks like you'd have to stand in the bathtub in order to close the door.

The second door opens up to a loft and I smile as I walk past Teller to explore it. I've never had this much space all to myself before. There are a few boxes stacked haphazardly along one wall and I can see that Stan was using this space for storage.

"I think the bed is over here," Teller says, weaving his way around a stack of pillows and blankets.

I peek around him and take in the small twin-size bed. It's just a mattress and a box spring on the floor but it doesn't look that worn. The best part is that it's right next to the double doors that lead out onto the balcony.

The balcony looks out over the water and I can just see over the top of the trees. I can make out part of the town and the bridge from here. It's the view that has hope blooming in my chest.

"Fortune cookie?" Teller asks and I frown, thinking that I misheard him.

"What?"

“Fortune cookie?” he says, holding out his hand and offering me one.

“Uh, thanks,” I say, taking the wrapped cookie from him.

“Do you need help bringing in any of your luggage?” he asks, changing the subject again.

“Yeah, that would be great,” I tell him with a smile.

We jog back downstairs and Teller leads me out the back door. I let him grab some of the heavier things from the back of the Volkswagen Beetle while I grab my duffel bag and my tote bag of books.

It takes us two trips to get everything and by the time we’re done, the tour is over and Stan is calling for Teller to come help him downstairs.

“That was the last tour, so I’m about to leave for the night, but there is food in the fridge and cupboards if you’re hungry.”

“Thanks,” I tell him honestly and he gives me another one of those easy grins before he turns and heads downstairs to see what Stan needs.

I’m not that hungry, so I get to work on clearing out the attic. I open the double doors and the window and hope that helps air the space out a bit before I stack all of the boxes up against one wall. The extra pillows and blankets go on top of the boxes.

The sun is starting to set by the time I’m done putting all of my clothes away in the closet and stacking my books next to the bed. I found some sheets that seemed clean and made the bed.

I’d like nothing more than to crawl into bed but all of that cleaning really worked up an appetite. I make my way back downstairs, wondering if I’ll run into my uncle.

I get my answer a minute later when I walk past the living room and see him sitting in the recliner. The TV is playing but he doesn’t seem to be paying attention to it. It looks like he’s

lost in thought and I'm not sure if I should announce my presence or just sneak into the kitchen.

He turns his head and our eyes lock. For just a second, I can see the family resemblance. He has the same bright blue eyes that my mother did, although his are harder and the brightness in them has dimmed.

"Hey," I say, taking a step closer to the living room entrance. "I was going to make something to eat. Are you hungry?"

"I already ate," he says back right away.

Okay...

An awkward silence hangs in the air between us and I don't know how to fill it. What am I supposed to say to this complete stranger who is my family?

"I'm going to bed. We have to be up early tomorrow," Stan says, turning off the TV and standing abruptly. "The gift shop opens at nine but I need you there by eight forty-five so I can show you how to work the register."

With that not so friendly reminder, he heads past me and down the hall to his bedroom.

"Okay then," I say to myself as I turn and head into the kitchen.

I didn't realize how late it had gotten but the clock on the microwave says that it's close to ten p.m. I guess part of it is the time difference between Michigan and California.

I open the old fridge and look around. There isn't really anything to choose from and I'm guessing that my great-uncle isn't much of a cook. The dishes in the sink have been washed and put away and I grab a plate out of one of the cupboards and then dig around until I find a loaf of bread.

My mom used to make me peanut butter and honey sandwiches when I was a kid and tears sting the back of my eyes as I make one for myself now.

I thought that I was all cried out after the last few weeks. I stopped crying myself to sleep a week ago but now it's almost worse. It's the little things now that sneak up on me and take me by surprise.

I hear a song that she loved and I start to cry. I see something that reminds me of her and the waterworks turn on.

Everyone kept telling me that it would get easier with time. The pain would fade and I would just remember all of the good times with her. I wanted to ask them how long that would take but I know that no one really knows.

It's dark out but there's a full moon and eating outside seems less sad than standing in the dimly lit kitchen, eating my sandwich over the sink by myself, so I head out the back door.

There is a wooden bench on the back porch and I take a seat there, resting my feet on the porch railing. I take a bite of my sandwich, resting the plate on the bench next to me as I take in my surroundings. The back of the house faces the woods and with the full moon shining down, I can just make out most of the property.

Something about seeing the stillness of nature is beautiful and I find myself relaxing. It's peaceful, a gentle breeze blowing my hair around my shoulders. I close my eyes, resting my head against the back of the bench as I try to process everything that has happened today.

Sure, my great-uncle doesn't seem that friendly but he did let me stay here for free. It's hard to get my hopes up but maybe he was just thrown off by finding out that my mom passed and me showing up on his doorstep. Maybe tomorrow will be better, though I somehow doubt it.

Teller seems nice and at the very least he's pretty to look at. I didn't know that I had one but my body's reaction seems to be telling me that he's exactly my type. I'm actually pretty sure that he's everyone's type. Who doesn't like laid back, charming, smoking hot guys? I'm not looking to start a relationship while I'm here, but I could be friends with him.

Even if I was, my plan is to find an equally successful person in the future to settle down with. Some small town employee at a tourist trap doesn't fit that.

My room seems nice now that it's cleaned up. Plus, it's free and I'll be able to earn some extra money while I'm working here. Hopefully I can head to Boston in the fall with a nice safety cushion.

I sigh, thinking about delaying my five-year plan for this summer. I keep reminding myself that it's only for three months and then I'll be back on track. Three months and then I'll be starting my new life. I'll find a good paying job, a nice apartment, and I'll be back on track. I'll be successful. I'll be able to take care of myself.

I just need to start thinking of this summer in a different way. It's just a vacation. A break before I get back to my real life.

Maybe this summer won't be so bad after all.

The sound of an animal on the porch has my eyes flying open and I look up to see a mangy black and white stray dog standing a foot away from me. I don't know anything about animals but if I had to guess I would say that he was at least part collie based on his long fur.

He's so skinny and he looks hungry as he licks his lips. We stare at each other for a beat and I wonder what I should do.

We never had pets when I was growing up. We couldn't really afford one and our apartment didn't allow them.

Am I supposed to let him smell me? If I move to touch him, will he bite me? He looks friendly enough, but what do I know?

As I'm debating, he edges closer and I hold my breath as he shuffles even closer to the bench. Maybe he's the friendly neighborhood stray.

I smile at him, trying to show him that I'm not a threat as I start to lean forward. He holds still as my fingers brush over

him. His fur feels dirty and is matted in some places. I can feel his ribs as I brush over them and my heart breaks for him.

Then he lunges.

I squeak, darting off the bench and spinning around in time to see him grabbing my sandwich off of the plate and leaping over the porch railing.

“What the!” I shout as I take a few steps toward him but he’s already devoured it.

He wags his tail, staring at me from a few feet away and I can’t help it.

I start to laugh.

The crazy dog eyes me happily, barking once before he runs off into the trees and I sigh, tipping my head back to the night sky.

Somehow, this feels like the fitting end to a long day. Nothing is going the way I thought it would and maybe I should take it as a warning.

If you get your hopes up, you’ll only end up getting burned.

I take one last look up at the moon before I head inside, locking the back door and making my way up the stairs. I change into my pajamas and collapse down on my bed, closing my eyes. I’m asleep a minute later.

FIVE



Sutton

I DEFINITELY SHOULD HAVE GONE to bed earlier last night. I've been up since seven-thirty, which is four-thirty California time, and I'm paying for the few hours of sleep that I got now.

Stan was in the kitchen when I stumbled down the stairs and while he hadn't said anything to me, he had passed me a cup of coffee before he headed into the gift shop. I usually only have some oatmeal or a banana for breakfast and I make a mental note to go to the store at some point this week to grab a few things.

I toast a piece of bread and down another two cups of coffee before I head into the gift shop. It's just now eight-thirty but my great-uncle is already waiting behind the front counter like he's been standing there for the last twenty minutes.

He's brisk as he shows me how to ring everything up. It seems straightforward but I already know that if I do have any questions, I'll be finding Teller and asking him instead of Stan.

The gift shop isn't very big and I walk around, trying to get a look at all of the merchandise. There are a few shelves and display tables set up in the center of the room. All of the T-shirts, sweaters, and hoodies are hanging up along the back wall.

I'm just heading back to the cash register when the door opens and Teller comes in carrying a few boxes.

“Morning, Sutton,” he says with a smile and I can't help but smile back at him. “How did you sleep?”

“Pretty good, actually.”

He sets the boxes down by the front counter and then rolls his shoulders out. He's wearing a navy blue T-shirt today with the Mystery Cabin on the front and Staff written across his back. The material stretches tight across his chest and around his biceps. The sight has butterflies taking flight in my stomach.

“Stan wanted me to have you stock this stuff. We usually aren't busy until later in the morning so it should give you something to do.”

“Sounds good,” I tell him as I open up the first box.

“The first tour starts in fifteen minutes and it usually takes thirty to forty minutes for them to go through so they shouldn't be in the gift shop until closer to ten.”

“Okay,” I say as I glance at the clock hanging above the door. “Hey, I forgot to ask yesterday, but what exactly do you do here?”

“I'm the handyman,” he says. “I fix up the attractions and the Cabin and then help with the zip line and the miniature golf course when Lyla isn't working.”

“Who's Lyla?”

“She works in the gift shop here too. Today is her day off but she'll be in tomorrow,” Teller says as Stan yells for him from the next room. “I'll be around if you need help with anything. There's a walkie-talkie on the shelf under the register. Just radio if you need me.”

I give him a grateful smile as he turns and heads off to find my great-uncle. I notice that he's opening a fortune cookie as he goes and I wonder what the deal is with him and fortune cookies.

I get to work on stocking and I'm surprised when forty minutes have passed and the first crowd of tourists comes in the door. I was able to hear part of Stan's speech to them as they passed by outside the door.

He's good at this. He was so light and charming with them and it was weird to hear him putting people at ease when he hasn't made such an effort with me.

There aren't that many people in the first group and it only takes them twenty minutes to all look around and then check out. I wave goodbye to them and get back to stocking, doing that two more times before Teller comes back into the gift shop.

"Hey, I'm here to relieve you for your lunch break."

"Oh, thank god. I'm starving."

He chuckles at that as he takes my place behind the register.

"I think you'll have to run into town. There wasn't much left in the kitchen."

"Any place that you recommend?"

"The Upside Diner is always good. Plus, it's close by," he says, pointing in the direction of town.

"Thanks. How long do I have?"

"Half an hour, but I won't tell if you take a little longer."

He gives me that grin of his and I smile before I hurry out of the shop. I take the stairs two at a time and grab my purse and car keys before I head out the back door and over to my car. I pull up directions to the diner that Teller mentioned and head down the road toward Destiny Falls.

If I eat fast, I should have enough time to run to the store to grab some food for later too. It's closer to one pm when I pull into the lot and the place doesn't look that busy. It's retro-looking with a neon sign and chrome fixtures.

I park close to the door and jog inside, looking around to see if I should seat myself or wait.

“Go ahead and sit anywhere!” comes a cheery voice from the kitchen and I decide on a booth close to the door.

The menu is slightly sticky as I grab it from behind the napkin dispenser but I’m too hungry to worry about that. I’ve just decided on the bacon burger when two girls about my age come into the diner.

They’re laughing together and my heart cinches when I see how comfortable they are with each other.

I’ve never really had that. I was the poor girl growing up and then when I got to graduate school for my MBA, everyone was so competitive that I just stopped trying to make friends with anyone.

The girls look up and spot me and much to my surprise, they head in my direction.

“Hey!” the one with the dark black hair says, a warm smile curving her lips.

“Hi,” I say as they stop next to my booth.

“I’m Madelyn and this is Iris,” she says, pointing to her pale red-haired friend. “Did you just move to town? You don’t seem to have that tourist vibe to you.”

“Uh, yeah. I’m here for the summer. I’m staying with my great-uncle at the Mystery Cabin.”

I point up the road like they don’t know where that is.

“Stan is your great-uncle?” Iris asks, and I nod, my eyes widening slightly when both girls slide in across the booth from me.

“I love him. He’s such a crotchety old man,” Madelyn says with an infectious laugh.

The waitress chooses that moment to come over to take my order and I order my bacon burger and a Coke. Madelyn and Iris get the same before they turn back to me.

“Well, welcome to Destiny Falls. How are you liking it so far?”

“I actually just got here yesterday afternoon but it’s been good so far.”

Our drinks are set down and then our waitress, Suzie, heads back behind the counter.

“We’ll have to hang out sometime. We can have a girl’s night!” Madelyn says excitedly.

I’m startled by her offer. I’ve never had many friends and I missed out on the sleepovers and slumber parties when I was younger. The idea of hanging out with them while I’m in town sounds cool though. Maybe even bucket list-worthy.

Besides, Madelyn and Iris both seem sweet and like a lot of fun.

“That would be great,” I say and I realize that I’m being honest.

We swap phone numbers and then spend the rest of lunch talking. They tell me about growing up in Destiny Falls and the shops that they both work at. Iris owns Blast From The Past Antiques, a cute shop right next to the lighthouse. Madelyn inherited the Falls Market from her parents when they retired and runs that.

She offers to walk with me there after lunch and I realize that I don’t have much time left.

“I’ll grab the check. You two go,” Iris says with a smile and I hesitate.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, you can get it next time.”

I give her a smile as Madelyn grabs my hand and we hurry across the street to the market. She’s stopped by an employee almost as soon as we step inside and she gives me an apologetic smile as she heads off to help them.

I grab a basket and hurry up and down the aisles throwing in some fruit, oatmeal, spaghetti, and bread. I'll have to come back to properly go grocery shopping.

I've just checked out and I'm headed for the door when I run into someone.

"I'm so sorry," I start, looking up at the guy that I just bumped into.

"No worries. I should have been paying attention to where I was going," he says, giving me a friendly smile.

I take him in. He's got dark brown eyes and close-cropped blonde hair. He's a little soft around the middle but he looks studious, successful.

He's like who I always saw myself with when I was older. Someone non-threatening but successful.

My mind flashes to Teller and I realize that I'm comparing the two of them. It's no contest. My brain might say that I should pick someone like this guy, but my heart and body say something completely different.

"I'm Chet, by the way."

He holds his hand out to me and I take it, forcing a smile to my lips as he shakes my hand. There's no spark or connection here. In fact, I feel a little uneasy in his presence but I try to shake the feeling off.

I'm probably just tired from driving the last few days and I'm overreacting to a guy who is just trying to be friendly to the new girl in town.

"Are you new to town?"

"Yeah, I'm just here for the summer to work for my great-uncle at the Mystery Cabin."

As soon as I mention Stan and the Mystery Cabin, his nose scrunches up like he's tasted something bad.

"Stan Tate?"

“Yep.”

“That’s cool,” he says but I can tell that he doesn’t mean it. “How are you liking Destiny Falls so far?”

“I haven’t been here that long but so far, I like it.”

“If you want, I can show you around sometime,” he says, taking a step closer to me.

My spine tingles in warning but I push the feeling away. We’re in a crowded grocery store. He’s not going to do anything to me.

“Oh, uh...” I start, trying to figure out a way to let him down gently.

“I’m the mayor’s son, so no one knows this town better than me,” he boasts and I want to roll my eyes.

It feels like he’s just trying to be friendly and I don’t want to come across as rude so I find myself nodding.

“Sure. I could always use a new friend in town. A friendly tour would be great,” I say, making sure to emphasize the word friend so that he knows that I’m not looking at dating him.

“How about tomorrow night? The Mystery Cabin closes at seven pm. I can pick you up at seven-thirty then.”

“Oh, um...” My eyes dart around as I try to think of a way out of it, or maybe to push it back until after I’ve settled in more, but I come up empty. “Sure, sounds great.”

He gives me a smile but it doesn’t affect me the same way that Teller’s does.

“I’ll see you then,” he says and I give a distracted nod as I hurry outside and back to my car.

I’m way past the thirty-minute lunch break and I hope that Stan and Teller aren’t too upset with me.

Chet seemed friendly enough, I guess. Maybe a little full of himself but harmless. I guess he would be the type that I

should be trying to date. It's obvious that he's got high aspirations, that he's well off, and yet, he does nothing for me.

I know that it's supposed to be a friendly tour but I'm still not looking forward to tomorrow night but it's just one night.

How bad could it really be?

SIX



Wednesdays are apparently slow at the Mystery Cabin, so after lunch, Teller comes to find me in the gift shop. Lyla is supposed to be in for her shift any minute and I'm looking forward to meeting her, but when Stan walks in after Teller, I have a feeling that I won't get the chance to today. At least not right now.

"Hey, do you want to give me a hand with the zip line?" Teller asks as he sets his toolbox down on the front counter and digs his baseball hat out of it.

"Uh, I'm not sure that I'm really qualified for that."

Teller laughs and I could swear that I see Stan smiling too but it must be my imagination.

"No qualifications necessary. I just need help fixing one of the steps on the ladder," Teller assures me, and I look over to my uncle again.

If Teller is asking me in front of him, then he has to be okay with me leaving to help Teller, right?

"Okay, sure. Should I wait until Lyla gets here and can cover the gift shop?"

"No, I'll get it," Stan says and I nod, shoving my cell phone into the pocket of my jeans and following Teller outside.

I still haven't gotten much of a chance to know my great-uncle. I made dinner for us last night and he had sat with me in

tense silence as we ate it. He had fled as soon as his plate was cleared and had disappeared into his bedroom. I had been exhausted, so I had gone upstairs and taken a shower before I passed out for the night.

He hadn't been around for breakfast this morning so this is the first time that I've seen him today and even then, he didn't bother to say much of anything to me.

I don't know what my mom thought was going to come of me working for him for the summer. He barely seems to tolerate me.

It's another beautiful day outside and I try to push my less than stellar relationship with my great-uncle aside as I follow Teller down the path to the zip line course.

"So..." Teller says as he adjusts his hat and sets his toolbox down next to the steps that lead up to the first zip line platform. "How are you liking Destiny Falls so far?"

"Is that the town motto?" I mumble and Teller looks over at me with a confused look. "You're like the third or fourth person to ask me that since I got to town."

"Yeah, who else has asked you?" he asks as he grabs a hammer out of the box and climbs up to the sagging step.

"I met Madelyn and Iris yesterday when I went into town for lunch and then I ran into a guy named Chet when I was leaving the market."

"Chet Morton?"

"I didn't get his last name. He said that he was the mayor's son if that makes a difference."

"Yeah, that's Chet Morton."

I can hear the hint of annoyance in his voice and I think that it's the first time that I've heard or seen Teller without any easygoing smile on his face.

"You don't like Chet?" I ask, prying for more information.

“I’m not his biggest fan, no. Although the rest of the town seems to love him. He’s the golden boy, born and raised here, his dad has been mayor for like a decade and it’s rumored that he’s looking to take his father’s job when he retires.”

“He offered to give me a tour of the town tonight,” I admit and I wonder if he can hear how I’m less than excited about it.

“You should know, Chet and Stan do not get along.”

“Why not?” I ask, passing the plank of wood for the new step over to him.

Teller digs in the toolbox, pulling out a power drill and some screws before he gets back to work.

“I don’t really know, to be honest. They haven’t been fans of each other since long before I came to town. The mayor is always calling the Mystery Cabin a shack and trying to rile Stan up but the truth is that this is a big draw for people to stop in town and the mayor knows that.”

“So I probably shouldn’t tell Stan that Chet’s going to be showing me around tonight then. He already isn’t my biggest fan and I don’t see that earning me any brownie points.”

“Probably not,” Teller says and it might just be the sun in my eyes, but Teller’s smile doesn’t look as bright as it normally does.

“To be honest, I don’t really want to go. I tried to tell Chet that yesterday but he didn’t seem to want to take no for an answer and then it felt like I was making a big deal out of it.”

“If you don’t want to go and told him no, then he should have accepted that,” Teller says and I can hear the steel in his voice.

I wonder why Teller doesn’t like Chet but I don’t want to ask him.

“I told him that it was just as friends so I don’t think that he’s going to try anything.”

Teller just shrugs, getting to work on fixing the step. I sit on the bottom one, picking a blade of grass and twirling it between my fingers as I look around.

It's silent, except for the hum from the power drill. Maybe that's why I find myself telling Teller about the list my mom left for me.

"You know, zip-lining was one of the things on the bucket list that my mom left for me."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. She wanted me to go zip-lining or bungee jumping or parasailing. Something extreme and terrifying," I say with a laugh.

"Well, the step is fixed..." Teller trails off, raising an eyebrow at me in invitation.

"Will Stan be mad? I didn't pay or anything."

Teller laughs, throwing his head back at my question, and his easy laughter rolls over me, leaving goose bumps in its wake.

"Nah, Stan won't mind. Come on, I'll get you set up."

"You're going to do it with me?"

"Yeah, I'll go first and then be on the other side so that I can catch you and make sure you stop in time."

He heads over to the small shed and digs around for a minute, coming back with a harness and a helmet. He plops the helmet onto my head and then gets to work on getting the harness ready.

"Step in," he says, holding the leg parts open for me to step into.

He moves the straps up over my waist and has me buckled into it in a minute. I watch as he does the same to his gear.

"This way," he says as he leads me up the stairs to the platform.

I try not to look down but I can't help it and I swallow when I see just how far off the ground we are.

"You're sure that this is safe?"

"I'm sure," he says with that easy smile as he hooks another strap to my waist.

This one is attached to the overhead line and I grip it tightly. Teller is hooked up a second later and he joins me at the edge of the platform.

"Ready?"

"Um..."

"It will be fun. You'll see. I'll go first. You just need to get a walking start at least so that you have enough momentum to make it to the next platform. If you just step off, you'll get stuck in the middle."

"Okay," I say, my heart thundering in my ears.

"Then when you get close to the other platform, you pull down on this strap. That slows you down so that you don't go flying into the stop on the line on the next platform. I'll tell you when to pull it."

"Got it," I say but I must look pretty shaky and uncertain.

"It's going to be fine, Sutton. I'll be on the other side to catch you."

With that, he takes a few running steps and flies off of the platform. I watch in wonder as he sails through the air, gliding to a stop as he comes to the other platform.

He makes it look easy. I wait until he unhooks from his line and gives me a nod before I take a deep breath, back up a few steps and then run, jumping off the platform and into the air.

There is something so freeing about leaping into the nothing and trusting that the strap will catch you and keep you safe.

The ride across to the other platform doesn't last long, just thirty seconds or so, but by the time I coast to a stop on the other side, I'm feeling lighter and happier than I have since my mom's funeral.

I can't help but picture her cheering me on as I glide through the air. It was always the two of us and so she made sure to be my biggest cheerleader no matter what I pursued.

Maybe that's the reason behind the bucket list. She knows me well and if I didn't have a reason to try new things, then I tend not to step out of my comfort-zone. Maybe this is her way of giving me a nudge to keep living, even now that she's gone.

She always was clever. Thinking about her watching me as I near the other side has a smile tugging at my lips and I grin, laughing as Teller pulls me more firmly onto the stand.

"So, what did you think?" he asks with a grin and I can't help it.

I throw my arms around his shoulders, squeezing him tight.

"Thank you," I whisper against his shoulder as he wraps his arms around my waist and holds me.

"Anytime, Sutton."

I pull back after a minute and I can feel the blush staining my cheeks. Teller gets to work on unhooking me from the line and we walk over to the other side of the platform. This next line is longer, going between trees along the way.

"Ready to go again?" he asks as he grabs the straps to hook us up to the line.

"Yeah."

"So, what else was on the bucket list?" he asks after a beat.

"Uh, um not much. It wasn't very long. I was supposed to spend the summer here and get to know my great-uncle, do something wild like zip-lining or swimming with sharks, dye

my hair a crazy color, adopt a pet, go skinny dipping, just stuff like that.”

I leave off the last one, falling in love, and I don't want to think about why.

“It's a good list.”

“Thanks,” I whisper as I realize just how close we're standing.

“If you ever want help with the rest of it, just let me know. I don't know how to dye hair, but I can give it my best shot, and we don't have sharks but I can take you parasailing or something.”

“Thanks, Teller. I might just take you up on that.”

He gives me that smile of his and takes a step back. I squint against the sun as I turn to face the other platform and I'm surprised when Teller drops his hat onto my head.

“Same as last time,” he says before he grins as he jumps off the stand.

I watch him glide through the trees to the other side, my heart racing out of control and I know that this time it's from something other than the zip-lining.

SEVEN



Sutton

I'M flushed by the time that we clean up from the zip line and then head back to the cabin. I have no idea when my shift should be over, but since Lyla is here, I'm guessing that it's okay to head upstairs and take a shower before Chet gets here.

I wanted to meet the other gift shop employee before she left though, so I head inside after Teller and smile when I see the bored looking girl about my age behind the counter.

She glances up, her warm blue eyes looking me over with interest.

"You must be Sutton," she says with a wide grin, standing up from the stool behind the counter. "I'm Lyla."

"It's nice to finally meet you," I say as I step closer and I can tell instantly that we're going to get along.

It's a weird feeling since I didn't grow up with many friends, and certainly no one that I felt a connection to right away, but I find that I don't mind it.

"Cause I'm the youngest person that you've met since you got to town?" she jokes and I can't help but laugh.

It seems that we have a similar sense of humor and Lyla seems friendly and down to earth. Finally, someone in this place that I can see myself getting along with and that I don't risk losing my heart to.

My eyes cut over to Teller and I quickly glance away.

“How long are you in town for?” she asks me as Teller waves goodbye and heads off to fix something.

I can hear Stan giving a tour and I know that I don't have much time before the tourists come into the gift shop.

“Just for the summer.”

“Well, if you ever want to get together and hang out, just let me know.”

“Yeah, I met Madelyn and Iris in town yesterday and they mentioned having a girl's night soon. Maybe we can all do that one night next week,” I offer.

“Sounds cool. Just let me know when.”

We exchange numbers and then the door is opening and the tourists are coming in to shop so I wave goodbye and head upstairs to my room.

It's already after four p.m. and I'm getting tired. I debate texting and canceling on Chet but it seems too late to do that, so instead, I send him a message asking if we can do the tour earlier and hope that he says he can't.

No such luck.

A minute after I send the message, he's replying and saying that he can be here in twenty minutes. That doesn't give me a ton of time to get ready but it's not like I'm going to dress up or anything.

I let him know that it's alright and then hurry through a shower before I throw on some jeans and a plain gray T-shirt. I grab my phone and my purse before I head back downstairs.

I debate just leaving but then I worry that Stan might have plans for us for dinner, so I leave a note, letting him know that I went out to explore the town.

I head outside right as a new looking Mercedes pulls up and Chet waves at me. I hurry to the passenger door before he can get out to open it for me. I want to remind him right off

the bat that this is not a date. I also decided to dress casually as another reminder that I'm not interested in dating or starting a relationship right now.

Chet is dressed up more and I remember that he was dressed more formally when I ran into him yesterday too. I'm hoping that that's just how he always dresses and that it doesn't mean anything.

"Hey," I say, trying to interject some excitement into my voice.

"Hey, you look great," he says and I force a smile as I buckle up.

"Thanks."

He starts the car and heads toward downtown. I expect him to start pointing stuff out or telling me a bit about the history of the town, but he spends the first ten minutes talking about himself and his day. By the time he gets around to telling me about the town, we're already on the other side of it.

"This is the mayor's office," he brags and I have to bite back a laugh.

I should have known that this is where he would start the tour.

"It's nice," I say, studying the fancy-looking building.

"Yeah, the mayor's house is right there," he says, pointing next door.

"Oh," I say, trying to sound suitably impressed.

This tour just started and I'm already sick of it and the tour guide. Chet stops at a red light and a few women cross the road. They all smile and wave at Chet, and I see a few of them give me dirty looks.

I want to tell them that they can have him. I don't know how this boring, egotistical twerp could be the town golden boy like Teller said.

“That’s Beth and Mary Sue. They both asked me to go to prom with them senior year but I had already promised to go with Chloe. She was the head cheerleader so I mean, it was kind of a no-brainer, you know?”

I gag a little bit at that but try to pretend like I’m still interested in what he has to say.

The next hour and a half pass in much the same way. I learn all about what a stud and popular guy that he was in high school, how everyone was always saying that he was going to grow up to be an important man.

He skips over college quite a bit and I realize that he left Destiny Falls for college and must have hated it. He would be a small fish in a big pond there. No one would have been impressed that his father was the mayor of some tiny town that no one had ever heard of before. I don’t see him handling people not kissing his ass very well.

It’s obvious that he has high aspirations. He wants to be the mayor of this small town so that he can lord his little bit of power over everyone else. He wants everyone to look up to him and to like him. I wonder if he knows that a lot of people don’t seem to even like him.

I’m bored to tears and almost falling asleep by the time he pulls up outside of the Mystery Cabin. Lyla is just leaving the back door, headed to her car and I send her a pleading look to save me as Chet pulls up next to her.

“You know, Stan should really pave this lot so that customers don’t have to park on the gravel or dirt,” he whines and I can’t help but roll my eyes.

“I’ll be sure to mention that to him,” I lie as I throw open the passenger’s side door and hurry out. “Thanks so much for the tour.”

Lyla steps closer to me and I see her glare at Chet. It looks like no one here at the Mystery Cabin cares for him.

“Anytime,” he says with a wink and I force a smile that feels more like a grimace.

I'm about to close the door and start praying that I never see him again when he stops me.

"I was wondering if you would want to grab dinner with me sometime."

"Oh, no," I whisper.

Lyla lets out a bark of laughter that she tries to cover up with a cough.

"What?" he asks, his brow furrowed and I wonder if he's ever heard the word no before or if he just really didn't hear me.

"Oh, um, Like I said yesterday, I'm really not looking for a relationship or anything," I start.

"Come on, Sutton. It's just one dinner," he says in a voice that is clearly trying to make me feel like I'm being ridiculous. "Besides, everyone has to eat, right?"

"Um." I shift on my feet, feeling uncomfortable.

Do I really want to spend another night listening to him brag about himself? God no. He was so annoying and self-centered tonight that it was unbearable.

Maybe he was just nervous and was overcompensating so I wouldn't notice. It still doesn't change the fact that I'm not attracted to him. Maybe that's something that grows over time though.

An image of Teller flashes behind my eyes but I push him out of my mind.

I've never really dated before and Chet's making it sound like it's not a big deal. Am I overreacting or being dramatic? Making it into a big deal when he just wants to buy me dinner and welcome me to town?

He said that it was just one dinner. Just one dinner and then I'll never have to see him again.

"I guess," I say but he doesn't seem to hear my less than enthusiastic response. "Just this once. I was telling the truth

when I said that I really wasn't interested in dating right now."

"Don't worry. I'm sure that I'll be able to change your mind," he says with a wink and I can't help but grimace, my stomach dropping.

Do pick-up lines like that really work on women?

"Is tomorrow night alright? I'll pick you up at seven," he says before he shifts into drive.

I hurry to close the door and get a sinking feeling in my stomach as I watch him drive away.

"So, how was the tour?" Lyla asks sarcastically and I scrub my hands down my face.

"Awful."

"Yeah, you look like you need a drink. Come on," she says, waving me over to her beat-up Jeep.

I let out a breath, hoping that maybe tonight won't completely suck as I climb into the passenger seat next to her and we take off.

EIGHT



Sutton

I WAKE up the next morning and it takes me a second to remember where I am. Part of that is because I'm still half asleep and the other part is because I have the hangover from hell.

I'm not much of a drinker, never have been, but I went a little wild with Lyla last night. Most moms would say that she was a bad influence but I have a feeling that my mom would have loved her.

She had driven me back to her apartment and we had stopped for some takeout at a little Chinese restaurant downtown. She had run next door and grabbed two bottles of red wine. I remember thinking that two bottles seemed excessive. I'm also pretty sure that we drank both of them last night.

Lyla lives in a small apartment above some upscale restaurant downtown. She had parked out front and I remember being concerned that the restaurant was going to be upset that we were taking up one of their spots but she had waved me off.

I remember seeing a handsome-looking man watching us from the front window, or rather watching Lyla. He had a mischievous smirk as his eyes tracked her and Lyla had waved

at him, giving him a cheeky smile and a salute as we headed around the corner out of his sight to the stairs.

After that, things start to get hazy. I remember eating and drinking a glass of red wine. Then another. I think I had one more after that but I honestly can't remember. We had been watching *10 Things I Hate About You*, but I don't remember finishing the movie. I must have passed out.

It's been a long time since I had any alcohol and even longer since I've had a night like last night. Not since my mom was alive and I had turned twenty-one. We had gone pretty wild that night and I remember being miserable and promising that I would never do that again.

Right now I wish that I stuck to that promise.

I pull my head off of the couch, looking over to see Lyla just starting to wake up as well. My phone is buzzing on the coffee table and I realize that the sound must have been what woke me.

"What time is it?" I mumble and Lyla groans.

"Too early."

I agree but then I start to worry that I'm late to open the gift shop and I roll over, swiping up my phone.

"Shit! I have to be at work in half an hour!"

Lyla shoots up from her spot on the couch, her blonde hair sticking up in every direction. She has mascara smudged under her eyes and looks about as bad as I feel but she still manages to shoot to her feet and take off down the hallway.

"Give me ten minutes and I'll be ready to go!"

I stand up, trying my best to clean up some of our trash from last night. I manage to find my shoes, kicked off behind the bookshelf in her living room and I tug them on right as Lyla comes charging out of the bathroom, showered and changed.

"Ready?"

I nod and we hustle down the stairs and over to her car. There's a piece of paper stuffed under her windshield and she swipes it, smiling slightly as she stuffs it into her pocket.

"What was that?" I ask as I buckle up and she throws her Jeep into reverse and guns it in the direction of the Mystery Cabin.

"Nothing," she says in a hurry but I can see the smile on her lips.

"Is it from the guy at the restaurant last night?" I ask her and when she blushes slightly, I know that I'm right.

"He leaves me notes on my car."

"Asking you not to park there?" I guess.

"No, he just writes 'come to dinner. I'll save you a table.'"

"Aww, why don't you go?"

"It's not that big of a deal. He probably does it all of the time."

"I don't know about that," I say, remembering the way the man from last night had looked at her.

We pull up next to my Beetle a few minutes later and I throw myself out of the Jeep and hurry inside.

"Nice of you to show up," Stan grumbles as Lyla and I run inside.

Teller just gives me a grin as I sprint past them and upstairs. I'm sure I look like a mess but if I hurry, I should be able to make it to work on time still.

I race into the bathroom and slam the door shut before I turn the shower on, stripping while the water warms up. I'm still feeling slightly hungover from last night but even that can't ruin my good mood.

I'm starting to settle in here, to make friends. Teller is so sweet and charming and Lyla is fun and can make me laugh like no one else. Even Madelyn and Iris seemed super nice.

Stan is still an issue but sometimes it feels like we're making progress.

Things are looking up.

Until I look down and spot the mouse at the other end of the bathtub.

I scream, stumbling my way out of the shower and wrapping a towel around me as I jump up onto the top of the toilet seat.

I hear Teller shout my name in a panic and a second later, the bathroom door bursts open and I meet Teller's wide eyes with my own. A second later, I'm abandoning the top of the toilet for him.

My arms and legs wrap around him and I cling to him. I'm sure I look like a half-drowned rat but it's okay because it's not like he can see anything with my shoulder covering his face.

"Are you okay?" he mumbles against my skin and I shake my head no, my cheek brushing against his ball cap.

"There's a mouse in the tub," I inform him, and I feel him start to shake with laughter. "It's not funny!"

"Okay, you're right, I'm sorry. Why don't you let me set you down and I'll get him."

"You're not going to kill him, are you?"

"No, I'll just catch him and release him in the woods."

"Okay."

His hands let go of the back of my thighs and I start to slide down when I realize that the towel has come undone and if I drop down, it's going to fall too.

I freeze, now eye level with him as my cheeks heat and I scramble for a way out of this mess.

"Everything okay? The mouse isn't out here. I think he's stuck in the tub."

“Yeah.”

“Okay,” he says, giving me that smile that I love as I cling to him like some kind of psychotic koala and we continue to stare at each other.

“It’s just that the towel came undone.”

“Oh.”

Teller’s eyes dip to my cleavage and then dart away quickly. A pink tint stains his cheeks and I wonder if he liked what he saw.

“Maybe if we go into the bedroom? You can set me on the bed so I can throw the blanket over me or something?”

“Sure thing,” he says, turning and striding next door to my bedroom.

I realize too late that he can’t really see where he’s going with me in front of him.

“Oh! Watch out for the—”

We go tumbling down onto the mattress and I groan as all of Teller’s weight lands on me.

“Suitcase,” I finish as he leans up on one arm to peer down at me.

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah.”

“Hey, Stan sent me up here to see what all the screaming is about and now I can see,” Lyla says as she stands in my doorway.

“It’s not what it’s looks like,” I start. “There was this huge —”

“Oh my god, dude! I don’t want to know the details!” she yells as she turns and hurries back downstairs.

Teller is laughing so hard that he’s shaking the whole bed and even though I can tell that my whole body is blushing from embarrassment, I can’t help but join him.

“So, good morning,” I say once we’ve caught our breath.

“Morning,” he says, giving me a bright grin. “Ready for me to get off of you?”

No.

I’m shocked by that thought but I push it aside, clearing my throat as I nod.

Teller covers his eyes, giving me plenty of time to get the towel situated before he opens them and I realize that I could have just asked him to close his eyes in the bathroom. I’m going to blame that oversight on my hangover and try not to think about it too much.

“Thanks.”

“Anytime, Sutton. I’ll go get the mouse so you can shower.”

I nod, watching as he strides out of the bedroom. A few minutes later he passes by again, holding up the paper box that he caught the mouse in and letting me know that the bathroom is safe.

I smile as I head back to the shower.

NINE



Sutton

I'M with Teller again this morning and I follow him over to the miniature golf course to help him fix the windmill hole and some kind of filter. I had flinched when I first walked back outside, the sun piercing my eyes and causing my headache to hurt even more. I guess that Tylenol that I took when I got out of the shower hasn't kicked in yet. Teller had given me his hat again and I had smiled, trudging after him across the grass.

I'm still eating the banana and granola bar that I swiped from the kitchen as we cross the yard. Tourists are starting to arrive and I smile as I watch one family with twins climb out. The little kids are so excited to be here, their little eyes wide in wonder as they look around the property.

"You can see the lighthouse and the bridge from here!" the little boy shouts and I laugh, enjoying his excitement.

The windmill is one of the last holes, so Teller and I have to wind our way through the course.

"What's wrong with this one?" I ask as we set our stuff down next to the hole.

"We need to check on one of the boards on the windmill and clean out the water," Teller says and I notice that he's wearing a pair of rubber boots.

He wades into the shallow river that runs through the course and grabs a shovel. I sit on a rock nearby, watching as he scrapes along the bottom of the water.

“So, how was the tour last night?” he asks after a moment and I can tell that he’s trying to keep his tone upbeat, but he’s not quite pulling it off.

He wasn’t exactly subtle in his dislike of Chet and that he didn’t want me to see him.

“Awful,” I admit. “Chet is really boring and he spent the whole time talking about himself instead of the town. So the tour really sucked too.”

He grins, turning away and pretending to work and I roll my eyes.

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“I’m sure that you are. You look really broken up about it.”

He laughs at that, tossing the shovel aside. “Hand me the flathead screwdriver?”

I dig through the toolbox, finding it and passing it over to him. Our fingers brush together and I try to ignore the tingles that spread throughout my body at the simple touch.

I’ve never had this kind of reaction to a guy before. I don’t like it, or at least I’m trying hard to convince myself that I don’t like it.

“He asked me out to dinner tonight,” I blurt and I watch as Teller’s easy smile falters.

“Of course he did,” he mutters under his breath but I still hear him. “Did you say yes?”

“Kind of?”

“Kind of?” he asks, his brow furrowed.

“I told him that I would go to dinner but that it wasn’t a date.”

“I thought you didn’t like him.”

“I don’t. Not like that.”

“Then why did you say yes?” he asks, unscrewing some plastic filter piece on the edge of the river.

“He... I don’t know. He made it sound like it was no big deal. It’s just one meal. He said that everyone has to eat, right, and I just felt like maybe I was making too big of a deal out of it. I told him I wasn’t interested in dating him and he knows it’s just this once and that it definitely isn’t a date.”

“So, you told him that you didn’t want to go out with him on a date, that you didn’t see him like that and weren’t interested in him, and he twisted it and made you feel like you were the one making a big deal by saying no to him?”

“Uh, I guess.”

“You can’t let him, or anyone else, push you around like that, Sutton. What he did? That’s some toxic masculinity shit right there. Instead of being a man and accepting that you said no, he turned it on you and kept pushing until you said yes.”

“I know. You’re right, but it’s just one date. It just feels easier this way.”

Teller shakes his head and I know that he’s disappointed in me, in my answer.

“You can cancel, Sutton. It’s not on you. He’s the asshole for not taking no for an answer. A real man doesn’t need to pull tricks or use mind games to get a girl to go out with him, and he *never* makes her feel uncomfortable or like she doesn’t have a choice.”

I know that Teller is right, but I also know that I don’t want to start anything with anyone here. I can’t afford to. I’m leaving at the end of the summer and besides, guys aren’t in my five-year plan. I need to get a job and an apartment and work my way up the corporate ladder before I think about dating and guys.

But dating was on the bucket list and between the two of them, Teller is the more dangerous one. He’s the one that I

want, that I'm attracted to. Chet, I can barely stand. I'm not going to lose my head or my heart to Chet.

Maybe that's why I said that I don't want to cancel the pseudo-date. I'm hoping that it will distract me from my growing attraction to Teller while at the same time allowing me to cross off an item on the bucket list.

"I'll be fine. It's just dinner and he knows that it's not a date. We're just going as friends."

"If you need anything, Sutton, you can always call me. I'll come get you."

My heart melts at the concern then and I force a smile.

"Thanks, Teller."

We finish cleaning out the filter and I watch as he inspects the windmill arm for damage before I help him pack up the supplies and carry them back to the storage room in the cabin.

"See you later," he says with a wave as I head into the gift shop to relieve Lyla for her lunch break.

The last of the tourists are just checking out and I smile when I see the twins grinning down at the Mystery Cabin snow globes in their hands.

"I was going to see if you wanted to take your lunch break first," I tell Lyla as I lean against the front counter.

"Nah, I can wait. I think Stan just went to eat too if you want to join him."

My good mood plummets.

I've been trying not to think about my shaky relationship with my great-uncle. I don't know what to say to Lyla though, so I just nod and head back toward the door.

Sure enough, my uncle is in the kitchen, slamming some pots and dishes around.

"Need any help?" I ask him.

He just grunts and I roll my eyes, moving to join him at the stove. I'm getting used to his grunts and nonverbal responses. By the end of the summer, I'm going to speak fluent Stan.

"What are we making?" I try again.

"Soup."

"It's like a hundred degrees out."

"If you don't like it, you can make something else. Or get your new boyfriend to take you out."

The venom in his voice catches me off guard and I flinch, staring at him wide-eyed.

It's like I've been slapped. It's not like we've become best friends since I got here, but I thought that we would at least be civil toward each other.

"Do you mean Chet? He's not my boyfriend. We're not even friends. He was just nice enough to show me around town."

I can't help but take a small dig of my own at him. I'm sick of being the only one of the two of us to try here.

Suddenly, all of the anger and sadness that I've been carrying around with me since my mom died hits me like a train. The shock of finding out that my mom was dying, then having to watch her die. The days of funeral planning and weeks of packing up the house and getting another shock from her letters.

It all slams into me and I'm like a pot boiling over. I just can't take anymore. I can't take the snide comments. I can't take everyone thinking that they know better than me. I can't take being pushed around by men.

I snap.

"Why did you let me stay here? It's obvious that you don't want me. No one wants me," I scream.

Stan looks at me, shocked and his mouth opens but I barrel over him.

“I just didn’t want to be alone. I wanted family, but you’re not my family. You’re just some mean old man that I don’t understand. And you don’t want to understand me either. I’ve been trying. I’ve been trying so hard, for so long, and I’m just done. I’m done.”

“Sutton...”

That’s all he says, just my name and I can’t take it. I know that he doesn’t know what to do with me, that he doesn’t know how to fix me and it’s okay because I don’t think that I can be fixed.

Tears are already threatening to spill over and I don’t want him to see me like that. I turn and bolt, running up the stairs to my room. I fall down on the bed, curling up into a ball and sobbing.

I don’t even know what I’m crying about. My mom dying, Stan being a jerk with no interest in me, being alone, Chet pushing me around, Teller wanting me to throw away my plan for the future, feeling so lost and alone.

I cry for all of it, until I can’t cry anymore. Until there are no tears left.

Then I get up and take another shower. I build my walls back up when I’m in there and by the time I step out and look at my reflection in the mirror, I can no longer see any remains of the scared, lonely girl that I am on the inside.

Sure, my spirit is bruised, my mind tired, but on the outside, you can’t see any of that. All you can see is the mask. The face that I show the world.

I’m Sutton Tate. The girl with a plan.

TEN



Sutton

I SWEAR that I was going to cancel on Chet, but by the time I get out of the shower, it's already so close to when he's supposed to pick me up and I don't want to bail at the last minute. Besides, I need to get out of the house before Stan tries to come talk to me.

Chet picks me up again and from the first word out of his mouth, I know that tonight is a mistake. I should have canceled at the last minute and let him think that I was a rude bitch. I'm too tired, too drained, and not at all prepared to spend hours listening to him brag and talk about himself.

Chet takes me to the fancy restaurant that Lyla lives above. According to him, Prim + Proper is *the* place to eat in Destiny Falls. It is nice, but I get the feeling that Chet is telling me this because he wants to know that he is high class and paying a lot for our dinner. He strikes me as the type of man to expect things for buying a girl an expensive meal and I start to look for the cheapest thing on the menu.

Chet talks about the menu here and from the sounds of it, he's tried everything they have to offer.

"The spaghetti Carbonaro here is delicious. So is the sirloin. They get the best cuts of meat here. It's really the only place to take a date in this town."

That last sentence makes me think that he's trying to brag about how many dates he goes on. Disgust fills me at that thought. What a dumb thing to brag about.

I order a strawberry and feta salad and I can see that Chet doesn't like my choice of order. I have a feeling that he's annoyed that I didn't order one of the menu items that he had recommended.

He orders the sirloin and the spaghetti Carbonaro, assuring me that I'll want to try some. Him thinking that I can't order for myself just pisses me off even more. What is it with men thinking that they know better than me?

Chet doesn't seem to notice that and he moves onto his day and how important his job is.

"So, we had to file all of the paperwork," he says dramatically and it snaps me out of my daydreams.

I take a large gulp of my wine, downing half of it, but when I see the excited look in Chet's eye, I vow to stick to ordering water for the rest of the meal. Hopefully we can be in and out of here in an hour and I can put Chet and this crappy dinner behind me.

"Anyway, I ended up arguing with Tom Hartford about the zoning permits for like an hour. I mean, does he really think he knows more than me? I'm the mayor's son and an aide and he just runs some little tourist shop on Main Street."

His condescending tone has my anger rising and I have to grind my teeth to keep from telling him that I think he's an egotistical prick.

Chet keeps going, not noticing that I'm bored out of my mind and finding him repulsive. He just keeps droning on and on about how important he is, how rich his family is and how he's so smart. Luckily, none of this requires my input because my head is a million miles away. Or I guess, actually just a few miles up the road would be more exact.

My conversation with Teller and Stan both pass through my mind all throughout our first course. I debate trying to play

a drinking game and taking a sip of my wine every time Chet says something obnoxious but I'd be wasted before our salad plates were taken out of the way.

Every time that Chet brags about himself, I think about what Teller said about him and I regret not telling him that he's right and canceling this dumb date.

Part of me can't help but compare the two men and I wonder what a date with Teller would be like. I doubt that he would take me somewhere as fancy as Prim + Proper, but if he did, I bet it would be more fun. I also know that he wouldn't spend the whole date talking about himself.

I'd have more fun with Teller. Hell, I already have more fun with him and that's when we're working around the Mystery Cabin.

The date is stilted and uncomfortable and feels like it drags on and on. A few people from town stop by our table to talk to Chet. They give me curious looks but he doesn't bother to introduce me. Why would he? He'd have to talk about someone else to do that.

"Sorry about that," he says after the latest person leaves but he doesn't look sorry or even upset that our date keeps getting interrupted.

I think that he likes all of the attention. He lives for it. If he didn't have people coming up to kiss his ass, he'd probably throw a fit or get pissed off.

"Next time we go out we'll have to go somewhere more private," he says with a sleazy, over-exaggerated wink and smirk.

I think I die a little inside when I think about seeing him again in any capacity.

"Uh, I told you that this was just a one-time deal. I'm not looking for a relationship. Remember?"

Chet's jaw hardens along with his eyes and a nervous tingle runs down my spine. Maybe it's intuition. Either way, I

take the warning seriously.

“Sutton, I thought that we were on the same page here. You don’t feel this connection between us?” he asks, acting wounded.

I’m surprised, taken aback by his shift in attitude.

Is this another trick? Another way to trick me into saying yes like Teller said he would do?

Today has been too long. Too long and filled with way too many emotions. I can’t take it and I don’t want to waste another second of my life with this conceited asshole.

“No, Chet, I don’t,” I snap, my tone hard. “I don’t feel anything toward you except disgust. All you do is talk about yourself. You spent our ‘tour’ yesterday talking about yourself and you’ve done nothing but brag about yourself again tonight. I’m done here. Thanks for dinner,” I say sarcastically as I throw my napkin onto the table and stand up.

I’m pulling up Teller’s number on my cell phone before I have even left the restaurant. The man who has a crush on Lyla, who was watching her that night that I came here and who leaves notes on her car, watches me from the back hallway, giving me an almost proud smile as I head for the door.

Teller answers on the second ring, sounding distracted.

“Hello?”

“Teller? It’s Sutton.”

“Are you alright?” he asks right away and I let out a sigh.

“Yeah, I’m fine, but I could use a ride.”

“Where are you?”

“Prim + Proper,” I tell him, heading down the sidewalk a few feet.

“I’ll be there in ten.”

He hangs up then and I tuck my phone back into my purse. The restaurant is closer to the bridge and I can just make out the water below from all of the lights running across it.

Teller pulls up a few minutes later in his old black truck and I relax, smiling as I hurry to climb into the passenger seat. Chet comes out as I'm buckling up and he glares at us as Teller waves and we drive off.

"So... how was the date?" Teller jokes, trying to lighten the mood in the cab.

"Ugh," I groan dramatically, resting my head on the back of the seat.

"That sounds promising," he teases and I roll my eyes at him as I reach over and swat his arm.

"It was just like the tour of the town last night. A lot of information about him and not much else. The food was good though. Or the food that I actually got to eat was good."

"Well, I can help with that. So, this is Main Street," Teller starts, switching to the voice that Stan uses with tourists.

"Oh my god," I groan when Teller tries to go on and starts to point out shops along the road.

"Did I interrupt your evening?" I ask him as we get closer to the cabin.

"Not yet. I'm on call tonight and tomorrow so I'll be headed to the firehouse after this."

"You're a firefighter?" I ask, surprised by the news.

"A volunteer one. This town is too small for a real one, so there are just thirty or so of us guys who all train and volunteer."

"That's really cool of you," I say honestly.

I'm not even surprised. Teller is exactly the type of man who likes to help people. Of course he spends his time volunteering to help out the town.

“Thanks,” he says with a grin. “I like it. I actually did it when I lived back in New York too.”

“You lived in New York?!” I ask because that news does shock me.

“Yep. I was a firefighter and worked fixing up houses there on my off days.”

“Why did you leave?”

“I got tired of it. I was working two jobs and barely making ends meet. I was tired and stressed all of the time and I just didn’t want to live that way anymore.”

“And so you decided to move to Destiny Falls?” I ask, sounding skeptical.

“Yep.”

“But why?”

“Why what?” he asks with a laugh.

“Why give up a great job and civilization to come here? To work at a tourist trap in the middle of nowhere?”

“I like it. Besides, how many people can say that they’ve done that?”

“I mean it’s definitely more than the number of people who actually *WANT* to be able to say that...”

His laughter is like a shot and it leaves me feeling warmer than the glass of wine that I just downed at dinner.

Teller pulls up outside of the Mystery Cabin and I hesitate, not wanting our conversation to end just yet.

I wish that it was him that I went out with tonight.

That thought hits me out of the blue and I suck in a sharp breath. I need to stop thinking about that. I need to follow my plan and Teller and this tiny town are not part of it.

“Thanks for the ride.”

“Anytime, Sutton. Have a good night,” he says as I climb out and close the door.

I wave, rounding the hood and heading toward the front door when Teller stops me.

“Hey Sutton?”

“Yeah?” I ask, turning around to face him.

“Did Chet tell you that you look beautiful tonight?”

“Um, no,” I say when I realize that he had barely looked at my outfit. “No, he didn’t.”

“Then he must be blind, because you’re gorgeous.”

My whole body warms at his words and I wonder if he can see the blush staining my cheeks.

“Thanks, Teller,” I whisper softly.

“Anytime, Sutton.”

With that, he gives a little wave and shifts into drive and heads back down the road and I’m left staring after him.

ELEVEN



Sutton

I'M SHOCKED when I come downstairs for breakfast the next day to find Stan in the kitchen. He's swearing up a storm, trying to flip over a pancake that isn't quite ready, and I have to bite back a chuckle when he swears again, even more creatively this time.

The kitchen is messy and I'm guessing that Stan didn't wash the dishes after dinner last night since the sink is piled high and I doubt those are all from breakfast.

"Uh, do you need help with that?" I ask as I take a tentative step inside the kitchen.

Stan spins around and for a second we both just stare at each other. I wonder if he's going to bring up yesterday, but after a beat, he just nods and holds out the spatula for me.

I take it from him and it feels like a peace offering of sorts.

We stand side by side at the stove as I flip the pancake over. I don't know this man that I'm living with, that I'm related to. He's never going to be the family that I had imagined when I first learned about him. He's so gruff and standoffish. He's secretive and a bit of a loner.

Maybe he's just grieving and he handles it differently than me. Maybe he just has a hard time showing people that he cares.

We're probably never going to be as close as my mom and I were, but at least he seems like he's trying now though. That doesn't mean that I know what to say to him.

The silence is tense at first but after a few minutes, I get lost in cooking. It isn't until we're sitting down that Stan speaks.

"I—" He clears his throat and I just stare at him quietly, waiting to see what he's about to say. "I want you here, Sutton. I want to get to know you."

I think that this is the most I've ever heard him say at once, that wasn't part of the tour, that is. His voice comes out gruff and strained, like the words are dragged out of him.

I nod, shoving a bite of pancake into my mouth. We eat breakfast in silence, just like all the other times that we've shared a meal, but this time the awkward tension isn't in the air. Stan might not be who I envisioned my family to be, but that doesn't change the fact that he is my last remaining family member on Earth. We're never going to be as close as my mom and I were, but I can see maybe coming back here for Christmas or something.

"Teller is off today. It will be you and Lyla in the gift shop," he says as he carries his dirty dishes over to the sink.

"Sounds good," I say, dumping my dishes on top of his and heading toward the entrance of the gift shop.

Lyla is walking in from the other door and I smile when I see her.

"Hey Sutton! How was the big date last night?" she asks, pretending to gag.

"Yeah, it was like that."

"Oh, come on! You have to give me more details than that!"

Lyla starts to open the register while I get to work stocking some of the shelves and while we're both alone, I fill her in on last night.

“He took me to Prim + Proper and then didn’t shut up about how impressive it was that he could get a reservation last minute and how it was the nicest place in town. I saw your man, by the way.”

“My man?”

“Yeah, the guy who leaves you notes on your car and looks at you like he wants to devour you.”

“Oh, him,” she says, rolling her eyes.

“Did he leave a note this morning?” I ask her.

“Maybe,” she admits reluctantly, and I grin at her.

“So did Chet ask you out again?” she asks, obviously trying to change the subject.

“Yeah. Or he said that next time we go out it will have to be somewhere more private.”

“Gross.”

“Right? He spent the whole night talking about himself and bragging about how important he is. Then we kept getting interrupted by people from town and instead of cutting those conversations short, or even introducing me,, he seemed to be more interested in them than in me.”

“So you turned him down then?”

“Yeah, I told him that we had agreed it would be one dinner as friends and that I had no interest in seeing him again. Then I thanked him for dinner, left, and called Teller for a ride home.”

“Oh my god! I would have paid big money to see Chet’s face when you turned him down and then walked out on the date!”

“You could have if you had taken your mystery man up on his offer,” I say, slyly turning the conversation back to her.

“I barely even know Hudson. I’m not going out with him.”

“Aren’t dates how you learn more about people that you’re interested in?”

“Mine usually aren’t. Every time I go on a date, they end in disaster.”

“Do tell,” I say with a wide grin.

Lyla laughs and comes over to help me restock the shirts.

“One time, when I was in high school, I went to the summer fair with this boy named, Robby. Robby Schulmer,” she says with a small laugh. “Anyway, we went on a few rides, ate a bunch of junk food from one of the stands, and then he dragged me on the Tilt-a-Whirl.”

“Uh oh,” I say with a laugh. I know where this story is going.

“I know, right? So we get on the ride and I instantly know that this is a bad idea and I try to stand up but they’re already closing the lap belt and I’m trapped.”

“How long did you make it?” I ask her through my laughter.

“About two laps. Then all of the junk food came right back up.”

“So no second date then?” I joke and she laughs.

“No, my great love affair with Robby Schulmer came to an abrupt end. He couldn’t wait to get away from me. He didn’t even take me home, just ditched me when I went to the bathroom to clean up.”

“What a dick.”

She snorts but agrees.

Lyla is so easy to be around, to talk to. She’s one of those people who is effortlessly cool but never tries to chase a trend a day in her life.

She tells me more stories about some of her worst dates and I laugh, but a part of me wonders if I’m missing out on

something.

Getting stood up by my prom date stung, it burned me, and instead of getting back out there, I just retreated more into myself. Maybe that's why my mom pushed me to go dating on the bucket list.

The first tour group is about to come through so I get to work carrying the boxes into the back as Lyla heads behind the counter. Before I disappear into the stockroom, she stops me.

"I'm sorry that Chet was a jerk, although I could have told you that before you ever met him. Him and his whole family are so slimy. We'll find you someone better," she says with a grin, and my mind flashes to Teller.

I'm saved from having to answer when the tourists come in and I hurry into the back room.

I can't stop thinking about her stories. Sure, all of the dates sounded awful, but at least she can look back and laugh at it now.

Before I can stop myself, I pull out my phone and send off a quick text message.

SUTTON: I know you're on call tonight, but I was wondering if you would want to help me with my bucket list tomorrow night?

I STACK up the boxes of shirts and I'm about to head back out when my phone buzzes.

TELLER: Absolutely. What are we working on crossing off?

I SMILE as I type back my response.

SUTTON: **Something crazy.**

I GRIN as I tuck my phone away and head back out to help Lyla. I can't help but feel that my mom is somewhere in heaven right now watching over me, guiding me.

I hope that she's smiling.

TWELVE



Sutton

TELLER and I end up at The Fainting Goat bar two nights later. We both just got off of work at the Mystery Cabin. I had dinner with Stan while he went home to change and then he came back to pick me up. I had offered to meet him at the bar but he had insisted that he wanted to drive me and that he didn't live far away.

Stan had seemed happier about my choice of dates tonight. When I told him that I was going out with Teller to the bar in town, he had just nodded. I think that's the first time that I've said something to him that he hasn't just grunted back at.

The music is loud inside, some old Shania Twain song playing over the speakers, and I'm surprised to see that the place is packed. Lyla is supposed to be meeting us later, and I even invited Madelyn and Iris.

I spot them right when I walk in, Iris's bright red hair is like a flame in the dimly lit bar. Lyla is next to them and my eyebrows rise when I see that Hudson, the guy from Prim + Proper is standing behind her. I give her a look as we get closer and she just shrugs in response, but I can see the interest in her eyes.

"Hey!" Madelyn shouts over the music as Teller and I join them at the bar.

“Hey! Thanks for coming out.”

“Anytime! Don’t think that I forgot that we still need to have a girl’s night one day soon.”

“Let’s try to do it next week,” I suggest, and she nods.

The bartender comes over a few seconds later and we all put in an order. Teller and Lyla both order beer, Hudson orders a whiskey, and Madelyn, Iris, and I all order lemon drop martinis.

“So, why are we all at The Fainting Goat?” Lyla asks after our drinks are set in front of us.

“I need to ride that,” I say, pointing to the corner of the room where a mechanical bull is.

The contraption seems to take up half of the bar, with a giant foam padding circle around it. There’s some bored looking guy working the controllers while a bachelorette party takes a turn on it. Some guys are standing around hooting and hollering as the girls climb on and ride.

The whole thing isn’t really my scene, but I’m hoping that it will count as doing something crazy. Normally I would be too embarrassed to get up and do something like this, especially in front of a crowd. That was why I invited my friends. I know that they’ll support me and try to make this fun.

“Any particular reason?” Lyla asks, eyeing the bull uncertainly.

“Uh, my mom died a little over a month ago and she left me this list, this bucket list. Doing something crazy was on the list.”

There’s a moment of silence as that news hits everyone and I take another big gulp of my drink.

“Does riding a mechanical bull counts as crazy?” Iris asks and for a second, I think she’s making fun of me, but when I look over to her, it looks like she’s trying to figure out an equation in her head and I know that she was seriously asking.

“For me, it does. I would never get on one willingly.”

“Smart girl,” Lyla jokes and I laugh.

“I was hoping that you would do it with me, actually,” I tell her and she winces but I know that she will. I know that they all will.

“I’ll go put our names on the list,” Teller says, passing me his beer bottle as he heads over to the guy at the control box.

“Is Chet going to be showing up tonight?” Madelyn asks, and I notice that she looks less than thrilled with the idea of hanging out with him.

“Uh, no. Why?”

“I heard about your date the other night. The whole town did.”

“Great.”

“Yeah, that’s not how people are saying it went,” she quips and I laugh, downing the last of my martini and licking some of the sugar off of the rim as Teller walks back over to us.

“We’re up next,” he tells the group and I pass him back his beer.

We don’t have to wait long before the first name is called.

“Up next!” the operator calls over the speakers, “is Lyla Winters!”

Lyla groans so loud that I can hear her over the music. She downs the last of her whiskey and heads over to the bull. The rest of our group follows and I grin, leaning closer to Teller as Lyla walks across the soft pads and hops up onto the bull. She gives me a playful grin as she grabs hold of the strap attached to the bull and gives a nod.

She raises her hand as the bull starts to move and we all whoop and holler. She grins, laughing as the speed of the bull picks up. There’s a timer on the back wall, and I cheer when she passes eight seconds.

Teller is laughing next to me, one hand resting on my shoulder, the other holding his beer bottle as he calls out tips for her. Madelyn and Iris are both grinning like lunatics and laughing as they count off the seconds and Hudson is just watching, a smile on his face, his arms crossed over his chest and his eyes locked on Lyla.

The bull twists, blurring before my eyes as it spins and bucks, and Lyla goes tumbling off the side, laughing as she bounces on the soft mats.

“Who’s next?” the operator asks as Hudson leans over the rails and helps Lyla stand up.

Iris raises her hand timidly, and I’m surprised that she volunteered. She pads gingerly over to the bull and tries to climb onto the bull, but she’s too short. The bartender ends up coming over and giving her a boost up and I notice the way her cheeks heat as his hands linger at her waist. He gives her a smile and a thumbs-up before he heads back behind the bar.

The bull starts up and Iris scrambles to grab hold of the strap and raise her other hand. She makes it ten seconds before she slides off the side, landing with a giggle on the mat.

Madelyn goes next and is laughing so hard that she only makes it seven seconds. She points at me when she stands up, a wild grin on her face, and I know that it’s my turn.

Teller claps me on the shoulder, grinning down at me. “You got this, Sutton.”

I nod, making my way over to the bull. I have to jump twice before I make it onto the back and grab hold of the strap. I nod and the bull starts.

I’ve watched my friends go and I’m feeling way more relaxed about it. I know that there are people in the crowd watching me, but I don’t let it get to me. I just have fun.

I can hear Teller and my friends cheering and I grin, happiness bubbling up inside of me. I must be past the eight seconds because the speed picks up and I have to hold on

tighter. My legs start to slip and I giggle as I fly through the air and land on the padding.

Teller is there when I climb back to my feet. He's clapping and cheering, a wide smile on his face, and I could swear he looks almost proud of me.

"Your turn!" I say, pointing at him and he groans, his head falling back as he stares at the ceiling but he makes his way over to the entrance.

"Try to beat my time," I challenge him as I pass by and he laughs, easily hopping up onto the bull.

He lasts a few seconds longer than me, and I cheer as he hits the mat. He makes his way back over to us and we all turn to look at Hudson. He just raises his eyebrow at us but when Lyla nudges him with her elbow, he relents and goes to take his turn.

I try to catch Lyla's eye to talk to her about him and why he's here tonight but her eyes never stray from Hudson on the bull.

He slips off just after eight seconds and Lyla cheers for him. We all join in and then follow Madelyn back to the bar to order another round. I buy the next round. It's the least I can do after they all did that with me.

Madelyn and Iris talk about work and we make plans with Lyla to do a girl's night next week. They each pull me aside and give me a hug, telling me that they're sorry to hear about my mom and to let them know if I want help with the rest of the bucket list.

The night starts to wind down a few hours later and I know that both Iris and Madelyn have to get up early the next day for work. Teller does too, and so we close out our tab and all head outside to the parking lot.

Madelyn and Iris are parked over on the other side of the lot, so Teller and I walk them over to their cars. I'm happy to make sure that they get there safely, and I love that Teller suggested it instead of them having to ask.

I wish that I had been able to see if Hudson and Lyla drove together, but I know that I'll be able to ask her more about it at work.

Teller gets my door and I thank him as I settle into the passenger seat. The bar isn't far from the Mystery Cabin and I struggle to keep my eyes open.

"Did you have fun tonight?" Teller asks and I blink sleepily, giving him a smile.

"Yeah, thanks for going with me."

"Anytime, Sutton," he says easily.

We're about a mile and a half away from the cabin when I spot a familiar shape along the side of the road.

"Have you seen that dog around a lot?" I ask as Teller slows.

"No. He looks like a stray though," he says, peering over the dashboard.

I chew on my bottom lip, but my heart goes out to the scrawny, pitiful looking animal. He's even skinnier from the last time that I saw him. I can't just leave him out here.

"You know, one of the items on my bucket list was to adopt an animal," I say, looking out of the corner of my eye at Teller.

He doesn't say anything, just grins as he hits his hazards and pulls over to the side of the road. I lean over, brushing a kiss on his cheek before I climb out to try to catch my new fur baby.

THIRTEEN



Sutton

STAN HAS BEEN GLARING at Bandit all morning.

It took Teller and me two hours last night to coax him to come to us. I ended up sitting on the side of the road with Teller. Bandit sat a few feet away and just stared at us. We had tried to talk soothingly to him and he would take a few steps toward us and then sit down again.

This happened on repeat until finally, he let us get close enough to him to pet him. I had thought that we were going to lose him again when we tried to get him into the truck but by then, he seemed at ease with us and he jumped right up into the cab.

Teller had helped me get him inside and into the bathroom and we had gotten completely soaked as we gave Bandit a bath. Teller didn't seem to mind and I couldn't help but wonder if he was remembering the last time that we were in this bathroom together.

It took three washes to try to get all of the caked in mud and dead leaves and debris. I let Teller dry him off as I went downstairs to get him something to eat. We didn't really have any dog food, so I made him another sandwich. Bandit ate it in about two seconds flat.

I had offered to help Teller clean up his truck. Bandit had jumped up on the front seat and gotten mud and dirt all over it but he had assured me that he had it covered and that it wasn't a big deal.

Teller promised to pick up dog food on his way into work and I'm already planning on taking Bandit to the pet store downtown on my lunch break so that we can get him some food and water bowls, toys, treats, and a bed.

We're eating breakfast now, some eggs and bacon that I made to try to soften Stan up a bit before I brought up Bandit staying here. I'm not sure that it helped since he hasn't said anything since he walked in and saw Bandit sitting at the kitchen table next to me.

Bandit keeps staring at Stan as he shoves another bite of food into his mouth and for a moment it looks like they're having a staring contest. Stan looks away first, taking another bite of his breakfast. He still looks mad about our new addition but at least he hasn't demanded that I take Bandit outside or that I get rid of him.

"Isn't he cute?" I ask Stan when I catch him looking over at the dog again. I make sure to add some extra pep to my voice to really try to sell Stan on the dog.

"I guess," he grumbles and I grin.

"Can I keep him here?"

"I guess," he repeats and I can tell that he isn't thrilled about our new family member, but it means a lot that he's going to let me keep him here.

I already know that I'll be taking Bandit with me when I head to Boston. I'll have to find an apartment that allows pets and maybe even find a dog walker for him depending on my work hours.

"Thanks, Uncle Stan," I say, standing and giving him a quick hug before I step over to the sink and start to wash up the dishes.

“Morning,” Teller says as he steps into the kitchen, a huge bag of dog food on his shoulder and a small plastic bag dangling from his fingers. “I grabbed some dog food and a collar and leash. I wasn’t sure what else you needed but I figured that was good for now.”

“Thanks,” I say, trying to grab the bag of dog food from him but Teller waves me off, passing me the collar and leash instead.

Bandit jumps off the kitchen chair and comes over right away, his tail wagging as Teller bends down to scratch him behind his ears. I slip the new collar on Bandit, smiling when I see that it fits perfectly. I get him a small bowl of food, not wanting to overdo it until he’s used to the new diet.

“I’m going to take him for a walk before we open,” I say, grabbing the leash as Bandit finishes inhaling his food.

“Do you want some company?” Teller asks and I smile.

“Sure.”

Stan has already disappeared into his room to get ready for the first tour so I don’t bother asking if he wants to join us. I have a feeling that I know what his answer would be.

I hook Bandit up and we make our way out the back door. Bandit tugs on the leash, happily trying to sniff every blade of grass.

“How was he last night?” Teller asks as we head down the path that winds between the Mystery Cabin and the Pine Motel and Cabins next door.

“It was good. He ended up curling up in bed with me and passing out like right after you left.”

Teller laughs at that. “Sounds about right.”

Bandit seems happy to run back and forth from one side of the trail to the next as we slowly walk down the path.

“I can take him out with me today. I think I’m set to fix one of the cabins over at Pines so I can tie him up to the front

porch so he can enjoy being outside.”

“That would be great. I was worried that he would just bark if he was inside all day.”

“No problem.”

We continue on in silence for a few more feet. Our fingers keep brushing together and with each pass, the tension between us grows more and more.

Teller clears his throat and I look over to him.

“Would you have dinner with me tonight?” he asks and my steps falter.

I guess maybe I should have seen this coming, but it still hits like a bomb.

“Like on a date?” I ask and I realize that I’m not feeling scared.

I’m just excited.

“Yeah, it’s a date.”

“Alright,” I say shyly.

“Tonight? I can pick you and Bandit up around seven?”

“Sounds good,” I say as we reach the back door of the Mystery Cabin.

Teller takes Bandit’s leash and I give him one last pet before I wave and head inside. Lyla won’t be here until noon, so it’s just me and my thoughts as I get to work stocking the shelves and cleaning up behind the register.

I make a list of things to buy for Bandit on my lunch break and text Iris and Madelyn back, but then there’s nothing left for me to do and thoughts of tonight flood my mind.

Where will he take me? What do I wear? What if things are awkward or go badly and then I have to see him for the rest of the summer?

Maybe this date isn’t such a good idea.

I can't stop remembering my prom date standing me up, or all of the times that I was ignored by my classmates. All of my old doubts swamp me and I can't seem to focus on anything. There's just one thought that keeps circling in my head.

Why is Teller interested in me?

He's a good looking guy, charming, funny, smart. He must check a lot of women's boxes.

I wonder what he sees in me.

FOURTEEN



Sutton

BANDIT WATCHES me from his spot on my bed as I sort through my closet, trying to find something suitable to wear for my date tonight. The new dog bed and toys that I bought him earlier today go unnoticed as he sprawls out over my comforter.

His new food and water bowl are downstairs in the kitchen and out of everything that I bought for him today, those bowls and the treats are the only thing that he's paid any attention to.

Teller had brought Bandit back to me this afternoon after he had finished fixing up one of the cabins next door and my heart had melted slightly when I saw how sweet he was with my dog.

I've decided to do what my mom obviously wanted me to do and try to let people in. I've already started it with Lyla, Madelyn, and Iris. Even me telling all of them about my mom dying and the bucket list was more than I would have shared before I got to Destiny Falls.

I'm going to go with the flow where Teller is concerned. I'm sick of fighting my attraction to him, tired of being alone. Maybe if things get serious, we can try a long-distance relationship or I can convince him to move to Boston with me.

I trust Teller. He's proven himself to be a good guy, and I know that he would never do anything to hurt me.

"What do you think, Bandit?" I ask him, pulling the dark blue dress out.

The dog barely glances at me and I sigh, deciding on the dress and my comfortable flats. I'm not sure what we're going to do on our date tonight, but the dress feels low-key and also dressed up for whatever he has planned.

Stan has agreed to watch Bandit for tonight. I'm not sure if he's warming up to the dog or if he's just trying to encourage me dating Teller instead of Chet.

Teller should be here in a few minutes, so I hurry through putting on some makeup and tying my hair up into a high ponytail.

"Come on, boy," I call and Bandit hops down from the bed happily, following me back downstairs and into the living room.

Stan is set up in the living room and Bandit heads over and hops up on the arm of his recliner. Stan side-eyes the dog but doesn't say anything.

"Are you sure that you're okay watching him tonight?" I ask as I slip on my shoes.

"Yeah, we'll be fine."

Teller pops up behind me in the doorway, and I smile when I see that he's changed into a button-down shirt and a pair of black dress pants. His hat is still backward on his head, his unruly black hair curling around the edge.

"Hey, I tried to knock, but no one answered."

"Great watch dog you got here, Sutton," Stan quips, and I roll my eyes at him, petting Bandit's head before I leave.

Bandit wags his tail, smacking Stan in the face and I try not to laugh when I see Stan give Bandit a death glare.

"Ready to go?" Teller asks me and I nod.

Stan said that he would watch Bandit tonight while I was out and I was so shocked by the offer that I said okay before I remembered that Teller was planning on picking Bandit and I up tonight. I doubt that Teller will mind though and I'm happy to see that Stan and Bandit are bonding.

"See you later," I tell Stan and he waves, his eyes locked on the TV but I see him smile as we head out.

Teller's hand rests on my lower back as he leads me out to his truck and helps me into the passenger seat.

"You look beautiful," he tells me as he starts up the truck and pulls out of the drive.

"Thanks, you too."

"So, I thought that I would cook for you, but if you don't feel comfortable going to my place, then we can head into town."

"I guess that depends," I say.

"On what?"

"Can you cook?"

"Yeah, I can cook," he says with a laugh and I grin.

"Then a home-cooked meal sounds great."

Teller doesn't live very far from the Mystery Cabin and downtown Destiny Falls. His house is a two-story cabin nestled in the woods. It's on a hill and I can just see the top of the bridge from here.

Teller parks out front and rounds the hood to help me out.

"Come on. I'll give you the tour."

He leads me up the front porch steps and inside. We walk into his living room and it's exactly how I pictured it. Leather sectional, wood coffee table, a thick blue rug, and a giant TV hanging on the wall above the fireplace. It's both warm and inviting and also masculine.

The stairs lead up to the second floor, but we bypass that and head into the kitchen. It looks like a chef's dream and I wonder how much time Teller spends in here.

"It smells great already."

"I started a roast earlier today. Hope that's okay?"

"Sounds delicious. Stan and I have been living off of sandwiches and canned soup since I got here."

"Sounds about right." Teller laughs.

Teller starts the oven and lines up biscuits up on a baking sheet as he asks me about my day. He tells me about fixing up the cabin and how Bandit had spent the whole time lying on the porch in the sun.

"So tell me about yourself," Teller says as he sets a plate full of delicious looking pot roast down in front of me.

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything, but let's start with the basics. Where did you grow up? What was your family like? Where did you go to school?"

"Uh, I grew up in Los Angeles. It was just my mom and me. My dad was never in the picture."

"His loss," Teller says, and I'm grateful that he doesn't make a big deal out of it.

"I went to college at Boston University and then got my MBA from Wharton."

Teller whistles, looking impressed.

"I just graduated a few months ago and had a job lined up in Boston for a company that I did an internship at last summer, but I went home to be with my mom."

"Do you regret not going to Boston?"

"I'm still planning on going. I'm only in Destiny Falls for the summer."

Teller takes a bite of his food and I notice that he seems upset by that news.

“What about you? Where did you grow up?” I ask, trying to change the subject.

“I grew up in New York. My mom was an ER nurse and my dad was a firefighter. They’re both gone now. My dad died in a fire and my mom had a heart attack and passed away.”

“I’m so sorry.”

He nods, taking a sip of his water before he goes on.

“I became a firefighter right out of high school, but New York is so expensive and I just got sick of working all of the time and barely scraping by. I wanted to see the world and find a different place to settle down.”

“So how did you meet Stan and start at the Mystery Cabin?”

“I was passing through and stopped for gas. Stan was there hanging up a help wanted sign and I asked him what he did. The Mystery Cabin sounded interesting and so I took the job. I like Destiny Falls and your uncle.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” he says with an easy laugh. “I like small-town life. I like the family that I’ve made here.”

I mull over his words as I pop the last bite of food into my mouth and chew. Things have been easier since I got here. I like my friends and even Stan is starting to grow on me.

Teller and I head back into the living room and he pours me a glass of wine and grabs a beer for himself. We sit on the couch and Teller tells me stories about Stan and his early days of working at the Mystery Cabin.

I laugh as he tells me about the time that the miniature golf course flooded and Stan tried to convince Teller to set up swamp tours for the kids.

“Did you?” I ask through my laughter.

“No, I told him that it was a liability and that I could fix the course and he let it go.”

I laugh, setting my empty wine glass on the coffee table. My phone lights up and I’m surprised that it’s already after midnight.

“It’s getting pretty late.”

“I’ll drive you home,” he says, standing up and carrying our glasses into the kitchen.

I grab my phone and follow him out to his truck. It’s a beautiful night and I smile as I hear the crickets sing. Lightning bugs dance around us and I can see the appeal of this small town. They don’t have any of this in Boston.

“I had fun tonight,” Teller says as we make the short drive back to Mystery Cabin.

“Me too,” I tell him truthfully.

I like Teller a lot. He’s smart, funny, and so kind. Plus, he’s gorgeous and he makes tingles race through my body every time he looks at me.

We pull up outside of the Cabin and I smile when I see that Stan left the porch light on for me. Teller gets out and opens my door for me and he takes my hand as we walk up to the front door.

“Go out with me again.”

“Okay,” I say right away.

I wonder if I was supposed to play a little hard to get. Man, I don’t know anything about dating, but slowing down with Teller just doesn’t feel right.

“Good,” Teller says.

We stare at each other, the soft glow from the porch light bathing both of us in a golden glow. My heart is racing and I wonder if I should shake his hand or try to move in for a kiss, but I’m not that bold.

Teller takes a step closer to me and I curl my fingers into my sweaty palms. I wonder if he can hear my heart beating out of control. I wonder if he's just as nervous as I am right now.

Then he's leaning down, his head blocking out the light, and my heart skips a beat as I feel his warm breath on my face. I part my lips, my tongue running over them and wetting them a second before his lips brush gently against mine.

Heat floods through my veins as my chest brushes against his and Teller presses another soft kiss against my lips.

He presses soft, quick kisses against my mouth as he backs me up. Once I hit the porch railing, things really heat up.

His hands cup my face, the rough calluses scraping against my neck as he tilts my head back. Tingles race down my spine and I shiver. Teller steps closer to me, his woody smell enveloping me as his tongue brushes against the seam of my lips, searching for entry.

I open for him eagerly, my toes curling as I get my first taste of him. His warm taste silences my racing thoughts and I'm left drowning in him, in our kiss. His kiss is so intense, filled with hunger.

The wood porch railing is rough against my back but it's also the only thing keeping me standing. I know it sounds cliché, but I think my knees went weak as soon as our lips met.

Teller's hands slip down my arms and he pulls me closer against him, his arms strong and comforting as they wrap around me. It's strange to feel so turned on, and yet completely at home, at ease.

We're glued to one another and I never want this kiss to end, but before I can stop him, Teller is pulling back. He rests his forehead against mine for a beat before his eyes meet mine. His are dark, filled with some emotion that I don't recognize right away because I've never seen it directed at me.

It's lust.

I want to invite him in, I want to keep making out with him, but then I remember that I currently live with my great-uncle and that Stan could be watching us right now for all I know.

“Have a good night, Sutton,” he says softly and I nod, unable to find my voice to say anything in return. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I nod again and then head inside. Teller stands there until I’ve locked the door before he heads back to his truck and heads home himself.

I turn off the porch light and creep through the house, not wanting to wake Stan. I make it back upstairs to my room and collapse down on the twin-size bed, smiling up at the ceiling.

That kiss keeps replaying over and over in my head. My lips are still tingling and the warm feeling that encompassed me when his lips first brushed against mine is still lingering.

I’ve been kissed before, once, when I was in high school, but it was nothing like Teller’s. This kiss was on a whole other level.

Paul’s kiss in high school had been that of a boy. It didn’t make me feel anything, except nervous. I had been so distracted by my thoughts, wondering if I was doing it right or if I should move my hands somewhere else or tilt my head in a certain direction, that I barely processed anything.

With Teller, it was all feeling.

I can’t tell if that scares me or thrills me. I guess a little of both. Strangely enough, that doesn’t freak me out.

I change into my pajamas and get ready for bed, smiling the whole time.

FIFTEEN



Sutton

MADELYN AND IRIS each sent me a text this morning and they both just said ‘Girl’s Night.’ I had told them both that I was in and that I would make sure that Lyla joined us as well.

Lyla worked today, so she agreed to drive me over to Madelyn’s apartment. She lives one street over from Main Street and close to the Destiny Falls Market. It’s a nice, modern looking two-story with a great view of the lake.

There are three cars in the driveway and I wonder who else is coming tonight. Iris is just climbing out of her car and she beams at us as we make our way over to greet her.

“Hey, need a hand with anything?” I ask when I notice that she’s got a duffel bag on the passenger seat.

“No, I got it. Thanks though.”

Lyla and I follow Iris up the front walkway and Iris opens the front door.

“We’re here!” she calls out and I hear Madelyn’s footsteps on the floor above us.

“Hey, Flynn,” Iris says and I notice the man sitting at the kitchen counter.

“Hey, Iris,” he says, giving all of us all an easy smile.

“Girls, this is Flynn. Flynn, this is Lyla and Sutton.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Flynn says and we both nod at him.

“Who’s ready for girl’s night?” Madelyn calls as she slides into the room and I laugh at her exuberance.

“What do you have planned?” I ask her.

“Takeout, wine, gossip... about boys,” she whispers and I laugh.

“Yeah, I’m going to take that as my cue to leave,” Flynn says as he clears away his dishes and heads for the door. “It was nice to meet you guys,” he says with one last smile, and Lyla and I both wave as he makes his way upstairs.

“Does he live here with you?” I ask.

“Yeah, he’s been my best friend since college and we moved back here after we graduated.”

“Are you two, like, together?” Lyla asks and Madelyn lets out a little laugh.

“No, just friends and roommates.”

“Hmm,” Lyla says and I see Iris grin at Madelyn.

I’m guessing that Iris thinks that Madelyn and Flynn should be together.

“What do you guys want to order for dinner? We’ll need to go pick it up since I’m out of wine too. I meant to get some on the way home and then forgot.”

“No worries,” Iris assures her and I nod.

“How about pizza?” Lyla suggests and my stomach rumbles.

“That sounds good to me,” I joke and the girls laugh.

“I can drive,” Lyla offers and we all head outside and back to Lyla’s Jeep.

Madelyn calls in our order and we make the short drive back to Main Street. The pizza parlor, Mancini’s, is a few stores down from the market and we head in there to grab

some wine while we wait for the pizza and breadsticks to be done.

We're walking up and down the aisles, grabbing snacks for tonight when we hit the hair dye aisles and I remember my mom's bucket list. Madelyn spots me eyeing the boxes of dye and grins.

"Are we going to dye our hair tonight?" she asks excitedly and I laugh.

"It was on my mom's bucket list," I start to explain, but it turns out that's all it takes for the other girls to gather around me and debate colors.

"I want to dye my hair too. Maybe purple?" Lyla says, picking up a lavender one.

"That would look pretty. Mine is red so I don't think anything would show up," Iris says, eyeing the boxes.

"We could bleach it first," Madelyn suggests, examining the boxes too.

"No thanks," Iris says, her eyes wide and I wonder if she's tried that before and regretted it.

"I don't know what will show on mine either," Madelyn says, her fingers combing through her dark hair, "But I'll help you two with yours!"

I inspect the boxes until my eyes snag on the box of pink hair dye, and I know that I've found my color. I toss it into the cart and head up to the checkout, giggling with the other girls as we unload our cart of junk food onto the belt.

Madelyn pays while Iris and I head over to Mancini's to pick up our order. We meet Lyla and Madelyn at the Jeep and all pile back in and make our way back to Madelyn's house.

"I'm starving," Lyla says as we dump our grocery bags and pizza boxes down on the expansive kitchen counter.

Iris is already grabbing plates and wine glasses and I help Madelyn clear off a space for us to sit at the counter. Flynn

comes down as we're grabbing a slice and steals a piece for himself before Madelyn yells for him to get out.

I laugh as he dodges the dishtowel that she throws at him and races out of the room.

"I'm sorry, why aren't you two together?" Lyla asks as she leans back in her chair.

"Yeah," Iris chimes in enthusiastically as she takes a large gulp of her wine.

She's had half a glass and I'm pretty sure that she might already be drunk.

"We're just friends," Madelyn says, shoving a slice of pizza in her mouth.

"Yeah... but why?" Iris asks.

"Oh my god," Madelyn groans. "Enough about me and Flynn. What's going on with you and Hudson? Or you and Teller?" she asks, turning it on Lyla and me.

"Hudson just works at the restaurant beneath my apartment."

"Yeah, and he leaves her notes on her car asking her out to dinner," I add.

Lyla shoots me a glare but Iris and Madelyn both ohh at that information.

"I don't know much about him. He's not a townie. He moved here, what? Three years ago? Or was it two?" Madelyn asks.

"Two, I think," Iris says and Madelyn nods.

"He seems like a nice guy from what I've heard. Plus, you two would be soooo cute together," Iris says.

"You totally would," Madelyn agrees and I nod.

I can tell that Lyla doesn't want to talk about her and Hudson anymore, so I'm not surprised by what she does next.

“Sutton went out with Teller the other night,” Lyla blurts, throwing me into the line of fire.

“Yes!” Madelyn cheers. “I knew there was something between you two. He couldn’t stop staring at you the other night,” Madelyn says excitedly.

“It was just one date, but it was really nice,” I tell them.

“Teller is so sweet. There aren’t that many single guys in town and even fewer who are dating material. I mean, there’s Teller, Hudson—”

“Arlo,” Lyla adds, and Madelyn rolls her eyes.

“Arlo,” Iris whispers, and we all turn to look at her.

“Who is Arlo?” I ask, taking a sip of my wine.

“He’s a bartender at The Fainting Goat.”

“The one who helped you up onto the bull?” I ask, and she blushes but nods.

“Gavin!” Lyla says and I frown at her.

“Who?” I ask but the other two girls seem to know who she’s talking about.

“Gavin. He’s some recluse that lives up in the woods. He’s a total hottie but we see him like once a month,” Madelyn explains.

“Do you guys know everyone in town?” I ask with a laugh.

“Yeah, it’s the curse of small-town life, I suppose. Everyone knows everyone... and all of their business.”

“You must have liked it. You both left for college and decided to come back. Right?” I ask them.

“I guess. I came back because this will always be home. I don’t mind the slow pace of life,” Iris says.

“And my parents wanted to retire and leave me the market here. I guess I could have decided not to come back here and they would have left it to someone else, but like Iris said, this will always be my home,” Madelyn says with a small smile.

“What about you?” I ask Lyla and she shrugs.

“I’m not from here. I actually just moved here a couple of months ago.”

“How did you start at the Mystery Cabin?” I ask curiously.

I had thought that Lyla was born and raised here too.

“I had just gotten to town and was planning on passing through when I saw a help wanted sign on the bulletin board at the Destiny Falls Market. It seemed interesting and I was planning on taking the tour since it’s the only thing to do in town really. I went and met Stan and kind of fell in love with the place. I asked him if he was still looking for extra help. He said yes and I applied. I think I was the only one to apply, so I got it. I found my apartment after that and the rest is history.”

“Where are you from originally?” I ask.

“New York.”

“You’re from California, right?” Madelyn asks, turning the conversation to me and I nod my head.

“Did you have a boyfriend back home?” Iris asks me, and I shake my head no.

“No, I’ve never had a boyfriend. I didn’t even really date.”

“Why not? Are the boys in California dumb?” Lyla asks and I laugh.

“I was always busy. It was just my mom and me, and we didn’t really have much. I was busy working and studying to get good grades so I could get a scholarship and afford college.”

“Yeah, but there had to have been some free time,” Madelyn says as she gets up from the table. “Flynn! Do you want pizza?” she yells up the stairs.

His footsteps sound above us and she comes back over to the table with a new bottle of wine. Flynn darts in and grabs the pizza box before he disappears back upstairs. Madelyn pours each of us some more wine and sits back down.

“I got asked out for prom. He stood me up,” I admit.

“That asshole!” Iris shouts and it startles all of us. “He’s an idiot. You’re so pretty and nice.”

“Thanks,” I say with a smile. “I kind of swore off guys after that and just buckled down to get through college.”

“And now you have Teller,” Madelyn says with a dreamy smile.

“I guess? Honestly, it’s been a struggle to let him in sometimes too. Old habits, I guess. I think that’s why my mom put so many relationship tasks on the bucket list.”

“What else is on the bucket list?” Lyla asks.

“Um, it was come to Destiny Falls and meet my great-uncle Stan and spend the summer working at the Mystery Cabin. Dye my hair a crazy color, do something crazy like zip line or ride a mechanical bull, skinny dip, adopt a pet, date, and fall in love.”

“What have you done so far?” Iris asks.

“The first two, something crazy, adopt a pet, and date.”

“You got a pet?” Madelyn asks, pouring us another glass of wine.

“Yeah, I adopted this adorable stray dog the other night. I named him Bandit,” I tell them.

“He’s really cute,” Lyla adds and I smile.

“Thanks.”

“Ready to dye your hair?” Madelyn asks as she finishes off her wine and I laugh.

“Yeah, let’s do it!”

We crowd into Madelyn’s bathroom upstairs and Iris helps Lyla while Madelyn helps me. I laugh as Iris tells us about the last time that she tried to dye her hair and how the bleach had turned it orange. Lyla looks slightly afraid and like she’s

regretting letting Iris help her with her hair and that only makes me laugh harder.

The conversation moves onto town gossip. I don't know any of the people that they're talking about but it's still just nice to be hanging out with friends.

The conversation moves onto the mayor and his family and I learn that Chet is the actual worst. Everyone seems to have some creepy story about him and it seems weird but I feel like I fit in more now that I have my own horror story about the mayor's son.

"I still can't believe that you went out with Chet!" Madelyn says with a dramatic shiver and I can't help but laugh at her dramatics.

"He was the worst."

"Why *did* you go out with him?" Iris asks, her nose wrinkling but I can't tell if it's in disgust or from the fumes of the hair dye.

"Honestly? I've had this idea of what my life should be since I was a kid. I want to be successful. I don't want to worry about money or bills or any of that, and I thought that Chet could have given me that. But then he opened his mouth."

"No financial stability is worth putting up with that," Lyla mumbles.

"Agreed. I think my mom wanted me to see that too. You can't plan everything."

The girls nod and I drain the last of my wine. The conversation turns once more and Iris and Madelyn tell Lyla and me about growing up here and some of the mischief they got into over the years.

Madelyn and Iris have been best friends since kindergarten and they are obviously as close as sisters. They have an ease about them that reminds me of my mom and me.

We used to do movie nights. We'd get our pajamas on and splurge on a pizza on Friday night then sit around and watch movies. It was nice to hang out and unwind after school and work all week. It was our special time together and this reminds me of those nights with her.

The familiar ache of thinking about my mom is still there, but it feels different now. Not as acute or sharp. Instead it's a dull ache and I smile as I look around the crowded bathroom.

I think I know why.

"Ready to see the new you?" Madelyn asks as she finishes washing out my hair and wraps it up in a towel.

I stare at my reflection in the mirror for a moment, weighing her words.

Am I?

"Absolutely," I whisper with a smile.

SIXTEEN



Sutton

MY PINK HAIR barely gets a reaction from Stan the next morning when I come down for breakfast. He's digging around in the fridge, Bandit at his side, and he glances over at me, grunts a good morning, and turns back to the fridge.

Today is my day off and I plan on walking Bandit and then running a few errands. I wanted to explore Destiny Falls a little more. Maybe I'll spend some time at the beach or take a tour of the lighthouse.

"Want an egg sandwich?" I ask Stan, nudging him aside and grabbing the eggs and a slice of Kraft cheese from the fridge.

"Sure," Stan says, tossing some bacon onto the counter too.

I get to work making breakfast and I can't help but smile when I see Stan getting Bandit some food and water out of the corner of my eye. It looks like I wasn't the only one bonding with new friends last night.

"Do you like my new hair?" I ask Stan, curious to see his reaction and wanting to make small talk.

"It looks like cotton candy."

I laugh at that and the bland tone of his voice.

“Thanks?”

“It suits you,” he admits as he takes the plate that I pass him.

“I like it too.”

We both dig into breakfast and I catch Stan sneaking Bandit some of his bacon but I pretend like I didn’t notice.

Teller comes in a few minutes before nine and heads to the coffeepot. He freezes when he sees my new hair but then grins.

“I like the hair,” he tells me, twirling a strand around his finger. “You look like a unicorn or some kind of fairy.”

“Wait until you see Lyla’s,” I tell him with a laugh.

“What about me?” Lyla asks with a yawn as she walks into the room.

“I like your hair,” Teller says, pouring each of them a cup of coffee.

Lyla grunts, taking a big sip of her coffee and I grin.

“Teller said that I look like a unicorn,” I brag and she laughs.

“Stan, what do you think?” Lyla asks and Stan pretends to be annoyed but I can see the amusement on his face.

“You both look like unicorns. Happy now?”

“Ecstatic,” Lyla deadpans.

“Yeah, yeah. Get to work. I don’t pay you to stand around lollygagging.”

“Lollygagging?” I ask with a laugh.

Stan just huffs and dumps his dishes into the sink before he heads down the hall to get everything ready for the first tour.

“How are you feeling?” I ask Lyla and she rubs her head.

“A little hungover. I’m hoping that the Tylenol kicks in soon.”

“Do you want me to stay and help you out in the gift shop?” I offer.

“Nah, I’ll be fine. Thanks though.”

She gives me a side hug before she fills up her coffee cup again and heads out to the gift shop. Teller is leaning back against the kitchen counter, sipping his own coffee and giving me that easy smile of his.

“Is this the lollygagging that my uncle was talking about?” I tease as I carry my dishes over to the sink.

“Probably.”

I laugh, starting to wash up the dishes.

“What are your plans for today?” he asks after a beat.

“I need to walk Bandit still. Then I was going to run into town and run a few errands. Maybe look around town a bit.”

“Do you want me to watch Bandit again today? I think I’m fixing an exhibit and some other stuff around the cabin today.”

“Thanks for the offer, but I think I’ll take him with me. I made a vet appointment for him for this morning. We can check out the beach and I wanted to go check out the town waterfall.”

“Why don’t you let me take you out tonight? I can make a picnic and we can hike up to the waterfall.”

“A second date?” I ask and I realize that I’m excited about the prospect.

“Yeah. What do you say?”

“Sounds good,” I tell him with a grin.

“Good.”

He grabs a dishtowel and helps me dry the dishes and put them away. Bandit has finished eating his food by now and is sniffing around, looking for crumbs.

“I’ll pick you up tonight? Six p.m.?” Teller asks as he hangs up the dish towel and I nod.

“Perfect.”

“I’ll see you then.”

He leans down, brushing his lips against mine but before we can deepen it, Stan is calling for him.

We both sigh and I can’t help but laugh.

“I’ll see you tonight,” Teller whispers and I nod.

I watch him leave before I head upstairs to my room and grab my phone, purse, and keys. Bandit’s leash is hanging up by the back door downstairs and I call him, hooking him up and leading him over to my old Beetle.

He hops inside right away and I start the car, rolling the window down for him as we pull out onto Main Street. There’s a small dog park a few streets over and we head there first. I sit on the bench, enjoying the beautiful summer day as Bandit runs around and sniffs everything.

I’m trying to make up for taking him to the vet next. I’m not sure how he’s going to handle it but don’t most animals hate the vet office?

I call Bandit over and he wags his tail, running over to me and letting me hook his leash to him. We head back to the car and drive to the other side of town where the vet office is.

Three shots and one order of heartworm and flea and tick medicine later and we’re headed back to the car. Bandit didn’t seem to mind the vet. Even the shots didn’t really faze him and I’m glad that he doesn’t seem mad at me now.

We head down Main Street and I pull into a gas station to grab us some water and fill up my tank. I’m almost done when a familiar Mercedes pulls up to the pump next to mine.

Chet steps out, giving me a condescending smile, and I narrow my eyes at him.

“Nice hair,” he says sarcastically as he wrinkles his nose at me.

What an asshole. Bandit seems to agree. He growls at Chet, sticking his head farther out the window, and for a second I'm worried that he's going to jump out of the car.

"I don't think that you can make fun of anyone's hair," I say, giving him my best fuck you smile as I eye his greasy, oil-slicked hair.

"Bitch," he hisses before he turns and storms into the gas station.

Boy, did I dodge a bullet there. I can't believe that I went out with him.

I climb back into my car and we head toward the beach next. I find a deserted spot and park. I kick off my shoes before I grab Bandit and we make our way across the sand. There are a few dunes nearby and I sit down close to one of them.

It's a nice day out and Bandit is having a blast digging in the sand and fighting the tall grass so we stay there until it's lunch. I know that this beach isn't the same as the one back in California. The water isn't as crystal clear and the beach is rockier, but it still reminds me of my mom.

We used to go to the beach on her days off or just to relax sometimes. It was the only entertainment that we could really afford in California since it was free. We would grab an Icee or a snow cone and then sit in the sand and watch the waves.

My mom used to say that walking in the sand was the best way to exercise because it was a workout, but it was also relaxing. She claimed that was why she never paid for a gym membership but I think we both knew the truth. We never could have afforded a fancy gym payment every month.

I wish that she was here with me now. We could have sat here and talked about Stan and Teller and my friends. She would have liked Lyla, Madelyn, and Iris and been so happy that I had made friends here. She would have been even happier to hear about Teller.

My heart starts to ache and I'm not sure if I'm happy or sad to realize that the ache isn't as sharp and stabbing as it was right after her funeral. This place, these people are helping me heal.

Bandit and I stand up and head back to the car. We're both hungry and I think about stopping to grab something on the way home. I can get something for Stan too. I brush the sand off of me before I open the door for Bandit and climb behind the wheel.

Madelyn and Iris both sent me messages, asking when the next girl's night would be and I'm excited.

I had a blast last night. I've never had many friends and I thought that maybe there was something wrong with me, but I like these girls and they seem to like me too.

I finally feel like I fit in somewhere.

It's really too bad that I'm leaving in two months.

SEVENTEEN



Sutton

“WATCH YOUR STEP,” Teller warns and I grip his hand tighter as he leads me through the trees.

We’re headed to the waterfall that Destiny Falls is named after and I’m more excited than I thought I would be. Teller picked me up and we drove a little farther north. It’s cooled off so that it’s the perfect hiking weather and the trail is worn enough that even a novice hiker like me can handle it.

Teller has a blanket and a picnic basket in one hand and his other is holding mine as we weave our way through the forest. I can hear the water get louder with each step that we take and I wonder just how big this waterfall is.

“We’re going to come out below it, but we can hike up so that you can look down at the falls if you want,” Teller explains as he holds a branch back for me.

I step past him and my breath catches as I see the view that greets me.

Everything is green and lush. There are wildflowers and tall grass growing all around the base of the falls. The waterfall is about the size of our apartment building back home, about three stories tall and I’m surprised at how clean the water looks.

“It runs out this way, down the river, and into Lake Michigan.”

I step closer to the base of the falls and reach down, dipping my fingers in the cool water. Teller is behind me, smoothing out the picnic blanket and setting the basket down, but he joins me.

“We can go swimming if you want. We might want to wait until it’s dark out so that no tourists join us.”

“Will it be dark soon?” I ask, not wanting to leave this place so soon.

“No, we’ve got an hour or so. Plus, I brought a lantern and two flashlights.”

“I bet Bandit would love it here.”

“He’s probably already been here. It’s not too far from town and it would be fresh water.”

I wipe my hand off on my jean shorts and step over to the blanket.

“Are you hungry?” Teller asks and I nod.

He pulls out sandwiches, potato salad, chips, some cut up fruit, and of course, some fortune cookies as I continue to look around the area. The trees surround it, blocking it from view from any roads, and it doesn’t look like anyone lives around here. It’s probably state land.

“How are you liking Destiny Falls? What did you end up doing today?” Teller asks as we dig into the food.

I tell him about the dog park, vet, and going to the beach and he tells me about fixing up one of the exhibits at the Mystery Cabin and mowing the lawn.

“It doesn’t look like that big of a property, but it seems like there’s always something to do, huh?” I ask and Teller nods.

“Between the Mystery Cabin and the Pines Motel and Cabins, I’ve always got a long to do list.”

I help Teller pack up our trash and we sit together side by side, staring at the waterfall. No one else came out here and now that it's starting to get dark, I doubt that anyone will.

The sun is starting to go down so Teller turns on the two lanterns that he brought and sets them on the edge of the blanket. Between them and the lightning bugs that are starting to come out, this space feels even more magical.

"My mom would have loved this place," I murmur and Teller nods.

"She did."

"She came here?" I ask, shocked. I keep forgetting that Teller met my mom when she came here last year.

"Yeah, last summer. I brought her and Stan out here. It was during the day, but she said it was her new favorite spot."

I smile at that. I can see my mom hiking out here, taking one look at this place, and declaring it the eighth wonder of the world.

Thinking about my mom reminds me of her bucket list and as I stare at the calm blue water, I get an idea.

"You know, skinny dipping was on my mom's bucket list for me."

Teller's eyebrows raise and then he gives me a grin.

"Right now?" he asks, and I nod.

"Are you in?" I ask, standing up and reaching for the hem of my shirt.

"Anything for you, Sutton."

I laugh as I kick off my shoes and tug my shirt over my head. His words help distract me from being nervous about him seeing me naked for the first time. I've never been naked in front of anyone before but I feel relaxed with Teller.

We race to pull off our clothes and then I'm laughing, the sound light and free in the empty clearing. It gets lost in the

sound of the waterfall as we both run closer.

I start to have doubts as I get closer, wondering how cold the water is or if there's fish or something in the water and I stop at the edge, worried about jumping in and freezing, but Teller doesn't stop as quickly as me. He slams into my back and together we go tumbling into the water.

We both come up laughing and I splash him as I swim into the center of the small lake. Teller splashes me back and I duck under the water, swimming away from him. We splash and play in the water and there's something so freeing about being naked in the water with him, the sun setting behind the tree line. I know that we'll have to get out soon since the glow from the lanterns won't be enough to see by soon.

Eventually we both swim closer to the waterfall, wanting to check it out. Teller swims up alongside me and points to where we can dip behind the falls. The sun is just starting to set, turning the sky a beautiful orange and pink color and giving us just enough light to see where we're going.

It's almost quieter behind the waterfall and I swim back, running my hands over the smooth rocks there. The water is cool on my skin and I turn around, smiling at Teller.

“Thank you for taking me here.”

He nods, his eyes locked on me.

Maybe it's this place, or maybe it's the look in his eyes, but I can feel myself falling for him. It's like I was edging toward the edge of the cliff all this time. Every time he helped me out, I took another step closer. Every time he was there for me, looked out for me, or checked in on me, I took another step closer. Spending time with him, joking around and laughing with him. All of it has been bringing me closer and closer to the edge.

And now, it feels like I just jumped over the side, but somehow, I know that he'll catch me.

Our limbs tangle in the water and instead of moving away, I move closer, wrapping my arms around his neck. One of his

arms wraps around my waist while his legs and other arm keep us afloat.

My breathing is starting to come faster. I can feel his skin on mine and my nipples pebble as they rub against his chest. I look so pale compared to his tan skin and I feel so tiny, so delicate in his arms.

My eyes drop to his lips and that's all the encouragement that Teller needs. Our lips meet and cling together as my hands tangle into his thick hair. His fingers tighten around my waist, the rough calluses turning me on as they brush against my skin.

He tastes like the watermelon that we ate with dinner and it instantly becomes my new favorite fruit. My hands move to his shoulders and I wrap my legs around his waist, wanting to be closer to him.

We both moan as my core rubs along the length of his cock and I can't help but rub my aching breasts against the small smattering of hair on his chest. I want his hands on me. I want his mouth on me.

The water laps at my breasts, then higher, and when it hits our chins, we pull apart, both of us sucking in air.

I unwrap myself from around him and start to tread water again. It's a lot darker behind the waterfall now and I wonder how long we were making out for. I'm still so turned on, so when Teller grabs my hand and helps me out from behind the waterfall safely, I go willingly.

We're still holding hands as we reach the shoreline. Teller turns to look at me, and I wonder what he's thinking.

"Do you want to get out of the water first? I can turn around or close my eyes if you want some privacy," he offers and I melt.

"Actually, I don't want privacy."

"What do you want?" he asks, his voice coming out husky as I stand from the water and walk up onshore.

“You,” I say simply and he hurries to follow me back over to the picnic blanket.

I’m not sure how to go about this, but I don’t feel scared, just a little nervous that I’ll let Teller down or won’t be good at it.

Teller steps into me, his hands wrapping around my waist as his head drops to mine. He kisses me gently, showing me that we’re in no rush, that I’m in good hands. That he’s got me.

My hands land on his shoulders and I cling to him as his mouth continues to move over mine. He takes control of my mouth, of my body, and I let him. I barely even notice when we start to move.

He lowers me down to the blanket, never breaking our kiss, and I moan as the soft blanket rubs against the skin of my back and he rubs against my front. He holds himself up on his hands, hovering just barely above me, and I can’t help but explore his body.

My hands run over his arms, over his back, and down to his ass. He nips at my bottom lip as I mold his butt in my hands and I giggle, enjoying the playful side of him.

He nudges my thighs open wider and kneels between them. His lips leave mine and he grabs my breasts in his large, rough hands and squeezes them. I moan, the sound raw and wild in the empty field.

The sun has set so the only light is coming from the moon and the two lanterns next to us. It’s more than enough and the lighting actually lends a romantic glow to our actions.

My nipples harden against his palms, turning into hard diamond points.

TELLER’S HANDS glide over my breasts and travel down my ribcage. My breath catches in my lungs as I wait to see what he’s going to do next.

“You’re so beautiful, Sutton,” he whispers and I stare up at him.

No one has ever told me that I’m beautiful before, but Teller does it constantly.

Teller’s head dips, his breath fanning over my chest first before his lips make contact. I sigh, letting sensation take over. He trails kisses down my neck, stopping to suck at the pulse point there before he continues with his path.

He kisses down to my chest and then licks between my breasts. His mouth is so hot on my flushed skin that each kiss feels like a brand and leaves me panting for more.

I arch up into him as his lips wrap around one of my nipples and he sucks, rolling his tongue over the peak. He does the same to the other one, moving back and forth and back and forth between the two until I’m a panting, writhing ball of need.

“Teller,” I gasp when his teeth graze over the tip and he does it again.

His hands glide down my thighs and he grips them, tugging them up around his hips as his lips move lower down my body.

When he settles between my legs, my heart starts to race. I expect him to go straight for my center but he skips over it, starting at my knee and kissing up my inner thigh until he reaches my bikini line. He’s so close to where I need him but he skips over my pussy once again and moves to my other leg, giving it the same treatment.

“Teller!” I cry when I think that he’s going to move past my core once again.

“I’ve got you, Sutton,” he murmurs against the inside of my thigh. “Let me take care of you.”

His lips trail along my crease, driving me wild. He’s teasing me, and I want to tell him that there’s no need. I’m

already wetter and more turned on than I've ever been in my entire life.

"Fuck," I moan as his mouth finds my center and he licks a path between my folds.

My fingers twist into his hair and I hold him to me as he starts to work me over with his mouth, tongue, and teeth.

He drives me higher and higher, and I suck in a breath and hold it as my orgasm barrels down on me. I'm almost a little afraid for when it hits me.

I see stars and I'm not even sure if it's actual stars or just in my head.

When I finally blink open my eyes, I see Teller hovering over me, a small smile on his face.

"Do you have a condom?" I ask breathlessly.

"We don't have to do anything tonight," he assures me but I shake my head.

"I want you, Teller."

He studies my face for a minute before he nods and reaches for his jeans. I watch as he fishes a condom out of his wallet and tears it open with his teeth.

He rolls it on and then he's over me, his cock nudging at my entrance. I stare into his eyes, my fingers digging into his shoulders as he slowly pushes into me.

He kisses me, distracting me as he thrusts into me, taking my virginity. I barely register the sting of pain. It's there one minute and gone the next. Then all I can feel is Teller as he moves inside of me.

He goes slow, taking his time and letting me get used to his size and rhythm. It isn't long until I'm moving with him, rocking against him as we make love.

It isn't much longer until another orgasm is rushing toward me.

“Oh god! Teller, Tell, I’m going to come,” I cry out and he grunts.

His face looks flushed as his pace picks up and he fucks me harder.

“Sutton,” he moans, his eyes closing as I start to come. “Fuck,” he grits out and I know that he must have found his release too.

He collapses onto his side on the blanket next to me and I roll over so that we can look at each other as we both catch our breath.

“That was incredible,” I whisper, my hand brushing some loose strands of hair away from his forehead.

He catches it, bringing my palm to his mouth and kissing it. He moves my fingers so that I’m forming a fist, holding the kiss in place and I fall farther for him at his act of sweetness.

“We should head back to the truck before it gets much darker,” Teller says and I nod, helping him pack up.

It takes us a while to make it back to the truck, but I don’t mind. It’s beautiful out, a slight breeze cooling our skin. We finally make it back to our truck and Teller opens my door before he heads to the back to put the picnic basket and blanket into the truck bed.

Teller starts the engine and we talk on the way home but it isn’t long before my head is lolling against the headrest. I must fall asleep because the next thing I know, Teller is laying me down in bed.

“Thanks,” I mumble as my eyes fall closed again.

Teller tucks me in, pulling off my boots before he leans down and presses a quick kiss to my lips.

“Anything for you, Sutton.”

EIGHTEEN



Sutton

“PRIM + PROPER?” I ask with a laugh when Teller pulls up outside of the restaurant.

“The food is really good here, and I didn’t want Chet to ruin this place for you,” he explains as he parks and turns off his truck.

“Good thing I left the hiking boots at home tonight,” I quip as he slides out of the driver’s side and comes around to get my door for me.

I wore a maxi skirt and a lacy camisole. It still feels like I’m underdressed for a place like this but Teller doesn’t seem to mind.

“You look perfect.”

“I know, you told me when you picked me up and again at that stoplight back there,” I say with a smile as we head into the restaurant.

It’s pretty packed for a Thursday night and we have to wait a few moments at the maître d’ stand until it’s our turn. I look around the restaurant, enjoying Teller’s hand on the small of my back.

“Hey, Teller,” the maître d’ says with a smile as he reaches over and fist bumps Teller.

“Hey, Steve,” Teller says easily and it’s in stark contrast to how Chet was greeted when I was here with him.

“This is my girlfriend, Sutton,” Teller introduces me when Steve’s eyes cut to me.

“Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too, Sutton,” Steve says with a smile as he grabs two menus and leads us over to our table.

Teller gets my chair for me and I smile up at him as I sit down and Steve hands me a menu. Teller takes the seat across from me and Steve tells us that our waitress will be with us soon.

“What’s your favorite food?” I ask Teller as we look over the drink menu.

“Fortune cookies,” Teller says right away and I can’t help but laugh.

“What? Really?”

“Yeah, I’ve always loved them. The place in town has really good ones too. Sometimes I just go and order a few.”

“I’ll have to make sure to order some the next time I go there.”

“I’ll take you there on our next date,” he says easily and I love how he keeps talking about our future.

The waitress comes and we place our drink orders. I pick up the other menu and try to decide what to order.

“How was the gift shop today?” Teller asks as I open my menu.

It was his day off today, so I fill him in on some of the more colorful tourists that came through today after we’ve placed our orders. Teller laughs, telling me some of the funnier stories that he has from working at the Mystery Cabin.

“Did she give birth at the Cabin?” I ask, my eyes wide as Teller finishes his story about a woman going into labor in the

gravity-defying part of the Mystery Cabin.

“Almost. The ambulance got there in time and I think she actually had it on the way to the hospital, but boy, was it interesting trying to get the woman out of that section of the Cabin while she was having contractions and screaming at everyone.”

“How did Stan handle it?” I ask with a laugh.

“He tried to yell over her so that he could help her to the exit and she just screamed in his face.”

“I can see him doing that,” I say with an eye roll.

“Then he yelled for me to come help,” Teller finishes with a grin and I crack up.

“Yeah, I can see him doing that even more.”

Our food comes and we finish with the easy banter throughout dinner. Teller tells me about the time that Stan was sick but still tried to give tours.

“He got dizzy and almost fainted in the middle of the tour and I had to carry him out. I think Lyla took a picture of him in my arms. He’s yelling at her to put the camera down in the picture.”

“What is Stan like when he’s sick?” I ask, curious about my great-uncle.

“Grouchy. Even more grouchy than normal,” he says with a chuckle. “Although Lyla and I did get a raise after the last time that he was sick and we both picked up the slack at the Cabin.”

“That was nice of him.”

Teller nods, taking a sip of his wine.

“Your uncle has a hard, prickly exterior, but inside he’s a big softie.”

“I wonder why my family cut him off,” I muse out loud.

“I have no idea. He’s never mentioned them and the one time that I tried to ask him about it, he snapped at me. Told me to mind my own damn business.”

“I haven’t brought it up either, and my mom didn’t tell me in her letter. She said it was his story to tell but I can barely get him to say anything. He just grunts at me most of the time.”

“Yeah, it took him a while to warm up to me too. I bet if you asked him, he would tell you. You’re his family after all.”

I’m not so sure about that, but I don’t tell Teller that.

“Would you two like dessert?” our waitress asks as she stops at our table.

Teller looks to me and I shake my head.

“I’m way too full,” I say with a laugh.

“Me too,” Teller says with a smirk.

The waitress smiles and drops off our bill before she clears away our empty plates. Teller pays the bill and helps me up from my chair. He slips his hand into mine as we head for the door.

We’re almost to the door when I notice a flash of lavender out of the corner of my eye. I turn in time to see Hudson backing Lyla up against the wall outside of his office.

I watch as she stares up at him and he says something to her. I wish I could tell what he was saying and I make a note to text her about it later.

“You want to go for a walk along the beach or something?” Teller asks as we head to his truck.

“If you want, but I had something else in mind,” I say coyly and Teller grins down at me.

“Oh, yeah?”

“Uh huh.”

“Care to elaborate?” he asks as he opens the passenger door for me.

“I can, but we have to do it at your place.”

Teller laughs at that, helping me up into his truck and closing the door once I'm settled. We joke and make flirty comments on the way over to his house. His hand is holding mine, his thumb drawing patterns against the inside of my wrist, and I wonder if he can feel how fast my heart is beating.

By the time that we make it to his cabin, I'm so turned on that I can feel my panties are soaking wet. I can't stop squirming in my seat and I know that Teller notices.

It's dark and I take Teller's hand as he helps me out of the truck and leads me up the porch steps.

“I'll have to get some more lights out here so you can see,” Teller says as he opens the front door and lets me go in ahead of him.

“Do you want something to drink?”

“No, I'm fine.”

I don't want something to drink, I just want him. I take a step toward him, my hands running up his chest and I wrap my arms around his neck.

“I really like you, Sutton,” Teller whispers and it's like butterflies take flight in my belly.

“I like you too,” I whisper back and he smiles.

This smile is different from his usual easygoing one. It's filled with promise and something else that I don't want to think about right now. So instead, I lean up on my toes and press my mouth to his.

Teller takes over, his hands gripping my waist, his fingers dipping beneath the hem of my camisole. The calluses tickle against my soft skin and I squirm, pressing closer against him. His touch is soft, gentle, and it has me aching for more.

“Bedroom?” I ask against his mouth and he nods, grabbing my hand and leading me up the stairs.

He turns on the bedroom light and I take a quick look around before I focus all of my attention on him. His bedroom is pretty bare. Just a bed, dresser, and nightstand, but it fits Teller somehow.

The walls and floors are hardwood like the rest of the house and I spot a bathroom on the left, next to a door that must lead to a closet.

Teller walks up behind me, gathering my hair and moving it over one shoulder. His lips skate down my neck, leaving goose bumps in their wake. His fingers tease the straps of my camisole down my arms and I shimmy out of my skirt, letting both pool at my feet.

“Perfect,” Teller murmurs against my shoulder, his voice filled with awe.

I love how much he loves my body. I’ve never felt sexy. I’ve always been more studious, a nerd, but Teller makes me feel desirable.

His fingers trail down my spine and I feel him unhook the strapless bra. Soon it’s on the floor with the rest of my clothes. My panties are the only thing left and I turn around, intending to help him take his clothes off, but then Teller’s hands find my breasts and I get distracted.

“Teller,” I moan, my head falling back as he sits down on the bed and starts to tease my sensitive nipples.

His mouth is so hot, the suction just right as he molds the soft globes in his hands, plumping them up for his mouth. I step closer to him, in between his legs, and my fingers tangle in his hair.

I don’t want him to do everything again tonight. I want to taste him, to make him feel as good as he makes me feel.

I take a step back and his eyes meet mine as I drop to my knees between his thick thighs.

“Sutton,” he starts as I reach for the zipper on his pants. “You don’t have to.”

“I want to,” I tell him, my voice coming out husky, dripping with lust.

Teller pulls his shirt off and my eyes devour every exposed inch of him. He lifts up, undoing his pants and pulling them and his boxers down. I move out of the way as he kicks them off and then I scoot back, eyeing his stiff cock.

I look up, meeting Teller’s eyes, and the longing, the heat, that I see in his eyes is enough to have me burning up with desire.

My fingers shake slightly as I wrap them around the root of him and I lick my lips, causing Teller to groan as I lean forward and wrap my mouth around the tip of him.

“Fuck,” Teller hisses, his fingers tangling in my hair.

He doesn’t try to apply pressure or anything else. He just leaves his hand there. I find that I love the feeling.

My tongue licks a path down his dick, my mouth following soon after. I can only fit about half of him into my mouth, so I use my hand on the other half, working in tandem as he starts to swell in my mouth.

He groans, the sound coming from deep in his throat and it only spurs me on. I suck harder, my cheeks hollowing around him.

“Sutton!” he groans and my hand moves faster. “Sutton, you’ve got to stop, I’m going to come.”

“Isn’t that the point?” I purr, my hand still stroking him.

“Yeah, but I want to fuck you.”

Before I can do or say anything, Teller has grabbed my waist and is tossing me onto the bed. I gasp and he comes down over me, grinning as he stares at me.

“What are you waiting for?” I ask him and he smiles wider.

He reaches for a condom and I scoot farther up the bed, resting my head on his pillow and spreading my legs wide for

him in invitation.

“Ready?” Teller asks, lining up at my entrance and I nod, my hands running up his biceps.

He thrusts into me and we both let out a groan as he bottoms out inside of me. I watch him, watch his face, as he makes love to me. He watches me right back and it adds a whole deeper level of intimacy.

We move together so perfectly; fit together like we were made to. I get lost in him, adrift in everything that he makes me feel until I reach my peak. He follows soon after and rolls onto his side.

He gathers me into his arms and I scoot closer, cuddling into his chest. Teller’s hand strokes over my hair, smoothing up and down my back as we both catch our breaths. He’s so warm and I’m so comfortable that it isn’t long before I drift off to sleep.

That night, I dream of him and me in the future. I wake up wondering why my future with Teller doesn’t include any part of my five-year plan.

NINETEEN



Sutton

IT'S a week later and my day off again. Things have been running smoothly around here. Teller and I have been spending most nights together now. Sometimes we just have dinner together and sometimes I spend the night with him. We even ate dinner over here with Stan once although I'm not sure that anyone wants to do that again anytime soon.

Bandit and I have gotten into a new routine too. We go for walks in the morning before the Mystery Cabin opens and then he hangs out in the gift shop with me. He loves all of the attention that he gets from the kids and since he doesn't bark or anything, Stan is alright with him being there.

I set up a dog bed for him behind the counter and he spends most of his mornings lying in that. He naps in between the tourist groups coming through. We go for another walk during lunch and then again after the Mystery Cabin has closed.

Sometimes Teller takes him out with him if he has to fix things and he usually joins us for the walk during lunch.

Teller is back on call at the firehouse next weekend, so I've already made plans with my friends for another girl's night. It's strange how active my social life is now that I'm in this tiny town. When I was at college, I spent most of my time

alone, either in the library or my dorm room. When I was back home, I spent most of my time with my mom.

I let Bandit back inside and we head for the kitchen to grab something to drink. Bandit goes right for his bowl but I pause.

For the first time since I got here, Stan's office door is open. Curiosity gets the best of me and I look around, making sure the coast is clear before I step inside.

The décor is much like the rest of this place. Slightly old and outdated, worn, but it still functions and serves its purpose.

I walk around the small room, taking in some of the pictures on the wall. There are some that I recognize of my grandpa when he was younger and some of my great aunts and uncles. There's even one of Stan and my mom from last year, before she lost all of the weight.

Papers are stacked on the desk and filing cabinets in the corner of the room. It looks like invoices and old ads for the Mystery Cabin. An ancient-looking computer is on his desk and I can't help but smile as I picture Stan trying to work it. That man is terrible with technology.

I take a seat in his chair, leaning back as I look around the rest of the office. My eyes snag on two pictures on his desk and my breath stalls in my lungs. One is of my mom, smiling in front of the Destiny Falls waterfall.

The other is of me. I'm at my college graduation and I wonder how Stan got it. No one was there for my graduation. At least, I thought no one was. Stan never approached me, never introduced himself.

I'm shocked. Did Stan go to my graduation? That's the only excuse for him to have a slightly blurry snapshot of me in my cap and gown with my diploma.

Stan comes into the office then, looking like he's in a hurry. He stops short when he sees me sitting at his desk, my eyes wide with shock.

“What are you doing in here?” he snaps, his face turning red and I wonder why me being in here bothers him so much.

“The door was open.”

“So you just made yourself at home?” he snarls.

“I didn’t realize that I wasn’t allowed in here.”

Stan looks away then, his jaw hard as he stares at a spot on the floor.

“Were you... did you come to my graduation?” I ask slowly and his whole body tenses.

“Stay out of my stuff,” he barks out, grabbing some folder off the filing cabinet by the door.

He storms off and I frown as I watch him go. We’ve been getting along better since my breakdown. He’s still gruff and grunts more than he talks, but I thought that he wanted me here.

Now, not so much.

I wonder what happened? What could I have done, or what’s in this room that he doesn’t want me to see? And how did he get this picture?

I doubt that I’m going to get answers to any of those questions sitting here. I stand, grabbing Bandit and heading up to my room to think.

I’m just about to collapse on my bed when my phone starts to ring and I pull it out to see that it’s the company that I interned at last summer. My heart starts to race as I hit accept and bring the phone to my ear.

“Hello?”

“Hi, is this Sutton Tate?” comes a pleasant female voice.

“Yes, this is Sutton.”

“Hi, I’m Jenna and I’m with Reinhold Holdings. You did an internship with us last year and we still had your resume on

file. We're hiring and we thought that you would be a perfect fit for a new position that just opened up."

"That sounds interesting! What's the position?" I ask, trying to infuse some enthusiasm into my voice.

"You would be working in HR as a senior manager under the workplace planning section. We're conducting interviews in two weeks. Would you like me to schedule you a spot?" Jenna asks and I freeze.

Do I want to interview for this position? It would mean flying out to Boston this week, and I'd have to dip into my savings for the ticket. If I got the job, I'd have to leave Destiny Falls early, probably almost immediately so that I could start at Reinhold.

"Of course," I say, sounding professional and excited even though the words taste like dirt on my tongue.

"We have a spot Monday morning and then two on Tuesday morning."

"I'll take the one on Monday morning."

"Eleven a.m. okay?" she asks.

"That's perfect. Thank you so much."

I confirm the time and address with her and she asks for my email address so that they can let me know about any changes.

I hang up a few minutes later and even though I know that I should be excited about this interview, about getting back to my five-year plan, all I feel is dread.

Do I really want to leave Teller and my friends? I haven't told him yet, but I'm in love with Teller and I don't see that changing anytime soon. I also don't see him leaving Destiny Falls to go to Boston with me. He's already said that he gave up New York for Destiny Falls and that he likes living and working here.

I'd also have to leave Lyla, Madelyn, and Iris. They've been so nice to me, so welcoming. They're the first real friends that I've ever had. Am I really okay with just leaving them behind. Sure, we can still text and call, maybe they'd come visit me out on the East Coast or I could come back here but how long before we get busy and drift apart?

But can I really give up my big plan for them and this tiny town?

I just need to shake it off. I'll get to Boston and I'll see that it's where I'm meant to be.

I just need to stop thinking about this tiny town and start thinking about my future.

I head downstairs and run into Teller in the kitchen.

"Hey, you alright?" he asks when he gets a look at my face.

"Yeah, just tired," I lie.

I don't want to tell him about the interview. Not yet.

"Why don't you take a nap? We can do dinner a different day if you're not feeling up for it," he says, stepping closer and kissing me on the forehead.

"Thanks. I think I just need to rest tonight."

He nods, giving me a quick hug and promising to check up on me later before he heads down the hallway. I watch him go before I move over to the kitchen table and take a seat. I stare out the window, eyeing the lighthouse as I debate my options.

Part of me doesn't really want to go. Do I really want to leave Destiny Falls? Do I want to leave Teller and my friends?

No.

On the other hand, though, can I really throw away this opportunity and all of my plans and what I've worked for, for the future all for this tiny town? I've been working so hard to get to this point and part of me feels like it's a failure if I don't get the high-paying job in the big city.

I don't want to leave these people, but I can't give up on something that I've been working toward for my entire life. I want money and stability and I don't feel guilty for that. I can't pass up this interview.

Not if I might end up regretting it for the rest of my life.

TWENTY



Sutton

“ALRIGHT, what’s going on with you?” Lyla asks as she barges into my room after the Mystery Cabin closes for the day a couple of days later.

I’ve been getting different variations of this question since I set up my interview a few days ago. I’ve been putting off everyone by saying that I was tired or feeling under the weather but I don’t think that anyone believes me.

“What are you talking about?” I ask her, trying to stall.

“You know what I’m talking about.”

I look away from her and debate if I should open up to her. Maybe it would help to talk everything out with someone. I’m not used to doing that with anyone but my mom, but isn’t that friends do?

“Alright, that’s it. We’re going to The Fainting Goat.”

She grabs my hand, dragging me off of my bed and over to the doorway. I almost trip and take us both down as we jog down the stairs. I’m shoved into her Jeep and we’re headed toward town before I know it.

“Madelyn and Iris are meeting us there,” Lyla says as she tosses her phone into the cup holder.

I just sigh. I know that Lyla isn't going to let this go, so there's no point in fighting it.

We pull outside The Fainting Goat a few minutes later and Madelyn and Iris pull up beside us before we can even get out. Iris gives me a sympathetic look as she passes me and Madelyn pulls me into a hug before I realize what she's about to do.

"Are you okay?" she whispers in my ear and I nod.

She holds my hand as we follow Lyla and Iris over to a booth along the back wall. I slide in next to Iris, and Madelyn orders for all of us when the bartender comes over. I've never been to a bar where the bartender left to go to tables to take orders before. When he looks at Iris and no one else, I realize why we're getting special treatment.

"So, spill. What's going on with you?" Lyla asks and I lean back in the booth.

"I got an interview."

"You don't like working at the Mystery Cabin?" Iris asks.

"I do. This one would be in Boston and I'd be doing what I actually went to school for."

"How did Stan take it?" Lyla asks with a frown and I clear my throat.

"I haven't told him yet. I haven't told anyone yet."

"So you would leave us?" Madelyn asks, looking sad.

"If I got it. Maybe. I don't know."

"Maybe Stan would give you a new position at the Mystery Cabin?" Madelyn suggests.

"It's not just that. I've had this vision of my life since I was young. We didn't have much and I promised myself that I would find a good paying job that offered me stability."

The girls all look upset but the bartender is back, dropping off our drinks so I'm saved from having to talk for a minute.

“Thanks,” I tell the bartender, Arlo, as his nametag says.

He nods, his eyes straying to Iris once more before he turns and leaves.

“Don’t get me wrong, there is nothing wrong with wanting money and stability. I just think that you need to be sure that that’s what will make you happy,” Madelyn starts.

“You’ve been getting along so well with Teller and I’ve never seen Stan happier. I know that he loves having you here,” Lyla says.

“Stan likes having me here?” I ask her, shocked.

“Yeah, he’s been bragging about you for the last six months. ‘Sutton is so smart. She graduated top of her class from Wharton. Sutton is so strong and pretty.’ He’s shown Teller and me that picture of you on his desk like ten times. I think Teller was half in love with you before you even got here,” she says with a laugh.

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Lyla assures me.

I sit there in stunned silence for a beat, digesting that news.

“Plus, we would miss you,” Iris says quietly and I look over to her, feeling tears sting the back of my eyes.

“I would miss you all too. So much. But nothing is set in stone,” I remind them. “I might not get the job.”

“Of course you’re going to get it!” Madelyn says and I smile at her belief in me.

I take a sip of my drink and the conversation turns to them asking me questions about the new job and Boston. The cloud of melancholy still hangs over our table but it means a lot that they’re trying to be happy and supportive of me.

We finish the round of drinks and then Iris says that she has to head home since she has an early night. We all stand and I notice that Arlo is once again staring at Iris as we leave.

I hug Madelyn and Iris goodbye, promising that I'll text them and let them know how the interview goes. Lyla starts her Jeep and I climb into the passenger seat as we head back to the Mystery Cabin.

"I wish that you wouldn't go," she says quietly. "I know that I need to be supportive of what you want since you're my friend. I just don't want to lose you after we just met."

"You won't lose me," I promise her.

"Yes, I will," she whispers and I don't have an answer for that.

She's right. It would be different if I lived across the country from her. How often would I really come back here? We'd both get busy and our phone calls and texts would get fewer and far between.

We ride in silence for a bit until something orange starts to peek through the trees. A police car flies by us and Lyla slows down to see what's going on.

The fire trucks are already in front of the burning house when we start to drive by and my heart shoots up into my throat when I spot Teller's truck parked close to the property edge.

"Teller," I whisper but Lyla must hear me because she turns in.

"I'm sure that he's fine, Sutton. He's trained for this," she tries to reassure me but right then a paramedic runs by with Teller on the gurney and I jump out of the Jeep before Lyla can stop.

"Teller!" I scream, racing up to him before they can put him in the ambulance.

"Miss!" the paramedic says, trying to keep me away but I need to see him. I need to make sure that he's alive.

Images of my mom's frail body keep coming up and I'm choking back a sob when Teller's eyes finally meet mine.

“Sutton,” he starts but they put him into the ambulance.

“Can I go with him?” I ask, my voice coming out shrill and filled with panic.

The paramedic looks to Teller who nods and I hop in, waving to Lyla before they can slam the doors closed. I can barely concentrate on anything as the paramedics work on Teller. He’s still awake, so that has to be a good sign.

I’m shoved to a corner on the bench in the ambulance and I sit in shock, my fingers wringing together as they say some medical jargon that I don’t understand.

We pull outside of the hospital and the doors are jerked open. It startles me but everyone else in the ambulance barely reacts. Instead, they’re in motion.

They wheel the stretcher with Teller out the back and I scramble to follow them. The nurses stop me at the entrance and direct me over to a waiting area.

Sitting down in the cold, uncomfortable plastic chair has painful memories crawling back to the surface and I choke back a sob. Even the sterile waiting area reminds me of my final days with my mom.

Lyla comes in soon after and sits with me.

“Have you heard anything?” she asks and I shake my head.

“No, but he was awake. That has to be a good sign. Right?” I ask, and I wonder if she can hear the hysteria in my voice as well.

“Yeah, I’m sure that it is.”

She holds my hand and we sit like that for a while. Some firefighters join us, their faces dirty. They’re all wearing the DFFD T-shirts and they sit close to us. I lose track of time but soon a doctor is walking into the waiting room with a clipboard.

“Anyone here for Teller Wells?” he asks.

“Yes,” Lyla and I say at the same time, both of us leaping to our feet.

The doctor walks over to us as the other firefighters join us.

“So he’s suffered from a second-degree burn on his arm. We’re treating him and have him on some medicine for the pain. He’ll be in the hospital for at least the next twenty-four hours but then he should be good to go home. He’ll have bandages that he’ll have to change for a week or two.”

I nod, swallowing hard as Lyla takes over.

“Can we see him?”

“For a little bit. He’s tired and a little out of it right now from the medicine but one or two visitors should be fine. The nurse will show you the way.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” she says.

He nods, turning and heading back down the hallway. A nurse comes in a minute later and says that she can take someone back now and then she’ll come back for the next person. One of the firefighters that came to the hospital, I’m assuming the chief, goes with her, and Lyla and I sit back down.

“He’s okay, Sutton,” she says and I nod.

“I know.”

“Then why are you shaking so much?”

I gulp, noticing that she’s right. I’m trembling, my teeth chattering as I stare into space.

“I can’t stop thinking about my mom,” I admit and I can’t stop the tears from spilling onto my cheeks.

“Oh, Sutton,” Lyla says, wrapping her arm around my shoulders.

We sit huddled like that until the nurse comes back. I still don’t think that I’m emotionally ready to go back to his room,

to see someone that I love in a hospital bed again.

I stand on shaky legs when Lyla nudges me up and I wobble after the nurse down the hallway.

“Hey,” Teller says drowsily and he gives me a small smile.

“Hey,” I choke out. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine. It was just a little burn. I’ll be back to normal in a few days.”

I nod. I know that he’s right, that it wasn’t nearly as bad as it could have been, but seeing him in the hospital bed still has me shaken. Just being in the hospital is getting to me.

It’s like the walls are closing in on me. All I can see is my mom, lying in a similar hospital bed, as she takes her final breath.

“Oh god,” I whisper, tears spilling faster.

“Sutton,” Teller says, sounding alarmed. “I’m fine. Don’t cry, don’t cry.”

I can’t stop though.

“I can’t, I can’t. I can’t do this anymore. I can’t lose another person that I love.”

“Sutton,” Teller says and he sounds like he’s more alert this time. “Sutton, I love you too. I’m going to be just fine. I’m not going anywhere.”

He tries to reassure me but the damage has already been done. I’m too gunshy from losing my mom, the wound is still too fresh. I can’t go through that again.

I’ve been burned too. I don’t want to go back near the fire.

I don’t want to leave Teller. It feels like I’m letting my mom down. I’m doing the opposite of what she asked of me in her letter. I know that this reaction is irrational, but I can’t seem to stop myself.

“I’m so sorry,” I sob, backing toward the door. “I’m so sorry.”

“Sutton... Sutton!” Teller yells but I turn and run.

Lyla catches me as I bolt past the waiting room door and hugs me.

“I need to get out of here,” I cry and she nods, grabbing my arm and leading me outside to her Jeep.

The drive back to the Mystery Cabin is silent except for my sobs.

“Thanks for the ride,” I mumble as I rush out of the Jeep.

“Sutton!” Lyla calls but I’m already running up to the cabin.

I run inside and head toward my bedroom but I’m stopped by Stan.

“Whoa!” he says as he steps out of his room. “What’s wrong, Sutton?”

“Teller,” I stop, clearing my throat and trying to get myself under control. “There was an accident and Teller was hurt.”

I can see the worry on Stan’s face right away and I hurry to let him know that he’s alright.

“It’s a small burn. He’ll be released in a day or two.”

“Good. Then why are you running around like a tornado?” he grumbles.

“I’m leaving.”

That statement lands like a bomb and I watch it detonate.

“What?” Stan asks, his voice devoid of any emotion.

“I got a call about a job opening in Boston. I’m leaving tomorrow to head out there to interview for it.”

Stan looks furious but I can see something that looks like hurt in his eyes.

“I have to go,” I say and I have to force the words out.

My throat is raw and scratchy from holding back tears for most of the night.

“Then go,” Stan snaps before he stomps back into his bedroom and slams the door closed.

Bandit whines from the stairs and I cry, hurrying up to my room. I toss my suitcase onto the bed and shove my clothes inside. I just need to pack a small bag for right now. If I get the job, then I’ll come back for my car and the rest of my things.

I collapse onto the bed, staring up at my ceiling. I know that I should be exhausted, but I can’t turn my brain off. I can’t stop seeing Teller and my mom in their hospital beds. I can’t stop feeling scared and helpless.

Bandit curls up into my side and I hold him through the night. When the sun starts to peek through the trees, I take my suitcase downstairs to my car. I make sure that Bandit has gone to the bathroom and has food and water before I climb behind the wheel and head toward the airport.

Toward my five-year plan.

TWENTY-ONE



Sutton

BOSTON IS JUST like I remembered it.

It's the complete opposite of Destiny Falls with its sprawling city blocks and all of the historical buildings. The history of this city drew me in the last time I was here, but it doesn't seem to have the same effect this time.

I checked into my hotel late last night and went over some interview questions that I might get asked this morning, practicing my answers until I was sure that I was prepared for my interview. The whole time, my mind kept wandering. It's like my heart wasn't really in it.

I can't get Stan and Teller's hurt faces out of my head. They had both looked so shocked, so devastated when I told them that I was going to Boston.

I can't think about that right now though. I need to get mentally prepared for this meeting. I woke up early, brushing my hair until it was shiny and lying perfectly to my shoulders. I had a brief moment of panic, wondering if they would be turned off by the pink strands, but I can always tell them that I'll dye it before I start working.

I put on a light coat of mascara, lining my blue eyes with some eye liner and smeared lip gloss on my lips. I had packed my nicest black power suit and my new pair of heels and as I

check out my reflection, I look like the old Sutton. The Sutton that I was before I lost my mom. The Sutton that I was before I went to Destiny Falls.

My hotel was close to Reinhold Holdings and it was nice out so I decided to walk to the interview. I got here early and now it's ten forty-five and I'm already checked in and waiting in the lobby of Reinhold Holdings. I knew my way around from last summer and it was nice to see people that I knew from when I was interning here. I wasn't friends with them or anything but a few of them who recognize me wave as I pass them.

It just makes me feel alone.

I stare around the almost sterile waiting room and I can't believe it, but I miss the rustic décor of the Mystery Cabin. I must really be starting to lose it.

"Miss Tate?" the interviewer asks and I stand, pasting on a professional smile as I straighten my suit coat and head over to her.

"Nice to meet you," I say, shaking her hand before I follow her inside the office.

My mind keeps wandering throughout the interview. I get the usual questions and I know that my answers are professional and impressive. Normally, this is my element. I used to love being in a profession setting. I used to love the busy city, the anonymity that it gave me.

Now though, everything has changed. My suit feels itchy after a month and a half of wearing tank tops and shorts. I can't seem to find my bearings on the busy city streets, and even though I'm surrounded by people, I've never felt so alone.

"Well, Miss Tate. Do you have any questions for me?" she asks and I shake my head no.

"Well, we have interviews tomorrow morning as well, but I must say, you have the most impressive resume and your internship here last year goes a long way too."

I give her a polite smile, shaking her hand as I stand to leave.

“We’ll be making a decision tomorrow afternoon since we want to fill this position as quickly as we can.”

“Perfect. I look forward to your call,” I say as I head out the door and back to the elevator.

I thought that I would be excited about being back in Boston. I mean, I couldn’t wait to get back here at the beginning of the summer.

I don’t need to ask myself what’s changed either.

I decide to walk around the city for a bit after my interview, hoping that it will bring back good memories and make the ache hurt less. It’s hot out and I ditch my jacket as I make my way down the sidewalk.

It’s loud here and I keep getting bumped into by people as I make my way down the sidewalk. I’ll admit, I am distracted, so maybe it’s my fault. After the third time that it happens, I give up on my walk and head back to my hotel.

I’m just stepping into my room when my cell phone rings and I see Lyla’s name on the screen.

“Hey, I was just about to text you.”

“Sutton, it’s Stan.”

“What?” I ask, panic clawing at me. “What’s wrong? What happened? Is he okay?”

“The mayor was just in here and they got into this awful fight. Stan... I think that he was crying, Sutton,” she whispers sounding worried and horrified. “And he told Teller and me to go home, that the Mystery Cabin was closed for the rest of the day.”

“What were they fighting about?”

“I don’t know. They were in his office and I could just hear their raised voices, but I couldn’t make out what they were saying.”

I bite my bottom lip, but I already know what I'm going to do.

“Okay, I'm on my way,” I tell her and she lets out a relieved sigh.

“Thanks, Sutton. I'll see you soon. Teller and I don't want to leave him alone right now. I've never seen him like this before.”

My stomach sinks and I start to pack faster.

“I'll call to switch my flight right now. I'll be there late tonight,” I promise her, and she thanks me again before we hang up.

I'm like a whirlwind as I race around the hotel room, packing up everything and calling the airline to switch my flight up to today. I order an Uber and have to ask them to step on it as I slide into the back seat.

As I wait in line to get my boarding pass, it hits me.

It feels so right to be headed back to Destiny Falls. I was all alone in Boston and if I take the job here, I'll be leaving behind my friends. My family.

Over the last six weeks, I've grown used to my new life in Destiny Falls. I like the slow pace of life there. I like the people and the sense of community that I have there. I even like working at the Mystery Cabin.

I think my mom knew that this would happen. She sure was on to something with her bucket list.

As I head down the terminal, a sense of rightness hits me.

I'm heading home.

TWENTY-TWO



Sutton

BY THE TIME I've landed back in Michigan and then driven back up to Destiny Falls, it's close to midnight. The town is quiet as I drive down Main Street and all of the porch lights are off at the Mystery Cabin when I pull up out front.

Teller's truck and Lyla's Jeep are still parked around back in the employee parking lot and my heart races at the thought of seeing Teller again.

I'm tired, exhausted from traveling all day, but anxiety starts to prick at the back of my neck as I climb out of my Beetle and head toward the back door. It's unlocked and Bandit comes running up to me.

"Hey, boy," I say quietly, bending down to scratch behind his ears.

He licks my face and I laugh. I didn't realize how much I missed him until he's jumping all over me.

"I missed you too," I tell him, giving him one last pet before I stand.

"Hey," comes a voice from the hallway and I jerk around to see Teller standing there.

His arm is bandaged up and he looks tired, but he's still the most handsome man that I've ever seen.

“Hey,” I whisper, my voice coming out raspy with emotion.

I swallow hard, my eyes skittering away from his as I look around the back room.

“He’s in his office.”

I nod, wincing at the tone of Teller’s voice. His easy smiles and charming attitude are nowhere in sight and I don’t know if it’s because I broke up with him or if he’s just tired after today.

I follow him down the hallway and we both pause outside of the closed office door.

“How’s your arm?” I ask him and he just shrugs.

“It’s fine.”

I nod, looking away from him and I spot Lyla in the kitchen.

“Welcome back,” she says, coming up to me and giving me a hug. “I made him some tea.”

She passes me the mug and I take it from her, wrapping my fingers around it and welcoming the burn.

“We’ll get out of your way, but you can call me if you need help with anything,” she says and I nod.

She shoots one more nervous look toward the office door before she and Teller turn and head out the back door. Teller looks back before he heads outside and our eyes lock for one moment.

I open my mouth, wanting to say something, anything, but he turns and leaves before I can figure out what to say.

The cabin is quiet after that and I take a moment to compose myself before I step forward and open the office door.

My uncle is inside, slouched in his desk chair, and when he sees me, he hurries to wipe the tears away from his cheeks.

“Oh, you’re still here?” he asks sarcastically.

The bite in his words has me wincing but I still step closer to his desk and sink down into the chair across the desk from him.

“Lyla called me. She said that you were upset and that the mayor left here just as angry.”

“She doesn’t know what she’s talking about,” he snaps and I stare at him.

“Obviously,” I say dryly and he glares at me.

“I’m fine.”

“Right. I can see that.”

He huffs and I power on.

“What’s the deal with you and the mayor? Even Chet seemed to hate you, but no one knows why there’s so much animosity between you two? Why do they have such a problem with you?”

“That’s none of your business. Don’t you have some fancy job to get back to?”

“I don’t know if I got it or not... but I don’t want to move to Boston.”

“Not swanky enough for you?”

“Honestly? I missed this place more than I thought I would when I left. Destiny Falls is small, but I like the slower pace of life here.”

He looks away from me and I swallow, forcing the rest of the words out.

“I missed Lyla, Madelyn, and Iris. I really missed Teller and Bandit, although I think I might have blown my chance with Teller.”

“You haven’t. That boy has been in love with you for like a year.”

“Why does everyone keep saying that?”

“Cause when your mom was here, she showed him a picture of you and you could see it then. He was dazed from that moment on. Your mom would tell us stories about you, and he would hang on her every word.”

“Well, he wasn’t acting that way when I just saw him.”

Stan rolls his eyes, taking a sip of his tea.

“I missed you too. You’re a cranky pain in the ass who hasn’t let me get close to since I got here, but you are my family. The last family that I have left and I still love you, Uncle Stan. If you’ll still have me, I’d like to keep working here... and living in your attic.”

That gets his attention and he looks back to me.

“I thought that I wanted some big life but I was miserable in Boston and I was only there for twenty-four hours. That job would have sucked the life out of me in under a year, and I would still be there trying to convince myself that I was happy if I hadn’t spent this summer here. If I hadn’t met you.”

We’re silent for a few minutes until Bandit starts scratching at the door and I lean back and open it for him. He stops by my side for a minute before he heads around the desk to see Uncle Stan.

“I’d love to have you here, Sutton. I didn’t want you to leave in the first place and I didn’t handle you telling me very well.”

I give him a smile as Bandit comes back to me and I scratch his ears.

“I know that I haven’t been very open with you since you got here. I-I have a hard time trusting people.”

I sit back in my chair, willing him to keep talking. He looks nervous, uncomfortable, as I stare at him.

“I’m gay.”

My mouth drops open. That is not what I thought he was going to say and I blink at him.

“I know that times have changed, but when I told my family back in the seventies, they didn’t take it very well. They cut me off, disowned me. They said that they didn’t want to have anything to do with a sick freak like me.”

“Uncle Stan,” I say, tears spilling over. “I’m so sorry. They shouldn’t have said that. They shouldn’t have treated you that way.”

I can’t even imagine being a twenty-something kid and losing my family, my home, my everything because of who I was.

Stan is crying too and it breaks my heart even more.

“That was why you never heard of me. I got kicked out and so I moved east until I landed here in Destiny Falls.”

I nod, tears still spilling from my eyes.

“What made you fall in love with Destiny Falls?”

“Lorne Morton.”

“Morton? As in, the Mayor Morton?”

“It was his father, Chet’s grandfather,” Stan clarifies. “We were together. We were in love, but then his family found out and gave him an ultimatum. Either he left me and married a suitable girl that they had already lined up for him, or they would disown him.”

My stomach sinks and I know what’s coming.

“I begged him to choose me. He didn’t,” he says brokenly.

Suddenly I’m starting to understand Stan more. Everyone that he has loved, everyone that was supposed to love him back, deserted him. They abandoned him. Over and over again he was let down. Is it any wonder he doesn’t want to let new people in?

“Is that why they hate you?” I whisper and he nods.

“They don’t want anyone to know their family secret. They still think being gay is something to be ashamed of.”

“It’s not,” I say vehemently.

“I know. It’s just hard to still be treated like this.”

We’re silent again, both of us wiping away tears as a new connection, a new bond, forms between us.

“I’m sorry, Sutton.”

“For what?” I ask, confused.

“For treating you the way I have. I’ve been holding you at arm’s length so that I didn’t get hurt again, but I’ve only been hurting both of us in the end. Living like this is no way to live.”

My stomach clenches and I wonder if I’ve been doing the same thing. I got hurt by bullies when I was a kid and instead of trying to make friends, I shut myself off from the rest of the world.

“Take it from an old man, Sutton. Don’t make the same mistakes that I have. You can’t be afraid to get burned. If you keep pushing people away, then you’ll end up alone and miserable. Just like me.”

I nod. I know that he’s right.

“You’re not alone anymore, Uncle Stan. You haven’t been for a while. Lyla and Teller both hung around here all day to make sure that you were alright. You have people who love you and who care about you.”

He gives me an emotional nod, his eyes watering as my words hit me.

We stare at each other for a beat and then he gives me a shy smile.

“You should head to bed. We’re going to have to give Lyla the day off tomorrow after she hung around here all day today,” Stan grumbles and I laugh.

“I’ll be ready at eight a.m.,” I promise him.

“Night, Sutton.”

“Night, Uncle Stan,” I say as I stand and head upstairs to my room.

Bandit joins me and as I lay down in bed, a sense of rightness hits me.

I know that I made the right decision coming back here. This is where I’m meant to be.

This is home.

TWENTY-THREE



Sutton

STAN GAVE Teller and Lyla the day off, so it's just me in the gift shop the next day. It's been a slow day, usually Tuesdays are, so I have plenty of time alone with my thoughts.

I made breakfast for Stan and me this morning and we actually had a nice chat. He told me about when my mom was here last year and it's nice to talk about her with someone who actually knew her.

He asks me about my grandpa, his brother, and my other great aunts and uncles. I'm nervous that me sharing any good times I had with them will be painful but he seems to have let the anger of the past go. At least a little bit.

We didn't have any tours start at nine this morning so Stan had joined me in the gift shop for a little bit and I had told him about growing up in California and school while I stocked the shelves.

Reinhold Holdings called at about ten thirty to offer me the job but I turned them down. I was nervous that after I did I would feel like I had made a mistake, like I should have said yes, but that feeling never came. This is my home and my family. This is where I'm meant to be.

We did one tour before lunch and then had another break. Stan watched the gift shop while I walked Bandit. Madelyn

and Iris have both texted me to welcome me back to town and when I told them that I was staying, they had both been so excited and asked for a standing girl's night once a week.

It feels good to be back. There's just one thing that is bothering me.

Teller.

I know that I hurt him when I broke things off at the hospital and I know that I'm going to need to explain why I freaked out and ended things. I just hope that he takes me back.

It would be so hard to work with him again. Especially considering that I'm still in love with him.

"Sutton, why don't you take the rest of the day off. We close in an hour and I don't see us getting a mad rush before closing."

"Are you sure?" I ask him as I put the box of T-shirts back in the storage room.

"Yeah, go talk to your fellow."

I smile at him and he smiles back. It's a little rusty but I have high hopes that he'll be better at it soon.

"I'll grab us pizza on the way home," I offer, but Stan waves me off.

"No need to rush home on my account. Enjoy yourself. I'll watch Bandit."

I wipe my hands off on my jean shorts and nod.

"Thanks, Uncle Stan," I whisper as I give him a hug.

Bandit gets a pet and then I'm grabbing my purse and heading for my car. I make one stop before I head to Teller's house, grabbing him some of the fortune cookies that he loves so much. I'm hoping that maybe they bring me some luck tonight too. I have a feeling that I'm going to need it.

My hands are sweaty, my heart racing as I pull up outside of Teller's place. Part of me was hoping that he wouldn't be home, but I know that I need to have this conversation before I lose my nerve.

His truck is in the driveway and I pull in behind it, taking a deep breath as I climb out, the takeout box clutched in my hand. Teller steps out onto his front porch and we stare at each other before I give him a timid smile.

"Hey," I say, stopping at the bottom of the porch steps.

"Hey," he says and I miss the warm tone that used to be in his voice.

"Can we talk for a minute?"

He nods, holding the door open for me, and I slip past him. He leads me over to the couch and I take a seat, my heart dipping when he sits down and I see how much space he puts between us.

"I got these for you," I say, passing him the white takeout container.

"Thanks," he says, setting the box on the coffee table.

That can't be a good sign. I can't give up though.

"How's your arm?" I ask, clearing my throat.

"It's fine."

We stare at each other for a beat. Seeing him bandaged up reminds me of him in the hospital. That image still haunts me. It reminds me so much of my mom's final days that I can't think about it without flinching.

I need to be strong, be brave, so that I can show Teller how sorry I am for leaving him. So that I can show him how much I regret it.

"I wanted to apologize for ending things with you like that. I just... I freaked out. I saw you lying in that hospital bed and it just reminded me so much of my mom. I didn't want to get left again."

“So instead, you left first.”

“I know that it was dumb. I know that I hurt you. I hurt myself too.”

The wall that he’s putting between us drops for just one minute and I see the pain I caused on his face as he swallows and looks away from me.

“I’m staying in Destiny Falls. I already turned down the position out in Boston.”

He nods, watching me carefully.

“I was wondering, hoping, that maybe you would give me a second chance.”

“So that you can run away again when things get hard?”

I deserve that but it still stings.

“No. I talked to Stan last night and I know that I’ve been acting childish. I need to face my problems. I’m not going anywhere. This is my home and I’ve found my family. I’m not going anywhere.”

Teller eyes me, and I hold my breath waiting for his answer.

“I’m sorry, Sutton, but I can’t. I have to protect my heart. I don’t think that I could survive you walking away from me again.”

Pinpricks hit the back of my eyes and my throat gets tight as I try to keep the tears from coming and swallow against the pain. I nod, looking down at my hands in my lap. My fingers keep twisting together and I can’t stop fiddling. I don’t want to cry in front of him. I don’t want to make this more awkward.

“I’m going to show you. I’ll prove that I’m never walking away again,” I vow, my throat thick with emotion as I stand from the couch.

I can feel Teller’s eyes on me as I head outside and back to my Beetle and when I’m climbing into the driver’s seat, I look

up and meet his gaze. He looks just as torn up as I feel, but I know that he's right.

I need to prove it to him. I need to show that he's the man for me and that I'm never going to run away from him again.

I stop for pizza on the drive home and when I walk in the door with it, Stan gives me a pitying look. He seems just as upset as I am that things didn't work out with Teller and that I'm back here. At least Bandit is happy to see me come back.

"What happened? He wasn't home?" Stan asks as he grabs us some plates and puts the can of soup that he was probably going to heat up for dinner away.

"No, he was," I say, trying to keep the sadness from my voice. "Things just didn't go as well as I wanted."

"I'm sorry, Sutton," he says as we take our seats at the table.

"It's okay," I say after a beat. "I'm not giving up. I love him and I know that he loves me. I just need to do something to show him that I'm not going to leave when things get tough again."

Stan nods, eyeing me intently as I force myself to take a bite of pizza, chew, and swallow.

"Alright, I'm in," he finally says and my gaze flies to meet his.

"What?"

"I'm in," he says again, firmer this time.

"You're in?"

"Yeah, whatever your plan is to win him back, I'm in. I'll help you."

I'm a little shocked by his offer but then a sense of ease fills me. I've got my family in my corner.

"Thanks, Stan," I say quietly, and I mean it.

"Don't mention it. Now, what did you have planned?"

TWENTY-FOUR



Sutton

SO, Stan and I may have started a fire.

A small one and it was completely by accident but that's how Stan, Bandit, and I end up lined up in the front yard. We're all soaking wet from the sprinklers and we're dripping water, leaving puddles at our feet.

It's been a week of Stan, Lyla, Madelyn, Iris, and I brainstorming ideas of what to do to show Teller that I'm all in. That I love him and that I'm not going to run from him or us again. Funny enough, the idea hit me when we ordered Chinese food one night and I remembered how Teller said that the fortune cookies from the place in town were his favorite.

A quick Pinterest search and we found this cute little handmade fortune cookie box. The post even came with plans on how to make it, and it had seemed so easy. That post was a lie as Stan and I soon learned.

We spent an hour at the hardware store last night looking at all of the different kinds of wood. The post hadn't said which kind to buy, just the length that we needed to cut it into and apparently the employees at the hardware store are not equipped to answer any questions about making a fortune cookie box. Seeing Stan argue with them had been pretty entertaining though.

We ended up grabbing three different kinds of wood, figuring that we would find some use for the other ones around the Mystery Cabin.

Then we had to figure out how to cut the boards and that's where the real trouble started.

Teller walks over to the three of us and Stan crosses his arms over his chest, acting and looking like a kid who knows that he's in trouble. Normally, the image would have me smiling, but I'm too nervous about what Teller is about to say.

I'm still clutching the pieces of the wooden fortune cookie, the pieces of wood rough and uneven in my arms as I stare at Teller.

He's dressed in his heather gray Destiny Falls Fire Department T-shirt, dark blue jeans, and a pair of black boots, his face blank as he stares down at the three of us.

The other firefighters are packing up the truck. The sprinklers took care of the fire but they still did a walk-through to be safe and told us that we would need to replace the curtain and a small section of the wall. They left Teller to find out how the fire started.

“What the heck happened here?”

Stan just points a finger at me, throwing me under the bus, and I glare at him.

“It was an accident,” I say, gripping the wooden pieces tighter as nerves hit me.

Man, this was a stupid idea. I should have picked a different way to apologize and tell Teller that I love him.

“*What* was an accident?” Teller asks, growing exasperated with us and our vague answers.

“The fire. I was trying to make you something, as a way to say sorry and to show you how I felt about you, and things just got away from us.”

“That’s an understatement,” Stan mumbles under his breath and I glare at him again.

“You were right there with me,” I remind him and he huffs out an annoyed sound, rolling his eyes.

Teller’s eyes drop to the disaster that I’m holding and it looks like he doesn’t know if he should laugh or yell at us.

“What is that?” He asks, his voice cold and distant like it has been ever since I got back to town.

My nerves ratchet up another notch and I can feel my emotions threatening to drown me. I just want to see him give me one of those easy going grins. I want to hear him say my name in that way of his that sounds like a caress.

“I…” My chin starts to wobble and I can feel the tears starting to spill over my eyes. “I’m so sorry!” I cry, clutching the wood to my soaked T-shirt. “I was trying to make you a fortune cookie box. All of the Pinterest posts made it look so easy but then I couldn’t figure out how to work the tools and Stan didn’t know either—”

“Wait, you were using my tools?” Teller interjects, looking worried. I wonder if it’s because of my tears or the fact that we were using his tools.

Stan and I both nod, looking guilty, and now it looks like Teller is leaning more toward yelling at us.

“What were you trying to do? How did the fire get started?”

“We were using the saw and—”

“Oh my god,” he interrupts, dragging his hands down his face. “You’re lucky you didn’t lose a finger or worse!”

“I mean, we did start a fire, so we didn’t get off that easy,” Stan grumbles, and Teller and I both turn to glare at him.

“Well, the wood kind of jerked and then the next thing I knew, the saw was starting to spark and we tried to unplug it

but by then the curtain had caught fire and the sprinklers turned on and then you and the firefighters showed up.”

Teller just stares at the Mystery Cabin with a blank look on his face for a minute.

“Why were you making me a fortune cookie?” he finally asks.

“Because you love them. I was going to make you the cookie and then fill it with a bunch of apology notes and then one that said that I loved you and that we were meant to be so you should give me another chance. It was going to be really cute,” I tell him, wiping tears from my cheeks.

Teller’s lips twitch and I can see the amusement in his eyes.

“Can I see it?” he asks and I gingerly hand him the half-finished cookie.

“It’s... cute,” he lies and I can’t help it. I start to laugh.

“It looks like a pirate’s worst nightmare,” I say through my laughter and that earns me a bark of laughter from Stan.

“It’s not that bad,” Teller says, but I know that he’s lying to spare my feelings.

“Yes, it is. I’m sorry, I should have figured out something else. I should have just tried to talk to you again.”

Teller stares at the pieces of wood in his hands and I know that this is my chance to tell him how I feel.

“I’m sorry for ending things when I got scared. It was a really dumb thing to do. I wanted to do something to show you how sorry I am and I thought making you something would be a good idea. It was going to be a real bonding moment for us, but then all of this happened instead.”

Teller nods, turning the demented fortune cookie over in his hands.

“You really love me?” he asks finally and Stan throws up his hands.

“Oh my god, of course she does! Do you think we would have gone through all of this, almost burned down my house and place of business if she didn’t?” Stan asks exasperatedly.

“Uncle Stan,” I say, trying to get him to quiet down so I can hear what Teller has to say.

Stan grumbles, and I know without looking at him that he just rolled his eyes. Teller just smiles and it looks a lot like the easy going one that he used to give me.

“Yeah, I really, *really* love you,” I tell him, trying to get us back on track.

Stan makes another disgusted noise and walks off, giving the two of us some privacy, and Bandit follows hot on his heels. Teller and I both ignore him. I take a tentative step closer to him, my heart thundering in my ears.

“I’m sorry that I left, Teller. I’m sorry that I ran away when things got scary. I regretted it as soon as I left the hospital room, but I let the fear rule me. I’m done doing that,” I promise him.

He studies me and I bite my bottom lip.

“Will you give me a second chance?” I ask when he still doesn’t say anything.

He nods, that familiar easy smile tipping his lips up.

“Yeah. Anything for you, Sutton.”

I laugh, relief filling me, and I step into his arms.

He grins, pulling me into his body closer as our lips crash together.

TWENTY-FIVE



Teller

FIVE YEARS LATER...

I STRAIGHTEN MY TOOL BELT, smiling as my wife heads my way. Sutton and I got married four years ago in a small ceremony on the beach across from the Mystery Cabin. Sutton said that she wanted the cabin to be in the background of some of the shots and I would do anything to make my wife happy.

I ended up finishing the fortune cookie box that Stan and Sutton tried to make. Both of them aren't allowed anywhere near my tools, or any type of machinery since they almost burned down the cabin.

The box is now sitting in our living room. Sutton and Stan started this tradition after it was made of adding slips of paper to it each new year. Each slip was something that they wanted to do that year. It was a fun way to keep the bucket list that Sutton's mom made going. I know that it helps Sutton keep her mom's memory alive and it helps her feel closer to her.

The fortune cookie was also how I proposed to Sutton. I'll never forget the look on her face when she pulled out the slip of paper and read what I had wrote. Stan had been in on it and had just grinned as Sutton looked up at me with wide eyes. I

had been down on one knee by then, holding the ring out to her and she had cried as she shook her head yes.

Stan and her have only grown closer over the last five years. He's getting ready to retire soon, so she's been taking over more and more of the business side of things in the last few months. He's going to stay on for another year since we're expecting our first baby together and he wants her to be able to focus on our son instead of worrying about the Cabin.

We've already started making some changes since she became the acting manager. The walls got repainted and the golf course got updated. We even added a playground next to the Pines Motel and Cabins property line so that tourists and guests had somewhere to let their kids play.

We have been working on changing her old room in the attic into a nursery and playroom so that we can bring our son to work with us once he's a little older. I can already see my kid hanging up here, growing up here and maybe even taking over from us one day.

Stan has already told us that he left the Mystery Cabin and the Pines Motel and Cabins to us. He'll still be living at the cabin because this place will always be his home, and we're both more than okay with that.

Sutton moved in with me after six months of us dating. We wanted to spend as much as possible together and we were already spending every night together, so it just made sense.

I've been half in love with Sutton since her mom first showed me a picture of her. Getting to know her, seeing how brave and strong she is, how kind and smart she is, and her sense of humor had me falling the rest of the way in love with her.

She's the best thing that has ever happened to me. Through her, I've got a family and a bright future.

"Hey," I say, bending to drop a kiss on her lips as she comes to a stop next to me.

Bandit is at her heels, his tail wagging. He knows that it's time for his walk. We go at the same time every day. The rest of the time, Bandit likes to hang out with Stan. They've grown closer over the last five years and eventually, Sutton started leaving Bandit at the Mystery Cabin every night so that Stan would have some company. She likes to joke that they co-parent the dog.

"Ready to go?" Sutton asks as she passes me Bandit's leash and I take her hand, starting to head to the path around the property.

Sutton walks slower now that she's almost eight months pregnant but I don't mind. This is our quiet time before we head home and it's just nice to get to be alone with her.

"Did you fix that railing on the zip line platform?" she asks as we make it back to the Mystery Cabin and I nod.

"Yeah, and I cleaned out the golf course river too."

"Good," she says with a yawn and I tug her closer to me.

"Are you ready to vote tomorrow?" I ask her as we head inside to return Bandit to Stan.

"Oh yeah," she says with a big grin and I laugh.

We're voting for our mayor tomorrow and there's a really good chance that Chet's father, Philip, isn't going to be re-elected. Sutton and Stan have been very excited at the prospect of Chet and his family being kicked out of office and out of the big mayor's house that they seem to love so much.

"Are you two headed home now?" Stan asks as we join him in the living room.

Bandit makes himself at home, jumping up on the recliner next to him. Sutton bought Stan a new recliner two years ago and this one is extra wide so that Bandit and Stan can cuddle together without squashing each other.

"Yeah. Did you need anything else before we left?" I ask.

“No, I’m good. You two have a good night. Tell Lyla and the ladies that I said hi,” he says, and Sutton blinks.

“Oh man, I forgot that tonight was girl’s night!”

Stan just grins at her. He might be older but he sure hasn’t lost a step.

“I’ll drop you off somewhere. Or we can grab junk food and you can have everyone over at our house,” I reassure her and she nods, pulling out her cell phone to text her friends.

Madelyn, Iris, Lyla, and Sutton are all still best friends. They might have all gotten married and started families in the last five years, but they’re still super close. They have girl’s night every week, or try to. Last week was canceled because Lyla was having terrible morning sickness and I’m guessing that’s why Sutton forgot about it this week.

“We’re doing it at our place,” she tells me, and I nod.

“See you tomorrow, Uncle Stan,” she says, awkwardly bending over with her big belly so that she can kiss him on the cheek.

I have to grab her hips to help her up and I hold in my laugh.

“Ugh, I’m so pregnant. I’m like a beached whale,” she says dramatically, and Stan and I both laugh at that.

I wave goodbye as I head for the door. Stan knows that I’ll lock up on my way out.

We head over to Sutton’s Beetle and I climb in, cramming myself into the driver’s seat. We usually drive my truck but there are certain days where Sutton wants to feel closer to her mom and on those days, I have no problem trying to squeeze into the old car.

We go back to California once a year, on her mom’s birthday so that Sutton can go to the cemetery and leave her mom flowers. Stan usually goes with us. He likes to pay his respects and complain about how busy California is. It’s usually a pretty fun weekend.

We head down the street and I pull up outside of the Destiny Falls Market.

“What should I get?” I ask her, knowing that it will be faster for me to just run in.

“Um, chips, ice cream, one of those cheesy breads, pickles, pop, and some Chex Mix,” she finishes with a smile and I laugh. “Is that too much?” she asks and I shake my head no.

“Anything for you, Sutton.”

That still gets her every time and I watch as she melts for me.

“I love you, Teller.”

“I know. I love you, too.”

I lean over the center console and give her a quick kiss, rubbing her swollen belly before I reach for the door handle and head inside the store.

I have a feeling that the girls are all going to pass out after an hour since they’re all close to seven or eight months pregnant. I’ll be texting their husbands and then carrying my wife to bed.

I couldn’t think of a better way to spend my Friday night, I think with a smile as I grab a cart and start to grab everything that my Sutton asked for.

RUINED

DESTINY FALLS

*

This story starts with a car crash.

Lyla Winters's life is at a crossroads. She's bounced around from one job to another since she was sixteen, wanting to experience everything, but now that she's twenty-five, her lack of a plan is a little less cute. Too bad for her, she has no idea what she wants to do with the rest of her life.

She's got a plan though. She'll take a year off to travel and find herself. That plan goes off the road though when she gets to Destiny Falls, Michigan, and runs into some fancy SUV.

Out climbs Hudson Hayes. Restaurateur, James Beard Winner, and the man with a plan.

Also, maybe the man of her dreams.

She has to pay for the damage to both of their cars and just like that, there goes her savings for the year. Now she's stuck in Destiny Falls, working at the Mystery Cabin and living in the apartment above Hudson's restaurant.

The plan for the year off is still in play though. She just needs to save up her money and keep her eye on the prize. It's just that the prize looks more and more like Hudson every day.

When Lyla finally has enough saved to leave Destiny Falls, will she be able to say goodbye to the friends and life that she's made here in this small town? Or will she have finally found the one place that she truly belongs?

This is a 50,000 word small town romance novel that ends in a happily ever after

ONE



This story starts with a car crash.

I'll get to that part in a minute though. Right now, I'm running late for work.

I race down the stairs of my apartment, bursting out the front door and onto the sidewalk of Main Street. My black Jeep is parked in its usual spot right outside of the door and I head that way, digging in my purse for my car keys. I don't miss a beat as I grab the scrap of paper tucked under the windshield wiper on the driver's side that is always there every morning and hop behind the wheel.

I only live about ten minutes away from the Mystery Cabin, where I work, and there is never any traffic in Destiny Falls, Michigan, so the commute doesn't take long. I head down Main Street, past all of the little tourist shops, and head just outside of downtown.

I spot the familiar A-frame house that my boss made into his tourist trap of a business. It's old, with a few shingles missing in some spots on the roof, but seeing the place always makes me smile.

I park next to Sutton's old Volkswagen Beetle and hop out, sprinting for the gift shop door.

"Well, it's about time you showed up," Stan, my boss, says without looking up from the clipboard in his hands as I walk inside.

“I’m right on time,” I tell him, nodding to the clock on the wall and he hums his disapproval.

Stan reminds me a lot of that movie *Grumpy Old Men*. He’s crotchety, always grumbling unless he’s in front of a group of tourists whose money he’s about to take. He puts on a gruff exterior but I know that inside, he’s a big old soft marshmallow. He took a chance on hiring me when I first got to town and has always treated me fairly, and for that, I’m grateful.

“Hey,” Sutton says with a smile as she walks into the gift shop with a cup of steaming coffee in her hand.

The Mystery Cabin is still set up as a house. The living room at the back of the house has been set up as the gift shop. It has its own door that leads out to the back of the house, where Stan has set up a miniature golf course and zipline.

From the gift shop, you head down a hallway that leads to the rest of the house. Off to the right is the entrance of the Mystery Cabin and if you head straight, it leads to the kitchen, living room, and bedrooms.

Sutton is Stan’s great-niece, and she just moved to Destiny Falls a few months ago after the death of her mother. She was supposed to just spend the summer here, connecting with the last bit of family that she had left on Earth and finishing off the bucket list that her mom left behind for her. After the summer, she had a great job lined up for her in Boston, but instead of going, she fell in love with Teller, the Mystery Cabin’s handyman, and decided to stay in town and work for her great-uncle.

“Hey, how’s it going?” I ask her as I bend down and give Bandit, Sutton’s dog, a pat on the head.

The black and white mutt nudges my hand and I know what he’s after. I chuckle as I oblige him and scratch him behind his ears.

“Come on, Bandit,” Stan says gruffly. “Let’s let these two get to work. I can’t keep paying them for nothing.”

Bandit happily follows Stan out of the gift shop and down the hall. Sutton just rolls her eyes. We're all used to her great-uncle pretending that he doesn't care about things. It's been his coping mechanism for a long time and it caused some problems between him and Sutton when she first got here.

Stan had given her a hard time when she first found Bandit, but now the two of them are practically inseparable—not that Stan would ever admit that.

"It's going to be a slow day, so I was hoping we could start inventory on the supply closet?" Sutton asks and I nod.

The kids just started back at school, so Stan has warned us that the next few months will be a little slow, especially during the week. It's boring just sitting around staring at the walls of the Mystery Cabin and at all of the merchandise, so I'm actually looking forward to organizing and doing inventory.

"Sounds good. Did Teller fix that cabin next door yet?" I ask her, and she shakes her head.

Stan also owns the Pines Motel and Cabins next door and Teller is in charge of keeping them running smoothly too.

"No, he's doing that today. I was thinking about heading over there and helping him."

"Go for it!" I encourage her, knowing that she's probably excited to spend a few hours alone with her boyfriend.

"Thanks. I'll have the walkie-talkie, so just let me know if you need us for anything."

"Will do. Have fun," I call as she heads for the back door.

She waves and I see Teller smile as he grabs his toolbox and waits for her to join him. Teller waves at me, his usual baseball hat on backward, his dark hair curling over the edges.

I can't help but feel a pang of jealousy as I watch the two of them head next door to the cabin rentals. They got together shortly after Sutton came to town and, after a minor hiccup or two, are now together and stronger than ever.

It's obvious to see how much that they love each other and I wish that I could find that too. I've never loved anyone romantically. I've never even come close.

I've dated, more so when I was younger, in high school, and had more time, but I never seemed to be able to make it past the first date. Something always went wrong, or I found some way to ruin it.

There was that date with Robby Schulmer where we went to the county fair and I threw up on him after one too many funnel cakes and twister rides. Or the time where I accidentally ran over Trever Beltima's foot when we went go-karting. Every single date has ended with someone sick or injured. After a while, I just stopped trying. It seemed safer for everyone that way.

Like it was a sign that maybe I'm just not meant to be in a relationship or find love.

An image of Hudson pops into my head and I know that I can't go down that road, so I turn and try to focus on the inventory that needs to be done.

It doesn't work.

I only make it a few minutes before I'm back to thinking of my dark-haired landlord. I've been thinking about Hudson since I first got to town. In fact, he's the reason why I'm currently living and working in Destiny Falls. Remember that car crash that I mentioned?

It all happened two and a half months ago.

I had just driven over the bridge and into the small town of Destiny Falls and was trying to grab my sunglasses from out of my purse when some fancy black SUV had pulled out in front of me. I had tried to stop, but it was too late and I ended up rear-ending them.

The *them* being Hudson Hayes.

I had thought that maybe I needed more sleep, that I must have been seeing things, but when I blinked again, it was still

him. I had closed my eyes again, praying for sweet death to take me so that I didn't have to get out of this car and face him.

Hudson Hayes is a big deal in New York City, where I'm from. He's actually a big deal to anyone who likes good food or handsome men. He's a Michelin star chef, a James Beard winner, and the owner of restaurants in all of the major cities all over the world.

He got out of his car, his hand grabbing the back of his neck as he went to look at the damage and I couldn't help but notice that his hair had looked longer than the last time I saw his picture in the newspaper back home. It'd been a while, probably over a year, but I hadn't really noticed. The two of us didn't exactly run in the same circles, and if I was ever able to get off the waitlist for a night out at one of his restaurants, then it would mean that I couldn't afford rent that month.

He used to be a staple in the *New York Times* and the society pages, standing in his chef's uniform, arms crossed, easy smile on his sculpted face. Sometimes I wonder if it's that face that has so many people clamoring to get a reservation at one of his places.

I had gotten it together, jumping out of my Jeep to assess the cars and looking at how bad the damage was.

Luckily, there had only been a scratch on the front of my Jeep. His Range Rover didn't get away so easily. One of his taillights was busted and the back door was dented along with his bumper. I couldn't help but wonder how much of a dent this was going to put in my travel fund.

"I'm so sorry. Are you alright? I was trying to grab my sunglasses and didn't see you in time," I apologize.

"It's... fine," he finished as he finally turned to look at me.

"I can grab my insurance card," I offer, wincing as I think about what this is going to do to my rates.

I had an accident when I was sixteen and had just gotten my license and another right after my father's funeral several

weeks ago. I could barely afford insurance before this; it's going to be impossible now.

"I'll tell you what. Let's just take it around the corner to Gavin's Mechanic Shop. He can take a look at it and maybe we won't have to go through all of that paperwork," he offered, and I almost gave myself whiplash turning back around.

"Really? Are you sure?" I asked, and he gave me an easy smile.

"Yeah, I'm sure. Gavin's shop is just around the corner."

"I'll follow you," I promised.

He nodded, heading back to his car, and I climbed into mine. Gavin's Mechanic Shop really was just right around the corner but given the fact that this town seems to be one main street and not much else, that's not a surprise.

Hudson pulled in front of one of the loading bay doors and I parked in a spot in front. I grabbed my purse, hopping out, and sighed as I stretched my legs. I'd been driving for the last few days and I didn't realize how tight my muscles had gotten.

I did my best to stretch as I headed over to meet Hudson at the door. He opened it for me and I smiled, walking in front of him inside.

It had taken some time for Gavin to look over Hudson's car and when he came back, wiping his hands off on a greasy towel, I knew that I was screwed. I had only saved up a few grand for this soul-searching trip and I had a feeling that my savings were about to get wiped out.

I was right.

I had still offered to go through the insurance since I couldn't cover the cost, but Hudson said that he trusted me and that I could make payments.

That's how I ended up working at the Mystery Cabin and living in the apartment right above Hudson's restaurant

downtown. It was the cheapest place to live since he gives me a break on the rent and I just have to cover the utilities.

He got his car fixed. I know, because he leaves it parked right next to mine every night even though he lives in a nice house on the water a block and a half away.

That reminds me, and I reach into my pocket, opening up the note that was left on my windshield. Hudson has been doing it for months and it's always the same. A would you rather question and an invite to dinner.

So far, I haven't taken him up on his dinner offer and I never reply to his would you rather questions either, no matter how entertaining I may find them. I swore off guys until I have a plan for the rest of my life. I thought that it was a good idea... before I met Hudson.

Hudson makes me wish that I already had my life together, that I already had a plan.

He's basically my dream guy and I hate having to ignore him every time he leaves me a note or when we run into each other in town.

I take a deep breath as I read the note that he left for me today.

LYLA, would you rather be forced to sing along or dance to every single song you hear?

Have dinner with me and we can discuss...

x. H

"ARE YOU HUNGRY, LYLA?" Stan asks as he comes back with Bandit on his leash.

"Yeah, I skipped breakfast."

"Hmph, you should wake up earlier. You need to eat," he says with a frown, and I try to hide my smile.

“You’re right. Want me to go grab us something to eat?” I ask and he sighs.

“I guess. Can’t have you collapsing on me at work,” he says, pretending to be annoyed as he grabs his wallet and hands me a ten-dollar bill.

“The Upside Diner?” I ask, naming the retro-style diner just down the road and he nods.

“Get my usual. You should probably take Bandit. He’s been cooped up in here for too long.”

“What a great idea!”

“Smartass,” he mumbles, but I can see him smiling as I take the leash and grab my phone.

“I’ll be right back!”

I head across the gravel parking lot and down the sidewalk toward downtown Destiny Falls. It’s a beautiful day, not too hot yet and I enjoy the slight breeze blowing in off of Lake Michigan. Bandit has to stop and sniff every blade of grass, so the ten-minute walk ends up taking twenty, but I don’t mind.

I wonder what the weather will be like when I leave. I’m close to having enough to pay Hudson back and then I’ll be hitting the road again. I don’t mind the cold and I wonder what a Michigan winter is like. Part of me wants to find out, but I’m on a mission.

My dad passed away a few months ago and that’s when this itch to travel first started. It had been just the two of us for so long that I just couldn’t bear to live in our cramped New York City apartment without him. I could barely afford it either and I didn’t want to get a roommate and have them touching mine and my father’s things.

The plan was for me to travel across the country, working when I needed to, but mainly just exploring and learning more about myself and what I wanted out of my life.

The truth is, I’m twenty-five and I have no idea what I want to do with my life. I never have, though I’ve tried to

work in a vast number of fields. None have been a perfect fit.

I was hoping that this trip would help me find my place in the world now that the last real family member that I had was gone. Help me figure out what I'm meant to do, what makes me happy. It's not like I had anything left for me in New York City.

"Lyla!" my friend Madelyn calls and I smile as she joins me at the door for The Upside Diner.

"Hey, grabbing breakfast?" I ask her.

"Yeah, Flynn and I are supposed to meet here, but it looks like he's running late," she says and I smile wider as I see Flynn pulling in behind her.

Flynn is Madelyn's friend from college and roommate. Everyone is pretty sure that they're in love but they have yet to admit that.

"Speak of the devil," she teases and Flynn laughs as he joins us.

"Are you joining us for breakfast, Lyla?" Flynn asks and I shake my head.

"No, I'm just here to grab something to eat for Stan and me."

We head inside and I put my order in with Suzie at the counter before I head over and join them at their booth to wait.

"Are you ready for girl's night tonight?" Madelyn asks as I slide in next to her and I grin.

"I forgot that was tonight."

"What are you ladies going to be doing?" Flynn asks.

"Probably just head up to The Fainting Goat," I tell him with a shrug, looking over to Madelyn.

"Yeah, or we could head over to Lilac Harbor. I heard that there's some new bar opening up over there," Madelyn suggests, naming the next town over.

“Lyla!” Suzie calls with my food all bagged up. I stand up, telling Madelyn that I’ll see her tonight before I wave goodbye to both of them and start the walk back to the Mystery Cabin.

Bandit sniffs the food as we walk and I laugh as he tries to bury his nose in the bag. I know that I’ve only been in Destiny Falls for a few months, but I’m at peace here. The first real peace since my father passed away.

I’ve got a job and great friends here but is it enough? Shouldn’t I want more than a dead-end job working in the gift shop of some tourist trap?

I frown as I head back across the gravel parking lot and to the gift shop door, and I realize something as Bandit and I head inside.

It’s going to be hard to say goodbye when it’s time to leave this town.

TWO



I wince as some of the hoots and hollers of the drunk guys around the mechanical bull in the corner of the bar hit eardrum busting decibels. They've been doing that off and on for the last twenty minutes and it's causing the headache that I had when I first got here to kick up a notch and now all I can concentrate on is the pounding I can feel in my head.

We're at the bar in town. It's a western theme place with a mechanical bull in the corner and a stage on the other side of the bar. They're not doing live music tonight, but the place is still pretty crowded.

I rub at my temples, wondering if maybe the alcohol isn't helping with the headache as I try to tune back in to my friends as we sit around a table in the center of the bar.

"I'm just saying, he's totally into you," Madelyn tells Iris as we all try to pretend that we're not watching Arlo, the bartender here at The Fainting Goat, checking out Iris every chance that he gets.

Iris sighs. I think that she's used to us encouraging her to go for him but she seems happy to run her antiques store downtown and hang out with all of us instead of dating and all of that.

"I'll tell you what. I'll ask Arlo out, when you ask Flynn out," Iris says with a smirk, and Madelyn pouts at her.

"For the millionth time, Flynn and I are just friends," Madelyn argues, but no one with eyes believes that.

“Yeah, um, we’ve seen you two together so…” Sutton says, trailing off as she grabs her martini and takes a drink.

“Alright, alright,” Iris says, waving her hand to stop Madelyn before she can start to argue. “How’s this then? I’ll go out with Arlo when Lyla finally takes Hudson up on one of his dinner date offers.”

All eyes turn to me expectantly and I regret sharing that he leaves me notes every day asking me out. I’m saved from having to answer by Flynn heading over to our table.

“Ladies,” he says with a smile as he grabs a chair from a nearby table and joins us.

“You know that this is girl’s night, right?” Madelyn asks as he takes her drink, finishing off the last of her appletini.

“You aren’t happy to see me?” he asks and I lean back in my chair, getting comfortable for this argument.

“What are you doing here?” Iris asks.

“I’m meeting some friends. I thought that you guys were headed over to Lilac Harbor tonight?”

“We were going to, but Iris is headed to some flea market tomorrow morning and has to be up early,” I tell him and he nods.

“Can I get you guys another round?” Arlo asks as he stops by our table.

The glasses that he’s holding clink together as he shifts them, his eyes straying constantly to Iris who is blushing and can’t seem to meet his eyes.

“Sure, that would be great,” I say as I smile up at him.

He smiles back, taking one last look at Iris before he heads back to the bar. Gavin and a guy that I don’t recognize come in and Flynn waves at them, standing up to greet them.

“I’ll let you ladies get back to your night,” he says as he heads over to a table nearby and takes a seat with his own friends.

Madelyn watches him go and I bite back a smile. She has it bad for him and if the way that Flynn keeps stealing glances over here at her is any indication, then he's head over heels in love himself.

"Thanks," I say as Arlo drops off the next round of drinks and he nods before he heads back to the bar, grabbing some empty beer bottles as he goes.

"He's cute," I say, nodding at Arlo.

Iris sighs and I grin. It's true though. Arlo is lean but fit, with sandy brown hair and bright green eyes. He looks like Captain America and he has the same wholesome vibe. I think that he'd be perfect for Iris but I know that I won't be able to convince her of that.

I take a sip of my martini, relaxing as the girls chat about some town gossip with the mayor's son and about the new bar that opened up in Lilac Harbor.

"Want to try to check it out next week?" Sutton asks as I finish off my martini and we all agree.

Iris is getting ready to leave and even though it's only nine-thirty, I'm ready to call it a night too. Normally, I love hanging out with my friends but I'm just not in the mood tonight. I've been distracted all day. At first, I thought that I was just bored since work has been so slow but I know that it's more than that.

I'm just feeling... adrift.

And I've been feeling this way for a while. Probably ever since my dad died but I can barely remember those months that he was ill, so maybe it was even before that.

I'm sick of it.

I'm sick of bouncing from one job to the next and feeling like I have no direction or idea about what I want to do with the rest of my life.

I'm lost in thoughts as I look around at my friends and the rest of the bar.

Everyone that I know seems to have it figured out.

Sutton turned down her dream job in her dream city to help Stan run the Mystery Cabin and to be with Teller. Madelyn runs the Falls Market in town and has her friends and Flynn. Even Iris has her career figured out. She's always loved antiques and the classics and now she's running her own store in her hometown, doing what she loves, where she loves. Plus, she has a guy that's obviously into her.

Me? I'm in a town that was just meant to be a blip on my road trip. I'm working in the gift shop of some tourist trap that most people have never heard of. I have no idea what I want to do with the rest of my life career-wise, where I want to do it, and the only remaining family that I have left is my mom, stepfather, and stepsister, all of whom I don't get along with.

I stopped being close with my mom when I was nine and she ditched my dad and me for someone better. I haven't seen her since I was twelve. That was when she married my stepdad and got busy with her new family. She called me a few months ago to inform me that one of my stepsisters, Heidi, was engaged, but that was the last time that we spoke.

The call hadn't ended on a good note. Dad was sick, in hospice by then, and we knew that he didn't have much time left. My mom didn't care about that though and didn't even ask about him. She was too wrapped up in planning her daughter's wedding and demanding that I be there. I had promptly told her to fuck off and hung up on her.

I was distraught over losing my only real parent and even if my dad had been healthy, I still couldn't have cared less about my evil stepsister and her upcoming wedding.

My dad died two days later and I had quickly forgotten about the wedding and phone call. My mom didn't show up to the funeral. She didn't even call to ask me how I was doing and if I needed anything. I don't know why I was surprised by that.

Like every other time I think about my mom, my mood turns sour and I know that it's time for me to head home before I start to bring everyone else down.

"I think that I'm going to take off," I say and everyone else nods.

"Yeah, I'm getting pretty tired too," Madelyn says, covering up a yawn.

"Are you headed to Teller's?" I ask Sutton.

He had dropped her off tonight and doesn't live that far from me, so I could drive her home instead of having him come out to get her.

"No, he's got his volunteer shift at the fire station, so I'm going to call a car and head back to the Mystery Cabin and hang out with Uncle Stan and Bandit."

"I'll give you a ride," I say even though it's in the opposite direction from my place, and she smiles, grabbing her purse as we all stand.

"See you guys later!" I call as we watch Madelyn and Iris head across the parking lot to their cars.

They wave and I unlock my Jeep, climbing behind the wheel.

"Do you want to just crash at the Mystery Cabin too? We can share my bed," Sutton offers as I yawn but I shake my head.

"No, I'd have to stop and grab clothes from my place for work tomorrow, so I'll just head home. Thanks for offering though."

"Plus, you'd miss out on your note if your car wasn't parked outside of Prim + Proper," she points out with a smirk and I roll my eyes as we start to head down Main Street.

I know that she's right though. I live for these notes.

We pass by the Destiny Falls fire station and I see her look over, checking to make sure that Teller's truck is there. I know

that she still gets anxious for him to be a firefighter after his accident a few months ago when he hurt his arm fighting a house fire and I don't blame her. It has to be nerve-racking waiting to see if he's going to come home in one piece or not.

"Thanks for the ride," Sutton says as I pull up in front of the Mystery Cabin.

"No problem. I'll see you tomorrow," I tell her as she hops out.

She waves as she heads up to the front door and I wait until she's inside before I pull back out onto Main Street.

It's late and the streets are deserted as I drive back downtown and pull into my usual parking spot outside of Prim + Proper. Hudson's Range Rover is parked next to my Jeep in its usual spot and I can't help but look into the front windows of the fancy restaurant to see if I can spot him as I hop out of my Jeep.

It's just after ten-thirty, so the restaurant must have just closed and there are only a few lights on in the kitchen. I slow as I head past the window and look into the empty dining room, only to lock eyes with Hudson.

He's standing over by the maître d stand, some papers clenched in his hands and he grins at me, a dimple popping out in his right cheek. His eyes do that sexy smolder thing and I can feel my inner thighs start to quiver.

I give him a little wave with my fingers and grin before I turn the corner of the building and head upstairs to my apartment. As I go, I can't help but wonder what the note on my windshield will say tomorrow morning.

I head into my bedroom, digging in my jean pocket and pulling out the note that he left me this morning. I don't know why, but I've never been able to force myself to throw them away. Instead, I've been keeping them in a box under my bed with the money that I've been saving up to pay him back.

I grab the shoebox now, opening the lid and dropping the latest piece of paper inside. The box is getting pretty full and I

bite my lip, wondering what I'll do with the notes when I leave town.

THREE



Hudson is just slipping the note under the windshield wiper of my Jeep the next day as I come downstairs to head to work.

“Listen, I’ve almost got your money, man,” I joke, and he freezes, looking up at me sharply.

If I didn’t know any better, I would swear that he almost looks sad to hear that, but that can’t be right.

“I’m not in any hurry. You don’t need to stress about it,” he says and I nod.

“Thanks, but Stan pays me well, actually. Besides, my landlord is really lenient on rent,” I tease him.

Hudson looks away from me and I study him. He’s wearing his usual attire. White button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled halfway up his forearms, a pair of dark blue jeans, and navy blue tennis shoes. Today there’s something different though. He looks tired. There are dark circles under his blue eyes, his mouth pulled down at the corners. Even his hair seems flatter, like he didn’t have time to style it.

I still look like a slacker compared to him in my old, ripped jeans, beat-up Converse, and Mystery Cabin employee shirt that is a size too big. I threw my hair up into a bun, but I can already tell that it’s starting to fall apart. Loose pale purple strands keep blowing in my face and brushing against the back of my neck.

“Late start today?” I ask him as I dig my keys out of my purse.

“Yeah, my alarm clock broke.”

“You still have an alarm clock? Like an actual alarm clock? You know your phone does that, right? It has one built in and everything.”

“Ha ha. I like my alarm clock more. I’m headed to grab another one this morning. Do you need anything from the store?”

“No, I’m going to go grocery shopping tonight after I get off work.”

“Are you out of food?” he asks and I can hear the concern in his voice.

“Nah, I’ve got some ramen and cereal. I’ll be fine.”

“Or, you could come out to dinner with me,” he suggests and I shake my head at him.

“I would... but I’m busy. I need to go grocery shopping tonight,” I say with an evil grin and Hudson laughs.

“Yeah, alright. In all honesty though, are you alright? You seemed a little, I don’t know, sad, last night.”

There is no way in hell that I’m telling Hudson about my lack of direction in life. I’m pretty sure the guy was saving up for his first restaurant and learning how to cook before he could walk. He wouldn’t get it. How could he understand that I’ve failed at pretty much every career that I’ve ever had when I doubt that he’s failed at anything ever?

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just tired after work and girl’s night last night.”

“Did you guys go to The Fainting Goat?”

“Yeah, we were going to try that new bar in Lilac Harbor, but it will have to wait until next week.”

“Did Arlo ask Iris out yet?” he asks and I can’t help but laugh.

Even Hudson knows about Arlo and Iris and he practically lives at Prim + Proper.

“Nope, but he did stare longingly across the bar at her for most of the night,” I say with a dramatic, dreamy sigh.

“Well, I guess that’s baby steps then,” Hudson says with a grin.

“Yeah, at this rate they could have their first date in a few decades!”

Hudson laughs and I unlock my Jeep. I need to get to work before I’m late and have to deal with Stan.

“Can I have my note?” I ask as he opens my door for me and our eyes meet and lock.

“I wasn’t sure that you liked them,” he admits in a low voice and I give him a little smile, plucking the piece of paper out of his hand.

“They’re entertaining,” I hedge as I climb behind the wheel.

“We could have an entertaining conversation instead of this. Perhaps over dinner?”

I grin at him, biting my lip. It’s getting harder and harder to turn him away, to remind myself why it isn’t a good idea to go out with Hudson no matter how attracted I am to him.

“I’ve got to go. Don’t want to be late for work.”

He looks disappointed, but he nods, stepping back as he closes my door. I roll my window down and he leans his elbows on it, meeting my eyes.

“Drive safe,” he teases with a grin and I laugh, flipping him off as I back out of my spot and head toward the Mystery Cabin.

I park next to Sutton’s car and head into the gift shop. Sutton and Stan are arguing over by the snow globe display, and I wince as Sutton’s hands get a little too close to the glass

shelves. She barely misses it and I shake my head as I make my way back behind the cash register.

Bandit is curled up in his bed by the stools, and I shove my purse into the cupboard beneath the counter before I pet him. He tries to kiss my face and I laugh as I push him away and scratch his ears.

“It could bring in more business! Even in the off season,” Sutton argues and Stan snorts.

“I’ve been running this place for longer than you’ve been alive.”

“Yeah, and things have changed a lot in all of those years! I went to school for business. All I want to do is see this place succeed. Why won’t you just trust me? All I want to do is help.”

Stan sighs and I stay crouched down behind the register with Bandit, listening as they argue.

“Fine. Let’s try it your way,” Stan says after a minute, and I smile, happy that he’s learning to trust Sutton and other people more.

I hear Stan leave, probably headed back to his office, and I kiss Bandit on the head before I stand and smile at Sutton.

“Congratulations on getting Stan to agree that maybe, *just maybe*, you might be right,” I say with a laugh and she rolls her eyes as she smiles and heads over to join me.

“I know. I guess maybe miracles do happen.”

I laugh, leaning on the counter by the register. She leans on it from the other side, looking around the gift shop.

“Did you finish the inventory yesterday?” she asks and I nod.

“Yeah, we only had that one tour group, so I got it all done. I gave Stan the forms.”

“Did he order the rest of those pastel shirts that we sold out of last week?”

“I’m not sure. He didn’t say if he did or not.”

“I’ll go check,” she says, petting Bandit before she heads down the hallway to talk to her uncle.

If today is anything like yesterday, then we won’t be that busy. I take a seat on the stool and open up a new browser on the computer. It’s an older model and I head into the kitchen, letting the computer boot as I grab myself a cup of coffee and head back to Google a career assessment test.

I remember taking one of these in high school. I had thought that they were a joke then and I still think that, but I’m getting desperate to find some kind of direction to go in with my life.

I click on the first link and take a sip of my coffee as the first few questions start to load. I can’t really remember the tests that I had to take in high school. I think one said that I should be a lawyer and the other one a teacher.

Neither option interested me. I don’t want to argue for a living and I’m not patient enough to deal with kids all day long.

Maybe I’ll get a different answer now. I know myself better than I did as a teenager, and I’m more focused on it than I was when I was fourteen years old.

The website finishes loading and I take another drink before I start answering the questions.

Would you rather work in an office or outside? Both isn’t an option and I bite my lip, trying to decide which I like more. This already feels like I’m off to a bad start.

I click ‘inside’ and start on the second.

Do you like to help people? *Sure, who doesn’t.*

Question three is do you like building furniture? *Does anyone enjoy building furniture? Like Ikea furniture?* I hit the circle for no on that one.

The list of questions goes on and on and by the time I've gotten to the end, I've skipped probably half and I don't feel that confident about another quarter of my answers. I'm starting to remember why I hated doing these in school.

I go back, doing my best to fill in the missing questions. I hit submit and groan when it asks me for my credit card information.

I close out of the browser, finishing off my coffee and looking out the window. There are still no guests pulling in so I head to grab another cup of coffee from the kitchen. Stan must have beat me to it, so I grab the coffee and a filter from the cabinet and get to work on making another pot.

I lean against the counter as the coffee starts to drip into the pot and that's when I remember the note that I took from Hudson this morning and I reach into my pocket and pull it out, opening it up to read it.

LYLA, would you rather find true love today or win the lottery next year?

Have dinner with me and we can discuss...

x. H

THE WOULD you rather question reminds me of the career assessment that I just took and I bite my lip, giving his question some real thought.

Unlike the career assessment questions, I don't have to think long to answer Hudson's.

Love, I'd rather have true love. I've seen my mom marry for money and she still seems miserable. I never understood why she married my stepfather or put up with his kids. No amount of money seemed worth that.

I know that money doesn't cure everything. Having true love, someone who supports you and wants to be with you no

matter what, that's priceless. That's what I want from my life.

I fill my coffee cup and head back to the gift shop. Sutton is at the register looking over some order forms and I join her.

"Do you need any help with anything?"

"Some of that would be nice," she says when she smells my coffee and I laugh as I head back to the kitchen to grab a cup for her.

"Thank you. I was just joking though. I could have grabbed my own cup," she says with a sigh as she blows on the coffee.

"It's no problem," I assure her.

"How have you been?" Sutton asks and I'm surprised by the question.

Sutton and I see each other pretty much every day. We talk all of the time. She knows how I'm doing. Right?

"Um, fine."

"Yeah? Are you sure? Because you seemed a little off last night."

I shrug, not wanting to get into everything right now.

"Is this about Hudson?"

"What?" I ask, almost spitting out my sip of coffee. "Hudson and I are not together."

"Yeah, I meant to ask you about that. Why aren't you jumping that guy's bones?"

I laugh, sitting back on the stool as Sutton takes a drink from her cup.

"We're just friends," I insist and she snorts.

"Yeah, but he wants to be more than friends with you, and I think that you want to be more than friends with him too. You just won't admit it for some reason."

“Maybe it’s a Destiny Falls thing? Madelyn and Iris won’t admit how they feel either,” I suggest, trying to deflect her question.

She gives me a look over the rim of her coffee cup and I sigh. I know that she’s right. Why am I fighting this thing between the two of us so hard?

“Well, there’s nothing to tell,” I inform Sutton and she pouts.

I think she’s looking to going out on double dates and having her friends fall in love too.

“Madelyn asked if we wanted to go up to Honey Peak tonight. I’ve never been there before and I wanted to take a look around. Teller gets off his volunteer shift at four this afternoon and he said that he’s in,” she says, changing the subject.

“What time are we leaving then?” I ask.

“Probably seven thirtyish? Then we can be there by eight for sure.”

“Yeah, I’m in,” I say with a smile and she grins back at me.

“Great! I’m going to go finish ordering the last of the merchandise. I’ll be back to walk Bandit in a little bit and then Stan said he’d cover us if we wanted to go to lunch together.”

“Sounds good,” I say as she gathers her papers and heads to the office.

I watch her go before I pull the note from Hudson out of my pocket, rereading his words and wondering if I’m making a mistake by keeping him at arm’s length.

FOUR



Sutton and I didn't end up getting our lunch together. We had a tour bus come through at eleven and had to take it separately but Sutton did run out and grab a pizza for the both of us to eat.

“Are you still coming tonight?” Sutton asks as I grab my purse from under the register and get ready to leave for the day and I nod.

“Yeah, I need to run to the store and grab some groceries. I've been living off of cereal and ramen for a while now and it's getting old. I'll do that and then I'll head up to Honey Peak to meet you guys. It's the Honey Bee Bar, right?”

“Yeah. Did you want to ride up there with Teller and me?” she offers, but I shake my head.

“No, I don't want you guys to have to wait for me in case the store takes a while. I'll be fine,” I say and she smiles.

“See you in a bit then.”

I wave and head out to my Jeep, starting it up and heading down Main Street. I roll my windows down so that I can hear the waves crashing on the shore and I smile. It's peaceful here in Destiny Falls.

There are a few people out walking down the sidewalk and the kids just got out of school. I stop as a bus in front of me turns on its lights and a few kids come clamoring off, excited to be done with school for the day.

I get to downtown and try to find a place to park. The Mackinac Bridge looms large in the background and I study it, wondering when I'll be driving back over it to continue on my journey of self-discovery.

I park a few doors down from the Destiny Falls Market and as I'm climbing out, I spot Iris. She's out front of her antique shop, Blast From The Past Antiques, and I wave as I head over her way.

"Hey, how's it going?" I ask and she smiles, setting down some big flowerpot vase-looking thing with a groan. The thing looks like it weighs more than her.

"Hey, not much. I just got back from the antique sale so I'm just trying to find some spots for the new purchases."

"Need a hand?" I offer.

"No, this was the last of it. I sold a few things online so I need to package them up and mail them before the post office closes tonight."

"Did you find some good stuff this morning?" I ask and she grins, pointing out a few things.

"And then I found this cool old kitchen sign that I think will sell fast," she says as she finishes going over her new treasures.

"Sounds like a good haul," I say and she nods.

"It was. I'm thinking I'll go to the next one too."

I nod, leaning against the front door.

"How have you been?" Iris asks me, her voice soft and I try to force a smile.

Iris is the one in the group that always seems to see everything. She's quiet, so maybe she's just paying attention more than the others. Either way, she can always seem to tell when something is wrong or when someone needs to talk.

"I'm good," I lie.

“No, you’re not,” she says, her voice kind but I can tell that she’s growing frustrated with me telling everyone that I’m fine. “What’s going on, Lyla?”

“I’m just feeling a little lost,” I admit. “I’ve been trying to figure out what I want to do with the rest of my life, but it’s harder than I thought it would be.”

“You’re not happy at the Mystery Cabin?” Iris asks, sounding surprised, and I shake my head.

“I actually love working there. The job is easy and I love Stan, Sutton, and Teller. It’s just... I’m twenty-five and work as a cashier at a tourist trap. Shouldn’t I want to do more with my life?”

“Like what? What do you want to do instead?”

“I don’t know. Maybe become a cat burglar or run the lighthouse?” I joke, nodding next door to the large white and blue lighthouse.

Iris laughs at that but I’m only half joking. The truth is that I have no idea, but shouldn’t I want to do more than work in a gift shop? Am I really helping society or anyone where I’m at?

“Then do that! You can do anything that you want. My parents wanted me to be a doctor or a lawyer or something. Something where the pay is good and the chance of me getting laid off was low and I understand why they want that. It’s an easier path than selling antiques. We lived paycheck to paycheck growing up and I know how stressful that is, but I would have been miserable in any of those fields.”

I can’t picture Iris as either. She’s too sweet to be a lawyer and I’ve seen how she handles blood. She would have made a crappy doctor.

“What do you like doing? What hobbies do you like?” she asks.

“I like being creative and daydreaming. I like setting up the shelves at the Mystery Cabin and I like that it’s not some boring store or restaurant.”

Iris nods, biting her lip as she thinks for a moment.

“Maybe you should do something creative then? Be a writer or go into advertising or graphic design? Or even interior design if you like setting up the gift shop?” she suggests.

“I don’t think I want to work in a corporate office. It would suck my soul dry,” I say with a wry smile.

“What about writing? Or can you draw?”

“Not well,” I say with a laugh.

“We’ll come up with something,” Iris promises.

I nod, but I can’t help wonder if there is something else out there for me. Iris still has her family, though they don’t see each other much since they moved to Arizona to retire and help with her grandparents. She has Madelyn and Flynn in town though, people who she loves and are basically family.

“What else is it?” she asks gently.

“I want what Teller and Sutton have. She was so lost when she got to town too.”

“And you think that it was Teller that helped find herself?” Iris asks, leaning against the wall next to me.

“No, not just Teller. I mean, Stan is her family and she loves this place. She has a job now and a man who loves her and she still has family, even though she thought that she was all alone. I just want that. I want some area of my life to feel settled.”

Iris nods but doesn’t say anything and I sigh.

I have friends here but no real family left. I can’t help but wonder if deep down, I want that more than a career path?

My chest hurts as I think about my dad and I blink back tears. All of this rolls into this lost feeling that I’ve had ever since his funeral. I’ve been telling myself that if I just had a career or some idea of what I wanted to do for the rest of my life, that everything would settle, but maybe that’s not

accurate. I didn't have a real career with my dad and I was happy.

The truth is that I want what Sutton and Teller have, what Madelyn and Flynn like to pretend that they don't have.

I want to belong somewhere. Maybe then this feeling will finally go away.

“Are you coming with us to Honey Peak tonight?”

“Yeah, I'm riding up with Madelyn and Flynn. Want to join us?”

“Maybe, I need to head to the market here for some groceries but I'll let you know when I'm done and see where you guys are.”

“Sounds good! See you soon,” she says as a couple starts to browse some of the items that she has out front.

I wave and leave her to help her customers as I head back down the sidewalk to the Falls Market, grabbing a basket as I make my way up and down the aisles. I grab the staples, bread, eggs, milk, moose tracks frozen yogurt, and then throw in some pretzels, a few frozen meals, and some macaroni and cheese.

Eggs, frozen pizza, and macaroni and cheese are pretty much the only meals that I can make without something getting ruined or getting horribly burned. My dad always did the cooking when I was growing up. He tried to teach me on more than one occasion, but each time ended with something going terribly wrong. He never minded, just laughed and helped me clean up before we ordered takeout.

A wave of grief hits me and I blink back tears, wishing that he could still be here with me. I hated my receptionist job back in New York but I would work there every day if it meant that I could go back and hang out with him at the end of the day in our tiny closet of an apartment.

I check out, carrying my groceries out to my Jeep and hopping in so I can drive the few blocks back to my apartment.

Hudson is by the maître d stand and he looks up as I park and head to grab my groceries from the back. He comes outside, meeting me at the trunk, and I step back and let him reach past me and take some of the grocery bags.

“Hey, I thought that you were getting real food,” he says with a frown as he looks down at all of the frozen meals.

“I did.”

“This is... not real food,” he says, still staring down at the frozen boxes in the bag like they’ve offended him somehow and I wonder if he’s ever eaten them before in his life.

“We’re not all five-star chefs like you,” I remind him primly as I try to grab the bags from his hand.

“Take me up on my dinner offer then. I can feed you better than this.”

My heart kicks in my chest and I’m so tired of pushing this guy away. I hate turning him down, seeing that flicker of disappointment on his face before he masks it. He’s been so nice about his car and he didn’t have to be. Maybe I should just give him a chance. With my track record, I’ll have ruined things and we’ll be over before we ever begin.

Is that why I’ve been turning him down? Because I don’t want it to be over? Because if I ruin things with him, then I’ll miss out on the notes and feeling his eyes on me every time I pass.

I shouldn’t be letting that dictate things. I make a split-second decision, shifting the groceries in my hands.

“Hey, I know that it’s super short notice, but the girls, Teller, Flynn, and I are going up to Honey Peak tonight. There’s some new bar up there that everyone wants to try. The Honey Bee Bar. Why don’t you join us?” I offer and his mouth drops open in surprise before he recovers, the dimple in his cheek popping out as he grins at me.

“I’m in. I’ll drive us.”

“I can drive,” I offer and he shakes his head.

“I don’t mind.”

“More like you don’t trust me,” I joke and he grins wider.

“Just want to make sure that we all get there in one piece without any other fender benders.”

I laugh as we head up the stairs to my apartment and he sets the bags down on the kitchen counter, looking around my place.

It’s a large one-bedroom apartment with windows lining one whole wall overlooking Main Street, the lighthouse, Mackinaw Bridge, and lake. I never added curtains, wanting to see that view every day.

I don’t have that much stuff since I was traveling, so there’s only a TV, couch, and coffee table in the living room. The kitchen is the same way with just the essentials and a few stray papers on the counter. My dirty dishes are in the sink from this morning and I left the empty cereal box on the counter.

“I like how you decorated it,” he compliments and I stare at him like he’s crazy.

My place is filled with hand-me-downs and furniture that I pulled in off of the curb before trash day. I didn’t have money to furnish it and this was supposed to be temporary, so there wasn’t much point in buying new stuff.

“I’m serious. It’s inviting and comfortable. It just seems like you. It suits you.”

I look around the living room, trying to see it the way that he does. I guess there is a certain kind of charm to the eclectic design.

“What time tonight?” he asks.

“Uh, we’re leaving here at about seven-thirty and meeting at the bar around eight.”

“Let’s leave at seven. We can grab food first.”

I look over to the clock seeing that it’s already after six.

“Okay, I’ll get ready and meet you downstairs at seven,” I say and he nods, grinning at me as he turns to head for the door.

He gives me one last smile as he closes the door after him, and I bite my lip after he’s gone. I wonder if dinner and the bar tonight is a good idea. I guess either way, it’s done and there’s no going back now.

Still, I can’t help but wonder why it feels like I’m balancing on the edge of something important.

FIVE



I finish applying another coat of mascara, looking at my reflection in the bathroom mirror. I look pretty good considering that I didn't have that much time to shower and get ready, so I just applied a new layer of deodorant and perfume and tugged on a dress.

The bar is supposed to be casual so I didn't apply too much makeup. I tug my hair up into a messy bun and grab my wedge sandals before I head out to the living room. I still have a few minutes before I need to be downstairs but I don't want Hudson to have to wait for me. I stuff my phone and keys in my purse before I head for the door.

I open it, startling when I almost run right into Hudson.

"Hey, I thought maybe we could just eat here," he says, holding up the two plates in his hands.

I can tell from the plates that they're from Prim + Proper and it smells delicious. My stomach growls and Hudson frowns. I don't want to turn him down after he went through all of the trouble, so I open the door, letting him carry everything into the kitchen.

He sets the plates down at the counter in front of the barstools and grabs the bottle of wine that I didn't notice under his arm.

"Hope you like red," he says and I laugh.

"I like alcohol," I joke and he laughs, grabbing a wine opener out of his pocket and opening the bottle with a flourish.

I go to grab some wine glasses and silverware for us while he opens the wine and he smiles at me as he pours us each a glass.

“This looks delicious,” I tell him and he smiles.

“Thanks. I’ve been playing with some new spices and recipes so I hope that you don’t mind testing them out.”

“Not at all. Are you going to be changing the menu at Prim + Proper?”

“Maybe, but I’m actually thinking about opening up a new restaurant over in Lilac Harbor or maybe Maple Bend.”

“Really? Is Upper Peninsula Michigan going to be some new culinary hotspot?” I ask as I take a bite of the sliced steak.

“No, I just—”

I cut him off with a moan.

“Oh my god. This is so good,” I say, taking another bite of steak.

“I’m glad that you like it,” Hudson says with a laugh.

He watches me chew, his eyes darkening so that the blue looks almost black and I swallow, giving him a small smile as I pick up my wineglass and take a sip.

“It’s so good, but I’m sorry, what were you saying?”

“I just like this place. It’s not as competitive or stressful as the big cities,” he says as he takes a bite of his own food.

“Will it be a second Prim + Proper?”

“No, I’ll have a different name and I need to research what those towns already have and what type of food and atmosphere that I think would do well there.”

We talk about food as we eat. I tell him about this greasy spoon diner that my dad and I ate breakfast at every Sunday back in New York. I’m not surprised that he had never heard of it. They made the best eggs benedict but Hudson promises that his is better. I believe him. He asks me where else I liked

to eat and I tell him about my favorite pizza place and this fancy burger place on Coney Island that we went to once.

He tells me all about culinary school and the places where he's cooked, and I practically lick my plate clean. He went to culinary school at the Culinary Institute of America at Hyde Park in New York. He tells me about how he took a year off and cooked his way across Europe and part of Asia before he came back to the United States and worked under a chef in New Orleans.

He's been all over, cooked in some of the best kitchens in the world and it shows. His food is delicious.

Hudson seems pleased that I loved his food so much and I let him clean up the dishes while I finish off my glass of wine.

"I'll leave this for you," he says, putting the cork back in the wine bottle and putting it in my fridge.

I can tell that he's frustrated to see my fridge mostly empty except for the milk and eggs. I don't want him to worry about me. Maybe that's why I say what I say next.

"I'll have to stop by Prim + Proper more often," I say casually and I see Hudson smile as he closes the fridge door and turns to face me.

"Anytime you want. I'll reserve a table for you every night."

I try to ignore the way that my stomach flutters at that.

"Are you ready to go?" I ask and he nods, grabbing the dirty plates as we head for the door.

I wait on the sidewalk while he runs inside and hands off the dishes, and then he's escorting me over to his car. I already texted Iris to let her know that I had a ride with Hudson. She was still getting ready, so I have a feeling that we'll be beating everyone up there.

"How are you liking Destiny Falls? It's quite the change from New York," he says as we start to make our way up to Honey Peak.

“I like it. New York isn’t the same without my dad there. Besides, who can afford it.”

He nods even though I’m sure that he is one of the few who could afford to live there without their apartment being the same of a shoebox or having ten different roommates.

“Where are you planning on going? Or are you staying here?”

“I’m supposed to be on a cross country trip but *somebody* pulled out in front of me and messed that up.”

I smile as I say that, letting him know that I’m not actually mad or blaming him for that.

“What luck! Was he handsome?” he asks and I laugh, refusing to answer that question.

“Have you been to Honey Peak before?” he asks as we pass by the town welcome sign and I shake my head.

“I haven’t left Destiny Falls,” I admit and he smiles.

“We’ll have to fix that.”

We reach Honey Peak and I lean forward, admiring the view. We’re so high and you can see all of the bridge and the lights from the towns down below.

“I didn’t know that Michigan had mountains.”

“They don’t. Well, not really. There are a few peaks or man-made ones, but no mountain ranges or anything like that.”

I nod, staring out my window as the sun starts to set. You can see most of the lake from here and even a few boats as they cruise across the water.

We pass by a few shops. There’s a trading post and market, a mechanic shop a street over and a few little boutique shops lining the streets. We head down Main Street and I smile at a cute little coffee shop. The bar where we’re meeting everyone is another block down, and I look out the window as the mountain peak comes into view.

“Honey Peak is a smaller one. That one was made for skiers and sledding. There are some more cabins and hotels up there on that mountain that I’ve heard are pretty cool,” Hudson says as he nods over to the peak in the distance.

I can just make out the ski lift and what look to be cabins dotted along the side.

“I bet the view is awesome,” I say as Hudson parks in front of the Honey Bee Bar.

“It doesn’t look like everyone else is here yet,” he says and I nod.

“Let’s go in and grab a table. This place looks packed.”

We climb out and I let Hudson lead me inside and over to the far wall where there is a big circle booth that just emptied out.

We both slide in and I grab my phone to text Sutton and Iris that we’re here, but they walk through the door and spot us before I can. I wave them over and we all try to cram into the booth. It’s probably only meant to fit five, so seven is a bit of a stretch.

I’m plastered up against Hudson and he rests his arm along the back of the booth, giving me a little more room. The heat from his body radiates to mine and I’m in danger of overheating in minutes. I have a feeling that he’s going to be glued to my side all night.

“I’ll grab drinks,” Flynn says and Madelyn goes with him to help him carry everything.

“I didn’t know that you were coming, man,” Teller says to Hudson and the two men start talking.

Sutton and Iris are both staring at me, practically giddy to see Hudson and me sitting so close. I widen my eyes at them, begging them to be cool and not do or say anything embarrassing, and they finally stop grinning at me like loons.

“Did you get everything mailed this afternoon?” I ask Iris and we start talking about the antiques that she bought today

and a new flea market sale that she wants to check out next week over in Maple Bend.

Madelyn and Flynn get back with our drinks and I down half of my lemon martini. I'm overheating crammed into this booth with everyone and I look over to the dance floor. It's only about half full and my favorite song comes on. I smile, getting ready to head that way, and it's as if Hudson can read my mind because he nudges me.

"Want to dance?" he offers and I nod.

We scoot out of the booth and I let him take my hand and lead me into the crowd. I'm glad that I wore my hair up as we start to dance and I grin at Hudson. I'm surprised to see that he's terrible at dancing and seeing him try to move to the beat and failing just makes him more adorable.

"I'm really bad at this," he calls over the music and I laugh.

"I can see that! Thanks for doing it with me though."

He nods, growing serious as the fast-paced pop song that was playing ends and a slow song starts to play. He moves closer, his hands gripping my hips as my hands go to his shoulders.

I feel flushed and I try to tell myself that it's just from the heat and dancing, but I know that that's not it. At least not all of it.

Hudson moves closer to me, his warm breath fanning some of the loose hairs at my temple and I swallow hard, looking up into his dark blue eyes.

"Lyla," he whispers, his eyes wide and honest. "I can't get you out of my head."

I want to pretend that I can't hear him over the music but that doesn't seem right. I stare up at him, not sure how to respond.

"I can't figure you out," he goes on. "You're an enigma to me and I've been trying to find a way in with you for but

you've been keeping me at arm's length."

I look down, knowing that he's right and his fingers tighten on my hips.

"I can't take it anymore. I swear, this will be the last time that I ask you this."

I look up at him, my eyes meeting his, and my heart starts to race.

"Lyla, will you go out with me?"

The question seems to hang in the air between us, and I want to say yes. It's right there, but I can't get my throat to work, I can't seem to get the words out of my mouth, so I do the next best thing.

So instead of answering, I grip his shoulders, leaning up on my tiptoes until my lips meet his. Hudson seems surprised by the move but he catches up fast. My eyes flutter closed and Hudson's hands move around to my back, drawing me closer until I'm flush against him, until I can feel every hard ridge and plane of his body.

We're still swaying slowly, our hands wrapped around each other as our lips mold together, moving in sync. It's nice to see that his rhythm problems don't extend past the dance floor.

He tastes like the red wine that we had at dinner and something that is all Hudson. He takes over the kiss, one of his hands wrapping around the back of my neck as he changes the angle and deepens the kiss.

I don't know how long we stay locked together, our bodies moving closer, grinding together and then swaying together for the slow songs. By the time we head back to our booth to grab something to drink, I'm a sweaty, horny mess.

"Hey, there you are!" Madelyn shouts over the music as I down the last of my lemon martini. "We were just saying that we think we're going to call it a night."

I nod, grabbing my purse from the booth and following after my friends as we make our way through the crowd and outside. I feel bad that I didn't really hang out with them much tonight, but I have a feeling that I'll be seeing them a lot tomorrow.

"We parked over here," Sutton says and Madelyn nods, moving to head that way too.

"See you guys later," I call and they all give me equally mischievous and knowing looks before they head down the sidewalk.

I'm sure that I'll be answering questions all day tomorrow about what is going on between Hudson and me and that kiss on the dance floor.

Hudson takes my hand and I let him open my door for me and help me in. He's smiling softly as he rounds the hood and slides behind the wheel and I'm not surprised when he picks up my hand again in his and holds it for the entire drive back to Destiny Falls.

The drive is mostly silent. It's warm in the Range Rover and I'm tired from a long day. The soft sway of the car as it heads down the mountain and with Hudson gently stroking the back of my hand with his thumb, I must doze off. I wake up when he parks in his usual spot next to mine outside of Prim + Proper and my apartment.

I yawn as he turns the car off and unbuckles, rubbing my eyes to try to clear them of sleep.

"I'll walk you up," he says gently and I nod, grabbing my purse and letting him help me out of the car.

We walk up the stairs together and I dig my keys out of my purse as we go. I'm about to unlock the door when he turns me to face him. He cups my face, tilting my head until he has me where he wants me. Then he looks into my eyes, his fingers softly stroking my cheeks. I lick my lips, holding my breath, and he stares into my eyes.

He dips his head and the spell is broken. His lips meet mine and I get lost again in the taste and feel of him, in the angle of his head and the way his lips feel against mine.

He pulls back and I blink, trying to clear the fog from my head. He shoves a piece of paper in my hand, giving me one last smile, the dimple popping out in his left cheek, before he turns and heads back down the stairs.

I unlock the door and stumble my way inside, closing and locking it after me. I lean back against the door, dropping my purse onto the table next to me before I unwrap the note that he gave me.

I can't help but smile as I read it.

LYLA, would you rather detect every lie you hear or get away with every lie you tell?

Here's my number. Call or text anytime.

517-518-4549

x. H

SIX



I make it all the way until noon the next day before Iris, Madelyn, and Sutton corner me, demanding to know what's going on with Hudson and me. If I'm being honest, it's longer than I thought I would get.

“Spill!” Madelyn half shouts as she jogs into the gift shop, tossing me a slightly greasy paper bag from The Upside Diner.

“Hey, Stan!” I call, half laughing as I open the bag. “I'm going to take my lunch.”

He wanders out of his office, nodding to the girls before he takes a seat behind the counter. Bandit nudges his hand and I see Stan smile as he scratches his ears.

I take my food into the kitchen and everyone sits down at the table over by the window.

“So?” Sutton says, grinning at me and I roll my eyes.

“So, we're going out tonight,” I tell them, and I can't help but laugh when they all cheer. “Don't get too excited. It's just the first date.”

“What are you doing?” Iris asks.

“Yeah, where is he taking you? Or is he cooking for you?” Madelyn asks, wiggling her eyebrows at me.

“I don't know. He just asked me out last night and then in his note this morning said to be ready at six-thirty.”

The girls all grin at that and I roll my eyes, taking a bite of the burger that they brought me. Sutton steals some of my fries and I move them to the middle of the table so that everyone can have some.

“You guys aren’t working today?” I ask as I take a drink of water.

“Lunch break,” Madelyn and Iris say at the same time.

“Teller is fixing one of the cabins next door and then we’re headed home,” Sutton says with an excited smile.

She’s so in love and a momentary twinge of jealousy hits me. I push it away because Sutton is a total sweetheart and she’s been through so much, she’s lost so much. She deserves a man that is crazy about her and Teller is definitely that.

“Maybe he’ll take you over to Mackinac Island!” Madelyn suggests.

“Or somewhere fancy over in Maple Bend?” Iris adds.

“He could just be taking me to Prim + Proper,” I add and they all look appalled.

“That seems tacky. He wouldn’t do that,” Sutton objects, and Madelyn and Iris nod.

“He’ll take you somewhere good,” Iris says, sounding confident.

“I’d be happy if he took me back to his place and cooked for me. He’s supposed to be a god in the kitchen, right?” Madelyn asks and I laugh at how reverent she sounds when she says it.

“Yeah, he is.”

“Have you eaten his food before? He was big in New York, right?” Iris asks and I nod.

“Yeah, he has two restaurants in New York but I’m pretty sure the waitlist is like a year out and I could never afford it. He made me a steak and some vegetables last night before we went to Honey Peak and it was delicious though.”

“Lyla!” Stan calls and I look out the window to see a tour bus pulling into the parking lot.

“Coming!” I call back, shoving the last french fry into my mouth as I ball up my trash and stand.

“We’ll let you get back to work, but call us if you need anything tonight,” Iris says, pulling me into a hug.

“Send us a picture of your outfit!” Sutton adds.

“And text us tomorrow to tell us how it went. I want to know everything,” Madelyn says, hugging me.

Sutton hugs me too, whispering to have fun in my ear before she pulls back.

I smile as I watch them leave and head back to the gift shop. The first guests are just about to come in and Stan and I switch places as they do.

I watch him launch into his welcome speech and grin as everyone hangs on his every word. He really can be charismatic when he wants to be.

He starts to lead them down the hallway and into the first attraction room. I take a seat behind the register, petting Bandit as I take a seat. He whines and I know that he’s looking for treats.

“Hey,” Teller says as he comes into the gift shop and I look up with a smile.

He’s got his usual baseball hat on backward and he grins at me as he sets down his toolbox by the register.

“Is my girl in here?” he asks and I nod.

“She’s around here somewhere.”

Bandit wags his tail, pacing at Teller’s feet, and he opens the door, letting Bandit head outside and over to his truck. He stops over by some trees, sniffing around happily.

“Hey,” Sutton says as she comes into the gift shop and heads over to greet Teller.

I look away as they kiss and say hello.

“We’ll see you later, Lyla,” Sutton says and I wave goodbye as they head out.

The rest of the afternoon passes by pretty slow. We only get the tour bus and one family who comes through and Stan lets me leave half an hour early. I text Hudson before I head home, my heart racing for some reason before I hit send.

LYLA: Hey, it’s Lyla. What are the plans for tonight? I’m wondering what I should wear.

I START DRIVING, figuring that it will be a few minutes at least before he gets back to me but my phone dings a minute later with a reply.

I drive back to my apartment, parking next to Hudson’s Range Rover. I don’t see him in the restaurant’s front windows, so I head up to my place.

HUDSON: The place is casual. Just wear whatever you’re comfortable in. I’m sure that you look beautiful no matter what.

I’VE ALWAYS loved surprises and I love that he didn’t tell me where he’s taking me. I head to my bedroom, rummaging through my clothes as I try to decide what to wear. I want to kind of dress up, so I grab a pair of dark wash skinny jeans and a fancier tank top. I didn’t think to pack anything too fancy before I left for my trip and I wonder if I should go shopping soon for some nicer clothes.

It’s nice outside today and I hope that wherever we go, we can sit outside and eat. I have one black cardigan and I grab that in case we do and I get cold.

I don't have that many shoes either, so I grab the same wedge sandals that I wore last night and head to the bathroom to put on some makeup.

Hudson knocks at my door at exactly six-thirty and I hop on one foot, tugging on my shoes as I make my way to the door.

"Hey," he greets me and I grin, taking him in.

He's wearing jeans too and a tight black T-shirt that clings to his biceps and chest. It's probably the most casual that I've ever seen him and I like that.

"Hey," I say as he leans down and brushes a soft kiss across my cheek.

"You look beautiful," he tells me and I smile up at him.

"You look nice too," I tell him as I grab my purse and lock my front door.

He has a bag in one hand and he uses the other to grab my hand as we head downstairs. I expect him to lead me over to his car, but we keep walking, crossing the street and heading down to the beach.

Hudson stops and digs a blanket out of the bag.

"A picnic?" I ask, bending over and kicking off my shoes as we start to walk across the sand.

"Yeah, it's so nice out today and I thought that we could eat and watch the sunset over the water."

"That sounds perfect," I say as I take a seat on the blanket.

Hudson starts to unpack the food from the bag and I take the wine from him. He brought two of the single-serve wines that you can buy in some stores, and I get to work peeling off the tops. My stomach growls as he pulls out a small charcuterie board with some crackers, meats, cheeses, olives, and jams.

"That looks amazing," I say, making room on the blanket for the tray and plates.

“Thanks. I made some snacking plates and a few desserts too. I hope that’s okay.”

I would reply but I’ve already got a mouthful of crackers and cheese. I flash him a thumbs up and he laughs as he takes out the rest of the food from the bag.

“It’s awesome,” I say after I’ve swallowed.

Hudson just smiles and passes me another plate. This one has mini tacos with homemade shells and I practically inhale mine. We work our way through the food and wine as we watch the sun start to set over the water.

“So, tell me about yourself,” Hudson says as he reclines on the blanket and we listen to the waves crash on the shore.

“What do you want to know?” I ask, looking out over the water.

“Everything.”

I smile at that, squinting as I look over to the bridge. The lights are starting to turn on as the sun sets.

“Well, I grew up in New York with my dad. My parents divorced when I was twelve, but I can’t really remember a time where they got along. My mom wanted more than my dad could provide, so she left and she got remarried to my stepdad like six months later. I haven’t seen her since I was twelve. She’s been busy with her new husband and stepkids ever since.”

“I’m sorry about that,” he murmurs but I wave him off.

“It’s alright. My dad was awesome. He got me, you know? We had the same sense of humor and he always supported me in whatever I wanted to do.”

“When did he pass away?”

“About six months ago. He was sick for a while, cancer.”

“I’m so sorry, Lyla.”

I nod, staring out at the water so that Hudson can't see the tears in my eyes.

"Thanks."

"Is that why you're in Michigan?" he asks after a minute and I shrug.

"Kind of. I had been feeling lost since he passed. I didn't know what to do in New York without him there."

Hudson nods, his fingers starting to sift through the sand, and I clear my throat before I go on.

"I never knew what I wanted to do with my life and I've had quite a few jobs over the years. I thought that I was just exploring when I was younger, but now I'm in my mid-twenties and I still don't know. Shouldn't I have some things figured out by now?"

"I don't think so. Some people know what they want out of life early on and others it takes longer. There's no right or wrong time."

"It's not just my career. I don't have *anything* figured out," I say with a humorless laugh. "New York doesn't feel like home without my dad there, and I thought that I would take a road trip around the country. Maybe I would go somewhere and it would just click and this feeling would go away."

"You don't feel that way about Destiny Falls?" Hudson asks with a frown.

I shrug. "I don't know what I feel. I still just feel a little lost. A little adrift. I'm like one of those buoys over there. I'm just bobbing along."

I can't plan for a family or finding my happily ever after, so that leaves a career. Maybe that's why I'm so focused on it.

I wish that I was more like Hudson. He knows what he wants to do with his life and he went after it until he became the best at it.

We're both silent for a minute, watching as the sun starts to set, painting the sky with streaks of orange and pink. The lights on Mackinac Island are starting to flicker on and I know that it will be dark soon.

I can't help but wonder what he's doing with me. He's so put together. He doesn't jump into anything on a whim, researching and studying market trends before he makes a decision. He never seems to misstep, and that's all I ever seem to do.

I wonder if this conversation is going to scare him away. I mean, he's a Michelin star chef and successful restaurant owner. He has everything figured out and I barely graduated high school and have no idea what I want out of life.

"What about you? Where did you grow up?" I ask him, clearing my throat and trying to distract myself from those thoughts.

"Originally? New Orleans. My parents owned a few boats and seafood markets there."

"Do you have a restaurant there?" I ask him and he nods.

"Yeah, I have a place in the square. I still buy the seafood for the restaurant from my parents' place, though they retired a few years ago."

"How many restaurants do you own?" I ask, drawing circles in the sand next to the blanket.

"Total? Nine. I have the one in New Orleans, two in New York, one in Paris, one in Spain, one in London, two in Los Angeles, and then Prim + Proper here."

"Why are you in Destiny Falls?" I blurt out and he laughs.

"I like it here. I've been going non-stop, constantly building and trying to grow for the last five, ten years. I wanted to slow down and just enjoy cooking. I still travel to check in on the restaurants but I'm happy here."

I ask him about some of the places that he's been and we go down to the shore, dipping our toes in the water. I help him

gather up the blanket and plates, and he takes my hand as we head back to my apartment.

“I had a lot of fun tonight,” he says as we head down the sidewalk past Prim + Proper.

“Me too,” I tell him honestly.

“Want to do it again tomorrow night?” he asks as we walk up the stairs to my apartment and I grin as I turn to face him.

“Aren’t you supposed to wait a few days so you don’t come off as desperate?” I tease.

“Is that how I’m coming across?” he asks and I slowly shake my head no.

“I’m not sure that you could pull off desperate,” I whisper and he pulls me into his arms.

His lips meet mine and I can taste the chocolate mousse and white wine from dinner on his lips. I open under him, wanting more of his flavor. His tongue pushes into my mouth and I flick mine against his, teasing him before I pull back.

He groans, his fingers gripping my chin and holding me in place so that he can plunder my mouth. I moan, letting him take what he wants, what he’s acting like he needs.

He’s acting like he’s desperate for me, like he needs me more than air. I wonder how long he’s been thinking about kissing me like this.

We come up for air and his fingers let go of my face, sliding down my throat and then to the back of my neck.

I blink my eyes open slowly and meet his. I wonder if I look as dazed as he does right now.

“Is that a yes for tomorrow?” he asks, his dimple popping out in his cheek as he smiles down at me and I laugh.

“Yeah, that’s a yes for tomorrow.”

He waits while I let myself into my apartment and I wave as I close and lock the door. I grin as I look down at the

folded-up piece of paper in my hand. I don't even remember when he slipped it to me, and I open it, biting my lip as I read it.

LYLA, would you rather be the funniest person in a room or the smartest person in a room?

You look beautiful. You take my breath away. Always.

x.H

FOR THE FIRST time since I got to Destiny Falls, I want to write him back. I grab a piece of paper from my room and scribble out a quick note before I sneak back downstairs and over to his SUV.

I'm giggly as I race back upstairs and into my apartment. I wish that I could see his face when he finds the note.

I grab my phone and head to my room to get ready for bed. I remember that my friends asked me to text them so I send off a quick message.

LYLA: Made it home safe.

Madelyn: How was it?

Iris: Where did he take you?

Sutton: What did you eat?

I CAN'T HELP but laugh at Sutton's question and I wash my face clean before I reply.

LYLA: We went to the beach and had a picnic. He cooked a bunch of small plates for us.

Madelyn: Awwwwww!

Iris: So romantic!

Sutton: Did you have fun?

Lyla: Yeah, it was really nice. I'm getting ready for bed now. Talk to you tomorrow!

THEY ALL TEXT me good night and I pull on my pajamas and crawl into bed. As I close my eyes and start to drift off to sleep, I realize something.

I'm excited for the future for the first time in a long while.

SEVEN



I study my appearance in the bathroom mirror as I gather my pale lavender hair back into a high ponytail. It's an overcast day and I'm betting that we won't have many tours, so I don't bother with makeup as I finish in the bathroom.

I tug on one of my Mystery Cabin employee shirts and a pair of jeans before I grab my purse and head for the door. My usual note is on the windshield and I grab it with a smile as I slip behind the wheel.

I'm actually early for work today, so I stop by The Upside Diner and grab three pancake breakfasts to go. Sutton is running errands today, so it's just Teller and me in the gift shop. They both cheer as I come in, holding the bag of pancakes up over my head like Simba in *The Lion King*.

"My hero!" Teller jokes and I laugh as I reach inside and pass him one of the to-go containers.

Stan grunts out a thanks as I pass him his and I lean over, kissing his wrinkled cheek.

"Anything for the best boss in the whole wide world."

"I'm not giving you a raise," he says back right away and I laugh.

"I can't just do something nice?"

He eyes me suspiciously but takes his pancakes and shuffles out of the gift shop. I'm guessing that he's headed to eat in his office. I know that he has a mountain of paperwork

to catch up on and I'm pretty sure that Bandit is in there snoozing and he probably wants to share the pancakes with him. Stan bought him some fancy dog bed and put it in the corner of his office and Bandit loves the thing. I'm pretty sure Stan ordered another one for the living room since he seems to like it so much.

Teller and I eat our pancakes on the counter by the register. He lets me have the stool and we talk about the gloomy weather and take bets on how many tourists that we'll have come through here today.

It's a slow morning, but by noon we've only had two tours. That means that I won the bet with Teller since he said four. It looks like the afternoon is going to be slow, so I'm thinking that I might be able to head home early, especially if the weather stays like this. It's started to rain half an hour ago, so Teller is back inside hanging out with me while I stock some shelves.

"Did you fix that hole on the putt-putt course?" I ask him and he nods.

"Yeah, but it's about all that I finished before it started raining," he says as he puts the last of his tools away in the back closet.

"It was more than me. There wasn't much to stock after the tours," I say and he looks around the shop.

"Do you want to go outside, Bandit?" he asks and I look over to see the dog side-eyeing Teller. I didn't even hear him come into the gift shop.

"Looks like that's a no," I say with a laugh and Teller grins, bending down to scratch Bandit's ears.

"Smart boy," Teller whispers and I smile, putting the last snow globe up on the shelf.

"I meant to ask, I heard about the fire last night over at Mrs. Mason's place. Is everyone alright?"

Teller is one of the volunteer firefighters for Destiny Falls. Our town is too small to have a full-time department, so I'm sure that he went to help last night even though he was off duty.

He used to be a firefighter in New York City but he said that it was too expensive living in the city and he got sick of working two jobs just to barely be able to make ends meet, so he left and came out here. He just happened to see a help wanted sign when he was passing through town and Stan hired him on the spot, so he's been living and working here in Destiny Falls for the last two years.

"Yeah, Mrs. Mason fell asleep with a lit cigarette in her mouth. She's honestly lucky to be alive, but her whole house is gone now."

"Oh, man. Does she need anything?"

"All of her possessions are gone now, so I think that they're organizing some drive for people to donate to. The firehouse is planning it but I headed home before I heard all of the details last night."

"Let me know when you know. I'll donate some money."

"I will," Teller says with that affable smile of his.

"Is she going to go live with her son now?"

"No, I don't think so. Last I heard was that he couldn't take her in. She'll be going to the nursing home down by him though, so at least she'll be close by and she'll get to see the grandkids more often."

"That's too bad. I'm sure she'd rather stay with her son and grandkids."

"I know. I don't think that Peter can handle it though. He's got a lot on his plate with the kids and work. His mom is going to need a lot of help and supervision. Probably round-the-clock care. It sucks, but at least he's honest with the level of care that he can provide for her. The home will be able to give

her the care and attention that she needs and they do outings and activities there that she can go to.”

I nod and I wonder if maybe I messed up by taking care of my father by myself. Maybe he would have lived longer if he was in a place like that, with trained nurses instead of his flighty daughter.

“Can I ask you a question?” I ask him after a few minutes.

“Sure, what’s up?”

“You and Sutton, you’re perfect together.”

Teller smiles and it’s adorable that just the thought of his girl can cause that reaction.

“Is that the question?” he teases and I smile, looking down at the box of coffee mugs at my feet.

“How did you know that she was the one? That you loved her, I mean?”

Teller rocks back on his heels, blowing out a deep breath as he looks up to the ceiling for a minute as he thinks about his answer.

“Honestly? I don’t know.”

“Sutton will be so happy to hear that you said that,” Stan says as he comes into the gift shop with a huff.

Teller just laughs, not worried at all, and I bend down, starting to stock the coffee cups on the shelf.

“I guess we just had a connection. I just felt it as soon as I met her. Maybe even before that because I was intrigued as soon as her mom told me about her. I don’t know how to describe it. I’ve never had to put what being in love feels like into words.”

“Luckily you don’t have to. Literally millions of books and songs have done it for you,” Stan says with a straight face and I can’t help the bark of laughter that escapes.

I nod, remembering the look on his face when Sutton's mom had shown us a picture of her daughter. He had looked dazed for the rest of the day and hung on her every word about Sutton for the rest of her visit.

"I love working here, but once she got to town, it wasn't the job that I was excited about. Sutton was the one that I came to see every day. No offense," he says to Stan and I laugh at Stan's less than impressed face.

Stan just snorts and rolls his eyes so Teller continues.

"She was the first person that I thought about when I woke up and the last one before I fell asleep. She makes things better, makes me a better man. Definitely makes Stan and this place better," he teases and I laugh as Stan glares at him.

His answer leaves me feeling dissatisfied and even more confused. If that's love, then I've either been in love a hundred times before or not at all. It has to be more than that.

I've felt connected to dates before, been excited about new crushes. That wasn't love, obviously. None of them were right for me. Is love just those feelings but stronger?

"Is this about that Hudson fella?" Stan asks and I'm surprised that he knows about that, but I play it off with a shrug.

"Yeah, how are things going between you two?" Teller asks and I grab some more mugs, lining them up on the shelf.

"Good, I guess. I mean, we've only been out on the one date, so it's not that serious."

I see Stan and Teller share a look with each other out of the corner of my eye and I wonder what they know that I don't.

"How do you *feel* about Hudson?" Teller asks and I pause to think about it.

"Connected," I whisper, but I know that they hear me. "There's chemistry there, like you said."

“But...” Stan asks and his surly, impatient attitude makes me smile.

“But I’ve felt connected to other guys before him. It didn’t mean anything those times so I’m not sure that it means anything this time.”

“Do you feel more connected to Hudson? Or is it the same as when you went out with those other guys?” Teller asks.

“More,” I whisper, twisting a coffee mug around in my hands.

“Then maybe you should see where this goes,” Stan says quietly.

“Maybe,” I say, finishing up stocking the coffee mugs.

Teller and Stan both smile gently at me and I clear my throat, grateful when some cars pull into the lot.

“Back to work. No more slacking off and talking about boys,” Stan says as he heads back to his office to get ready for the tour, but I see him pause and look at me, waiting for me to nod and tell him that I’m okay before he goes.

“I’m going to go finish cleaning out the back stock room. Need anything before I go?” Teller asks and I shake my head no, grabbing the box of coffee mugs to put away.

“I’ll get it,” he says, taking the box from me. “I’ll have the walkie-talkie. Let me know if you need a hand with anything. Or if you want to talk some more.”

I wave to him, pasting on a smile as the first tourists step inside out of the rain. I welcome them, pointing them down the hallway right as Stan steps out, ringleader persona on full blast. They follow him out and I smile as they head into the first room.

As soon as they’re gone, thoughts of Hudson and my feelings come flooding back. I might like Hudson more than any of my other dates, but can I really trust this feeling?

I try to convince myself that things are finally different. I never made it past the first date with any of those guys, but I said yes to a second with Hudson. Maybe that is a good sign. Maybe the times of me ruining everything are finally over.

EIGHT



“You look gorgeous,” Hudson tells me as he picks me up for our date.

“Thanks,” I say, smoothing my hands down my sweater.

The rain this afternoon cooled things off, so I’m in a thin sweater, jeans, and a pair of flats that have probably seen better days. I just couldn’t handle walking in those wedge sandals for another night and it was either the flats or my Converse which are in even worse shape.

“No picnic basket?” I ask as he leads me over to his car.

“No, I think it’s a little too cold outside for a picnic. Besides, I didn’t want you to think that I only had one date idea. Can’t have you getting bored with me,” he says with a smile as he helps me into the passenger seat.

“Where are we headed?” I ask him as he starts up the SUV.

“I thought that we would head over to Lilac Harbor and check out the restaurants there.”

“Oh, I see. Is this a research mission or a date?”

“A date. Definitely a date.”

I lean back in my seat, smiling as Hudson reaches over and picks up my hand.

“How was work?” he asks and I shrug.

“Slow. We had like two tours the whole day. I got all of the stocking done though and I got to hang out with Teller and

Bandit for a bit, so still a good day.”

“Sounds like it,” Hudson says with a smile as he squeezes my hand.

“What about you? Create any new culinary masterpieces today?”

“No, not quite. I did inventory today too. We got our produce delivery this morning and I spent the morning helping with that and the afternoon balancing books and finishing up some paperwork.”

“Being a chef sounds boring,” I tease and he laughs.

“The business side can be sometimes,” he admits as we head out of Destiny Falls and farther down the coast to Lilac Harbor.

“I’m not a businesswoman but it seems to me that not opening more restaurants might help with the business side a bit.”

“Smartass.” He laughs and I grin at him, smiling wider when his thumb rubs against the back of my hand.

Lilac Harbor isn’t far from Destiny Falls and it doesn’t take us long to pull in front of the Blue Plate. The Blue Plate is a casual restaurant right on the water. It’s a two-story restaurant with a deck on the lower and upper level so that diners can sit and enjoy the water.

“I’ve heard about this place. Iris loves it. She said that she and Madelyn always come here for her birthday.”

“I’ve heard that it’s good, but I don’t get over to Lilac Harbor that often. I’m always working at night, so I don’t eat out that much.”

“Well, I’m glad that you made an exception tonight for me.”

“Always,” he says as he hops out and I open my door, hopping out and joining him at the sidewalk.

I take his hand, interlacing our fingers as we head inside and up to the hostess stand.

“Table for two?” a pretty brunette asks Hudson and he nods. “Would you like to sit inside or out?”

I don’t know how she manages to say that and make it come across like a pickup line, but she does.

“Inside,” Hudson tells her, turning to me to make sure that that’s okay and I nod.

“Yeah, with the breeze off the water, it’s a little too chilly out there for me.”

She gives me a tight smile and I roll my eyes at her antics. That earns me a glare and Hudson wraps his arm around my shoulders, laughing as the waitress continues to glare at me as she grabs our menus.

“Look at you. Making friends all over the place.”

“She started it,” I sass back and he laughs, tugging me closer to his side.

“You don’t have to worry. I only have eyes for you,” he whispers in my ear, and I bite back a grin as we reach our table.

“Here you go,” the hostess says, batting her eyes at Hudson, but he doesn’t even look at her.

He pulls out my chair and I sink down, picking up a menu. Hudson sits across from me and we’re quiet as we look over the menu. Our table is right by a window overlooking the water and I watch as the sun starts to set.

“I think I’m going to get the salmon. What about you?” Hudson asks and I grab my menu, flipping it open to remember what it was called.

“I’m getting the pistachio-crust ed halibut with the twice-baked potatoes.”

“That sounds good too,” he says as he sets our menus aside and reaches across the table for my hand.

Before he can though, our waiter comes over to take our order.

“Welcome to the Blue Plate! Can I get you two started with something to drink?”

“Do you want wine?” Hudson asks me and I shake my head.

“Can I get a pomegranate martini, please?”

“Of course,” the waiter says with a wink at me and I look over to Hudson to see if he saw that.

If the scowl on his face is any indication, then yes, yes, he did.

“I’ll have a whiskey. Neat.”

The waiter nods, writing down his order before he turns to head back to the kitchen. He gives me a smile as he heads back and I grin wide at Hudson as he goes.

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” he says dryly and I laugh.

“You have nothing to worry about. I only have eyes for you,” I quote back to him.

He stares at me and I could swear that his eyes are full of longing.

I can’t handle seeing him look at me like that and I turn, looking around the rest of the restaurant. We’re on the first floor still, and I look around at the other tables. The place is half full with some people sitting at the bar on the other side of the restaurant.

The tables and chairs are all painted a bright blue and stand out against the dark wood floors and walls. There’s fishing gear tacked up on the walls every few feet and some nautical kitsch on some shelves behind the bar.

“Would you ever have a restaurant like this?” I ask Hudson and he looks around.

“No, probably not. The kitsch stuff isn’t really my style. I’d rather have murals or framed artwork than all of this. I like the style of this place though, with the decks and the two stories.”

“I like how laid back it is. I don’t usually dress up, so this is kind of my kind of place,” I say with a wry grin.

“I can do laid back.”

“What if the market trends don’t point that way?”

“I can still do it.”

“Seems like a pretty big gamble,” I say and I wonder if we’re still talking about restaurants.

“It’s worth it,” he says, his eyes holding mine prisoner and I swallow hard.

“Here you are!” the waiter says as he sets our drinks down in front of us. “Are you ready to order now?”

“Yes,” Hudson says, grabbing our menus and rattling off both of our orders.

The waiter grabs the menus, nodding as he continues to write down the order. I don’t look at him so I’m not sure if he smiles at me as he leaves this time.

“Are you going to open a place up over here still?” I ask him as I take a sip of my martini.

“Maybe. I need to look into the area more. I like Maple Bend, and even Honey Peak was cool when we went up there.”

I nod and ask him more about his other restaurants.

“Which is your favorite restaurant that you own?” I ask him and he sips his whiskey.

“That’s a hard one. I like Noir et Blanc, the one in France for the location. It’s right in the heart of Paris and surrounded by these bakeries and cafés. Tru Blu in New Orleans reminds

me of home and it's right in the square. I like Prim + Proper too though. Like I said, it's laid back and fun here."

"Why would you ever leave Paris?"

"Have you been?"

"No, I wish."

"It's nice, but I missed the states."

I nod as our waiter comes over to drop off some fresh rolls and butter.

"What was your favorite job?"

"Ohh, that's a long list."

"Really?" Hudson asks with a laugh as he butters me a roll.

"Yeah, I've had quite a few."

Hudson leans back in his chair with a grin and I take another drink of my martini before I tell him about some of the jobs that I've worked over the years.

"Let's see, there was the ice cream parlor in high school. I worked one day for this pest control company—it was the worst day of my life. Then I worked a month at an animal shelter and tried to adopt eight dogs and five kittens. That's apparently too many animals and I was let go to find a job that was a better fit."

Hudson grins at me as I go on.

"Then I tried to be an assistant for a wedding photographer. The three months I worked as a gas station clerk. They got robbed one night while I was off and I just couldn't bring myself to go back."

"I don't blame you," Hudson says with concern.

"I spent a summer on the carnival circuit, working the Ferris wheel, a few months as a dog groomer before I finally landed at a law office as an assistant to one of the partners."

"Did you like it?"

“Nope, but it paid well and was a quick commute from our apartment. Plus, it had great health benefits,” I say with a shrug.

Saying all of my failed careers out loud just reminds me that I still don’t have it figured out.

“I guess I never really knew what I wanted to do with my life and I still don’t,” I mumble, a lump forming in my throat.

“That’s okay. You’re still young and it’s cool that you have so much experience in all of these different areas.”

“I wish that I could find what I love though.”

“You will,” he promises me and I smile as the waiter comes back to drop off our food.

He asks me more about my jobs and growing up. I tell him about my dad and I swear it’s like my mom can tell that I’m happy because she calls as we’re getting ready to leave.

Hudson pays and I excuse myself to the bathroom where I can call her back.

“Finally!” my mom says in annoyance as soon as the call connects and I want to point out that I literally *just* missed her, but I know it’s no use, so I bite my tongue.

“Sorry, I was out on a date. What’s up?”

“I’m calling about your sister’s wedding. You already missed the engagement shower,” she huffs.

“Stepsister,” I correct her and I can feel the icy chill coming through the phone at that reminder.

“You need to be here for her bridal shower, bachelorette party, and wedding. Is that clear?”

“I’ll try, Mom.”

“You need to do better than that. If you’re going to bring a date, then I need to know now.”

“This is only our second date and I’m not even sure that I can make it, so no, I don’t need a plus one.”

“When are you going to settle down?” she demands and I roll my eyes.

“I don’t know, Mom.”

There is a moment of silence and I shift uneasily. I never know how these phone calls with my mom are going to go and they make me uneasy.

“I’ll see you soon,” she says before she ends the call and I sigh as I head back to the table.

Hudson has paid by now and the waiter waves at me as I grab my purse and take Hudson’s hand as we head out.

He holds my hand the whole way back to Destiny Falls and I stare out over the water, wondering what I should do with my mom.

I’m looking for family, and she’s the last bit that I have left. Maybe I should be trying harder with her. Maybe I should go visit. I could help with the wedding planning and try to bond with my stepfather and stepsiblings.

It sounds awful, but maybe I’m just not trying hard enough.

“I’ll walk you up,” Hudson says as he parks in the spot next to my Jeep.

I nod, letting him help me out of his car and up the stairs to my apartment. I stick my key into the lock, but before I can open it, Hudson’s fingers are on my chin and he’s tilting my face up toward his.

His lips are warm and firm as they claim mine and I wrap my arms around his neck, wanting to get lost in him.

Everything else in the world fades and for a moment, I forget that we’re still technically in public. I can’t bring myself to care though. In this moment, it is just Hudson and me.

He pushes me back against my door and I moan as he leans into me, the hard planes of his body molding against

mine. His fingers caress my jaw as his tongue licks along the seam of my lips and I open for him greedily.

His teeth nip my bottom lip and I gasp, my fingers running through his hair and pulling him closer to me. He moans, his tongue pushing into my mouth and twisting with mine.

I gasp, swearing the world shifts on its axis under my feet. I moan into his mouth as one of his hands tangles in my hair to hold me to him while the other wraps around my waist to steady me.

I want to wrap my legs around him. I want to climb him like a tree, but his phone starts to ring and I remember that we're not even in my apartment.

I expect him to answer his phone, but it's like he can't even hear it and I'm not going to tell him to stop. His phone stops ringing and I'm trying to wrap one of my legs around his hips when it starts to ring again, and he pulls back with a groan.

"I'm so sorry," he whispers as he rests his forehead against mine and I smile.

"I get it."

"Let me cook for you tomorrow night," he says and I grin.

"Alright—wait! I can't tomorrow. It's girl's night."

He frowns, stealing another kiss as his phone continues to ring.

"The night after then."

"Friday? Isn't that a busy night for Prim + Proper?"

"Yeah, but my staff can handle it for one night."

"Alright then. Friday."

His phone starts to ring again and I let myself into my apartment, smiling at him one last time before I close the door and he answers his phone.

Friday can't come fast enough.

NINE



I peruse the menu even though I've been to this restaurant at least a dozen times in the last few months and I always get the same thing.

Madelyn is running late, so Iris orders her food for us when the waiter comes over to ask us if we've decided yet. We split a large pepperoni pizza and two orders of breadsticks. Iris gets the mozzarella sticks with extra ranch dressing for Madelyn and we order a round of Cokes to drink.

The waiter nods, scribbling down our order still as he turns and heads back to the kitchen.

"How was your day?" Sutton asks Iris and I lean my elbows on the table, my face in my hands as I wait to hear her answer.

"It was fine. Slow," she says with a sigh.

"The Mystery Cabin was too," Sutton tells her, squeezing her shoulder slightly in comradery.

"It's probably because of the weather," I add and they both nod.

"I'm sure that it will pick up soon," Sutton tells her.

It's got to be stressful running your own business. I wonder if I would like to do that. I have no idea what I would sell though. What am I passionate about that I wouldn't mind looking at it every day for the rest of my life.

I'm not sure that I could handle the stress or pressure either though. Iris is so smart and she is great with money. She's more business savvy than I am. I bet that I would be bankrupt in months if I were in her position.

"Sorry I'm so late!" Madelyn says the next minute as she hurries over to our booth in the back of Mancini's Pizza Parlor.

"No worries. The food isn't even here yet," I tell her as I slide over in the booth to make room for her.

"Busy day at the market?" Sutton asks her and she nods.

"Yeah, there was a problem with the delivery today and it was a big headache. Enough about work though. Tell us all about your date with Hudson!" Madelyn says, turning to me with a big grin.

"It was nice," I say with a smile.

They all groan and I laugh.

"You have to give us more than that," Sutton complains and I take a sip of my Coke.

"We went over to Lilac Harbor, to the Blue Plate," I say, nodding at Iris.

"Oh, what did you eat?" she asks excitedly and I see Madelyn look at her like she's crazy.

"What did they eat? No, tell us the good stuff!" Madelyn says, and I'm saved from having to answer by our pizza and breadsticks getting delivered.

Everyone takes a slice and I take a bite of the cheesy goodness.

"So? What did you guys talk about?" Sutton asks.

"We talked about his restaurants and some of the jobs that I've had. He told me about growing up in New Orleans and his parents and then going to culinary school in New York."

"He still has a restaurant there, right?" Iris asks and I nod.

"Yeah, he's got places all over."

“Then what happened?” Madelyn asks.

“Then we got ready to go and my mom called. She wants me to go to Chicago for my stepsister’s wedding and bachelorette party or something.”

“Are you going to go?” Sutton asks and I take another bite of pizza, shrugging.

The truth is that I’m still undecided on that. I want to find my place in the world, where I belong, and the truth is that I don’t think it will be with them. Still, I guess it wouldn’t hurt me to go and try. Maybe I’ll have enough to pay Hudson back by then and I’ll be getting back to my trip and I can stop there first.

“Did he kiss you goodnight?” Madelyn asks.

“Yeah,” I say and I can feel my face heating as I remember the way that he kissed me goodbye last night.

They all ohh and giggle and I laugh, taking a sip of my pop.

“Are we going to The Fainting Goat after this?” I ask before I take another bite of pizza.

“Sure,” Madelyn says with a shrug, and I see Iris bite her bottom lip.

“Should we invite Flynn?” Sutton asks and Madelyn gives her a dry look.

I’m sure she’s getting tired of the comments about how good the two of them would be together.

“No, it’s girl’s night,” she says, taking another bite of her pizza and I laugh.

The subject changes to upcoming holidays. Sutton is already starting to plan for Halloween at the Mystery Cabin and potentially doing some themed nights or promotions. I told her that as long as I didn’t have to dress up like I was working in some kind of haunted house that I was fine with it, but I have a feeling that Stan might be harder to talk around.

The three of us throw out ideas like decorating the miniature golf course and having a deal on it or even setting up a haunted house inside the Mystery Cabin. Iris mentions advertising in the local papers or on social media sites like Facebook or Instagram. Madelyn recommends billboards on either side of the Mackinaw Bridge and I see Sutton writing them down on her phone.

I can't help but wonder if I'll be here to see any of it.

We finish off our pizza and pay our bill before we head across the street and down the block to The Fainting Goat. It's live music night and the band is already in full swing when we walk in and grab a table close to the bar.

Sutton grabs us a round of martinis and we settle in to listen to the band play. The place is pretty crowded.

"Did Hudson ask you out again?" Sutton asks as the band takes a short break.

"Yeah, he's going to cook for me tomorrow night."

"Marry him," Madelyn says with a straight face and I laugh.

"I'm being serious!" she insists. "Does he have a brother by chance?"

"Does who have a brother?" Flynn asks as he plops down into the chair next to Madelyn.

"Hudson," I tell him, and I can't help but notice the way that he frowns at hearing that Madelyn was interested in someone else.

"So, does he?" she asks and Flynn shifts in his seat, taking a sip of his beer.

"No, I don't think so. I'm pretty sure he's an only child. At least he's never mentioned any siblings."

"You can ask him for me tomorrow when he cooks for you," Madelyn says and I laugh.

“Ugh, I bet it’s going to be delicious,” Iris says with a moan and I see Madelyn stare at her.

“There is something wrong with the way that you’re more interested in food than the man,” she says with a frown and Iris laughs.

“He’s a famous chef with an entire cabinet of awards. It’s literally guaranteed to be incredible. I think it’s weird that you’re not excited about it,” Iris argues and I smile as they start to bicker.

“Yeah, but we’re not getting to eat it,” Madelyn says and I see Sutton roll her eyes before she interrupts them.

“Have you talked to Arlo yet? Maybe he can cook too,” Sutton suggests and Iris’s face turns beet red with a blush.

Her eyes dart to the bar but Arlo isn’t working tonight.

“Maybe,” she mumbles but she looks doubtful and I wonder if it’s because she doesn’t think that he can cook or because he isn’t here tonight.

The band starts back up and we take a break from talking to listen to the music. Flynn hangs out with us for a bit and we debate a second round, but I think everyone is tired after a long week. Besides, we all have to work tomorrow, so when Sutton says she’s going to head out, we all decide to call it a night.

Madelyn has to go back to the market to make sure that the delivery is put away and that there weren’t any other problems. She heads across the street to the market and I watch Flynn as he watches her go.

Sutton and Iris both head back to their cars, but I’m just walking home.

“I’ll give you a ride,” Flynn says, nudging my arm and I nod my head, yawning as I follow him over to his car.

“You know, if you like Madelyn, you should just tell her,” I say as Flynn turns out onto Main Street.

He doesn't answer me right away and I'm ready to let the subject go when he finally does speak.

"It's more complicated than that," he says quietly and I get the feeling that he's relieved when we pull up outside of Prim + Proper.

"Thanks for the ride," I say as I climb out and he nods but seems distracted.

I wave as he backs out and I'm about to head up to my apartment when I remember the note that I wrote out to Hudson at work. I don't see him when I look into the restaurant windows, so I sneak over and slip it beneath his windshield wiper before I head upstairs.

I let myself into my apartment, kicking off my shoes and heading into the bedroom. I'm looking forward to showering and then heading to bed.

I got paid today and I pull out the cash that I got from the bank this afternoon. I count it out, grabbing the box from beneath my bed and opening it up to add the new cash. I owe Hudson three grand and I count it out. I'm at two thousand five hundred and fifty-eight. I'll be able to pay him back in two weeks.

Why does the thought of paying him back and getting to move on from Destiny Falls no longer hold the same appeal?

Stan asked me today why I was being so weird lately this morning and I admitted that I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. I thought that he might be able to offer me some kind of wisdom or advice.

He had suggested college. According to him, "that's where kids go to figure shit out." The only problem with that is that I never really liked school and the thought of going for four more years makes me feel like I'm dying a little bit inside. I doubt that I could afford it either and I don't want to take out a bunch of loans. Especially not for something that I don't even want to do.

When I had told him that, he said I just needed to figure out what I loved and try to make a career out of that. Figuring all of that out though seems easier said than done.

I know that I don't want to work for a big company or corporation and I don't want to work in food which is probably a good idea since I can't actually cook anything and I don't want to smell like grease every day if I were to work at some fast-food place. I don't want to have a long commute, work in a cubicle, or do the same thing every day.

I have this long list of things that I don't want, but nothing that I do.

My mind flashes to the Mystery Cabin, to my friends that I've made here, and to and I realize that maybe I do know what I want after all.

TEN



“So, this is your place,” I say as Hudson opens the door for us and ushers me into the foyer of his house.

Hudson lives in a two-story white house right on the water and only about a block and a half away from his restaurant, Prim + Proper. The place is beautiful with a bunch of windows to let in natural light and provide amazing views of the lake and bridge behind it.

“Yeah, this is my home,” he says and I let him take my hand and give me a quick tour.

There are dark brown hardwood floors running throughout the first floor and up the stairs. The walls are white and I wonder if that’s by choice or if he just didn’t want to bother with painting them a different color.

The living room and stairs are to the right and the dining room is to the left. Neither are decorated very much, just the bare necessities like a couch, TV, kitchen table, and chairs.

He leads me down the hallway, past the stairs and into the kitchen. It’s obvious that this is the room that he loves the most.

The counters and the appliances all gleam under the lights. There are cookbooks on the shelf under the kitchen island, spices lined up on a huge shelf that almost covers an entire section of wall, and shiny copper pots and pans hang from the rack on the ceiling.

The cabinets are painted a dark teal color that matches the hardwood floors and white backsplash perfectly.

“I like it,” I tell him as he pulls out a cushioned stool for me at the counter. “It looks like what I imagine is a chef’s dream kitchen. Is that why you bought this place?”

“Partly. I like the layout but what really sold it for me was the location. I have my own little slice of beach right outside those doors,” he says, nodding to the double back doors.

“Yeah, that would sell it for me too. I always dreamed about falling asleep with the windows open, the sound of waves lulling me to sleep,” I say with a sigh and Hudson grins at me.

“I haven’t done that yet. Maybe I’ll have to try it one of these nights.”

“I bet it’s relaxing.”

“Me too,” he says as I take a seat and he leans down, kissing me before he heads over to the deep copper sink to wash his hands.

“So, what are we eating for dinner?” I ask him as he starts to pull some vegetables and other ingredients out of the fridge.

“I thought I’d make us some chicken since we had fish the other night.”

“Can I help with anything?”

“Sure,” he says as he pulls out a cutting board and a knife.

“I should warn you that I’m not great in the kitchen,” I say as I slide off of the stool and go to wash my hands.

“It will be okay. I’ll show you a few tips.”

I wash my hands and move to join him at the counter. He passes me some carrots and a peeler and I get to work. He’s ten times faster than me, but he doesn’t complain about the wait. We finish peeling and he shows me how to cut them. I’m sure that he could cut them in no time, but it takes me almost ten minutes.

He's so patient with me. He shows me how to prepare the chicken and tells me about marinades and different spices. We're doing blackened chicken and he tells me about the different spices as we mix them together.

"Then we dip them in the olive oil, making sure that they're coated before we cover them in the spice mix."

I nod, grabbing a chicken tenderloin and doing as he says. We line them up on a plate and he explains how we'll fry them for a few minutes on each side before we put them in the oven to finish cooking.

"Now for the carrots," he says.

We melt butter and add garlic, stirring it together before we dump it over the cut-up carrots and toss them so that they're all evenly coated.

"And we just bake these?" I ask as he spreads them across the parchment-covered pan.

"Yep. I'll put them in now since they'll take longer than the chicken and the broccoli."

I nod, watching as he slides them in.

"Want something to drink?" he asks as he sprinkles some spices on top of the broccoli.

He cut that up while I was doing the carrots, so I don't think that there is much left for me to do.

"Sure. What are you having?"

"How about a beer? Or I have wine here?"

"A beer sounds great," I say as I reclaim my stool.

He grabs two from the fridge and pops the top off of them before he passes me one.

"Can I ask you something?" I ask as he flips the first batch of chicken in the pan.

"Of course."

“Why do you always leave your car at Prim + Proper? I mean, I get that it isn’t a very long walk, but you have to be tired of being on your feet all day, so why walk home at all?”

He smiles as he takes the chicken from the pan and lines them up on the baking sheet.

“I was hoping that you would finally reply to one of my messages.”

I’m not sure if it’s the heat in the kitchen or what, but I could swear that he’s blushing a little bit.

My heart starts to race and I suddenly get what Teller was talking about.

Is this love?

I rub my sweaty palms on my jeans as I ponder what I’m feeling. I’ve certainly never felt this way before in my life about anyone. It’s stronger than just a crush or a like. Could this finally be it?

I take a bigger drink of my beer and try not to panic. Hudson is busy cooking, in his happy place, so he doesn’t notice me freaking out at the counter.

The oven goes off for the carrots and broccoli and I stand to help set the table. Hudson nods to a cabinet and I grab some plates out while he puts the chicken in the oven to bake for a few minutes.

“This looks amazing,” I say as he passes me a fork and knife and he takes a seat next to me at the kitchen island.

Hudson made some kind of avocado dip to go with the chicken and I realize why when I take a bite.

“Oh man! This is spicy,” I say and Hudson laughs.

“Yeah, try it with the dip,” he says and I nod, dipping the next piece in the avocado sauce.

“Better?” he asks and I nod, taking another bite.

“It’s really good,” I compliment him and he smiles.

“How was work?” he asks and I tell him about the Halloween planning.

“Isn’t it a little early for that? It’s the beginning of September,” he says with a laugh.

“I know, but I guess you have to plan for theme nights and different advertising things.”

Hudson nods and I take a bite of my carrots.

“Would you rather,” Hudson starts and I can’t help but laugh.

“Really?” I ask him and he nods.

“We never got to play the other night.”

“Alright, you’re right.”

“Would you rather live in a tent every day or in a hotel room?”

“Hotel room.”

“Really?” he asks and I nod.

“Yeah, I mean, can you imagine being in a tent in a hurricane or twister or something? Hotel, hands down.”

He nods, chewing as he thinks of another question.

“Would you rather have the ability to see ten minutes into the future or a hundred and fifty years into the future?”

“Hmm, hard one. I guess ten minutes into the future. I can’t change the past after all.”

“Yeah, me too,” he says.

“My turn. Would you rather have the ability to move things with your mind or the ability to read minds?” I ask him.

“Read minds.”

“Why?” I ask as I finish off my chicken.

“I think it would come in handy with you. I swear, sometimes I’d kill to be able to know what you were

thinking.”

My heart beats fast at that and I grab my beer, finishing it off.

“What about you?” he asks.

“Yeah, I want to read minds too.”

He seems to pick up on my change in mood and he steers us back to more neutral territory.

“Would you rather be chronically under-dressed or overdressed?”

“Under. That way at least I would be comfortable,” I say with a laugh.

He nods and the game goes on until we’re done eating. I insist on helping him with dishes and clean up.

“Want another beer?” he asks and I nod, wandering over to the glass door and looking out over the beach and water.

He passes me a beer and I follow him into the living room. He takes a seat on the couch and I sit down next to him. There is a TV, but he doesn’t turn it on. Instead, we both look out the window, watching as the waves come in.

“I love your place. It’s cool that you’re so close to the water,” I tell him and he turns to me with a soft smile.

His dimple is just barely showing and I suddenly have the desire to lean over and kiss it.

So, I do.

Hudson’s breath catches as my lips make contact with his cheek. His body goes stiff as a board as I lean against him.

“I’ve been wanting to do that for a while,” I whisper as I pull back and he stares at me for a beat.

Then his lips are on mine. His hands are in my hair and I move closer to him on the couch. His body is so firm and warm beneath my fingers. I want to feel him against me. I want to straddle him. I want to feel his weight on top of me.

Hudson's hand falls to my hip and he tugs on the back of my thigh. I get what he's trying to say and throw my leg over his. His hands grip my hips then and he pulls me tight against him so that I can feel that thick ridge in his pants.

I moan, opening my mouth for him and greedily tangling my tongue with his. He groans as I suck on his tongue, my hips starting to grind down on him.

"Fuck, Lyla. You're so hot," he whispers as we come up for air.

"Take your clothes off," I whisper back and he laughs.

"Yes, ma'am."

I tug my tank top off as Hudson starts to unbutton his shirt and I stand, wiggling out of my jeans and kicking my shoes off as Hudson's shirt gets tossed aside. He lifts his hips, unbuttoning and tugging down his pants as I move to straddle him again.

My hands land on his chest and I rub my fingers through his chest hair and up to his shoulders.

Hudson is watching me, his eyes dark and locked on my face. He's waiting to see what I'll do next, how far I want to go tonight.

I want to go all the way with him.

I reach behind me, keeping my eyes locked with his as I unhook my bra and let the straps slip down my arms.

"Fuck," Hudson hisses.

"Yes please."

Hudson growls and the next thing I know, my back is flat on the couch and Hudson is coming down over me.

He buries his head in my neck, licking, biting, and sucking a trail down my neck to my collarbone. He nips my collarbone, kissing lower over the swell of my breast.

“Yes,” I moan as his lips wrap around the bud of my nipple.

I arch into his mouth, my fingers tangling in his dark locks as he teases my nipple into a stiff peak. His fingers are playing with my other breast and I never thought that I could come from someone playing with my nipples, but I’m on the edge already.

Hudson looks up at me, his eyes filled with desire and I wiggle under him. I need more.

He kisses between my breasts and I watch as he licks a path down my stomach. His hands go to my panties and he tugs them down my legs, moving back between my spread thighs as soon as they’re removed.

“Beautiful,” Hudson murmurs as he spreads my folds and I lean up on my elbows, looking down my body at him.

He leans forward, licking a path up my center, and my eyes almost roll back in my head at the sensation.

“More,” I moan and Hudson grins up at me.

He does as I ask and buries his face in my pussy. His tongue finds my clit and he sucks the pearl into his mouth, rolling his tongue over the ball of nerves until I’m seeing stars.

“Oh my god!” I scream as I come against his lips and he buries his face between my legs, trying to lick up all of my juices.

As soon as I come back to Earth, I’m reaching down, tugging on Hudson’s arm and trying to pull him up my body.

He rises up, kneeling between my legs and I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him to me and kissing him. I can taste my tangy passion on his lips and I moan, opening for him as I hook one of my legs around his hips.

Hudson kisses me harder, his hand searching for his discarded jeans on the floor, and I grin against his lips as he finds a condom. We break apart and he rips it open with his teeth, rolling it on in one smooth move.

“Lyla,” he whispers and I nod, letting him know that I want him.

That I need him.

He nods back, smiling softly. Then he’s lining up with my entrance and we both stare into each other’s eyes as he slowly pushes into me.

We both moan as he sinks an inch in and my eyes flutter as I feel him stretching me. He sinks another inch and I wrap my legs around his waist, rocking against him and trying to take more of him.

Hudson gives me what I want then. He kisses me as he thrusts fully into me and I groan, my hips restless as he keeps me pinned to the couch.

I forget all about time and the things that have been weighing on me since my father passed and I just get lost in Hudson, in what he does to my body.

I can feel my second orgasm building, growing inside of me. As it starts, Hudson leans down, claiming my lips and cries with his mouth. He groans and I know that he’s found his release too.

We both pant, our faces flushed as we stare at each other, and I can feel myself giving him a tiny piece of my heart in this moment.

“Maybe you should show me your bedroom now,” I suggest and Hudson grins, pulling me off the couch and carrying me upstairs.

ELEVEN



I blink my eyes open, squinting as the sun blinds me and I remember where I am.

“Morning,” Hudson says and I squint, smiling when I see him coming into the bedroom with a tray in his hands.

“That smells amazing,” I groan as I move to sit up in bed.

I’m still naked and I pull the sheet up to cover myself as Hudson sets the tray down over my lap.

“Thank you,” I say and he smiles, kissing me before he stands and heads around the bed to his side.

He slides in next to me and I cut up the pancakes, offering him a bite. We share the pancakes and eggs but I eat all of the bacon by myself. Hudson just smiles and sips his cup of coffee.

“What are your plans for today?” he asks as he moves the tray off of my lap.

“I actually have it off, so I’m just going to relax.”

“Want to relax with me?” he asks and I’m surprised that he doesn’t have to go into Prim + Proper.

“Sure. What did you have in mind?”

“You’ll see,” he says and I watch as he grabs the tray off of the ground.

“I’ll go clean up. You can help yourself to the shower or whatever you need or I can take you home and then meet you

in a little bit.”

“Yeah, I think I should go home. I don’t really want to wear last night’s clothes all day.”

He nods, handing me my clothes that he must have grabbed from downstairs off of the dresser and putting them at the end of the bed.

“I’ll let you get dressed then. I just need to take a quick shower and then I can go into Prim + Proper while you get ready.”

I nod and he heads downstairs as I slide out of bed and pull my jeans and tank top back on. My shoes must still be downstairs, so I head down and into the living room to find them.

I pass Hudson and he drops another kiss on my lips before he heads upstairs to shower. I find my shoes. One is tucked under the couch and another is behind the end table. I wonder how the heck they got there.

My purse is on the kitchen counter still and I pull my phone out, groaning when I see I have five missed calls from my mom. I know that she didn’t call me to see how I was doing, so I’m guessing it was about making sure I was there at the end of the month for Heidi’s wedding.

I decide I’ll call her back later and I’m just tucking my phone back into my purse when Hudson comes back downstairs, freshly showered and wearing a new T-shirt and pair of jeans.

“Ready to go?” he asks and I nod, taking his hand as we head out.

We walk the block over to my apartment and Hudson tells me he’ll be downstairs when I’m ready before we part ways.

I head upstairs and into my apartment and hurry through a shower and throwing on some new clothes before I head downstairs to meet him. He’s not out front so I open the front door, poking my head in to see if I can spot him.

I don't see him, but I can hear him, so I head farther inside, poking my head around the kitchen door.

"Hey," I say and he looks over.

"Okay, so finish up with the freezer inventory and I'll be back later."

His staff nods and he heads my way, wrapping his arm around my shoulders as we head outside to his car. He opens the door for me and I hop in.

"Where are we going?" I ask as he buckles up.

"There's the annual fudge festival over in Maple Bend. Or we could go explore Honey Peak or something," he suggests.

"Let's do the fudge festival. I could use some good peanut butter fudge."

He nods, backing out of his parking spot and heading east toward Maple Bend. He interlaces our fingers together and I smile as I slide my sunglasses on.

"I've got some chef friends coming into town in a few weeks to visit. It's the annual Honey Festival up in Honey Peak and we're going to go check it out. Want to join us?" he asks as we park in the lot and climb out to head across the street to the festival.

"Sure. Sounds like fun, though I'm scheduled to work on Sunday."

"That's okay. We're going Saturday."

"Perfect."

The fudge festival is set up like a farmers' market with different stands, and we take our time wandering around. By noon, I'm stuffed and have a stomachache from all of the junk food that I've eaten.

"What do you say to me feeding you something a little healthier now?" Hudson asks as I try to juggle my boxes of fudge.

“I say it’s about time.”

He laughs, taking the fudge from me and we double back to his car, dropping it off before we head down the street in search of a restaurant that isn’t packed.

“How about tacos?” I ask, nodding to the restaurant with the sombreros hanging in the windows.

“Sounds good.”

We cross the road and Hudson puts our name in with the hostess. It doesn’t take long for us to be seated, and I smile as I look around at the brightly colored tables.

We both order the enchilada plate and a margarita, and I lean back in my seat.

“Thanks for bringing me here. I had a lot of fun,” I say and he grins.

“Me too. Just remember that later tonight when you can’t sleep from all of the sugar,” he jokes.

“Maybe I won’t be able to sleep for another reason,” I whisper back and Hudson grins as he leans over the table and kisses me.

Our food gets delivered a few moments later and we both dig in, talking about the festival and our upcoming weeks. He tells me about his friends that are visiting next weekend. They’re all chefs too with their own restaurants and we talk about their specialties and where they work. They all seem to be in New York but in different boroughs.

Hudson pays and we head back to Destiny Falls. He parks next to my Jeep and I smile as I unbuckle.

“Want to come up? I can make us dinner in a few hours.”

“Sure,” he says, hopping out.

“Would you rather have a frozen TV dinner or some cereal?” I ask and he groans, his head tipping back as he drapes his arm around my shoulders.

“I’ll figure something out. You have to eat better than that,” he says and I shrug as I unlock my apartment door and head inside.

I set the boxes of fudge down on the kitchen counter and turn to face him.

“Are you hungry now?” I ask.

“Not for food,” he says, caging me in against the kitchen counter.

I grin, pushing my body into his until I can feel every ridge and sculpted muscle through both of our clothes.

“Want to see my bedroom?”

“I’ve been wondering what it looks like,” he murmurs as he leans down, nuzzling my neck.

He steps back and I take his hand, leading him down the short hallway to my bedroom. My bedroom is pretty bare. There is only a full-size bed with mismatched pillows and sheets and a small chest of drawers. I don’t even have a headboard for the bed, just the frame and mattress, but I didn’t think that I was staying for very long, so I never bothered to furnish it.

There’s a small pile of dirty clothes in the corner since I haven’t had a chance to bring it to the Mystery Cabin to do laundry.

“It’s kind of messy,” I say apologetically, but he just smiles.

“I like it.”

His hands grab my hips and he pulls me into him. I can feel his dick starting to swell against my thigh and I can’t help but rub against it.

I feel wanton and desired as his cock hardens even more. I shift so that the thick ridge is between my legs and I can’t help but moan. It feels so good, so hard.

His head dips, his warm breath hitting my face and my eyelids flutter shut as his lips land on mine.

My heart is racing and as my hands rub up his chest, I can feel that his heart is beating out of control too. My fingers climb higher and I run my fingers over his collarbone, memorizing every line of his body as I go.

Hudson backs me up a step and I go willingly. The sunlight is shining through the bedroom window and I like that I can see all of him this time.

My fingers trace along his jawline and he pulls away, staring down at me. I trace around his ear, my fingers tangling in his dark locks, toying with the long strands.

“I really like you,” he says.

“I really like you too.”

The words I love you are on the tip of my tongue but I can't get them out. Surely, it's too soon to be saying things like that. Right?

His lips capture mine as his hands move up my ribcage until he's cupping my breasts in his big, capable hands. His hands knead the soft globes and I break the kiss, pulling away as I moan, my head falling back.

Hudson kisses down my neck, his lips finding the pulse point at the base of my throat. I push into him, wanting his hands on my skin, on every inch of me.

I raise my hands over my head, letting him drag the thin cotton of my shirt over my head. He drags the cup of my bra down, exposing my nipple to the cold air. It puckers instantly, tightening into a stiff peak.

“Perfection,” Hudson whispers against my skin and I gasp as his warm mouth sucks the tight bud into his mouth.

His tongue swirls around it and I arch into him. My eyes flutter open and I watch as the fan spins round and round on the ceiling above us. Hudson's hands go around my back and

he pulls me into him, his hands tangling in my purple hair as he devours my breasts.

He pulls the other cup down and I swear that I'm about to explode. My whole body feels like it's on fire. I'm hot and needy, aching for him to make me come.

Everything about Hudson turns me on. He's so strong, so smart and capable. He's sexy and funny, but right now it's his body that is doing it for me.

The toned abs, the full lips, and dark blue eyes, the chiseled lines of him, all of the dips and planes. All of it is a work of art that I want to admire for hours.

Hudson pulls back and I bite back a whine, missing having his mouth on me.

"Bed," he orders and I nod, pushing down my pants as I back up toward the mattress.

Hudson's eyes are burning, glinting in the sun as he takes me in and I straighten my shoulders, wanting him to look his fill. It's obvious that my body turns him on just as much as his turns me on.

Hudson pushes me down onto the bed and I start to wiggle let out of my panties, letting Hudson pull them the rest of the way off.

"Fuck. Every inch of you is a dream, Lyla."

My body warms at the compliment and I hold my hand out to him, wanting to feel his weight on top of me. He pulls his shirt off first, kicking his shoes off as he pushes his pants down his toned legs.

He comes down over me and I spread my legs. He's still wearing his boxers, so we're not skin on skin but I can still feel how hard and hot he is.

His head dips again and his mouth latches onto one of my nipples, sucking the whole thing into his mouth. His mouth is so hot and wet, the suction so perfect that I'm close to coming in seconds.

My toes curl into the sheets as my hips rock restlessly against his and he switches to my other breast.

That spot between my legs is getting wet, tiny sparks going off with every bite, suck, and caress that he gives my breasts. It's not quite enough though. The nagging emptiness between my legs just won't go away and the dull ache is starting to drive me crazy with need.

I remember how he went down on me on the couch at his house and I want to return the favor. I push on his chest and he lets my nipple go with a pop, leaning up to look at me questioningly.

"I want to take care of you," I say, my fingers running down his chest, following his happy trail down to the band of his boxers.

Hudson pushes off of the bed, reaching for his boxers and I drop to my knees, helping him pull them down his legs. They pool at his feet and he steps out of them as I reach up, fisting his thick length.

I open my mouth wide, sucking in the tip of his cock as Hudson's hand tangles in my hair. He doesn't push on my head, he just rests his hands there, his fingers tugging on the strands as my head starts to bob.

The feeling lights up my scalp and I moan as I take more of him into my mouth. I work my hand in time with my mouth and my body only burns hotter as I feel him swell against my tongue, hear the moans and the way that he says my name like it's a prayer.

"Fuck," Hudson says, pulling me off of him and he reaches down, dragging me up to my feet and then pushing me onto the bed.

I pull him down and our lips meet, we cling together as we take our time exploring each other. The earlier rush is gone and I moan, rolling him onto his back and straddling his hips.

"Let me lick your pussy," Hudson says, but I shake my head.

I'm already wet enough and I know that if I let him do that, that he'll take control again and I want to set the pace this time.

I reach behind me, grabbing his dick and lining it up with my opening as I slowly sink down, taking him into my body inch by delicious inch.

"Fuck," he hisses out as I slowly sink down until he's fully seated inside of me. "You're so wet. So fucking hot."

I grin at him, resting my hands on his chest as I slowly roll my hips. We both moan with every rock of my hips, every in and out, every push and pull of his cock inside of my snug channel.

His hands go to my ass, groping the globes, using them to pull me down harder onto him. I pant as I grind against him and he leans up, sucking one of my tits into his mouth.

He takes over, thrusting up from beneath me as our mouths fuse together and I can feel myself starting to splinter apart around him as the pressure inside of me builds.

He hits a certain spot deep inside of me and that's all it takes to send me flying over the edge of the cliff into oblivion.

Hudson's brow furrows in concentration as he grips my hips and drives into me in perfect precision.

Seeing him like that is intoxicating, and I can't look away as he finds his own release inside of me.

If I wasn't in love with him before, I sure am now.

TWELVE



I shove the last bite of cereal into my mouth, rinsing the bowl out and leaving it in the sink to wash later as I finish getting ready to head to work.

I'm a little early to leave for work but I don't have anything else to do at my apartment, so I head out.

There's a new note under my windshield wiper and I grin as I grab it. I think it's adorable that Hudson still leaves me messages even though he has my phone number now. He still asks me out at the end of every one or if we've already made plans, then he asks what I want to eat or where I want to go. I like him surprising me so I always leave that part up for him to decide.

I open the gift shop door and am immediately greeted with the sounds of Sutton and Stan's latest argument.

"We can form new relationships with better vendors," Sutton says and I'm guessing that she's arguing with Stan in his office.

The Mystery Cabin isn't open yet and it's been like this for the last few days as they try to plan for the upcoming promotions and order new merchandise for the gift shop. Yesterday I came in to hear them fighting about the website. Eventually Stan gave in and let her hire someone to spruce it up a bit since the other one looked like it was made in the nineties. Probably because it was.

“But we’ve had these vendors for years,” Stan argues back, sounding annoyed.

“And they’re ripping us off! We could get better quality for cheaper at any of these sites.”

I can hear some papers rustling and I set my purse down under the counter, smiling when Bandit and Teller come through the gift shop door.

“Morning,” I tell him as I bend over to pet Bandit.

“Morning! Are they still going at it?” he asks me and I nod.

“Looks like it.”

He shakes his head, setting down his toolbox on the counter.

“We can try them,” Stan relents and Teller smiles, happy that his girlfriend won the argument.

“I think the new shirts came in yesterday. Want me to grab them for you out of the storage closet?” Teller asks and I nod.

“Yeah, that would be great.”

He nods and heads over to the closet to grab the boxes for me. I decide to grab some coffee and make my way down the hallway and into the kitchen.

“Are you making a new pot?” Stan asks, coming in as I close the filter lid and hit start.

“Yeah, you want some more?”

He grunts out yes and I smile as I lean against the counter and listen as the coffee starts to brew.

“Want some French toast?” I ask him and he perks up.

“Are you making it?”

“Only if you want it to be burned or for me to possibly start a fire in your kitchen,” I say with a laugh and he smiles.

“I’ll make us some in a minute. I have a feeling that we’ll be slow today since it’s supposed to start raining soon.”

I nod and he shuffles out of the kitchen and back toward his office. I’ve seen Stan make it enough to remember the ingredients, so I start to dig around in the cupboards, pulling out a bowl and frying pan. There are only a few pieces of bread left and I add bread to the grocery list on the fridge before I grab milk and eggs.

Stan comes back in as I pour the coffee into our cups and he gets to work on the French toast.

“Are you hungry?” Stan asks Sutton as she comes in to grab herself a cup of coffee.

“No, thanks. Teller and I ate breakfast before we got here,” she says and he nods.

“Can Bandit have some?” Stan asks and Sutton sighs.

“A little bit. *Little*,” she stresses. “At his last vet appointment, they mentioned that he was a little high on weight.”

Stan doesn’t look like he’s bothered by that, but he’s smart enough not to say anything to Sutton.

“I’m going to get started on the books,” she says as she grabs her coffee and heads back to the gift shop.

Bandit comes in a few seconds later, and I wonder if he heard us talking about him.

“Grab us some plates?” Stan asks and I grab two from the cabinet, holding them out as he puts some perfectly golden brown French toast on each one.

“I’m surprised that your fancy new man didn’t cook breakfast for you this morning. He’s a chef, right? Surely he could have made you something better than this,” Stan says and I pause with a piece of toast halfway to my mouth.

“He offered,” I admit. “I just woke up late and was running behind.”

Stan huffs and I smile sweetly at him, stuffing my piece of toast into my mouth. We eat in silence and when Stan stands, I tell him that I'll clean up since he cooked.

He pats me on the shoulder as he passes and I smile.

My grandparents both died when I was young and I don't really remember them all that much, so Stan is kind of like the grandpa that I never had. I know that he and Sutton got off to a slightly rocky start but they're solid now. Even if they do argue a bit.

It starts to rain as I finish up the dishes, the drops splattering against the windowpane by the kitchen table. I lean against the counter, sipping the last of my coffee and listening to it. I used to love the rain in New York City. It was the only time that the city was even remotely quiet. I can remember turning off all the lights and sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the window in my bedroom, watching the lightning strike across the sky and the raindrops slide off the roofs of buildings.

A car pulls into the lot outside the window and I sigh, pushing off the counter. I refill my coffee cup before I head into the gift shop to get to work. I pull out my phone, sending Hudson a quick message as I go.

LYLA: I just had a man make my French toast for breakfast and it was delicious. Probably better than anything that you could have made.

I SLIP my phone back into my pocket as I get started stocking the new T-shirts and sweatshirts. The car that pulled in must have turned around because no one ever comes in. My phone buzzes a minute later and I grin as I pull it out to read Hudson's message.

HUDSON: Sounds like I need to up my game. Can't have someone stealing you away from me. Let me cook for you tonight.

Lyla: I don't know... I bet I could convince Stan to make me a roast or something.

Hudson: I bet you could. I promise that mine will be better though.

Lyla: I'll be the judge of that.

Hudson: Six?

Lyla: Perfect.

SUTTON IS bent over the front counter busy balancing the books, so I try not to distract her as I get to work stocking.

Bandit comes in from Stan's office and curls up in his dog bed behind the counter. It starts to rain harder and I have a feeling that we won't be getting a lot of tourists today.

"What did you do yesterday?" Sutton asks me as she takes a break from the accounting.

"Hudson and I went over to Maple Bend and checked out the fudge festival."

"How was it?"

"Good... and kind of nauseating. I ate way too many sweets," I say with a laugh.

Sutton laughs too, bending down to scratch Bandit's ears when he barks, wanting to join in on the fun.

"Did you save me any fudge?"

"Yeah, I have two boxes for girl's night on Thursday," I tell her and she cheers.

"Peanut butter?" she asks and I nod.

"Of course. I got a bit of peanut butter, cookies and cream, and then a whole box of chocolate."

“Have I told you lately that you’re the best?” she asks and I laugh.

“Not today.”

“Well, you are. Now I can’t wait until girl’s night. I’ve been craving something sweet.”

“Glad I could help,” I tell her as I grab the last shirt from the box.

We work in silence for another few minutes and then I break it.

“He invited me to the Honey Festival up in Honey Peak in two weeks. I guess some of his chef friends are coming into town and he wants me to meet them.”

“That’s great! That’s a big step, right?” she asks and I shrug.

“I don’t know. I thought the next big step was meeting family or something.”

Sutton thinks about that. I know that neither of us really has much experience with relationships, so I’m not sure that we’re the ones we should be asking about it.

“Well still, that’s exciting. I think it’s a good sign that he wants to introduce you to people in his life.”

My phone buzzes again and I pull it out.

HUDSON: Do you really want a roast tonight?

Lyla: I was just teasing. Whatever you make is fine.

Hudson: I’m aiming to please here, baby.

Lyla: Alright, then yeah, a roast with all of the fixings pretty please.

Hudson: Done.

MY PHONE GOES OFF AGAIN before I can put it away and I expect it to be Hudson again, maybe asking me what I want for dessert. I have a witty retort ready to go. Maybe that's why I'm so disappointed to see my mom's name on the screen instead.

I don't want to deal with her today. This whole weekend was great and I want to continue that streak into this week, so that means ignoring my mother.

I already know what she's going to want to talk to me about. Heidi's wedding. It's all she ever wants to talk about lately and seeing as how I still haven't decided whether I'm going to make that trip yet, there's really nothing new for us to talk about.

I know that if I answer, she'll only try to pressure me into promising that I'm coming or worse, she'll just pretend that it's already a done deal. I don't want to deal with her steamrolling over me and not giving a shit what I want. She probably won't even ask how I'm doing. Come to think of it, I don't think that she even knows where I am right now. I never actually told her about my trip.

I push thoughts of my mother and how terrible our relationship is aside and try to think of nicer thoughts.

It doesn't last long.

Do I want to go to Chicago? Maybe I could sit down with my mom and tell her how I wish things were different between us. Maybe things would finally change or even improve.

Can I leave Destiny Falls though?

Things have been going great with Hudson and I want to see where this thing goes. Maybe he's what I was searching for. All I know is that I've stopped feeling so lost and antsy since I started going out with him.

Apparently my mom doesn't get the memo that I don't want to talk to her because she calls me five more times over the course of my shift. Every time my phone goes off, I get

tenser and tenser and by the time that I clock out and head out to my Jeep, I'm wound pretty tight.

My stomach is in knots because I know that I'll have to deal with my mom tonight and that the conversation isn't going to go well.

She calls again as I'm driving home. I park next to Hudson's Range Rover, biting my lip as I decide what to do.

I send Hudson a quick text, asking if we can do a raincheck tonight for dinner. I don't hear back from him right away and I assume that he's busy in the kitchen, so I dodge the rain and run upstairs to my apartment.

I take a deep breath, deciding to get this over with. I figure that it's best to rip it off like a Band-Aid and I hit call, holding my breath and praying that she doesn't answer.

I'm not that lucky.

"There you are."

"Yeah, hi Mom. Sorry I didn't answer earlier. I was at work."

I can practically see her scrunching her nose up in distaste at the idea of working for a living.

"This was important. I expect you to call me back faster next time. We're making wedding plans and we can't be sitting around waiting for you to get back to us. This is about Heidi and she's stressed enough as it is having to plan all of this. The least you could do is answer and do your part to help her out."

"Right," I say, even though I don't mean it.

Heidi is a younger version of my mom. I bet every dollar that I have that she's not planning any of this. I bet that she hired a wedding planner or maybe even two to take care of everything. She's probably having a blast bossing them around and making their life miserable.

“We have to get you fitted for your dress as soon as possible,” my mother continues and I wrinkle my nose.

“What dress?” I ask, wondering if I missed something.

“Your bridesmaid dress,” she says like that should be obvious.

She sounds so put out that I have to think if maybe she mentioned this before and I just forgot but I think that I would remember if Heidi had asked me to be in her wedding and I haven’t talked to her in years.

“One of Heidi’s bridesmaids dropped out, so we need you to fill in,” she continues and I almost laugh.

I want to point out that Heidi never asked me and that it’s the least that she should do but I know that it would only start another fight with my mom and I just want this phone call to be over.

Truth be told, I’m surprised that one of Heidi’s bridesmaids dropped out. Both Heidi and Holly act like Stepford wives and usually their friends are the same. At least that’s what I remember from the last time that I visited. If one of them dropped out, then Heidi must be a real bridezilla to get someone to step out of line.

“I’m not sure that I’m going to be able to make the wedding, Mom,” I start and I can practically feel the disapproval from my mom coming through the phone.

“We are your family, Lyla Mae. You will be here. You will be here in two weeks so that we have enough time to get you fitted for your bridesmaid’s dress and you will do everything that you can to support your sister on her big day. I will see you in two weeks.”

With that, she hangs up on me and I toss my phone onto the couch. I run my fingers through my hair and sigh. Things were finally starting to be good. Then my mom drops in to ruin everything.

I know that Stan would probably give me the time off if I wanted to go home for the wedding since we've been slow lately. Now I just need to figure out what I want to do.

Do I leave Destiny Falls and go visit my mom and stepfamily, maybe even try to repair our relationship? Or do I stay here with the friends that I've made here?

THIRTEEN



It's been a week and a half and I haven't had any more phone calls from my mom. I've been counting that as a blessing. She did text me to ask my size so they could at least buy the dress and since she didn't seem to be letting this go, I ended up asking Stan if I could have a week or two off for the wedding. He had said yes, just like I knew he would.

I haven't told Hudson or any of my friends yet that I'm leaving. I think it's because I don't want to go, so I don't want to talk about it. If I don't talk about it, I don't have to think about it either.

Things have been going great with Hudson. We've spent the last ten days exploring the town and surrounding towns together and we have a new routine now. He works until later at night most nights so he usually comes over to my place and we spend the night together. On the days where he leaves work early, we go to his place and he cooks for me or we kick off our shoes on his back deck and walk along the water.

We spent last Sunday hiking out to the Destiny Falls waterfall and splashing in the water. He may have pushed him in at one point and he may have jumped in after me. One thing led to another and he ended up taking me roughly against the rocks underneath the waterfall. On Tuesday we went kayaking over by Maple Bend and I considered it a success that I only flipped my kayak twice. Then on Thursday, we went back to Lilac Harbor and got donuts from this cute little bakery before we walked around downtown.

“Here’s your paycheck,” Stan says as I get ready to leave.

“Thanks,” I say, taking the check from his hands.

“I’ll see you when you get back,” he says and the way he’s looking at me makes me wonder if he thinks that maybe I’m not coming back after the wedding.

I know that Stan has issues with people abandoning him. Sutton let that slip one day, though she didn’t tell me why. I wish that I knew how to assure him that I wasn’t leaving him.

“Yeah, of course,” I say, leaning over and giving him a side hug.

I tuck the check into my purse, waving goodbye to him as I head out to my Jeep and head back to my apartment. I need to cash the check at the bank on the way home so I swing through the drive-through before I head back toward downtown.

I don’t see Hudson’s car when I park and I wonder where he went. Then I remember that he mentioned wanting to check out some real estate over in Lilac Harbor today.

That means that I probably won’t be seeing him tonight which will be the first time all week. I should be used to sleeping alone but as I head up to the apartment, I find myself feeling lonely and bored.

I add the money that I got from the bank to the money in the box under my bed, counting out the three thousand that I owe to Hudson. I put his money into an envelope so that I can give it to him on Saturday when he picks me up for the Honey Festival.

His friend comes in on Friday and I know that he’s going to pick them up from the airport. Since tomorrow is girls’ night, I don’t think I’ll see him until Saturday when he picks me up for the festival.

Part of me doesn’t want to pay him back just yet. I know that I don’t need it, but I like having a reason to need to be in his life.

I want to tell Hudson that I love him, but I think maybe it's too soon. We've only known each other for a few months now but we've only been dating for a few weeks. Maybe I should wait for him to say it first or maybe I should wait until after his friends have left and we're alone again. I could tell him and invite him to Heidi's wedding. I would love to see the look on her face when he stole the spotlight away from her but I'm not sure that I want to subject Hudson to my family.

I tuck the envelope with the money in it back into the box of notes that he left for me and slide it back under my bed. I decide to take a shower and change into my pajamas. I don't feel like going out, so I'll order food or make some ramen and curl up on the couch.

I take a shower, taking my time and letting the hot water loosen the tense muscles in my neck and shoulders. I take my time drying off and rubbing lotion into my skin before I head back to my bedroom and pull on my comfiest pajamas.

I'm about to decide whether I want to order takeout or just warm something up here when there is a knock at the door.

I frown as I head over to answer it and I'm surprised when I open the door to see Hudson standing there with a bag of groceries in his arms.

"Hey, what are you doing here?" I ask, opening the door wider to let him in.

"I thought I'd surprise you," he says as he drops a kiss on my lips and heads past me to the kitchen.

"I didn't think that I would be seeing you tonight. I figured you'd be busy at Prim + Proper."

"No, I finished up the desserts earlier and my staff can handle the rest."

"So, what's all of this?" I ask as he starts to take out food from the bags.

"Dinner. How do you feel about salmon and some roasted vegetables?"

“That sounds delicious.”

I sit at the counter and watch as Hudson cuts up some zucchini, mushrooms, and potatoes. He tosses them in olive oil with some spices and spreads them out on a baking sheet.

“Would you like some wine?” he asks, pulling a bottle out of the bag and I grin.

“Oh, you’re trying to spoil me,” I say with a laugh as I go to grab some glasses.

He pops the cork and I hold the glasses out to him to fill. He takes a sip of his, moving to the salmon to prepare it and I take my seat at the counter again.

I take a big gulp of my wine and Hudson notices, raising an eyebrow at me in concern.

“Everything alright?” he asks, setting the salmon on the baking sheet.

“Yeah, it’s just been a long week.”

“Yeah?” he asks and I nod, taking another drink of my wine.

“My mom has been calling me. I have to go to Chicago for my stepsister’s wedding next weekend.”

“And you don’t want to?”

“Not at all. It’s going to be awful. I can already tell you how it will go. I’ll get bossed around, pushed around, for the whole weekend. Nothing that I do will be good enough and I’ll leave at the end with a pounding headache.”

“They’re all really that bad?”

“Yep. I know that I’m still pissed at how she left me and my dad but that’s not the only reason why I’m mad at her, at them.”

He nods, waiting for me to go on and I take a deep breath. I can already feel the stress tightening my muscles and I’m not even with them yet, just talking about them.

“I know that she’s my mom and that’s why I’ve put up with her for this long but the truth is that they just aren’t really loving people. They care more about looks and status than they do people and relationships.”

“Then why go back at all?”

“She’s the last bit of family that I have left. I haven’t seen her in years, so what do I know? Maybe she’s changed.”

“Does it sound like she’s changed on your phone calls?”

“Nope. She’s still demanding, talks down to me and doesn’t ask about me or my life. It’s all about my stepsisters and stepfather. But maybe that’s just stress from all of the wedding planning.”

Hudson looks doubtful but I can tell that he doesn’t want to hurt my feelings or upset me.

“Your mom is an idiot,” he says quietly and I almost choke on my wine. “If you’re going to go and be miserable, then don’t go. If she can’t see how amazing you are, then it’s her loss. You know that, right?”

Part of me knows that he’s right but I still have to wonder what my mom saw in them that she never did in me.

“Besides, you’ve got your super successful restaurant owner and chef boyfriend to hang out with.”

I smile at that, liking that he called himself my boyfriend.

“If I told my mom that I was dating *the* Hudson Hayes, she would flip out. Maybe then she’d finally be proud of me or have some questions about my life.”

“She should already be proud of you. You’re incredible, Lyla.”

I look away. I’ve never been great at taking compliments so I drain the last of my wine to avoid having to say anything.

“Do you want me to go to the wedding with you? I don’t mind being your backup if you need me,” he offers.

“That’s sweet of you, but I already told her that I wasn’t bringing a plus one. I have a feeling changing that so close to the date would make her snap.”

“Fair enough.”

The oven goes off and he moves to take the food out as I pour myself another glass of wine.

I remember the money that I have for him and I know that I should go get it for him, but I can’t bring myself to do it.

Hudson smiles at me as he sets the plates down on the counter and I pick up my fork, smiling at him as he joins me.

I hate to admit it, but talking to my mom has brought back that lost feeling again. I try to push it aside as Hudson and I eat, but I have a feeling that I’m not fooling anyone.

FOURTEEN



“Can you pass me the sour gummy worms?” Iris asks and I slide the bag of candy over to her.

It’s girl’s night and we’re at Madelyn’s house. We grabbed some candy from Sweets, the candy store in town, and then grabbed takeout from Prim + Proper and now we’re sitting in her living room, eating junk food and watching some old nineties movie.

“Is this mask supposed to be sliding so much?” Sutton asks, picking at the sheet face mask near her eye and putting it back in place.

“I was just thinking the same thing. Every time I talk, it moves,” I say with a laugh.

Madelyn giggles, trying to take a drink from her pop but the straw keeps moving and when she finally gets it right, the mask slips.

“Whose idea was it to do the masks?” Sutton asks, pushing the mouth hole back up.

“Yeah, you guys look like serial killers,” Flynn says as he comes into the living room.

I didn’t even hear him come in and I laugh at his joke. Madelyn throws the spare mask at him and he catches it.

“It’s girl’s night. Put the mask on or get out,” she tells him.

He grins, popping a chocolate into his mouth before he tears open his mask and puts it on.

“My skin is going to look so good after this. My pores are going to be nonexistent,” he says, reclining on the floor next to the couch.

“What are you doing home? I thought that you were going over to Maple Bend tonight with the guys?” Madelyn asks Flynn as he steals some fries from her takeout box.

“It got canceled. Toby has the flu or something, so we just decided to do it next week.”

“Well, you can join us for girl’s night,” Iris says and he grins.

“What are we doing tonight?” Flynn asks.

“I wanted to redye my hair,” Sutton says and I nod.

“Me too.”

“Want me to run to the store for you guys?” Flynn offers but Madelyn shakes her head.

“No, I want to get some new nail polish too.”

“I can drive you guys.”

We nod, standing and getting ready to head out.

“You know, I’ve always wanted to know. How did you two meet?” I ask Madelyn and Flynn as we climb into Flynn’s car.

They’re in the front seat and they look at each other, both of their cheeks turning pink.

“It’s a long story,” they say at the same time and I roll my eyes.

“We’ve got nothing but time,” I point out.

“Yeah!” Sutton chimes in.

“We met in college,” Madelyn says and I wait for her to go on.

“Yeah, but how?” I ask when neither of them says anything else.

“Um, a party,” Flynn says but I can tell that that’s not the whole story.

We arrive at the Falls Market and the conversation ends as we all climb out and head inside. Madelyn and Flynn head toward the nail polish display up front, Iris heads toward the snack aisle, and I follow after Sutton to where the hair dye is.

My phone buzzes and I pull it out to see a new text from Hudson.

HUDSON: How is girl’s night going?

Lyla: Good. We’re at the Market now.

Hudson: Stocking up on more snacks? I can make more takeout for you if you’re still hungry.

Lyla: Actually we’re getting hair dye and nail polish.

Hudson: Are you going to go purple again?

Lyla: Maybe. Would you rather I did purple or pink?

Hudson: I’m a fan of the purple but whatever you want, I’ll love.

MY HEART SKIPS a beat at the word love, but I shake it off.

LYLA: Purple it is then.

Hudson: Want to come over to my place after girl’s night is done?

Lyla: Will you be done at Prim + Proper by then? I think we’ll be winding down around nine or ten.

Hudson: I don’t think I’ll be done until eleven or midnight. We need to deep clean tonight. But I can give you a key. I had a spare one made for you.

I'M NOT sure how to take that revelation either.

HUDSON: Swing by Prim tonight when you're done and I'll give it to you and meet you at home.

I BITE MY LIP, debating if I should say yes or just head back to my apartment for the night.

HUDSON: Don't make me beg, Lyla.

Lyla: Alright, I'll see you around nine-thirty. You can't be mad if I get purple dye all over your pillows.

Hudson: I wouldn't dream of it.

I TUCK my phone away, grabbing a box of lavender hair dye from the shelf.

“Are you going with pink again?” I ask Sutton when I notice her eyeing the blue.

“I think so. I don't know that I could rock the blue.”

“I think you could,” I tell her but she shakes her head, grabbing the pink one.

“I like my cotton candy hair,” she says with a smile.

We head up front to join Iris, Madelyn, and Flynn at the checkout counter. Madelyn has about ten different colors in her hands and Flynn grabs his wallet as she dumps them on the counter.

Iris already has a bag of white cheddar popcorn open and is popping a few kernels into her mouth.

And that's when Arlo steps into line behind her.

I watch as she almost chokes on the popcorn, her face turning bright red. I set my hair dye on the counter, peeking

out the corner of my eye as they shift nervously, still not saying a word to each other.

“Hey, Arlo,” Sutton says, coming to the rescue.

“Hey, how’s it going?”

“Pretty good,” she says, setting her dye down next to mine.

“Are you dying your hair too?” Arlo asks Iris and she shakes her head.

“I’d have to bleach it to get it light enough for any other color to show,” she tells him and he smiles.

“Good. I like the red,” he says sweetly and I want to ahh but I have a feeling that the reaction wouldn’t be welcome.

“Thanks,” she says as I pay and then it’s her turn.

She hurries to pay and we wave goodbye to Arlo before we head outside to Flynn’s car and pile in.

We spend the next few hours painting our nails, dying our hair, and asking Iris about Arlo. She insists that she’s just not ready to talk to him yet or try to start a relationship with him yet, so we let it go.

I fill them in on Hudson and me, and Sutton tells us that Teller asked her to move in with him. We congratulate her and help Madelyn clean up before we call it a night.

I wave goodbye to Iris and Sutton and hop in my Jeep to head to Prim + Proper. I stop by my apartment first, grabbing a change of clothes and some other overnight items before I head to the restaurant to see Hudson.

He’s busy in the kitchen, so I wait outside the doors for him to come out and give me the key.

“Hey,” I say as he comes out, looking distracted.

“Hey,” he says, leaning down and giving me a quick kiss.

“Everything alright?” I ask him and he nods, still looking distracted.

Something falls and breaks in the kitchen and I see Hudson biting back a curse but he shakes it off as he looks at me.

“I made you some more food in case you were hungry,” he says, passing me a bag of takeout and the key to his place.

“Thanks, I’ll see you in a little bit?”

“Yeah,” he says, already turning to head back into the kitchen to fix whatever mess was just made.

“See you,” I call, turning and heading for the front door.

I make the short drive over to Hudson’s house, letting myself in and heading into the kitchen to unpack the food.

I smile when I see that the bag is filled with desserts. That man knows me well. I’m not that hungry, so I put it in the fridge for later. Maybe I’ll have dessert for breakfast tomorrow.

I grab my overnight bag and head upstairs to his bedroom. His bed is perfectly made and I laugh as I run and jump onto it.

I need to take a shower and rinse my hair again before I head to bed. I strip, hopping in the shower and grabbing Hudson’s body wash as I step beneath the hot spray.

I take my time, enjoying taking a shower in a bathroom that isn’t the size of a small closet. I towel off, pulling on my pajamas and heading back into the bedroom.

Hudson has a balcony in his bedroom and I go over to the doors, opening them and letting the sound of the water in. It’s a nice not, not too hot or cold, so I decide to leave them open as I lay down in bed.

I never even hear Hudson come in or lie down behind me in bed, but he’s there when I wake up the next morning and I smile as I cuddle closer to him.

“Morning,” he says sleepily and I kiss his chin.

“Morning.”

“Want me to make you some breakfast?” he asks and I shake my head.

“I’m going to eat the dessert that you gave me last night.”

Hudson laughs and I kiss his chest before I climb out of bed. I smile when I see the purple streaks staining his pillowcase. I like that I’m leaving my mark on this place, and I grin as I head downstairs to eat my breakfast.

FIFTEEN



I can't tell if my upset stomach is from being excited to meet Hudson's friends, or nerves. I've changed my clothes three times trying to find the perfect outfit.

At first, I had on a sundress that I borrowed from Sutton but that seemed a little too fancy for a honey food festival. I had tried on cutoff jean shorts next, but that seemed a little too casual and while it was warm out, I was worried that it would be colder up on the mountain. In the end, I settled on a pair of my nicer skinny jeans and a nicer T-shirt.

"They're going to love you," Hudson reassures me as we walk down the stairs of my apartment.

I squeeze his hand, my old sneakers slapping on the steps the whole way down. It's warm, a perfect day for the Honey Festival and I'm excited to finally meet his friends.

We head over to his Range Rover and I see that his friends are already sitting inside. They stayed the night at his house last night and are just here to pick me up. I didn't get to meet them last night since they got in so late.

There's a pretty redheaded girl in the passenger seat, so I head to the back to climb in. There are two guys already sitting in the back and the one who was sitting behind Hudson's seat grumbles slightly as he slides over into the middle seat.

"Guys, this is my girlfriend, Lyla. Lyla, this is Heather, Alex, and Steven."

“Nice to meet you,” I say as I buckle up and they all murmur the sentiment back, but I can feel them studying me, taking me in, and seeing how I measure up.

I can tell right away that they find me lacking. It’s the same feeling that I get around my mom and stepsisters.

Heather especially seems to have a problem with me. She gives me a fake smile before she turns around in the passenger seat and slides her sunglasses on.

Steven starts up a conversation about some other New York chefs and I stare out the window as we head up to Honey Peak. I think it’s rude that they’re excluding me, but I’m also conscious that they haven’t seen each other in a while and are probably just trying to catch up.

We follow some other cars as they head to the designated parking and I hop out as we park, brushing my hands on my skinny jeans. I’m wearing my old Keds and a dark blue T-shirt and I thought that this outfit would be fine for a festival, but compared to Hudson and his friends, I’m wildly underdressed.

Steven, Alex, and Hudson are all wearing polo shirts and dress shorts with boat shoes. They all look like they should be at some fancy yacht club instead of wandering around a food festival. Heather is wearing a pair of jean shorts with a silky tank top and wedge sandals. She’s got three necklaces on, all different lengths so they’re layered over the tank top and I swear that there are at least a dozen gold bangles on her wrist. They keep knocking together and the tinkling is starting to drive me crazy.

I shrug that off too, trying to reassure myself that we’ll be able to walk behind them and I can stay close to Hudson, but part of me has a feeling that today is going to suck.

“Ready to go look around?” Hudson asks me, holding his hand out and I take it, feeling at peace as his familiar fingers wrap around mine.

I smile as the sun shines on my face and we cross the road to the festival.

“So, how did the two of you meet?” Heather asks as she walks on the other side of Hudson, her hand brushing a little too close to Hudson’s for my comfort.

“She rear-ended me,” Hudson tells her, grinning down at me and I laugh.

“He pulled out in front of me out of nowhere, causing me to hit him,” I correct him and he laughs.

“So, you rear-ended him and then asked him for his phone number? That’s quite a move,” Heather says, scrunching her nose up in disapproval.

“Uh, no. Actually, he asked for my phone number.”

“Right,” she says, and it’s obvious that she doesn’t believe that Hudson would ever pursue me.

I wonder if the two of them were ever a thing. It’s obvious that she wishes that they were now, if the looks that she keeps flashing him are any indication.

We get to the front booth and Hudson pays for all of us. He helps me with the wristband and I intertwine our fingers together as we start to walk around the different booths checking out all of the different foods for sale.

There are so many different honeys with different flavors. We walk past some honey-flavored cheeses and other honey-infused foods. There are honeycombs and even live bees for sale at some booths.

Hudson buys us a few different honey flavor sticks and I try half before I give the other half to him to try. We debate our favorites and I smile as he doubles back to grab me a dozen more of the honey cherry kind.

Alex is over at a different booth arguing with the young boy working there about the bees that made this honey, and I roll my eyes. It’s honey and I don’t see what the big deal is.

I thought today was just supposed to be a fun sightseeing day, but apparently Alex and Steven didn’t get the memo. They stop at every booth and ask the vendor about a million

different questions and in the end, they usually don't even buy anything.

We hit the bakery section and I can't help but grab some baklava and some honey cinnamon rolls. Heather rolls her eyes at the baklava, launching into a lecture about how hard baklava is to make and how she wouldn't eat it outside of Greece or top-rated bakeries. I'm determined to not let her ruin my day. I just stare at her as I take a big bite, offering Hudson the other half.

Heather glares at me and if looks could kill, I'd be dead after that move.

Things really go downhill from there.

Hudson's friends are major snobs and, as the day goes on, I wonder how he can stand them. These are the people that he likes and chooses to hang out with?

Maybe I misjudged him, though I've never gotten that vibe from him. Maybe I wouldn't though since he picks every restaurant that we eat at or cooks himself. Maybe I should try to take him to some crappy diner and see how he reacts. I still doubt that he would say anything though.

I stop at another booth as we get ready to head back to the car, grabbing some honey suckers that are shaped like bees, some cookies, jam, and fudge for my friends.

My mom calls as I go to put my wallet back in my purse and I hit ignore. I'm already dealing with a bunch of stuck-up people. I can't throw my mom into the mix now or I'm afraid that I'll snap.

My phone buzzes again and this time it's a text from Sutton. I look up, making sure that Hudson and his friends are all a few booths down before I text her back.

SUTTON: How's the festival going?

Lyla: The festival is good. I just got us some snacks for the next girl's night!

Sutton: YES!

Sutton: And how are his friends? Have they given their stamp of approval yet or whatever?

Lyla: Um...

Sutton: That bad???

Lyla: Yeah. I'm pretty sure that Heather has a thing for Hudson and the other two are just culinary snobs. Well, they're all snobs but Heather is too busy to try to get Hudson's attention to argue with any of the vendors here.

Sutton: Yikes! What are you going to do?

Lyla: We're about to head back to Destiny Falls so I'm going to say I have a headache or something and head home early, I think. I'm not sure that I can handle much more of them.

Sutton: Good luck! Let me know if you need anything! I can call if you need an excuse to leave.

Lyla: Thanks! I'll let you know.

"ARE YOU READY TO GO?" Hudson asks as I tuck my phone back into my purse and I nod.

He takes my hand and all of the bags filled with things that I bought today as we head back to his car.

"Did you have fun?" he asks as we walk a few feet behind his friends and I nod, not meeting his eyes.

I wonder if he can tell that I'm lying. I wonder again if he and Heather were ever a thing. Hudson doesn't even seem to notice the way she acts around him, and I wonder if I should mention it to him. I don't want to look like the jealous girlfriend. Even if that is what I am.

"Are you alright?" Hudson asks, looking down at me with concern filling his eyes.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I say as we reach his car.

“Do you mind if I ride up front? I get carsick if I sit in the back,” Heather says and since she’s already climbing into the seat, I don’t bother to respond.

I end up sandwiched in the back between Alex and Steven, both who apparently have never heard of elbow room because they’ve got their legs spread wide and keep digging their arms into mine.

It’s a long ride back to Destiny Falls.

I’m about to ask Hudson to drop me off at home, but he’s already turning toward his house and I decide to just let it go. I can hang out for a little bit longer before I head home.

We pull into his driveway and Heather leans over laughing at something that she just said and my teeth grind together.

Why does it feel like I’m going to regret this?

SIXTEEN



Well, this is awkward.

I'm sitting at the kitchen counter at Hudson's house, sipping on some wine and watching as everyone else cooks. They keep laughing at inside jokes and speaking in chef shorthand so that I have no idea what they're talking about.

When they found out that I couldn't cook, they had turned their noses up and got to work. I had thought that it wouldn't be that bad to sit and watch them, but now I have to watch as Heather keeps brushing against Hudson and blaming it on the cramped kitchen. I'm sure that that's partly true, but it feels like she's enjoying it a little too much.

I stopped trying to keep up or join the conversation half an hour ago. I've been trying to figure out the best way to excuse myself and head back to my apartment, but it seems rude to leave after they've spent the last hour cooking dinner for everyone.

For his part, Hudson keeps shooting me apologetic looks and trying to change the subject so that I'm included, but that never lasts long.

"So, what do you do for a living, Lyla?" Heather asks and I see Alex and Steven give me curious looks.

"I work at the gift shop of the Mystery Cabin in town," I tell them with a smile.

"How... cute," Heather says with a patronizing smile.

“Yep,” I say, taking a big gulp of my wine as I try to discreetly check the time.

I hate to say it, but I think I would actually welcome a phone call from my mother right now. Anything to get away from this kitchen.

“Are you from here?” Alex asks and I shake my head.

“No, I was born and raised in New York City.”

That at least seems to impress them, but I lose that in the next instant.

“Is that where you went to college too?” Steven asks and I shake my head.

“I didn’t go to college.”

They share a look at that information as Hudson gives me a smile, checking to make sure that I’m alright with being questioned. I force a smile, trying to reassure him, but I think that he can see that I’m not having a great time.

His friends don’t seem impressed by me or any of my answers. It’s obvious that they don’t think that I’m good enough for Hudson, and I wonder if they’re right.

Steven sets some pan on fire, shaking it over the flames and I know that if I tried that then I would probably set this place on fire and burn whatever was in the pan in the process.

They’re making surf and turf. I barely understood all of the ingredients that they mentioned. All I know is that there’s steak, salmon, risotto, bacon glazed green beans, and some kind of fancy sweet potato crème brulee thing and that it all smells amazing.

My stomach growls and Hudson grins at me, passing me a piece of bacon. Heather just glares at me and I don’t think that Alex and Steven heard since they’re busy debating the best piece of meat for some dish that I can’t say.

“What did you do in New York before you got here?” Heather asks and I don’t want to tell them that I did the odd

job that never lasted more than three or four months, tops.

“Um, I did a little bit of everything.”

“Yeah, Lyla here has done it all,” Hudson says like he’s proud of that fact.

None of his friends seem to share the sentiment.

“Dinner is served!” Alex says as he finishes plating the food and I’m excited that tonight might actually be close to ending.

We head out onto the back porch to the table there, and I sit between Hudson and Steven. The conversation turns back to some chefs that they know who opened a new restaurant and butcher shop in Detroit.

I sit silently, eating my food in a hurry. I realize too late that my finishing quickly is a mistake. They look at me like I’m an idiot for not savoring every bite and I’m stuck at the table with nothing to do now but listen to them talk.

“Remember when we went out the night after we graduated from culinary school?” Heather asks and I can’t take it any longer.

“I’m going to head to the bathroom,” I say, excusing myself and Hudson reaches out, his hand squeezing mine as I pass behind him.

I head to the bathroom and splash some water on my face. Today did not go the way that I wanted it to go. I was so excited to be meeting his friends and what that could mean for our relationship and now I’m just desperate to get out of here.

One day with his friends and I’m questioning where I stand with Hudson and if I’m good enough for him. One day and I’m back to feeling lost.

My phone buzzes in my back pocket and I pull it out, hoping that it’s Sutton again or one of the girls and I can ask them to call me so that I can leave this dinner party from hell.

It’s not.

HEIDI: You need to answer Mom.

Heidi: Do you have any idea how rude it is to just not respond?

Heidi: No wonder she's so disappointed in you.

THESE TEXTS ARE the last thing that I need right now, and I blink back tears. I don't even know what she's talking about. My mom hasn't tried to call or text me in days and I answered her last message about the dress size days ago.

I can't do this. I can't do any of this.

My eyes sting as I hold back the tears and I pull up my messages so that I can text Hudson that I have a headache and am heading home. I know that I should go out and say goodbye to everyone, but I just can't. I don't want them to see me close to tears and I don't want Hudson to try to stop me.

LYLA: Sorry to eat and run but I have the worst headache. Have fun and tell your friends I said that it was nice meeting them. I'll talk to you later.

Hudson: Are you alright? Want to lie down here?

Lyla: I'm fine. Just too much honey and sun ☺

Hudson: Are you sure?

Lyla: Yeah, I'll be fine.

I HIT SEND AS I grab my purse from the kitchen stool that I left it on and head out the front door.

I debate texting Sutton, Madelyn, and Iris and asking them if they want to grab a drink or talk, but everything feels too fresh and I just want to be left alone.

I climb up the stairs to my apartment, locking the door behind me before I head back to my bedroom. I peel off my clothes, pulling on some pajamas and collapsing in bed.

The tears come then and I cry. I cry for everything that I'm about to lose.

My father always raised me that if you love someone, then you should want what's best for them. I know that I love Hudson, but am I really what's best for him?

I'm not like him. I don't have anything figured out. I don't have a career or some fancy degree. The most prestigious job that I've had was probably working at that law firm and I hated every minute of it.

Shouldn't Hudson be with someone more like him? I can't even cook without burning something. How long before he grows bored with me or realizes that he could do better and breaks up with me?

Maybe I should do us both a favor and end it now before I fall for him any further.

That thought has more tears spilling free and I wrap my comforter around me, curling up in the center of the bed, and crying myself to sleep.

SEVENTEEN



Hudson's friends left today and I have a feeling that means the end of me being able to avoid Hudson anymore.

That thought is proven true when there's a knock on my door.

I stop packing my bags and head over to answer it.

"Hey," I say as he slips past me into the apartment.

"Hey, long time no see."

"Yeah, how was the rest of your visit with your friends?"

"Fine. It was boring without you."

I force a smile, stepping back when he tries to kiss me.

"What's all this?" he asks, noticing my bags stacked up by the door.

"I'm headed to Chicago for my stepsister's wedding."

"I thought that wasn't for a few more days," he asks with a frown.

"Originally, yes, but I have to be fitted for my dress and help with some other things."

He doesn't look like he believes me, and I swallow hard as I grab the first bag. I packed up most of my belongings. I left the furniture and bigger items. None of it was fancy anyway, and I can replace it later when I get to wherever I'm going.

I already told Sutton and Stan that I was going to be gone for a few months and I figured that they would let me go, but they surprised me by saying my job would be here when I got back.

I'm sure that a big part of that is because it's the slow season, but still, it's nice to know that I'll be missed here and that they want me back here. Part of me wonders if I'll really ever come back though.

"This seems like a lot of stuff for a few weeks visit," Hudson says as he helps me carry the bags down to my Jeep and I nod.

When I look up into his eyes, I can tell that he knows what I'm about to say next.

"Don't," he says quietly, his fingers tightening on the straps of my duffel bag that he's holding until his knuckles turn white. "Don't do this, Lyla."

"I'm so sorry," I sob, turning away to wipe the tears from my face.

"Why?" he demands.

"It's time to get back to my trip," I say, pulling out the envelope of money and passing it to him.

He glares down at it, making no move to take it.

"I have enough to pay you back for the damage to your car. I wasn't going to leave town without paying you back."

"I don't want the money. I never wanted the money. I just wanted you, Lyla."

"It's for you. I owe you."

"I don't want it," he insists.

"I'm leaving, Hudson. It's time for me to take my trip."

"No," he says, taking a step back from me.

He's still holding my bag and I reach out, trying to take it from him, but he holds it out of my reach.

That's it. I snap. This is already hard enough as it is. Can't he see that I'm trying to do the right thing.

I slap the envelope of money against his chest and he reaches for it reflexively.

"It's over, Hudson."

"No, it's not. Why are you running?"

"Why are you doing this? What the hell are you even doing with me?" I half scream and tears start to spill over onto my cheeks.

"What are you talking about?" he asks, looking concerned.

"You've got it all together. You're successful and impressive, and I'm the exact opposite. I have nothing figured out and no plan for the rest of my life. I barely graduated high school, have no idea what I'm doing next week, let alone in five years. I don't know how to cook, my savings account is at zero and I just don't know what the hell you could see in me. You're the whole package and me, well..." I trail off.

"None of that matters to me," he insists, but I shake my head.

"It bothered your friends. None of them approved of me. None of them think that I'm good enough for you and I think that they're right."

"They're wrong. I don't even really like them all that much. We were friends in culinary school and we stayed in touch, but I don't have anything in common with them besides cooking. I hated the way that they treated you on Saturday, and I was this close to kicking them out when you left. I'm sorry, I should have protected you from them, but they're wrong. You are perfect for me. I love you. I don't want anyone else. I don't want someone like me. I pursued you, remember? I can decide what I deserve and what's best for me and I want you. I need you. I love you, Lyla."

"Why?" I ask with a cry, swiping at the tears.

“How could I not? You’re a total badass who does what makes her happy. I love your free spirit. I love that you aren’t afraid to make mistakes or admit that you don’t have everything figured out. So many people don’t have the guts to do that.”

“If you love someone, then you are supposed to want what’s best for them, even if it sucks for you, and I am not what’s best for you.”

“Shouldn’t I be the one to judge what’s best for me?” he demands.

“I’m just trying to put you first, Hudson. Please don’t make this harder than it has to be.”

“I loved you, Lyla. I’m in love with you. Just the way you are.”

I want to believe what he’s saying so bad, but I just can’t. Even my mom calls me a disappointment. Hudson just doesn’t know me well enough yet. Soon he will and he’ll regret saying all of this to me.

He studies my face and I can see when he accepts it.

“I love you, Lyla,” he says, stepping forward and cupping my face in his hands. “I’m complete by myself and so are you. Things are just better together.”

I bite my lip, not sure what I should say to that, but I guess I don’t have to.

“I love you, but until you realize just how awesome and incredible you are yourself, then I’ll never be able to change your mind,” he says as he kisses me slowly goodbye.

He pulls me close to him and I wrap my arms tight around his neck. I don’t want to let him go, but I have to.

“One day you’re going to realize how amazing you are and come back to me,” he whispers against my lips and I choke back a sob.

I hope that he’s right.

“Don’t take too long,” he whispers and I close my eyes, tears streaming down my face.

He kisses me once more, this time soft and over far too soon.

He pulls back, taking a few steps, and I close the back of my Jeep, heading for the driver’s seat. I only make it a few steps before I’m calling after him.

“Hudson! Wait!” I race up to him, staring into his dark green eyes. “I need a longer goodbye than that,” I whisper, throwing my arms around his neck.

“Me too,” he whispers, squeezing me tight to him.

I hug him, inhaling his masculine scent and trying to memorize it. I get the feeling that neither of us wants to let the other go, but I have to.

I let him go, stepping back and wiping the latest stream of tears from my face. We don’t say anything as we break apart this time. I take one last look at his handsome face before I turn and hop into my Jeep.

Backing up and driving out of Destiny Falls and over that bridge that I’ve loved looking at every day for the past few months feels like someone is stabbing me in the heart.

I can only hope that that feeling fades with time and miles.

EIGHTEEN



I drove straight through to Chicago, even though it took me all day and I showed up at my mom's house looking rumpled and exhausted. I cried on and off for the whole trip, so I'm sure that I looked like a mess. I probably could have stopped for the night at a hotel, but that would have meant using the money that I tried to pay Hudson, and that just didn't feel right to me.

My mom and stepfamily live in a huge palace of a house in a small gated community just outside of the city. It's got marble floors, a gleaming stainless steel kitchen, a huge in-ground pool, and a pool house, which is where I've stayed for the past week.

Being with my mom and stepfamily is exactly like I thought it would be, but I've welcomed their demands. Every second that I spend running errands and helping with the wedding is one less second that I spend missing Hudson.

It doesn't stop me from dreaming about him at night though. I wake every morning with tears on my cheeks, more heartbroken than I was when I went to bed the night before. After seven days, you wouldn't think that was possible anymore.

I kick my feet over the edge of the bed, staring out across the pool at the main house. I really don't want to get up today. Luckily for me, I've got some time since if I show up at breakfast with even one hair out of place, I'll be nagged until I come back here and fix it.

I head for the shower, standing under the hot water until I feel human again. I scrub every inch of myself, making sure that I'm shaved and buffed to perfection before I turn off the water and step out.

My mom took me shopping the first day that I got here. She said that it was us bonding, but I know that she just really didn't approve of my wardrobe of ripped jeans and T-shirts. She took me to a salon that first day too and had them dye my hair back to my natural platinum blonde.

I tug on a pastel purple dress that matches my old hair and find the silver flats that my mom bought me to match. Some mascara, lip gloss, and a quick brush of my hair and I'm ready to go.

I hate this.

I look like a Stepford wife. Like one of them.

I miss my purple hair. I miss my ripped jeans and comfy shirts.

I miss Sutton, Madelyn, Iris, and Flynn.

I even miss Stan and the Mystery Cabin.

Most of all though, I miss Hudson.

This place isn't home. I might share blood with my mom, but she's not my family. None of them accept or love me for who I am. None of them care what I want.

Sutton, Madelyn, and Iris have all sent me messages since I got here. Most of them are asking me when I'm coming back, but I still don't know. They sent me pictures of girl's night, all of them with their masks partially slipping out of place as they grinned at the camera. Looking at that picture, I almost felt homesick.

My phone goes off and I look at the screen as I get ready to go to the main house. I expect it to be Sutton or Madelyn, but it's not. It's Hudson.

I know without reading the message that it's my daily *would you rather* question. He's been sending me one every day since I left and it reminds me of the notes on my car. The notes that I still have in a box stored in one of my suitcases.

HUDSON: Would you rather watch nothing but Hallmark Christmas movies or nothing but horror movies?

I BITE MY LIP, debating if I should respond or not. I haven't answered any of them yet but the temptation is getting stronger with every passing day. Seeing his name on the screen, it makes me miss him even more, so I shove my phone into the pocket of my dress and head over to the kitchen.

The chef has laid out the usual buffet for breakfast and I grab a plate, filling it up with bacon and pastries before I take a seat at the table big enough to fit twenty.

I'm the only one down here and I'm guessing that everyone else is still asleep or getting ready for the big rehearsal dinner tonight.

"Good morning," my stepdad Fred says as he sits down at the head of the table, at least five seats away from me.

He has his newspaper, and he doesn't even look up at me, so I don't bother responding to what he said.

"There you are. I thought that you were going to sleep all day," my mom says as she comes in to join us.

I don't bother pointing out that I was down here before her.

She grabs a cup of coffee and the chef slides an egg white omelet in front of her. She eats the same thing every day. Egg white omelet with spinach, tomatoes, and mushrooms, one half of an English muffin with exactly one tablespoon of raspberry jam, and a small cup of seasonal fruit.

I know how she takes her coffee, the way that she looks when she's disappointed in something that I said or did, the

tone of voice she takes with her fake friends.

I wonder what she knows about me.

“I just can’t!” Heidi half screams, half sobs as she slumps into a chair across the table from me.

“What’s wrong, dear?” Fred asks, not bothering to look up from his phone.

The cynical part of me wonders if he’s texting his mistress.

“I just have so much to get done today. I don’t know how I’m going to get it all done!” she wails and I barely restrain from rolling my eyes.

“Don’t worry about it, sweetheart. This is why we have the wedding planner and Lyla here,” my mother soothes her, and my eyes snap up at that.

That’s why I’m here? Guess that’s good to know.

I can’t say that I’m surprised to hear that she didn’t really want me here to catch up with me.

My phone buzzes again and I discreetly pull it out to check as Heidi continues with her dramatics.

TELLER: Miss you, Lyla. The Mystery Cabin isn’t the same without you here.

Teller: Stan says hi.

I SMILE as I read his messages. I can picture him in the gift shop, Stan trying to read the screen over his shoulder as he types out the words.

LYLA: Miss you guys too! Chicago isn’t that great.

Teller: Come back. Stan says that he’ll give you a raise!

Teller: Okay, no he didn't and he wants me to make sure that you know I was joking.

I GIGGLE at that and the sound of joy in this house must be so unusual because it catches everyone's attention.

LYLA: Got it!

I TUCK my phone back into my pocket and continue to eat my breakfast. My mom is frowning at me and Heidi is glaring across the table. Fred is still busy with his phone, the newspaper folded in front of him.

"We'll get started on the to-do list now," my mom says, nodding to me and I shove the last piece of bacon into my mouth before I stand to follow her.

Ruby, the overworked wedding planner, is standing in the foyer, clipboard in hand, and my mom nods toward her before she turns and heads back to the kitchen table.

I sigh, making my way over to Ruby.

"What can I help with?" I ask and she gives me a grateful smile.

I spend the rest of the morning and afternoon picking up decorations, setting up tables at the venue for tonight, and making sure that everything is ready for the rehearsal dinner. I make it back to the pool house just in time to rinse off and change into my dress for tonight.

It's a poofy pink monstrosity and I pull it out, frowning at my reflection. I wonder what Hudson would say if he saw me in this. I want to take a picture of myself and send it to him, but I know that I can't.

I remember what he said about me being awesome and just needing to see it myself. I thought that I would be happy with

family or on this trip, but now I doubt that. I was happy in Destiny Falls with Hudson and my friends.

Did I make a mistake?

I told Hudson that when you love someone, you do what's best for them, you want what's best for them. I still believe that.

My mom is selfish in love. She married for all of the wrong reasons and she's just as miserable today as I remembered her from when I was a kid.

She always has to get her way, always has to be right, and I don't want to be like her. I don't want to win in love if it means that someone else loses.

"We're waiting on you, Lyla," my mom snaps as she pokes her head into the pool house.

"I'm coming."

"Please try to remember that tonight is your sister's night. We don't need any of your hysterics or fits," she tells me, and my fingernails dig into my palms.

I want to scream at her. I want to tell her that I am here doing a favor for her and that she can't treat me like this. That she shouldn't want to treat her daughter like the help but I know that it won't do any good.

I wonder if it's too late to fake a headache or being sick, but I know that my mom would still make me go even if I wasn't feeling well. She wants me here for the pictures. So that she can show her friends the perfect shiny family.

Even if it doesn't exist.

Maybe I've been chasing the wrong thing. I'll never get my dad back, but I had a great makeshift family in Destiny Falls and I left to find something better.

The truth is that there isn't anything better.

"Let's go," she snaps and I grab my purse, swatting the poofy skirt of my dress down as I make my way out of the

pool house and over to the waiting SUVs.

I cram in next to my other stepsister, Holly. She's in the same color dress, but hers is more modern, sleek, and tasteful.

She's ignoring me, busy texting her boyfriend, and I pull out my own phone as the SUV starts to move.

I find myself scrolling through my pictures, smiling as I see the ones of Sutton, Stan, Teller, and I at the Mystery Cabin or of Madelyn, Iris, and Sutton at The Fainting Goat.

I get to the ones I took with Hudson last week and my breath catches as I scroll to one of him smiling down at me.

I can see it then. How much he loves me.

The final piece of my heart breaks as I stare at that picture.

NINETEEN



Hudson: Would you rather stay in during a snow day or build a fort?

THAT WAS the message that I woke up to today. It looks like he sent it around midnight and I wonder if he was headed home or if he couldn't sleep and was thinking about me.

I type out a response, saying that I'd rather make a fort, but I hesitate to hit send.

Last night was rough. I spent six hours with a fake smile pasted on my face as I posed for pictures and made meaningless small talk with the other wedding rehearsal guests.

The wedding rehearsal went well, I guess. Heidi only had two hissy fits, so I guess that can be considered a success. The food was bland, but I'm pretty sure that I was the only one eating it. Everyone else appeared to be drinking their dinner and as the night went on, the vibe changed.

I can't remember how many hands I had to bat away as the party started to wind down. I got slipped at least five business cards, all from men who were married and were there with their wives. I wonder if Heidi knows that this is the life that she's going to have soon. I wonder if she cares or if as long as her husband keeps her in the lifestyle that she wants, she'll be fine with whatever he does. Even if that means cheating on her.

Being around those people last night reminded me of Hudson's friends. They would have complained about the food instead of what everyone was wearing, but it was still the same snotty behavior.

"Get up!" Holly screams as she pokes her head into the bedroom of the pool house.

I jack knife up in bed, staring wide-eyed at the door that she disappeared through. It's six-thirty in the morning, but I should have known that Heidi's wedding day would be the first time that anyone got up before eleven a.m.

The house looks like a tornado went through it. There are people running around, clothes and flowers all over the place. The usual buffet is set up and I snag a pastry as I head over to where the wedding planner is chewing on a fingernail and nervously checking her clipboard.

"Hey, Ruby. How's it going?"

She gives me a look and I laugh.

"That bad, huh?"

"Heidi doesn't like the flowers now because one of the bridesmaids said that they look cheap, so we're scrambling to get different ones put together. Oh, and one of the bridesmaids put on a few pounds so Heidi called her a fat pig and now she's crying in one of the guest bathrooms and we're trying to find a way to let out the dress an inch or so."

"Today is going to suck," I groan and she nods.

"I wouldn't be surprised if one of the bridesmaids dropped," she says and I don't want to tell her this, but I'm thinking of backing out.

I don't even know what I'm doing here. These people don't love me. I don't mean anything to them and if I'm being honest with myself, they don't mean anything to me either. They might be family, but my life is better without them in it.

"There you are! What are you doing standing around? Go get dressed," my mom yells at me as she stomps past me.

I wave goodbye to Ruby, heading up the stairs and into one of the guest rooms where everyone is getting ready.

The king-size bed has been pushed against the far wall so that there's more room for everyone. Garment bags and bobby pins are scattered all over the place and I tiptoe around pairs of high heels as I make my way to the closet where my dress is hanging.

Heidi chose pastel colors for her wedding and I pull out the pastel purple dress. It's just as poofy as the one I was forced to wear last night and I bite back a groan as I pull it off the hanger and head into the bathroom.

The next five hours are like my own personal hell.

I pose for pictures.

I run around in high heels doing my mother and stepsister's bidding.

I don't eat.

That last one might be the worst of all.

By the time we make it to the ceremony, I'm dizzy and light-headed with hunger. I wobble in my heels, clinging tighter to the groomsmen that I'm walking down the aisle with so that I don't stumble.

That move appears to be a mistake because he starts walking closer to me.

"I can't wait to see what's under this dress," he whispers in my ear, and I try not to grimace at his words or the way his breath fans over my skin.

Luckily for me, it's time for us to part and stand on opposite sides of the altar. It doesn't stop him from checking me out and I shiver.

The music changes and the doors open for Heidi and Fred to make their entrance. Heidi looks beautiful and I can't help but look between her and her fiancé, Trevor.

The love and happiness that I expected to see there is missing. Don't get me wrong, they're both smiling, but it doesn't reach their eyes.

For the first time in my life, I picture my wedding.

I wouldn't want something as big as this one. Just a small, intimate gathering with close friends and family. Maybe I'd have the ceremony on the beach or by the waterfall.

I'm startled when I realize that I'm imagining marrying Hudson in Destiny Falls. I knew that I was in love with him, but I never thought about marrying him.

The ceremony starts and I see my mom glaring at me. She stretches her mouth into a smile, or what appears to be a smile. It looks forced and more like a grimace, but I get the message.

I paste a smile on my face, conscious of the cameras clicking around the room and of the people watching us.

The ceremony drags on and by the time they kiss and are announced as husband and wife, my cheeks hurt from smiling for so long. I loop my arm through the creepy groomsman's and let him lead me back down the aisle and outside.

The sun is starting to set and I'm hoping that we can head over to the reception and I can grab a few appetizers to eat before I pass out from hunger.

No such luck though.

"Picture time!" Ruby says, trying to infuse her voice with energy.

She looks like she's aged five years in the last few hours and I give her a sympathetic smile as I pass her and go to take my spot for the first round of pictures.

"Smile," my mom says, elbowing me as she stands between me and Heidi.

I do as I'm told, counting down the seconds until I can head to the reception and get some food.

“Time for your entrance!” Ruby calls and I’m the first one to line up to head inside.

Me and my groomsman, Ryan, lead the way inside and up to the wedding party table. I take my seat, smacking his hand away when he tries to grope my leg.

Heidi and Trevor come in and I applaud along with everyone else. They grin and wave as they head up to their spot at the center of the table, and I almost cry when the first round of food is brought out not long after they sit down.

I inhale all of my food and I’m grateful when the dancing starts and I can make my way over to the snack tables set up in the corner of the ballroom.

“You’re acting like a pig. Control yourself,” my mother hisses at me out of the corner of her mouth.

“I’m hungry. I haven’t eaten all day.”

“And whose fault is that?” she asks me.

“Yours,” I snap back and I think that shocks both of us.

I blame it on the lack of food and the hunger headache mixed with having to fake a smile for the last ten hours. It feels good though. Standing up to her and finally telling her how I think and feel about her.

“Excuse me, young lady?”

“I said it was your fault. You made me run around with Ruby and help all of the other girls. There was no time to eat.”

“You don’t talk to me like that,” she says with a glare. “I’m your mother.”

“No, you’re not,” I tell her flatly. “You’re just some bitch that I have the misfortune of sharing blood with.”

She glares at me and I glare back.

“I know that you want to ask me to leave, but you can’t. Wouldn’t want to cause a scene at your precious princess’s wedding.”

She stomps off and I grab another plateful of food and head outside to call a ride back to her place. It's time that I got out of here and forgot all about these people.

I lean back against the building, staring up at the dark night sky and I frown, feeling sad when I realize that I can't see the stars like I could in Destiny Falls.

My phone buzzes in my hand as I pull up the app to call a car and I smile when I see that it's a picture from Iris. It's of the three girls, crowded around Madelyn's kitchen island with margaritas in their hands.

IRIS: Wish that you were here!

Lyla: Me too!

I WANT to tell her that I'll be back soon, but I want it to be a surprise. My phone buzzes again and I expect it to be a response from Iris but instead it's a call from Hudson.

It's late, close to eleven, and I wonder why he isn't at work. I stare at the screen, wondering if I should answer it or not when my mom comes out.

"Get inside," she says firmly and I look up.

Her eyes flash down to my screen and her eyebrows lift when she sees Hudson's name and the picture of the two of us that I made as his contact photo on the screen.

"You know Hudson Hayes? You should get him to cater Holly's wedding. You know that she and Samuel are going to be engaged by the end of the year," she brags, and I stare at her like she's an idiot.

"I'm not going to ask him that."

"Why not? Obviously, you two seem close."

"We're not. Things ended... weird."

"What did you do?" she demands.

“I came here.”

“That couldn’t have been it. What? Did he wake up and realize that he could do so much better than you?” she asks with a humorless laugh.

I stare at her, refusing to answer that.

I don’t like how close she is to the truth. She must be able to see it on my face though.

“I’m not surprised. You ruin everything,” she says before she turns and heads back into the reception.

My phone dings, signaling that I have a new voice mail and I order the car, wanting to be alone when I listen to what Hudson has to say.

My mom is wrong. I don’t ruin everything. Hudson never made me feel that way either. I thought that I was doing the right thing but I can see now that I’m only hurting both of us.

It’s time for me to go home.

My phone buzzes again, this time with a text, and I look at it as I slip into the back seat of the car.

HUDSON: Would you rather come back or keep making both of us miserable?

I LAUGH, my eyes starting to tear up as I read his words. He knows me too well. I’m pretty sure that the driver thinks that I’m insane and I tip him well as I climb out of the back seat and hurry over to the pool house.

I remember his voice mail then and I pull it up as I kick off my heels.

“Lyla, fuck, I probably shouldn’t be calling you,” he slurs and I can tell that he’s been drinking. “I miss you, Lyla. So much. Destiny Falls is boring without you here. I just want to wake up with you. I want to see you smiling at me. I want you.

I just... please come back to me," he finishes in a whisper and I take a deep breath, blinking back tears.

I want to call him and tell him that I'm coming, but if I start driving right now, I can be back in Destiny Falls tomorrow morning. Maybe I can catch him before he heads to work.

I start packing as soon as possible, throwing everything that can fit into my bags and I haul everything out to my Jeep, throwing it in the back.

I'm headed home. Back to where I belong and I shed a few more tears and I realize that I've finally found where I'm meant to be.

Sure, I still might not have a plan for my future or any idea of what I want to do for a job besides working at the gift shop, but I'm happy and I've found someone who loves me no matter what my plans are. Isn't that more important than some career?

It is to me.

I smile as I stuff the skirt of my poofy dress into my Jeep and pull out of their driveway. It's time for me to go home and get my happily ever after.

TWENTY



I'm exhausted as I pull into Destiny Falls the next morning and I'm headed toward Prim + Proper when I see Hudson's Range Rover in front of me and I get an idea.

The light turns green and I speed up, trying to catch up with him. He slows down as he gets ready to park in front of Prim + Proper and I don't slow.

My front bumper hits him and I grin as he pulls over into the spot and angrily climbs out of his car.

He looks like hell. There are dark circles under his eyes and his mouth is turned down into a frown. He runs his hands through his hair and drags it down his face as he moves to check out the damage.

He looks annoyed as he turns to look at the other driver and I give him a little wave, smiling as he freezes. His eyes widen and I take that as my cue to park in the spot next to him and hop out.

I smooth my damp hands down the skirt of my pastel purple dress as I round the side of my Jeep and Hudson meets me before I'm even halfway to him.

"Lyla," he breathes, dragging me into his arms.

I regret not changing out of the poofy dress now that it keeps me at least a foot away from his body.

Hudson is grinning down at me as he tangles one hand in my hair and cups my face with the other.

“It’s about time,” he whispers and I laugh, happy tears falling down my cheeks.

His lips claim mine then and it is heaven.

He tastes like coffee and sugar and I love the taste. His hands wrap around my waist, pulling me flush against him. I can feel the thick ridge of his cock pressing against my stomach.

I moan, wanting to go somewhere private. I get so lost in Hudson that I forget that we’re in public, standing in the center of downtown Destiny Falls and that it’s the middle of the day.

He pulls away from me, resting his forehead against mine as he breathes me in.

“I love you, Lyla. So much.”

“I love you too,” I tell him as he kisses my cheeks.

“I miss the purple hair.”

“Me too. I’m dyeing it back tomorrow.”

“Good,” he says, trailing kisses across my cheeks and back to my lips.

I wrap my arms around his neck, laughing as Hudson growls and pushes at the skirt of my dress.

“I don’t like this,” he tells me. “I mean, you look beautiful. Prettiest thing that I’ve ever seen, but I wish I could get closer to you.”

“I’m burning it.”

He grins.

“Tell me that you’re here for good.”

“I’m here for good. This is my home now. Here with you,” I say, reaching up and holding onto his wrists as he cups my face in his hands.

“Thank god you realized that. I was about two days from coming and dragging you back here,” he says, trailing kisses up my neck.

I grin up at the bright sunny sky, so happy to see that I didn't ruin this thing that we have.

"I would have killed to see my mom's face when you dragged me away from all of the wedding festivities."

"Do I need to go and have a word with her?" he asks, sounding annoyed that someone might have hurt me.

"No, I told her off and left the wedding reception early. I don't want to have anything to do with her or my stepfamily ever again."

"The trip was that bad?"

"Oh yeah. I forgot how miserable everyone in their world is. It's all about money and status. No one eats anything," I complain and Hudson laughs.

"They sound awful," he agrees.

"They are. I'm glad to be back. I missed you so much."

"I missed you too."

"Lyla!" Madelyn yells as she screams at Flynn to stop the car.

The tires screech as Flynn pulls over and then Madelyn is running over to hug me. Hudson barely lets me out of his reach so Madelyn hip checks him out of the way.

"I wasn't sure that it was you without the purple hair!"

"I know. I need to color it again soon."

"Are you back in town? We can have a welcome back girl's night tonight or tomorrow," she suggests.

"We have plans for tonight," Hudson tells her and she sighs.

"Fine. Tomorrow night then. I'll let Sutton and Iris know about tomorrow night."

She hugs me again and I smile. I didn't realize it before, but my mom and stepfamily never once hugged me while I

was home. I guess this is just further proof that my real family is here.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I promise and she waves as she heads back to the car.

Flynn waves, calling out that it’s good to have me back and I grin, waving as they take off down Main Street.

I’m sure that news of my return is already spreading throughout town and I turn back to Hudson.

“What now?” I ask him as he takes my hand.

“Whatever you want.”

I grin at him. I’ve got a few ideas.

TWENTY-ONE



Hudson

FIVE YEARS LATER...

I HEAD out of Fender and over to my car. I'm late getting home to my wife and I don't want her trying to put our son's crib together by herself. Knowing Lyla, she's probably got all of the pieces spread out around the room and halfway down the hallway.

Fender is my newest restaurant, the one that I opened up in Lilac Harbor. Fender as in fender bender. I named it after Lyla, after the way that we met. It's meant to be an inside joke, and it made Lyla laugh, so that's good enough for me.

It only takes me fifteen minutes to get back to Destiny Falls and I pass by the Mystery Cabin and see that Teller and Sutton are just leaving too. Sutton is seven months pregnant, a month ahead of Lyla, and the two pregnancies have only brought the two of them closer together.

Iris and Madelyn just found out that they're expecting too and I know that all of the women are excited to have kids around the same age together. They're already planning play dates and the kids haven't even been born yet.

I park in the driveway next to Lyla's new Jeep and hop out. We bought her a new car a few months ago when her old Jeep

finally gave out. It had quite a few miles on it, so it was time.

I hurry inside and I'm about to head upstairs when I smell garlic burning in the kitchen.

"Hey," I say, coming into the kitchen and around the counter so that I can kiss her hello.

"Hey, how was work?"

"Good, what are you making for dinner?" I ask even though I can guess.

Lyla has been craving Italian food for the last few weeks, so I've been eating spaghetti, ravioli, and manicotti for weeks, along with a lot of garlic bread. I'm guessing that it's the bread that is burning.

Lyla moved in with me right after she got back to town. I didn't want to let her out of my sight, and it didn't make much sense to have her in that apartment when we were spending every spare second together.

She's gotten a lot better at cooking in the last five years. We usually make dinner together, but I'm guessing that she got hungry or wanted to surprise me tonight. She's mastered noodles, but sometimes when she has to do two or three things at once, something gets slightly charred.

"Spaghetti," Lyla says happily and I discreetly pull the garlic bread out of the oven before it can really burn.

I put the bread onto a plate to cool as Lyla stirs the sauce that's boiling away on the stove.

"How was your day?" I ask and she launches into a story about Sutton crying while watching some commercial on her lunch break and Stan hiding in the kitchen for the rest of her shift.

I listen as Lyla goes on about some of the tourists that they had go through today and I love hearing her sound so happy. She tells me that she walked Bandit this afternoon for Sutton since she had a doctor's appointment. She's been talking about him a lot and I know that she would love a dog. I was planning

on getting her one for our anniversary next week but I want it to be a surprise, so I haven't told her yet.

I help Lyla drain the noodles and plate the food before I grab us some milk from the fridge.

“Smells great, Lyla. Thanks for making this.”

She grins happily as she takes a big bite of the garlic bread. I tell her more about Fender. We found a new chef for it the other week and just changed the menu. Lyla makes me promise to bring her home some of the chocolate fudge cake tomorrow and I make a mental note to grab an apple pie from the bakery downtown too since I know that she loves it.

“Ready to tackle the nursery?” I ask as we finish up dishes.

She nods, smothering a yawn and I smile, letting her lean on me as we head upstairs and into the room next to ours.

We already painted and set up the dresser and rocking chair and I lead her over to the chair, letting her sit down while I go and start unboxing the crib.

I let Lyla pick out whatever she wanted for the nursery. As long as Lyla is happy, then so am I, and I know that she put in a lot of research to know what brands were best.

I get started on the crib as Lyla rocks in the chair.

We haven't talked to her mom or family since Lyla came back to me. Her mom and stepsisters tried to reach out to her after news broke that we were together, but she never returned the calls or texts. When I asked her why, she said that they only cared now because we were together. If they didn't want her before, then she didn't want to pretend that they really did now.

Her stepsister, Holly, reached out to me to see if they could get me to cater her wedding. I had declined, telling her that I would still be on my honeymoon then. They hadn't taken the news of not being invited to the wedding well, but since we never heard from them again, I guess it doesn't matter much.

We went on an extended honeymoon. I wanted to show Lyla all of the places that she had never seen before, so we traveled around Europe, Australia, Greece, before we went to Hawaii.

Stan had been nice enough to give Lyla the time off. I'm sure that it helped that it was during the slow season. We got back just in time to get ready for Madelyn and Flynn's wedding. We were both in that wedding party and with me opening Fender, we were busy. That's why we decided to put off having kids for a few years.

We joke that there must have been something in the water because Lyla, Sutton, Madelyn, and Iris all got pregnant at the same time. They're all due within a month or two of each other.

I get the crib up and I'm moving to put the mattress in when I notice that Lyla is fast asleep in the chair. I smile, finishing up with the crib before I go over to her to carry her to bed.

She barely stirs in my arms and I smile as I tuck her into our bed and head to the shower to get cleaned up.

I hurry through getting ready for bed, wanting to cuddle with my wife.

I knew that Lyla was meant to be mine from the second that she rear-ended me. While we had a few bumps in the road, I'm glad that we finally got our happy ending.

Lyla rolls over as I slide into bed behind her, blinking sleepily at me as I pull her into my arms. She smiles at me, her eyes falling shut as she falls back asleep and I kiss her forehead, closing my eyes and following her into dreamland.

□□□

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WRECKED

DESTINY FALLS

*

This story starts with a break-in.

Madelyn Freya has always had things come easy for her. She's outgoing, smart, pretty, comes from a loving family. So why isn't she happy?

She thought that it was just growing pains, a side effect of growing up in a small town, and that she would be able to find herself when she went off to college.

Instead, she found Flynn.

He broke into her dorm room one night by mistake and, while she should have been terrified, she was drawn to the crazy man.

Now they're graduated and back in her hometown of Destiny Falls. They're closer than ever, living together, and things seem perfect.

There's just one problem.

She's in love with him.

When Flynn gets a job offer halfway across the world, will Madelyn be able to work up the courage to tell him how she really feels before it's too late? Or will her admission ruin the friendship that they have?

ONE



Madelyn

I TWIRL around in my office chair, counting down the minutes until it's time to head home. It's Friday, and that means movie night with Flynn. I would never tell him, but it's my favorite time of the entire week.

My phone buzzes on my desk and I stop spinning long enough to grab it. My foot pushes off and I go twirling once again as I unlock it and smile at the message he just sent me.

FLYNN: T minus twenty-five minutes.

Madelyn: Shouldn't you be working?

Flynn: Shouldn't YOU be working?

"WHAT MOVIE ARE WE WATCHING TONIGHT?" Flynn says as he walks into my office, scaring the crap out of me.

Flynn is tall and naturally thin, something that absolutely drives me insane. With the amount of food that he eats at every meal, he shouldn't be so fit. It'd be really annoying if he wasn't such a good guy.

He's always smiling.

Always.

It's one of many things to love about Flynn. Though I'll admit I used to wonder if he was on drugs. Turns out he just has a good sense of humor and is always looking on the bright side.

Flynn has dark-blue eyes and a thick crop of dark-brown hair that always seems to be just a touch too long, even after he gets a haircut. There's this one section that is always falling across his forehead and it has my fingers twitching to brush it away whenever I see it.

"Are you trying to kill me?" I ask, my heartbeat racing under my hand.

My fingers curl into my shirt slightly when I see that damn piece of hair hanging down across his left eyebrow.

He's over here looking like a damn model, and I'm sure that I look like a mess. I can tell my hair has started to fall out of the bun, so half of my red locks are hanging down around my face and shoulders.

I woke up early this morning to head into work so my eyes probably have dark circles under them and my shirt has a stain on it from when I spilled some mustard on it at lunch.

"Yes. I have been since the night we met, but for some reason you're really hard to kill," he deadpans as he collapses into the chair across from my desk.

"Maybe you're just really bad at it," I tease him and he grins.

Flynn and I met five years ago, and it started with a crime.

Well, sort of.

See, our story starts with a break-in.

I was at college, when one night, this dark-haired man practically leapt through my dorm room window. I had been watching a scary movie at the time and he freaked me the hell out.

I opened my mouth to scream when he looked at the television screen, looked at me with those dark-blue eyes, and said, “You know that it was all a dream, right?”

I stared at him with my mouth open for a solid minute, wondering if he really just ruined the movie for me. Then he stood up, dusted himself off, and introduced himself.

“I’m Flynn, by the way. I like your taste in movies.”

He towered over me, and I had to crane my neck up to maintain eye contact. I should have been freaked out, but I was still hung up on the fact that he had just blown the ending of the movie, so I must not have been thinking clearly. When he gave me that crooked grin and stuck his hand out, his brown hair curling over his eyes, I shook his hand, even if it was against my better judgment to do so.

“Um, I’m Madelyn.”

That one meeting was all it took, and we’ve been inseparable ever since. We spent all of college hanging out or studying together. He came home with me for most of our school breaks and holidays. We even shared an apartment together for our sophomore through senior years.

We were so close that he ended up moving back to Destiny Falls with me after graduation. He said that he could work from anywhere and since he wasn’t sure what his next steps would be, he wanted to take some time to think it through.

That was five years ago, and he’s never left. Something that I will always be grateful for. I don’t know what I would do if he moved away, and I didn’t get to see him every day.

He’s been there for me when I was sick or freaking out about taking over the family business. He’s been my cheerleader and held my hand when I needed the extra support, and I will always be grateful for that.

In the meantime, Flynn built up his own graphic design business and helps me out around the house. I inherited it from my parents when they retired and moved to warmer weather. Truthfully, I think they bought it for me as a bit of an apology

because they dropped the business on me and ended up leaving town right after.

Still, I suppose I can't complain. I don't have to pay a mortgage or rent and it's a pretty sweet house. It's a two story that was just remodeled. It has plenty of room and is just off of Main Street with a superb view of the water.

"What are we watching tonight?" Flynn asks, grabbing one of the chocolates out of the bowl that I keep on my desk and popping it into his mouth.

"Do I get to choose?" I ask, wondering if he forgot that I picked last week, and it's his turn.

"No," he says as he grabs my water bottle and unscrews the cap.

I roll my eyes at him, helping himself to my things.

"So, which romantic comedy am I sitting through tonight, then?" I ask as I click around on my computer, saving the work I had been doing and logging off.

"I'm thinking something classic."

"So, something from the eighties," I deadpan and he smirks at me.

I groan and he laughs, standing up and offering me his hand as I make my way around my desk. My office at the back of the Destiny Falls Market is a bit of a mess, with papers and boxes stacked up everywhere. I'm still working on making this place my own and setting up my own system, so it's a bit of a disaster. My friend Sutton's boyfriend, Teller, is a firefighter, and he likes to tell me that it's a fire hazard. I know he's probably right, but I do better in chaos.

Or at least that's what I like to tell myself, since I hate cleaning.

I slip my hand into Flynn's, doing my absolute best to ignore how it sends shivers down my arm and has my heartbeat running like a thoroughbred after the race bell sounds.

I've been in love with Flynn since the night I met him. He ended up sticking around that night and we watched another movie. I think he could tell that I was homesick and more than a little lonely, so he hung out with me for the rest of the night.

We bonded over movies and our mutual dislike for frat parties, and by the time the sun was coming up, I had a new best friend. We've been best friends ever since.

I also had a pretty big crush on my brand-new best friend.

It was hard not to. He's hilarious, a genuinely sweet guy who is always willing to help out a friend, and he's hotter than all of the guys in a fireman calendar combined.

For five years, I've kept my feelings to myself because I know that if I ever told him, it would wreck everything between us.

He once told me that if a guy was into someone, then they would find a way to be with them. That they would ask them out or respond to texts. Actually, scratch that, I think that we were watching *He's Just Not That Into You* and it was Justin Long's character who said that, but Flynn didn't disagree with it and it seems like solid advice.

Flynn has never told me that he's into me. He's never asked me out on a date or made a move. Sure, he always texts me back, but we're best friends, so that's normal. Things have always been easy between us, so if I told him how I felt, I know that he would let me down easy and then things would be so awkward between us that we would stop hanging out altogether.

And I can't have that.

I need him in my life and if the only way that I can have him is as a friend, then I need to live with that.

Flynn's fingers squeeze around mine as I slip past him and head out of my office, and I don't dare look back. I can feel my cheeks are hot with a blush and I don't want him to ask me why. I'm not sure he would believe it's hot in here when I only started blushing as we were leaving my office.

I'm not that lucky, though.

Flynn gives me a strange look, his finger running over my cheek and I force a smile, praying that he doesn't say anything.

When he doesn't, I'm not sure if I should be relieved or let down.

Flynn is my best friend and usually he can read me better than most. That leaves me with two options. Either he can see how I feel about him and doesn't want to say anything because he doesn't feel the same way and is hoping to avoid all of the awkwardness, or maybe I really have just gotten better at hiding things and not letting my face say everything that I'm not.

"Did you already grab us snacks?" I ask him as we head down the short hallway and out into the grocery store.

"No, I was waiting to see what you were in the mood for."

I nod, grabbing a shopping basket and heading down the first aisle. Flynn grabs the basket from me easily and I roll my eyes at his chivalry as he follows after me.

"I ran into Iris on the way over here," he says as I peruse the chip aisle.

"Yeah? Is she still hiding from Arlo?"

"Yep. Poor guy was unloading beer outside for like an hour and a half just to catch a glimpse of her."

"She hid inside her store the whole time?" I ask, and he nods.

I sigh. Iris is my oldest friend and my best girl friend. We grew up in Destiny Falls together and stayed in touch when I went away to college. She was ecstatic when I moved back and it's been amazing getting to see and talk to her every day. She owns the antiques store in town, Blast From The Past, and has always loved old things. Her shop is right down the street from the market and we grab lunch together most days.

Iris and I are complete opposites. She's quiet and controlled, whereas I can be loud and a bit of a mess sometimes. I'm dramatic and tend to not think things through.

I was the one that nearly got us arrested in high school after we went skinny dipping at the beach. I was the one who convinced Iris to spend an entire summer working on construction sites. The pay was pretty good, and we got a workout in every day! We also got sunburned and came home so sweaty and tired every night that we didn't end up doing much of anything else that whole summer.

I was always able to talk her into things, or maybe she just went along with it because we were best friends. Either way, without me, Iris would have lived a very dull life. Luckily for her, she has me to pull her into a wild adventure from time to time because she tends to think things through so much that she never actually does it.

Take, for instance, her and Arlo. He's a bartender at The Fainting Goat pub, the bar in town that is right across from her store. The guy has been crazy about her since we first went there, but she can barely say two words to him.

I know that she likes him and that they would be perfect for each other, but every time I tell her that, she reminds me about my feelings for Flynn. She says that she'll talk to Arlo when I finally tell Flynn that I love him.

That's not going to happen, so I guess that we're both going to die alone. Well, not alone. We'll have each other.

"Maybe she'll make a move soon," I say and Flynn snorts.

I know what he's thinking and I smile, correcting my statement.

"Okay, okay, then maybe *he'll* make a move soon."

"He's just as awkward around her as she is around him, so if we're waiting on him, then it's going to be a while. We can expect an invitation to their wedding in about fifty years."

I chuckle, knowing that he's probably right.

“Skittles or Starbursts?” I ask him, holding up the boxes of candy for him to choose from, and he grabs both boxes out of my hands.

“Uh, both. Duh.”

“You’re so perfect. How are you still single?” I tease.

The words are out of my mouth before I can think them through. As soon as they’re out there, I wish that I could take them back. We both kind of freeze and I wonder if he’s going to answer me.

I know why I’m still single. It never felt right to be with anyone else. Not when I was in love with Flynn, but he has been single since we met, too. I kept waiting for and dreading the day that he brought someone home with him for the night or introduced me to someone. So far, it hasn’t happened, and that doesn’t make sense because Flynn is the total package.

He’s smart, funny, thoughtful, and a total smokeshow. Anyone would be lucky to be with him, but he’s never seemed interested in dating, or at least he’s never mentioned anyone catching his eye.

I look away from him, grabbing another few boxes of candy and tossing them into the basket before we move on to the next aisle. Flynn throws in some chips and pretzels and I grab popcorn.

“Have you ever thought about dating?” Flynn asks and I notice that his voice sounds a bit strained.

“Not really. What about you?” I ask carefully.

“No.”

His answer is so definitive and I wonder what that means. Does he not want to date or get married? Does he mean that he’s just never met anyone that has interested him?

We’re silent for a moment, the awkwardness seeping into my bones and I think frantically of a way to change the subject.

“What do you want to drink?” I ask after a few minutes, trying to change the subject and get us back to safer ground.

“I’m going to stick to water.”

I nod, grabbing a bottle of Coca-Cola and adding it to the basket.

“Is that everything?”

“I think so,” I say, and we start to make our way up to the front registers.

The market closes in a few hours, but it’s already pretty dead and I smile when I see Chelsea chewing gum and flipping through a magazine behind her counter.

“Hey, boss,” she says when she spots Flynn and me.

“Hey, Chels. How’s it going?” I ask as we start to load everything onto the belt.

“Pretty slow,” she says through a yawn.

Flynn and I check out and then I follow him over to his car. He’s parked out front in one of the spots next to my own car and I drop my bags into his trunk.

“See you at home?” he asks and I nod.

“Did you decide on a movie yet?”

“Why? Are you trying to decide if you should come up with an excuse and bail?” he teases and I grin.

“Of course not! I would never do that to you.”

He grins back at me and pulls me into his side for a quick hug.

“*How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*,” he whispers against my hair and I groan, sagging against his side.

“Not again,” I beg.

“It will be fun. You’ll love it.”

“Are you forgetting that I’ve already watched it with you like five times?”

“Yeah, but you didn’t appreciate the beauty of it then. This time will be different,” he says as I pull back from him and I roll my eyes but head over to my car.

He shoots me that smile that I love, the one that has my knees feeling weak and my stomach flipping over like I’m on a roller coaster that just did the big drop. I swallow hard, looking away before I can do something to embarrass myself.

Some days I wish that I could get rid of my feelings for Flynn. It would certainly make being his friend a lot easier, but I’ve loved him for so long now that I just can’t imagine not wanting him. I can’t picture myself loving anyone else either. He’s the only one who I’ve ever been into.

Growing up in Destiny Falls means that everyone knew everyone. It also means that everyone dated everyone else in high school and I just always found that so strange. It was like we were just passing partners around, and that seemed sort of... incestuous. Aside from that, the guys in my class weren’t exactly all catches.

I met Flynn my second week of college, so I never really got to explore my options there either. Or I guess I could have, but after I met Flynn, I never felt the urge to look at other guys.

I shake my head, trying to get my hormones under control as I head over to my car a few parking spaces down from him.

“See you at home!” I call before I climb in and he waves and climbs into his own car.

I watch him drive past and let out a deep breath. I feel like I’ve been slipping lately around him and I can’t have that. I don’t want to mess up what Flynn and I have. I can’t lose him as a friend and that means keeping my emotions under control.

Now I have ten minutes to get myself back to normal so that I can just be his friend as I’m forced to watch a romantic movie with the man that I love.

I sigh as I shove the key into the ignition and start my car.

I think I'm going to need a little bit more time.

TWO



Madelyn

FLYNN IS GETTING the living room all set up by the time that I walk through the front door and I smile at him as I pass by the doorway and up the stairs to the second floor. After sitting in my office all day, I'm looking forward to showering and changing into some comfy pajamas for movie night.

Maybe if I stretch out my legs, Flynn will give me a foot rub.

I smile at that thought as I turn into my bedroom. I have the master bedroom of the house. I was going to leave that room open in case my parents ever came back, but when they gave me the keys, I got the impression that the house was all mine and that they never intended on living here for any amount of time.

I knew that they didn't want to stay in Michigan. They were starting to complain more and more about the winters here and the heavy lifting at the market, and I knew that they were looking forward to retiring.

That was one of the reasons why I moved back here after my graduation. I knew that I would have a job all lined up.

I guess that I also thought that if I was here, my parents would want to stick around a little more or come visit more

often, but when we see each other, it's always me going to them.

My parents haven't been back once since they retired. They live in Arizona now with my grandma. She needed help since she was getting older in years, and so it worked out. My parents get to enjoy the sun and warmer weather, help out my grandma, and they've made their own friends out there, so they always seem to be keeping busy.

Flynn's room is just down the hall from me and I pass it as I head into mine. The house has three bedrooms and two-and-a-half baths. It was a little too stuffy when we first moved in, but we've managed to make it ours over the last year.

The artwork on the walls is some stuff that we picked up when we were in college, and having it here just reminds me of the apartment that we shared in Lansing. We added a few colorful rugs to the main living areas and spent an entire week painting all of the rooms so that they weren't the boring beige that was here when we first moved in.

Now the place is modern and bright, and it actually feels like home for both of us.

I hurry to hop in the shower and I smile when I see Flynn's body wash on the shelf. I ran out this morning and ended up stealing his. I meant to grab a new bottle when I was at work, but I forgot. I guess he hasn't noticed that it's gone yet.

I squirt some onto my bath pouf and try not to think too much about his scent being all over me. I've always loved how Flynn smells. It's clean, but not too minty or overpowering. Not like some guys who douse themselves in cologne or Axe body spray.

I know that Flynn is waiting on me, so I rush to rinse off and turn off the water. As soon as I step out of the bathroom into my room, he yells for me.

"Hurry up!" Flynn calls up the stairs and I roll my eyes.

"Go ahead and start without me!" I call back, knowing that he never would.

I can hear him grumbling as I slip on my pajamas, grab the throw blanket off my bed, and head downstairs to join him.

How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days is already queued up on the screen and I grab the bowl of popcorn from his lap as he presses play.

The usual upbeat romantic soundtrack starts to play as Matthew McConaughey and Kate Hudson walk on screen. I can see Flynn grinning at me out of the corner of my eye, but I ignore him and rip open the box of Starbursts. I pass him the orange one without looking and he unwraps it as he stares at the screen.

I do the same with a pink one and when I glance up, Flynn is staring at me, his eyes locked on my mouth.

“What?” I ask, wondering if I have something on my face.

“Nothing,” he says quickly, turning back to the movie, and I wiggle deeper into the couch cushions.

We’re silent until the characters head to the movies together. I know what’s coming next, and I look over at Flynn.

“You know? I think I might actually prefer that someone did this to me than some grand gesture. The movies always try to make weird things seem so romantic.”

“Like what?” Flynn asks, smiling as we start to bicker.

“Like when a guy rips the girl’s shirt off. That’s not hot. That’s just annoying. Now my shirt is ruined and if there’s buttons, then who do you think is going to get stuck cleaning all of that up?”

Flynn rolls his eyes, but he’s grinning and I know that he knows that I’m right.

“Okay, so don’t rip clothes, but that’s just one thing,” he points out.

“It’s more than that. It’s all of this over-the-top nonsense, too. I mean, I feel like if anyone ran screaming my name

through an airport, I would just be embarrassed. Not turned on.”

“So, what did you mean by you wish that someone would do this instead of some grand romantic gesture? Took you to the movies?”

“No, punched me in the face,” I tell him with a straight face and he starts laughing.

Flynn grins at that, turning to face me more on the couch.

“Really? Cause he just got knocked out. I think that might be worse,” Flynn says as some guy at the movie theater punches Matthew McConaughey’s character.

“Hmmm, nope, I think I’d still rather have that happen.”

“That’s because you’ve never been punched in the face before.”

“And you have?” I challenge and he nods.

“Yeah, I have.”

“What? When?” I ask, turning to face him more and he reaches over, pausing the movie.

I sit up more, eager to learn something new about him.

“Remember that night our junior year when we went to that party at the Alpha Sigma Phi house?”

I frown. This is not where I thought that he was going with this. I thought that the fight had been before we ever met.

“Um, vaguely,” I say slowly, my brain already working to remember that night and everything that happened.

“Well, Randy Peterson tried to shove his tongue down your throat.”

“What?!? I don’t remember that.”

“I’m not surprised,” he mumbles, and I glare at him.

“What does that mean?”

“Your grandpa had just passed away, remember?” He asks gently, and that night starts to click into place.

“Yeah,” I say quietly.

“And we went out because you didn’t want to mope around in our apartment all night. You said that you needed something new to help take your mind off of everything. Then you heard about that frat party and even though we both hated them, you wanted to go. I wasn’t about to let you go there alone. I’m glad that I didn’t because you ended up getting pretty drunk.”

I try to think back to that night, but I don’t remember much besides my mom calling me with the news and me crying on Flynn’s shoulder. He had offered to set up a movie night, but I wanted to get out and turn off my brain for a little bit.

I don’t really remember much of the party, but I know who he’s talking about.

Randy freaking Peterson.

Ugh.

We used to joke that it must have been because he was so rich that he was able to get into the frat, since no one really liked him. Even his “friends” in the frat tended to make fun of him and keep a safe distance.

Randy was a total asshole. He was loud and abrasive. He used to act like he was God’s gift to women, but he was single for the entire time that we were at college. I haven’t kept in touch since we left, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he still hadn’t found anyone dumb or desperate enough to go out with him.

“Randy Peterson was a disgusting creep,” I remind him and he shoots me a look.

“Trust me, I know, and besides, it wasn’t like you were into it. You were trying to get him off of you when I came into the room.”

Flynn sounds so pissed, like he's still upset about something that happened years ago, and I swoon a little bit. He's always been so protective of me. That was one of the reasons why I felt comfortable enough to go to a frat party back then. I knew that he would take care of me and keep me safe.

“Where were you?”

“You were dancing and got hot. I went to get you a water and when I came back into the living room, you had wandered off. It took me like five minutes to find you in the crowd and I got there just in time to pull him off of you.”

I nod, motioning for him to go on.

“I dragged him away from you, but he didn't like that. He punched me and gave me a black eye.”

“I remember the black eye,” I say carefully as I try to think back to that party.

“We left shortly after that and you passed out on the way home. When you asked me about the black eye, I told you that I bent over and hit it on the counter the night before.”

“Why didn't you tell me what really happened?”

“I was worried that you would be even more upset, and you were already dealing with a lot with all of the funeral stuff. If you didn't remember, I didn't want to remind you. I made sure that Randy stayed far away from you for the rest of college.”

We're both silent for a minute until I lean over and wrap my arms around his neck.

“Thanks for being there, Flynn.”

“Always, Mads.”

I smile at the nickname that only Flynn ever calls me, and he picks up the remote and starts the movie again.

I try to get lost in the plot, but I can't stop thinking about what Flynn said. Flynn nudges me and I force a smile, leaning

my head on his shoulder so that he can't see my face.

"I can feel you thinking," he murmurs, his breath fanning a few stray hairs across my forehead, and I shake my head.

"I'm just thinking about how cheesy this is," I whisper back. "Shh, I need to concentrate on not throwing up."

He chuckles, the vibrations passing through his body and into mine. I'm hoping that he lets it go, but I'm not that lucky.

"Maybe you just need to find the right guy and when he does something like that, something like ripping your shirt off, you'll love it," he suggests, and I freeze.

My mind immediately fills him in as the right guy, but I can't say that.

I clear my throat and pretend to think about it.

"Nah, I think that even if Bucky Barnes was a real person, I wouldn't like it. I mean, I can't see him doing any of this anyway, but even then, I would find it annoying."

"You and Bucky Barnes," Flynn grumbles and I laugh as I pull away from him and grab my water bottle.

"He's the perfect man!"

"In what way?" he asks, entirely serious.

"He's so hot."

Flynn scrubs his hands down his face and I laugh.

I lean back against the armrest on my side of the couch, stretching my legs out and nudging his leg with my toes.

"Picture what that metal arm could do, Flynn! Those fingers..." I trail off and he throws a pillow at me.

"Pervert," he jokes and I laugh harder.

The movie keeps playing, but Flynn turns to face me and I stop laughing, relaxing back against the couch armrest. He grabs one of my feet and starts to rub, his thumbs digging into the sole of my feet. I have to fight not to moan at how good it feels.

“What?” I ask when he doesn’t say something after a full minute.

“You know who looks a bit like Bucky?”

“Sebastian Stan,” I joke, and he tickles my foot.

“No, smart-ass.”

“Who then?”

“Gavin.”

“Gavin Desote? The mechanic?” I ask.

“Yeah. He’s single too.”

My stomach drops at his words.

Is he really trying to set me up with someone else? One of his friends in town, no less?

I guess that just proves that he doesn’t see me as anything more than a friend, and while I knew that before, it still hurts to have it reinforced now.

“Do you think that he would be into me?” I ask and I could swear that Flynn’s smile falters, turning fake and brittle around the edges.

His hands tighten around my foot slightly and I frown down at his fingers. He releases my foot instantly and starts to go back to rubbing.

“Sure,” he says, but the word is clipped, none of the earlier lightness remaining in his tone.

“I don’t,” I admit. “I’ve met him like a hundred times and all he ever does is ask me about my car. I’m not sure that we have much in common”

The tension in the room starts to lessen and I clear my throat, looking back toward the TV screen. I forgot that the movie was still playing and I try to get back into it, but I can’t.

“Besides, he’s a nice guy, and I know that he’s your friend and all, but he’s always so stoic. I feel like me going on and on about something would just annoy him.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” Flynn says, his shoulders relaxing as he glances away from me and back to the TV.

“What about you?”

“I don’t think that Gavin would be into me either.”

“I meant, is there anyone else, dummy.”

“No,” he says, but he doesn’t sound so sure of that and suddenly I’m wondering if I’ve missed something.

Flynn is a graphic designer, and he works from home. He has friends in town, but he spends most of his time here at the house. Could he have been going out with someone for lunch? Some nights I work late and I wonder if I’ve somehow missed him going out on dates.

“You can bring girls home if you want,” I say, even though the words taste like dirt and feel like shards of glass coming up my throat.

“Great,” Flynn mumbles, and I wonder why he’s in such a bad mood.

Maybe he’s having girl trouble already? Should I offer to help? Could I help? I’m not sure that I trust myself not to give him bad advice and break them up so that things can stay the way they are right now.

“And I can help you out with any relationship trouble,” I grit out, trying not to show just how much I hate the thought.

I’m trying to be a good friend, but God is it hard.

“Uh-huh,” Flynn says, crossing his arms over his chest and going back to the movie.

“Flynn,” I start.

“There’s no one to talk about, Mads.”

I know that he’s lying. It’s just something in the tone of his voice, in the way that he’s avoiding my eyes.

Part of me knows that eventually things will change. He’ll meet someone and we won’t be doing movie nights anymore

because he'll be going on dates. Maybe she won't like how close we are and we'll end up drifting further and further apart until we barely talk anymore.

My eyes sting and I realize that I'm close to crying, just imagining it happening.

I study his features, and he turns to look at me.

"I promise. It's just you and me."

His words have hope building inside of me, but I know how dangerous that is. I can't start thinking that he likes me too or who knows what I'll do. I might be okay being spontaneous in other areas of my life, but I can't put my relationship, my *friendship*, with Flynn in jeopardy.

I shove down the hope, biting my tongue so I don't just blurt out my feelings. He's still staring at me and I clear my throat, trying to get myself under control. If he thinks that I'm acting weird, he doesn't show it.

I study him for another moment before I finally nod.

"Just you and me."

THREE



Madelyn

I'M WORKING through the order forms the next day when my office door opens and Flynn strides in, a wicker basket that I've never seen before in his hand.

“Hey, what are you doing here?” I ask him, eyeing the picnic basket.

“I thought I would take you to lunch. It's a beautiful day out and none of the tourists are in town yet, so we can head down to the beach and eat.”

“Ooh, that sounds amazing. I've been cooped up in this office for too long.”

“You could stop working so hard,” he points out and I sigh.

“I know, I know. I just need to get my own system in place and then I can streamline stuff.”

“You could hire someone.”

I shrug, and he reaches out his hand. We've had this conversation before, and I'm glad that he's not dragging it out right now. I know that I need to find a better work-life balance.

I'm sure I'll get there.

Maybe.

“Let’s go then.”

I take his offered hand as he leads me around my desk. I smile at him gratefully, trying not to see how much I miss his touch when he drops my hand a minute later.

We sneak out the back door of the market and zigzag through the small parking lot there, waving at a truck driver who is busy unloading our latest shipment. Chelsea is there and I wave at her as we head over to the sand and down to the beach. Flynn takes my hand again as I bend over and take off my socks and shoes and I try to convince myself that the goose bumps spreading on my arms are just from the cool breeze.

The wind picks up my hair, blowing the red strands into my face, and I laugh as I push the mess back. I take a deep breath, enjoying the feel of the sun on my skin and the scent of the beach in my nose. I already know where we’re headed. Flynn found this one secluded spot a few months ago when we came out here for a walk after work one night. It’s half-hidden behind a cluster of trees and some larger rocks.

The water is a bright blue with waves gently lapping at the shore and I listen to them crash along the sand and rocks, letting it relax the tension in my shoulders.

“How was your morning?” I ask and he shrugs, glancing back at me over his shoulder as we head farther down the beach.

“I had breakfast with Gavin before he opened the shop and we ran into Teller.”

“At the diner?” I guess.

There really aren’t that many dining options here in town. Especially not bright and early in the morning. One of the drawbacks of small-town life, I guess.

“Yeah. He was grabbing breakfast for Stan and Sutton.”

I nod and we continue to make our way down the beach, my feet slipping in the cool sand with each step. Flynn turns back to smile at me, his eyes sparkling in the midday sun.

“Are you doing okay?” he asks and I huff out a breath as he laughs.

I didn’t even realize that I was breathing so hard. I’ve been spending too much time sitting behind a desk. I need to start exercising a little more.

“I’m going to start working out,” I tell him, and he grins.

“I’ve heard that before.”

“You can join me,” I offer.

“Oh yeah?” he asks and I nod.

Flynn works out a few times a week. He loves hiking and kayaking, so if he’s not over at Gavin’s or Arlo’s working out with them, then he’s out in nature being active.

It shows. His body is sculpted and toned in all the right places.

Abort! Do not check out your best friend!

“For real this time! I hope that you packed me a salad for lunch because that’s all I’m eating from now on.”

“Stop, you’re perfect... and I packed you one of my famous grilled cheeses.”

“That sounds so good,” I half moan.

I can practically taste the melted cheese and all thoughts of salads or working out leave my head. I sink down onto the sand in the shade of the rocks and I expect Flynn to do the same, but he surprises me.

“I brought a blanket,” Flynn says, digging it out of the picnic basket and I raise my eyebrows at him.

“You’re so fancy!”

“Hardly,” he says, shaking his head at me.

“What’s the special occasion?” I ask as I help him lay it down on the ground and then crawl onto it.

He doesn't look at me as he starts to unpack the food, and I cock my head.

"Flynn?"

"I was thinking about what we were talking about last night," he starts, and my stomach drops.

"Oh my god, you didn't invite Gavin, did you? Because he's cute and all, but I'm seriously not into him."

"No, no, nothing like that," he promises, and I start to relax.

"Then what's all of this for?" I ask again. "There aren't really that many eligible bachelors in town, and I mean, I know everyone that you do."

"It's not about setting you up with someone," he promises me.

"Then what is this all about?"

"I was thinking about what you said about all romance movies and stuff being cheesy and I thought that maybe I should try to get you to change your mind."

It feels like my heart is doing somersaults in my chest and I do my best to still act normal.

Flynn is my best friend. He's just sick of me giving him shit over his taste in movies. That's all this is. Do not blow this out of proportion.

Apparently, my heart doesn't get the memo because it is still beating out of control in my chest.

Does that mean that he wants to be my knight in shining armor? Why else would he be doing this? Should I tell him how I feel? Or is he about to do that?

"I figure that it will make Friday night movies with you more enjoyable because you won't be rolling your eyes every five minutes," he teases as he reaches into the basket for some water bottles and the smile that was forming on my face slips off.

That's why he's doing all of this? I really need to get my expectations under control. If he hasn't had feelings for me in the last five years, then he probably never will. Maybe I should find someone else. Not in Destiny Falls because I already know everyone, but I could try to convince the girls to go to Maple Bend or Lilac Harbor for our next girls' night and we could hit up a club there.

"This looks great. Thanks for thinking of this," I tell him as I start to add some fruit salad to my plate.

"No problem," he says easily, as he dumps some chips onto each of our plates.

I pop a barbeque chip into my mouth and look out at the water. There are only a few boats cruising around and a few people fishing off of a dock nearby.

"Maybe we should get a boat?"

"Don't you get seasick?" Flynn asks as he adds a grilled cheese to my plate.

"They make medicine for that. I would be fine."

Flynn shrugs and I sigh.

"Yeah, it's probably not a great idea. Maybe we should go camping."

"You hate camping," he reminds me and I frown at him.

"Maybe I'll like it this time," I say tensely, and he grins at me.

"What's with all of this wanting to do things that you hate?" he asks, and I sigh again.

"I just feel like I'm stuck in a rut. Like I need a new goal to work toward."

"How about learning to love romance movies?"

"Something else. This is nice and all, but I don't see how it's supposed to help me fall in love with romance movies."

"We're acting them out."

My eyebrows rise so high that I'm sure that they're lost somewhere in the mess of black hair that has escaped from my bun and is blowing across my forehead in the wind.

"We are? Which one are we acting out with this?" I ask, not sure what to make of all of this or of Flynn's intentions.

"A classic. *Pride and Prejudice*."

"Ahh, I see. You know, I didn't hate that movie. It wasn't cheesy like all of the rest."

"See! It's working already then!"

"If this is *Pride and Prejudice*, then when do we go to a ball?"

"I didn't set that up," he says, looking apologetic.

"Bummer. I want my money back."

"I'll just tell someone walking by that I never want to dance with you in a minute," he answers smoothly, and I crack up.

"Good, good, and when will you insult my entire family?"

"I'm getting to that," he assures me, laughing along with me.

I finish off my food and move my plate out of the way, lying down on the blanket and closing my eyes.

"You should take more time off," Flynn says and I know that he must be noticing the dark circles under my eyes from my sleepless night last night.

"I will. Being outside makes me realize that it's been a while since I've been out in the sun."

"I'll have to drag you away for more picnics then."

I smile, raising my hand to shield my eyes as I look over at him.

He moves the picnic basket out of the way and stretches out beside me.

“How’s work?” I ask and he rolls his head my way until our gazes clash.

His dark-blue ones are almost the exact color of the water and I wonder if that’s why I love the beach so much.

It shouldn’t be so monumental. Him looking at me, that is, but every time our eyes meet, fireworks start to go off inside of me. It’s been like this since the night that we met and maybe I should be used to it by now, but it still gets me.

His eyes glint and I wonder if it’s just the sun. I could swear that it seems like he has something that he wants to say. I can practically see him trying to form the words. His mouth opens... and nothing.

He blinks, looking back toward the trees and the spell is broken. I take a deep breath, wondering when I started breathing so shallowly.

What were we talking about? His work, right? So why does it feel so much more important than that?

“Flynn?” I try and he blinks and sits up, staring out at the water for a beat before he looks over at me.

“Good. I got a new client this morning, so I’m waiting for them to fill out some forms before I can start on their project.”

We go back to enjoying the weather, the only sound the crashing of the waves onto the shore and the traffic from the nearby streets.

“Are you having a girls’ night tonight?” he asks and I shake my head.

“No, that’s tomorrow. Iris is at some flea market today and she didn’t think she would be back until later. I think that Lyla was supposed to be going with Hudson over to Lilac Harbor to look at a few places, too.”

“Is that where he’s opening his new restaurant?”

“Yeah, I think so. As long as he can find the right location, anyway.”

“I wonder what he’ll serve at this one.”

“Are you seriously hungry right now after we just got done eating?” I ask with a laugh and he leans back on his elbows to look down at me with a grin.

“I’m a growing boy!”

I roll my eyes, moving until I’m sitting cross-legged.

“I should get back to work,” I say with a sigh as I roll out my shoulders and Flynn nods.

He looks over, catching me trying to rub the back of my neck and without saying anything, he takes over. His large hands swallow the back of my neck and I relax under his touch.

He moves some of my hair out of the way and I smile at how gentle he is.

I should be used to this. We touch all of the time and it’s always felt natural, but not this time. Maybe it’s because of that moment before, the one where it looked like he wanted to say more.

Either way, I can feel something new, some kind of energy or awareness prickling at my skin. It sinks into my veins, running under my skin and as his fingers smooth away the tension in my shoulders, I can’t help but wonder what it would be like for him to be rubbing me in a different way.

Or on a different part of my body...

As soon as my mind goes there, I leap to my feet.

He’s just a friend.

He’s just a friend.

He’s just a friend.

I repeat it to myself over and over again, hoping that it will sink in. My heart is beating like a drum in my ears, drowning out part of my chant.

“Are you alright?” Flynn asks and I can see that he’s worried about me.

“Oh, yeah!” I say, scaring both of us with how high pitched my voice sounds.

Flynn doesn’t look convinced, so I clear it, willing my face not to turn beet red as I close my eyes.

“I’m fine,” I try again, and I’m relieved when I sound like my normal self. “I ... I just realized that I need to turn those order forms in before two.”

“It’s only one now,” he says, checking his phone.

“I know, but I wasn’t done with them.”

“Okay... let’s get you back to the market then.”

I can tell that he doesn’t really believe me, that he knows that something weird just happened between us, but he doesn’t say anything. What’s even stranger is that he doesn’t seem concerned that I jumped away from him. In fact, he almost seems happy by my reaction.

I help him clean up and pack everything into the picnic basket before I follow him back to the market. As we go, I can’t help but wonder if this was simply just Flynn doing something nice for me, or if there’s more to it than that.

I’m not sure which option I want it to be either.

FOUR



Madelyn

“WHAT’S with all of the flowers?” Lyla asks as she walks in the front door, take-out bags stuffed full of boxes from her boyfriend, Hudson’s, restaurant, Prim + Proper, in her hands.

That had been my question when I first came home as well. Flynn was standing in the living room with that boyish grin I love so much. I couldn’t help but return it. I even allowed myself to fantasize that we were married, and I was coming home from a long day at work to my loving, doting husband.

But then Flynn started listing off movies where the guy gave the girl flowers as he passed me a bouquet of peonies. It was about the movies. Of course, it was.

He left to go hang out with his friends shortly after, leaving me to try to figure out what all of this meant. I’ve been trying to convince myself it’s just about his new game to get me to like chick flicks, like he says, but I can’t shake the feeling that this is something more.

I’ve been grappling with it for the last hour and a half and I keep swinging back and forth on explanations. Is he trying to tell me something? No, I’m just reading too much into it, filling in the blanks with what I desperately wish would happen. Then repeat that back and forth and back and forth until I’m so worked up that I can barely think straight.

I haven't been looking forward to explaining all of this to my friends. I know that they'll want to talk about it and examine everything he's said and done in the last few days. While one part of me wants to do that too, the other part of me knows that they could get my hopes up about something that just isn't true.

I thought about canceling girls' night or asking if we could do it at a different place, but by the time that I got home and saw everything, it was too late to cancel.

"Flynn got them for me," I tell her and I know what her next words are going to be before she says them.

"Are you two finally together?" she half shouts as she dumps the bags of takeout onto the kitchen counter.

I wince, already dreading this conversation. "No, this is... something else."

"What?" she asks as the front door opens and Sutton walks in.

Iris is right on her heels, her red hair twisted up into a messy bun on top of her head, and it sways as she comes to an abrupt stop right inside the door. I wave at both of them, but they're too distracted by the flower shop in front of them to notice me over in the kitchen.

"Whoa. What's with all of the flowers?" Sutton asks, and I sigh.

"Oh my gosh," Iris says, turning to me with wide eyes. "Did someone die?"

She half whispers the words and I can't help but smile.

"No, nothing like that. These are from Flynn."

"Oh, good. I know that your grandma was—Wait, what?" Iris asks, her head whipping around to look at me.

"Flynn?" Sutton asks, staring at me too.

Both of their eyes light up and they rush into the kitchen. *Ugh, looks like the floodgates are open and we'll be rehashing*

the details all night.

“You two are finally together? Why didn’t you call me?” Iris asks, her mouth stretched wide into a bright smile.

“No, this is something else.” I repeat to her. My jaw is clenched as I bite the words out, but I take a breath and try to relax. My friends are just trying to help, but I’m already so twisted up about Flynn, I don’t know if I can handle their opinions.

Still, I owe my friends a little bit of an explanation. I can see Lyla getting frustrated with my vague answers, and I get it. I know I’m being dodgy.

“What does that mean?” Sutton asks, looking around at all of the bouquets of flowers.

“He’s trying to get me to appreciate romance movies.”

“By buying out the nearest flower shop?” Iris asks, her fingers smoothing over a rose petal on the nearest vase of flowers.

“I don’t know,” I say, as I start to unpack all of the food that Lyla brought with her. “Is this Hudson’s steak and frites?”

“Yeah, but don’t try to change the subject. What’s going on with you and Flynn?” Lyla asks.

“And why are we just now finding out about it?” Sutton adds.

“Because I don’t really know what’s going on either,” I tell them as I take a seat at the counter.

I know they’re not going to let this go, and that I’m not getting out of girls’ night without discussing this, so I might as well get it over with.

“We were watching *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* on Friday night and I was teasing him about how cheesy they are.”

“You don’t like romance movies?” Sutton asks, looking at me like I kicked her puppy.

“I don’t mind them, but I prefer comedies or action movies,” I say almost apologetically. “But I mainly just say that stuff to get a rise out of Flynn.”

She nods, seeming appeased by that answer.

“We started talking about them and why I didn’t like them and I thought that we were just hanging out. Then the next day he showed up at the market with a picnic for us.”

“Ahh,” they all say at once and I roll my eyes, but I can’t bite back my own grin.

“We ate lunch on the beach and he told me that he’s going to try to get me to see the beauty of those kinds of movies. So, he’s trying to reenact the more romantic parts of movies.”

“That is so sweet,” Sutton gushes and Iris nods.

“I know, right? I mean, does Hudson even care about me?” she asks sarcastically.

I laugh as I pass her one of the take-out boxes.

“I’m serious. I’m going to have to have a talk with him when I get home.”

“I’m texting Teller right now,” Sutton says and I laugh when I see that she really is on her phone.

“So why haven’t you told him how you feel?” Iris asks as she takes a seat next to me at the counter.

“Yeah, this seems like a pretty clear sign that he’s totally into you too,” Sutton says, taking the seat next to Iris.

“You know what else was a pretty clear sign? The way that he looks at her, treats her, acts around her,” Lyla lists off as she takes a seat on my other side.

“It’s not like that, though. We’re just friends,” I remind them, but the usual strength behind that statement is missing.

Are we?

I need to stop thinking about this before I drive myself insane or beg Flynn to explain what’s going on between us.

“Did Hudson find a place over in Lilac Harbor?” I ask her, trying to change the subject.

She cuts her eyes over to me and I can see that she doesn't want to, but she relents and lets me get away with it. I have no illusions that we'll be back on Flynn soon enough, though.

“He did, actually. It's right on the water and close to downtown. I think he was going to put an offer in on it today. Grab it before someone else does.”

“That's exciting! Are you going to get a place closer to Lilac Harbor then? Or somewhere in the middle?” Sutton asks and Lyla shrugs.

“I like the place here, and it's not that far of a drive. I guess we'll have to see what happens. He might not even get the place,” she points out.

“That's exciting though. Growing the empire and all of that,” Iris says before she pops a french fry into her mouth.

“He wants to get married,” Lyla blurts, and Iris chokes on her wine.

“Congratulations!” I say, turning to give her a hug.

“He hasn't officially asked and I haven't said yes,” she adds.

“How do you know that he wants to, then?” Iris asks, looking just as confused as I feel.

“He's been dropping hints,” Lyla admits, pushing some of the food around on her plate without actually eating any of it.

“Okay... and why haven't you said yes? Because he hasn't officially asked?” Sutton asks, pausing.

She was halfway out of her seat to congratulate her too, but she sits back down on her barstool.

“He knows that I wanted to take things slow between us.”

“Wanted?” Iris asks and Lyla frowns.

“I love him. We already live together and I know that I want to be with him for the rest of my life. He’s my family.”

“So, you do want to marry him, then?” I clarify and Lyla bites her lip but nods.

“Yeah, I do.”

“Tell him that!”

Sutton and Iris are both grinning and nodding along.

“He’s so in love with you. You guys are perfect together,” Sutton adds.

Lyla grins and I can tell that she’s cooking something up in that crazy head of hers. I wonder if I should give Hudson a heads-up that she’s planning something but who am I kidding? He loves Lyla’s crazy side. He loves all of her.

“You could have a summer wedding. Or maybe in the fall, once the tourists have started to leave and everyone isn’t as busy,” Iris adds.

“Do you want something big? We can go to Maple Bend and look at wedding dresses soon!” I add and Lyla shakes her head.

“Something small, but we need to pump the brakes. I’m not even engaged yet.”

“Soon,” Sutton singsongs and Lyla throws a fry at her.

“Maybe it can be a double wedding,” Lyla says, and I wonder who she’s talking about.

“Are you and Teller...” I start to ask, but Sutton shakes her head.

“No, we haven’t been together that long. I’m all for taking things slow right now.”

“But soon you will be,” Iris says, and it’s a fact.

Sutton and Teller are made for each other. I wouldn’t be surprised if she had a ring soon, too.

“We’ll have to ask Flynn for some tips on proposing and weddings and all of that,” Lyla says, and I know that she’s bringing things back around to Flynn and me.

“Yeah, I’m sure that Flynn would love to help,” I say, and she seems annoyed that I’m not taking the bait.

“Help with what?” Flynn asks as he joins us in the kitchen.

“No more flowers?” Iris asks, and he grins at her.

“The flower shop was out.”

“He bought out an entire flower shop?” Sutton whispers at me and I can see her melting inside at all of the romance.

“More like there’s no more room inside of the house,” I joke.

Flynn wanders over, looking in the empty take-out boxes and frowning. I pass him my half-eaten plate, and he beams at me before he takes it and starts to eat.

“I thought that you were going out with the guys?” I ask him and he shrugs.

“We did, but then Gavin got some emergency call and Arlo got called into work, so Teller and I thought that we would just come here and hang out.”

“Teller is here?” Sutton asks, looking around for her man.

“Yeah, he’s outside. Stan called as we were getting out of the car.”

She nods distractedly, her eyes locked on the front door. I wonder if I look that lovesick when I’m around Flynn too.

“Should we watch a movie then?” Lyla asks innocently, but I know her and she’s up to something.

“Sure,” Iris says, already sliding off of her stool and heading for the living room.

Teller walks in and heads straight for Sutton. I look away as he kisses her and find Flynn staring at me.

“What are you in the mood for?” he asks me and it takes me a minute to realize that he’s talking about movies.

“Whatever you want,” I say weakly.

I follow after my friends into the living room and when I see that the only open spot is wedged next to Flynn on the overstuffed chair, I get why Lyla was grinning at me.

Flynn shifts around, making a little more room for me, but it doesn’t really help. We’re plastered together. Part of me is frustrated at my friend’s meddling, but the bigger part of me is happy to have an excuse to touch Flynn. Even if it’s going to kill me.

Iris picks a movie but I couldn’t tell you what it is. All I can focus on is the way Flynn feels pressed up against me, the heat coming from his body, and the way his scent wraps around me, making me dizzy.

When the couple on screen starts having sex, I want to sink to the floor or maybe run to the kitchen and stick my head under the cold water. I need to do something so that I don’t throw myself at Flynn and beg him to ease the ache forming between my legs.

“Are you okay?” he whispers in my ear when I start to squirm in my seat.

“I’m fine. My butt is just falling asleep,” I lie.

Flynn moves over a little more, trying to give me more room and I force myself to smile at him before I go back to staring blankly at the TV screen.

After a few more minutes of me shifting restlessly, Flynn drops his arm from where it was slung around my shoulders, curling his hand around my hip instead. He tucks me into his side and adjusts me so my legs are resting across his lap. God, I want to curl up against him and bury my nose into the side of his neck. I want to feel his warm touch everywhere, his fingers gliding up and down my curves.

By the time the movie ends, I'm a turned-on mess, and when I look over to Lyla and see her grin, I know she's aware of exactly the effect sitting this close to Flynn has had on me. I'm glad we dimmed the lights when the movie started, otherwise everyone might see how flushed I am.

I know she's hoping that the close proximity forces me to admit how I feel to him, but I can't do that. Flynn means too much to me and I can't lose him.

I let out a sigh of relief as we say good night to everyone and head up to our own rooms.

I survived girls' night.

I'm a survivor.

Unfortunately for me, the ache is still there and I'll be sleeping alone tonight.

"Good night, Mads," Flynn says quietly and I pause before I head into my bedroom, turning back to smile at him.

"Night, Flynn."

"Sweet dreams," he says with a smile before he heads into his own room.

It's more like dirty, sexy dreams, but I don't bother to correct him as I head into my room and collapse down onto the bed.

FIVE



Madelyn

I DON'T BOTHER LOOKING up when Flynn walks into my office a few days later. I know that it's him before he even opens his mouth. It's too late for lunch and too early for dinner, so I know it's not one of my friends coming to see if I want to grab something to eat. Besides, it's Monday, and I know everyone is at work today.

"Want to go shopping?" Flynn asks as he leans against the open office doorway.

"Like for food?" I ask him without looking up from my computer.

"No, something a lot more interesting than that. Think sexier," he says, and that gets my attention.

My core clenches at the word sexier coming from his perfect mouth and I try not to flush. My mind starts to fill with dirty thoughts and I blink hard, trying to get back to the conversation at hand.

"What?" I ask as I look over at Flynn.

He moves closer to my desk, giving me an easy smile, and I wonder why he's so dressed up.

"What's with the suit?" I ask, and he gives me a grin.

I can count the number of times that I've seen Flynn in a suit and tie on one hand, and I wonder why he's all dressed up today.

Flynn is hot when he's in an old pair of jeans and a plain T-shirt, but seeing him all dressed up and smiling at me like that, he's earth-shatteringly gorgeous. My heart kicks into overdrive and I suck in a shaky breath as I try not to show my reaction to that look.

"It's *Pretty Woman* time," he says easily, wiggling his eyebrows, and I laugh.

The tension that had started to choke me dissipates and I relax in my office chair.

"So, I'm a prostitute in this scenario?"

"It's only for one day."

"Oh, cool," I say sarcastically.

"So, do you want to go shopping?" he asks again, and I lean back in my desk chair.

"Are you going to buy me whatever I want?"

"Of course. As the rich benefactor in this scenario—"

"I make more money than you and you live rent-free in my house."

"Okay, then maybe I should be Julia Roberts in this scenario," he says after a beat and I roll my eyes.

I log off of my computer and stand.

"I like your way better," I tell him and he just smiles that easy smile of his as we head out of my office.

"I parked out back," he tells me and I nod, following him out the back door and over to his car.

"Where are we headed?" I ask him as he opens the passenger door for me.

"I thought we could go over to Maple Bend? Or maybe Honey Peak if you wanted."

“Maple Bend sounds better. They have more shops.”

“Whatever you want, pretty woman.”

We roll the windows down as we turn onto Main street and start to cruise along the coast.

“It’s so nice out,” I yell over the wind.

“You need to get out of that office of yours more. It’s been nice all week.”

“I’ll have you know that I was up front this morning.”

“Stocking or working the register?”

“Both,” I admit.

I love how well Flynn knows me. I’d like to say that it’s just because we’ve been so close for years, but we’ve clicked from the moment that we met.

He puts on the Pretty Woman soundtrack and I laugh as he sings along. He’s terribly off-key, but that just makes him even more endearing.

Maple Bend is the town to the east of Destiny Falls. It’s a lot like our town. They’re both small towns right along the water, but Maple Bend is more upscale than Destiny Falls.

Our Main street is filled with kitschy gift shops, ice cream parlors, and a few other tourist trap places. Maple Bend is lined with modern restaurants, cute boutiques, and a handful of tourist gift shops.

Flynn parks in front of a string of clothing stores and we climb out.

“Am I going to get to say big mistake today?” I joke and he laughs.

“You can, but I’m guessing that everyone is going to treat you nicely.”

“Big mistake,” I retort as he opens the door for me and he follows me inside, laughing the whole way.

The store already has beach and summer clothes out and I get sucked in by the bright colors and fabrics.

“That’s pretty,” Flynn comments as I pull out a bright-pink swimsuit cover-up.

“Do you think that it would force me to go to the beach more?” I ask him as I hold it up against my body.

“Definitely.”

I let him take the hanger from me and add it to the small pile of clothes hanging over his arm.

“Maybe I should start to try on a few things now. I don’t want the pile to get too heavy for you.”

“Oh please, this is nothing,” he says, and I force a laugh when he flexes his arm.

My eyes stay locked on his bicep for too long and I turn to the nearest rack so that Flynn doesn’t notice. Unfortunately for me, that rack is filled with lingerie.

“Oh no,” I whisper.

“What?” Flynn asks and I tuck my hands behind my back, turning and pretending to browse at some nearby stands.

Luckily for me, Flynn doesn’t bring up the lingerie, and we move toward the back of the store.

“This reminds me of my parents’ vow renewal,” Flynn says as I head into the changing room.

“Oh, my gosh! I forgot all about that,” I say as I laugh.

“We spent four hours looking for a dress for you.”

“Only for them to throw paint on it five minutes after we got there,” I finish, tugging the first sundress over my head.

“I’m still sorry about that,” he says, and I hear him lean against the wall next to my changing room door.

“I should have expected it. The invitation did describe the ceremony as a ‘vibrant rebirth.’”

Flynn's parents live on some commune in upstate New York. They moved there when he was eighteen and had started college, so going to visit them was a bit of a shock to both of us.

They were very welcoming, and they're truly lovely people. They just tend to be a little more touchy-feely than I would like. Flynn says that they've always been like that, but the crystals and chanting and nude morning yoga are all new.

"Remember when your mom tried to convince you to do that morning, Tai Chi?"

"The naked one, you mean?" Flynn asks dryly, and I grin as I open the door and step out for him to see.

"Yeah, that one."

"Hmm," Flynn says distractedly, his eyes moving over the short, flirty dress. The skirt ends a few inches above my knees and is maybe a little shorter than I would normally wear, but I love how pretty it makes me feel.

"I like it. What do you think?" I ask Flynn.

"Yeah, get that one for sure," he says, and he sounds strange, like he just woke up or his throat is a little scratchy.

I twirl around and head back inside the changing room to try on the next outfit. This one is a dressy silk tank top. I grab a jean skirt to try on with it and hurry to get changed.

"The commune was pretty though," I say, picking back up on our conversation.

"Yeah. They seem happy there."

"Have you talked to them recently?"

Flynn and his parents only talk about once a month or so. They don't have great cell phone service where they're at, so they have to go to the nearest town to get in touch with him.

My parents only talk once a month too, but that has more to do with them staying so busy. They're constantly going on cruises or day trips. If they happen to be home, then they're at

the senior center or running my grandma to doctor appointments.

“Not in a few weeks,” he says, and he doesn’t seem concerned about that.

I wish that my parents and I were closer. Growing up, everything was about the business. I was their only child, and they pushed a lot of their hopes and expectations onto me.

Sometimes it was hard to be the daughter that they wanted. I used to think that if I could just be smart enough or make the market successful enough, that they would show more of an interest in me, but I’ve increased sales on the market for the last two quarters and they’ve only told me that’s exciting before moving onto the subject.

I should be used to their lack of interest in me, but I can’t deny that it still stings.

“Mads?” Flynn calls and I step out in the tank top and skirt.

“I don’t think that I have any shoes to go with this,” I comment as I do a spin for him.

“So, we need to go shoe shopping next, is what you’re saying?”

I just smile at him over my shoulder before I head back into the changing room.

“Want to grab lunch or something to eat after this shop?” he asks as I put on the last outfit.

“Maybe grab something small?” I call back.

“Ice cream?”

“You read my mind.”

“I wish,” he mumbles and I frown.

“What?”

“Nothing. Did you have another outfit?”

“Yeah. Just a second,” I call back and I slip on the capris and shirt.

I like this shirt more than the other one and contrary to what Flynn said, I’m not going to try to spend all of his money today.

“I think I’ll get this top instead,” I say as I come up and Flynn nods.

“Get both,” he offers, and I shake my head.

“I’ve got enough clothes. We should really be looking for you.”

“I’ve got enough clothes too,” he argues, and I roll my eyes.

“You have like four T-shirts. Oh, and apparently a suit,” I add, motioning to his outfit.

“And that’s enough!”

“It’s really not,” I promise him.

I head back into the dressing room before he can argue with me anymore and get dressed in my own clothes.

I hang everything that I tried on back onto their hangers and head out to join Flynn. He’s back in the store, browsing the jewelry section, and I nudge him as I head toward the register.

I try to pay, but Flynn grabs my card before I can swipe it and uses his own.

“It’s not *Pretty Woman* if I don’t pay,” he reminds me.

“I’m buying ice cream then.”

“We’ll see.”

The cashier is smiling at Flynn like he’s the best thing that she’s ever seen. Jealousy flashes through me, and I take a step closer to *my* Flynn and make sure to give the cashier my most saccharine smile as she bags the clothes and passes it to Flynn.

“Thanks,” Flynn says as he takes it from her and I can’t say that I’m not happy to see that he didn’t even notice the other girl.

Flynn drops the clothes off at his car and I watch as he sets his suit jacket in the trunk, too. He’s rolled up his sleeves and I notice that the tie is loosened around his neck. It should make him look tired or maybe even sloppy, but instead he’s even hotter.

I look away before I can start drooling and we head farther down the sidewalk to the ice cream parlor on the corner. It’s an old-timey place that’s been around for as long as I’ve been alive. I know what I’m going to have before I even walk inside.

“The Nutter Butter with extra peanut butter drizzle is really good,” I tell Flynn as he opens the door for me.

“Are you going to share with me?”

“Depends on if you get something that I want too.”

He chuckles as we head up to the counter and I put in my order right away. Flynn takes his time browsing all of the options before he settles on the berry cheesecake.

“Good choice,” I compliment him and he nudges my shoulder with his.

“Does that mean that you’re going to share?”

I don’t answer him. Instead, I take out my debit card and pay before he can beat me to it.

“I was going to pay,” he grumbles.

I don’t say anything back and instead thank the guy working behind the counter and push back out onto the sidewalk.

“Want to take a walk on the boardwalk?” I ask, nodding toward the wide pier off to the left.

“Sure.”

We walk in silence for a bit, enjoying our ice cream and the warm weather.

“Tourists are going to start overrunning this place soon,” he comments and I nod, taking a swipe of his ice cream.

“Couple more weeks,” I say with a sigh.

“Are you not looking forward to it?”

I shrug.

“I know that it’s good for all of our businesses, but I hate the traffic and them taking over the beach.”

“We could go on a vacation. Maybe even just spend a week or so up in Honey Peak in one of the cabins there.”

“Maybe,” I agree.

Flynn takes a seat at a bench at the end of the pier and I join him.

“Did you want to go look at shoes or a different store?” he asks and I shake my head.

“No, I’ve got enough clothes. Unless you wanted to look?”

“Sure, if you want. Do you need to get back to the market?” he asks after a beat and I shrug.

“I should... but I can just go in early tomorrow and catch up. I’m having fun out here.”

“Me too,” he says, resting his arm along the back of the bench.

His skin brushes against mine and goose bumps break out down my arms. I can feel the hairs on the back of my neck prickling with awareness at his proximity.

I try not to let my feelings for him show as I finish off my ice cream and follow him back to his car.

SIX



Madelyn

I'M at work the next day, helping with stocking in the canned vegetable section when Iris wanders down the aisle toward me. She's wearing her usual jeans, sneakers, and a T-shirt with Blast From The Past Antiques emblazoned across the front.

Her red hair is twisted up into a high ponytail that bounces with each step. As she gets closer, I can see a streak of dust on her arm and I know that she's been busy working.

I wonder if I'm covered in dust too...

"Hey, you! What are you doing here?" I ask her as I wipe my hands off on my jeans and stand up.

"I just got done with inventory and was looking to take a bit of a break. I thought that I would come over here and see if you wanted to grab lunch with me?"

"Sure. Just let me finish up stocking this box and then we can head out."

She nods, bending down and helping me add the cans of soup to the shelf.

"Wait, is it already lunchtime?" I ask, twisting my wrist to try to get a look at my watch.

"It's actually a little late for lunch, but I figured that you hadn't eaten yet, or if you had, it probably wasn't much."

“Have you been talking to Flynn?”

“Not recently. I just know you, though. You’ve been working so hard ever since you came back to Destiny Falls and took over the market.”

“I know,” I admit.

I’ve been hearing about my work schedule from Flynn more and more and I know that he’s right. I’ve been trying to prove a point, to show my parents how successful I am, how good I’m doing with the family store, all in the hopes that they finally notice me, maybe even praise me.

So far, that hasn’t happened.

All I’ve gotten was a few distracted phone calls and a sore back from staying hunched over my desk or stocking shelves for hours on end.

I love my parents and I know that they love me too. They just don’t love me in the way I wish they would. It’s taken me a while to realize why I’ve always felt distant from my mom and dad, even after they bought me a house and gave me the family business. You’d think we’d be a tight-knit family after something like that, but more and more, it’s starting to feel like they dumped their old life on me so they could go on and live the life they missed out on while raising me.

I was an accident, a happy one, they say, but still an accident. Nothing like being told you were unplanned at the ripe age of ten. What was I supposed to do with that information? My mom told me they were already struggling to turn a profit at the store and had only been married for a year when I came along. Neither one of my parents ever explicitly said I made life more difficult for them, but they didn’t have to. I’ve picked up on the not-so-subtle hints over the years.

My parents are crazy about each other. They’ve always been head over heels for the other and growing up, I wanted a marriage just like that. The only problem is that it felt like they loved each other so much, there wasn’t really a ton of extra

love or attention to go around. I didn't even know that's what I was missing, what I was craving, until Flynn came along.

The first time our eyes met, I felt seen. Like really, truly *seen*. Understood in a way that's still hard to explain. Flynn seems to always be aware of me, anticipating my needs before I can voice them. He's so freaking thoughtful, too. It's not that my parents were uncaring, they just never went the extra mile. Flynn is over the top in the best way, as was demonstrated by the ridiculous amount of flowers currently taking up the house.

I've mostly come to terms with the fact that my parents probably won't give me the kind of affirmation I so desperately long for, but I still find myself falling into old patterns. Growing up, I tried to be the perfect daughter, all in the hopes that they might include me in their little bubble. That never happened, but once I met Flynn, I guess I stopped caring as much.

Maybe it's time that I take a break. I have a house that's paid off, no student loans or other crazy bills, and money in the bank. I'm never going to get what I want from my parents. Maybe it's time that I go after something else that I want.

"How are things going at Blast From The Past?" I ask Iris, forcing myself to stop thinking about Flynn.

"Good," she says with a smile. "I already sold most of the finds from the last flea market trip. I need to get some of them packed up for pickup and the rest are being shipped out tomorrow. I'm thinking about making another run out there next week. It's kind of far away, but it seems to be worth it."

"That's awesome! Maybe I'll take a day off and join you."

"That would be cool. I hate making the drive by myself."

"Because you have to go over the bridge," I guess, and she nods.

Iris has hated driving over bridges since she was a kid. She avoids going down to the lower peninsula as much as she can because of it. I think that it was all of the coverage when we were younger about workers falling from the bridge and dying,

because she's been scared to go near the Mackinac Bridge ever since.

We finish stocking the shelf and I push the cart with the rest of the boxes into the back storage area and head to my office to grab my purse from behind my desk.

"Where did you want to go?" I ask Iris as we head outside and she nods over toward The Upside Diner.

"Sounds good. I haven't had one of their burgers in forever. We've been living off of food from Prim + Proper for weeks now."

"Oh no, having to eat five-star meals all of the time. Your life must be so terrible," Iris deadpans and I laugh.

"It's a hard life," I say as we cross the road together and head inside the diner.

It's only half-full because it's close to two in the afternoon and everyone has already eaten their lunch. We grab a booth toward the back and I slide in across from her. Neither of us bother grabbing a menu from behind the napkin holder. We've been coming to The Upside Diner since we were little kids, spending our allowance on milkshakes and fries.

"Hey, Suzie," we say in unison as our waitress ambles over to our table.

"Hey, girls. Long time, no see."

"We were just saying that," I tell her and she gives me a welcoming smile.

Suzie is a staple at the diner. She owned the place with her late husband and after he passed a few years ago, she started working more. She says that she likes to keep busy. I think that I would be the same way if I lost my other half.

"What will it be, girls? The usual?"

We nod, and she doesn't even bother writing it down on her pad. She just nods and heads back behind the counter to tell the cooks our order.

“We haven’t grabbed lunch in a while,” I comment and she nods.

“I know. I’ve been busy with the shop and you’ve been spending all of your time with Flynn.”

“Is that why we’re here? So you can grill me about Flynn?”

“Part of it,” she admits.

Iris has always been a straight shooter. She was the one to give me the hard truths, even if I hated hearing them. She’s the realist of the two of us, and I’ve always appreciated her honesty. Maybe not in the moment, but in the long run. I’m glad that she isn’t trying to lie or beat around the bush now, too.

“What do you want to know?” I ask, gearing up for this conversation. My stomach has been in knots for days, and there’s a pressure in my chest that won’t go away. It gets worse every time I fall into thoughts of Flynn.

“It’s not so much information that I want. I wanted to ask you a question instead.”

“Okay,” I say slowly, wondering where she’s going with this.

“I just want to know why you think that Flynn is doing all of this?”

“He just wants me to like his movies and not give him such a hard time when it’s his turn to pick from now on,” I tell her.

That explanation comes rolling off of my tongue. It’s been what I’ve been telling everyone for the last week and a half. The only problem is that I’m not sure that anyone is believing it anymore. Including myself.

“Okay, but that hasn’t mattered to him for the last five years. So why does it matter now? It just seems all out of the blue, right?” Iris asks and I’m saved from having to answer by Suzie coming back with our food and drinks.

It's lucky too, because I don't know how to answer Iris's question.

She's right. Flynn and I tease each other all of the time and me ragging on his movie choices has never bothered him in the past, so why is he doing all of this now?

I take a sip of my chocolate milkshake and mull over her question. Iris eats in silence, occasionally glancing up at me. That was always another one of her tactics. She's never been afraid of sitting in silence and she knows when to give me space to think. She knows that I won't be able to sit without talking for long and she'll get what she wants out of me then.

I'm sure that she knows that I'm mulling over her question now and she's giving me time to think it through. I know what I *want* it all to mean, but saying it out loud is a big step. It makes it real. And once it's out there, I'll have to do something about it.

"I don't know," I hedge.

"Maybe you should finally tell Flynn how you really feel," Iris suggests gently.

My heart starts to race just thinking about telling Flynn that I love him and I'm not sure that I'm brave enough to actually get the words out.

"I'm having fun on his movie dates," I tell her quietly, and she gives me a small smile.

"At least you're finally admitting to yourself and someone else, out loud, that you love him. That's baby steps, I suppose."

I realize then that I called them dates. Of course, Iris picked up on that.

"I know what you want from me, and I want that too, but..." I trail off.

I'm starting to get sick of all of these excuses of mine. Even if some of them are more than just excuses.

“But you can’t lose Flynn,” she finishes for me.

“I know that you think that he’s in love with me and that we’re going to get this big happily ever after if I can just work up the courage to tell him how I feel, but I don’t see it. I don’t see the way that he looks at me. Or at least I don’t see it as love.”

“It is,” she argues, and I shake my head.

“That’s how he’s always looked at me, Iris. If it was really love, *a romantic love*,” I stress, “then maybe the fact that he hasn’t said anything in five years is a sign.”

Iris seems to deflate at my words, but she doesn’t say anything for a moment.

“Would you really take that risk?” I ask her, and she chews on a fry, mulling over my question. “With Arlo? You could ask him out. Everyone knows that he’s crazy about you. Everyone has told you that he’s so into you, but you don’t ever act on it. Could it be because you’re afraid that he’ll say no and you’ll have to see him around town all of the time?”

“I’m not looking for a boyfriend right now,” she starts and I roll my eyes.

She hasn’t been looking for a boyfriend for as long as I’ve known her.

“You aren’t willing to risk it and you barely know Arlo and could avoid him pretty easily. Flynn is my best friend. We live together, we hang out all of the time. Losing him or having to avoid him isn’t going to be easy.”

By the time that I’m done talking, I’m worked up, my breathing coming fast, my food all but forgotten before me. Sure, I’ve had all of these thoughts ping-ponging around in my head, but hearing myself rattle them off only serves to drum up more fear.

“Okay, Madelyn, I get it. I’m not in your position and I don’t know what I would do if I were. It’s a tough decision, but I would argue that it’s worth it.”

I sigh, dropping my head down into my hands.

“If you don’t tell him, what happens? You both stay single forever? Can you handle that? Can you handle if he doesn’t? If he gets a girlfriend? Moves out?”

“I don’t know,” I whisper, blinking fast to try to stem the tears that are welling in my eyes.

But I do know. It would kill me. Just imagining him with another woman makes the pressure in my chest tighten a notch. And him getting married? Moving out? Leaving me?

“You need to figure it out,” Iris says matter-of-factly. “Because I have a feeling he’s waiting for you to make a move, to give him some inkling that you’re into him.”

I nod. I know she’s right. I can feel it between us, that things are changing. I’m always second-guessing myself around him lately and wondering if something is a sign or all in my head.

I feel like I’m walking on a tightrope and I know that eventually, I’m going to need to jump before I fall.

Iris pays the bill when Suzie drops it off and we head back outside.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you,” she says as we cross the road back to the market.

“I know. I know that I need someone to give it to me straight, and I’ve always respected it when you do.”

“I just want you to be happy, Madelyn.”

I nod and she leans over, wrapping her arms around my shoulder in a tight hug.

“Love you, Iris,” I whisper against her hair.

“Love you too, Maddie.”

We used to say that to each other all of the time when we were kids and the memory makes me smile. I miss how things

were back then. Everything was so simple. Sometimes I wish that I could go back in time.

We part ways and I head back inside the market to finish my stocking. Her words stay with me long after our lunch though and when I head home for movie night, I wonder if tonight is going to be the night that I work up the courage to finally tell Flynn how I really feel about him.

SEVEN



Madelyn

FOR ONCE, I'm home before Flynn is on Friday night. I've been trying to be more mindful about my work hours and have been heading home right at five every night. It's been nice to see that the sky doesn't fall if I don't spend all day, every day, at work.

Maybe I'm finally learning to let go a bit, not only of my work habits, but the driving need to please my parents. I'm finding more and more that I just want to be home so I can hang out with Flynn. God, I'm so in love with him that it's insane.

Flynn texted me to let me know he was out on a hike and taking some pictures, but that he would be home in time for our movie night. That was close to an hour ago now, so he should be home any minute now.

No sooner do I look at the clock on the microwave than the front door swings open. My palms grow sweaty, and my heart thuds unevenly in my chest. I'm still not used to the way his mere presence affects me. How have I survived this long living with him? And more importantly, how long can I keep up the charade of being just friends?

Stop psyching yourself out, I scold myself.

“Hey, let me take a quick shower and then I’ll be right down!” Flynn calls as he sets his camera down on the entryway table and jogs up the stairs. If we were a couple, I would probably follow him upstairs and join him in the shower. Warm water, steam, a naked Flynn...

I shake my head of those thoughts and busy myself with setting up the snacks and drinks on the coffee table before I take my usual seat on the couch and grab the remote. Nothing feels usual about tonight, though. I don’t think I’m ready to have *the talk* with Flynn right now, but I can’t deny the shift in our relationship. Maybe Flynn is just being nice, but for a few moments, I allow my mind to run wild with the possibility of a life together.

The shower shuts off, pulling me from my fantasy. It’s my turn to pick the movie and I start to scroll through the choices. I’ve just landed on the horror section when Flynn comes back downstairs and plops down next to me on the couch.

His hair is still wet and the scent of his body wash hangs in the air around us. I try not to let him see me sniffing him. I also try not to picture him in the shower, rivulets of water streaming down his sculpted chest and trim waist, lower, lower, until it reaches his...

“What are we watching?” Flynn asks as he grabs a can of Coke off of the coffee table. I nearly jump out of my skin, and he gives me a strange look.

I just smile at him, hoping to cover up my awkwardness. “I’m thinking *It Chapter Two*.”

“Really?” he asks, and I wonder if he expected me to pick a romantic comedy or something. I think if I watched another movie with a sex scene right now, I might spontaneously combust. Or worse, I might throw caution to the wind, jump Flynn’s bones, and hope for the best.

“Yep.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to pick a different movie?” Flynn asks me as he reaches for the little bowl of peanut butter

M&M's.

I look around at the other snacks spread out all across the coffee table, trying to decide what I want to eat. We did good with this snack haul. I want some chocolate eventually, but I decide to start with popcorn.

“I'm sure,” I confirm with a grin as I grab the remote.

Flynn collapses back dramatically against the couch, his brown hair falling over his forehead. Just once, I want to sweep the strands back and then lean in and kiss him. Okay, who am I kidding? Once would never be enough.

I focus on the TV, trying to forget about what I want to do to my best friend. The opening scene starts to play on screen and I wiggle deeper into the couch.

“This is because of Bill, isn't it?” Flynn says as each of the kids is shown all grown up.

“Bill Hader or Bill Skarsgard?”

“Both,” he says with a slight chuckle.

“They're both just so talented,” I say with a sigh and I see Flynn roll his eyes.

Flynn knows everything about me, including my slight obsession with Bill Hader. We used to watch *Saturday Night Live* every weekend together and he would always sigh or roll his eyes every time he came on the screen.

“Remind me what happened in the last movie?”

“The first one?” I ask as I grab a handful of popcorn.

“Yeah, it's been a while since I've seen it.”

We watched the first movie when it came out. It was one of my picks for movie night, obviously, but he's right. It has been a while since we've seen it.

“The kids defeated It and they made a pact to come back if It ever resurfaced.”

Flynn nods, a slight frown on his face as he tries to think back to the movie.

“We should have watched that one first and then this one.”

“We’d be here for hours. Both movies are like three hours,” I remind him and he nods.

I shove some popcorn in my mouth, chewing as we turn back to the TV screen. We’re quiet for a few minutes, trying to pay attention to what is happening in the movie. We watch silently as all of the characters meet up back in town at the Chinese restaurant and I’m almost lost in the movie when Flynn moves over and takes some of the popcorn from the bowl in my lap.

Our fingers graze each other’s and I peek over at him from the corner of my eye, but he’s busy watching the movie, so I try to let it go.

He doesn’t feel anything for you. You need to stop imagining things.

I force myself to turn back to the movie. Flynn takes some more popcorn and scoots closer to me.

He’s so warm that I don’t need the blanket anymore with him sitting next to me, so I kick it off, leaving me in just my pajama shorts and a thin tank top. Flynn has a pair of basketball shorts on and his usual plain T-shirt and every time one of us moves, our bare skin brushes up against each other’s. *Would he notice if I just started rubbing up against him like a cat in heat?* Yeah, probably.

I keep looking over at Flynn, wondering if our light touches bother him, if he can feel the tension growing between us with each graze or press of his arm and leg against mine. I’m painfully aware of every inch of our connection, and I’m pretty sure Flynn can hear my heart pounding out of my chest.

His fingers brush against the back of my hand and I can’t help but imagine those same digits caressing my body. They’d trail up my inner thigh, teasing me at first, stroking my heated skin until I spread my legs, giving him access to my...

I shift on the couch, clearing my throat and reaching for my drink when I feel my face getting hot. If Flynn notices, he doesn't say anything, and I wonder if he just thinks that it's because Bill Hader is on the screen.

I don't have the guts to tell him he's sexier and funnier than Bill Hader. For one, I couldn't bear the look on his face if he thought I was crossing a line, and two, I don't know if I could bring myself to say something disparaging about Bill Hader. Maybe if things go horribly awry with Flynn, I can fake my own death, run away, and make Bill Hader fall in love with me.

"Can I have a sip?" Flynn asks, jarring me out of my runaway thoughts. I pass him my glass of water.

My eyes linger on his mouth as he raises the cup and takes a drink from the same spot that my lips just did.

Did he do that on purpose? Or am I just reading too much into everything?

Gah! Stop overanalyzing everything!

Flynn leans forward, putting the glass back on the coffee table and when he sits back, his forearm drags along my bare thigh.

My breath catches, and Flynn glances back at me. Our eyes meet and cling to each other for one breathless moment. He blinks, slowly moving back so that he's sitting back against the couch cushions, but we never look away from each other.

My heart kicks in my chest, beating hard like a drum, and awareness prickles along my scalp and down the back of my neck. I lick my lips and Flynn glances down. His lips part slightly as his eyes lock on my mouth and I want to scream at him.

Kiss me! Kiss me now before I pass out from the anticipation.

He must get the memo because he leans closer to me and my breath stalls in my chest as I sway toward him too. Flynn

lifts his arm, resting it on the back of the couch so he can get closer. Our mouths are only a few centimeters away and I'm afraid to look up. It's like if I look up at him, the spell will be broken, or maybe we'll both realize what we're about to do and one of us will pull back.

If he doesn't pull back, then does that mean that he wants to kiss me?

Flynn inhales sharply, then lets it out, the warm air tickling my lips. I let out a shaky breath, my entire body trembling as a raw, throbbing ache blooms in my core.

I'm about to close my eyes. I'm about to reach out and grab him to pull him to me quicker, maybe finally sink my fingers into his hair, when a sound breaks into our bubble and we both look up at each other in shock.

I don't know who pulls away first, but we spring apart and I watch as Flynn digs in the pocket of his basketball shorts and pulls out his phone.

"It's Gavin," he tells me and I nod.

"You should get it," I say, and I'm shocked that my voice sounds like that.

It's husky and lust filled. I sound like a seductress, like a sex kitten.

I kind of like it.

"Hey, Gavin," he says as he answers the call and looks over at me.

I know I told him to answer it, but disappointment washes over me all the same. What did I think he was going to do? Toss his phone aside and pull me into his lap? Wishful thinking. But God, if he did drag me on top of him, I might die of lust and happiness. Worth it.

Too bad I'll probably never find out what that feels like.

I wish I could tell what Flynn was thinking. He looks a little confused, and a little freaked out as he talks to his friend.

I don't think that either of those things is a good sign.

Maybe it's a good thing that I can't read his mind.

"Okay... yeah, I'll be there soon."

"Is everything okay?" I ask him as he hangs up his phone.

"Yeah, well, kind of. Gavin needs some help with this car that broke down. I told him that I would meet him since it's close by."

"Okay, do you want me to pause the movie and wait for you?" I offer and I'm relieved to hear that my voice only sounds a little breathy.

"No, I don't know how long it will take us. I think I'll have to cut this movie night short," he says apologetically.

I try not to deflate at his words. Flynn is a good person, and knowing he's willing to drop his plans to help a friend is one of the many reasons I love him. Still, I'm finding that I'm more and more greedy with the time I spend with Flynn. I don't want to share him, but he's not mine to stake a claim on.

"It's okay," I say in a chipper voice. "I'm tired anyway, so I think I'll just turn in for the night."

"Okay, I'll see you in the morning," he says, and I nod.

Except... he doesn't get up to leave right away. He's just staring at me and I can't tell if he's waiting for me to make a move or maybe say something. Our eyes lock, the swirling blue in his irises as magical as ever. Would he push me away if I leaned in? Would he spear his fingers in my hair and tug me closer?

Flynn studies me, and once again, I get the sense that he wants to say something. God knows I have plenty to say to him. Is it possible he has feelings for me, too? Is he as nervous as I am about admitting them?

But then he blinks, breaking the connection.

"Let me know if you need any help with Gavin," I say after a beat.

“Will do,” he says and I wave lamely at him as he grabs his shoes and keys and heads out the front door.

“Ugh,” I groan, throwing myself back against the couch cushions.

I can't seem to wrap my head around the fact that Flynn and I almost just kissed. I want to call Iris and tell her about the way that he was looking at me and how close our faces were, but I know what she'll say.

Maybe Iris is right, and Flynn does have feelings for me, too. Telling her about our almost kiss though will only spur her on and I don't want to deal with all of them pushing me to tell Flynn that I love him. They already do it all of the time and I can't imagine how much more ammo this will give them.

I drag my hands down my face before I turn off the TV and head upstairs to go to bed.

EIGHT



Madelyn

“I FEEL like this hike has gotten harder since the last time that I did it,” I pant out as I follow Flynn down the narrow trail toward the Destiny Falls waterfall.

“I’m sure it has,” Flynn reassures me and I glare at his back as I try to tell if he’s being sarcastic or not.

Sweat slips down my spine and I reach up, wiping some more away from my eyes as I think back to the last time that I was out this way. I was still in high school then. I don’t remember being this winded back then, but I was in better shape and I’m sure the excitement of sneaking out for a party in the field has glossed over some of the more painful parts of the night.

“We’ve got to be getting close, right?” I half wheeze a few minutes later.

I’m a little embarrassed that I’m so out of shape, especially when I’m standing next to Flynn. He’s barely breathing hard, his skin tan and just barely glistening with sweat. His cheeks are a little flushed, but somehow that little bit of color only makes him look sexier.

Meanwhile, I’m over here sweating like a stuck pig. I can feel my hair is matted to the back of my neck and my

forehead. I sound like I've just got done running a marathon and I'm sure that my cheeks are redder than a stop sign.

No wonder I'm still single. I must be crazy to think that I have a shot with Flynn.

"I think so. The water is getting louder."

We round one last bend in the trail and then it opens up, revealing a lush green meadow and the waterfall that gave Destiny Falls its name.

The grass around the waterfall is lush and green and I want nothing more than to lie down in it and catch my breath, but Flynn is already walking down the narrow path to the lake at the base of the waterfall.

Rocks smoothed by years of water crashing down on them surround part of the lake and then climb up either side of the waterfall. If memory serves me right, there's also a bit of a rock bench right behind the waterfall as well.

I stop for a moment, taking it all in. It's been a while since I've been out here and even though our town is named after it, I haven't thought about this place in years.

The last time I came out here was in high school. It was senior ditch day, and I spent the afternoon splashing around with my friends and then lay along the edge trying to soak up the sun.

It reminds me of when things were simpler. When I wasn't working all of the time or confused about what to do about my best friend. All I cared about then was getting good grades, getting into college, and having fun with my friends.

"Do you ever wonder what would have happened if you didn't go to Michigan State University? Or if you hadn't been hiding from that girl and jumped through my window?"

"Where is this coming from?" he asks me with a frown and I shrug.

"Just feeling nostalgic being back out here, I guess."

“I think we still would have found each other. We had that English class together, so we would have met then.”

“So, we were inevitable?” I didn’t mean to say that out loud, and I certainly didn’t mean for it to sound so vulnerable.

“Yes.”

His eyes catch mine, a spark of something lighting up his normally dark-blue eyes. I know he’s just talking about the inevitability of our friendship, but I’d like to think he’s referring to us as a couple. Then again, if he really thought we belonged together, wouldn’t he have said something by now?

Iris’s voice pipes up in my head. *And why haven’t you said anything yet?*

“We should watch *Avengers Endgame* tonight,” I blurt out.

Flynn laughs, getting the reference, and I grin.

“I can’t believe that it took me over a year to come out here,” Flynn says, passing me a water bottle.

I eagerly take it and twist off the cap, guzzling half of it down in one gulp. Once I no longer feel like I’m going to keel over from dehydration, I put the cap back on and squint up at Flynn.

“Why are we out here?” I ask. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, it’s beautiful.”

“It’s for our next movie,” Flynn says simply, and I follow after him as we walk closer to the little lake at the base of the waterfall.

I want to tell him to stop, that my heart can’t take us doing this. With every movie, I fall even more in love with him. Every time he takes me on one of these almost dates or does something so sweet for me, it has my head and heart all twisted up.

I need to keep both of those things clear about what is going on here. Flynn and I are just friends and that’s all that

we ever will be. *Especially if you're a coward*, my unhelpful inner monologue interjects.

“Uh-oh. What movie are we doing this time?” I ask. “Wait! Let me guess.”

Flynn grins over his shoulder at me, his T-shirt molded to his back and arms from the heat. His muscles flex, and my mouth waters. I want him to take off his shirt so I can see the dips and grooves of his sculpted back and chest. I admire the view for one more moment before I try to think of movies that take place next to a waterfall.

“All I can think of is *The Cabin in The Woods*, but that's not a romance movie,” I say as Flynn sets his backpack down next to the edge of the water.

“Where is the waterfall in that movie?” Flynn asks as he pulls out two towels.

“Wasn't the secret watch room behind one? Maybe I have that wrong. We could watch it tomorrow night for movie night,” I suggest, and he shakes his head.

“Okay, then *Mystic River*. That's at least next to water.”

“That movie is definitely not a romance movie,” Flynn says and I have to give him that.

“Then what movie are we doing right now?”

“*Twilight*.”

It takes me a minute to react because I'm sure that I must have heard him wrong.

“*Twilight*?” I squawk and he laughs. Sometimes my best friend still manages to surprise me.

“Yeah. That was one of the first movies that we watched together in college, remember?”

“I remember you convincing me that it was going to be scary.”

Laughter dances in Flynn's ethereal eyes, along with a playful glint that has me squeezing my thighs together. "And that fight scene at the end didn't have your heart racing?" he questions and I just give him a blank stare.

"Where's the waterfall in that one?" I ask as he pulls out a few bags of chips and some more water bottles.

"It's in Seattle, right? They have water," he says with a shrug.

"That's pretty weak, Flynn," I respond, though I can't hold back the smile tugging at my lips.

"We're here more for the sparkles."

"The sparkles?" I ask as he stands.

When he reaches behind his neck and pulls off his shirt, my mouth starts to water. Wasn't I just fantasizing about this? Did I pass out after all and slip into a dream?

"What are you doing?" I ask, my voice coming out shaky as I take in all of Flynn's bare skin.

I've seen him shirtless before, of course, but it's been a while and he's definitely gotten more muscles in that time. His skin is tan and pulled taut over his muscles. My eyes travel over the thin patch of chest hair and down the ridges of his abs to the *v* muscle at his waist. I'm glad that it's hot out now because I'm sure that my face is bright red. At least now I can blame it on the hike and weather.

"I don't have any glitter, and I doubt you'd want that all over the house, anyway."

"I do not," I agree, looking back into his eyes and trying to keep my gaze from wandering back down.

"So, I thought that we could go for a swim. The water droplets can be the sparkles."

I'm about to say no, that I can just use my imagination, but Flynn has already toed off his shoes and started walking into the water.

Well, I am pretty hot...

I strip off my tank top, shorts, and tennis shoes, leaving me in just my swimsuit as I step into the water. A zillion butterflies take flight in my stomach and chest as I take my first step into the water. I'm drawn to Flynn like a magnet, and it takes a considerable amount of effort not to jump in his arms. I want to feel the hard slabs of his muscles pressed up against my soft skin as he tugs me closer...

"That feels so good," I moan as the water climbs up my thighs. *Shit*. I didn't mean to say that. I have to get myself under control. We're both half-naked in a pool of water. This is no time to let my daydreams take over.

Flynn must not have noticed, but he turns around to smile at me, his throat working as he swallows. The water is halfway up his chest and he backs up a little more. I can see when he starts to swim and I hurry to catch up to him.

I dip under the water, loving the feeling of being weightless. When I come up for air, Flynn has flipped over onto his back and is floating a few feet away from me. I flip over and do the same, closing my eyes as I feel the heat of the day warm me up.

It's a beautiful, picturesque afternoon, and I feel blessed to be here in Destiny Falls. I'm surrounded by warm sun, cool water, breathtaking views of nature, and Flynn. If only I didn't have this huge secret sitting like a rock in the pit of my stomach.

Our hands brush in the water and I smile, not opening my eyes. Flynn reaches out, his fingers wrapping around mine, and I squeeze his fingers back. Like I said. Perfect. Except he has no idea what this means to me.

I don't know how long we float like that, just relaxing and taking some time for ourselves. I feel so content, like I could lie like this with Flynn forever and die happy.

This moment only shows me how much I need Flynn in my life. I want this with him forever and I'm not sure if telling

him that will help or hurt our relationship. If I can only have him as a friend, then that's what I'll have to be okay with.

"Want to check out the waterfall?" Flynn asks, and I blink open my eyes.

I'm surprised to see that we're almost back to where we first stepped into the water.

"Sure," I say, flipping over and dog-paddling toward the center of the little pond.

The water feels amazing against my overheated skin. I swim closer to the waterfall, letting the spray coat my face as I swim around behind it.

Flynn meets me behind the waterfall, his hand going to the rocks there as he holds himself above the water.

"Say it," I joke, trying to get my voice to go several octaves lower. "Out loud."

I'm just messing around, but I could swear that Flynn actually does want to say something. He looks so serious all of a sudden, and my heart beats against my rib cage. When he still doesn't say anything, it drops down into my stomach.

The energy around us turns from playful to serious in the blink of an eye and it has my stomach twisting with nerves. His mouth opens and my breath stalls in my lungs.

What is he going to say?

"Flynn?" I whisper after a few moments of him just staring at me and he blinks, the spell that was woven around us coming undone.

"Vampire," he finally says. A smile curves his lips, but it doesn't quite reach his eyes. He's killing me here. If he has something to say, he needs to say it.

Yes, I'm fully aware that I'm being a hypocrite. But... gah! If he gave me a hint that he felt even an inkling of what I do...

He has! Iris's voice echoes in my head once more. I shake it off, focusing back on Flynn.

"Are you alright?" I ask him and he nods, getting some of his regular energy back.

"Yeah, I think all of the sun must just be getting to me."

"Let's head back then."

He nods and I swim after him toward the shore. He climbs out and helps me up onto the grass before he passes me a towel.

I want to say something, to put a stop to this weird tension that I can feel between us, but I don't know what to say to fix this. Does he regret taking me here? Oh god, did he take one look at me in my swimsuit and get grossed out by the weight I've gained in the last year? It's been a while since we've been swimming together, and taking over the store hasn't left me much time to work out or make healthy meals. Not that I did very much of that before.

But no, Flynn isn't shallow like that. Sure, he might not be *unconditionally, irrevocably in love* with me, to quote *Twilight*, but he would never body-shame me.

"Ready to hike back?" he asks.

I nod, and we walk in silence for a few minutes. The hike back seems to go faster than the hike out to the waterfall, and we're back at our cars in no time.

"I'll see you at home?" Flynn asks and I nod.

Before he can climb into his car, I stop him.

"Hey, Flynn?" *What am I doing? What am I saying?*

"Yeah?" he asks, giving me a curious look. I swear I see hope swimming in his eyes, but why?

"I think that I'm starting to see your point. About the movies," I say quietly, and he studies my face for a minute before he smiles and walks closer to me.

“Good,” he says, bending down until his lips brush across my cheek.

My breath catches as I feel his soft lips on my skin. He lingers for a few heart-stopping moments, breathing me in before he presses his lips to my temple. I have to curl my fingers into my palm to resist the urge to grab him and hold on.

I want to turn my head and brush my lips against his, but I’m afraid to move. I don’t want him to pull back, not yet. Well, not ever.

I’ve waited a long time for Flynn to kiss me and while this isn’t the exact way that I imagined, it still has my heart racing out of control and my breath stalling in my lungs.

He smells like the outdoors, the water having washed away most of his cologne, but it’s still there, just barely clinging to his skin. I take a deep breath, wanting to hold his scent in my lungs for as long as possible.

I glance over at him and notice that his eyes are closed, too. It’s like he wants to remember this moment too. I take a second to study him, noticing the straight line of his nose, his long lashes fluttering against his cheeks, and his slightly parted lips. All I would have to do is stretch up on my tiptoes and our lips would touch.

I’m about to do just that, when Flynn takes a step back. I sway toward him before catching myself and crossing my arms over my chest. I don’t want him to see my hard, aching nipples poking through my swimsuit and shirt.

“I’ll see you at home,” he whispers, his eyes wandering back to my lips. I nod, my throat dry.

“See you.”

I climb into my car, watching in my rearview mirror as he backs out of his spot and takes off toward home. I do the same, taking my time.

I’ve never been so confused, so divided about what to do.

It sure seems like Flynn is sending me some pretty strong signals that he wants to be more than just friends. I don't have much experience with guys though, and what if I'm misreading all of this? What if I make a move on my best friend and he rejects me?

Could we ever go back to the way that things used to be between us?

NINE



Madelyn

I'M SO tired but it's movie night, so even though I'd rather take a bubble bath and go to bed early, I still go downstairs to curl up on the couch. I could never miss a movie night. In the last five years, we've never missed one. Even when we both caught the flu our sophomore year, we still did it. Actually, in that instance, we ended up watching movies and forcing each other to stay hydrated for like a whole week. Honestly, it was a highlight of the year for me.

"What are you thinking about?" Flynn asks as he sits down next to me on the couch.

"That time we both got sick with the flu."

"Ugh, why are you thinking about that?" he asks, looking at me like I've got two heads.

"I'm tired, but if we didn't miss movie night then, I won't miss it now," I tell him.

He sags back against the couch, letting out a sigh. "Stop working so hard," he admonishes. I know he means well. One look in his ocean eyes lets me know he's concerned about me. There he goes again, being all perfect and caring. Couldn't he have some sort of flaw? Maybe it would be easier to ignore this gaping hole in my chest if Flynn had an annoying habit or something.

“I know, I know,” I answer, rolling my eyes at him.

“Are you feeling sick? We can skip tonight if you would rather go to bed early and get some rest,” he offers, reaching over to feel my forehead. I swat his hand away, though I’d rather lean into his touch.

“No, I’m just tired. Don’t worry, you won’t have to hold my hair back anytime soon.”

“I liked holding your hair back.”

“You’re weird then. Is this some new fetish?” I joke and he smiles.

“No, I just mean, I like being there for you. Taking care of you.”

God, he’s killing me.

“Yeah, that’s what friends are for, right?” I squeak out. What I really want to say is that I love when he takes care of me, too.

“Right,” Flynn says rather curtly, turning back to the TV.

I said that friend line more to remind *me* than for him. Now I kind of regret it, though. I wonder what he would have said if I didn’t open my big mouth. Will we ever get the timing right? In the back of my head, I hear Iris nagging me to just fess up already and get it all out in the open. Glancing at Flynn, I see he’s busy studying the screen. Clearly, it didn’t mean anything to him.

He grabs the remote and starts to flip through the choices before he lands on *Avengers Endgame*.

“You remembered,” I say as I grab the blanket from the back of the couch and wrap it around my shoulders.

“Of course,” he says simply.

Flynn hits play and we both settle in as the opening credits start. He leans over, resting his head on my shoulder, and I smile, leaning my head against his.

“Are you tired too? Maybe something is going around,” I ask as he cuddles closer against my side.

“No, this is just comfortable. Do you mind?”

“Not at all,” I tell him and I don’t.

I love having Flynn next to me. The problem is that I love it a little too much.

The Avengers all start fighting the latest threat on screen and I get lost in the fight for a few minutes.

“What do you wish your superpower was?” Flynn asks as the team comes back on screen.

“Out of the Avengers powers?” I clarify, and he nods.

“Hmm, maybe Iron Man. It would be cool to be that smart and to fly and shoot stuff out of my hand.”

“Plus, he’s a billionaire.”

“True. I like that as well.”

Flynn laughs at my tone of voice and I grin.

“What about you? Who do you want to be like?” I ask him.

“I think I would be Thor.”

“Cause he’s a god with a big... hammer?” I ask with a laugh.

“Not because of that. I mean, that wouldn’t be anything new,” he says, leaning back so that he can give me a wink and I roll my eyes.

My mind still goes to the size of his hammer, though, and I bite my lip, wondering if that’s really true.

“Why then?” I ask him.

“He can fly, and I mean, he’s basically indestructible.”

“He almost died in *Infinity War*,” I remind him.

“Yeah, but he didn’t, and now he has a hammer *and* an axe.”

We fall silent as the action on the screen picks up once more.

“Star Lord is the worst,” I grumble and Flynn nods.

“Agreed. Thanos would be dead if he just could control himself.”

I wonder at his words. Maybe that’s good advice for me to take too.

He readjusts, laying his head in my lap and I start to run my hands through his hair.

“Feels nice,” he mumbles and I smile, scratching my nails against his scalp.

We’ve lain like this before, though it’s been a while. Right now, with my thoughts, urges, and heart all tangled up, it’s getting harder and harder to have intimate moments like this without pushing things further.

My hand wanders down Flynn’s neck, massaging him lightly there. A groan falls from his lips, and I can feel the vibration from where his cheek is resting against my lap. I’m in another pair of sleep shorts and a tank top, and I’m more aware of Flynn’s body, his touch, his breath, than I’ve ever been.

I don’t know what comes over me, but I let my hand drift underneath the collar of his T-shirt, my nails trailing down his bare back. Flynn freezes, and I worry I went too far. I pull my hand away, my stomach sinking when he sits up.

“I... I’m sorry,” I stutter out. I’m sure my face is bright red. I wish the couch would swallow me up.

“I’m not,” he growls, right before cupping my neck and crashing his mouth against mine.

My lips part automatically, welcoming the heat of Flynn’s kiss as it brands me for all of time. He licks into my mouth, sliding his tongue against mine in hungry strokes. His fingers tangle in my hair as he tilts my head up. I whimper at the sting, then moan when it’s followed by a rush of liquid ecstasy.

Flynn growls softly and trails his hands down my body, pausing to cup my breasts and squeeze them roughly. My hips jerk at his touch, and Flynn's sapphire eyes hook onto mine. He looks absolutely wild in this moment, like he can't get enough of me. It's unlike the sweet, gentle Flynn I've known all these years, but I love it. I love that he's having a hard time controlling himself.

He lifts me and repositions me so I'm straddling him. I take a second to catch my breath, resting my forehead on his.

"I've been wanting to do that for five goddamn years," he growls, gripping my hips and anchoring me in place while he tips my head up and captures my lips. *Did he really just say that?*

He kisses me hard and deep, each swipe of his tongue lulling me into submission, wiping away my doubts, building up my confidence until I'm kissing him back with just as much passion.

I feel his length harden beneath me, making me moan and rock my hips. Flynn hisses out a breath and leans his head back, groaning as he helps me move on top of him.

"Jesus, Mads, I feel your heat," he grunts. "You feel so good, baby." His hands slide down my thighs and then back up, his fingers slipping under the hem of the shorts I'm wearing.

A shudder works its way through my body as he squeezes my thighs and trails kisses up and down my neck. Flynn finds a supersensitive spot below my ear that makes my breath catch, so he licks and nips the soft flesh there over and over.

"I want to kiss you everywhere," he groans. *Oh god, I want that, too.* "Will you let me?"

I'm still not sure this isn't some elaborate hallucination, so I have to ask. "Wh-what, um..." I breathe out heavily, still lost in the way he's touching me. "What exactly do you mean?" I finally manage to get out.

Flynn takes my lips again, diving into my mouth with all the pent-up lust and need he's been harboring for the last five years. "You want me to tell you everything I want to do to your sexy fucking body, Mads?"

"Yes," I whimper, my thighs tightening around his hips as I shamelessly grind against his hardening shaft.

"Need to suck on these nipples, for starters," he says, trailing his nose and lips down my neck and over my collarbone, lower, until the tip of his nose circles my hardened peaks.

"Mmm...that feels good," I sigh.

Flynn grunts, the sound lodged deep in his chest. "Then I'm going to trace your curves with my tongue until I get to that dripping pussy of yours. I'm going to kiss that, too, and make you feel even better. Will you let me?" he asks again.

I nod eagerly, then shriek when he flips me on my back on the couch. He grins down at me, that sexy smile I love so much only deepening the ache in my core.

Leaning down again, he kisses me slowly and then blazes a trail of open-mouthed kisses down my neck and over my collarbone. Lifting up my shirt, Flynn's eyes widen as he takes in my bare breasts. I wiggle beneath him, letting him know I need more of his touch, his kisses, his attention. And I need it right *now*.

I spread my legs wider, and he groans, then thrusts his hips against my center. I can feel his thick cock beneath his basketball shorts, and it's all I can do not to beg him to fuck me right this second. But this is good, too. Flynn licks one nipple and then pulls it through his teeth, making me whimper. He groans, sending vibrations throughout my entire body.

"So perfect, baby. Every part of you."

He switches sides and gives my other pebbled peak the same attention. Flynn continues kissing and nipping his way down my body as he scoots farther down the couch. His

tongue dips in my belly button, and then his teeth scrape over one hip bone and then the other.

Flynn looks up from between my legs, silently asking me permission one last time. I nod and give him what I hope is a seductive smile. It must work, because his blue eyes turn nearly black as his nostrils flare. He looks almost mad, but I know it's just the intensity of the moment.

He hooks his thumbs into the waistband of my shorts and panties, slowly pulling them down and exposing every inch of me to his greedy eyes.

“Fuck,” he groans, staring at my throbbing center.

Resting his forehead on my lower abdomen, he buries his nose in my soft mound of curls and takes a deep breath. Then his eyes snap open, feral with lust. Flynn pries my legs open wide and holds them there before he dives into my soaking-wet folds.

“Oh god,” I cry out. His tongue feels incredible, warm and wet against my clit.

He licks me up and down, dipping his tongue into my entrance and then circling my clit. Again and again. Flynn leans back and looks up at me, my juices glistening on his face. It's unbelievably sexy.

“Delicious,” he grits out before lowering his head and licking me from top to bottom. He focuses on my clit, drawing patterns around my sensitive ball of nerves.

And then I feel a finger slide inside of me.

“So tight,” he grunts, more to himself than to me.

Flynn thrusts his large finger in and out of me while continuing his assault on my clit. I cry out when he adds a second finger, stretching me in the most deliciously painful way. My legs begin to tremble as pressure pools in my belly and my body starts to give up control.

“I'm... I'm...”

He chuckles into my pussy, sending the vibrations all over my body. He doesn't let up, though. It feels like I'm on the brink of exploding. My muscles tense and I'm making incoherent noises as his tongue and fingers take me higher, higher, higher, until...

"Flynn!" I scream. I feel my pussy convulse and gush as my muscles tense to the point of pain, but in the best, most intense way possible.

"I've got you, Mads. Give me one more."

He dips his tongue deep inside of my hole, lapping up my release, while his thumb circles my clit. The initial powerful wave of pleasure dies down a bit, but my pussy feels swollen and sensitive as Flynn continues to work me up with his skillful mouth.

My second orgasm hits me before I'm prepared for it, the force of ecstasy making me forget to breathe. I cry out and jump when his tongue flicks against my clit.

Flynn turns his head and bites the inside of my thigh, then licks away the sting. Crawling up my body, he claims my lips like a starving man. Ironic, since he just ate me out and pulled two orgasms out of me with his sinful mouth.

I taste myself on him and it's so damn hot. His hands are everywhere—pulling my hair, squeezing my breasts, grabbing my hips to pull me closer to him.

I have to break the kiss to get some much-needed air into my oxygen-deprived lungs. He takes the opportunity to kiss down my neck before resting his head on my shoulder.

"Fuck, baby. You come apart so beautifully for me. Love seeing you lose control like that," he says before kissing my neck again.

I finally get my breathing under control and tilt my head so it's leaning against his. "I want to make you feel good, too," I whisper, snuggling farther into his embrace.

"I feel better than I have in a long damn time," he answers.

“But there’s always room for improvement, right?” I tease, wagging my eyebrows at him.

Now that we’ve started, I don’t want to stop. I want to finally know what it’s like to be with Flynn in every way, to have that connection, both physical and emotional.

“Are you saying you want more, baby?”

“Yes, please,” I don’t hesitate to answer.

The next thing I know, I’m being lifted in the air. I squeal and kick out my legs as Flynn carries me, bridal style, to his room. Nervous anticipation claws at my insides, but lust and longing soon take its place. I’m finally getting everything I want. I just hope I don’t screw it up.

TEN



Madelyn

ONE MINUTE we're licking and kissing and devouring each other, and the next minute I'm falling through the air, only to land on the bed. Taking the hint, I sit up and whip my tank top over my head.

Flynn's eyes are wide, almost like a cartoon character. I giggle and then moan when he climbs on top of me and takes my lips in another wild kiss. I spread my legs for him, my bare pussy grinding against his cock, only covered by the thin material of his shorts.

"So beautiful," Flynn whispers as he drags his nose and lips down my throat and chest, placing a kiss between my breasts.

"I want to see you too," I say with a pout, hoping to get another glimpse of all those tasty muscles he's hiding under his clothes.

Flynn looks conflicted, like he wants to be naked but also doesn't want to leave me for a single second. "Let me help," I offer, giving him what I hope is a sexy smile.

"That's the best damn idea I've heard in a long time." He winks at me, leaning back when I push on his chest. Together, we stand and strip him out of everything until we're face to face, Flynn in just his boxer briefs and me completely naked.

“Well, come on,” I say impatiently. *I’ve only been waiting for this for five years.* He chuckles and I grin, eyeing his barely contained erection.

Flynn smiles deviously and hooks his thumbs in the waistband of his underwear, pulling them down to reveal his thickness. I swear he’s not real. His cock is massive, veined, throbbing, and jutting out right at me. He’s hungry. For me. That thought has my thighs wet with my own hunger.

Flynn taps my chin with his finger, and I realize my mouth is literally hanging open at the sight of him. I snap my mouth closed and blush profusely. I’m sure I look like an idiot. Flynn just chuckles and gives me a sweet kiss on my lips, cheek, jaw, and then his mouth ghosts over my ear.

“Love your beautiful body, Mads,” he whispers, almost in awe.

“Same,” I murmur, my voice breathy and wanton.

Flynn smiles so tenderly at me, making me feel completely seen, completely safe, and completely sexy. It’s a heady combination, one that makes me bolder than I’ve ever been.

I reach out and place the palm of my hand on his chest, loving the way he shudders at my touch. Flynn sighs and leans into me, then takes my other hand and places it on his chest as well, right over his heart. His hands cover mine while we just stand and stare at each other. This is it. This is everything.

Flynn leads me over to the bed and lays me down so gently before kissing his way up my body. I bite my lip and spread my legs wider for him, wanting more of his skin on my skin. Wanting to be connected to him in every single way. He settles his hips between my legs, his hot and heavy cock lying across my slit.

He begins thrusting his hips, gliding his massive dick along my folds and gathering up my honey. My nerves sizzle and pop each time the head of his thickness taps my swollen clit. I swear I could come just from this, but Flynn has other ideas.

The tip of his cock nudges in my entrance, only going in a fraction of an inch. Even so, my opening stretches to accommodate his size, a burning sensation tearing through my core and making my muscles tight.

“Relax, baby,” Flynn whispers into my lips before kissing me slowly. “I’m a big man, but I promise I’ll go slow.” He pauses, conflicting emotions playing across his face. I can tell he wants to say something else.

I cup his cheek, loving it when he leans into my touch. “You can tell me anything,” I murmur.

Blue eyes hold mine in a steady gaze, and finally, Flynn nods. “I’ve never been with anyone,” he admits. “I’ve only ever wanted you, Mads. I want to share everything with you, including this. Will you let me?”

The tears in my eyes aren’t from pain, but from a rush of emotion. “Please,” I whisper. “You’re... you’ll be my first, too.”

I can tell it means a lot to him, and truthfully, I’m relieved he hasn’t been with anyone else either.

Flynn presses his forehead to mine and eases in another inch.

“Let me in, baby. Open up for me and let me take care of you the way you deserve.”

I feel myself relax at his words, my tight channel pulsing and sucking his huge length inside of me. Flynn rubs his nose against mine and then thrusts forward, swallowing my cry by kissing the air out of my lungs. He breathes life into me as he sinks his thick dick into my body.

“Oh, god... Flynn,” I moan, crossing my ankles behind his back in an attempt to keep him there, so deep inside of me.

“Goddamn,” he grits out, burying his face in my neck and biting me there as he slowly withdraws himself. Flynn slides back inside of me, going even farther this time, filling me up to the absolute limit and then backing out again.

He grunts and snaps his hips, slamming home in one hard thrust. I choke on the scream in my throat and bow my back off the mattress, clawing at his skin as he hammers in and out of me. Each time he hits the end of me, my body jerks as if being electrocuted.

“Don’t...stop...” I breathe out as I cling to his trembling body.

“Not a fucking chance,” he growls, bending down to suck on one of my nipples. I’m shocked when the tingling sensation is mirrored in my clit, as if the two are connected by a string.

Flynn chuckles and bites my nipple, making me buck my hips and take him impossibly deeper. We both groan, getting lost in the way our bodies fit together. His thrusts become harder, faster, as he licks and nips his way up to my mouth. His lips are inches from mine. All I can think about is tasting him while he fucks me.

Flynn pounds into me and drags my bottom lip between his teeth, grinning when I whimper into his mouth.

“I feel you, baby. I *feel* how much you want to come. So do it, Mads. Come all over my cock.”

He kisses me as he slams into me in long, rough strokes. I’m stuffed so full of him I can’t take a full breath. I unhook my ankles from behind him and place my feet flat on the bed so I can meet him thrust for thrust.

I shout his name as my orgasm burns through me, all of my muscles spasming at once in the most intense moment I’ve ever experienced. My blood feels like sharp razor blades coursing through my veins, the pain spiking my pleasure into heights unknown.

“So beautiful, coming for me like a goddess,” he grunts, fucking me through my orgasm and then leaving me completely.

I almost cry at the loss of him, but Flynn grabs my hips and flips me over, tugging me back so I’m on all fours. I gasp

as he enters me in one hard thrust, his thighs smacking against my ass as he bottoms out, hitting me so incredibly deep.

“Yes!” I moan, arching my back and wedging his thick dick even deeper inside of me. He taps some supersensitive spot, making my pussy convulse and my limbs shake.

“There it is,” he grunts in satisfaction, gripping my hips and digging his fingers into my soft flesh. He bounces me off his cock, hitting that spot over and over until I’m coming again with his name on my lips. Flynn holds still, his cock buried inside of me as my orgasm washes over me in violent waves.

I whimper and squeeze my channel around his hard cock, unable to give him any words at the moment. My body is deliciously sore and used, my pussy is swollen and sensitive, but I need more. I need Flynn’s satisfaction.

One of his hands traces up my back, and then tangles in my hair. He tugs my head to the side and then leans down to kiss me as he slowly begins moving in and out of my tight channel. I feel his abs tense and flex against my ass as he works himself in and out of me.

I press back against him as he surges forward, earning me a sexy growl from Flynn. I fist the sheets in my hands and rock back into him, swallowing his hard shaft in my pussy again and again.

“Flynn... yes... I’m...” I pant and gasp for air, barely hanging on to my sanity as he ravages my body and rips me open in powerful strokes.

“Let go, Mads. Let go for me,” he rumbles. “I’m right there with you, but I need you to get there first,” he groans right as he explodes deep inside of me.

My world erupts in pure bliss, my vision tunneling until I can’t see, I can only feel. Pure light and energy are wrung from my very core as I twist in on myself and then go completely limp.

When I come to, I'm wrapped up in Flynn's arms and he's placing sweet kisses all over my face. I giggle and scrunch my nose up, trying to get away from him. He just holds me tighter and rubs his nose against mine.

"You okay?" he whispers.

"I'm so good," I huff out, still catching my breath. I'm in a blissful bubble, and I don't want to think about the consequences of what we just did. For now, I want to soak up whatever this feeling is between us. That was..." I blow out a breath, unable to find the right word to describe it.

"For me too, Mads. It was..." He pauses and then blows out a breath.

"Exactly," I agree, and then laugh softly.

We lie there, a mess of tangled limbs and drying sweat, breathing the same air and snuggling in the afterglow. If I didn't know before, I definitely know now... I'm in love with my best friend.

ELEVEN



Madelyn

WHY THE HELL did I do that? All those consequences I was trying to avoid last night made themselves known as soon as I blinked awake this morning.

I'm freaking out. I've been freaking out for a while, too paralyzed to move or even begin to process how badly I've just messed up. It's been like this ever since I woke up in Flynn's bed, his arm slung around my waist. My *naked* waist.

It was so good though. Maybe he'll want to do it again and then he'll tell me that he wants me as more than just a friend.

I shake my head. I shouldn't be thinking about that. I should be trying to figure out a way to fix this so that I don't lose my best friend.

I've got nothing.

Oh my gosh, I'm going to have to see him every freaking day. There's no way that I'm going to keep from staring at him longingly or blurting out that I love him and want another round in his bed.

STOP!

Focus. He's your best friend. Fix this.

I can't believe that I slept with him. It all just happened so fast and I start to squirm in bed as I think about the way that he

carried me up here and caged me in with his body. It was like he was trying to make sure that I couldn't leave.

The way that his hands felt, how hot his mouth was as it licked, sucked, and kissed along the curves of my body. My thighs tighten and I moan at the memory.

That's when I remember that I'm still naked and next to him in his bed. Flynn starts to stir and I bite my lip, remaining motionless. I close my eyes, pretending to sleep, but he never fully wakes up.

He rolls over, his arm slipping from my waist, and I miss the contact. I want to roll over, to cuddle up against him and soak up his warmth, but I can't. I need to figure out what I'm going to do now.

Should I sneak out and pretend like it never happened?

He's not awake yet, so there's a chance that I could slip out of bed, get all of my clothes, and make it back to my room before he wakes up. Scratch that, I'd need to be out of the house before he wakes up.

I twist, trying to see if I can spot my clothes on the ground, and I let out a breath of relief when I see them scattered over by the open bedroom door.

My thoughts start to race again when I see the way my clothes are thrown around his room. An image of me hurrying to strip, to feel more of his naked skin against mine, flashes behind my eyes and my thighs clench tighter together.

Should I wake him up?

That would be the mature thing to do, but I can't seem to do it. I raise my hand and it hovers over his bare shoulder for a moment. I just can't seem to find the strength to lower it to touch him.

Oh, my gosh. He's naked! I can't see him naked. Not in the daylight.

I throw my legs over the side of the bed, intending on getting out of here, but I waver. It's like I'm paralyzed. I know

that me leaving now, without waking him up, isn't going to solve anything. We'll have to talk eventually and I'm just pushing it off until later. I might even be making things more awkward when we do get around to talking.

I'm just not ready to face him yet.

I want to do it again, but what if last night was a mistake? What if Flynn regrets it? I can't be throwing myself at him if he never wants it to happen again. I need to wait and see how he reacts once he's awake. I just don't think that I can do that while I'm lying naked next to him.

I can tell that I'm about to spiral and I know that I need to get out of here before I freak out or have a panic attack.

I look back at Flynn and study him for a minute. His eyes are closed, his breaths coming out evenly, and I know that if I'm going to try to make a run for it, that now is my chance. If I wait any longer, he's sure to wake up and catch me.

I slowly scoot toward the edge of the bed, letting out a little breath when my toes make contact with the floor. Flynn sighs and I freeze, looking back at him to make sure that he's still asleep. He is and I watch as he rolls onto his back. His hand stretches toward me on the bed and I quickly jump off the side before he can reach me.

I land on the balls of my feet and hold my breath as I wait to see if Flynn is going to wake up. He starts to stir a bit, and I wonder if I should just make a run for it.

If this happened with anyone else, I would rush to tell Flynn. We would laugh about my daring escape and he would probably tease me about it for a whole week.

It's not happening with someone else, though.

I wonder if we'll ever laugh about it.

Seeing his naked chest has me reacting strangely. I love him so much and I want to wake up with him like this every morning.

My eyes start to water and I know that I can't have him waking up to me standing over him naked and crying.

When he doesn't stir anymore, I make quick work of tiptoeing over to my clothes, scooping them up in my arms and beelining it down the hallway to my bedroom.

I close and lock the door after me, but that doesn't stop me from freaking out. I need to get out of here, out of this house. Just for a little bit so I can clear my head.

It's already after eight and I can go to work, or maybe I could text Sutton, Lyla, or Iris and see if they want to grab breakfast with me. I don't know if I want to talk about what happened last night, or still pretend that I didn't just wreck everything between Flynn and I.

I skip the shower and pull on a pair of jeans and a clean T-shirt. I press my ear to my bedroom door, but the house is still quiet, so I head out into the hall and hurry down the stairs.

I swipe my keys off of the kitchen counter, turning and freezing in my tracks as I see the living room where it all started last night.

Part of me wonders if us sleeping together was always inevitable. My feelings for him have only grown in the last five years and they have shown no indication of going away.

Maybe things were always leading here. I mean, I was going to have to admit to my feelings at some point. He would catch on to me, never wanting to date anyone else.

Maybe this is a good thing? I'll finally know where I stand with him.

Almost as soon as I have that thought, my stomach cramps.

I'm not ready for everything to change.

What if it was a mistake for Flynn, too? What if it was just a one-night stand?

Flynn doesn't seem like the type, but I've never seen him date anyone or sleep with anyone. Maybe he was just having a bunch of one-night stands the whole time. He could be doing it discreetly, though I don't know how he pulled that off when we moved in together.

I climb into my car and take one last look back at the house before I shift into reverse. I feel like I should walk back inside and have a real conversation with Flynn about what happened last night and what that means for us, but I'm just not ready yet.

I back out of the driveway and head down Main Street to the Destiny Falls Market. We opened half an hour ago and I force a smile as I head inside, nodding at Leah and Cal, who are up front on the registers.

"Hey, boss!" They call together and I wave.

I should probably stop and talk to them, but I just want to be alone right now. I head inside my office, tossing my purse onto a filing cabinet and collapsing into my office chair.

"What are you doing up so early?" Iris asks as she walks into my office and I jump in my seat.

"Jesus!"

"Are you alright? I was behind you on the sidewalk and I tried to call your name a few times."

"Sorry, I didn't hear you," I say, scrubbing my hands down my face as I lean my elbows on my desk.

"What's going on? You're really pale," Iris asks, concern clear in her voice.

"Flynn and I slept together last night," I blurt out and I peek out from between my fingers to see Iris staring at me with her mouth hanging open.

"It's about time!" She says, grinning at me.

I glare at her and her smile drops.

"Was it not good?" She whispers and I groan.

“No, it was amazing. Truly mind blowing.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“We didn’t really discuss anything,” I hedge, and she rolls her eyes.

“Of course not.”

“It just kind of happened! One minute we were watching a movie and the next we were making out and heading upstairs to his room.”

“And that explains why you’re at work so early.”

I nod, swallowing hard as I wring my hands together in my lap.

“I didn’t know what to say. I just wasn’t ready to face him yet,” I admit.

“You’re going to have to face him eventually,” she points out and I nod.

“I know. I just need to get my head on straight and figure out how to approach that conversation.”

“Just tell him that you’re in love with him. He’s so into you too and then you guys can finally be together.”

She makes it sound so easy, but I’ve been trying to work up the courage to tell Flynn how I feel for over five years and never managed to do it.

There was that time when we went out for Halloween and he had said that I looked hot in my costume. I had thought that maybe that was a sign that he liked me, or was at least attracted to me. I wanted to tell him that he looked hot too, that I loved him, but I had chickened out at the last minute.

Or there was that one Christmas when we had gotten trapped under the mistletoe at one of our friend’s holiday parties. They wouldn’t let us leave until we kissed, and he had leaned down and gave me a sweet peck. I had thought then that he would feel a spark between us and we would confess

our love, but nothing ever came of it. Besides a few fantasies for me, that is.

Every time I think that things are going to change or that he's going to make a move, I get let down. Then I get caught up in my own head for a few weeks and the cycle repeats.

I don't think that any of my friends really get why I don't want to risk everything on a shot that Flynn feels the same way and that we can go the distance. I need Flynn. He's my family, my best friend, and I can't imagine a future that he's not a part of.

Unfortunately, I may have just ruined that future with my rash actions last night.

I don't want to regret sleeping with Flynn. It was incredible, but I can't help but kind of wish that it had never happened.

I've imagined telling Flynn that I was in love with him before and not once was it after we had slept together. I always pictured that it would be after I was certain of Flynn's feelings for me. Almost all of the time it was me saying that I love him after he had already said it to me.

God, I'm such a coward.

Did I just mess up my whole relationship with him? For what? One night?

My phone buzzes in my pocket and I pull it out, staring at Flynn's name on the screen. I bite my lip, wondering if I should answer it.

I'm just not ready to face him yet.

Tears sting the back of my eyes and I blink them away, setting my phone face down on the desk before I stare miserably across the desk at Iris.

“Oh, Madelyn.”

She gets up and makes her way around the desk so that she can wrap her arms around me.

“It’s going to be okay. You’ll see,” she whispers.

I want to believe her so badly, but the sinking feeling in my gut tells me that things are about to go very wrong.

TWELVE



Madelyn

I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN that Flynn wouldn't stop at just a phone call.

He's probably freaking out about everything too and, unlike me, he's the type of person to want to clear the air rather than hide or avoid the issue.

"There you are," he says as he storms into my office.

I look up, trying to keep my features schooled as I take him in. He's wearing his usual jeans and a black T-shirt but both look wrinkled, like he grabbed them off of the floor and threw them on.

His hair is a mess, the brown locks sticking up and I know that he's been running his hands through it all morning, something that he only does when he's really stressed.

"Why did you leave?" He asks, his fingers stretching and rolling into fists at his side.

I take in his worried expression, trying to get a read on what he's feeling so that I know what to say in this moment.

Between his frazzled appearance and the fact that he hasn't tried to step fully into the office, it doesn't look like good news for me.

He shifts on his feet, hovering closer to the open office door than to my desk, and I swallow hard.

He's probably been freaking out all morning. He must be worried about ruining our friendship too, and he's only here to make sure that we're okay.

I feel like I'm going to throw up and I wonder if there's a way for me to put off this conversation now that he's here in person. I start to pray that Leah or Cal call for me and need my help up front. Maybe someone will rob us.

No, don't wish for that. It's too extreme.

"I had to get to work," I lie and I can tell right away that he doesn't believe me.

"Mads. Why did you really leave?"

I can't believe that he's going to make me say it. Maybe I could just keep quiet and he'll be the one to turn me down.

Is that really a better scenario?

"Last night was a mistake," I blurt out, dragging a hand through my messy black hair in agitation.

Flynn starts to pace, and I can't tell if that's a good sign or not. I watch him go, moving from one side of my crowded, cramped office to the other. It only takes him three strides each way, and I count them as he goes.

One, two, three, spin, one, two, three, spin.

I wonder what he's thinking about. Is he worried that things will be strange between us now?

This isn't how I wanted to do this. None of this is going the way that I wanted it to.

My heart is racing, and my palms are so sweaty. I try to wipe them off on my jeans, but I'm not sure that it helps. My whole body feels clammy and I wonder if I'm coming down with something.

I shouldn't have said anything. I should have waited for him to speak first and I'm kicking myself now that it's too late to hear what he was going to say.

I just feel so stretched thin. My nerves have been a wreck for weeks before we even slept together, and now I'm at my breaking point. I need things to go back to normal. I need to get myself under control.

Flynn stops pacing and my stomach cramps. I can't read his expression, but he doesn't look happy. I try to wipe my hands off on my jeans again, feeling like I'm in the principal's office as he stares at me across my desk.

"You think that last night was a mistake," he says, his voice flat and devoid of emotion.

It's a question, but he doesn't say it like one and I hesitate to answer.

I nod, my throat tight with all of the words that I really want to say but am too afraid to.

"You think that it was a mistake? Us sleeping together," he says again, adding on the us sleeping part like I was confused about what part of last night we were talking about.

I nod, but this time I'm not as confident in my answer. I swallow hard, forcing myself to stay quiet, though.

He stares at me and for the first time in a long while, I think that he's mad at me. His usual smile is missing and while his eyes are hard, I swear that I can see hurt swimming in their blue depths.

He stays silent too and I can't take it. I'm under too much pressure between him and work and something has to give. I want him more than I want anything, but I can't tell him that. Not until I know that he wants me too and that I'm not making a fool of myself or wrecking everything between us.

"I just want things to go back to the way that they were between us," I tell him honestly, tears starting to well in my eyes and I hurry to swipe them away.

Flynn nods, looking away from me. He rocks back on his heels and I hold my breath, wondering what he's going to say next.

A part of me is hoping that he'll tell me that he doesn't think that it was a mistake. That he wanted to sleep with me for a long time, since the night that we met even.

That part of me is an idiot.

"Fine," he says, and he sounds so unlike himself.

He's tense, his movements almost jerky as he holds himself so rigid. His eyes are distant and I try to get him to look at me, but every time I catch his eye, he looks away.

I want to ask if we're alright or if he's upset with me, but when I open my mouth, he turns and leaves before I can.

I watch him go, wondering what the hell I'm supposed to do now. Every instinct in my body is telling me to go after him, to risk everything that we have and just admit that I love him. That I want to be with him as so much more than just a friend. That I always have.

He didn't look happy about our conversation and while I know that he's said that we could go back to the way things were, it's pretty obvious that that's not going to happen right away.

So, what do I have to lose?

I try to get myself to move, but all I can think about is every other impulsive decision that I've ever made and how they all blew up in my face. I don't want to be that way anymore. I'm supposed to be older and more mature.

I try to get back to work, but my head is so full of everything that happened between Flynn and me that I really just end up sitting there, staring off into space.

I'm not surprised when Iris stops by after Blast From The Past closes. She's probably been dying to hear how things went with Flynn and me all day. I'm assuming that she knows

by the fact that my car is still in the parking lot and the way that she finds me hunched over my desk.

“Want to spend the night at my place?” She asks gently and I nod, tears welling in my eyes.

I don’t look up at her, but I’m sure that she can tell I’m crying by the sniffing.

“Come on,” she says, and I let her guide me out of my office and over to her car.

We don’t talk on the way to her place. I know that she’s dying to know what happened so that she can help me analyze and fix it, but we both remain quiet. That’s not like me at all, and I can feel her getting more and more worried as we make our way down her street and park outside of her house.

Iris lives in a cute little robin’s-egg-blue ranch-style cabin. It’s only got two bedrooms, a bathroom, a kitchen, and a living room, but it’s perfect for Iris. She’s made it cozy over the years, adding her vintage touch to every corner of the place. It used to belong to her grandma and when she passed, she left it to Iris. It’s a few streets over from my place and from her shop downtown, nestled into the forest so much that it’s easy to overlook it.

“Did Flynn come to see you today?” Iris asks as she unlocks her front door, and I nod.

“Yeah, just before lunch.”

“I’m guessing that things didn’t go so well?”

I can’t say the words, so I just shake my head no.

“Do you want to talk about it?” She asks hesitantly.

“I don’t know what to say. I just freaked out. He asked me why I left and I told him that I had to get to work and he didn’t believe me.”

“Smart man,” she mumbles.

“I told him that last night was a mistake and he didn’t really say much after that. I asked if things could just stay the

same between us, if we could just be friends, and he said that we could go back to the way that things were between us.”

“But that’s not what you want?” She asks, sounding confused.

“It is... It was, I mean...I don’t know. I told him that last night was a mistake. I just blurted it out. I was going to wait to see what he had to say about everything that happened between us, but I panicked and said that it was a mistake before he could start talking.”

The tears come now, streaming down my face as the weight of just how badly I’ve messed things up hits me. Iris comes to me instantly, wrapping her arms around me. She tries to hold me together and I sob onto her shoulder, weeping for everything that I’ve lost, for everything that could have been.

I did the one thing that I never wanted to do. I wrecked everything between Flynn and me and I know it. I know that it was all my fault.

My head is killing me, pounding against my skull in a frantic rhythm as I cry onto my best friend’s shoulder. It feels like my heart is breaking and I don’t know how to fix this or what to do now.

There was never anyone besides Flynn, so I’ve never had my heart broken before. Even with all of the songs or movies that I’ve seen, I guess that I never really believed that it would hurt this badly.

It feels like someone has cut into my chest and taken out my heart. My stomach hurts, my head hurts, and I feel weighed down, like there’s a pile of rocks pinning me to the ground.

This is worse than any sickness and I wish that someone had found a cure by now.

Eventually, we sit down on her ugly pink velvet couch. The thing has been around since the sixties and is a real eyesore, but it’s also the most comfortable thing that I’ve ever

sat on. It wraps around me, almost like a hug, and I let it cocoon me.

Iris orders a pizza and puts a pint of mint chocolate chip into my hands. I'm not that hungry, but I take a few bites to appease her.

We watch old stand-up comedies that used to make me laugh until I cried when we were younger, but now I can barely crack a smile. The pain that I felt earlier is starting to fade, leaving me a numb mess. If Iris notices, she doesn't say anything.

She hovers around me and I know that she doesn't know how to fix this, either. She's never had her heart broken, not by a man, anyway. Neither of us knows what I need to fix this, but it means a lot to me that she's willing to try everything to help me.

"Thanks for being here for me, Iris," I whisper, and she gives me a faint smile as she wraps her arm around my shoulder.

"Of course. That's what friends are for," she says, and it reminds me of when I said that to Flynn not so long ago.

That only confuses me more. I kept thinking that he must have feelings for me too if he was upset about me saying it was a mistake. Unless he took it as a slight to his sexual prowess. He doesn't seem like that type of man, though.

Iris puts out some junk food and encourages me to eat or drink something, but nothing sounds good. She does her best to keep my mind off of Flynn and what happened today. It reminds me of sleepovers that we used to have growing up and that helps to lift my spirits.

For a little bit anyway.

"What is wrong with me?" I ask her as we get ready for bed.

"Nothing, Madelyn. It was a bad day, but I know that you and Flynn will be able to get past this. Maybe he'll surprise

you and say that he wants you, that it wasn't a mistake."

"That only happens in the movies," I mumble and she gives me a sympathetic look.

We climb into her queen-size bed and she reaches over, squeezing my hand. I squeeze hers back, willing my eyes to close and for sleep to claim me.

It doesn't happen though.

I stare at Iris's ceiling, wondering why I said that it was a mistake. I didn't want to ruin things between us, but I'm afraid that I did it, anyway.

THIRTEEN



Madelyn

I DRAG myself downstairs and shove my feet into my tennis shoes as I wait for Iris to get here. She's picking me up so that we can go to some of the flea markets that she found in the lower peninsula.

I have a ton of work to get done at the market too, but I need to get out of town, even if it's just for a little bit. I'm hoping that this little day trip helps me clear my head and maybe relax for a little bit.

Iris pulls up in her Ford Explorer, and I head outside to meet her.

"Hey," she greets me as I climb into the passenger seat.

She's got the whole car cleaned out and the back seats folded down and I know that she's hoping that she finds a lot of good deals today.

I've never told her this, but Iris is kind of my hero. She dropped out of college to open her own antique shop even though her parents were furious with her for that decision. They always pushed her to become a lawyer or a doctor. They wanted her to be financially secure with her career, but she forged her own path and now she gets to do something that she loves every day.

It's got to be scary and stressful to start your own business, but she never showed it. I've always envied that she knew her passion early in life and wasn't afraid to go after what she wanted until she made it a reality.

"Thanks for inviting me to this," I tell Iris as she pulls out of my driveway and heads down toward Main Street.

It's been a few days since everything happened with Flynn and things aren't really any better. I'm hoping that getting out of the house and this town gives me a new idea on how to fix things between us.

"How are things going at home?" Iris asks me as she grabs her travel coffee cup and takes a sip.

"Awkward," I admit with a sigh, and she shoots me a sympathetic look.

She brought another coffee for me and I grab it, taking a sip as we drive through town.

"Have you two talked any more?" She asks, and I shrug.

"Not really."

I went back to my house the morning after everything happened with Flynn. I didn't really have a plan, but I needed clean clothes and I was hoping that seeing each other and going about our normal morning routine would help speed up things going back to normal between us.

Flynn hadn't been there that morning though and when I went past his room, it looked like he hadn't been home the night before, either. That should have been my first sign that things weren't going to go back to the way they were between us.

I had taken a shower and gotten dressed slowly, hoping to catch him before I had to leave for work, but that hadn't happened.

He had been home when I got back that night, though, and things did not go well. Neither of us seemed to know what to

say to each other. Every time I walked into a room, Flynn would find some reason to leave.

He was going to make something to eat, he needed to take a shower, he had work to do. The reasons went on and on and at first; I tried to give him the benefit of the doubt, but when he went to bed at eight thirty, I knew that he was lying and trying to avoid me.

I need to find a way to smooth things over, but I don't know how to do that, how to make things go back to normal between us. Truth be told, I don't know what to say to him either. I was kind of relieved when he would leave because I didn't have to think about how weird everything between us was.

"He's avoiding me. He's been spending more time out of the house," I tell Iris and she frowns.

"Maybe he needs to clear his head, too. He's always loved being outdoors anyway, so that's not necessarily weird," she tries to reassure me.

"Yeah, but sometimes he doesn't come home at all."

"Oh."

I was hoping that she would be able to excuse that away too, but I guess not.

"When he is home, he's at the farthest point of the house from me at like all times."

"Are you sure? Maybe that's just all in your head."

"Iris, it's been three days, and we went from talking all day long, to barely saying three words to each other. It is definitely not all just in my head."

"Oh," she says, her shoulders slumping.

"Maybe he just needs to get used to things again?"

"Maybe."

“Besides, it’s like you said, you two talk all day long, nonstop. I’m sure that not seeing and talking to you is driving him crazy, too.”

I think about that and wonder if she could be right. Even if she is, Flynn can be stubborn. I have a feeling that I’ll break before he does.

He’s all I think about anymore. If it’s not about how to fix our relationship, then I’m fantasizing about him.

I can’t stop thinking about our night together. When I’m in the shower, I imagine his hands smoothing over my naked skin. When I lie awake in bed at night, I can’t help but remember the way he moved above me, in me. He left a hickey on the left side of my neck and I’ve lost track of how long I’ve spent staring at it, running my fingers over the mark and trying to remember when he could have given it to me that night.

I’ve never been so turned on in my life, but it feels wrong to touch myself and try to take away the ache.

“Did you see him this morning?” Iris asks, breaking me out of my daydreams.

“Briefly,” I say with a wince, remembering our conversation this morning.

“Did he say anything to you?” she asks as we get ready to cross over the Mackinac Bridge.

“No, not really. Just good morning and that he’s going over to Gavin’s. He’s been over there quite a bit and when I tried to say something to him, I froze up. He ended up leaving a few minutes later, and I went upstairs to get ready for today.”

Iris makes a noncommittal noise, but I know that she’s starting to worry about the bridge, so I don’t say anything.

We pay the toll fee and I try to distract Iris as we drive over the bridge to the lower peninsula.

“How are things at the shop?” I ask, trying to change the subject and keep her occupied so she doesn’t think about

where we are.

“Um, fine,” she says and I can see her fingers turning white on the steering wheel.

“Do you have all of the garage sales and flea markets all mapped out?”

“Yeah, we should be at the first one soon. There’s a community garage sale right over the bridge.”

I nod, letting out a gust of air as we reach the other side, and I see Iris start to relax.

“What are you going to do about Flynn?”

“I don’t know,” I answer honestly. “I feel like I just need to tell him that I lied and that I want him. That it wasn’t a mistake.”

Iris nods enthusiastically. I knew that she was going to react that way. She’s been Flynn’s and my biggest cheerleader since we first met, so of course she’s going to say yes to anything that has us getting together.

“He’s been avoiding me, though. Maybe I just need to give him some space and let him process this in his own way.”

She shrugs but doesn’t seem to like my idea.

“I just don’t know how to fix this,” I admit as we start to turn off of the highway.

Traffic is light since it’s still early in the morning and I check the GPS, noticing that we’ll be at the first stop in just a few minutes.

“You know what you should do?”

“What’s that?” I ask her.

“You should invite him to dinner. It would force you guys to be around each other and maybe after a few minutes of making awkward small talk, you two would realize how perfect you are together and you could laugh all of this off.”

“Maybe,” I say, but I don’t know if that will really work.

I don't even know if Flynn would say yes to dinner. He would probably have some other excuse.

Iris chews her bottom lips as she mulls over my problem and I point to the street that we need to turn on. We follow the signs down the residential street and she parks behind a string of other cars.

"It's Friday though. Movie night, right? He won't miss that. You can tell him tonight."

"That's true. He's never missed a movie night."

Hope starts to build inside of me and I climb out of the car and follow her up the sidewalk to the first garage sale.

We spend the day going around to three garage sales and two different flea markets. I haven't been to either in quite a while and I actually find a few cute things for the house. I picture showing them to Flynn and I wonder if he'll like them. I found him this old camera and I can't wait to give it to him.

Iris finds quite a few pieces too, and she's so happy as we drive back home that she barely even tenses up as we head back across the bridge to Destiny Falls.

"I'll help you unload everything," I tell her, and she seems relieved to have the help.

"Thanks."

We park outside of Blast From The Past Antiques and I hop out and help Iris haul in all of her new finds. She has me stack them on the tables in the back of the shop so that she can do inventory and take photos for her online shop tomorrow. I didn't even realize how late it had gotten and I'm going to need to hurry if I want to be home in time for movie night. It takes us several trips to get it all out of her car and inside and as we unload, we work on what I can say to Flynn tonight when I see him.

I'm feeling better about things as I head down the street to the market to grab snacks and drinks for tonight. Iris drops me

off at home, wishing me luck and making me promise to call her if I need anything before she heads home herself.

I hurry inside, getting everything set up in the living room before I hurry upstairs to change my clothes. I want to wear something sexier than just my normal clothes or my pajamas, but I don't want to look like I'm trying too hard.

Part of me is still hoping that we can talk and I can tell him that I love him and that I want to be with him. Maybe he'll say it first and if he does, I'll be ready for another night with him.

I settle on a pair of skintight yoga pants and a backless top. I hurry downstairs and jump on the cushions, getting settled in my usual spot on the couch.

I look at the clock, seeing that it's almost seven. Flynn should be home any minute, so I turn on the TV and start scrolling through the romance section on Netflix.

I keep an eye on the door as I open some of the snacks and continue scrolling through our queue. Once it gets to seven thirty, I wonder if maybe he lost track of time. I eat a few of the snacks, wondering if I should call or text him.

By the time it's eight, I have a sinking feeling in my gut. Did he forget? Maybe Gavin or someone needed his help, and he's just running late.

When the clock hits eight thirty, I know that Flynn isn't coming home.

I turn off the TV, picking up the snacks and dump them all in the trash as I fight to hold back tears.

I can't believe that he missed movie night. I knew that things were rocky between us, and maybe I shouldn't have assumed that he would come home tonight, but I can't deny that it hurts.

I head upstairs, each step feeling painful. By the time that I reach the top, I'm desperately holding back the tears swimming in my eyes.

When I pass his room, the knife in my chest twists and I run down the hall to my room. I curl up in the center of my bed, letting the tears come then.

I don't know what to do now. I don't know how to fix things between us and I know that it's all my fault that I'm in this position.

FOURTEEN



Madelyn

I FEEL LIKE A ZOMBIE.

What's the saying? Death warmed over? Yeah, that feels about right.

My eyes are gritty and feel like they're full of sand from crying most of last night. I didn't sleep great either, so I'm exhausted, feeling weak, and more than a little nauseous.

It's almost six p.m., and I wonder where the time went.

I've been in a daze all day.

I had tried to stay home for as long as I could this morning, hoping to catch Flynn before I went into the market, but he didn't come home. He's avoiding me and he knows my schedule too well, or maybe he just drove by and saw my car still in the driveway, so he kept driving.

Either way, I didn't get my chance to talk to him. I ended up passing him on Main Street instead and I wanted to stop, to flag him down and force him to listen to what I have to say, but he had just driven past.

He looked like shit too, with dark circles under his eyes, his usual smile no longer on his face. It made me wonder what he got up to the night before.

Was he out all night? Or did he just have a hard time falling asleep at Gavin's place? Was he even at Gavin's place?

I force those thoughts away before they have me crying and try to focus on the papers in my hands.

I can't. I'm falling behind on inventory, payroll, and the schedule already and I know that I need to buckle down and get it done, that people are relying on me, but every time I start to read over the schedule or enter times for payroll on my computer, I find myself zoning out.

Maybe I need more caffeine.

I look over at the empty coffeepot. I think I've had close to a dozen cups today and the thought of more isn't really appealing.

Maybe I shouldn't have had so much coffee.

"Hey! Are you ready for girls' ni-whoa!" Lyla says as she rounds the corner and skids to a stop inside of my office.

"Hey," I say, my voice sounding like I've been smoking six packs of cigarettes a day for the last ten years.

I clear it, trying to get rid of the rough gravel sound as I shuffle some papers around on my desk. I try to remember if we have plans for tonight, but my brain isn't working right.

"Are you feeling alright? Because you don't look so good," she says as she takes another tentative step into my office.

"I just didn't sleep well last night."

"Do you want to skip girls' night tonight then?"

I think about going home and trying to talk to Flynn. I know that I need to do it sooner rather than later because the way things are going is killing me. Maybe I should reschedule on them and I can go home and put this whole thing with Flynn behind me.

I straighten my shoulders, already getting ready to tell her that yeah, I need to head home, when she speaks.

“I passed Flynn when I was headed here, but I can pick up soup or something for you,” she offers and my stomach sinks.

So do my shoulders and the hope that was building inside of me. I deflate like a balloon

He’s not home. No, he was home, but when I was set to get off work, he left. That means that he’s definitely still avoiding me.

I tried to text him a few times today, but he never replied. This is the longest that we’ve gone without speaking since the night that we met and it feels wrong. Like I’m missing the most important part of my day. Like I’m missing some integral part of me.

My heart.

That’s probably why I can’t function and feel like hell.

I keep reaching for my phone to send him something funny or ask him if he wants to grab lunch and then I remember how messed up everything is and I end up not sending anything.

I miss him. I really, really miss him and I don’t know what to do or how to fix this, but I need to figure it out, and soon.

“No, I’m still in, or at least I’ll come for a little bit,” I say, forcing a smile to my lips.

She doesn’t look convinced as her eyes scan over my face, but she doesn’t argue with me.

“Okay then, let’s grab some snacks. We’re headed to my place tonight.”

I nod, following her out of the office and into the market. Lyla keeps shooting me worried looks over her shoulder as we grab some bags of chips and some drinks. It’s like she’s expecting me to keel over or burst into tears any minute. I feel like both of those things are real options too, but I don’t tell her that.

“Sutton is picking up Chinese food for us,” she tells me and I nod, pretending to study the selection of candy in front

of me.

“Then we can talk about whatever has happened with you,” she says and it dawns on me that Sutton and Lyla don’t know about everything that has happened between Flynn and me.

“Flynn and I slept together,” I whisper, and she drops the box of chocolates in her hands as she spins to face me.

“What? I mean, freaking finally!” She half shouts, a giant smile stretching her lips. “That’s great, Madelyn.”

“No, it’s not. I told him it was a mistake and now he’s not talking to me.”

“Oh...is that why you look so... tired?” She asks, the smile falling from her face and being replaced with more of a friendly grimace.

I’m just grateful that she didn’t say how bad I really look.

“Yeah. He missed movie night last night,” I admit quietly, and she wraps her arms around me.

“I’m so sorry, Madelyn. We can fix this, though. I know we can,” she says when I start to shake my head. “Forget the junk food. I’ll ask Hudson to grab something else for us. Let’s go.”

I want to ask her if he’s working tonight or say that it’s fine if we just grab something here, but she takes my hand before I can argue and drags me out of the store.

“Iris is already at my place,” she says and I nod, digging out my car keys.

“I’ll follow you there,” I tell her and she gives me a worried look like she wants to tell me that she’ll just drive, but she lets it go and nods before she heads over to her Jeep.

I back up, waiting for her to do the same before I follow her down Main Street and toward the house that she lives in with Hudson. We pass by the lighthouse and Prim + Proper

and turn toward the beach, following along the coast until we reach the two-story house that Lyla now calls home.

“Where’s the snacks?” Sutton asks as she climbs out of her old Volkswagen beetle.

“There’s no time for snacks! We have an emergency,” Lyla says and Sutton stares between us, her hands full of take-out bags.

“Should I not bring in the Chinese food then?” She asks, and I can’t help but laugh at how confused she sounds.

“No, bring it! We’re going to need nourishment,” Lyla calls as she takes the stairs two at a time and heads inside the house.

“Let me help,” I tell Sutton and she smiles at me, passing me two of the bags.

“Are you alright?” She asks, and I shrug.

“No,” I admit, and she gives me a sympathetic smile.

“Are you coming?” Lyla calls and we hurry up the stairs and into the house.

“So, what’s going on?” Sutton asks as we start to unpack the food on the coffee table in the living room.

“Flynn and Madelyn slept together,” Lyla tells her as she passes around some forks and plates.

“Well, it’s about time! But how is that a bad thing?” Sutton asks with a big smile and I shake my head.

“I messed everything up and now he’s not talking to me.”

“I’m guessing movie night didn’t go well, then?” Iris asks, and I shake my head no.

“He never came home. I passed him this morning when I was driving to work but he didn’t wave or anything. He’s avoiding me now.”

“But you two are meant to be together! What happened?” Sutton asks and I swallow around the lump in my throat.

“I panicked. I didn’t want things to change between us... I told him that it was a mistake and that I wanted things to go back to the way they were between us.”

Sutton and Lyla share a look between them and I stuff half of an egg roll into my mouth, chewing even though it tastes like dirt on my tongue.

“You don’t mean that though,” Sutton points out. “So, why don’t you just go tell him that you lied, that you freaked out? I’m sure that he would understand.”

“I don’t think that he wants us to be together, either. He didn’t try to fight for it. I think that things are just awkward between us now and I keep waiting for them not to be but it doesn’t look like that’s going to happen anytime soon,” I admit, dumping the other half of my egg roll back onto my plate.

“I’ve seen him around town these last few days, and he looks miserable. I think that he’s missing you just as much as you’re missing him,” Lyla says and Sutton and Iris both nod in agreement.

“Just talk to him. You have to clear the air or things are going to stay this way,” Iris adds, giving me an encouraging smile.

I know that they’re right. Nothing is going to change unless I get it together and actually talk to Flynn face to face. It’s just that the idea of laying it all out there for him is scary. It’s scarier now than before we slept together because I know what my life will be like without him now.

What do I have to lose, though?

“Want to practice what you say to him?” Sutton offers and I bite my lip but nod.

“So, I ask him to talk. Maybe we sit down,” I say as I start to pace around the room.

Lyla nods and I wring my hands together, trying to figure out how to start the conversation.

“Flynn, I made a mistake the other night... or wait. Flynn, I messed up the other day. Our night together wasn’t a mistake. It was the best night of my life and I just wanted to say... I just... I just needed to tell you that I love you.”

I can barely get the words out and when I look over at my friends, I can see that while it was okay, it wasn’t great.

“Maybe add more about what he means to you?” Lyla suggests.

“Or that you’ve been in love with him since you two met?” Iris adds.

“And tell him that you just panicked and didn’t want to ruin things between the two of you and that’s why you said it was a mistake the other day,” Sutton says.

I nod, trying to remember everything that they said. I start to pace again as I start from the beginning.

By the time that I leave Lyla’s place, I feel better about things. I drive home, rehearsing what I’m going to say to him, and my heart beats faster and faster as I make my way home.

Will he be there? He could be sleeping over at Gavin’s place again.

I turn onto our street and a nervous laugh escapes me when I see his car parked in the driveway.

I can do this. Just say exactly what we practiced.

I park next to him and head inside, giving myself one last pep talk before I open the front door and step inside.

The house is quiet and I know before I climb up the stairs that he’s already asleep.

Do I wake him up?

Flynn hates being woken up. The few times that I had to do it in college were a nightmare, and then he was so grumpy for the rest of the day.

Maybe he’s not fully asleep yet and it won’t be so bad.

I climb the stairs to the second floor and peek into his bedroom. The door is slightly ajar, but with the light from the hallway, I can just make out his form in bed. He's fast asleep, and he looks so tired. I don't have the heart to wake him.

At least that's what I tell myself. Really, it's a mixture of not wanting to wake him and being a giant chicken.

I'll talk to him in the morning, I promise myself. Besides, maybe him sleeping here tonight is a good sign.

I take one last look at him and tiptoe across the hall and into my own bedroom.

FIFTEEN



Madelyn

I SLEPT great last night and I don't know if it was from exhaustion or if knowing that I had a plan and was going to talk to Flynn about everything just put me at ease.

When I wake up, I can hear Flynn moving around downstairs and I hurry to throw on a change of clothes and catch him before he can leave for the day.

Normally, we spend Sundays together. Sometimes we go out for brunch or to see a movie, but more often than not, we spend the day lying around the house together. After he missed movie night on Friday, though, I don't have high hopes of him sticking around the house today.

"Hey, good morning," I say as I turn the corner into the kitchen and I hate the way that his back tenses at the sound of my voice now.

He turns around, giving me a weak smile and I steel myself, trying not to let his reaction or lukewarm greeting get in my head. I just need to get this over with. It's like ripping off a Band-Aid, right?

"Hey, I was hoping to catch you today," he says, acting like he hasn't been avoiding me and the house for the last few days.

“Yeah, me too,” I admit. “I wanted to talk to you too, I mean.”

He looks up at me when I say that and I try to guess what he wants to say to me.

Maybe this will go better than I thought.

Except when I look into his eyes, I could swear that he almost looks guilty. He looks away before I can study him more and my heart rate kicks up.

“Madelyn,” he starts, sounding nervous yet somehow resigned. “I...I’m moving out.”

What did he just say?

“What?” I ask, my stomach hollowing out like he just sucker punched me. “Where are you going to go?”

I can fix this. I’ll just stop him before he can move in with Gavin or whatever house in town he has lined up. I’ll tell him that I love him and we can laugh about him thinking that he had to move out.

It will be fine.

“I got a job offer, and I took it.”

“What? But you love working for yourself. I thought that your company was doing good?”

Oh man, have I been so wrapped up in my own thoughts and problems that I didn’t notice him struggling? I could have sworn that he was telling me about a new client not so long ago and he’s been working. So, what happened?

“I do, and the company is doing good. I just... needed a change of pace,” he finishes lamely.

He needed to not be around me; I fill in for him.

“Okay, so where is the new job?” I ask.

There aren’t really any big towns around here, so maybe he’s working remotely. Or maybe it’s for one of the casinos a little way from here.

Even if it is, things are still going to be different. If he takes that job, am I willing to move to be with him?

I know the answer right away. Yes, of course I am. I know now what my life is like without Flynn and I can't go back to that.

I hold my breath as I wait for him to tell me more about his new job.

"It's in Los Angeles," he says finally and I don't know what to say back to that.

How do I spin that into something that can be fixed?

I let out the breath that I was holding in a whoosh. It's like he just sucker punched me in the stomach.

My lips feel numb. As a matter of fact, my whole body feels cold, like I'm losing feeling everywhere.

He's moving to the other side of the country, as far from me as he can possibly get. He decided to do that even though he says his business was doing fine. Even though he has friends here.

"But you hate traffic," I mumble, and I have no idea why.

"What?" Flynn asks and I shake my head.

I don't know why I said that or why that's the thing that I'm thinking about right now. I guess that's the first thing that stands out to me. Flynn wouldn't have chosen Los Angeles to live. It's too big, too expensive, and there's way too many people. He's going to hate living there, but he's going just so he can get away from me.

Looks like the girls were wrong. He was never into me. It was all in my head.

I nod dumbly, my eyes going to the space between his feet and staying there. I can't look at him right now. I'm too afraid that he'll be able to see all of the emotions swirling in my eyes, that he'll know that I'm in love with him.

Then he'll just feel pity for me.

“When do you leave?” I ask, clearing my throat when I start to feel the tears coming.

“Tomorrow.”

Tomorrow?

I don't know what to say to that. Well, I do, but it would just be me screaming at him.

Thanks for the heads-up, I think sarcastically.

It's too soon, it's way too soon. Should I argue with him? Would it do any good in the long run?

I want to tell him that I love him.

I want to yell and rage at him. I want to demand that he stay and that we fix this.

I want to beg him not to go, but what good would it do now?

“When do you start?” I ask.

There I go again with the pointless questions.

“Not for another two weeks, but I want to get settled in there, learn the new city and all of that before I start work,” he continues, and I look out the front window.

It's sunny outside, the birds chirping even though it's only a little after seven in the morning. It doesn't feel right. The sky should be dark, there should be a hurricane or some other natural disaster on the horizon, something to signify that it's more than just my world ending.

“Listen, Madelyn, I'm sorry but I've got to get going, but I'll see you later. I'll say goodbye tomorrow before I leave for the airport,” he says.

He pauses as he starts to walk by me and I want to stop him and tell him that I never told him what I wanted to say to him but I can't seem to move in time and then just like that, he's walking past me and out the front door.

I watch him climb into his car and leave and I stay frozen, rooted to the spot. It's like if I don't move, maybe I can convince myself that this was all some terrible dream. Any minute now, I'll wake up in my bed and I'll run across the hall and he'll be there.

He won't be leaving me or our home. He won't be going to California. It will all have been a dream.

Any minute now...

I don't know how long I stand there with tears streaming down my face. I'm not sure when Iris comes into the house or how many times she's called my name.

It all snaps back into focus when she grabs my shoulders and gives me a rough shake.

"Madelyn! What happened?" She asks and I notice that her own eyes are shiny with unshed tears and panic.

"He's leaving. Flynn is leaving Destiny Falls. He got a job offer, and he's going to California. Tomorrow," I say and I'm amazed that my voice could come out so flat.

Maybe I'm still numb, in shock or whatever.

"Did you tell him how you felt about him?"

"No, I tried to, but he told me he was leaving first and then he was just gone."

"Maddie," Iris starts, but I don't want to hear it.

I know that all of my friends have only been trying to make me be positive about all of this, but I don't want to hear any more theories about Flynn and me and how he feels. I can't take it right now.

"If he loved me, then why didn't he fight? Why didn't he try to tell me how he feels?" I ask Iris, a fresh wave of tears falling from my eyes.

"I don't know. I just don't know," she whispers and I nod, doing my best to stem the tears, but it's no use.

I let out a broken sob and then Iris is wrapping herself around me.

I vaguely hear her on the phone as she wraps her arms tighter around my shoulders, letting me bury my face in her shoulder and sob. I should have known that she was calling the girls because ten minutes later, Lyla and Sutton show up, both still in their pajamas, their bright pink and purple hair tied up in messy ponytails on top of their heads. They look like they're half-asleep still, but they both give me little smiles and hold up the bottles of champagne and orange juice that they're each carrying.

“Emergency girls’ day?” Sutton asks, as Lyla starts making each of us a mimosa.

“No, I don’t want to take you away from Teller and Hudson. I know that you guys don’t get many days off together,” I try to argue, and they both look at me like I’m crazy.

“Yeah, we’re not leaving you like this. The guys understand,” Sutton says.

“Hudson told me to call if we need anything,” Lyla says with a nod and I try to smile, but it comes out flat and before I know it, they’re all surrounding me, their arms wrapped around my back and shoulders.

SIXTEEN



Madelyn

“DO you want to talk about what happened?” Lyla asks and I can tell that she’s trying to choose her words and timing wisely.

I don’t blame her. The girls have been here for the last hour and I’ve spent most of that time crying, downing one mimosa after another, or curled up on the couch sniffing.

“I blew it,” I tell her as I stare at the cluttered coffee table miserably.

I’m still curled up on the couch, a blanket draped over me. Lyla and Sutton went out to get food, and Iris made a few pitchers’ worth of mimosas for us before we ran out of champagne and orange juice. The glasses and food are all spread out on the coffee table in front of us, but no one has touched any of it in a while.

“He got a job offer in Los Angeles and he took it. He’s leaving Destiny Falls. He’s leaving me,” I blubber and I can see Iris, Lyla, and Sutton share a look.

They seem just as surprised by Flynn’s news as I do. That doesn’t really make me feel better, though.

“Why... I ... are you sure?” Sutton stammers, looking carefully between Iris and Lyla.

I know that she's just trying to wrap her head around the news, but her question still annoys me.

Does she think that I would make this up? Or that I could have possibly misheard him?

"Yeah, he told me himself. He's leaving. Tomorrow," I add, because I'm pretty sure that I haven't shared that little detail with them yet.

"Tomorrow?" Lyla asks, her voice coming out so loud that all three of us jump in our seats.

"Sorry," she apologizes, looking a little sheepish. "I just... can't believe it. That's so soon. Why is it so soon?"

"I don't know," I mumble.

I don't know how to tell them this, but they aren't really making me feel better about any of this.

"Did you tell him that you love him?" Sutton asks and I shake my head.

"No, he dropped the bomb on me that he was leaving before I could. I tried to tell him after, but he left before I could get a word out."

"Is he coming back tonight?" Lyla asks, and I shrug before I shake my head.

"I don't know. Maybe? He's been staying with Gavin for the last few nights, I think, but he'll have to come back to pack, I guess. Unless he's already done that. If he does, he won't be back until later. He's been sneaking in when I'm already asleep the last few times he was here. I doubt that tonight will be any different."

"You should call him," Iris tells me. "Call him and tell him that you guys need to talk. Or if he can't or won't come back here to meet you, just tell him over the phone."

"Or you could ask him to meet you at the beach," Lyla suggests.

“Maybe it will be easier to say on the phone, though. You could even write out all of what you want to say,” Sutton adds and Lyla nods.

“That’s a good point! And then if he feels the same, he can come back and you two can get all lovey-dovey,” Lyla says.

“We’ll clear out for that part,” Iris adds, and I crack a smile.

Maybe they’re right. I don’t want Flynn to leave without knowing how I feel about him and, at this point, what do I really have to lose? He’s already leaving and I know that with how things are messed up between us, I doubt that we’ll stay in touch.

Things can’t really get any worse.

Can they?

“Okay,” I say, wiping the tears from my eyes and sitting up on the couch.

It takes me a few minutes to find my phone from where it got wedged between the couch cushions. I pull up his name and take a deep breath. Iris, Lyla, and Sutton all lean forward on the couch, their faces hopeful and encouraging.

I pull out my phone, opening the app and trying to think of how to start.

“How about, Hey Flynn, can we talk?” I start and they nod encouragingly.

“Sure, Mads. What’s up?” Lyla says, trying to get her voice to be as low as Flynn’s.

I crack a smile, starting to loosen up more as I organize my thoughts.

“I wanted to talk about you leaving. With everything that happened this morning, I forgot to tell you what I had to say.”

“Oh, right. What did you want to say?” Lyla says, giving up on Flynn’s voice halfway through that sentence.

“That... I love you and I don’t want you to go.”

“I love you too,” Lyla says and I roll my eyes.

Somehow, I doubt that things are going to go that easily, but I know that she’s just trying to boost my confidence.

“That was great! Now call him!” Sutton says as she scoots to the end of her seat.

She’s balancing on the edge so much that I’m amazed that she hasn’t fallen on the floor yet.

I take a deep breath and nod. It’s time. I can do this.

I finish my little pep talk and hit the call button, and it feels like everyone holds their breath as they wait for me to speak.

The phone rings and I try to relax each muscle in my body. I’m mentally repeating over and over what I want to say to him and wondering if I should have practiced a few different scenarios before I hit call.

The phone rings again and I start to chew on my bottom lip.

Then it rings again.

And again.

And again.

I deflate more and more with each ring and I know before it kicks in that I’m going to get sent to his voice mail.

“He didn’t answer,” I tell them as I end the call and toss my phone to the side.

“Maybe he didn’t hear it,” Iris suggests.

“Yeah, he could have been in the shower or something,” Sutton says with a nod.

Lyla is nodding and trying to look supportive, and I try to calm down. They’re right. He could be doing a million different things.

“Yeah, he’ll call me back once he sees that he missed my call,” I say, but there’s no conviction behind the words.

Do I really believe that he’ll call me back?

The truth is that I don’t think that he’ll get back to me tonight. All I can remember is how he’s been avoiding me all week. He seemed pretty done with me when he left earlier.

Instead, he’ll come up with some excuse. He was out with friends or running an errand, he was asleep, his phone died. It will be something and I know that I won’t be able to tell him how I feel. At least not tonight, anyway.

“You could try to text him,” Lyla says with a shrug.

“No, the thought of telling him that I love him for the first time in a text just doesn’t seem right,” I tell her with a sigh and she nods.

“That’s probably a good call.”

“Are you hungry? We could go grab something to eat? Or go somewhere else and just get out of the house for a little bit,” Sutton suggests, and I shake my head.

“I don’t feel like getting dressed,” I admit, and she smiles softly.

“We’ll have a pajama day then. Should be watch a movie or something?”

“Yeah,” I say vaguely.

I know that I’m going to need some kind of distraction if I want to be able to have any peace of mind tonight. My brain is already spinning with ways to get in touch with Flynn and different ways for me to tell him just what he means to me.

Would going out looking for him be too much? Tracking him down so that I can declare my love for him just seems desperate somehow.

Which I technically am.

Where would I even start?

Destiny Falls isn't a big town, but there're a million places that he could be. Gavin's house or mechanic shop, Arlo's place, a bar, restaurant, hiking in the woods, down at the beach. He could have gone to the waterfall or even for a kayak ride. And all of that is just if he stayed in Destiny Falls today instead of going to one of the nearby towns.

Lyla puts on some comedy movie with Kevin Hart in it and I try to pay attention, but when the end credits roll, I couldn't tell you a single thing that happened. Everyone else picked at the food throughout the movie, but I couldn't eat. My stomach is twisted into a giant knot and I know that if I tried to eat right now, I would most likely throw it up.

Sutton grabs the remote and puts on *The Cabin in the Woods* and my eyes get a little misty as I remember the waterfall movie date that Flynn and I went on and how we talked about this movie.

I try to pay attention to this movie, but it's no use. I can't focus. My thoughts are filled with Flynn and everything that I did wrong between us.

I've been checking my phone every five minutes, but he hasn't called me back and it's so late now that I doubt that he will.

The sun is starting to set and I know that I just wasted my friends' whole Sunday. I should tell them to go home and try to get some rest myself.

"Thanks for hanging out with me today guys, but I don't think that he's going to call and I haven't been great company."

"Maybe his phone died or something," Lyla suggests, and I know that she's desperate to make me feel better about all of this.

I can see it on all of their faces. They just want me to be happy, and they would do anything to make me smile. If it were any of them in this position, then I would be doing the exact same thing for them.

I just don't think that it's possible for me to be okay right now. I probably won't be okay for a really long time, but I know that they'll stick with me until I'm over losing Flynn.

Over losing Flynn. Being over him doesn't even seem possible.

These people, they're my family. They're more of my family than my own parents. They're the ones that I call when I need advice or a shoulder to cry on and I know that no matter what happens, they'll be here for me as I work through all of this.

"You know what you should do?" Sutton says after a few minutes of me staring off into space and everyone else remaining silent.

A smile starts to curve her lips and I wonder if I should be excited or scared about what she's about to say.

"What's that?" I ask her.

"You should surprise him and do some grand romantic gesture. Like in the movies."

"Oh my gosh! That's brilliant!" Lyla agrees.

"It would be just like what he was doing with you and all of those dates," Iris adds.

"Exactly! So, before he leaves tomorrow, you can wake him up with this big romantic thing and tell him how you feel. Really do it right," Sutton says and I can see that all of my friends are excited about the idea.

That idea has the knot in my stomach loosening, and I sit up straighter. Sutton's idea has me excited and I start to wonder what I could do to show him that I love him and that I don't want to lose him.

"Do you have any ideas?" I ask them and for the first time all night, I smile.

SEVENTEEN



Madelyn

I WAS unaware of how heavy boom boxes could be.

Turns out that it's quite a bit.

Maybe I'm just too out of shape, I think as my arms start to shake. I should have picked a different movie. Ugh, I feel like such an idiot right now.

I'm currently standing on my front lawn, facing Flynn's bedroom window with the world's ugliest beige trench coat on. I couldn't find any other ones in the stores around Destiny Falls but luckily, *really unluckily* for me, Iris had one that would fit me.

Today was the first day all month that the temperatures reached over eighty degrees. Which is just my luck because this damn trench coat is hotter than Hades. I try to wipe the sweat on my forehead away on the sleeve while still holding the boom box suspended above my head but it's harder than I thought that it would be.

This was not one of my finer ideas. I should have picked a different movie. Or just told him how I felt like a normal person.

I blame Sutton.

The girls and I spent over four hours last night searching for everything that I needed for today. We ended up driving all

over and by the time we got home I was exhausted and passed out. I guess a day of crying and stressing will tire you out.

I bought the boom box from a pawnshop in Maple Bend and the Peter Gabriel cassette at a thrift store in Honey Peak. After we went to a few more thrift shops for the trench coat, Iris remembered that she had her grandma's old one at home and we went there to grab it before I headed home. That was everything that I needed for my big grand gesture.

I feel so stupid, standing here, sweating like a freaking pig, carrying an outdated piece of technology. I'll give the guys in the cheesy chick flicks some credit. I underestimated how terrifying it is to stand here with your heart in your hand, or in my case, a boom box.

My arms start to shake, the muscles in my shoulders screaming and I let out a curse. I've been holding this freaking thing above my head for the last five minutes and I was not prepared. The song starts over again and I groan, this time loud enough to be heard over the music.

The muscles in my shoulders and arms are on fire and I know that I'm not going to be able to keep this up for much longer.

Why hasn't Flynn come out yet? Can he not hear it? Oh, what am I thinking, the whole freaking town can hear this damn song.

Is he even home?

Oh my gosh! Why didn't I freaking check to make sure that he was actually at the house?

"What are you doing?" comes a familiar voice behind me and I jump, dropping the boom box on the grass as I whirl around to face Flynn.

"What are *you* doing?" I counter, sounding out of breath even though I wasn't actually moving and he gives me a weird look.

The boom box is broken, or at least partially broken judging by the way it keeps skipping and replaying the same part of the song over and over again.

I can't say that I'm going to miss the thing and if I never hear this song again, it will be too soon.

"I thought that you were home! Shouldn't you be packing?" I ask and he shrugs.

"I packed up yesterday. Didn't you notice that my room was cleaned out?"

"No... I've been busy," I mumble, feeling like an idiot.

"What?" He yells over the music and I realize then that we've been screaming at each other in the front yard this whole time.

I hope that the neighbors have been enjoying the show. I'm really looking forward to being the town gossip for the next few weeks.

I bend down, annoyed as I hit the button and turn the boom box off.

"I said, I've been busy," I repeat.

"I can see that," he says dryly, his eyes moving over the scene in front of him. I want him to smile at me, tease me, something. *Anything*. Do I still have a chance with Flynn, or did I destroy everything between us?

He seems sad about the boom box but he looks more confused about what is happening than anything and I start to feel defensive.

How does he not get what this is?

"Do you know how hard it is to find a trench coat in the middle of the summer?" I snap. He's the one who loves these movies, shouldn't he have figured out what I'm doing? Hello, boom box, '80s music, trench coat.

"Um, no..." he says, sounding unsure.

I let out a huff and the trench coat flaps around my waist and legs. Flynn tries to hide his smile but I can still see it. That has to be a good sign, right?

“Okay, I’ll bite. What is all of this?” he asks, waving a hand at my oversized tan trench coat and the half-busted boom box at my feet.

“*Say Anything*,” I inform him.

I don’t add the duh to the end of that sentence but it’s clearly implied in my tone, and that just makes Flynn grin wider.

“Uh-huh... and why are you reenacting *Say Anything* on the front lawn?”

“For you, dummy!”

“*Me?*” he asks, his eyebrows rising to meet his hairline.

“Yeah, this is my grand romantic gesture.”

Flynn doesn’t say anything. He just stares at the busted boom box at my feet, this annoying little half smile on his face and I want to scream at him. I want to run up to him and demand that he tells me what he’s thinking.

Instead, I stay still, waiting for him to end my suffering.

I feel like I can’t lift my arms. Is that normal?

“I don’t like the coat,” he finally says and I’m not sure if I should laugh or scream.

“No one does,” I tell him. “Well, no one but Iris. It’s hers.”

“I figured.”

That’s it. *That’s it?* Okay, I’m definitely leaning toward screaming more now.

“Flynn!” I snap and he laughs, that familiar smile curving his lips. “Say something,” I beg.

His features grow serious, his deep-blue eyes finding mine. “Why are you doing all of this?” he asks me and I take a deep breath.

“It was Sutton’s idea. To do this big movie thing.”

He nods, telling me silently to go on.

“I was trying to figure out the best way to tell you,” I say and he takes a step forward.

“To tell me what?”

I take another deep breath.

This is it. Either he feels the same or he doesn’t.

“That I love you,” I blurt out. “That I can’t stand the thought of you moving to California, that I’ve hated the last week, that I can’t lose you and that it wasn’t a mistake and I just panicked and wrecked everything between us.”

With each confession, Flynn takes another step toward me until he’s right in front of me.

Then he does something amazing.

He kisses me.

Flynn slides his tongue between my parted lips and licks into my mouth, kissing me like he owns me. I feel his passion, his attention everywhere, filling me up with liquid pleasure, so much so, I feel some of it trickling down my thighs.

One of his hands trails down my back, settling right above my ass and pulling me closer to him. Flynn’s other hand tangles in my hair, tilting my head up to deepen the kiss. I moan when his tongue tickles the roof of my mouth, trembling in his capable hands.

The kiss goes on forever and still isn’t enough when we finally break apart for air. I’m struggling to breathe as Flynn nibbles and kisses down my neck. I tilt my head to the side, making him growl as he continues to lick and suck on my delicate skin.

His mouth finds mine once more, his hands roaming over my body, causing me to squeeze my thighs together to find some relief from the almost unbearable pressure. Flynn

groans, pulling my bottom lip through his teeth before resting his forehead on mine.

“I love you too,” he breathes out, his hands still caressing my skin, my hips, my back, like he physically can’t stop touching me. I don’t mind.

“Oh, thank god.”

He laughs, the sound traveling through his body and into mine.

“About time!” Gavin calls and I didn’t even see him idling in his truck across the street.

“He was giving me a ride home. I was going to tell you that I loved you. I just needed you to know before I left.”

“Thank god you did or who knows how long I would have been standing out here with that damn boom box.”

“Get a room!” Gavin calls and Flynn flips him off with one hand while the other takes mine and he pulls me into the house.

“He’s got some great ideas every once in a while,” Flynn says as his lips come crashing down on mine once more.

EIGHTEEN



Madelyn

“SO, YOU’RE NOT LEAVING?” I manage to ask when Flynn and I finally come up for air and he grins down at me, cupping my face in his hands.

“No, I’m not leaving. I only took that job because I couldn’t stand to be in the same house or town with you and not be able to touch you or kiss you.”

“I’m so sorry that I said that it was a mistake. I was afraid that sleeping together would ruin everything between us and I couldn’t lose you. You’re my best friend and I need you in my life.”

“Same,” he says, brushing some loose hair away from my eyes.

“I just panicked and I ended up wrecking everything between us anyway. I wanted to tell you that I didn’t mean it so many times,” I confess and he frowns down at me.

“Why didn’t you?”

“At first, it was because I thought that maybe we really could go back to the way things were between us, then I couldn’t catch you. You stopped sleeping here, didn’t text me back. I had it all planned out for movie night but then you never showed up.”

Flynn ducks his head and I know that he's regretting that he missed our standing date.

"Yeah... I almost came, but I just couldn't bear the thought of sitting next to you on that couch, remembering what happened on the previous movie night..."

He trails off and I know that we're both remembering the one and only time that we slept together. I'm hoping that we can rectify that soon.

"I came to your office the next day. I was going to tell you that I loved you, that I had been in love with you since college, since before we even met, but you told me it was a mistake before I could get the words out."

"I've loved you since college too," I admit and he gives me a smile but his eyes look a little sad.

"So, we could have been together all this time."

It's not a question but I nod anyway.

"We're idiots."

He laughs at that, tugging my hips until we're pressed together.

"I'm a bigger idiot. You know that night that we met?"

"When you broke into my dorm room?" I ask with a laugh.

"Yeah... I didn't actually mean to do that. I was hiding from some clingy girl and I ducked behind that bush that was right next to your window."

I nod, remembering the one that he's talking about. I had loved that thing because it blocked out most of the sunlight in the morning.

"I tripped over a root or something on the ground and just kept going."

"And since my window was open..." I continue.

"And your screen had been removed..."

“It was broken,” I whisper, remembering how I had to wait almost two months for them to replace it. “So, you fell into my room.”

He nods, giving me a wry grin.

“Yeah, and I meant to apologize and ask to slip out your front door, but I looked up and you were so beautiful. Then I saw what you were watching and the look on your face when I told you how it ended.”

He grins as he remembers our first interaction and I can’t help but join him.

“I fell in love with you right then and there.”

“No, you didn’t,” I say, trying to pull away from him but he holds me close.

“I did. I had told all of my friends that I was going to play the field at college. Instead, I trailed you around for the whole four years and didn’t get any.”

“Do you regret it?”

“Never.”

I grin like a fool in love, and god, it feels so good to finally admit that I am.

“Want to make up for lost time, then?”

The next thing I know, Flynn bends down, then tosses me over his shoulder. I squeal and pound my fists on his back, but he just chuckles and swats my ass.

Flynn finally sets me down on the ground, holding me steady when my knees give out.

“You okay?” he asks. His voice is rough and deep, pouring over my skin and making me shiver in anticipation.

I nod, unable to speak at the moment. Flynn laughs, and then steps away from me, stripping off his shirt. God, I’ll never get tired of looking at him. I can’t stop the soft, needy whimper that falls from my lips.

Everything aches now that he's no longer touching me. My skin is too tight, the electricity humming along my nerves too powerful.

"You're shaking, Mads," he murmurs, stepping closer to me, completely naked. I'm still fully clothed, and for some reason, that makes it all so much hotter.

"I know."

"You hurting for me?" he whispers, ghosting his fingers down my neck and across my shoulder.

"Yes. Everywhere."

Flynn groans, nuzzling into the side of my neck. "Need you naked."

Before I realize what's happening, he wraps his fingers around the collar of my blouse, then tugs. Hard. I gasp as my shirt rips open, the buttons popping off and flying every which way.

"I can't believe you just did that!" I shriek, trying to glare at him.

Flynn laughs, slipping my shirt off the rest of the way. "Was it sexy?"

I shake my head no as Flynn dips his head down and nods yes, our noses rubbing together.

"Would it be sexy if I offered to clean it up later?"

I bite my bottom lip, trying to hide my grin. It doesn't work. "Take me now," I say dramatically. Flynn doesn't hesitate.

He unclasps my bra, his hands covering my breasts as soon as the fabric falls to the floor. He squeezes the sensitive flesh and rubs my nipples until they harden into tight little points. Flynn trails his hands lower, taking time to explore my body.

He spins me around, then presses a hand between my shoulder blades while holding my hip in a tight grip with his

other hand. I bend over and catch myself on my hands on the mattress. Flynn growls and slides his hands all over my back, cheeks, and thighs, nudging my legs apart so he can stroke my aching pussy from behind.

I moan and buck my hips, rubbing against his hand shamelessly. Flynn fists the back of my thong, the only piece of clothing I still have on. He pulls, making the lacy material scrape along my throbbing clit.

“Flynn...” I moan.

“Yeah, baby?”

“Flynn...” I can’t seem to say anything else, but I don’t need to. He growls and rips my panties off of me, making me gasp as my hips jerk back.

“I’ve got you, Mads. Hang on.”

I barely register his words before he slides his thickness into me, setting a relentless pace. I cry out as he stretches the walls of my swollen, dripping pussy, hitting that most sensitive spot hard and fast, over and over.

My fists clench the sheets, and my head drops forward as Flynn fucks me roughly, bouncing me off his cock. I squeeze my eyes shut and gasp for air, each thrust going deeper, deeper, deeper...

He pulls out suddenly, making me gasp at the loss of him. I look over my shoulder just in time to see him drop to his knees behind me and grip my ass cheeks, spreading them apart. He growls and sucks on my clit, making every nerve ending in my body spark at once.

My arms give out and I face-plant into the mattress, but Flynn doesn’t stop. He covers me with his saliva and attacks my pussy, scraping his teeth along my lips and then licking away the sting. Flynn thrusts his tongue in and out of my entrance until pinpricks of light flash in my eyes.

The pressure in my core is intense and blinding as he keeps pushing me higher and higher, closer and closer, so

close I can taste it.

He stands and thrusts into me once more and that's all it takes to have me flying over the edge of my sanity.

A furious orgasm crashes over me as my pussy knots around his huge cock over and over. Pleasure bordering on pain surges through me, and I cry out with each brutal stroke. I claw at the sheets and somehow find the strength to push myself back up on my arms. I rock back into him, meeting him thrust for thrust.

I bow my back, changing the angle of my hips so he's hitting me impossibly deeper. I'm struck by lightning again, coming hard and fast. The electricity from my sudden, intense orgasms lingers in my veins, keeping me impossibly close to the edge.

My world suddenly spins, and when I open my eyes, I see Flynn hovering above me, pressing my back into the mattress as he dips his head down and claims my mouth with his own.

"Need to kiss you," he says by way of explanation.

Flynn pushes his cock into my entrance, sinking into me slowly and filling me up inch by agonizing inch. He teases me with long, languid strokes in and out while kissing down my neck and chest, pausing to suck on my pulse point.

I cry out and bow my back off the mattress, making Flynn groan and focus his attention on my tits. He picks up his pace, pounding into me harder, faster, while lapping at my nipples and biting the sensitive peaks.

I dig my nails into his shoulders and wrap my legs around his hips, rocking into him as he tears me apart. Flynn's muscles tense and flex as he hammers into me, his strokes becoming uneven and frantic.

An almost suffocating pressure blooms in my core, overwhelming me with its intensity. My entire existence shrinks down to this moment, this connection, the way Flynn is breaking me, healing me, showing me how much he loves me.

I stare into his deep-blue eyes, needing him to see what he's doing to me. We don't have to talk, we only have to be here in this moment, sharing every emotion without words.

Every muscle in my body twitches, tenses, and then locks up. My heart thrashes wildly in my chest and squeezes up tightly as I hold my breath.

“Come for me, baby. Fuck, please come for me,” he grits out, sounding pained.

The crushing pressure building up in my core explodes out of me, the sweet, sharp ache breaking over my body in waves of excruciating bliss. I convulse beneath Flynn's rippling muscles as more and more of my juices pool and then gush out of my pussy with each contraction.

I'd be embarrassed by how wet I am, but I can't think about anything else except this never-ending orgasm rattling through my bones.

“Jesus, that's it. So good.”

The words barely leave his lips before he stills. I can feel him swelling up inside me, and then he's pumping me full of his release. I cling to his massive body and clench my pussy around him, sucking down every last drop of his cum.

Flynn collapses on top of me and rolls onto his back, taking me with him and draping my limp, sated body over his.

We're sweating and completely out of breath, yet Flynn cups the back of my neck and draws my face up toward his. He presses his lips to my forehead and breathes me in. His tender touch is exactly what I need after the intensity of what we just experienced. Flynn gives me a quick kiss on my lips and guides my head back to where it was resting on his chest.

My phone buzzes and I frown, wondering where it went.

“Down here,” Flynn says, digging it out of the sheets and I wonder how it got there.

“It's the girls. They want to know how my grand gesture went over and if you're staying,” I tell him as I read the group

chat.

“Fantastic, and absolutely. I never wanted to leave Destiny Falls and now that you’re mine, I never will.”

I smile as I type out my reply.

MADELYN: Three down. One to go. It’s your turn now, Iris.

NINETEEN



Flynn

FIVE YEARS LATER...

MADELYN'S OFFICE at the Destiny Falls Market has only gotten messier as her pregnancy progresses. There are papers stacked haphazardly on the desk, bags of popcorn and gummy worms mixed in with the piles.

"I see we've been eating a balanced diet today," I comment as I step into my wife's office.

"The gummy worms have Vitamin C in them," she informs me and I grin.

"Yeah, I'm sure they do... along with about a gallon of sugar."

She just grins at me, popping another one into her mouth as I take a seat in the chair across from her desk.

Madelyn and I have been married for close to four years now and are expecting our first baby together. It's still too early to tell the gender and I know that it's killing Madelyn not to know. She wants to start decorating the nursery and buying baby clothes. Well, really, she wants them to be here already. I'm not surprised. My wife has never been the patient type.

"How was work?" She asks me and I shrug.

“It was fine. Busy. I got a few new clients this week.”

“That’s great, boo!”

Madelyn has always been my biggest cheerleader, and that hasn’t changed. After I turned down that job in Los Angeles, I threw myself into my own company. I’m proud to say that my little freelance graphic design company has grown over the years and I now have three other people working for me. I’m still the face of the company and handle all of our new clients, but it also means that I get to take off time when I want or need to. That’s come in handy with all of the baby appointments that we have scheduled lately.

“How was lunch with the girls?” I ask and Madelyn moans.

“It was so good. Fender has the best burgers,” she says, her hands going to her stomach and I have a feeling that I know what we’ll be eating for dinner tonight.

“Yeah?”

She nods and starts to tell me about Hudson’s new restaurant over in Lilac Harbor. He just opened it a few weeks ago, and it’s been crazy busy since then.

“Are you ready for the doctor’s appointment tomorrow?” I ask as she logs off of her computer.

“I can’t wait. We should go shopping after,” she says, and I try to hide my grin.

“Whatever you want,” I tell her.

I don’t bother adding that I already took the whole day off, anticipating that she wouldn’t be able to wait to start buying stuff for our baby after we found out the gender.

We’ve already got part of the nursery set up. They’ll be in my old bedroom since it’s closest to the master bedroom. I don’t know that Madelyn ever caught on to the fact that that’s why I picked that room when I moved in. The other bedroom is actually bigger, but it’s farther down the hall and I didn’t want that much space between us.

I've been crazy about Madelyn since I broke into her dorm room all of those years ago. I only wish that it hadn't taken me so long to tell her how I felt about her.

I offer her my hand as she grabs her purse and we lock the office door behind us, heading out the back door and over to her car. I walked down to the market from our place and I take her keys, opening the passenger door for her.

"Are you hungry?" I ask as she slides past me and into the car.

"Yep," she says, popping the *p* and making me smile.

She's always hungry lately and I try to stay on top of her pregnancy cravings. It's the least that I can do with her growing our baby and doing all of the heavy lifting for the next few months.

"Fender?" I guess and she nods.

"I'll text the girls. Maybe everyone can meet us there."

I steer us out of the parking lot and head toward Lilac Harbor. The girls have only grown closer over the last five years and now that they're all married and expecting, they have a new bond between them.

I know that Madelyn is excited to have playdates with the babies and she's relieved that she'll be able to get tips and advice from people that she loves and trusts.

"My mom called me today," Madelyn says, and I glance over at her.

"Oh, yeah?"

We don't hear from Madelyn's parents that often, maybe just once a month. I think that Madelyn is finally okay with their lack of involvement. She found a new family here in Destiny Falls to take their place and I make sure that she knows how loved she is and how proud of her I am every single day.

Her parents are still in Arizona, enjoying their retirement. They weren't surprised when we told them that we were dating or when we got engaged. They missed the bridal shower and engagement party, but they showed up for the actual wedding. I think that was about what Madelyn expected from them.

They're excited to be grandparents and have been checking in a little more often since we told them the news. I think that it annoys Madelyn because it seems like they only care about her now because of the baby, but we're working on it and on setting up boundaries.

"Yeah, they wanted to know how that baby was doing. I told them that we learn the gender tomorrow and promised to call them after," she says and her smile dims.

I nod and try to change the subject. I hate when Madelyn is upset about anything, but it's been worse since she got pregnant. It's like all of my overprotective instincts have been cranked up to eleven now that she's carrying our child.

"My mom and dad promised to send us some sage so that we can cleanse the nursery," I tell her and she laughs, the mood in the car instantly restored.

"Oh good. That can go on the mantel next to the crystals that they sent us for our wedding."

My parents are hippies, living on some commune in upstate New York. They don't call often and that's fine with both of us. They send us some new age stuff every few months and have promised to try to make it out to see their grandbaby after they're born.

We'll have to wait and see if that actually happens. They tend not to follow through on a lot of plans, especially if it involves them leaving the commune.

"Yeah, I thought that would be a nice addition to our place," I say with a laugh.

Madelyn's phone goes off and she smiles as she reads the text.

“Everyone is in for dinner,” she says as we near the Lilac Harbor town limit. “They said that they’ll leave now, so they’ll just be a few minutes behind us.”

I nod, reaching over and taking Madelyn’s hand in mine as we drive along the coast.

It still makes me smile to know that I can hold her hand and kiss her whenever I want now. The first few months after we got together, I could barely keep my hands off of her. Oh, who am I kidding? It’s five years later and I can still barely keep my hands off of her.

I can see Fender up in the distance. That name still makes me laugh. Hudson named it after Lyla and the way that they met. She had rear-ended him when she first got to town and ended up having to stay to work off the damages to both of their cars. That’s how they fell in love and when they had to name it, he wanted to pay homage to his new business and life partner and so fender bender got shortened to just Fender.

It’s situated right along the water and I pull into the parking lot across the street, grabbing a sweater out of the back seat for Madelyn as we head across the road and inside. We’re the first ones there and we grab a table for everyone outside on the deck.

I sit next to my wife, smiling as I think about all that we’ve been through in the last ten years.

Our meeting was a total accident, something that shouldn’t have happened, but God, am I glad that it did. There is no one on this earth that I would rather laugh with, fight with, or build a life with. Madelyn is my other half and without her, life would be a bleak existence.

I lean over, kissing her cheek as our friends walk over to meet us.

“Thanks for texting! I’ve been craving one of the burgers from here,” Sutton says.

“Didn’t you guys come here at lunch?” Teller asks his wife as he pulls out her chair.

“Yeah. What’s your point?”

“Just asking,” he says, leaning over and brushing a kiss on her lips.

I grin at his save and he widens his eyes at me. Sutton is further along and has been more emotional lately. I know because I’ve gone with Madelyn to open the market at midnight when she had a craving for pickles or peanut butter.

“Back again?” Hudson asks as he comes out from the kitchen to greet his own wife.

“We want more burgers,” Lyla says as she tips her head up for him to kiss her.

“Of course,” he says with a grin. “I’ll go get started on that.”

“Where’s Arlo and Iris?” I ask when he walks away.

“They’re coming. I passed them on the way here, and they were just leaving Blast From The Past,” Lyla tells me.

Iris and Arlo finally got together right after Madelyn and I did. It was interesting watching them dance around each other in the beginning, but now they’re like an old married couple.

“We should get a burger to go too,” Madelyn whispers to me and I reach over, tugging her into my side.

“Whatever you want, Mads.”

TWENTY

SCREWED

DESTINY FALLS

*

This story starts with a theft.

Iris Maeve has always had a penchant for things from the past. It's why she studied art history in college and why she opened her own antique store in Destiny Falls.

She prefers the simpler things, the slower pace of life in her hometown. She has her shop, her friends, and her little cabin in the woods.

Her life is going according to plan.

Until, one night, her store is broken into.

The thieves got away with some of her antiques and left her with a big mess to clean up.

Enter Arlo Michaels.

He's the bartender at The Fainting Goat Pub in town and everything that she wants in a man.

And it looks like he wants her too.

When Arlo starts coming around to help her pick up, she wonders if maybe she's in danger of losing something else.

Like her heart.

When they share one hot night together, she ends up with the biggest surprise of her life.

She's pregnant.

Then she finds out who stole from her and she's left wondering if she can trust the man who's claimed her heart.

This is a 40,000 word secret-baby, small-town romance story that ends in a happily ever after.

ONE



Iris

THIS STORY STARTS WITH A THEFT.

But I don't know about that yet.

I'm still in my own little world as I smile and make my way down the center aisle of my antique shop. It's five thirty, almost closing time, and I make sure that the lights are shut off and the back door is locked. It's my usual routine. I'm a bit neurotic and if I don't do my closing routine in the same order, I know that I'll second-guess myself and have to come back to double-check. I make sure that the packages that are ready to be mailed out tomorrow are stacked carefully on the counter before I triple-check the back door and windows. I make my way up to the front, breathing in the scent of my store as I go.

I've always loved antiques. Show me anything from decades or centuries ago and I go absolutely gaga. It's always been like this.

I think, actually, I know that I got it from my grandma. She was my favorite person in the whole world and she practically raised me. My parents were too busy trying to make ends meet to remember that they had a kid most of the time but my grandma always had time for me.

My grandma was a history teacher and loved to tell me about lesson plans that she was working on or chapters that her

class was working on that week. Her passion for it lit something inside of me, it inspired me, and I used to hang on her every word.

The first time that I found the history section at the Destiny Falls Library had been a real game changer. Instead of fairy tales, we read history books at bedtime. Forget cartoons on Saturday mornings. I'd rather sit with her and watch the History Channel for hours.

Her and my grandpa were the ones who used to take me to garage sales and flea markets to look for antiques or forgotten treasures. We spent most weekends traveling around the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, looking for finds to add to our collection. We never really found much, but that didn't matter. Not to us. It was more just the excitement about what we could find and spending time together.

My grandparents were the only ones who really got why I wanted to open up my own antique store and when this prime spot right by the water and in the middle of downtown Destiny Falls became available, they helped me out with the down payment.

My grandma even gave me a few pieces to start my store and I still have them to this day. They're in a display case right up front even though they're not even close to the most expensive things in my store. I know that I'll never be able to part with any of those pieces. They hold way too much sentimental value to me and I'll never be able to get rid of any of them.

Growing up loving the past wasn't easy. I liked to wear vintage clothes, partly because it was all that I could really find at the thrift stores in town, and partly because it made me feel closer to the past. It was like I was an antique in my retro clothes. Unfortunately for me, it also made me a weirdo in school where everyone else was wearing the latest fashion.

It didn't just stop at clothes either. While everyone was excited about the newest iPhone or app, I was more interested in watching reruns of *Antiques Roadshow*.

Suffice to say that I never had that many friends.

I did have Madelyn though. She's been my best friend since kindergarten and has always supported my hobbies and interests. Madelyn was always cool, one of the popular kids. She's beautiful and funny, outgoing and sweet as pie. No one messed with Madelyn and once we became best friends, people stopped picking on me so much too. No one wanted to get on her bad side.

I needed Madelyn for more than protection though. We're complete opposites and she balances me out. I'm the calm and rational one who tries to let things roll off of my back, and Madelyn, is the wild, spontaneous one who can't help but take things far too personally.

Her parents were workaholics too, so she spent a lot of time with me and my grandma. She never quite found a love for antiques like I did, but she loved being around other people. Plus, her options were either hang out with my grandma and me, or go to the Destiny Falls Market with her parents where I'm sure they would have put her to work.

It wasn't really much of a hard choice.

My grandma would tell her stories about her college days or some of the trips that she took when she was younger. Madelyn used to love those stories and I know that she was making a list of things that she wanted to do when she was older too.

That's another difference between Madelyn and me. She's impulsive and adventurous and I never do anything without looking at it from every angle.

Speaking of every angle...

I spot Arlo as he parks in front of The Fainting Goat, the bar across the street from my antique store. He climbs out and my eyes devour the sight of him greedily.

He's wearing dark jeans and a black button-down shirt. That seems to be his usual attire when he's working at the bar. I can make out his sandy-brown hair and it still looks wet like

he just got out of the shower. I can't see his eyes from here, but I know that they're a bright green that reminds me of sea glass or fresh-cut grass in the summer.

My friend Lyla says that he looks like Captain America and I have to admit that it's pretty accurate. He's lean but still muscled from carrying cases of beer and kegs around all day. I've never openly agreed with her though. I know that I would never hear the end of it if I did.

I know that if I told my friends that Arlo was hot or that I was into him, that they would be pushing me to ask him out or make a move on him.

The truth is that I want Arlo.

All of my friends say that he wants me too and that I should make a move on him, but I can't. I want to make sure that we're compatible, that I won't mess everything up between us by saying something. Destiny Falls is a small town and I know that if he rejected me that it would spread around town like wildfire.

I've never been great with guys. I never dated in high school and I was too busy studying and working in college to go out to parties or find a boyfriend.

I'm also not the type of girl that most guys go for. I'm a wallflower and too mousy for most guys to even notice me. Add on the extra pounds that I gained over the last few years and the fact that I would rather spend my time sifting through dusty old antiques than going out to a party or to the beach and finding someone who's into me is almost impossible.

Arlo seems different though.

"Why don't you just ask him out already?" Madelyn asks from right behind me and I shriek.

I jump around, staring at her with wide eyes and she smirks at me. Her black hair is braided and hanging over one shoulder. She's wearing a plain T-shirt and a pair of skinny jeans. She's dressed casually, but she looks effortlessly chic. I look like an old maid standing next to her in my long floral-

print skirt and pale-pink button-up blouse with the Peter Pan collar.

“You scared the crap out of me,” I hiss at her and she laughs.

“Yeah, I got that from the yelling and spinning around,” she deadpans.

I look over my shoulder and sure enough, Arlo is staring in our direction. He raises his hand in a wave and I hurry to turn around.

“Let’s go inside,” I whisper to Madelyn and she rolls her eyes and sighs but follows me into my store, Blast From The Past Antiques.

“You should just talk to him,” she tells me as the door closes behind us.

I can still see him through the front windows and I try not to be obvious that I’m watching him like a weirdo.

“I can’t. I should be getting ready to close up shop and then we have to get ready for girls’ night,” I tell her and it sounds like a lame excuse even to my own ears.

We both know that all of our friends would be more than okay with me being a few minutes late if it was because I was talking to Arlo.

“Oh, come on, Iris! Besides, girls’ night is tomorrow night,” Madelyn reminds me and I turn away from the window to focus on my friend.

Madelyn likes to talk with her hands when she’s worked up and having her in my shop when she’s like that is one of the worst places that she could be.

“Shouldn’t you be getting home to Flynn?” I ask her, trying to change the subject.

“He’s picking me up in a few minutes,” she says, waving me off and coming dangerously close to knocking over a vase from the 1860s.

“How are things going between the two of you?” I ask her as I try to maneuver her closer to the register and front counter, where there are fewer breakables.

“Great. Everything is perfect between us,” she says, a wide smile curving her lips. “Now back to you and Arlo.”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” I argue and she snorts.

“Everyone knows that you two like each other. Everyone knows that he would say yes or ask you out if you just gave him an inkling that you felt the same way.”

“That’s not what I’m afraid of,” I admit to her. “What happens when things go sour?”

“Who’s to say that things would go sour?”

“History,” I tell her flatly and she sighs.

“You and history,” she grumbles and I frown.

“Those who don’t know history,” I start.

“Are doomed to repeat it,” she finishes for me and I give her a pointed look.

She rolls her eyes and I make sure that the cash register is locked before I dig my keys out of my purse.

“Iris, you have to get out and live life. If I can face my fears and tell Flynn how I felt about him, if I can risk my friendship with him, then you should tell Arlo that you like him too.”

“Yeah, you told Flynn that you loved him when he was literally hours away from leaving town. You didn’t have a whole lot left to lose,” I point out to her dryly.

“I still did it, so it still counts,” she says primly and I huff out a laugh.

I see Flynn pull up in front of my shop and I start to relax. This inquisition will be over soon and I can head home and forget all about my pesky feelings for Arlo. Flynn waves at

Arlo as he climbs out of his car and heads toward the front door.

“You should tell him. Arlo is a good guy. He won’t hurt you.”

“You don’t know that,” I tell her as Flynn opens the door.

His eyes go right to Madelyn and my heart kicks in my chest as I see the way that he’s looking at her. I want someone to look at me like that. Like I’m their everything. Like their whole day just got better by simply seeing my face.

My eyes stray back to Arlo and I can see him watching the front of my shop through the window.

I want him to look at me the same way that Flynn looks at Madelyn.

I wonder what my grandma would have said about all of this. She always encouraged me to step out of my comfort zones, so I’m guessing that she would be with Madelyn on this. She would have called Arlo fine or dreamy or some other adjective that would have made me laugh and ask her where she heard that word. She probably would be able to talk me into asking him out too. She had a way of convincing me to do anything.

My heart breaks a tiny bit in my chest, the same way that it does every time that I think about my grandma. I miss her and I would do anything to get just a little more time with her. I wish that she was still here with me.

“Are you ready to go home now?” Flynn asks Madelyn and she nods, rising up onto her tiptoes so that she can kiss his lips.

I look away, trying to give them some privacy. I’m used to Flynn and Madelyn being touchy-feely. They were pretty much a couple before they were actually a couple so I should be used to it. It feels like things have ramped up a bit since they made it official though.

“Hey, Iris. How’s it going?” Flynn asks me as he wraps his arm around her waist.

“Pretty good.”

I follow them back outside and lock up as they hold hands and try to decide what to get for dinner.

“Want to join us?” Madelyn asks and I shake my head.

“I made a pot roast in the Crock-Pot this morning, but thanks,” I tell them honestly.

“See you tomorrow?” She asks and I nod.

“See you!” Flynn calls as they head over to his car and I wave as I head down the street a few parking spaces to my own car.

Arlo is still by his car. He’s hauling some stuff inside but he stops when he spots me and raises his hand in a wave.

My face flushes and I wonder if I should wave back or pretend that I wasn’t staring at him and just head to my car.

He’s looking right at me so I lift my hand, weakly waving at him before I hurry over to the driver’s side of my car and slip inside.

I try not to look at him as I reverse onto Main Street and drive past him and the bar. I can’t help but sneak a look in the rearview mirror though once I’m past him and my heart clenches when I see him standing in the same spot, staring after me.

TWO



Iris

I DRIVE out of town and farther into the forest. I inherited my grandmother's little ranch-style cabin in the woods. It's tucked deep in the trees and is easy to overlook if you aren't looking for it. The only thing that helps it stand out is the fact that it's a robin's-egg-blue color. My grandma insisted on painting it that color and we spent a whole spring break my freshman year of high school redoing it.

I absolutely love it. It makes me feel closer to my grandma. I can look anywhere around the property and remember a special moment between the two of us.

It's only got two bedrooms, a bathroom, a kitchen, and a living room, but it's perfect for me. I've made it cozy over the years, adding my own vintage touch to every corner of the place.

I can smell my pot roast as soon as I step inside and I sigh, kicking off my shoes and hanging up my purse on the rack behind the door. My grandpa made it out of a piece of driftwood and I smile as I run my hands over the smooth wood.

My grandparents were married for fifty-two years before he passed from a heart attack. They always seemed like the perfect couple and I used to dream of growing up and having a marriage like theirs.

Then I did grow up and I realized that the chances of that happening were slim.

I mean, my grandparents met when they were kids. They were high school sweethearts. I don't really get guys my age. It seems like everyone wants to hook up. No one is looking for something that can last.

My mind flashes back to Arlo standing outside of the bar, watching as I drove away, and I wonder if he wants something to last a lifetime.

I'd like to think so but the truth is that I don't really know him that well. We've only spoken a few times and it was never about anything more substantial than what I wanted to drink or if I was having fun.

I sigh as I make my way into the kitchen and check on the pot roast. It's done so I turn off the Crock-Pot and grab a plate. As I sit down at the little table tucked into the corner of the kitchen, I wonder if maybe I should have taken Madelyn and Flynn up on their offer of joining them for dinner.

I've been in a weird mood all day. Normally I only get this melancholy when it's close to my grandparents' birthdays or when I talk to my parents. Neither has happened recently and knowing my parents, I won't hear from them for a few more weeks.

They're in Florida. They retired there a few years ago. I think that they did it out of spite. I had just come back from college and bought the antique store. They were furious with my decision to start my own business. There were so many fights about how I was making the wrong choice. How hard owning and running your own business was and how I wasn't ever going to make any money.

Suffice it to say that they haven't been proud of me and my little antique store. I like to think that they were just worried that I wouldn't be financially stable, but I'm not sure that that was the only reason.

They never ask me how things are going. I've tried to tell them stuff before, like slipping in that I had my best month yet or that I found and sold this old necklace for a crazy amount of money, but they never seemed to care.

My parents always pushed me toward the higher-paying careers. They wanted me to be a doctor but I can't handle the sight of blood. Then they were pushing me to become a lawyer, but I hate arguing with people or being the center of everyone's attention.

From there it was all downhill. I was never going to be who they wanted me to be and I think that they just kind of gave up. I'm pretty sure they retired so that they wouldn't have to stay in town and watch me at the antique store. That and maybe they wanted to make sure that they were on a fixed income so that if I needed it, I couldn't ask them for help monetarily.

We haven't been close in years and I hate to say it, but I think my life is better without them in it. They were never the best parents but I didn't mind because I had my grandparents.

Now I just have my friends.

My phone rings and I smile when I see Sutton's name on the screen.

"Hey, what's up?" I ask her as I answer the call.

"Not much. Teller is still on his shift at the firehouse. I was wondering if you had eaten yet? Or if you wanted to grab a drink here in town?"

"Are you trying to get away from Stan?" I tease and she groans.

"Yes. He's driving me crazy today! He's being even more crotchety than usual," she complains.

"I heard that!" Stan yells in the background and I picture Sutton rolling her eyes at her great-uncle.

"I made a pot roast and I'm just sitting down to eat. You're more than welcome to join me," I offer.

“That sounds awesome. Should I bring anything? Wine?”

“If you want.”

“See you soon!”

“Where are you going?” Stan asks her before she can hang up and I smile as they start to bicker.

“Iris made pot roast,” she tells him.

“That sounds good,” he grumbles and I laugh.

“Tell him that I’ll send you home with some.”

“She says I can bring you home some.”

He grumbles some more and I grin. Stan reminds me a lot of my grandpa. He was a cranky guy, too, except when he was around my grandma and me. Then he was like a giant teddy bear.

Stan actually knew them and even though he can be a bit prickly, I’ve always had a soft spot for him. He came to both of their funerals and used to drive by the store once a week to check on me. He still does occasionally. Usually, it’s around their funeral dates. He always plays it off as just browsing the store but he never buys anything or even really looks around. Instead he spends twenty minutes asking me how things are going.

“Why don’t you bring him with you?” I ask Sutton before she can say goodbye.

“Are you sure?” She asks, sounding uncertain.

“Yeah. There’s more than enough. Bring Bandit too.”

“Alright, see you in a few minutes.”

I hang up and stand so that I can set the table. I wonder if I should call Lyla too. Her boyfriend is probably working at his restaurant tonight.

As if my thoughts have conjured her, my phone rings.

“I hear that we’re having pot roast,” she says once I answer and I grin.

“Yep, come on over.”

“Okay, should I bring anything? Wine?”

“Why does everyone keep offering to bring that?” I ask with a laugh.

“It’s like girls’ night.”

“Madelyn is with Flynn and Stan is coming,” I inform her but she doesn’t seem bothered.

“So, wine?”

“Sure.”

“Okay, see you soon!”

She hangs up and I grab another plate from the cabinet.

I guess that I was wrong. I’m not eating alone tonight after all.

Sutton and Stan arrive first and I’m not surprised. My place is closer to the Mystery Cabin where they both live and work than Lyla’s place.

Sutton opens the door and Bandit, her dog, jumps out and immediately starts sniffing every blade of grass. It looks like Sutton and Stan are arguing about something as they climb out and Sutton rolls her eyes when she sees me in the open doorway.

“Hey,” I greet them and I give each of them a hug.

Stan sighs when I wrap my arms around him but he wraps his arms around me anyway and I try to hide my smile when I pull away.

“It smells so good,” Sutton says as she tries to call Bandit.

I take the bottle of wine from her as we turn to see Lyla pulling into the driveway. Stan heads inside and I wave at her too before I follow after them.

Bandit jumps up on the couch, making himself at home and I smile as I set the wine down on the kitchen counter and finish setting the food out on my little table.

It only has four seats, so it's a good thing that Flynn and Madelyn didn't want to join us. I know that they're still in the honeymoon phase of dating and trying to spend every minute that they can together.

"Dig in," I tell them as they take a seat at the table.

"This smells amazing," Lyla says as she pops a carrot into her mouth.

I've always loved cooking but sometimes it can get a bit tedious to only be cooking for myself.

"Thanks," I say as I open the wine that Sutton and Lyla brought. "Red or white?"

"Red," Sutton and Stan both say.

"White, please!" Lyla says and I nod.

I carry the glasses over and take my own seat between Stan and Sutton. I grab a roll and take a bite out of it as I listen to Sutton and Lyla talking about some festival that's happening up in Honey Peak next weekend.

"We should go," Lyla says and Sutton and I both nod.

"We already have two tours at the Mystery Cabin," Stan reminds them and they sigh.

It's summer, the busy tourist season so we're all working more hours. By August, it will slow down again but everyone in town makes most of their money between May and August. That's life in a small tourist trap town, I guess.

"We can still go after closing. That's when they bring more of the alcohol out," Lyla says with a wiggle of her eyebrows.

"Honey beer?" Sutton asks, looking slightly sick.

"Maybe it's good?" I ask and we all try to imagine how it must taste.

"Maybe they'll have honey wine," Lyla says after a minute and I laugh.

"Yeah, let's stick to that."

The conversation moves to the Mystery Cabin and I wonder if Stan is going to retire after this season. He seems tired when he talks about it and all of the upcoming tours that they already have scheduled.

I know that Sutton and Teller could handle running the Mystery Cabin but it's going to be weird when Stan isn't there. He's been running that place since before I was born.

My grandma used to tease me because I never handled change very well. I just always wished that things could stay the same and I guess nothing has changed since she's been gone. I know that she would tease me about being sad for when Stan leaves. I can almost hear her voice in my head.

Iris, you're so busy looking at everything that might happen in the future that you're missing out on the present. You can't stop change, darling. You have to just learn to let go and have some fun.

I never quite mastered that.

"Anyone want seconds?" I ask as I finish my wine and go to grab the bottle.

"I'll take some more," Lyla says and Sutton nods.

"Dinner was delicious, Iris," Stan says, carrying his dishes over to the sink.

"Thanks," I tell him with a smile and he nods uncomfortably before he goes over to join Bandit on the couch.

I grin when I see him pass the dog a few bites of meat.

"So, what are you going to do about Arlo?" Lyla asks me as I sit back down at the table with them.

I sigh, dropping my head back and staring at the ceiling. I should have known that this topic would be brought up eventually. Ever since Flynn and Madelyn got together, they've become almost obsessed with seeing me in a relationship too.

I kind of get it. They're all over the moon happy and in love and they just want that for me. I just know that it won't be that easy for me.

Sutton is gorgeous and so smart that it's easy to see why Teller fell for her. Lyla is so bold and pretty that Hudson never really stood a chance at resisting her. Flynn and Madelyn have been in love with each other since the night that they met. They have so much in common and Madelyn is so bright and sweet that it's impossible not to love her.

Then there's me.

I tend to stick to the background. I'm not drop-dead gorgeous, outgoing, or bold. I'm boring and I know it.

Who is going to fall for someone like that?

I don't say any of this to my friends. I just let them make up elaborate plans for how I could run into Arlo and seduce him. I giggle into my wine at one of Lyla's more outlandish ones involving me emerging from the water like a mermaid as Arlo walks along the beach.

"I think you might have watched *The Little Mermaid* one too many times," I tell her and she frowns.

"First of all, there's no such thing as watching *The Little Mermaid* too many times."

Sutton nods along and I laugh.

"And second, it would totally work! All of your curves in a little bikini, he'd be a goner!" She insists and I roll my eyes.

"I think you should try it," Sutton says and that's when I know that she's had too much.

"Okay, I think that maybe you need to sleep this off," I joke, pushing her wineglass away from her.

"Hey, I heard that this was where the party was at," Teller says as he pokes his head around my front door.

"Yep, come on in."

He must have just gotten off his shift at the firehouse. Sutton waves him over and he drops a kiss on her lips.

“Are you hungry?” I ask him and he looks at the pot roast.

“I could eat.”

I just smile as I grab him a plate and a wineglass. Stan is half asleep on the couch with Bandit and I realize that I feel content.

Maybe I won't need a man. Maybe I can just be happy with my friends around.

I take a seat at the table again and ponder how I'm going to convince them of that.

THREE



Iris

I'M DREAMING.

Normally I don't know that I am until after I wake up but the way that Arlo is looking at me, the things that he's saying, well that can only be a dream.

Please, Iris. I just need a chance, just one chance with you and I can prove that we're meant to be.

I stare at dream Arlo, my heart racing as I wonder what to do.

What if he hurts me? What if I'm not the person that he thinks I am or I can't live up to the idea of me he has in his head and he breaks up with me?

There's a million and one ways for this thing between us to go wrong. Should I really risk it?

My grandma's voice comes from nearby and I turn to see an antique vase filled with tulips nearby. They were her favorite flower and my grandpa used to make sure that she had a fresh bouquet every Sunday.

I smile at the sight of them but then they start talking.

This is clue number two that I'm dreaming.

"Take the chance. He's worth the risk," she says.

“How do you know?” I ask her but there’s no reply.

The flower petals blow in the wind and I turn back to see Arlo. Only now we’re on a cliffside and the water is raging and swirling beneath us.

“Iris, I need you,” he calls over the wind and I stare at him wide eyed.

I want to say yes but I can’t get my mouth to cooperate.

“Iris, you know that things could be amazing between us. Just give me a chance!” He yells as the wind picks up and I open my mouth.

I’m going to do it. I’m going to tell him that I want him too, that I can’t stop thinking about him and I’m willing to risk it for a chance with him.

But when I open my mouth, instead of any of those words coming out, all I get is the ringing of the phone.

I can see Arlo’s mouth moving but the ringing phone sound is all that comes out.

I blink awake, sitting up in bed and wondering what the hell any of that dream meant. Why were we on a cliff? Why was it storming? And why was my grandma coming to me as a bouquet of tulips?

I don’t have time to answer any of those questions because my phone really is ringing. I lean over to my bedside table and grab it before the voice mail can pick it up.

“Hello?” I ask, sounding like I’m half asleep still.

“Ms. Maeve?”

“Yes, I’m Ms. Maeve,” I answer.

I don’t recognize the voice and my first thought is that there was an accident and one of my friends has been hurt.

I grip the phone tighter, my heart leaping up to my throat as I wait to see who is calling me in the middle of the night.

“This is Officer Miles. I’m down at Blast From The Past right now. It seems there’s been a break-in.”

I don’t hear much more after he says those words. It’s like I’m in a fog. My whole world grinds to a halt as I wonder who could have broken in and how bad the damage is.

“Your security company called us. Ms. Maeve, I think it’s best if you come down here,” he says and I swallow hard.

“Of course. I’m on my way,” I tell him before I hang up.

I wonder briefly if I should call one of my friends to meet me there but it really is the middle of the night and we all have work tomorrow. Besides, the police are already there.

I hurry to get dressed, grabbing the first thing that I can and tugging it on. I shove my phone into my pocket and shove my feet into a pair of flip-flops before I jog for the front door. My purse is hanging there and I swipe it off of the coat rack and head out into the night.

My heart is racing almost as fast as my brain as I make the short drive down Main Street toward Blast From The Past Antiques.

I always debated having the security system. It was already installed when I bought the shop which is a big reason why I continued to use it, even on months when things weren’t going great. Just last month, I had contemplated canceling my service with the company but now I’m glad that I didn’t do that.

Who would break into my shop? It isn’t exactly the most glamorous shop and I do most of my sales online so I never have much cash on hand at the store. If someone was looking for an easy score, then the Destiny Falls Market two stores down would have been a better choice.

Not that I would ever wish for someone to break into Madelyn’s store.

I spot the flashing red-and-blue lights before anything else. There are three cop cars out front of my shop. That’s all of the

patrol cruisers that this small town has. I try to take solace in the fact that they're taking this seriously.

Maybe they already caught whoever did it. I can get my items back and move on from this fast.

I park a few parking spots down from them, taking a deep breath and swallowing hard as I climb out of my Ford Escape and make my way toward the police cars.

"Iris!" Someone shouts and my head whips to the side to try to see who is calling for me.

Teller jogs toward me, his face full of concern and I give him a halfhearted smile.

"Thank god," he breathes, wrapping his arm around my shoulders in a comforting hug. "I got called in to cover for Jonas. His wife went into labor, but then they found someone else to take my spot. I was just headed home and saw all of the police cars. I was worried that you had been hurt."

"No, someone just broke into my store," I tell him.

He nods, waving at one of the cops. Teller is Sutton's boyfriend. He works at the Mystery Cabin as a handyman during the day and volunteers with the local fire department. I had completely forgotten that Sutton had said that he was still on duty today when I saw her at dinner.

I'm glad that he's here though. I could use a friend as I deal with all of this.

"Hey, Miles," Teller greets the cop.

I wrap my arms around my waist, sticking close to Teller as they exchange pleasantries. Then Teller asks him what happened here and I rip my eyes away from the storefront to focus on Officer Miles.

"The alarm was tripped. Someone broke in through the back, busted a window," he says before I can start to freak out and worry that I didn't lock a door before closing today.

“Did you catch them?” Teller asks for me and the officer shakes his head.

“No, they were long gone by the time that we got here. They left quite a mess inside though.”

My heart sinks at that. I was more upset thinking that someone broke into my place but tears sting my eyes as I think about all of those priceless antiques that they could have broken or ruined.

“Iris!” Someone else shouts and I look over my shoulder to see Arlo running across the road toward us.

I blink, trying to clear the tears from my eyes. I can’t seem to stem them though.

“Are you okay?” He asks, his strong hands gripping my shoulders as he looks me over.

I’m still in my pajamas and I blush. I’m sure that I look like a slob right now but I wasn’t thinking about getting dressed up, just on getting here as fast as I could.

“I’m fine,” I mumble and he frowns.

“Someone broke in,” Teller tells him and Arlo pulls me against his side.

“Did they get him?” Arlo asks and Teller and I both shake our heads no.

I want to soak in this moment. I’m pressed up tight against Arlo’s side and I should be memorizing how his skin feels against mine or the way that he smells, but my thoughts are too jumbled.

“We’ll need an inventory list from you. When you get a chance,” Officer Miles tells me and I nod, wondering if I can go inside now.

Do I even want to go inside right now?

“Can we go in?” Teller asks him and he nods.

I'm glad that Teller is here and taking charge of things. He lifts up the yellow tape and holds it for us to sneak under.

I'm not surprised to see Arlo follow us. It's kind of comforting to have him here. He gives me something else to focus on instead of what a nightmare tonight has turned into.

"Do you know where they broke in?" Arlo asks me as we head toward the front doors.

"They said that they broke a window in the back of the store."

"Did you hear anything or see anything?" Teller asks him but he shakes his head.

"No, I stayed late to finish up inventory so I was in the back. I didn't notice anything was going on until I walked outside and saw the lights and Iris's car," he says apologetically.

I wave him off. This isn't his fault.

I take a deep breath as we head inside. I was hoping that it would help but as I step up next to the register, those tears from earlier come back in full force.

My knees feel weak as I look around the main room of the store. Arlo steps up next to me, wrapping his arm around my waist in support as I survey the scene.

There are pieces of glass and pottery scattered around the ground. Display cases have been broken and jewelry and antique lamps and picture frames lie strewn around the floor, mixed in with the shards of glass.

Years of my hard work are in pieces at my feet and I think that a piece of my heart just broke with them.

It's going to be hard to do an inventory on everything when so many pieces are ruined now. I have insurance on the shop so I know that I'll get my money back, but that doesn't make the loss hurt any less.

“Let me take you home. There’s nothing that you need to do tonight. We can start cleaning this up in the morning,” Teller tells me and I nod distractedly.

I know that he’s right but it still hurts to not be able to fix this right now. Arlo gives my hip a soft squeeze and I turn to look up at him.

“I can come back in the morning and help you clean everything up,” he offers and I nod.

“Yeah, thanks,” I say and that’s how I know that I’m not thinking clearly.

I scan the shelves. I suppose that I should be happy that at least most of the antiques are unscathed. Everything on the higher shelves remained untouched and most of the things in the display cases are alright.

I look over to the register and see the cash drawer has been ripped open. My heart drops when I see the display case next to the front counter and I rip away from Arlo’s hold and stumble my way over to the case that held the antiques that my grandparents left to me.

They’re gone.

They’re all gone.

A sob claws its way out of my throat and I drop down to my knees before it. I ignore the sting of the glass scratching and digging into my skin as I stare at the empty space.

“Iris,” Arlo says as he and Teller both rush to my side.

“They’re gone,” I whisper to them and I can feel their concern filling the room.

“The police can find them,” Teller reassures me but I ignore him.

Nothing that he or anyone else can say right now would make a difference. Nothing is going to be able to fix this. Not until they’re back where they belong.

Out of everything in the store, the four items in this case seem to be the only thing to be actually missing. Everything else looks like it's either broken or still intact.

That tells me that the person who broke in doesn't know anything about antiques. The things in the case next to the register aren't worth much. They were up front because of their sentimental value, because they helped me remember my grandparents and having them there made it seem like we were doing this together.

If the robber knew anything about antiques, they would have taken the jewelry or the paperwork from the 1700s in the far case.

"Come on, Iris. Let's go home," Arlo says as he helps me to my feet and I nod.

Being here hurts too much. Maybe they'll have a lead or some news for me in the morning and this all won't seem so bad.

"I can take her," Arlo tells Teller.

Teller looks at me, trying to see what I want to do and I nod, letting him know that I'm okay with Arlo.

"I can drive," I argue when we step outside but Arlo shakes his head.

"You're shaking like a leaf," he tells me, his sandy-brown hair hanging over his forehead.

I look down and he's right. I stop arguing with him and let him lead me over to his car. It's still in The Fainting Goat's parking lot.

He opens the door for me and I slip inside, breathing in his familiar pine-and-whiskey scent.

"Are you okay?" He asks me as he climbs behind the wheel and I shake my head.

"No," I admit and he gives me a sympathetic look before he starts the car and pulls out onto Main Street.

The drive back to my place is silent and I'm grateful that he seems to have picked up my mood and I don't have to think about making small talk the whole way home. I just want to be alone with my thoughts right now

I can't believe that someone broke into my store. I can't believe how much damage they did.

I can't believe that they took my grandparents' things.

I wipe a stray tear from my eye as Arlo pulls into my driveway.

"It's okay, Iris. I'm sure that they'll catch whoever broke in soon," he tries to reassure me.

I just nod numbly.

"Thanks for the ride."

"Anytime," he says softly and I turn away from the concern in his eyes as I climb out and head up to my front door.

I can tell that Arlo wants to stay, that he wants to make sure that I'm alright, but I really just need to be alone right now.

I let myself in and lean back against the front door as all of my emotions seem to build inside of me.

I sink to my knees as tears stream down my face and for the first time in five years, I wonder if maybe my parents were right and I should have just gotten a boring office job.

FOUR



Iris

I POUR the coffee into my travel mug and then grab another mug and fill that one too. After the amount of sleep that I had last night, or lack of sleep that I had last night, I have a feeling that I'm going to need as much caffeine today as I can manage.

I yawn, rubbing my eyes as I make my way over to the front door to grab my shoes. My eyes feel gritty, like they're full of sand, and I know that it's because of the lack of sleep and from crying so much last night.

They're still bloodshot even though I put eye drops in twenty minutes ago and I'm not looking forward to explaining why I look like I've been crying to people today.

I slip my sunglasses on, wondering if I could just wear them until my eyes stop looking so bloodshot.

I check to make sure that I have everything that I need for today in my purse before I head back to grab my coffee. I grab a notebook and pen so that I can get started on the inventory list for the police and insurance company. I have a broom and dustpan, vacuum and cleaners at the store already, so I don't think that I'll need to bring anything else. If I do, I can just pop down to the market and get it there.

I open the door and let out a surprised scream when I come face-to-face with Sutton.

“Oh my gosh! You scared the crap out of me! What are you doing here?” I ask her as I try to calm my racing heart.

I set the coffee down, glad that this is the kind with the top that you can lock so that I didn’t spill boiling-hot coffee all over both of us. That’s just what today needs.

“Teller told me what happened last night,” she says, her voice filled with sympathy. “I thought that I would give you a ride into work. Stan said that I could take the day off if I needed to and help you clean up the store.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I tell her.

It’s June, the busy season for a lot of shops in town since that’s when the tourists start to come and he was just talking about all of the tours that they had booked last night.

Was it really only last night? It feels like that dinner was weeks ago with everything else that’s gone on.

“I know that Stan can’t afford to be shorthanded,” I tell her. “I’ll take the ride though,” I say when I remember that my own car is still out front of Blast From The Past.

“Sure thing.”

I follow Sutton over to her old Volkswagen Beetle. I love her car. There’s so much history in it. I’ve always been jealous of her little green Beetle but I know that it wouldn’t be practical for me to have one. I rely on my car too much and I need one with a bigger trunk and all-wheel drive.

“You’ll have to Teller thanks for me again. He didn’t have to stop by,” I say as we buckle up and pull out of my driveway.

“You know that he cares about you. Of course he stopped.”

I smile. She’s right. I see Teller as a friend but we don’t really spend much one-on-one time together.

Still, he’s a good guy and I’m not surprised that he stopped to see if I was alright.

“Teller said that Arlo stopped by last night too,” Sutton says as we head toward downtown.

I roll my eyes. I should have known that gossip of Arlo being there would have already spread through our friend group like wildfire.

“Yeah, he was staying late at the bar to do inventory or something,” I say, trying to prove that it was nothing.

“That was nice of him to come by and make sure that you were alright,” she says, her tone too bright and I sigh.

“It was nothing. He just saw the police cars and came over to check things out.”

“And he gave you a ride home,” she reminds me.

“He probably just wanted to help Teller out.”

“Uh-huh,” she says but I can tell that she’s not buying that.

We pull onto the main drag and I take a long sip of my coffee as we head toward Blast From The Past. It’s still early so there aren’t a lot of cars on the road. There’s never really traffic in Destiny Falls, even during the busy seasons. I think that’s one of the parts that I like best about this place. Besides all of the memories.

Sutton parks in one of the empty places out front of Blast From The Past and shuts off her car.

“Are you sure that you don’t want me to stay and help you pick up?” She asks and I’m about to wave her off when Lyla and Hudson knock on the car window.

Why is everyone trying to give me a heart attack this morning?

Sutton and I step out and Lyla wraps me up in a big hug.

“We heard what happened. We’re here to help with whatever you need,” Lyla says and Hudson nods, pulling me in for a quick side hug.

“Thanks, guys, but I think I’m going to need to do it by myself. I need to clean up and make a list of everything that was broken and what’s missing,” I explain.

“Okay, so you tell us what’s broken, one of us writes it down and the other two can help clean up,” Lyla says.

“Other four,” Madelyn says as she and Flynn join us on the sidewalk.

“You guys don’t have to do all of this,” I start to say but it’s clear that none of them are going to listen to me.

“It will go by faster with all of us,” Madelyn says as she wraps her arms around me.

She rubs my back and I relax against my oldest friend. She knows how much this place means to me and how devastating all of this has to be for me.

A few tears slip free behind my sunglasses and I know that it can’t be helping with my red eyes.

“Thanks,” I tell them, clearing my throat.

We head inside and it hits me all over again. Nothing has changed from last night except for the business card tucked next to the register. It’s from Officer Miles and I know that I’ll be calling him for more details on my case as soon as I get this place back in order.

“Hey,” Teller says as he steps inside.

“What are you doing here?” Sutton asks him.

“Stan said that I could take a few hours to come and help you guys. I just need to be back in time for the first tour.”

“You guys don’t have to stay,” I try to argue again but I know that it’s no use.

When the front door opens again and Arlo walks inside, I just sigh. It seems like I’m not going to be doing this by myself after all.

I know that most people would consider that a good thing. Having friends who love and care about me, who would do anything to help me, isn't a bad thing. I just wish that I could have a few moments to myself so that I can grieve for the things that were broken.

It's a strange thing having your place broken into. It feels like a part of me has been violated and I know that it's because of how much this place means to me.

I keep trying to figure out why this happened. Why my store? I wonder if maybe it was just an easy target, but that can't be right. I'm pretty sure that every store on Main Street has some kind of security system. Was mine just the weakest?

I push those thoughts aside as I dig my notebook and pen out of my bag and take another drink of my coffee as everyone looks around the shop. It doesn't look quite as bad in the light of day and I try to find some peace in that.

"Where do you want us to start?" Flynn asks and I look around, wondering where to begin.

"I guess up here and we can work our way to the back room?"

Everyone nods and Madelyn takes Lyla and Hudson down to the market to grab another broom and some more cleaning supplies as I start to write down the damaged items from the first display case.

One vintage art deco wooden box, estimated worth about eighty dollars.

One Antique Till Blue Willow Plate, estimated worth about seventy-five dollars.

Two Japonisme pâte-sur-pâte Paris porcelain vases, estimated worth fifteen hundred dollars.

I want to cry as I sift through all of the broken pieces. These things were like my babies and it hurts to know that they're lost forever. I can still remember where and when I

found each piece and I take a moment as I write them down to say a quick goodbye.

I continue to make my way through the damage, writing down the pieces that have been destroyed in one column and anything that's missing in the second. So far, they're all just in the destroyed one. I'm not sure if I should be happy or sad about that fact.

Teller and Sutton are going through and picking up the display case glass and I sidestep them as I make my way farther down the aisle. Madelyn, Flynn, and Lyla are working on sweeping up the pieces of the damaged items that I've already accounted for. Arlo and Hudson seem to be trying to fix the cash register up front and I wonder if I'm going to have to get a new one. The drawer looked pretty bent last night.

We work in mostly silence. I think that everyone is lost in thought. Maybe they can just feel my sadness in the air and they don't know how to make it better.

I don't look up from the display cases. I just want to get this done as fast as I can. Maybe if I get it all cleaned up this awful feeling in my stomach will go away.

I barely notice when Teller's phone goes off. It's Stan and I listen to them talk for a moment before he hangs up.

"We need to get back to work," he tells Sutton and Lyla apologetically. "A big tour bus just pulled up."

"Thanks for all of your help," I tell them honestly.

They all hug me again before they file out the door. I'm sure that they'll be back after closing or maybe on their lunch break and I try to make a mental note to buy everyone some lunch or dinner. Hell, maybe both after all of the help that they've been.

"I need to run to the restaurant for a delivery too, but I'll be back in about an hour, hour and a half," Hudson tells me and I nod.

“Thanks for your help,” I tell him and he gives me a quick wave before he heads down the street toward his restaurant, Prim + Proper.

“I think that I can hammer this drawer back into shape,” Flynn says as he takes a look at the cash register. “Do you have any tools here?”

“No,” I say, wondering if there’re any tools at the market or back at my place that I could run and grab.

“No worries. I’ll go grab one from Teller and be right back,” he says with an easy smile.

“Madelyn!” Cassie, one of the cashiers at the Destiny Falls Market calls a few feet away from the front doors and Madelyn sighs as she heads to see what she needs.

“I’ll be right back!” She promises and I smile and go back to writing in my notebook.

I’m trying to ignore the fact that it’s just Arlo and me now. I never know what to say to him and that’s why I try to make sure that I’m never alone with him, so I don’t have to try and scramble for something to say.

“I’m surprised that you’re awake so early after last night,” I comment, my voice still coming out a little hoarse.

My throat hurts from crying so much last night and holding back more tears this morning. Arlo doesn’t seem to notice, or if he does, he doesn’t say anything. Instead, he gives me a smile as he bends down to sweep up some glass.

He looks tired. His hair is still a little wet from a shower and his clothes are fresh, but I can see the drag smudges under his eyes and the weary set of his mouth.

“I knew that you would be here bright and early and I wanted to help. Looks like I wasn’t the only one,” he says, nodding to where my friends just left.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I tell him and he shrugs.

“I wanted to. I’ve always liked your store.”

“You have?” I ask, looking at him in shock.

He just gives me an easy grin.

“Yeah, I have. History was always my favorite subject in school.”

“Mine too,” I say, smiling down at my shoes.

“It’s cool that you get to be surrounded by it all day.”

His words are meant to be a compliment but they hit hard. All I can hear is my grandma telling me that I’m living too much in the past and that I need to enjoy the present.

“You don’t think that I’m living too much in the past?” I blurt out.

I wish that I hadn’t said anything because now Arlo is looking at me like he just got a big piece of a puzzle that he was working on. It makes me nervous and I clear my throat and go back to sorting through the broken pieces.

“No,” he says finally and I glance over at him. “I don’t think so. You aren’t clinging to the past. You have friends and you’re living in this century. I think it’s okay to like old things. I used to be obsessed with the Beatles when I was a teenager.”

“Really?” I ask and he nods.

“Oh yeah. I knew all of the words to every song. There was one embarrassing summer where I even tried to talk with a British accent.”

I laugh at that. I can’t picture him doing it at all. Arlo is cool. It’s hard to imagine him doing something dorky like that.

“Did you outgrow it?” I ask him and he shakes his head.

“No way! I still listen to them all of the time. I just have other favorite artists and bands now too.”

I nod, then realize that this is the most that I’ve learned about him since I met him a few months ago.

“Is that why you moved to Destiny Falls? To get away from everyone who remembered you when you were British?”

I tease and he laughs.

“No, I just got tired of the rat race. I wanted something simpler, so I started looking at small towns to move to.”

“What did you do before you moved here?”

“I worked on Wall Street,” he says simply but I’m shocked.

“What?” I squeak and he shakes his head.

“Yeah, I get that a lot.”

“You just seem so relaxed,” I try to explain and he laughs.

“Yeah, I am now. I wasn’t back then. Everything was about money and you had to be quick and cutthroat. It got exhausting after a while. You say that you have a problem living in the past? Well, I had one with living in the future. I was always trying to figure out market trends. Predicting what would happen next just got exhausting.”

“So, you decided to become a bartender.”

“No, I decided to move to Destiny Falls. I like the water and the weather. I have enough saved from my former life that I don’t really need to work, but it gets boring not doing anything all day.”

“My parents would love you,” I mumble but he catches it.

“Should I meet them?” He asks with a charming grin and I shake my head. “Too soon? You’re right. Maybe we should start with a date first. How about we grab some lunch? The Fainting Goat actually has some pretty good burgers,” He asks smoothly and I blink at him.

I open my mouth, about to say what I don’t know, but before I can, the front door opens and Madelyn comes back in.

“Sorry about that,” she says with a grin. “What did I miss?”

So much.

FIVE



Iris

“YOU DIDN’T HAVE to join us for lunch,” Sutton says as she nudges me with her elbow.

We’re just leaving Prim + Proper and getting ready to head back to Blast From The Past. I know that Hudson is working now that his restaurant is open for the day, Sutton and Lyla need to get back to the Mystery Cabin and Madelyn needs to get some work done at the Market, so I think that it will just be me and Flynn working on cleaning up. Luckily for me, most of the shop is done and I should be able to get back to business tomorrow.

“I know, but I wanted to take you guys out and buy you lunch as a thank you for helping me this morning,” I say with a grumble.

Hudson refused to let me pay for lunch. I should have known that I wasn’t getting my way when everyone picked that place to go eat at but I was hoping that I could sneak it. In the end, I just left a huge tip on the table before we left.

“She told him that he should come with us,” Flynn points out as he wraps an arm around Madelyn’s shoulders.

I nod. I did invite Arlo along for lunch but he said that he didn’t have time for something fancy. He needed to be at the

bar to open up early since it was Friday and they do their own lunch business.

I had felt butterflies take off in my stomach when he invited me over to The Fainting Goat for lunch but I didn't want to just bail on my friends who had spent all morning helping me out, so I had turned him down.

I'm trying not to regret that.

Realistically I know that there will be other opportunities to see him, but it really felt like we had bonded in the shop this morning. I've never felt that connected to a guy before. I've never really felt that connected to anyone before.

"We need to get back to the Mystery Cabin," Sutton says apologetically. "But let us know if you still need help after closing and Teller and I can stop by."

"I can too," Lyla says, giving me a hug.

"I will, but honestly we got so much done this morning that I should be able to handle the rest."

"I'll stay and help," Flynn offers and I nod gratefully at him.

"I can come back later too," Madelyn says, giving me a tight squeeze and I wheeze out a thank you that has her laughing.

I wave at my friends as they all head over to their cars, sneak one more look across the street to the bar as I try to spot Arlo, and then Flynn and I head back inside the antique store.

"Where do you want me to start?" Flynn asks and I look around.

Most of the shop is cleaned up. There's just the back section of the store and then the stockroom in back to go through.

"Can you get started taking photos of everything now that it's cleaned up? I'm not sure what the insurance company will need for the claim."

He nods, grabbing his phone and I wonder what else there is to do.

“Then we need to start taping up cardboard over the broken cases. I don’t want anyone to get hurt on them.”

“Got it. Holler if you need me,” he says as I head toward the back with my notebook and pen.

I get started cataloging the last of the damage and sweeping up as I go. I know that I’ll need to vacuum and mop still, but just cleaning up this bit is good enough for today.

I study a stack of love letters from the Revolutionary War, trying to determine what condition they’re in. There’s a smudge on the top left corner of the stack and I set them aside. I’ll try to work on cleaning them up later.

My mind drifts back to what Arlo said about needing to live in the present instead of getting lost in the past or tangled up in guessing the future. I wanted to ask him more about himself, but then my friends came back and the moment was gone.

Flynn sings along to the song on the stereo playing through the overhead speakers and I smile. I didn’t even realize that he had turned it on. I was too busy thinking about what Arlo said earlier.

“I’ve got the pictures of up front done. I just texted them to you,” Flynn says and I nod as I finish writing the latest damaged item down. “Is the cardboard out back?”

“I have some boxes in the back room, but maybe it would be easier to go over to the market and see if they have any?”

“Sure thing. I’ll be right back.”

I knew he wouldn’t mind heading over there. I have a feeling that I won’t see him for a little bit. He won’t be able to resist stopping in to see Madelyn and stealing a few moments with her.

I smile as I head into the back room. This is the room that they broke into, but aside from the broken window, not much

else looks disturbed.

I get to work cleaning up the broken glass from the window and double-checking that everything is as it should be before I head back up front.

Arlo is just walking in the front door and I freeze as our eyes lock.

“Hey,” he says, breaking the silence first and I blink, trying to get it together.

“Hey.”

“Did you guys already finish up?” He asks as he walks farther into the store.

“Just about. We just need to take care of the broken cases and I need to do another inventory check before I take the list down to the police.”

“Was there a lot stolen?”

“No, just the four things in the case up front by the register. The rest was either damaged or broken.”

My heart sinks in my chest as I think about all of the forgotten memories and items that were ruined today. It hurts more because the things that I cherished the most have been stolen. It feels like my store, my safe space, has been violated and I don't know how to fix that.

“Were those the most valuable?” He asks as he walks closer to the case that held my grandparents' things.

“No, not at all. The things in there were my grandparents'. Mostly my grandma's. She was the only one who supported me opening this store. She's actually who I got my love of antiques from,” I tell him and he closes his eyes.

It almost looked like he was wincing but that can't be right.

“I'm so sorry, Iris.”

“It’s okay. It’s not like it was your fault,” I tell him, trying to lighten the mood.

I’m not sure that it works. There’s still something a little off in his expression but before I can put my finger on what it is, it’s gone. He gives me a small smile and I know that he’s trying to comfort me.

“I was really worried about you last night,” he says quietly and I shift on my feet.

I’m not sure what to say to that. I’m not even sure how I feel about him saying that. The butterflies are back, but it has my nerves feeling like a frayed live wire.

Dangerous and out of control.

I like having everything in order. I like being calm and settled, but I have to admit that there’s something addicting about the way that Arlo can make me feel with just a look or a few words.

Is this what love is like? Or maybe just lust...

“I’m okay,” I try to reassure him.

My voice comes out shaky and unsure and he picks up on it.

“I like you, Iris. I want you and I’ve been trying to take this slow because I know how important you could be to me and I don’t want to do anything to screw that up, but I don’t want to wait anymore.”

I blink, wondering if I’m hallucinating.

How can this be real life?

That, what he just said, that’s leading man talk and while Arlo can definitely be a leading man, I’m no leading woman. I’m a wallflower and I’m totally okay with that. I’m more comfortable in the background.

So why is my heart beating out of control? Why am I moving closer to him?

“I like you too,” I whisper and Arlo grins, his green eyes flashing.

“Then have dinner with me. Not tonight. I know that you must be exhausted after all of this, so tomorrow,” he says, running his thumbs over my cheekbones.

I’m sure that there are dark circles there. Maybe even dirt or dust from cleaning all day, but he still looks at me like I’m the most beautiful woman that he’s ever seen.

He’s looking at me like I’m his leading lady and I swoon at the thought.

“Okay,” I whisper as I start to melt inside.

Then I swoon some more when his lips meet mine.

My eyes flutter closed as our lips meet and I feel myself sway into him. My hands go to his shoulders and I cling to him as his lips move over mine.

I’ve been kissed before but it was always awkward, at least for me. All of those other kisses were nothing like this though. Arlo is so confident and his lips fit against mine perfectly. It’s like for the first time, I can turn my brain off and not have to worry about where to put my hands or what to do with my lips. I can just feel.

He licks against the seam of my mouth, and I open for him. I’m just as desperate and greedy to learn his taste as he seems to be to learn mine. He pushes his tongue past my lips and rubs it against mine in an erotic dance.

He tastes like summer, like mint toothpaste and honey and I want to drown in the flavor. I moan, unable to hold the sound of my pleasure back anymore as my fingers tangle in his soft hair.

His kiss tastes like desire and longing. I think back to what my friends said about him wanting me for months and I wonder if that could really be true. Could he have been pining for me this whole time?

I can't deny that I've thought about kissing him too. I used to lie awake some nights, thinking about what he would taste like, what his lips would feel like against mine. It definitely exceeds what I came up with in my imagination.

His lips are firm but warm and pliant as they move against mine. I work up the courage to swipe my tongue against his full bottom lip, giving it a quick, playful nip and he groans low in his throat.

I grow bolder after that. I love hearing how much he loves what I'm doing. His hand slips up the back of my neck, cradling the back of my head and angling my mouth so that he can claim more of it with his lips. I moan again as his tongue wraps around mine. Our bodies press together and I revel in the feeling of his muscles pressing against my curves.

I never want this kiss, this moment, to end. I want to feel him more fully between my legs. I want to rub against him, against that bulge that I can feel behind the zipper of his jeans, until we both find our release. I'm about to try to make that fantasy a reality when I hear laughter just outside the door.

I pull away from Arlo in a rush, taking a few steps back from him for good measure as the front door opens and Madelyn and Flynn both come back in, flattened boxes in their hands.

My eyes fly to Arlo as my fingers go to my lips. I can feel how red and swollen they are and I know that it's going to be obvious what we were doing while they were away.

Arlo's eyes are heated and locked on me. He never even looked away when they came in and that thought has heat coiling through me.

"Did you finish?" Madelyn asks me and I look at her with wide eyes.

"What?" I choke out.

"Inventory? Did you finish up the inventory?" She asks, giving me a weird look.

“Oh... yeah,” I say, my face flaming as red as my hair.

Arlo is grinning at me. He knows exactly what I was thinking and I look away from him before I can do something childish like stick my tongue out at him.

“Yeah, I’m all done here,” I say, heading for the front door to help them with the boxes.

“We’re just getting started,” Arlo whispers as I pass him and I gulp as every muscle in my body tightens deliciously.

I hope he’s right.

SIX



Iris

“I THINK that I should just cancel,” I say as I stare at my reflection in the mirror on the back of my closet door.

“No!”

“Absolutely not,” comes another voice.

I had put the girls on speakerphone as I was getting ready for my big date with Arlo. I was hoping that they would encourage me and help me feel better. They did help me pick out an outfit and decide what to do with my hair, but as the clock ticks closer to seven, I only get more and more nervous. None of their encouraging words are helping.

“I feel like I’m going to throw up,” I tell them.

“That’s a good sign,” Lyla tries to convince me and I roll my eyes.

“It doesn’t feel like a good sign,” I argue.

“It means that you’re nervous because you know that this could be something big,” Sutton says and I sigh.

“What if I mess this all up?”

“You won’t! Arlo is crazy about you,” Madelyn reminds me.

“Plus, he’s a good guy so even if you do something embarrassing, he’s not going to make a big deal about it,” Lyla adds.

I know that they’re right and I take a few deep breaths. I close my eyes and try to imagine what my grandma would say about this.

She was always encouraging me to go out. She used to sigh and say that one day I was going to miss being young and carefree. I think that I’m starting to see what she meant. If I had gone out with more guys when I was younger, maybe I wouldn’t be so nervous right now.

“Okay, I can do this,” I say and my friends cheer.

“Call or text us if you need some more advice!” Sutton says.

“Yeah, let us know if you need anything,” Madelyn says as the alarm that I set for my date goes off.

Arlo wanted to pick me up but I insisted that I drive myself. He had to work earlier today so he would have had to go home from the bar, then come all the way over to my house, and then back into town. I told him that it would be faster and easier if I just met him and he relented but I can tell that it’s going against all of his ingrained manners to not pick me up like a gentleman from my front door.

“I need to get going,” I tell them and they all wish me good luck before we hang up.

We’re meeting at The Blue Plate over in Lilac Harbor. It’s actually one of my favorite restaurants from when I was a kid. I still come here with Madelyn for pretty much every single one of my birthdays and I was surprised that he had picked it.

It doesn’t take me long to get there and when I pull in, Arlo is already there, standing out front with a big bouquet of tulips in his hands.

He looks relieved when I pull in and I wonder if he thought that I would bail at the last minute. Seeing him

looking as nervous as I feel helps to put me at ease and I smile as I climb out of my car.

I'M WEARING A DARK-GREEN, tea-length vintage dress. It has cap sleeves and reminds me of the '50s, but that's not why I love it.

It's the color. It goes perfectly with my red hair and as I stare into Arlo's eyes, I realize that it matches them almost perfectly too.

"These are for you," he says after a beat, passing me the bouquet of flowers and I grin.

"They're beautiful. Thank you."

I want to tell him that they were my grandma's favorite flower and became mine. I wonder why he picked them. I swear, sometimes it feels like he knows me already but maybe they were just his favorite flower too.

"Shall we?" He asks, offering me his hand and I nod.

My hand only shakes briefly as I slip it into his and I bite my lip as he leads me into the restaurant.

The Blue Plate is situated right on the water and is a mix between upscale and casual. It's a two-story restaurant with a deck on the lower and upper level so that diners can sit and enjoy the water.

The sun has already set, but there're bobbing lights in the water and more lights placed along nearby pier posts. Twinkle lights shine overhead, wrapped around the wooden beams of the roof and I smile. The lighting in this place is one of the things that has always made this place feel so magical for me.

I let Arlo check us in with the hostess and we're seated fast on the second floor.

"I hope that you don't mind sitting outside," he says as he pulls out my chair.

"I prefer it actually."

“Good,” he says, his fingers brushing along the nape of my neck as he moves to take his own seat.

The hostess passes us our menus and lets us know that our waitress will be by shortly before she turns and heads back up front.

“Have you ever been here before?” Arlo asks me and I smile.

“Yeah, I’ve been coming here for my birthday since I was a kid.”

“Really? So then you know the best things on the menu.”

“I actually just always order the chicken tenders,” I admit and Arlo grins at me.

“Should we stick with the chicken tenders then or try something new?”

I know that it’s just a simple question but it feels huge. *Do I want to continue with the same thing or am I ready for a change?*

I blink at him and my heart rate kicks up. I don’t want to be alone anymore. I’m getting sick of being the third wheel with all of my friends. I want to be happy and in love like they are and I think that Arlo could be that for me.

So that’s why I open my mouth and say, “Let’s try something new.”

He smiles at me and I wonder if he knows that my words have a double meaning.

We open our menus and I start to look over mine.

“What about the wagyu beef sliders and truffle and parmesan fries to start? Then we can share the honey bourbon salmon, steak New Orleans, and the lobster pasta? Or what looks good to you?” He asks.

“That sounds good but I’m not sure that I can eat it all.”

“We can share.”

I nod and set my menu aside as our waitress walks up. I let Arlo order for both of us as I look out over the darkening water. There are a few boats in the distance and I can just make out their lights.

“It’s pretty out here,” he comments and I nod, turning back to him.

“You like the water?” I ask and he nods.

“Yeah, even in New York I had a place overlooking the lake in Central Park. I’ve always loved the beach. Every vacation that I took was to someplace tropical. It was like I couldn’t relax unless I was by the water.”

I smile at that. Growing up along the beach was cool but somewhere along the way, I stopped even noticing the water. I think that I was too wrapped up in work and proving my parents wrong. I was trying to make sure that I was a success so that I didn’t let my grandparents down.

“What about you? Would you rather vacation at the beach or up in the mountains or something?”

“Hmm, I hum as I take a sip of my water. “I don’t know. I can’t even remember the last vacation that I went on.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, we weren’t super well off growing up and my parents were obsessed with saving up for their retirement and stuff. I spent summers with my grandparents most of the time. Going to the beach sounds like fun but I just can’t picture myself in a swimsuit in front of so many people,” I say with a self-deprecating laugh. “Maybe we’d have to go to one that wasn’t so popular.”

Arlo frowns at that.

“You’re gorgeous,” he says.

He states it like a fact and it has my body burning with a blush.

“I love your body,” he continues and I don’t know what to say back to that.

Luckily, I’m saved by the waitress dropping off the sliders and fries. Arlo nudges the plate closer to me and I take a slider, and I take a bite.

“Oh man,” I moan and Arlo grins.

“That good?”

“Uh-huh,” I say with a nod and he takes his own bite.

“Damn, that is good.”

“Did you grow up in New York?” I ask, bringing the conversation back to his past.

“Yeah, or at least that’s where I spent most of my time growing up. I was actually born in Vermont and then we moved out to Colorado for a few years when I was young before we came back to the east coast. What about you?”

“I was born and raised here.”

“And you’re a single child?”

“Yeah, my parents barely had time for me so it probably a good thing that they didn’t have more kids. They’re retired and living in Florida now, closer to my aunts and uncles. What about yours?” I ask, volleying the conversation back to him.

“My parents passed away a few years ago. Car accident,” he says and I can see that he still misses them.

“I’m so sorry,” I say softly and he nods.

We both turn out to look over the water for a minute. It’s not awkward, more like we’re both lost in our thoughts.

The conversation turns to food and our favorite restaurants.

“Have you been to Prim + Proper? Hudson’s food is always amazing. I’m lucky that I’m friends with Lyla and get to eat so much of it,” I say as we polish off the fries.

“I haven’t been yet actually. It seemed like a date place and I never…” he trails off and I smile to myself.

“Yeah, I’ve only been because of Lyla and the girls.”

“I’ve eaten at his other place though. The one back in New York. Or one of the ones back in New York. He has like two or three there, right?”

“I think so. I remember Lyla mentioning them once.”

“It was life changing and since he’s the chef here, I imagine it’s just as good. Maybe better.”

“He’s opening a new place over here,” I tell him as our main courses are brought out.

It’s hard to find room on the table for all of the plates but we make do, laughing as I almost send one plate over the railing.

“What do you want to start with?” I ask him and he pulls the salmon closer to him, cutting it in half and adding one portion to his plate before he offers it to me.

I take a bite and it melts in my mouth.

We make our way through most of the food. The steak is my favorite and Arlo lets me have more of his half.

“Did you want to do dessert?” He asks me as they clear the plates and I stare at him with wide eyes.

“I couldn’t eat another bite,” I tell him and he smiles.

“Just the check please,” he asks our waitress and she nods.

“That was so good,” I say.

“Better than the chicken tenders?”

“Oh yeah.”

The check is dropped off and Arlo sets his credit card down before I can offer to split it with him.

“I think that I have some cash,” I say, grabbing my purse but Arlo shakes his head.

“I asked you out. It’s my treat.”

My cheeks heat and I'm not even sure why. I nod, putting my wallet back in my purse as the waitress takes his card and the check. She's back a minute later and I watch as Arlo signs his name and stands.

He offers me his hand and suddenly I'm not ready for the night to end.

"Where do you live?" I ask him as we make our way outside.

"Do you know where the Laundry Mat is?"

"Downtown?"

"Yeah, I'm right above it."

"Really?" I ask and he laughs.

"Yeah, I bought it when I first came to town and I wasn't sure how long I would be staying. I guess I just never got around to finding a different place."

"Is it... Does it smell like laundry detergent all of the time?" I ask and he laughs.

"Want to come over and find out?"

"Sure."

"Follow me there?" He asks when we both remember that we drove separately.

"Okay."

He squeezes my hand as he opens the car door for me and I smile as I slide inside and set the tulips on the passenger seat.

He closes the door and I wait for him to get into his car before I back up and follow him back to Destiny Falls. It feels like I should call Madelyn or Sutton or Lyla and ask for advice on what to do when the guy invites you back to his place but I'm too nervous that I'll get distracted and lose sight of Arlo's car.

Or that they'll freak me out and I'll make some excuse to go home instead.

Arlo turns off of Main Street and pulls into a small parking lot behind the Laundry Mat. I take the spot next to him and take a deep breath as I climb out of the car.

Arlo takes my hand and shivers run down my spine. The air around us seems to grow heavier with sexual tension as we take the stairs up to his place. My palms feel damp and I wonder if he notices. I wonder if he can tell that there are other parts of me growing damp too.

He drops my hand to unlock his front door and I miss his touch instantly. I don't know what's gotten into me, but I want his hands on me. I crave his touch.

Maybe all of those sexual feelings that I was supposed to have when I was a teenager are finally kicking in because for the first time in my life, I want him.

We enter his place and I glance around quickly as he closes the door behind us. There's a kitchen and living room directly in front of me. A row of windows overlooks downtown and the deserted street below us.

Arlo steps to the side of me and I turn to him. It's like everything happens in slow motion after that. He looks at me and I take a step closer to him, my dress swaying around my legs with the movement.

Then we're both reaching for each other and it's like everything shifts into overspeed. His lips land on mine and my hands grip his arms as he backs me up against the wall beside the door.

I press my body closer to his, wanting to feel every hard inch of him against me. His tongue slips against the seam of my lips and I open for him greedily. I've missed his mint-and-honey taste and I moan when I get it again.

"So fucking good," he whispers against my mouth before he goes back to stroking his tongue, learning my taste.

"More," I moan, greedy for him.

He gives me one hard kiss before he pulls away.

“I should give you a tour,” he says and I want to protest but then I realize that he’s leading me straight to his bedroom.

There’s a hallway off of the living room with three doors and he takes me to the first one. His room is pretty clean and I wonder if he was hoping that we would come back to his place tonight or if he’s always this clean.

I hesitate at the threshold of his room and he turns to look at me.

“We don’t have to do anything tonight, Iris. We can take things slow,” he says gently and I shake my head.

I’m ready for this. I’m ready for him.

“I’m ready,” I tell him. “I just don’t really know what I’m doing.”

He smiles at that and steps into me once more.

“I’ve got you,” he says before his hands come up to cradle my face.

His lips graze mine once more and I close my eyes, getting lost in Arlo. I don’t even notice when he starts to lower the zipper of my dress. It isn’t until his fingertips glide up my bare spine that I realize that it’s undone. I shiver as I feel the rough pads of his fingers drag along my sensitive skin.

The material starts to move, to slide down my arms and I catch it before it can drop away completely. My face blushes and I try to take a deep breath. I know that Arlo said that he loves my body but I still can’t help but be self-conscious to be naked in front of someone else for the first time in my life.

“It’s okay,” Arlo says and I glance up into his green eyes.

I trust him. Maybe I shouldn’t after only being around him for a short amount of time but I do. He’s starting to open my eyes, to make me see that I wasn’t really living, just existing. I want to try new things, to have new experiences and I want Arlo to be there for them.

I let the dress drop, leaving me standing in front of him in just my bra, panties, and heels.

“God. You’re every fantasy that I’ve ever had all rolled up into one perfect body,” he says, his voice rough with need.

That sparks something in me. Maybe it’s hearing how much he wants me, how much he needs me, but a surge of confidence skitters down my spine and I stop trying to cover myself with my hands.

I let him look his fill, but I can feel the heat staining my cheeks. I look up, meeting his deep-green eyes, and I can see how badly he needs me.

“Your turn,” I whisper.

His hands go to the button on his pants and I watch as he undoes them and lowers the zipper. I gulp as he pushes the pants down his legs. He reaches for his shirt next and quickly undoes the buttons. With each inch of skin that he reveals, my lust grows. By the time that he’s standing in front of me in just his boxers, I’m ready to tackle him to the bed behind him and beg him to take me.

He’s on the same page because he kicks his clothes to the side and reaches for me. Our lips meld together as he starts to back us up toward the bed.

“I need a taste. I need to explore this body,” he says against my lips and I nod. I would agree to anything that he said right now.

I need something. I’m just not sure what. I’m like an exposed nerve. My entire body is tingling and I’m burning up. My pussy clenches around nothing, aching to be filled and I start to back up faster.

“I need you,” I tell Arlo and his eyes darken with heat.

“You have me.”

With that, he pushes me down onto the mattress and comes down over me. He catches himself on his arms before he can crush me and I arch up, wanting to feel his weight on me.

He reaches up, his fingers tugging down the soft cup of my bra as he trails kisses down my neck and I bite my lip to keep from moaning. His mouth latches on to a nipple and he sucks, his cheeks hollowing out as he teases the stiff peak.

“Arlo!” I cry out, unable to keep my pleasure in when he’s doing such wicked things to my body.

He switches to the other breast, leaving that nipple hard, red, and wet from his mouth.

“More. I need more,” I cry, my hips arching in invitation.

Arlo nods, his hair brushing against my skin as he grabs my panties and slips them down my legs. As soon as he’s tossed them over his shoulder, he’s back and he nudges my thighs apart and settles between them. I’m about to tell him to stop, to just fuck me already, when he buries his face between my legs and starts to eat me like I’m a five-course meal and he’s starving.

“Arlo! Oh my!” I half shout, half moan.

He moans against my drenched flesh and I wiggle under him, both loving what he’s doing to me and feeling overstimulated by it.

His hands wrap around my thick thighs and he holds me in place, his tongue rubbing small circles over my clit. With each pass, my body seems to grow more and more tense, like he’s tightening a wire or something inside of me and I’m about to snap.

“I’m... oh gosh... I...” I babble incoherently as my orgasm grows and grows inside of me.

My mouth opens on a silent cry and just like that, I come, my hips wiggling and squirming against his face.

“Fucking delicious,” Arlo groans as he kisses my thighs and stands.

“I need more,” I say, already greedy for him.

So this is what has everyone acting like idiots. I can see why. I've never felt anything like what I just did with Arlo.

I want to feel it again.

Arlo climbs onto the bed and I scoot backward into the center as he does. His hands come down on either side of me and I spread my thighs as wide as they'll go, wanting him to sink inside of me.

"Are you ready?" Arlo asks and for the first time, he looks unsure.

"Yes, I've never wanted anything more in my life," I whisper.

He nods, lining himself up with my snug hole.

"Condom," he says, starting to pull away but I stop him.

I'm desperate for him. I feel like I'm balancing on a tightrope and I'll fall if I don't feel him in me in the next few seconds.

"I'm on the shot and I'm clean," I say in a rush and he nods.

"I'm clean too," he says and I nod.

My fingers dig into his arms as he starts to push inside of me. He leans down and kisses me, trying to distract me from the pinch of pain as he goes.

We both curse as he thrusts fully inside of me and I close my eyes tight, trying to get used to the sudden invasion.

"Holy shit," he murmurs and I start to laugh.

He sounds like he's in awe of me and I can't help it. I blink my eyes open at him and Arlo grins down at me.

"You're so big," I say and he huffs out a laugh.

"I'm sorry?"

That has me giggling some more and he grins.

“No, it’s good. It’s really good,” I assure him. “Can you move?”

“Oh, thank god,” he groans and I laugh again.

Until he pulls out of me and slowly starts to sink back in. This time, we both moan and my legs tighten around his hips.

He picks up the pace and my hips rise with each thrust. It isn’t long until that same feeling as before is growing inside of me again.

Arlo is sweating, his face filled with passion and I think that I start to fall in love with him in that moment. There’s just something about the way that he’s watching me. It connects with something inside of me, something that I can’t explain.

“I want to feel you come inside of me,” I half moan.

I can feel my own orgasm starting to brew and I know that it won’t be long before I’m getting lost in my pleasure once again.

“Shit!” Arlo grunts, his pace starting to falter as I feel him swell inside of me.

Then it happens.

I gasp as my orgasm hits me, my vision going blank and my whole body tightening around Arlo as I feel him find his own release inside of me. My orgasm seems to go on and on and I hear him call my name as it finally subsides and I sag back against the mattress.

He collapses on top of me, both of us breathing hard and wrapped around each other.

“That was so much better than I imagined it would be,” he whispers in my ear and I nod.

I haven’t spent that much time fantasizing about sex, but now that I know what it’s like with Arlo, I have a feeling that I will.

His lips find mine as he rolls onto his side and I wrap my arms around him, getting lost in him once again.

SEVEN



Iris

I WINCE as I roll over in bed the next morning. I brush my tangled red hair away from my face. I'm sure that I look like I've been in some kind of windstorm with how messy it feels from having Arlo's hands in it for half the night.

I bite my lip as I think about the way he worshipped me in bed last night. He was so attentive, so in tune with what I needed. It was mind blowing.

I move to sit up in bed and wince again. My body is sore and achy in places that I didn't even know could be sore and achy.

Arlo didn't close the blinds all of the way last night and now that the sun is starting to rise, the light is shining right in my eyes.

Maybe I should have left my hair where it was. I could have used it as a makeshift sleeping mask.

Ugh, my mouth tastes like crap. I probably have terrible morning breath. I wonder if I can sneak away and grab a piece of gum out of my purse. I wonder where my purse even is...

I roll over and come face-to-face with Arlo. He's lying on his stomach, his face half buried in his pillow. He's still fast asleep and I use the time to study him.

He really does look like Captain America with his strong jawline and the almost boyish way that his sandy-brown hair falls over his forehead. The blanket has dipped low on his back and my fingers itch to touch him.

I want to run my hands all over him like I did last night. I want to feel as alive and in tune with him as I did when we were making love.

Morning sex always seemed like a bad idea. I used to think that I would barely be awake enough to enjoy it, but now, as I lie next to Arlo, I think that I might like to try it. Just the thought of feeling his hands and mouth all over my body again has me feeling more awake already.

What am I thinking? I need to get out of here. It's already past opening time for my store and I still need to go home and change before I head to work. It's going to be bad enough doing the walk of shame with most of the businesses on Main Street open now.

Besides, I know that Arlo is used to working nights so I doubt that he's used to waking up this early. After last night, he deserves to sleep in.

I start to make a mental list of everything that I need to do today as I scoot toward the edge of the bed. I move slowly, trying not to wake Arlo and I let out a sigh of relief when I climb off of the mattress and see that he hasn't so much as stirred.

I need to stop and check in with the police to see if they have any news for me, I think as I pull on my panties from last night.

I should call the insurance company too, I think, as I find my bra that's halfway buried under his dresser.

How did that get there? I don't even remember taking it off so it must have been when he was kissing me.

Gah! Stop thinking about last night. What do you need to do today?

I didn't check my online store yesterday either. I need to update the inventory and make sure that I didn't have anything that needed to be mailed out today, I remember as I find my dress and slip it over my head.

Maybe I should update my security system? Get something with video cameras to go with the motion detectors.

I find my shoes and purse on the chair by his window and take one last look at Arlo's sleeping form before I tiptoe toward his bedroom door.

I barely looked around Arlo's place last night. It was dark and I was too focused on what Arlo was doing and saying to me to notice the decor of his home.

He lives on the other side of town of Destiny Falls, kind of over by Maple Bend and closer to downtown, whereas I live closer to Lilac Harbor. Destiny Falls isn't that big of a town and is right between those two towns, so even though we're on opposite sides, it only takes about fifteen minutes to get over to my house from here.

He has a loft apartment above the Laundry Mat and I briefly remember him telling me that he owns it. I wonder if he means that he owns the Laundry Mat, his apartment, or the whole building.

I poke my head out into the hallway. I'm not sure if he has roommates, though I doubt it. If he can afford to own this place or the Laundry Mat or whatever, then I doubt that he needs roommates. Still, I don't want to wake anyone up so I try to be quiet as I make my way out of his bedroom.

There are two other doors down this hallway. One is open and looks to be the bathroom but the other is closed. I want to open it, peek inside, and see if I can learn something about Arlo but it feels wrong to snoop so I resist the temptation and turn toward the main room.

I'm late enough as it is, I remind myself.

I tiptoe down the short hallway and come up short as I almost run into someone.

“Oh! Sorry,” I say, my face flaming as I look away from the guy’s bare chest.

“No problem,” he says and I look up.

He’s smiling at me, a kind of lopsided grin that I get the feeling he thinks is charming, but that’s not what catches my eye. It’s how much he looks like Arlo.

He looks like a darker version of the man that I just left in bed and I know instantly that he’s related to Arlo in some way. We didn’t really talk about family last night but I would guess that he’s either his brother or cousin.

“Are you leaving already?” He asks and something about the way that he says it, the way that he leans in closer to me, has my hairs standing on end.

His eyes are red, bloodshot, and I can’t tell if he’s just tired or maybe still drunk from last night. I can smell the whiskey on his breath so I’m guessing it’s a combination of the two.

Does Arlo know that his brother or cousin was out all night drinking?

“Uh, yep. I need to be getting to work,” I say as I sidestep him.

“That’s too bad,” he says and I notice that he’s kind of swaying on his feet.

I want to reach out and steady him but there’s something about him that has my protective instincts screaming at me to get out of here. I try to figure out what it is about him that I don’t trust as I make my way over to the front door. I keep my eyes on the guy and he watches me right back.

There’s something about the hazy look of his eyes that strikes me as odd. It takes me a second to realize that he’s on something. His eyes are glassy and he’s swaying slightly on his feet. I wonder if Arlo knows that he’s doing drugs. I don’t know enough to even guess at what the guy might be on, but I know that this is more than just alcohol and exhaustion.

Should I wake Arlo and tell him?

No, I'm sure that he will be up soon and he'll notice. He probably already knows and just doesn't like to talk about it.

"Um, see you," I say warily before I open the front door and head down the stairs.

"Bye," he says, his voice coming out slow and drawn out.

All of the happy, fuzzy feelings that I had from waking up next to a naked Arlo have vanished after my encounter with whoever that was. Now I'm too worried about what's going on there to focus on the way that Arlo made love to me last night.

My car is parked close to the back door of the Laundry Mat and I fish the keys out of my purse and climb behind the wheel. I peek back up to the building and see a dark shadow in the window there. They're partly behind the curtains so I can't make out if it's Arlo or his roommate but deep in my gut, I know that it's not Arlo.

I shift into reverse and make the short drive back to my little cabin. I need to shower and get changed before I can head into the store and I try to hurry through my usual routine.

By the time that I climb out of the shower, I'm already over an hour late for opening. I call the number that Officer Miles gave me while I make myself some oatmeal for breakfast. He doesn't answer so I leave a message asking him to call me back.

I call the security company on my drive into town and they promise to send someone out tomorrow to go over some upgrades for my system.

By the time that I'm unlocking the front doors of Blast From The Past, I've already crossed off half of the things on my to-do list for today. I don't think that I'll have many customers this morning, or hell, this afternoon either, so I leave the doors closed and head behind the counter to put my purse away.

I grab my computer from the back room and start the coffeepot before I head back up front and turn on my laptop. I get started on updating the inventory of the online store and

checking to see if I have any orders from the last few days. There's only two and it doesn't take me long to get them packaged and ready to be shipped.

When my phone rings an hour later, I'm expecting it to be Officer Miles or maybe the insurance company. Instead, it's one of my friends from summer camp when I was a kid.

"Hey, Hartley! It's been a while."

"I know," she says and I can hear the smile in her voice.

Hartley is always positive. We met when my parents sent me to a summer camp down in Georgia. They had family there and so while they spent a week with family and friends, I spent a week in the forest. I slept in a tent and spent the week either hiking or hiding and reading. I hated every minute of it, but so did Hartley.

We bonded over books and dreams for the future. We tried to stay in touch after camp ended but drifted when we went off to college. It wasn't until I went down to Atlanta for an antique conference that we reconnected. I was in college and she was studying at the culinary institute. She was at the conference with her grandma and we both fell back into a rhythm like no time had passed at all.

Now we still talk about every two or three weeks. I know that she's been busy getting ready to graduate from culinary school and I'm assuming that she's calling to tell me how it was. I can't wait to hear. Hartley is an amazing chef and baker and she's been so excited to graduate and open her own bakery with her grandma.

"How are things?" I ask her as I set my laptop aside.

"Alright."

"Yeah?" This is not how I thought this conversation would go.

I expected her to be gushing about graduation and her plans for the bakery. Instead, she just sounds... sad.

“How’s your grandma?” I ask her as I grab my second cup of coffee from the pot.

Talking about her grams can always put Hartley in a good mood. It’s one of the biggest things that we bonded over as kids.

“She passed away a week ago,” Hartley says after a pause and my stomach clenches.

“Hartley... I’m so sorry,” I say sincerely.

“I know. Thanks,” she says as she clears her throat.

“Can I do anything?”

“No, we... we’re having the funeral this Tuesday. I already made all of the arrangements,” she says before I can offer to help with them.

“I’m so sorry,” I say again.

It feels useless. I know firsthand that those words don’t really help. Not when you’ve lost someone as important as Grams was to Hartley.

“I know,” she chokes out and I feel tears sting my own eyes.

“Maybe I can come down for the funeral,” I suggest. “I can stay and help with whatever you need.”

“Flights are going to be crazy expensive,” she says and I know that she’s right. “I don’t really have a place for you to stay either. I’m working on packing up our apartment.”

“Are you moving?” I ask her with a frown.

I can’t imagine leaving my grandma’s cabin or this place that reminds me so much of her. Being around her things, her town, makes me feel closer to her. It gives me comfort being around the same things that she was.

“Yeah. I just... I just need a change,” she says and I can tell that she’s holding back tears.

My heart breaks for her and I bite my bottom lip, trying to hold back my own tears. A few slip free and I hurry to wipe them away.

“I get it,” I admit. Being around Destiny Falls and living in her cabin was hard for me at first too. I just missed her so much, but over time it got a little easier. “I’m really sorry. I loved your grandma and I know how much she meant to you.”

“She loved you too,” she tells me and I smile slightly.

“You should come up here and visit me. You can see if you like Michigan.”

“Maybe. I don’t know where I want to go yet.”

“How are you going to decide? Just travel around for a bit?”

“Nah, I think that I’ll just throw a dart at a map,” she says and I grin.

That sounds like Hartley. I think that the reason that I clicked with Hartley so fast was because she reminds me so much of Madelyn. Both of them are more go with the flow than I am. They tend to leap before they look.

“Well, let me know where you wind up and if you need anything, just let me know. I mean it, Hartley.”

“I know. Thanks. I miss you.”

“I miss you too,” I tell her and we catch up for a few more minutes before she has to hang up.

She tells me about graduation and I tell her about the robbery. She has a million questions about that and if we’ve caught the guys yet. She promises to check in once she gets to wherever she’s going and I know that I’ll be texting and calling her more over the next few weeks to make sure she doesn’t feel alone.

“I’ll talk to you soon,” I tell her.

“Yeah, I’ll call you once I’m settled.”

“Sounds good.”

We hang up and I try to clear my head as I head back to work.

It isn't until Arlo walks in the front door of Blast From The Past that I start to freak out about what happened last night.

EIGHT



Iris

“HEY,” I say as I make my way out from behind the counter.

“Hey, I was wondering where you went off to.”

“Yeah, I had to get to work,” I say.

It’s only a half lie. When I woke up, I could feel the weight of our night together starting to hit me so I made a to-do list to take my mind off the fact that I had no idea how to react on the morning after a steamy night with someone.

“Did something happen?” He asks and it’s only then that I notice that it looks like he just rolled out of bed and he looks slightly panicked.

His hair is sticking up in the back and it makes him look younger. His shirt and shorts are wrinkled and I wonder if he just grabbed the first thing that he could and came straight here.

Maybe I shouldn’t have snuck out. I didn’t mean to worry him.

“What? No, like I said, I just had to get to work. I had a lot to get done today for the insurance stuff and with the security company,” I tell him.

He nods, studying me and he must see that I’m telling the truth because he relaxes.

“Are you all caught up?”

“For the most part.”

“Want to take a quick break and grab something to eat?”

“Another date already?” I try to tease him.

“Yeah, I want to see if I can get lucky again today.”

“I think the time for morning sex was this morning before I left,” I try to joke and his mouth drops open.

“What?”

“What?” I ask nervously, wondering if I just overstepped or made some dating faux pa.

“I meant see if I was lucky enough to get you to go out with me again, but I like your idea too.”

He gives me an affable grin and I can feel my cheeks heating. I try to look away since I’m sure that they’re turning a terrible shade of red.

“So, what do you say?” Arlo asks, throwing me a life rope. “Dinner tomorrow night?”

“Sure, what did you have in mind?”

“What are you hungry for?”

“Honestly?”

He nods and I bite my lip. I wonder if I should say something fancy like steak and frites but that’s not what I’m in the mood for.

“Pizza,” I admit, wincing slightly.

I really wish that I knew more about dating etiquette. I don’t want to mess anything up with Arlo. I love being around him. I love how he makes me feel and I don’t want to do anything to screw this up.

“That actually sounds really good,” Arlo says with a relieved sigh and I relax.

“Mancino’s?” I suggest.

It's the best pizza place in town and is only a few doors down so I could grab it after work if I needed to.

"Sure. I need to do stock at the bar tomorrow afternoon but I can pick you up and we can head back to my place after closing if you want."

I remember his roommate from this morning and my stomach clenches at the thought of seeing him again.

"Actually, maybe we could go to my place?" I offer.

He studies me for a moment and I shift, my fingers twisting together in front of me.

"So you met Abel," he says, hanging his head for a moment.

"Is that your... the guy who was in your apartment this morning?" I ask and he nods.

"Yeah, he's my brother. He's staying with me for a bit. I didn't even think to mention him last night and then this morning you left before I woke up. To be honest, I didn't think that he would even be awake so early. He's usually a late riser," he says.

"To be fair, I don't think that he had gone to bed yet when I ran into him," I try to joke but instead of smiling, Arlo's jaw tightens and his eyes get hard for a flash.

"Oh, I'll have to have a talk with him," he grumbles. I want to ask, A talk about what? But it doesn't feel like I have a right to.

"So, dinner tomorrow?" Arlo asks, changing the subject and I decide to let it go.

If he wanted to open up or talk to me about anything, I'm sure that he would. We're just not there yet, which makes sense since we've only been out on one date.

"Sure."

"How about we get Mancino's? Say around six? I can grab pizza on the way home."

“I’ll grab it. Pepperoni?” he says and I nod.

“Sounds good.”

Arlo gives me that easygoing smile of his that puts me at ease and I watch as he closes the distance between us. I tilt my head up, offering my mouth as my eyelids flutter closed and he wastes no time in claiming my mouth greedily.

There’s no hesitation to our kiss this time. I open for him instantly and he pushes his tongue past my lips to tangle with mine.

I moan into the embrace, my hands gripping his biceps as I cling to him. It’s like we can’t get close enough and I have the strangest urge to try to rip his shirt off of him. I doubt that I could, but boy would it be fun to try.

His lips move over mine and I hold on to him tighter. He still tastes like summer, that mint-and-honey flavor that is starting to become familiar, and I wonder if that is his toothpaste or if it’s just him. Either way, I want to drown in the flavor. I want to commit it to memory so that if anything goes wrong between us, I’ll still have this taste.

His fingers tangle in my red hair and I’m glad that I didn’t put it up this morning. He tugs on the locks and I moan, opening for him more. He presses against me, that ridge in his pants pressing against me in the most mind-numbing way and now I wish that we were both naked.

“So perfect,” he murmurs against my mouth and I smile, my lips curving against his.

“I was just thinking the same thing,” I whisper back and he grins at me.

He drops one more kiss on my swollen lips before he takes a reluctant half step back. I love that he doesn’t want to pull away from me, that he can’t seem to get enough of me either. It makes me feel wanted and desired, something that I’ve never experienced before in my life.

I want to pull him back to me but I know that he needs to get to work and I have to do things around here too.

“I’ll see you tomorrow night,” he whispers before he pulls back, taking a few more steps away from me and I nod.

I’m still in a daze and I blink slowly as Arlo steps forward, his green eyes twinkling, and drops one last kiss on my lips before he heads out of the store. I watch through the front windows as he heads across the street to the bar and disappears out of sight inside.

I know that he has to work tonight and I wonder if maybe I should swing by the bar for a drink after work tonight and see him for a bit. I feel like a high schooler or some boy-crazy teen trying to spend all of my free time around my crush.

I kind of like it.

I try to get back to work and I’m surprised when the door opens a few minutes later. I’m expecting for it to be Madelyn or maybe Lyla or Sutton, here to check on me and the shop. I’m sure that they’re dying to know how last night went and I’m surprised that I haven’t heard from any of them yet.

Instead of my friends though, it’s Officer Miles.

“Hey,” I greet him and I can’t help but wonder if he has good news or bad news for me.

My anxiety levels start to spike as he walks farther into my store.

“Hello, Ms. Maeve. How are you doing this morning?” He asks me as he looks around the store.

“Pretty good. Did you have any news for me?” I ask him anxiously and he gives me a patient smile.

“No, not yet. I was hoping that you could answer a few more questions for me?”

“Of course. Whatever you need, whatever I can do to help catch the guy and get back my antiques.”

“Can you give me a better description of the items that were stolen?”

I start to list off the four items that were stolen. I have a few pictures of them from when they were still in my grandparents’ house and I offer to email them to him once I get home.

“If the thief were to sell the items, how much do you think that they would get for them?” He asks me as he scribbles some notes down on his pad.

“It depends. If they sell them at a pawnshop or something, probably not much. Maybe around a grand for all of the four pieces. If he took his time selling them and they went to private buyers or an auction house, it would be a little bit more than that. Probably closer to twenty-five hundred.”

He nods as he keeps writing and I try to think of anything else that would be useful.

“Do you think that that’s what they did?” I ask, my voice coming out quieter than I expected.

I don’t know what I’m hoping for here. That he pawns them or sells them to someone who would at least appreciate them.

“I doubt it. I think that they were after some quick cash and thought that the old pieces would be worth a lot. I bet they’ll try to pawn them and then we’ll be able to catch them.”

He gives me a reassuring nod but it doesn’t really help.

“Thanks for this,” Officer Miles says as he closes his notebook. “We’ll be in touch when we have some new information.”

“Do you have old information?” I blurt out, stopping him before he can leave. “I mean, do you have any leads?”

He gives me a small smile that has all of my hopes rising.

“Maybe but it’s too early to tell. We’ll be in contact once we have something concrete.”

“Oh, okay, thank you.”

He shakes my hand before he heads back outside to his cruiser. The streets are pretty deserted and I have a headache from the lack of sleep I got last night so I decide to close up shop early and head home.

It doesn't take me long to lock up and turn off all of the lights. I take one last look across the street at the bar. I guess I won't be stopping in to see Arlo tonight after all.

I climb into my car and turn toward home. I feel so overwhelmed with everything that has happened in the last twenty-four hours that maybe it's for the best that I just spend some time alone tonight. It will give me time to clear my head before my second date tomorrow night.

I can't help but hope that the police catch whoever broke in and stole from me soon. It feels strange to be running Blast From The Past Antiques without my grandma's antiques beside the front counter. I know that it may sound stupid but it felt like she was in this with me with her things there. Now it just feels empty and wrong.

I try to push those thoughts aside and I rub my forehead as I drive through the light traffic downtown.

NINE



Iris

I LEFT work early again today so that I could get home and have time to pick up my house a bit more before Arlo comes over. I've been so wrapped up in what's been going on with Blast From The Past that I've let the house get messy.

I have a feeling that I'm going to need more than an hour to clean up the house and so I toss my purse onto the coat rack and hurry to tidy up. My phone rings as I'm finishing up loading the dishwasher and I answer it distractedly.

"Hello?"

"Hey, are you busy?" Madelyn asks and I shake my head before I realize that she can't see me.

"No, I'm just cleaning up at home."

"Fun," she says dryly.

I laugh as I wipe down the kitchen counters and head into the living room.

"What are you up to?" I ask.

"I just got home and Flynn is still out helping Gavin with a car so I thought I would check in and see how things are going with you."

"Pretty good."

“Yeah? Did you hear anything back from the police or the insurance company?”

“No, not yet. Officer Miles came by yesterday and I think they might have a lead but he said that it wasn’t anything concrete.”

“That’s still good news though, right? Maybe they’re close to finding everything and the asshole who took it,” she says and I smile at how annoyed she is on my behalf.

“I hope so. I called a glass place today to replace the display cases and they’re supposed to come tomorrow to fix those. The security company is coming out too and I’m going to look at upgrading my system.”

“Yeah, that’s probably a good idea.”

I nod and put the phone on speakerphone as I continue to clean up the living room.

“What are you doing tonight?” Madelyn asks.

“Um, Arlo is coming over for dinner actually.”

“Really?” She asks and I can hear the smile in her voice.

“Yeah, it’s just casual,” I tell her because I can tell that she’s about to go full steam ahead with this.

“Yeah, just a casual second date,” she says and I picture her bouncing up and down in her kitchen.

“We’re just having pizza.”

“Uh-huh... and then you can get a slice of that sexy man!”

“Oh my god,” I groan.

“Who’s a sexy man?” Flynn asks in the background.

“Arlo,” she tells him and I’m sure that her boyfriend loves that.

“Oh, did Iris and Arlo finally get together?” He asks and I sigh.

“Yep! This is their second date.”

“I guess I should let you go!” I interrupt them.

“No, no. Do you think that you guys are going to do anything tonight?” Madelyn whispers.

She knows that I’ve never been with anyone, dating or sexual.

“We actually did the other night,” I admit.

“What!?” She shouts and I shush her.

I don’t want Flynn to hear. It’s embarrassing enough that I was a twenty-five-year-old virgin with no prospects on the horizon.

“On the first date! Way to go, Iris!”

“Oh my gosh,” I groan.

“How was it?” She whispers conspiratorially.

“Good. Really good,” I admit with a wide grin.

She squeals and I’m glad that I put her on speakerphone. If I had the phone against my ear, I feel like she would have blown my eardrum.

“I want all of the details.”

“He’s going to be here soon,” I tell her, checking the clock on the wall.

I only have twenty more minutes and I still need to finish cleaning and getting ready.

“Okay, but tomorrow night you tell me everything.”

“It’s girls’ night. Do we know what we’re doing this week?” I ask her.

“We were going to suggest going to The Fainting Goat so that you could see Arlo but if we’re going to be talking sex, then maybe we should do it somewhere more private. I’ll text Sutton and Lyla and see what they want to do.”

“Sounds good. I’ve got to go but I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Have fun!”

I hang up and wipe down the TV stand before I survey the house. The kitchen and living room are clean enough now and I start to relax.

Should I clean up my bedroom?

Do I want to sleep with him again?

Yes.

I finish tidying up the living room and head into my bedroom. Luckily for me, it's pretty clean. I hide my hamper in the closet, making sure that the door is closed to hide the mess.

The bathroom is unfortunately not as clean and I rush to throw hair care products and my toothpaste into the drawers of the vanity. I'm just wiping down the counter when there's a knock on the door and my heart takes off like a shot.

"Just a second!" I call as I check my reflection in the mirror.

My face is flushed and there's a slight sheen of sweat on my forehead from running around for the last forty minutes. My red hair has started to fall out of my ponytail and I take it out, letting the locks hang loose around my shoulders.

I splash some cold water on my face in the hopes that it will help but all it does is get my hair wet. I groan as I try to dry my face and hair off. I put it back up into a ponytail and hope that it's not noticeable as I head to the front door.

"Hey!" Arlo says as I open the door for him.

He's carrying two pizza boxes and a bottle of wine and I hurry to take something from him. He steps inside, dropping a kiss on my lips as he passes me. I close the door and turn to see him checking out my place.

He smiles as he sees the photo of a younger me with my grandparents and I let him step closer as he looks at the other photos that I have hanging up. He grins at one of the ones of me and Madelyn together. We're making funny faces at the camera. We were trying to make my grandma laugh.

“You two have always been close then?” He asks as he sets the pizza down on the kitchen counter and I nod.

“Yeah, we met in kindergarten and have been best friends ever since.”

“That’s cool.”

“Do you have any friends like that?” I ask as I grab two wineglasses from the cabinet.

“Yeah, I have a friend named Yates. We met in elementary school when he moved to New York. We’ve been best friends ever since but I don’t see him that much. He travels a lot but he was actually just talking about finding a place around here to settle down a bit.”

“That would be cool. You’d be able to see each other more.”

He nods and takes the wineglass that I pass to him. He lifts his in the air before I can take a drink and grins at me.

“To being closer to those we like,” he says with a sly grin and I laugh and clink my glass against his.

He takes a step closer to me as I take a sip and I watch him as he inches another step closer to me.

“What are you doing?” I whisper when he’s pressed up against me.

“Getting closer,” he whispers back.

I set my glass on the counter and turn back to him as his lips land on mine. I smile as they move over mine. There’s none of the rushed excitement from the other night. Now it’s more of an unhurried exploration.

We’re savoring each other.

I can’t decide which way I like best.

“Want to see my bedroom?” I ask him and he grins.

“I think that it’s only fair. I showed you mine.”

I take his hand and lead him down the short hallway to my bedroom. I picked up today and even dusted. I'm not sure why I bothered with it. Arlo never takes his eyes off of me.

"So this is my room. This is where I sleep," I say, stepping closer to the bed.

I'm acting like a dork but Arlo just grins. I feel like I can be myself around him. I know that he's not judging me, that he thinks I'm amazing no matter what I say or do.

"This is where you dream then, huh?" He asks, taking a step closer to me.

"Uh-huh."

"What do you dream about?" He asks, his voice coming out lower now.

"Let me show you," I say.

His eyes light with interest and I grin as I take a step closer to him. I think that he's expecting me to kiss him but that's not what I have planned.

He went down on me the other night and I've been wondering what it would be like to return the favor.

I drop to my knees as he reaches for me and his eyes darken more as I reach for the zipper of his jeans. I reach inside, stroking his hard dick with my fingertip before I push his pants and boxers down his legs.

His thighs quiver as I wrap my fingers around him and I look up at him, meeting his eyes as I lean forward, my tongue flicking over the tip of him.

His head tips back on a groan and I grin. I love how bold I am around him. I love seeing him like this and knowing that it's me who is having this reaction from him.

I open my mouth, wrapping my lips around the tip of him and trying to take him into my mouth. I only can get about half of him, but Arlo doesn't seem to mind. He groans when I wrap

my hand around his remaining inches and start to stroke him in tune with my mouth.

I'm acting on instinct but I seem to be doing something right. Arlo curses under his breath, his cock hardening even more against my tongue and I double my efforts.

"Need inside of you," Arlo says, taking a step back and I glance up at him as he bends down and scoops me up.

He sets me on the bed and his lips claim my swollen ones. We work together to get my clothes off and his shirt off and then we're both back on the bed.

He kisses me, his chest pressing against mine as his cock nudges my opening and I hold my breath, waiting for that perfect moment when he sinks inside of me.

"So tight," he groans as he pushes in and my eyelashes flutter closed as I feel him filling me up.

"So good," I counter and he nods.

He rests his forehead against mine and I reach up, wrapping my fingers around his wrists as we start to move.

We rock together, our bodies perfectly in sync and I close my eyes as his lips find mine. Our movements are steady, unhurried and I sigh as his fingers tangle in my hair.

It's hard to tell where his body ends and mine begins. We're just a tangled mass of limbs and I love it.

I wrap one of my legs around his waist and we both groan as he sinks deeper inside of me.

"Need to feel you come," he says and I nod.

"I'm so close."

I open my eyes, staring into his green ones as his pace picks up a bit. When he kneels more between my legs, hitting that spot deep inside of me, I see stars.

I come with his name on my lips and he follows me over the edge.

He rolls onto his side and I turn too, cuddling closer to his chest as we catch our breaths.

“The pizza is going to be cold,” he says and I grin.

“That’s okay.”

He kisses me once before he climbs out of bed. I watch his naked butt as he heads out of the room. He returns a moment later, the pizza boxes balanced on one hand and the wineglasses in the other.

My eyes are too busy taking in the rest of his body to care much about the food and Arlo must notice because he sets everything on the dresser and joins me back in bed.

The food is very cold by the time that we get around to eating it but it just might be the best meal of my life.

TEN



Iris

“WHO’S READY FOR GIRLS’ night?” Lyla shouts as she comes in the front door of Blast From The Past.

I grin and laugh as she fist-bumps the air. I’m just getting ready to close up the shop but I know that she didn’t have to work today and I’m sure that’s why she’s here half an hour early.

“I didn’t hear anything about what the plan was for tonight. Where are we going tonight?” I ask her as I flip off the lights in the back and make sure that the door there is closed and locked before I head back up front.

“We thought that we would grab dinner and head to my place for a bit. Then we can go to a bar or something.”

She gives me a knowing look and wiggles her eyebrows at me. I laugh, rolling my eyes at her antics.

“So, you heard about me and Arlo then.”

“Yep,” she says with a wide grin.

“Things are going really well between us. We’ve only been out twice, but I really like him.”

I give her a quick rundown, hoping that it appeases her but I have a feeling that I’ll be answering questions about him and

our dates all night. Lyla smiles, coming over to my side and wrapping her arm around my shoulder.

“I’m glad that you two finally admitted your feelings for each other,” she says sincerely and I rest my head on her shoulder, wrapping my arm around her waist and squeezing her side.

“Me too. I really like him,” I admit to her in a whisper.

“He really likes you too,” she promises me.

We pull apart a minute later and Lyla tells me about the latest tour at the Mystery Cabin. She tends to overexaggerate things but she’s always hilarious and I laugh as she tells me about some little kid bumping into a shelf and nearly knocking over an entire display of snow globes.

“I thought that Stan was going to have a heart attack!” She says and I laugh.

“Did he kick them out?”

“No, but the family obviously felt bad. I think that they bought like one of each thing and then they left in a hurry before the kid could get his hands on anything else breakable.”

I chuckle and turn off all of the lights as we head out the front door. I set the alarm and then lock it and shove the keys into my purse. When I turn around, I see Madelyn and Sutton heading down the sidewalk toward us.

“Hey, perfect timing, you two!” Sutton says.

“What are you guys hungry for?” Madelyn asks as she shoves her phone into her purse.

“Burgers?” Lyla suggests and we all nod.

“How about the Upside Diner?” I suggest and they nod.

“I’ll drive. You guys can leave your cars here,” Madelyn says and we climb into her car.

The Upside Diner is only a few blocks down the street so it doesn’t take us long to get there. The diner is more of a

breakfast and lunch place so we have the place to ourselves as we head inside and take the booth in the back of the place.

Suzie, the owner of the diner, ambles over to us with her notepad in hand.

She has to be close to seventy. She's been at this place for as long as I can remember and ever since her husband passed a few years ago, she's been working more here. She says that it keeps her busy but it has to be tiring.

"Hey, girls, how's it going?" She asks with a tired smile.

"Pretty good," Madelyn answers for all of us.

"Do you know what you want?"

We all order the burgers and fries with chocolate milkshakes.

"It'll be right out," Suzie says and we thank her as she heads back behind the counter.

As soon as Suzie walks away, the girls are on me.

"Tell us everything," Madelyn says, practically leaning halfway across the table.

"How was your date last night?" Sutton asks and I lean in closer to them before I answer.

I know that we're alone but I don't really want anyone else overhearing me talking about Arlo and everything that we did together.

"It was really nice," I say and Sutton nods, encouraging me to go on by waving her hand. "We had pizza and hung out at my place."

"And then what happened?" Madelyn asks with a sly grin.

"I showed him my bedroom..." I start and Madelyn and Lyla both squeal.

Wide grins stretch across their faces and I laugh. I can't help but grin too. I feel like I'm in high school a bit, giggling and gushing over a guy but it feels good. I'm not so stressed or

worried about the business or my lack of relationship with my parents.

I'm happy.

"Was it good? I bet it was good," Lyla says, bumping my shoulder with hers.

"It was really good," I say and I can't hold back my grin.

My face heats and the girls all cheer. When Suzie comes back with our drinks, we quiet down but as soon as she's gone again, they're back to asking me questions.

"Are you guys exclusive then now?" Madelyn asks.

"I think so? I mean, I'm not seeing anyone else."

"I doubt he would either. He's been half in love with you since I got to town," Sutton says.

I take a sip of my milkshake and try not to wonder if Arlo could be seeing someone else. I know that Sutton is right and I think that one of us would have heard if he was going out with someone else. This is a small town, after all, and gossip here spreads like wildfire.

Things are going so well between us and I don't want to let my own doubts or insecurities get in the way and cause us issues.

Arlo doesn't seem to mind how awkward I am about all of this dating stuff. Whenever I say something wrong or feel like I messed up, he just smiles. It makes me feel like I can do no wrong when I'm around him and I love that sense of security that he gives me.

Suzie comes back with our burgers and we start to talk about upcoming plans for the weekend. Madelyn and Flynn rented a cabin in the woods up in Honey Peak and I smile as she tells us about their plans.

"Are you going to the festival that's happening up there? We were thinking about going after work," Sutton says, popping a fry into her mouth.

“Maybe? We mainly just wanted to get away and relax for a few days,” Madelyn says.

Madelyn is a bit of a workaholic and I’m glad that Flynn has convinced her to take a break and have some fun. She’s been better about it since they started dating and part of me wonders if she only worked so much because she was trying to stay away from their shared house and him so that she wouldn’t have to face her feelings for him.

We split the bill and head back outside to Madelyn’s car.

“Want to hit up The Fainting Goat?” She asks, looking at me in the rearview mirror.

“Sure,” I say and she smiles as we reverse and head down the street to the bar.

It’s pretty busy when we pull into the parking lot and it takes Madelyn a second to find a spot. We head inside and Lyla leads us right up to the bar, pushing through the crowd like she owns the place. I just smile at her confidence as I follow in her wake. We have to stand off to the side for a minute until a spot opens up and then I’m being pushed up to the bar.

“Hey, I didn’t know that you were coming in tonight,” Arlo says with a grin once he spots me.

“Yeah, it was a last-minute thing,” I say, wondering if he doesn’t want me here.

“Well, I’m glad that you came.”

He gives me that smile that I love and I relax more, leaning on the bar top.

“What can I get you guys?” He asks and we order a round of martinis.

We find a booth along the back wall and I sit so that I can still see Arlo behind the bar. We keep locking eyes from across the room and I smile wider and wider each time our eyes meet.

I'm finally seeing what all the fuss about love is. Whenever friends used to go on and on about guys that they were seeing or crushing on back in high school, I always kind of rolled my eyes.

I didn't get it, but now I do.

I feel giddy when I'm around him. Like there are bubbles popping in my veins every time I'm near him. All of those love songs and movies where colors are brighter or food tastes better were spot on. I feel like I've finally been let into some exclusive club and I love it.

The girls and I get another round and settle into the booth more. I try to pay attention to the conversation between my friends instead of Arlo.

I fail.

"Last call!" Arlo calls and I bite my lip.

I didn't realize that it had gotten so late. I don't know when I decided to stay until he had closed up, but now that it's time, I'm antsy. I shift in my seat and Madelyn gives me a knowing smile.

"We're going to head home. See you tomorrow?" Madelyn says and I nod.

I give each of them a hug and I'm about to offer to walk them out to their car when Flynn, Teller, and Hudson appear beside our booth.

I'm not surprised that they all came. I'm more surprised that they waited this long to come get their girlfriends.

"We thought that we'd find you here," Teller says as he offers Sutton his hand.

"Want us to walk you to your car?" Hudson asks and I shake my head.

"I'm going to wait for Arlo, but thanks."

They wave and I head up to the bar and lean on the counter there as Arlo wipes down some glasses.

“How was girls’ night?” He asks me and I smile and rest my chin on my hand.

“It was good. They asked me about you,” I tell him.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. They wanted to know if we were exclusive.”

Arlo stops and looks up at me. There’s a strange vibe coming off of him and I think that he might be holding his breath as he waits for me to go on.

“What did you say?” He asks as the last customer stumbles their way out of the bar.

“I said that I wasn’t seeing anyone else.”

“Me either,” he says in a rush, his shoulders dropping in relief. “I don’t want anyone else.”

I smile, feeling bubbly at his words.

“Me either,” I whisper and he leans over the bar, claiming my mouth with his.

His lips meet mine and I wonder if he can taste the martini on my mouth. I try to lean closer, the wooden edge of the bar digging into my stomach and I wince when it presses against my rib.

Arlo pulls back and I sigh. The kiss is over way too quick for my liking but we do have the bar between us and leaning on it isn’t the most comfortable way to be kissed so I let him go without a fight.

“Good,” he whispers when he pulls back and I grin.

“Want to come back to my place tonight?” I ask.

I’ve never been this bold with anyone in my life but I feel confident around Arlo. I want to make up for lost time.

“Yes,” he says simply, no hesitation, and I grin.

I lean up on the bar, offering him my mouth, and Arlo meets me halfway. His hands land on my waist and he encourages me to climb on top of the bar fully. I break the kiss

and swing my legs over behind the bar and Arlo grabs my knees, spreading my legs wider so that he can fit his hips in between.

Then his mouth is back on mine.

I love being able to feel him pressing against me. His hands grip my hips, tugging me toward the edge of the bar and I moan into the kiss as I wrap my legs around his waist and tangle my fingers in his soft brown hair.

“Love having you pressed up against me,” he whispers against my mouth and I can only hum my agreement as he starts to kiss his way down my neck.

I’m wearing a flowy tunic over a pair of leggings and the thin straps give him plenty of access to me. He groans as his hands slide up my sides and he cups my breasts in his hands.

“So beautiful,” he murmurs against my skin and I arch into his touch.

I want his mouth on me. I want all of him on me.

His mouth claims mine again as his fingers push one thin strap off of my shoulder. It droops on my bicep and I grin.

I like where this is going...

“I think I would like sex like this,” I whisper seductively against his lips and he grins.

“Oh yeah?”

“Uh-huh. I could wrap my legs around your waist and my hands around your shoulders. Like this,” I say and his hands go to grip my waist as his eyes heat with lust and interest.

“You’re so smart,” he says as I press my breasts against his chest and I giggle as his mouth finds the sensitive spot beneath my ear.

I wiggle my shoulder, trying to get the other strap of my top to drop too so that I can push it to my waist. It’s right at the edge of my shoulder and I start to pant as I think about Arlo’s hands and mouth on me.

I'm so turned on already and we've only been kissing.

"Hey, Arlo? You still here? I... oh!" Comes a voice behind us and I jerk away from Arlo in surprise.

I jump down off the counter and turn to face the newcomer. It's the guy from Arlo's apartment, his brother, and Arlo and I both seem to stiffen at the sight of him.

I wonder why he seems tense, but when I peek down, I can see that the front of his jeans is tented with his erection and I bite my lip.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt anything," he says, giving me a lazy smile.

"No problem. I was just leaving."

"Wait," Arlo says but I'm already heading out from behind the bar.

I grab my purse from where I left it on the stool by the bar and turn back to Arlo.

"It's okay. I'll see you later," I tell him.

He frowns and I know that he doesn't want me to leave.

"See you back at your place?" He asks and I glance over to the other guy before I look back to him.

"Yeah. Let me know when you're on your way."

"I should walk you to your car," he says and I wave him off.

"It's okay. I'm just across the street."

He wants to argue with me but I turn and push out the front door before he can. I don't know what it is about Arlo's brother that gives me a bad feeling but I don't like being around him. He makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. I just have this feeling in my gut that he's bad news but I can't pinpoint why.

Maybe it was just embarrassment from being caught dry humping Arlo out in public like that. Or maybe it's just

because he keeps popping up when I'm not expecting him or anyone to be there and he catches me off guard.

I try to shake off the weird feeling as I climb into my car and head down Main Street back to my house.

ELEVEN



Iris

I LOOK around the shop as I head up front. It's only two p.m. but I'm just not feeling well so I decided to close up shop early.

I've been feeling so tired and run down a lot lately. Arlo says that it must be from the stress of dealing with everything at Blast From The Past and while that makes some sense, it's been going on for too long.

The break-in happened like a month ago but now it's been close to a week and a half and I feel like I can barely keep my eyes open some days. I've been feeling nauseous too and I wonder if the flu or something is going around town. I haven't heard of anyone else feeling sick but I've been keeping to myself for a while so it's possible that I just haven't heard of any virus going around yet.

I send Arlo a message that I'm going home early to get some rest so I'll have to take a rain check on our date tonight. We've been seeing each other for close to a month now and things are going great between us.

We spend every chance that we can together. It's hard sometimes because he works nights and I work days but we've been making it work. He spends the night at my place most nights and I'm relieved that he's stopped inviting me over to his apartment.

He seems to have picked up on my dislike for his brother. Sometimes I feel bad that I don't like his family, but I can't help it. His brother just puts me on edge.

I haven't seen his brother since that night in the bar. I tried to ask Arlo about him once, hoping that maybe if I learned more about him that I would learn to like him, or at least be more at ease around him, but he didn't seem to want to talk about it. He just said that he had hit a rough patch and was staying with him until he got back on his feet.

My phone dings and I glance at the screen.

ARLO: Feel better, babe! Do you need anything? I can stop at the store if you do.

Iris: No, I'm okay. I'm going to run over to the market right now before I get home and grab a few things. Thanks though.

I SEND him a kiss emoji and tuck the phone into my pocket as I finish locking up and setting the alarm before I grab my purse and head down the block to the Destiny Falls Market. My phone dings as I near the front door and I pull it out to see another message from Arlo.

ARLO: Okay, feel better. Let me know if you change your mind. I can always come over and nurse you back to health.

Iris: Oh yeah? How's your bedside manner?

Arlo: Well, full disclosure, I've never nursed anyone back to health before. I feel like I'd be really good at it though. Want me to come by and we can test it out?

Iris: I'll let you know but I think I just need to sleep. Besides, I'd hate to get you sick with whatever I have.

Arlo: I'm willing to risk it. Just let me know if you need anything.

Iris: I will. Thanks.

He sends me a heart emoji and I smile as I tuck my phone into my purse and head inside the Destiny Falls Market. I'm going to grab some Gatorade and crackers for my stomach before I head home. Maybe I should grab some vitamin C or something too. Maybe it would help fight off whatever virus I've got.

"Hey!" Madelyn greets me as soon as I walk in the door and I smile and head her way.

"Hey, how's it going?"

"Pretty good. Are you okay? You look a little pale."

"No, I'm not feeling very good. I was going to grab a few things and go home to get some rest."

She feels my forehead with the back of her hand and I smile at her concern.

"You don't feel warm," she says with a frown and I shrug as I grab a basket and head down the first aisle.

"I've been feeling tired and nauseous for like a week now," I tell her as she trails after me down the aisle.

"Hmm," she says and I can see her typing my symptoms into a web browser on her phone.

I add a few different flavors of Gatorade to the basket and turn to head down the next aisle.

"It could be the flu," she says and I nod. "But you would have a fever."

I grab some saltines and toss them in my basket. We head down the next aisle and Madelyn keeps reading.

"Maybe it's strep. Does your throat hurt?" She asks and I shake my head.

"No, I'm just tired and my stomach is upset."

“Hmm,” she says, going back to searching her phone for my symptoms. “It could be food poisoning. Did you eat anything weird yesterday?”

“No, and it’s been going on for closer to a week or week and a half,” I say, switching the shopping basket to my other arm.

“Hmm,” she says again and I head over to the beauty section to grab some shampoo.

“I think that you’re going to need one of these too,” Madelyn says hesitantly and I look over to see her handing me a pregnancy test.

“What?” I ask, my whole body going cold. “I’m not pregnant.”

“Are you sure? When was your last period?” She whispers and I try to think back.

My periods have always been a little spotty so I’ve been getting the birth control shot for the last few years to help regulate them.

When was my last shot? It was right before the break-in. Wait, did I go to that doctor appointment?

Panic starts to fill me as I realize that I canceled that appointment because I was going to the store to meet with Officer Miles. I never called to reschedule it.

I close my eyes. I want to kick myself. How could I have been so careless?

Am I really late? I guess maybe... but I’ve been so stressed lately. That has to be it. That’s why I haven’t gotten my period yet. I’m not pregnant. It’s just stress.

I repeat that sentence to myself over and over again as I stare at the pregnancy test in Madelyn’s hand. I can’t seem to force myself to take it. I know that she could be right and I should just do the test just to be able to cross that possibility off of the list.

“It’s probably just stress,” I tell her and she nods but she still slips the pregnancy test into my purse.

“Just in case,” she whispers and I swallow hard.

I’m starting to really panic now and I know that I need to get out of here before I start to freak out. I’ll go home and take the pregnancy test to put my mind at ease. Then I can get some rest and hopefully be over whatever virus this is in a day or two.

“I’ll see you later,” I say as I head up to the checkout.

“Sure. Call me if you need anything, okay?”

“Thanks,” I say, giving her a side hug before I dump all of my stuff onto the conveyor belt.

I check out and hurry back to my car. I can feel my heart racing the entire way back to my little cabin and I wonder if I should have taken the test at the market with Madelyn. Maybe having the support would have been better but it’s too late now. I’m already home.

I pull into the driveway and hurry inside. I drop everything by the door and grab the pregnancy test out of my purse and run down the hall to the bathroom.

I was so anxious to get the test over with on the drive home but now that I’m here, I start to hesitate. I flip the box over and over in my hands as I try to think this through.

What if it’s positive? How will I tell Arlo? Will he be happy or upset? Am I even ready for a baby? Oh my god, I could be a mom soon!

I take a deep breath, trying to calm myself down.

I can do this. It’s probably not even positive and I’m just panicking for nothing. Just get this over with so you can take a nap.

I tear open the box and read the instructions. It says that the best time to take the test is first thing in the morning but I

can't wait that long. I can take another one in the morning if I'm not feeling better.

I rip open the packaging and pee on the stick before I set it back on the counter. I set a timer on my phone for three minutes and then I start to pace. There isn't much room in the bathroom so I really only take three steps one way before I turn and head back.

What other symptoms do I have? My breasts have been a little sore but I just thought that Arlo was a little rough the other night or that maybe I slept on them wrong. They don't seem bigger, do they?

I palm them, weighing them in my hands. Maybe they are a little bigger. I've gained some weight in the last few weeks so it could just be because of that.

I've been nauseous and tired but that could be so many things. It doesn't mean that I'm pregnant.

But I don't have a fever...

I let out a groan and check the timer on my phone. I still have another thirty seconds and I sit down on the toilet to wait.

What would my life even be like if I was pregnant? Am I ready to be a mom?

I try to picture waking up in the middle of the night for feedings and to change diapers.

Would I still be able to run my store? I have some savings so I can take some maternity leave. I'd have to hire a babysitter or take the baby with me when I go to flea markets or garage sales looking for new pieces.

Would Arlo want to be a dad? I feel like the answer is yes but we haven't been together for very long. We haven't even said that we love each other and now we might have to raise a kid together?

I groan as I think about telling my parents that I'm pregnant. I know just what they'll say and I'd like to avoid that conversation at all costs. Maybe I wouldn't even need to tell

them. Surely, I can hide a baby bump and a baby from them. It's not like we talk that often and they almost never visit.

The timer goes off and I jump up off of the toilet seat. I have to dry my hands off on my dress skirt before I stop the timer. I take a deep breath, closing my eyes and trying to calm my racing heart before I open them and look at the test.

Two pink lines.

My breath wheezes out of my lungs and I scramble to check the instructions to see what that means.

Be negative, be negative.

Two pink lines means... Positive.

It's positive.

I suck in a sharp breath and slide down the bathroom wall until I'm sitting on the ground.

"Oh my god," I whisper. "Oh, my fucking god."

My hands find my stomach and I stare blankly at the bathroom vanity as I think about what this means.

I'm pregnant. I'm going to have a baby. I'm going to be a mother.

I'm going to have to tell Arlo that we're about to be parents.

I close my eyes and rest my head back against the bathroom wall as I try to calm my racing thoughts.

"Good news?" Madelyn asks quietly and I open my eyes to see her sliding down the wall next to me.

"It was positive," I tell her, my voice coming out hoarse. "I'm pregnant."

"That's good, right?" She asks, her shoulder bumping against mine.

"I don't know," I tell her honestly. "Arlo and I just started dating. Are we really ready for this? Are we really ready to be parents?"

“I think so. You’re committed to each other. You love each other.”

“We haven’t said it to each other,” I interrupt her and she just rolls her eyes.

“But you do love each other. Things might be happening a little ahead of schedule.”

“A *little* ahead of schedule?” I blurt out, staring at her with wide eyes. “We *just* started dating. We were years away from this, if ever!” I insist.

“You can’t control everything,” she singsongs and I roll my eyes.

“I could have controlled this. If I had just remembered my appointment.”

“Maybe it’s a sign then. Maybe this was meant to happen.”

“It doesn’t matter. This has happened. It’s happening.”

“I’ll be here for all of it,” she says, resting her head on my shoulder and I smile slightly, resting my head on top of hers.

She laces her fingers through mine and we stare off into space and get lost in our own thoughts.

I can’t stop thinking about how things are going to go now. How much my future just changed.

This pregnancy is going to change everything between us. It’s going to change everything for me.

I just hope that I’m ready for it.

TWELVE



Iris

I'VE BEEN HIDING from the world and reality in my cabin for the last few days but I know that it can't last forever. I need to get back to my life, back to the real world.

It's just... I'm pregnant.

I've been trying to wrap my head around it ever since I took the test but I still don't think that it's completely sunk in yet. I even woke up the next morning thinking that maybe I had dreamed it, but the pregnancy test was still sitting on top of the trash can in the bathroom.

I had ended up taking the second test that morning. I don't know what I was hoping for. Maybe that it would be a false positive and I could forget all about the way that my life was about to change.

It wasn't a false positive though. I'm still pregnant. I'm going to have a baby.

Madelyn stayed with me that night. We had lain in my bed and she let me stare off into space for a while before she got up and made me some soup and grilled cheese. It had tasted good that night but not so much the next morning when I threw it up.

Arlo has tried to call me and come by to take care of me the last couple of days but I keep telling him no. I've been

telling him that I don't want him to get what I have and he keeps insisting that he doesn't mind, that he just wants to see me. He's so sweet and I know that I need to tell him that I'm pregnant soon, but I want to have a handle on how I'm feeling about all of this before I add his feelings into the mix.

I thought about just blurting it out to him the last time that we were on the phone, but this feels like news that I need to tell him face to face. How do I even go about bringing up that topic though? Tell him that we need to talk and then just lay it on him? Is there an easier way to ease into all of this?

I tried searching that question on Google but it wasn't much help. Madelyn says that I should do something cute like make a onesie with something funny on it and give it to him as a gift but I'm honestly not sure how that would go over. Going the gift route should probably just be left for couples who were actively trying for a baby, not for ones who conceived by accident and barely know each other.

I can't stop wondering about how he'll react to the news. Will he be upset? Freaked out like I was? It seems like too much to hope for that he would be excited as soon as I tell him. We've only been dating for a few weeks and I'm not even sure if he'll want to be with me still after I tell him.

There are times when I regret sleeping with him so quickly. I was the girl who thought everything through and while we used protection, or at least I thought that we were using protection, I knew that there was a chance that it would fail.

I used to dissect a choice from every angle, carefully weighing the pros and cons before I made a decision. So why did I jump without looking with Arlo?

Madelyn, Sutton, and Lyla have all come by and they're the only ones who know that I'm pregnant. They've been trying to help by bringing over food and offering to watch the shop for me while I take some time off but I know that they have jobs and lives of their own and they can't drop everything for me.

I appreciate all that they've done for me over the last few days but I need to get back to my real life which is why I woke up this morning, threw up as per my new usual, and then dragged my tired ass down to Blast From The Past and flipped the closed sign over to open.

I'm here before anything else on Main Street is open so that I have time to catch up on any orders that came in while I was out. I need to get back into a new routine so that I can go out to estate sales or garage sales and look for new pieces. My shop won't last long if I don't have any antiques in it.

Maybe I should hire someone to help out at the shop. Lord knows that I can barely keep my eyes open most afternoons and that's when I get quite a few tourists coming into the store.

"Hey," Madelyn says as she pushes open the front door.

I'm leaning on the front counter, trying not to throw up again and she must see it on my face because she holds up a bottle of ginger ale and a bag of suckers.

"I got you some pregnancy pops. I was going to bring them by your place but then I drove by and saw your car parked out front here."

She passes me a sucker and the cold drink and I tentatively take a sip. I should have thought about ordering something for my morning sickness. I need to get my head on straight. I should be buying pregnancy and baby books, looking into what else I might need before the little bean gets here.

"Thanks," I say when it looks like I'm not going to immediately throw up that small bit of pop.

"No problem."

She leans on the other side of the counter and I sigh as I unwrap a sucker and pop it in my mouth. It doesn't taste great but I'm willing to try anything if it means not spending half of the morning with my head in the toilet or a wastebasket anymore.

“So... have you broke the good news to Arlo yet?” She asks and I shake my head.

“No, but I’m going to. Today,” I say firmly, trying to psych myself up for that conversation. “I have a feeling that the gossip will spread around town and I want him to hear it from me and not someone else.”

She nods.

“Yeah, that’s probably smart. Are you nervous?”

“Yeah,” I admit.

There’s no point in lying to Madelyn. She knows me better than most people. Besides, I trust her. I know that I can tell her anything and she’ll keep my secrets, just as I would do for her.

“Do you want to grab dinner tonight? We can bring something over to your place if you just want to take it easy.”

“Yeah, that would probably be better,” I say as my stomach starts to turn.

I can’t tell if it’s from nerves or if maybe these pregnancy suckers aren’t working. I have a feeling that I’m going to need all of the emotional support that I can get after I tell Arlo the news of our impending arrival.

“What do you want to eat?” She asks and I heave.

I spit the sucker out and grab the trash can at my feet and Madelyn winces.

“I’m so sorry! I wasn’t thinking.”

I dry heave again but there’s nothing in my system to throw up this time besides the sip of ginger ale.

“It’s okay,” I say when Madelyn keeps apologizing.

“Can I get you anything else?”

“No thanks. I brought crackers with me so I can eat them later if I’m hungry.”

She nods, looking worried and I force a smile to my lips.

“I’ll be alright. This comes with the whole pregnancy thing, right? A billion women have survived morning sickness. I’ll be fine.”

“Okay,” she says but she doesn’t look convinced and I wonder just how bad I look.

Maybe I shouldn’t go see Arlo today...

“I’ll text you about dinner later.”

“Sounds good,” she says and she squeezes my hand before she heads for the door.

I follow after her and lean on the door. I’m hoping that the fresh air will help with the nausea.

“Let me know if you need anything else in the meantime and I can bring it over,” she calls before she heads out down the sidewalk.

I head back inside and check my emails and orders. I need to send out a few things and I let out a breath of relief when I check my bank account balance. I have a good chunk set aside in my savings account but I was worried that I would have to dip into it after I paid for the new security system and display cases a few weeks ago.

The insurance company finally approved my claim and I got the check for that yesterday. I still need to deposit it and I wonder if I should go now before the bank and stores get busy for the day.

I grab my purse, intending to do just that, when the door opens again and Officer Miles steps in.

I completely forgot about him and the theft with everything else going on. I tried to call him once or twice after the new security system was installed a few weeks ago but he wouldn’t tell me much.

“Hey, Ms. Maeve,” he greets me and I smile weakly.

“Officer Miles.”

“I wanted to stop by and tell you that we have good news.”

“You found the antiques?” I ask.

My heart lodges in my throat. Getting back my grandparents’ things would mean the world to me and I’m almost afraid to hope that that’s why he’s here today.

“We did. The thief was trying to pawn them at a shop up in Honey Peak,” he tells me and I sag slightly against the counter in relief.

“Are they... Were they broken?” I ask, almost too afraid to hear the answer. “Or I guess if they were selling them, they must not have been, right?” I babble and Officer Miles gives me a patient smile. “What I’m trying to ask is, are they still in good condition?” I ask and he nods.

“Yeah, they were flagged and we were able to arrest the suspect before he could get away.”

“That’s good,” I say, my shoulders sagging in relief. “When can I get the pieces back?”

I look over to the display case. It looks strange with it sitting empty but I didn’t have the heart to put anything else there. That spot belonged to my grandparents’ things and nothing else.

“We need them for evidence with the case for a little bit but I’ll make sure that they get back to you as soon as they’re released,” he tells me kindly and I nod, my eyes starting to well with tears.

“Thank you. Thank you so much,” I tell him as I try to wipe the tears on my cheeks away.

“Of course. Let me know if you need anything else.”

“I will. Thank you,” I say again.

I can’t seem to stop saying it but Officer Miles doesn’t seem to mind. He turns and heads for the door and I realize that I never even thought to ask him who robbed me.

“Who was it?” I call, stopping him before he can reach the door. “Who was the thief?”

“His name is Abel Michaels,” he says and my mouth drops open. “Do you know him?” He asks when he sees my reaction and I try to get my emotions under control.

I think that I'm going to be sick.

“Sort of,” I mumble and he gives me a funny look before he heads back out to his police cruiser.

Abel Michaels.

Arlo's brother broke into my shop and stole from me?

With that thought I run back behind the counter and grab my wastebasket. I dry heave into it, tears streaming down my cheeks and I can't even decide why I'm crying so hard.

Then it hits me.

Did Arlo know?

THIRTEEN



Iris

“HEY! HOW ARE YOU FEELING?” Sutton asks as she carries in a take-out bag from Prim + Proper.

It’s girls’ night and I completely spaced on it. It didn’t even click this morning when Madelyn asked about dinner and our plans.

“Better now that the morning sickness has passed for the day. Luckily, I’m really only sick in the morning.”

“Well, that’s good, right?” She asks and I laugh.

“It’s better than all day at least.”

“Well, Hudson made a bunch of choices for us tonight so hopefully something sounds good. He said that he made you a few things that are supposed to be good for the baby but also easy on the stomach,” Lyla says as she comes in carrying even more bags.

“That was really sweet of him. Tell him thank you.”

“Of course,” she says, leaning over and smacking a loud kiss on my cheek that has me grinning.

Madelyn walks in with a case of ginger ale and another of Coke and I close the door after her.

“Did you tell him? How did he take it? Was his reaction good?” She asks, whirling around to face me with a smile.

“Ah, no,” I mumble, starting to unpack all of the food onto the kitchen counter.

“What? His reaction wasn’t good?” She yells, looking like she’s ready to go kick Arlo’s ass.

“What’s this now?” Sutton asks, looking about as angry as I’ve ever seen her.

Even Lyla has stopped unpacking the food and is turned to me with her hands curled into fists.

“Who needs him then? We’ll help raise the baby,” she says and Sutton and Madelyn both nod.

“Uh, no, that’s not what I meant. I meant that I didn’t tell him today,” I say quickly before they can try to formulate some kind of revenge plan.

“What? Why not?” Madelyn asks, her anger leaving her as fast as it came.

“Officer Miles stopped by today,” I start and Lyla and Sutton stop moving around the kitchen to listen. “They caught the guy who broke into my store. He was trying to sell the antiques up at some pawnshop in Honey Peak.”

“Well, that’s good news, isn’t it?” Sutton asks.

“Yeah, you get your grandma’s stuff back,” Lyla chimes in.

“Yeah, he said they still need it as evidence but I should get it back soon.”

“Okay, and what does that have to do with you not telling Arlo that you’re pregnant?” Madelyn asks with a frown.

“It was Arlo’s brother.”

“What was?” She asks.

“He was the one who broke into my store. He was the one who stole from me.”

The kitchen is silent as they all digest that news and I shift uncomfortably. I wanted them to tell me that there’s no way that Arlo knew what his brother did, that I should have still

told him because it's not his fault what his brother did and he probably wasn't even aware that his brother did it, but I find that hard to believe.

"They live together so wouldn't he have noticed if he wasn't home that night?"

"Not necessarily," Sutton says but she sounds hesitant.

"No, because he was there with you. Remember? He had stayed late," Madelyn points out.

My stomach clenches and I wonder if she could be right. Maybe Arlo really had no idea what his brother had done.

"He never wants to talk about his brother though. I asked him once and he just said that he had fallen on hard times and was staying with him for a bit."

My mind flashes back to when Arlo and I were making out in the bar. He had seemed nervous when his brother walked in. He didn't stop me from walking to my car by myself. It's almost like he wanted me away from his brother as fast as possible.

My stomach starts to clench and I lean against the wall as more and more revelations start to hit me.

"He was nervous every time I mentioned the police or the case," I murmur as I think back to when Officer Miles had first come into the shop.

"Arlo had asked if they had any leads and he relaxed when the officer said no. I had thought that it was disappointment like I felt but now I have my doubts."

"Maybe he really was disappointed," Lyla argues but I shake my head.

"No, he looked relieved. He knew that his brother was the one who broke in. He must have."

Everyone is silent and I know that they want to argue with me. They're trying to think of something that I missed, some

way to prove that Arlo couldn't have known, but there is no proof of that.

“He knew how much those items meant to me and he never tried to stop his brother or get them back,” I say and it's then that I realize that tears are streaming down my cheeks.

“You need to talk to him,” Madelyn says and I know that she's right but I'm not sure that I'm strong enough to hear the truth just yet.

I still feel too fragile after learning that I'm pregnant and trying to find a good way to tell Arlo. Throw in the news that it was his brother who robbed me and it feels like my world is spinning. I just want to get back on solid ground before I question Arlo.

Is that too much to ask?

A rapid knock sounds at the door and I wonder who that could be.

I just figure that it's one of the guys. Maybe they tried to call and we didn't hear the phone.

I push away from the wall and head over and pull it open and my stomach drops when I see Arlo standing there.

He's a mess. His eyes are filled with worry and fear and before I can say anything, he beats me to it.

“I can explain.”

I swallow down a sob and look over my shoulder at my friends. They're staring at me with wide eyes. They look just as shocked as I feel to see him here, apparently confessing to knowing what his brother did all along.

Sutton clears her throat and points over to my bedroom

“We'll just be in there. Give you two some privacy,” she says.

She has to physically drag Lyla and Madelyn behind her and I want to smile at how nosy they are but I don't have it in me right now.

I open the door wider, letting Arlo in even though a piece of me wants to keep him outside of my cabin while we talk.

“So, explain.”

“I heard that my brother was arrested for breaking into Blast From The Past and stealing those antiques.”

“You expect me to believe that you had no clue that he was the one who did it this whole time?”

“I didn’t want to,” he admits, looking down at the ground. He looks exhausted and stressed out and I have a fleeting thought, wondering if this is how he was when he was working on Wall Street.

It hurts to see him in so much pain and I want to comfort him but then I remember what he did and I hold myself back.

“He’s my brother and I didn’t want to believe that he would do something like that.”

“But you had your suspicions,” I state and he answers like it was a question.

“Yes.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me? You were there when I talked to Officer Miles. Twice! You had two times to bring it up.”

“I don’t know,” he admits but it’s not good enough.

“I remember when he said that they didn’t have any leads. You looked nervous and then relieved when he said no. Why didn’t you say something then? Why didn’t you tell us or just tell me that you thought that it was your brother?”

“I... It felt like I was betraying him. I just wanted to believe the best of him. I wanted to believe that he had changed.”

I look away from him. I don’t know what to do now.

“I was just hoping that I was wrong, Iris,” Arlo says and I know that he’s pleading with me to believe him, for this to be

alright but it's not.

I can kind of see his point of view but the betrayal is still too fresh for me to admit that. I'm a hormonal mess and I'm stressed to the max. I just want my life to go back to normal and I know that it's not fair but I think that I'm taking some of my panic and worry out on him now.

The logical part of my brain knows that I should probably sit down and try to listen to him and we can talk this out but the logical part of me isn't in control anymore.

"Well, you weren't," I say and I can hear the fire in my voice.

"I'm sorry, Iris."

"Me too."

"Are we alright?" He asks hopefully and he sounds desperate. I know that he's picking up on my mood, that the fact that I haven't hugged him yet or even let him near me is setting off warning bells in his head.

"No. How can I trust you now? You knew that it could have been him. You knew what those antiques meant to me! I opened up to you and you kept something huge from me."

I'm sure that my friends can hear everything that's going on. I'm not exactly being quiet, but I can't help it.

I've never felt this way before. I'm pissed. I thought that I could trust Arlo. I thought that things between us were perfect and meanwhile he's been keeping this huge thing from me.

"You're blaming me and punishing me for something that my brother did. His actions aren't mine, Iris," he says, his cheeks turning red with anger.

"You're not innocent in all of this. You knew how broken up I was about losing those pieces. You knew what they meant to me and instead of doing everything that you could to help me get them back, you kept your mouth shut to avoid hurting your thieving brother," I snap at him and he rocks back on his heels.

“Put yourself in my position. Would you have told me?”
He snaps and something in me snaps too.

“Yes. As soon as I realized that I was falling in love with you, I would have told you. Especially if I knew that my brother was capable of it. You chose him. Now I’m choosing me.”

I open the front door for him and he stares at me with wide eyes. It’s then that I realize what I said.

I told him that I was falling in love with him. It’s true but this isn’t how I thought that I would tell him.

“Please leave,” I tell him firmly.

I know that he doesn’t want to. I know that he wants to keep arguing but I can’t do it.

My hormones are so out of whack and now my emotions are too.

“We’ll talk later,” he says and I shake my head but don’t bother to say anything in response.

He disappears into the night and I watch as his taillights head down my driveway and disappear.

“Iris,” Madelyn says softly and I look over my shoulder at my friends.

As the first tears start to fall, they gather around me and I let them hold me and try to console me as I fall apart in their arms.

FOURTEEN



Iris

I HAVEN'T SEEN or spoken to Arlo since he came to my cabin last week. I've been trying to ignore him when I happen to see him in town but since it's a small town and we work right across the street from each other, that can be hard to do.

It wasn't until he left last week that I realized that I never told him that I'm pregnant. I know that I need to and I know that it's going to be the first question that Lyla, Sutton, and Madelyn ask me tonight when they come over for girls' night.

I'm not looking forward to it.

I feel guilty enough already and I know that I need to tell him. I just don't want to deal with all of this on top of the hormones and morning sickness.

I've been feeling so overwhelmed with everything going on. I just want things to go back to the boring way that they used to be, before I tossed caution to the wind and screwed everything up.

"Hey! Are you ready to go? I was hoping that you could give me a ride. I lent my car to Record this morning," Madelyn says as she wanders into Blast From The Past typing on her phone.

"Yeah, where are we going tonight?" I ask through a yawn.
"Wait, who's Record?"

“She’s a friend Flynn and I know from college. She came through town today but her car broke down so she’s stuck here for a bit. I gave her my car to use for a while since I can get a ride with Flynn or walk for a bit.”

“Oh, that was nice of you. Is she coming tonight for girls’ night?” I ask.

“No, I thought that we had some sensitive things to discuss so she’s going to hang out with Gavin while he works on her car tonight. We can all grab lunch together or something later though if you want.”

“That sounds like fun.”

“Yeah, you’d like her,” Madelyn says with a smirk.

I’m trying to ignore what she said about sensitive subjects but I know her better than to believe that she’ll let this go.

“I just need to lock up the shop,” I tell her.

I head to the back, double-checking that everything is put away and that the door is locked and the lights are off. I need to mail a few things out tomorrow and they’re on the back counter all labeled and waiting for pick up tomorrow morning.

“Lyla said that we could go over to her place if we want? Or Sutton said we could hang out at the Mystery Cabin.”

I snort as I try to picture us hanging out with all of the attractions at the Mystery Cabin. I’m not sure that it’s the right location to have such a serious discussion.

Maybe it would help cut the tension though...

“Whatever you guys want. We can go to my place too, but be warned that it’s not the cleanest right now.”

“Why don’t we go to mine? That way if you get tired, you can just crash in a spare bedroom.”

I nod and turn off the last of the lights before we head out the door. Madelyn waits as I lock the front door and then we head over to my car.

“To your place?” I clarify and she nods.

“Lyla said that her and Hudson are going to drop off food. He wants us to taste test a new menu for that new place that he’s going to open over in Lilac Harbor.”

My stomach doesn’t know how to react to that news. Certain smells still have me running to the bathroom but I haven’t learned what all they are yet. It feels like they can change from one day to the next.

Some days I love garlic and the next just the scent has me gagging. Other days it’s pickles or certain kinds of cheese. I just want my body to be mine again.

My hand drops down to my stomach and I rub the small bump there. It’s not a baby bump yet, just my usual curves but I swear that I can feel him or her growing in there sometimes.

I’ve been ordering baby books online and they started to arrive in the last few days. I would love to just grab them from the bookstore over in Maple Bend, but I’m worried about word of me being pregnant spreading like wildfire around town.

“Are the guys hanging out tonight too?” I ask as we drive down the slightly congested streets toward Madelyn’s house.

“No, Flynn is heading over to Gavin’s and I think Teller is joining them. Or maybe he’s on call tonight and is headed to the fire station.”

I nod and turn onto her street. Her driveway is empty so I’m guessing that Flynn has already left. We park and climb out as Lyla and Sutton both pull up. Hudson climbs out and starts to grab some take-out bags from the back seat and I follow after Madelyn as she unlocks the front door.

“It smells amazing,” Sutton says as her and Lyla help Hudson carry in all of the food.

My stomach flips and I dart toward the bathroom just in time to throw up the few bites of sandwich that I had for lunch.

“Should we take the food outside?” Sutton asks and I shake my head.

“No, I’ll be fine in a minute.”

I splash some cold water onto my face and wait for my stomach to settle before I head back out to join my friends.

“I’m so sorry, Iris. If you can tell me what is causing the nausea, I can take those dishes away.”

“I really don’t know. It feels like it’s something different every day,” I admit.

He looks over to the food and I know that he’s going to offer to take it all away so I say something before he can.

“It will pass in a few minutes. I’ll be fine.”

He nods and kisses Lyla goodbye.

“You’re not staying?” I ask and he shakes his head.

“I’ve got to get back to the restaurant. Let me know what you guys think of the menu,” he says.

He waves as he heads out of the front door and we turn back to the food.

“Where should we start?” Madelyn asks and she’s practically licking her lips.

“I think this bag was the appetizers,” Lyla says and I take a seat at the kitchen table as they start to split up all of the food.

“Are you going to eat?” Sutton asks me and I shake my head.

“No, not right now anyway.”

She nods and takes the seat next to me then pushes her plate farther away from me. She gives me an apologetic look but I wave her off.

“It’s okay. It’s starting to pass already.”

Madelyn and Lyla join us and they start to eat and talk about the menu but I know that that won’t last long. I take a

few deep breaths through my mouth and then grab a water bottle out of the fridge. It looks like they're done with the appetizers and when I sit back down, they turn to me.

"How are you feeling?" Madelyn asks.

"Tired, nauseous... stressed out."

"Have you seen Arlo since the other night?" Sutton asks carefully and I shake my head.

"Not up close. Just as he was coming or going from the bar."

"I'm surprised that he hasn't tried to talk to you again," Lyla says and she seems upset that he hasn't.

I'd be lying if I said that I didn't feel the same way sometimes. I want him to fight for this thing between us but I guess that I thought that those feelings had more to do with the baby hormones.

"He tried to wave at me the first day but I pretended like I didn't see him," I tell them.

"So, you still haven't told him that you're pregnant with his baby then," Sutton says and I answer her even though it wasn't really a question.

"No. I don't know how to bring it up now."

"You have to tell him," Lyla says and I glare at her.

"I know that. I would never hide this from him," I snap and she holds up her hands in surrender.

"You could just call him and say that you need to talk to him and then tell him over the phone," Sutton suggests.

"I feel like it should be done in person," Madelyn interjects and they start to debate that as I take another sip of water.

My stomach is starting to get upset again from all of the stress and I know that I need to tell him soon, for my and the baby's health.

“Have you heard anything more about his brother and the charges?” Madelyn asks and I sigh.

“Yeah, he pleaded guilty. Officer Miles said that he targeted my shop because his brother talked about it all of the time and he thought that it would be the easiest place to rob. He could just bust in, grab some antiques, and slip back out. Then he’d wait a few weeks before he tried to pawn them.”

“That doesn’t mean that Arlo knew that his brother was the one who robbed you,” Lyla says.

“Yeah, Arlo was probably talking more about you than the antiques,” Sutton adds.

“I know,” I admit quietly.

“Can you really blame him for wanting to believe that his brother changed? Family can make you do crazy things,” Sutton says and I start to tear up.

“No, not really anyway. I wanted to believe that he knew because then I wouldn’t have to deal with all of this right now. It was just a shock but I don’t think that he had hard evidence that his brother did it and I can’t fault him for wanting to believe the best of his family.”

“I think that you should just tell him. Just walk up to him one day and say it. You need to get this out in the open and off of your chest. We can all see how it’s wearing on you,” Madelyn says.

“I know,” I say with a sigh.

They start on the main entrées and I pick at some french fries and a burger. It’s delicious, like all of Hudson’s food is, but it does nothing to fill the ache in my stomach.

The topic moves on from me and my drama and I try to keep up as Madelyn tells us about the latest date and movie night that she had with Flynn. Sutton says something about Teller and the Mystery Cabin but it goes in one ear and out the other.

I need to get all of this over with. It's starting to affect every corner of my life and I don't want to be this person anymore.

I've wrapped my head around it and now I'm even excited to be a mom in a few months. It's time for me to tell Arlo the news now too.

I just hope that it's happy news to him too.

FIFTEEN



Iris

IT TAKES me another two days to work up the nerve to go to see Arlo.

I had thought about stopping him when I saw him heading into the bar but at work didn't seem like the right place or time to drop this news on him.

So now I'm standing outside of his apartment, trying to work up the courage to knock.

Just get this over with so that you're not so stressed out all of the time.

I try to pep myself up but I'm not sure that it's working. I have so many conflicting emotions and I've been trying to focus on just letting him know that I'm pregnant but maybe I should have taken some time and thought about what it was going to be like to be face to face with him again.

I still want him. I still love him, even after all of this drama and mess. Even when I was screaming at him about his brother, I couldn't get my heart to stop beating for him.

I tried to tell myself that it was just the pregnancy hormones but how I feel about Arlo has been the one constant throughout all of this.

I take a deep breath and raise my hand, knocking on his door twice. I wait a moment and when he doesn't answer, I try

again.

Then I start to pace.

What if he's not home?

I could have sworn that I saw his car in the parking lot but he could have gone out for a walk or maybe he's out with someone else.

Maybe he's in with someone else.

I shake that thought out of my head. I know that Arlo would never do that to me.

I knock again and I'm about to leave when I finally hear movement from inside. I wipe my sweaty hands off on my skirt and try to rehearse my speech one last time.

Then the apartment door swings open and Arlo is standing there in a towel.

"Um..." I say.

"Iris," he says and the way that he says my name, like it's his salvation, has my knees feeling weak.

"Hey," I say lamely.

"What are you doing here?" He asks and then he shakes his head. "Come in."

I don't get a chance to answer his first question before he's grabbing my hand, dragging me inside and closing the door behind us.

"You look great," he says, his eyes running over my body greedily and that has my core clenching with need.

His hand is still on my elbow and it's like he's afraid to let me go or to stop looking at me. It's like he thinks that if he does, I'll disappear.

"I've missed you so much," he rambles on and I start to relax.

"I've missed you too," I admit and he beams at me.

He's only wearing a towel and I try to keep my eyes on his face.

I fail miserably.

I track a stray drop of water as it rolls over his chest and down his stomach. My mouth waters and for the first time in a week, it's not from nausea.

"We need to talk," I tell him, dragging my mind out of the gutter.

"I know. I've wanted to come by and apologize again all week but it seemed like you needed space."

"I did," I admit and he nods, his hand finally dropping from my arm.

I miss it instantly.

"Want to sit down?" He asks and I think about him sitting across from me while he's wearing only a towel.

"Ye- er, maybe not right now," I say, my eyes dipping back to his bare skin.

"I can get dressed," he offers.

"You don't have to!"

I wince, rubbing my forehead. My sex drive has been nonexistent since all of this started but thirty seconds in a room with a half-naked Arlo and it's back in full force.

"My brother pleaded guilty," he starts and I nod.

"I know. Officer Miles came by to tell me and to return the antiques."

"Good. I'm glad that you got them back."

I nod, looking away from him.

"I really am sorry, Iris. I just, I wanted to believe that he had changed but you're right. I should have at least told you about my suspicion."

"I get why you didn't," I say before he can go on.

“You do?” He asks.

It’s obvious that he’s been beating himself up about all of this for the last week and a half.

“Yeah, he’s your brother. I don’t have any siblings but if it had been Madelyn, I would have probably done the same thing.”

He gives me a grateful smile and I smile back.

“Can we go back to being together? You have no idea how bad it’s been without you these last few days.”

I open my mouth but nothing comes out. *Will he want to be with me when he finds out that we’re about to be parents?*

Arlo mistakes my silence for rejection and his whole body deflates.

“Or not. I get it if you need more time or if you want to go back to being friends or whatever until you can trust me again. I just want to be part of your life and I need you to be a part of mine.”

“I’m pregnant,” I blurt out and he freezes.

I give him a minute, letting him process the news but he remains frozen.

“I know that this wasn’t planned and trust me, it was a big shock for me too. I was going to tell you that night last week but then I found out about your brother and just freaked out. I thought that you knew and I’m so sorry, I should have given you a chance to explain yourself. I should have still told you then,” I ramble on.

I start pacing when he still doesn’t say anything.

“I’ve been so nauseous with morning sickness and that’s why I missed a few days of work last week and then I just, I don’t know. I couldn’t find the right time to tell you. You were either at work or I was at home with my head in the toilet or a garbage can. Neither option seemed right. I could have called

you but this seemed like something to be done in person,” I continue and on my next pass, Arlo reaches out and stops me.

“We’re going to have a baby?” He asks and I don’t know why but I burst into tears.

“Yes, and I know that we didn’t plan this and if you don’t want to be –”

“I want to,” he cuts me off. “I want to be part of this.”

“You do?” I ask with tears still streaming down my face.

“God, yes. I want everything with you, Iris. I have for a while but I didn’t know how to say that to you without terrifying you or having you run in the opposite direction.”

“But we’ve only been dating for a few weeks,” I try to argue.

“It doesn’t matter. I love you, Iris.”

A hiccup leaves me then and Arlo’s arms tighten around me.

“You do?” I ask into his naked chest and he nods against my head.

“Of course, I do. How could anyone not? You’re so smart and funny. You’re kind, loyal, completely adorable.”

“I love you too,” I whisper against his skin and his hold on me tightens.

“And we’re having a baby,” he says with wonder in his voice.

He’s definitely handling the news better than I did when I first found out.

“I’ve got to admit, I thought that you would be freaking out,” I tell him as I wrap my arms around his waist and cling to him.

“It might be happening faster than we thought, but I want a family with you. I want forever with you.”

“I want that too,” I admit and it feels so good to say it out loud.

My fingers trail over his bare skin and my libido kicks into overdrive when I see a stray drop of water make its way down his chest and stomach.

“I’ve missed you,” I whisper as my body starts to heat with want.

“I missed you too,” he says, his arm tightening around my waist.

“No, I mean, I *really* missed you,” I stress.

He doesn’t get it until my hands slide down his stomach and I hook one finger into the towel.

“I never know what it’s going to be with these baby hormones. Sometimes I’m so tired that I can barely keep my eyes open. I’m nauseous all of the time. Normally I just want to rest but right now, I just want you.”

“I want you too,” he says and then his lips are on mine.

I get lost in the kiss, in having Arlo’s mouth on mine, his fingers in my hair, and his naked flesh under my fingertips.

Arlo reaches for the hem of my shirt and I raise my arms, letting him tug it over my head. My hands drop back down to my sides as soon as it’s off but I can’t resist touching him for long.

Arlo licks his lips as he sees me standing before him in just my lace bra and leggings. I reach behind me, unhooking the clasp and letting the cups fall as the straps slide down my arms.

Arlo groans low in his throat at the sight of me half naked before him and I grin.

“Now we’re even,” I say, my voice coming out husky.

Arlo reaches for the towel, pushing at the knot and letting the material drop. My mouth starts to water at the sight of his

naked body and I hurry to push my own leggings and panties down my legs and kick them off.

I tilt my head up to his and his lips meet mine as his hands start to explore my curves. Our tongues tangle in an erotic dance as his fingers find my stiff nipple and he rolls the peak between his fingers.

I moan, breaking the kiss as my head tips back and my eyes fall closed. Arlo wastes no time in kissing his way down my neck and I know that he's headed for my breasts but I want to be in a bed or on the couch before we get that far ahead.

"Bedroom?" I pant out and he nods.

He grabs my hand and starts to leave me past the kitchen before he stops suddenly and changes direction.

"Where are we going?" I ask him and he turns to me, grips my hips, and lifts me onto the counter.

"Right here," he says with a grin. "I remember the bar, how you wanted me to make love to you like this."

I smile shyly. I can't believe that he remembers that conversation. I barely do.

I reach for him, intending to pull him closer to me so that I can wrap my legs around his waist and feel him against me. He surprises me by dropping to his knees in front of me, dragging me over to the edge of the counter and burying his face between my legs.

"Oh!" I cry out, one hand going behind me to brace me on the counter and the other tangling in Arlo's hair.

I was already wet and dripping for him before he dropped to his knees. My core clenches and I whimper. I need him inside of me.

He eats me like a man starved, like he's trying to make up for lost time. He licks up my slit, his tongue finding my stiff nub and circling the sensitive button. I grip the edge of the counter, trying to keep myself in place as he sucks my clit into his mouth and rolls his tongue over it.

One more flick of his skilled tongue and I'm done. I come. Hard.

Arlo keeps licking me through my orgasm and I sag back, catching myself at the last second before I can collapse completely on the counter.

"Too much for you?" Arlo asks as he rises to his feet and steps between my thighs.

"Never," I tell him and he kisses me as he thrusts inside of me.

He makes love to me on the kitchen counter, making me come twice more before he carries me to his bed and tucks me in. I smile as he kisses my forehead and wraps his arms around my body. His hands find my belly and I smile as he places his hand there.

I know then that we're going to be alright.

Dating Arlo, sleeping with him, was the first time that I did something that I wanted without thinking through every possible scenario and I'm so glad that I did. Now I'm about to have a baby with the man that I love. What could be better than that?

I let my eyes close and sleep claims me as Arlo brushes a kiss against my neck.

SIXTEEN



Arlo

FIVE YEARS LATER...

“OFFICER MILES CALLED ME TODAY,” Iris tells me as we pick up our daughter, Marley’s, bedroom a bit.

Our daughter is a real whirlwind. She’s the joy of my life, the greatest gift that I could ever be given. She’s also terrible at picking up after herself.

“Oh yeah?” I ask as I help my wife pick up all of the Barbie clothes and shoes.

“He said that your brother is up for early parole because of good behavior,” she tells me and I glance up at her, trying to gauge how she’s feeling about that.

I haven’t talked to Abel much since he was arrested and went to prison. I tried a few times in the beginning but he didn’t want to see me. I think that he was embarrassed. That or he didn’t want to hear me yell at him.

We talked about what he did the first time that I visited him and I had snapped at him about how he robbed the woman of my dreams. He hadn’t seemed remorseful at all and to be honest, that didn’t change any of the other times that I went to visit him.

It was hard but it became obvious that I couldn't have him in my life. Not if I wanted a future with Iris. She would get tense whenever I mentioned his name and I know that she was still hurt by what he did and the fact that she may have never seen her grandma's antiques again.

"I hadn't heard that," I tell her and she nods.

"Do you think that he'll come back to town?" She asks as she tries to make the bed. There are about twenty different stuffed animals on the thing so it can be a little hard to maneuver all of them around.

"Maybe. He doesn't have any other family so chances are he might reach out to me," I admit. "He knows that I have money and could help him out."

"Do you want him in your life?" She asks a little hesitantly and I shake my head.

"No," I admit honestly. "If things had been different, if he had apologized or regretted it, then maybe I would, but he didn't. Besides, I know that you don't want him around and I'm going to choose you and our kids over him every time," I assure her.

"I don't want to stop you from having a relationship with him. He is your family after all."

"I know, but I truly don't want him in my life. He would just be using me for money and a place to live and I don't think that that's the right example for Marley or this little one," I say, rubbing her very pregnant stomach.

Iris is pregnant with our second child, a boy this time. She's about seven months pregnant and we've been busy getting everything ready for our newest bundle of joy.

This time around Sutton, Lyla, and Madelyn are all pregnant with us. I know that having close due dates has only brought the girls closer together. They all get to support and experience this time together and I know that that means a lot to my Iris.

Luckily for us, this pregnancy has been a lot easier on Iris too. She isn't as nauseous or tired. The morning sickness was so bad when she was pregnant with Marley and it lasted for all three trimesters. Iris ended up being put on bed rest for the last three weeks because she had started to lose weight since she couldn't keep anything down.

I had moved in with Iris by then so I was able to help out more around the house and be there in case she needed anything. We had talked about moving to my place above the Laundry Mat or even buying a new place together. I could afford any place that she wanted easily, but this cabin means too much to her.

She wasn't ready to leave but once we got pregnant with our baby boy, she knew that it was time to find a bigger place. We're half moved into the new place but Iris has been taking her time. I know that it's hard for her to move on from her grandparents' place, but she's managing alright and I'm okay with going at her pace. We're still keeping her cabin so she knows that she can come back whenever she wants.

Our new house is right on the water and only a few doors down from Lyla and Hudson. Iris had offered to move to Lilac Harbor so that I could be closer to Yates, but I know that she loves Destiny Falls. Marley loves the water so she's thrilled about the new house and I know that Iris loves being closer to her friends and Blast From The Past.

Yates moved to Lilac Harbor a few years ago and it's been great reconnecting with him. He got married a few years ago and is expecting his first kid too with his wife, Arlowe. I was best man at his wedding and I've never seen him look happier.

"You can change your mind later," she tells me and I smile.

"I know. I know that you're not keeping me from him. This isn't your fault. He did this and if he's not sorry, if he can't even apologize to me and my wife, then that's on him. I don't want him around when he's just going to try to use me and my money or when he could hurt you or our family."

She nods and I drop a kiss on her lips before I head over to the laundry basket in the corner of the room.

“Maybe we should be thanking him,” she says and I glance up at her sharply.

“For what?” I ask.

“We might not have gotten together if he hadn’t broken in and if you hadn’t come around to help me clean up the shop,” she points out.

“Yes, we would have. I was getting tired of waiting for you to be ready for me, for us. I would have asked you out soon.”

She smiles at me over her shoulder and I fall a little more in love with her. My wife is the most beautiful woman that I’ve ever seen in my life. Her curves have my mouth watering and even all these years later, I can barely keep my hands off of her.

She makes me laugh and think. She’s so smart and hardworking and it’s been a privilege to watch her make her store even more of a success over the last few years.

I don’t know how her parents couldn’t be proud of her and I get angry every time they do try to reach out to us. They weren’t thrilled when Iris told them that she was pregnant. I remember sitting next to her while they screamed down the phone at her. They told her that they weren’t going to help her raise a baby, that they can’t believe she got knocked up by some guy that she didn’t even know, and that when her shop failed, they weren’t going to be providing any financial help.

She hadn’t seemed surprised by their reaction and when I asked her why they talked to her like that, she said that it was pretty usual for them. They wanted her to go for a high-paying job but she didn’t want to. She’d rather be poor and happy than stressed out all of the time, miserable, and rich.

I couldn’t agree with her more.

They didn’t bother congratulating her when she announced the birth of Marley or when we announced our engagement.

They never bothered to come see their granddaughter and I doubt that they would have come to the wedding if they didn't find out that I was wealthy from working on Wall Street.

They spent the entire few days leading up to the ceremony telling Iris that they were proud of her for finding a good man but the truth was that they didn't even know me. They were just judging me based off of my bank account.

I could see that it was stressing Iris out to have them there so I surprised her by having a secret ceremony the night before our wedding. It was on the beach with just our friends and our baby girl. I married Iris beneath the moon with the waves crashing by our feet and Madelyn officiating. She had gotten ordained at some website online about an hour before we said I do. It was crazy and thrown together with barely any planning, but it was perfect.

Her parents were upset the next day when they learned but no one cared. We haven't talked to them much in the last five years and I know that neither of us really mind.

I quit working at The Fainting Goat Pub about a month before Marley was born. I didn't really need the money and I would much rather spend my free time with Iris than pouring drinks. I started helping her out at Blast From The Past and became a stay-at-home dad. I've loved every minute of it these last few years.

Iris's phone buzzes and she hurries to pick it up. Today is Marley's first day of preschool and Iris has been a bit on edge because of it. This is the first time that Marley has been away from one of us for longer than an hour or so and even then, it was one of our friends watching our daughter.

"It's Madelyn," Iris tells me. "She wants to know how we're doing."

"Pretty good, right?" I ask as we make our way down the hallway and into the kitchen.

"Yeah, I miss her and I keep wondering what she's doing and if she misses us, but I know that we need to do this. She

needs the socialization and she was so excited to be going.”

I nod, pulling her into my side so that I can comfort her.

“Our big girl,” Iris says, and I can tell that she’s about to start sobbing so I tuck her closer against me, letting her bury her face in my shoulder.

“It will be okay. It’s almost time to pick her up,” I remind her when I catch sight of the clock in the kitchen.

Iris wraps her arms around my waist and I kiss the top of her head. We sway together slightly and I smile as I hear her snuffle into my shirt.

Iris and I got married three years ago. I had proposed to her a few months before Marley was born but Iris wanted to date for longer so we waited. She wore the engagement ring for a whole year before she finally said that she was ready.

Me, I was ready the night of our first date.

Maybe even before then.

“Want to get out of here? We can go to the new house and take a walk along the beach. Maybe find a seashell to give to Marley when we pick her up.”

“Okay, let me find my shoes,” Iris says, trying to wipe the tears from her eyes.

She heads into the bedroom and I smile and head over to the door where I know that she left them.

“I’ve got them,” I call to her and she heads out to me. “Sit down. I’ll put them on for you.”

She takes a seat on the couch and I slip the shoes onto her feet.

“So Prince Charming of you,” she teases me and I grin.

“Anything for you, my beauty.”

She takes my hand as we head outside and I smile. I never thought that this would be my life, but man, am I glad that it is.

ARE you curious about Iris's friend, Hartley? Then check out her book, [The Trouble With Falling](#)!

WANT to read Record and Gavin's story? It's coming in Cursed! Sign up for my [newsletter](#) to learn more!

WANT to know more about Arlo's friend, Yates? His book is coming! Be on the lookout for The Mix Up, out this fall!

CURSED

DESTINY FALLS

*

This story starts with a curse.

Record Mason's whole life has been a curse, actually. At least that's what her parents have always told her.

It's kind of a long story.

She's sick of being a problem for her family and bringing them down with her bad luck though, so she packs up her old car and hits the road.

She's got a plan... kind of.

That plan comes to a screeching halt when her car breaks down just outside of Destiny Falls, Michigan.

Luckily for her, she has a friend that lives in town and after a call to the local mechanic, she's determined to get back on with her new life.

Then Gavin hops out of the tow truck.

She's into the sexy mechanic from the first moment, but she can't forget the curse. She's trying to get away from people so that she can't hurt them, so she needs to stay away from him at all costs.

Except Gavin doesn't seem to want her to.

When she tells him about the curse, he laughs in her face. Then he shows up the next day, determined to prove her wrong.

Will Gavin be able to break the curse, or is Record destined to a solitary existence?

ONE



Record

THIS STORY STARTS WITH A CURSE.

Actually, my life apparently started with a curse. Or as a curse. My parents like to mix it up and it gets confusing sometimes.

That's what I've been hearing my whole life anyway. My parents hadn't wanted kids. They were musicians and to hear them tell the story; they were days away from being discovered and making it big.

Then my dad broke up with his girlfriend, slept with my mom, and as the tale goes, his ex-girlfriend placed a curse on him.

I never really believed the story. Well, not all of it anyway. I was born eight months later, so either they got the dates wrong, or my dad was cheating on his girlfriend long before they broke up and she cursed him.

I had friends who used to tell me that it was all bullshit. That there wasn't a curse and that my parents were just blaming everything on me. I can't exactly argue with that, but when you grow up hearing about how you ruined everything, you kind of start to believe it.

So, when my car breaks down, sputtering and smoking as I steer it over to the side of the road, I'm not even surprised.

Bad luck seems to follow me, so of course my car will crap out when I've only been on the road for a few hours.

I pull over right next to the Destiny Falls town sign and sigh. Looks like I'll be calling a tow truck. I know next to nothing about cars or engines and even if I did, it might not be safe to try to fix it myself. I'm liable to break something or injure myself in some way.

I grab my phone and pull up Google to search for the nearest mechanic shop when it hits me.

Destiny Falls.

That's the town that my college friend, Madelyn is from. I think she and Flynn moved back up here after graduation.

I bite my lip. I've barely talked to her since graduation. We've been texting, but that's about it. Would it be weird for me to call her? I mean, I would love to see her while I'm stuck here.

I pull up her number and hit dial before I can second guess myself. Madelyn was my suitemate in college. She had the room next to me in the dorms and she used to let me hang out over there when my roommate had company or got to be a little too much.

It was always her and Flynn and I wonder if they've realized that they're in love with each other yet. I smile at that thought. It was always painfully obvious that they were crazy about each other, but neither would admit it. They always insisted that they were just friends, but no one with eyes would believe that.

"Record!" Madelyn answers and I grin at her excitement.

"Madelyn!" I parrot back in the same tone and she laughs.

"It's been too long. I was just telling Flynn that we should call you or maybe make a trip down to Grand Rapids to see you."

"I'm actually not there anymore."

“Really? Did you get a new job? Did some rich patron offer to sponsor you so you can just paint all day?”

“No, not quite. I just needed a change of scenery.”

“So, you finally got away from your parents then,” she says flatly and I bite my bottom lip.

Madelyn and Flynn are the only ones that I’ve really opened up to about my family and even then, I only gave them the bare minimum of details. They don’t know any of the truly terrible things that my curse has caused my family. It was still more than enough for both of them to hate my family and urge me to get away.

I want to tell her about everything that’s been happening in the last two years. I used to think that when I went away to college, that the curse would follow me too and leave my family alone but that’s not what happened.

My parents and sister have hated me for all of the bad luck that I’ve brought my family, and I can’t say that I blame them.

My sister, Callie, has always been the golden child. She was the one that they planned, that they wanted. It’s hard to be around them and see them be good parents to her.

Meanwhile, I’m treated as the family scapegoat.

All because of a curse that took place before I was even born.

Everything is always my fault in some way, and I just couldn’t take it any longer. I knew that I had to leave, so I packed up everything in my tiny room and left. My parents and Callie would be better off without me and my bad luck in their lives.

My whole existence fits into two suitcases. I can’t decide if that’s sad or not.

I want to tell Madelyn that I left because I didn’t want to be a burden or a pain on my family anymore, but it seems like maybe a face-to-face conversation, so instead I just say, “Yeah.”

“Good for you, Rec. Where are you at now then?”

“My car just broke down next to the Destiny Falls town sign.”

There’s a moment of silence and then Madelyn is calling for Flynn. I pull the phone away from my ear as she screams excitedly about me being in town to him.

“We’ll be right there! I’ll call Gavin on the way. He’s the mechanic and his shop is right by there, so he’ll be there to get your car in a bit too.”

“Thanks.”

“Of course! I can’t wait to see you again! Are you staying for long? Why didn’t you tell me that you were coming?” She rattles off questions rapid-fire as I try to keep up.

“Ready to go?” I hear Flynn ask.

“Yeah. We’ll be right there and then we can catch up,” she says and I smile.

“Sounds good. See you soon.”

We hang up, and I grab my purse and climb out of my old Mustang. I worked my butt off to buy her when I was twenty. She’s my most prized possession and I hate to say it but I’m a little nervous to let her out of my sight.

My parents and sister were always trying to borrow her but I never trusted them to not damage my baby in some way. None of them were the best drivers.

A tow truck rumbles around the corner and I lift my hand, shielding my eyes from the sunlight as I try to make out if they’re here for me or just passing by.

The truck slows and rolls to a stop in front of my Mustang, and I smile as a guy climbs out.

My smile drops quickly when I get a good look at the guy.

“Holy shit,” I breathe as my eyes drink him in.

He's tall, dark, and handsome. His grease-stained shirt is clinging to his muscles and my mouth waters as I look him over. He has dark brown hair that's just a tad too long. It's hanging over his dark eyebrows and half shielding his eyes but there's no hiding those eyes.

They're blue, crystal blue and so focused on me that I start to squirm. I reach up, tucking my faded blue hair behind my ears self-consciously.

"Are you with Madelyn and Flynn?" he calls to me and oh my gosh that voice!

"Uh-huh," I mumble as his boots crunch on the dirt and rocks.

His jeans are hanging low on his hips and are just as streaked with grease as his shirt.

"I'm Gavin. They said that you need a tow?"

"Yeah, it just started making this clunking sound and then the engine went," I tell him.

I clear my throat and try to get my mind out of the gutter.

"Let's take a look."

I watch as he opens my car door and bends down to pop the hood. My eyes zero in on his ass and my face flames.

Abort! This is never going to happen. You're not even staying that long and you're not dating. You're going to figure out your life first. Do not get attached to him!

"Could be your fan belt, but I'm guessing it's more likely the distributor cap. Actually, I think it's both," he says as he pokes around under the hood.

"Is that a hard fix?" I ask.

I'm already trying to figure how much of my savings I'll have to dip into to fix this.

"No, it's not hard to fix, but it might be hard to find the parts for a classic car like this," he admits.

He looks up and his blue eyes pin me to the ground.

“Oh,” I say lamely and he studies me for a moment before he goes back to looking at my car.

“I’ll tow it to my shop and look for parts. I should be able to get something in soon. Maybe a couple of days.”

“Okay. Thanks,” I say.

It’s not like I have much of a choice. I need my car if I want to make it to Sault Ste. Marie. I’ve rented a cabin there and I’m going to paint and try to sell my art at the farmers’ market and craft sales that they do there.

I figure that I can make that work for two months or so before I have to figure out a new way to make money.

I sigh and Gavin looks over at me with a frown.

“It shouldn’t take me that long to fix,” he assures me, and I nod.

“Thanks.”

Flynn and Madelyn pull up then and I grin as I see Madelyn bouncing in the passenger seat.

“Are they together yet?” I ask Gavin, and he gives me a grin.

“Yeah. They finally admitted how they felt like a month ago.”

“It’s about time,” I say, and he nods in agreement.

I can feel him eyeing me but I’m too focused on my friends as they climb out of their car. Madelyn runs at me, wrapping me up in a hug as I laugh.

“I can’t believe that you’re here!” she says and I step back, only for Flynn to pull me into a hug next.

“It’s good to see you again,” he says with a grin.

“You too. I’ve missed you guys.”

“Are you all set with your car?” Madelyn asks and I nod, turning back to Gavin.

“Yeah, Gavin said that he can fix it,” I say and he stares right at me.

I wish that I could tell what he was thinking.

“I can fix it,” he says with a dip of his chin.

I don’t know why, but the way he says it sounds like he’s going to fix more than just my car.

“Great! We’ll give you a ride. We can show you around town,” Madelyn says as she takes my hand and leads me over to their car.

I take one last look at Gavin before I climb into the back seat. Flynn and Madelyn wave as we drive back toward downtown Destiny Falls and I try to pay attention to the sights, but all I can think and wonder about is the sexy mechanic.

TWO



Record

“I WISH that you had told us that you were coming up this way,” Madelyn says as she lets us into her house. “Flynn and I rented a cabin up in Honey Peak for this weekend, so we won’t be around much.”

“Sorry, it was kind of a last-minute decision,” I tell her as I look around the place.

She lives in a nice two-story house just a block over from the water. The whole house is bright and welcoming, just like Flynn and Madelyn. It makes me feel at home as soon as I step inside.

“Well, you’re more than welcome to stay here while we’re gone. All of the cabins over by the Mystery Cabin have been rented and the hotel in town isn’t really that great,” she says with a scrunch of her nose.

“Thanks, that would be perfect.”

She shows me around the house and where my guest room is, and it’s only then that I realize that I never grabbed my suitcases out of the back of my car.

“Crap,” I mumble and I look over to see Madelyn smiling at me.

I’m guessing that she just figured out that I forgot it too.

“You can borrow my car while you’re here. Gavin’s mechanic shop is only a few blocks from here. I’ll text you the address,” she says, and I give her a grateful smile.

“You’re a lifesaver,” I tell her, wrapping my arms around her.

She just laughs and shrugs me off.

“Are you hungry? I have girls’ night tonight, but I can always eat twice,” she says. “I think that I have time for something quick.”

Madelyn already told me about girls’ night and invited me along but I’m too tired to stay up late tonight. Not after I’ve been driving for most of the day. She had offered to stay home with me, but I know that I won’t be much company. She’s already letting me crash at her place for a few days and use her car. I’m determined not to take away her time with her friends as well.

“No, I’m tired after driving all day. I’ll just grab my luggage and a sandwich or something on the way back here.”

“Sounds good. You can text me if you need anything.”

I nod and she gives me a quick hug before she heads back downstairs. My phone dings a second later and I tense.

My parents and sister have been texting and calling me all day. I haven’t been answering but that doesn’t seem to be deterring them.

I know what they want. They want me to come back. They want me to be their maid and ATM and I can’t do it anymore. I can’t pay for the mistakes that I didn’t intentionally cause. I know that they’ll say that I owe it to them because it’s my curse, my existence, that caused it, and I can’t hear that anymore.

I figured that everyone would be better off if I wasn’t around. That’s why I’m going to try to stick to myself while I’m in town. It will be nice to see Madelyn and Flynn again, but I’m better by myself.

I need to be on my own so that I can't hurt anyone else.

That was the thought that I kept having every day for the last six months. Then one day it hit me.

If I wanted my family to be safe and better off, then I needed to leave them. Sure, I might be lonely and they might struggle without my money but I could try to send some back, once I get my new place and save up a bit. Besides, without all of my bad luck there, I'm sure that my mom and dad will be able to find full-time work soon.

I know that I'm hoping that without me there, they'll miss me and that either their luck will stay bad and it won't matter that I'm cursed or that they'll say they miss me too much and don't care about me ruining everything. I have a feeling that it's a long shot, but I still can't stop hoping that it happens.

I take a deep breath and steel myself before I pull my phone out. That breath comes out in a relieved rush when I see that it's a message from Madelyn instead.

She sent me the address for the mechanic shop and I glance out the window. The sun is just starting to set and I really am tired. If I go right now, I could grab my bags, come back here for a shower, and then pass out for the night.

My fingers clench tight around my phone when it starts to ring and I see my sister's name on the screen. I hit ignore and grab the keys that Madelyn left for me off of the dresser before I jog downstairs.

It doesn't take me long to reach Gavin's Mechanic Shop, and I smile as I park right out front. I grew up in Grand Rapids and went to college in Lansing, so I'm used to traffic and loud sounds.

I kind of like it here in this sleepy little town though. There's no traffic, three people waved at me on the way here and I feel relaxed after staring at the water for half of my drive here.

"Hey, I was just about to text Flynn and let him know that your luggage was here," Gavin says as I climb out of the car.

“Yeah, Madelyn showed me my room and I figured it out then.”

He just nods and turns to head back inside, and I smile slightly as I follow after him.

He’s wearing a stained pair of overalls now, *Gavin’s Mechanic Shop* and the logo plastered on his back and his name stitched over the left pocket. Most people look terrible in them, but Gavin wears them well.

I need to stop. I can’t stay here. It’s not nearly enough distance between my family. Plus, there’s the curse to think about. I can’t get close to him or anyone. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if he got hurt because of me.

Besides, it’s not like the stoic, grumpy guy in front of me is showing any interest in me anyway.

I push some of my blue hair out of my face as I follow him into the open bay area. A fan by the door immediately blows all of my hair right back into my face and I sigh.

I step out of the way of the fan and try to right my hair as Gavin watches me.

“Did you have any luck finding the part?” I ask him as I fidget with the hem of my shirt.

There’s just something about having his blue eyes on me that makes me squirm. It feels like I’m burning up and I don’t know why.

“Not yet. I looked around town and the next few towns over but they didn’t have it. I have a few more feelers out and I’ve started looking online. I think I found a place that has it but it will be more expensive from there, so I was trying to find a cheaper option.”

“Thanks,” I say.

I definitely don’t have the money to spend on fixing my car if it’s going to cost thousands. I’m almost afraid to ask how much he thinks it will be, so instead, I look around the shop for my luggage.

“I put your things in my office,” he tells me and then he’s walking by me and inside the small waiting area of the shop.

“Okay,” I say, dragging out the word as I turn to follow him.

We head down a short hallway and pass by a bathroom on one side. His office is at the end of the hallway and I follow him inside.

That was a mistake because the space is tiny. Gavin turns around with my suitcase and duffel bag and we collide. I try to sidestep him but there’s nowhere to go, so I end up backing up out into the hallway.

I look like an idiot and my face flames as I look away from him and down to my luggage.

“Thanks,” I mumble and he just grunts.

“I’ll see you later,” I say as I spin on my heel and practically sprint out the front door.

My suitcase bangs on the door behind me, and I don’t dare look back. I unlock Madelyn’s car and toss my things into the back seat before I hurry to climb behind the wheel.

It isn’t until I’ve started the car that I get the strength to look back to the shop. Gavin is back in the open bay area, his arms crossed over his chest as he stares at me.

He’s looking at me like I’m some sort of puzzle that he can’t figure out. I stare back at him.

I want him to figure me out. No one has ever taken much of an interest in me. No one has really cared what I was thinking, but I get the feeling that he does.

Maybe I should tell him. I could warn him to not get too close to me, that all I ever do is ruin people’s lives, but when I open my mouth, my throat feels dry and I know that I would never be able to get the words out.

So instead, I push the car into reverse and take one last look at Gavin before I turn and head back down Main Street.

THREE



Record

THERE'S a note from Madelyn on the counter when I wake up the next morning. I yawn as I pick it up, rubbing sleep from my eyes as I try to make out her loopy handwriting.

RECORD,

HOPE THAT YOU SLEPT ALRIGHT! *I'm headed into the market to make sure that everything is taken care of and then Flynn and I are going to head up to our cabin rental. Flynn talked to Gavin last night and he said that it would be a few days so we'll see you when we get back on Sunday!*

FEEL free to take my car anywhere and eat anything that you want in the fridge or pantry! I told my friends that you were in town and they all want to meet you, so if you need anything, you can give them a call!

SEE YOU SUNDAY!

Madelyn

IRIS – 555- 0157

Sutton – 555- 0195

Lyla – 555- 0186

Gavin – 555- 0117

I SMILE at her thoughtfulness and grab a magnet so that I can hang the note up on the fridge.

It's been a while since I had a girls' night or a lot of friends and part of me wants to meet them, but I know that I won't be staying in town for long. Maybe it's better if I don't. That way I don't have to worry about my curse rubbing off on them.

I open the fridge and smile when I see that it's fully stocked. I have a feeling that Flynn did this last night while I was sleeping. I passed out after I got back with my stuff. I could barely keep my eyes open in the shower and when I couldn't find my pajamas, I just put on an old paint-splattered shirt and some underwear and called it good. Luckily for me, I was more awake when I got dressed this morning.

Now I'm feeling more well-rested. It looks like I'll be in town for a few days, so maybe I get dressed and see some of the sights. Or I could sit out on the porch here and read a book. It might be safer for everyone if I stayed by myself. It's been a while since I last laid around for a whole day. I was always working at least one job and painting in my free time. Not that I regret that. It allowed me to save up so that I could get out on my own.

I snag a muffin from the container on the counter and take a bite as I head over to the front windows.

“Hey!” a pretty purple-haired girl says, popping up right in front of me and giving me a heart attack. “You must be Record!”

I stare at her wide eyed and that's when I see the pink and red-haired girls standing behind her.

"We're Madelyn's friends," the pink-haired girl says, and I lift a hand to wave at them weakly.

"Uh, hi."

They wave back and head for the front door and I try to calm my racing heart as I move to let them in.

"Hey! I'm Lyla," the purple-haired one says. "And this is Sutton and Iris," she says, nodding to the pink and red-haired girls in turn.

"Hey, it's nice to meet you."

"I love your hair," Lyla says as they come into the house and I smile.

"Thanks. I like yours too."

"I need to dye it again. It's starting to fade already. Maybe I'll try blue this time."

"Yeah, I need to touch up mine too. I love the color, but it fades so fast," I tell her as we all head into the kitchen.

"Madelyn and Flynn left," I inform them.

"We know. We wanted to come meet you before we had to head to work," Sutton says.

"Yeah, Madelyn told me that you own the antiques store in town," I say to Iris and she nods.

Lyla passes her a muffin and grabs another for herself.

"We work at the Mystery Cabin. I don't know if you want to do any touristy thing while you're here, but we could take you over there if you want," Sutton says with a smile as Lyla hands her a muffin too.

"Yeah, I was just thinking that I should try to poke around town today. I didn't have any concrete plans though."

"Let us take you over there. You can check out the cabin and then we can take you out for lunch," Lyla says.

I bite my lip. These girls are really nice and I already like them. I don't want to put them in harm's way though with my curse.

"Let's go!" Lyla says, making the decision for me and I grab my phone and Madelyn's keys off the counter before she drags me out the front door.

"I've got to meet Arlo and get into the shop, but I'll see you guys at lunch," Iris says with a wave.

"See you!" Sutton and Lyla call back as they take me over to a Jeep parked behind Madelyn's car in the driveway.

"Madelyn says that you like to paint," Sutton says as Lyla starts the car and reverses out of the drive.

"Yeah, I love it. I was actually coming up here to see if I could sell my art at the farmers' markets or they have this big craft sale in Sault Ste. Marie for like the month of July," I say as we head down Main Street.

Maybe I should add that I also picked it because it's a solitary habit and I don't have to worry about hurting or cursing anyone while I do it, but I leave that part out.

"That's so cool! We'll have to go check it out," Lyla says as she stops at a red light.

"They're opening a new ceramics place in Lilac Harbor soon too. We could check that out too. Have you ever gone to a place like that?" Sutton asks, twisting in her seat to face me more.

"I've only done ceramics a few times, but it was cool."

"So as long as it's paint, you love it then?" Lyla asks with an infectious grin and I laugh.

"Pretty much."

"Oh, there's Hudson!" Lyla says, waving at a dark-haired man outside of some restaurant. "That's my boyfriend."

He waves back, blowing her a kiss, and I smile. I've always dreamed about finding my soulmate but it hasn't

happened. With the curse, I'm not sure that I would risk getting close to anyone.

“When did Madelyn and Flynn finally get together?” I ask and Sutton and Lyla both groan and roll their eyes.

“Like a month ago.”

“It took ages,” Lyla groans and I grin at her dramatics.

“Yeah, I kept waiting for one of them to say it in college, but they never did.”

“Oh yeah! I keep forgetting that you knew them when they first met. Was it love at first sight?” Sutton asks.

“Absolutely. They were both hooked but too chicken to say anything to the other. I thought for sure when we graduated that they would be forced to say it, but instead, Flynn just said that he was going to start his own company and Madelyn offered to have him move back here with her.”

“And then eighteen months later, they finally get together,” Sutton says as we head out of the downtown area and farther along the coast.

“How did they finally admit it?” I ask.

“Flynn got a job in Los Angeles and was going to take it. She admitted that she loved him before he could,” Sutton says.

“I'm surprised that he was going to leave her.”

“Well, actually they slept together, and she freaked out and said it was a mistake and then he was going to leave, so she told him.”

“Ah, yeah, that makes more sense.”

Sutton and Lyla laugh as we slow and turn into a gravel parking lot. The place looks like an old cabin. It's an A-frame with a bright red door and a sign on the side that proclaims that we've reached the world-famous Mystery Cabin.

“You work here?” I ask as we park and climb out.

“Yeah. My great uncle owns it. We’re in the gift shop,” Sutton says, leading me to the back door.

They enter first and I look around as I follow them. There’s a mini putt-putt golf course off to the side and a sign leading to a zip line farther back. I don’t know what I was expecting from a place called the Mystery Cabin, but it wasn’t this.

We head inside and I look around the gift shop. The place screams tourist trap, but I still love it.

“Welcome to the Mystery Cabin!” an old man in a suit says, waving his arms out wide to encompass the glory that is the gift shop.

“She’s with us, Stan,” Lyla says and the man’s smile dims and falls in an instant.

“Good. I’m grabbing something to eat,” he says, turning but Lyla stops him and hands him a muffin that she must have taken from Madelyn’s house.

“Was thinking of you,” she says, batting her eyes at him and he just grunts out a thanks before he heads out of a side door.

The gift shop door opens and a black and white dog sprints in.

“Bandit!” Sutton calls and the dog skids to a stop and turns to head behind the counter.

“Sorry, he’s got so much energy in the morning,” Sutton says but I just smile.

“It’s no problem. I love dogs. I just wasn’t expecting one to come bursting through the door,” I say with a laugh.

“Sorry, that was my fault. I didn’t know that we had guests already,” a tall guy in a backward baseball hat says as he comes inside.

“Record, this is my boyfriend and the Mystery Cabin’s handyman, Teller. Teller, this is Record. She’s Madelyn and

Flynn's friend from college and she's here for a visit," Sutton says.

"Nice to meet you," he says, shaking my hand before he heads behind the counter to drop a kiss on Sutton's lips.

"Ready for that tour?" Lyla asks, wiggling her eyebrows at me and I grin.

"Let's do it."

FOUR



Record

LYLA AND SUTTON invited me out to dinner with them, but I told them another time. We've been hanging out all day and while nothing bad has happened, that doesn't mean that it's not coming.

I figured that it wasn't worth tempting fate.

I'm pretty sure that they wanted to spend some time alone with their boyfriends anyway, so that's how I end up driving down the half-deserted streets toward Gavin's Mechanic Shop.

I told myself that I'm only going to go and check on my car's progress, but I can't deny that there are butterflies in my stomach at the thought of seeing Gavin again.

I don't know what's gotten into me, but it's like ever since I met him, I can't help but try to find new ways or excuses to be around him.

It's getting late, the sun is just starting to set, and I wonder if he'll even still be at the shop. Maybe he had a date tonight or was planning on hanging out with friends or something. Hell, he could even be out picking up someone else's car that stalled out.

My stomach drops at the thought of him out on a date and I try to ignore the feeling as I turn off of Main Street and head toward his shop. His place isn't far but now that it's starting to

get dark, I'm wondering if I should have driven instead of walked. It was just so nice out and I didn't think that it would take me long but I got distracted by some of the shops downtown and now I'm wondering if they have an Uber or anything here. I probably shouldn't be walking around at night.

It doesn't take long to get there and a smile tips my lips when I spot his tow truck out front. One of the bays is still open and there are lights on inside so I head in that direction.

"Hey," I call as I reach the door and he glances over at me.

It's the same as every other time those bright blue eyes land on me and I suck in a breath as my heart takes off like a shot.

He's wearing his usual dark blue overalls but they're unzipped and hanging at his waist. He's got a white shirt on that's covered in grease stains and I don't know where to look first.

My fingers itch for a paintbrush and canvas, but I doubt that I could ever truly capture this scene onto canvas. It would always be missing something.

"Careful," he says, nodding toward some car parts at my feet.

"Thanks," I say as I tiptoe around them.

"I found the belt for your car a few towns over and I ordered that today so it should be in tomorrow or the day after, but I'm still looking for distributor cap," he tells me as he bends over the hood of some old pickup truck.

"Any luck finding one online?"

He shrugs, his big shoulder lifting and falling distractedly as he finishes tightening something under the hood. I move closer, looking down into the depths of the engine but it's all just the same metal pieces or rubber tubes.

"I don't know how you know what each of these things does. Cars always seemed so confusing to me."

“Nah,” he says, finally standing back up. “They’re all pretty much the same. Same pieces, same concept that makes them work. That’s why I like them. They’re easy to figure out once you know what you’re doing.”

He sets his wrench down and picks up a tiny metal piece before he ducks back under the hood.

“When did you get into cars?” I ask when he comes back up.

“In high school. I loved shop class, but my dad was always into cars and I probably learned more from him over the years than that class.”

“Was he a mechanic too?”

“No, he was a psychiatrist.”

He grabs his wrench again and I watch as he screws a bolt back into place.

“Are you from Destiny Falls?”

“No, I moved up here right after I graduated. We used to come by here on family vacations and I always loved the area. When I found out that the old owner of this mechanic shop was retiring, I jumped at the chance to buy it from him.”

“So you’ve been here for like eight years then?”

I would guess that he’s not quite thirty yet.

He nods. “Yeah, around there, I guess.”

I get the feeling that if it’s not cars, he doesn’t really want to talk about it. Unfortunately, I know next to nothing about cars.

“What about you?” he asks and I blink at him.

“What about me?”

“Where are you from?”

“Originally, Howell, Michigan, but we moved to Grand Rapids when I was like four and that’s where I grew up.”

“Did you like it?”

I pause.

Did I like it?

The town was fine, there was always something to do, but I wasn't happy. I think that had more to do with my family than the city though. I mean, can anyone who's cursed really be happy?

He's still watching me and I swallow.

“It was fine. I didn't love the traffic, but there was lots to do and see.”

He nods, but I get the feeling that he can see more than I said.

“Did you get that from your dad? That dissecting look?” I blurt out and to my surprise, he cracks a smile.

His whole face lights up and I rock back on my heels as his bright eyes land on me.

“I suppose. Not a lot got past him. He was good at seeing more than surface-level things.”

“Sounds like a good psychiatrist then. Or a good police detective,” I try to joke and he grins.

“Yeah, he was. He retired a few years ago and now he and my mom travel a lot.”

“That must be nice.”

He shrugs and grabs a rag at his feet to wipe his hands off.

“Where did you grow up then?” I ask him as he reaches up to close the hood of the truck.

“Chicago.”

“Really?” I ask and he grins at my shocked tone.

“Yep.”

“I can't picture you in a big city.”

“Yeah, I prefer the small town. Less crime and traffic.”

I nod and he starts to gather up his tools.

“Are you closing up now? I wasn’t sure what your hours were.”

“Yeah, I think that I’m done for the day. Have you eaten?”

“Uh, no. I mean, Lyla and Sutton invited me to dinner, but I know that they wanted to see their boyfriends, and so I took a raincheck.”

I wince. Why did I just tell him all of that? It in no way answered his question.

“Is that what you did today? Hang out with the girls?”

“Yeah, they took me to the Mystery Cabin for a tour,” I say and he smiles. “And then we had lunch and I got to see Iris’s shop this afternoon.”

“How did you like town?”

“I love it. Everyone is so nice and there’s no traffic or long waits at the restaurants. Plus, the water! Though I didn’t really get to go down to the beach that much today.”

He smiles softly as I go on about the town and I close my mouth.

“We can go now. It will be dark, but the lights from the bridge and boats should help.”

I bite my bottom lip. I want to take him up on his offer so bad, but I can’t. Not unless I want the curse to get him too.

“Record,” he says softly, and I blink at him as he takes a step toward me and then another.

His hand cups my face, and I lean into his touch. How long has it been since someone has touched me? After Madelyn hugging me, I can’t even remember.

His mouth lowers to mine and I lick my lips. I know that I shouldn’t let him kiss me. We barely know each other and I’m cursed, but I want this.

I want him.

His lips lands on mine and I close my eyes.

FIVE



Record

HIS MOUTH COMES DOWN on to mine and I suck in a breath. I've only been kissed twice before and neither time went well. The first time Bobby Meyers's braces cut my lip, leaving me bleeding all over the both of us. The second time, Ray Calder had kissed me so hard that our teeth knocked together and I ended up chipping one of his. After that I just let the curse win and tried to stay away from boys, but I can't do that here. Not with Gavin.

His kiss isn't like either of the other two. He's gentle, his hands coming up to cradle my face, and he angles my head, kissing me deeper.

My lips part for him when his tongue slips along the seam of my mouth and he deepens the kiss even more as my tongue starts to tangle with his.

"Gavin," I breathe, gripping his shirt as the world starts to move under my feet.

At least that's how it feels anyway.

His hands tighten on my chin, the other slipping around the back of my neck, and I give him complete control of me. He tastes like coffee and apples, and I moan as his tongue tangles with mine.

He moves closer, his body pressing firmly against me as he conquers my mouth. His teeth nip at my bottom lip and my breath hitches at the sensation. My body is screaming for me to do more, to feel more of him against me.

He nips at my bottom lip again, his tongue coming out to soothe the sting, and I whimper with need.

I'm so close.

I don't even know what that thought means, but as Gavin presses against me, a coil tightens even further in my body, low in my belly.

"Record," he breathes out and I sigh.

I want to hear him say my name like over and over again.

"Record," he moans again and I blink my eyes open.

Record, all you do is hurt people.

That thought hits me and I jerk away from Gavin and he blinks at me. His fingers are still holding a lock of my hair and I reach up to pull it away from him so that I can get out of here but he tightens his grip.

"Record," he says.

I shake my head. "Don't."

"Yes," he says back firmly and I suck in a shaky breath.

I know that that voice, those words, are my family. I've heard my mother and father tell me that a million times over the years.

I hurt people and I really like Gavin. I can't hurt him too.

"I like you," I start and he takes a step closer.

"I like you too. That's why I kissed you."

He's so blunt and it has my lips curling but I stop when I remember what I'm about to tell him.

"Do you believe in curses?"

"What?"

“Do you believe in curses?”

“No, there’s no such thing.”

“Yes, there is. I’m cursed,” I whisper and he stares at me for a beat before he throws his head back and laughs.

“I am!” I insist and he only laughs harder.

I glare at him, taking a step back when I realize that he’s no longer holding on to my hair, and then I turn and bolt for the door.

The laughter cuts off immediately and a second later, I’m being lifted off the ground.

“Nope. You’re not walking home. It’s dark out and I know that you walked here,” he growls in my ear as I squirm to get out of his hold.

“I’m not getting in the car with you,” I snap, and he chuckles.

“Because of the curse?”

“It’s real!”

“No, it’s not, but don’t worry. We’re going to talk all about that.”

He carries me over to a workbench and grabs a set of keys out of the drawer there before he carries me outside and over to a new-looking Jeep.

“I can walk,” I tell him stormily.

“But the curse,” he says back sarcastically.

I try to kick him but he dodges me, and I seethe.

He’s not taking this seriously, but he will when something bad happens.

He opens the passenger door and sets me inside.

“I like you a little less now,” I inform him, and he just grins at me.

“No, you don’t.”

He closes the door and I glare at him as he heads around the hood and climbs behind the wheel.

“So tell me about this curse,” he says as we pull out of the parking lot.

“You mean the curse that you don’t believe in?”

“That’s the one.”

I debate telling him, but maybe if I can explain it to him, he’ll get it and he’ll stay away from me for his own safety.

A piece of my heart breaks at the thought of him avoiding me, but it’s for the best.

“I’ve been cursed since I was born.”

He glances over at me and I take a deep breath before I go on.

“My parents were musicians, and they had finally caught a break when they found out that they were pregnant with me. They had to turn down the record deal to raise me.”

“So they named you Record?”

“Yeah, they said that I was supposed to be their replacement. Something just as good as a label wanting to sign them, but I wasn’t. I’ve done nothing but mess things up for my parents and sister ever since.”

“How?” he asks, his fingers tightening around the steering wheel.

Good. He’s finally taking this seriously.

“Lots of stuff. They had to work to raise us and they hated their jobs. When I fell and broke my arm, my dad came to the hospital and missed a meeting with a big client and ended up losing his job.”

“That’s not your fault,” he starts, but I go on.

“I’ve broken a lot of bones. I have a ton of bad luck and that’s spread over the years to my family.”

“How?” he asks, his voice hard with frustration.

“My mom and dad have both gotten fired from numerous jobs,” I start.

“So they’re bad workers then,” he counters.

“One of our houses burned down,” I tell him.

“Probably from a candle that they lit or something electrical, so either way, not your fault.”

“We never won anything,” I list off. “Not on lottery tickets or at the casino or even things at school.”

“So? Lots of people never win stuff. I would argue most don’t and most certainly never win the lottery.”

“We lost houses and apartments. Been in car accidents.”

I’m listing off more and more things, desperate for him to see my point, and I don’t even know why. He wasn’t there for all of those things. He doesn’t know how much it hurt all of us.

“None of that was because of you or a curse,” he says, and I shake my head.

He pulls into Madelyn’s driveway and I hurry to unbuckle and get out.

“Hey,” he says, his hand resting on my arm. “You didn’t cause any of that. They did. They didn’t work hard, they slacked off, or they lied and got caught. Your family, they’re just blaming you for everything. None of those things were your fault or a curse’s fault.”

I open my mouth to argue with him, but his jaw is set and I know that he’s never going to believe me.

“It’s just bad luck or the consequences of their own actions, Record,” he says softly and I feel tears sting the back of my eyes.

“I have to go,” I choke out. “But you should stay away from me. For your own good.”

I climb out of the Jeep and run up the front porch steps and inside.

I lean back against the door, tears slipping free from my eyes, and wait for him to leave. It takes a few minutes, but finally his headlights reverse and head back down the street.

SIX



Record

I DIDN'T THINK that Gavin would really stay away from me. Maybe I just didn't want him to, but either way, what I wasn't expecting was for him to be knocking on the front door bright and early the next day.

“What are you doing here?” I ask him, and he grins at me.

“I'm going to prove to you that you're not cursed.”

I blink at him, wondering if I'm still dreaming or something but nope. Gavin is standing on Madelyn's front porch in a pair of swim trunks and a dark blue T-shirt.

“No,” I say, trying to close the door, but he catches it before I can.

“What do you have to lose? Let me take you out. Either you prove that you're right or I do.”

“And when I'm right? Will you stay away from me?”

“Yeah, sure,” he says, but I can tell that he's not happy about it.

“Fine.”

“Good. Now get dressed. You're going to need a swimsuit and comfortable shoes.”

I open the door and let him inside before I head up the stairs. I need to get away from him so that I can think this through and calm my racing heart.

I should tell him that I can't go, maybe make up some excuse or some fake plans. I'm betting that he would just call Lyla, Sutton, or Iris though to confirm my plans and find out that I was lying.

Looks like this is happening.

I'll just try to make sure that nothing bad happens to him. I'll keep my distance and everything will be fine.

I have to dig through my suitcases to find my swimsuit. I tug that on, pulling on a loose-fitting summer dress over it. I have a pair of slip-on flip-flops and I shove my feet into them before I head back downstairs.

"I just want to warn you again—" I start as I come down the stairs and he grabs my hand, cutting me off as he pulls me outside.

"Yeah, yeah, that you're cursed and something bad is going to happen. I'll take my chances."

"You should take this seriously!" I argue as he pulls me over to his Jeep.

"Oh, I am," he says. My heart kicks against my ribcage as his blue eyes meet mine.

He helps me into the passenger seat and then climbs behind the wheel.

"Where are you taking me?" I ask him as he heads toward town.

"I've today all planned out. We're going to go zip-lining, parasailing, kayaking, jet-skiing, and we're grabbing a bite to eat."

"Are you crazy! We're going to get hurt. Or one of us is going to die!" I argue as I turn to grab the door handle.

“No, we’re not. Well, we’re not as long as you don’t jump out of a moving car!” he says, grabbing my hand and tugging me back into the seat before I can get to the door.

“Are you crazy?” I ask him again and he shakes his head.

“No, and you’re not cursed.”

“Okay, but I tell you that I’m cursed and you decide to test it out by doing a ton of dangerous things. That seems pretty crazy to me.”

“It’s the fastest way to make you see that you’re not cursed.”

I fold my arms over my chest as we start to head down the coast. When he pulls up outside of the Mystery Cabin, I’m a little surprised.

Maybe this won’t be that scary.

Teller greets us as we pull up, and I wave at him as I hop out.

“Hey, you two,” he greets us and I stand closer to him.

Gavin rolls his eyes at me, and Teller just grins.

“Ready to go?”

“Go where?” I ask.

“Zip-lining,” Teller says as he starts to walk toward the woods.

I glare at Gavin, and he grabs my hand and pulls me along after him.

The zip-lining course at the Mystery Cabin isn’t very big or very tall and I let out a deep breath as Teller hooks Gavin and me into harnesses and goes over the rules.

“So, you just walk off the platform. You want to get a good push so that you don’t get stuck halfway across. Then once you’re close to the other side, you tug on this strap to slow down. I’ll be over there to catch you,” Teller assures me, and I nod.

“We got this,” Gavin says, and the guys fist bump before Teller heads off down the line to the next platform.

“I hate you,” I tell him, and he smirks at me.

“So, you want me to go first then?”

“Not a chance.”

He laughs as I get a running start and push off of the platform. I suck in a breath as I go weightless but the harness catches me and soon I’m flying through the air. I laugh as I get halfway, and I can see Gavin cheering from behind me.

I look forward and realize that I’m close to Teller, so I tug on the strap. Teller catches me as I come to a stop and he high-fives me.

“How was that?” he asks.

“So cool,” I tell him, a wide grin stretching my lips.

I never thought that I would do anything like that. How could I when I was cursed? I’m glad that I did though.

I turn to watch Gavin go next, and soon we’re both laughing on the other platform.

“Ready to do the next one?” Teller asks as he moves the lines to the next run.

“Sure,” I say, and Teller hooks his own harness up and takes off.

“Not so scary, huh?” Gavin asks, and I shrug.

“No, I guess not.”

“Still think that you’re cursed.”

“Yep. That was just one time. It could happen next time.”

“Something bad could happen to anyone next time,” he tells me, and I look away from him.

I think that he’s right...

I don’t tell him that. Instead, I wait for Teller to signal me and then I take off, flying through the air again.

We finish up the zip lining course pretty fast. It's only four different runs and we're done in under an hour.

"Thanks," I tell Teller and he just nods.

"Have fun!" he calls as Gavin takes my hand and leads me back to the Jeep.

"Where to next?" I ask him, and he grins as we head back toward town.

"Parasailing."

I shake my head at him as he heads past Destiny Falls and over toward Maple Bend. I watch the beach go by until I see the signs for parasailing.

"This is a bad idea," I groan as he drags me from the car.

"This is the best idea. Come on."

I let him lead me over to the little stand and watch as he pays, and then we're heading over to a small speedboat.

"Hey! I'm Jax," the guy says as he grabs two harnesses from a box by the boat. "I'll be the captain today."

We listen to his instructions as he gets us hooked into our harnesses and then we're holding on to the metal bar as the boat pulls away from the dock.

My heart is beating hard now. I'm more afraid than when we went zip-lining and I wonder if it's because we're going to be a lot higher in the air or if because I had Teller and Sutton and Lyla nearby for the last thing.

Now it's just Gavin and I and this boat.

"Scared?" Gavin yells over the wind.

"Terrified," I admit, nodding.

"You'll be fine!" Jax yells and I want to flip him off, but he tells us to get into position.

We move back slightly to the little stand and my palms feel sweaty on the bar.

“We should not be doing this,” I say, but it’s too late to protest.

The kite takes off, and soon we’re way up in the air.

“Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh,” I shout and Gavin laughs next to me.

“You’re doing great!” he yells and I’m too afraid to look away from the water way down below us to glare at him.

“I hate you!” I yell back instead, and he reaches over, squeezing my fingers before he grabs hold of the bar once more.

After a while, I start to relax but I never quite unwind like I did with the zip lining. We land back on the little stand and Jax flashes us a smile and a thumbs-up before he turns the boat back to the dock.

Gavin drags me up onto the dock when we get back, and I lean on him. My legs feel like jelly and Jax just smirks.

“Did you have fun?” he asks us and I stare at him until he laughs.

“The next time will be even better,” he promises me, and I look over to Gavin as we turn to leave.

“Never again,” I tell him and he just tugs me closer against him.

I thought that we would get back in the car, but he just leads me farther down the dock to a jet ski rental shack.

“This should be more your speed,” he says as he passes me a life vest and tugs one on himself.

We’re led over to a pair of jet skis and I climb onto one as the rental guy gives me instructions on what to do if we fall off or if it stalls out. Then we’re turning them on and slowly cruising out onto the lake.

Jet skiing is my favorite. I lose track of time or my fears as Gavin and I fly across the water. He tries to splash me with his wake and I laugh as I chase after him.

After a while, I notice that I'm almost out of gas and we both reluctantly head back to the dock.

"Still think that you're cursed?" Gavin asks as we turn in the life vests and head back to his Jeep.

"Yep," I say simply, but I'm starting to have doubts.

Surely if bad luck was going to hit me, it would be when we were a hundred feet up in the air or racing across the water. Nothing happened though. Is that just a fluke?

We climb back into his Jeep and head farther down the road.

"Where are we going?" I ask when I notice that we're headed away from Destiny Falls and toward the center of Maple Bend.

"I thought that we would grab a bite to eat," he says easily and I relax.

Then I see the Ferris wheel and the other lights from the carnival, and my stomach drops.

"Just let me kill you," I tell him as he parks, and he laughs.

"Come on, chicken!"

I follow him up to the front entrance. He pays for our tickets and then drags me through the crowd to a stage.

"What's this?" I ask him as he hands someone some money and they pass him a clipboard.

"It's a hot dog eating contest."

"What?" I ask as he grabs my hand and tugs me up onstage.

"You don't have to compete, but I thought that it could be fun."

"You want me to shove hot dogs down my throat? Think of the choking hazard!" I hiss at him, and some teenage boys next to me laugh and elbow each other.

I roll my eyes at them, and Gavin hands me a bib. I reluctantly tie mine on as he does the same.

An announcer grabs the mic and my face heats as he goes over the rules and the clock is set to a minute.

“It’s just sixty seconds. What could go wrong?” Gavin asks, and I glare at him.

“On your marks, get set, go!” the announcer yells, and I grab a hot dog and take a bite.

Gavin grins at me as he grabs one and we have to be the only two in this competition who aren’t trying to win.

I laugh as he grabs a second one, and I reach for one too. We make it through one and a half each and are officially declared the losers.

I laugh as Gavin grabs my hand and drags me off the stage and farther into the carnival. I can tell that he wants to ask me if I still believe that I’m cursed, but instead he leads me over to the Ferris wheel and helps me on.

I expect him to ask at some point on the ride, but instead, he turns to me and kisses me. I close my eyes, getting lost in him and the sounds and scents of the carnival.

The ride stops and Gavin pulls back from me. We’re both slightly out of breath, our lips red and swollen. I take his hand this time and we wander around, checking out some of the arts and crafts booths before we ride some more rides.

Gavin buys us popcorn, cotton candy, and an elephant ear, and we sit at one of the picnic tables and watch the kids and families walk by.

“Are you ready for the last activity?” he asks and I turn to him.

“Bring it on,” I tell him, and he grins at me.

SEVEN



Record

“I CAN’T BELIEVE that you tipped me over,” Gavin says with a laugh as we duck under one of the bay doors of his mechanic shop.

“It was only fair. I got wet, so you should have been too,” I tell him and he grins at me.

“You got wet because a wave tipped your kayak over, not because I tipped you over,” he reminds me and I try to hide my smile.

“Semantics.”

He laughs and passes me my tote bag.

“Want me to throw your towel in the wash with mine?”

“No, that’s okay. I can do laundry when I get back to Madelyn’s place. I’ll just hang it up somewhere to dry for now.”

“Here,” he says, taking the towel and heading into the lobby.

I watch him as he starts to hang up our wet stuff and smile. Today was the most fun that I’ve had in a really long time. Maybe ever.

My phone buzzes in the tote bag that Gavin bought me at some little store near the beach. I have to fish around inside

and when I finally grab it and see the screen, I'm starting to wish that I had brought it kayaking with us and it had fallen overboard.

There are over thirty missed calls from my family. I'm surprised to see that over half of them are from my younger sister. She never calls me unless she needs something, and I wonder if something bad happened.

Oh god, what if someone died or was in an accident? They could be in the hospital and I'm over here gallivanting all over town and drooling over some hot guy.

I'm just about to call her back when I notice the text messages.

There are over a hundred of them, and my heart races as I start to read. I'm expecting them to be letting me know that someone was hurt or passed away and asking me to come home, but that's not what I get.

Instead, it's message after message of them accusing me of ruining their lives and demanding that I return home.

They need my money to afford the mortgage and they were using my car to get around town. Now they're down to two, and my sister has been bugging my parents for rides to work or to borrow the car to go out with her friends and my parents stand it. They want me to buy her a new car. It's the least that I can do for messing up their lives and cursing everyone.

My stomach hollows at the familiar words and I start to feel numb.

They've been telling me some version of that sentiment for my entire life, and I guess I never questioned them. I mean, they're my parents after all and I just always trusted them and what they said. I'm sure that there's some psychological reasoning behind why victims blame themselves, and I wonder if I could ask Gavin's dad to explain it to me, but at the end of the day, I still believed it for over twenty-three years.

I think that Gavin was right.

I'm not cursed. There's no such thing as curses.

We make our own luck, and my parents and sister have always taken the easy road. They don't need to work hard or try for things. Not when they can fail, blame it on me, and then demand that I do something to make it up to them.

"I'm not a curse," I whisper to myself, my eyes stinging with tears.

"I know. That's what I've been trying to tell you," Gavin says softly from behind me and I hurry to dry my eyes before I turn to face him.

"My family has been texting and calling me," I tell him, passing him my phone.

I watch as he reads a few messages in the group chat, his features darkening and his fingers tightening with each new message that he reads.

"They're wrong. You don't owe them shit," he promises me, a fire burning bright in his eyes.

"I know. I'm starting to see that after today."

"Good."

He pulls me against his chest, and I go willingly, wrapping my arms around his waist as I breathe in his now-familiar scent of oil and pine trees.

"I mean, if anyone was the curse here, it was them. They held you back, tried to keep you tied down to their level," he points out.

It's amazing how just a few days away from them and I can suddenly see things so much more clearly. Or maybe it's just that Gavin took the time to show me how wrong I was.

He's right. I don't need them. I'm so much better off without any of them in my life.

"Are you okay?" he asks as he pulls back slightly.

“Yeah, I am,” I promise him, and he gives me a lopsided grin.

“Good. The last part for your car came in. Want to help me fix it? Then I can take you home or we can grab a late dinner or something.”

“Sure.”

I follow him over to my car and he grabs me a camping chair and sets it up nearby before he gets to work.

“It’s cool that you know how to do all of this,” I say.

He smiles. “It’s not super hard. Once you’ve done a few, you’re pretty much a pro,” he says and I shake my head.

“I’m clueless about building and fixing things. It’s cool that you’re so self-sufficient.”

His face heats slightly and I wonder if he’s blushing or if it’s just hot under the hood of my car.

“Do you want to learn?” he offers after a beat, and I’m tempted to take him up on it, but I shake my head.

“Nah, I’m enjoying the view too much,” I tell him with a wink, and he grins at me, shaking his head slightly.

He doesn’t seem to believe me, so I get comfortable in my chair and start to tell him what seeing him all greasy and sweaty does to me.

“I’m serious. The first time I saw you when you came to get my car, I literally said ‘holy shit,’ when I saw you.”

He peeks up at me and I stare back at him.

“Then every time I see you in those coveralls or all sweaty and covered in grease. Whew!” I say, fanning myself and his cheeks turn a brighter shade of pink.

He grabs the new belt, and I watch as he partly disappears under the hood of my car.

“Have you ever thought about making a calendar and selling them?” I ask him, and he bursts out laughing. “I’m

serious! I would even take the pictures for you.”

“How generous of you,” he says dryly, and I grin at him as he tightens the last bolt on my car and straightens up from under the hood.

“I’m a giver,” I tell him, and he crooks a finger at me.

“Me too. Come here and let me show you.”

I stand on shaky legs and make my way over to him. My heart is starting to beat faster as I approach him and take in a quick breath as I look up to meet his clear blue eyes.

Lust tightens like a fist around my throat and even though I have no experience here, I know that I need him.

I keep eye contact with him as I reach up, slipping the straps of my sundress down. The material sticks to my damp bathing suit and I wiggle slightly to free it.

“Fuck,” he whispers harshly, and I smile as I see his eyes heat.

The dress pools at my feet and I kick it to the side. My flip-flops go with it and then I reach for the tie of my bathing suit on the back of my neck.

“Record,” he says, and my heart kicks against my ribcage. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” I say instantly and it’s like a flip has been switched in him.

He takes over, untying the straps at my hips until I’m standing before him naked. He reaches behind his neck and pulls his shirt off, tossing it over by my dress and then he’s reaching for me.

He backs me up against the nearest vehicle, some newer model car, and I gasp as he pushes me back onto the hood.

“Gavin,” I start, but he just shoots me a sexy grin and steps between my legs.

“I’ve got you,” he says against my lips, and I nod.

He kisses me quick and then starts to trail kisses and nips down my neck. I wiggle and arch against the hood of the car, and he smirks against my skin as he licks a path up to my nipple.

As soon as his lips wrap around the stiff peak, I become possessed. My brain shuts off and I'm nothing but feeling.

He sucks and licks and nips at my body until I'm screaming his name, my hands trying to find purchase on the smooth hood of the car. Gavin kisses lower, his hands wrapping around my hips to keep me in place as he drops to his knees and buries his face between my thighs.

"Oh, shit!" I shout, and even though I can't see him, I know that he's smiling.

"That's it," he praises me, and I wiggle, trying to grind down against his face.

The dull throb that was pulsing between my legs has suddenly turned into an inferno. It feels like I'm being burned alive and I love it.

I come against his mouth, screaming his name, and then he stands, leaving me boneless on the hood of the car as he pushes his swim trunks down and pushes my thighs wider.

"Are you sure?" he asks, his mouth still wet from my juices and his eyes a little crazed.

"Oh yeah," I breathe out. He grins at me as he grips my thighs.

I bite my bottom lip as I feel the tip of his cock brush against my folds and I wonder if I should tell him that I'm a virgin but before I can decide, he thrusts into me, burying himself deep inside of my clenching channel.

His eyes widen and he stares down at me.

"Record... shit, I'm sorry. I had no idea," he says, and it looks like he's in pain.

The sting that came from him popping my cherry is gone now, and I wiggle, trying to take him deeper.

“Fuck,” he curses, his hands tightening around my thighs as he stops me from moving.

“It feels good,” I tell him, my voice coming out more like a moan.

“It’s your first time. It shouldn’t be on top of a car,” he tells me, but I shake my head.

“I think it’s hot. Do you not want to fuck me?” I ask, and he looks torn.

“Of course, I do.”

“Then move,” I urge him, and he closes his eyes.

It looks like he’s at war with himself and I wonder which side will win. Finally, his eyes open and I know that I’m getting laid tonight.

“Fine. I’ll fuck you on the car, but then we’re going upstairs to my bedroom so we can do this right.”

“Okay,” I happily agree. He grits his teeth as he starts to move.

He pushes some of my blue hair out of my face and I arch, trying to take him deeper.

“Fucking perfect,” he grits out and I reach up, grabbing hold of his biceps and hanging on as he starts to pound into me.

His hair is dark with sweat, or maybe just water from the lake still, and I look up into his blue eyes as he starts to rut into me.

He feels so good. I feel so full, and for once, I’m not worried about the curse or my parents or sister. I’m just living in this moment with Gavin.

I never want it to end.

I can feel a tightening in my belly though, and I know that it won't be long before I'm coming again.

"I'm close," I tell him, and he nods, his eyes locked on my face as he shifts, putting my legs over his shoulder and driving into me.

The new angle has him hitting my clit with each stroke and I swear my eyes roll back in my head as I burst apart.

"Gavin!" I shout and I hear him make a choked sound in his throat before he finds his own release.

He's still thrusting though and it has my orgasm going on and on. I sag back against the hood of the car, my body boneless. My eyes won't open, so I keep them closed as Gavin slowly pulls out of me and moves to the side.

I peek my eyes open and watch as he grabs his shirt off of the ground for me. I sit up and he drops it over my head, helping me pull my arms through.

"Now," I start, my voice coming out only slightly slurred. "Let's see this bed."

EIGHT



Record

“ARE you going to stick around then? You’re more than welcome to stay with us!” Madelyn says as we head down the street.

“Yeah, I think so,” I say, biting back a grin as Flynn backs up out of the driveway.

We’re headed to Prim + Proper for a tasting. Hudson, Lyla’s boyfriend and the owner of Prim + Proper is opening a new place in the next town over, Lilac Harbor, and he’s settled on a menu that he wants everyone to try out.

I was a bit surprised that I was invited since I’ve only been in town for a little over a week, but Lyla insisted. It seems that I’m one of the gang already.

I can’t deny that I love that.

I have friends for the first time in what feels like forever.

I never really opened up to Madelyn or Flynn in college. I was always too busy working or studying to really put too much effort into friendships. Or that’s what I told myself anyway.

The truth is that I was embarrassed. I was a curse, something bad. Even my own parents couldn’t stand me. How did I expect anyone else to?

Now I see how wrong that was. I've opened up a lot to my new friends here, and it's safe to say that they all hate my family. We got drunk one night, minus Iris since she's pregnant, and talked about our families. It was interesting to hear about Lyla and her mom and stepfamily. She doesn't talk to them now after the way that they treated her and I can't say that I blame her.

She's been encouraging me to go no-contact with my family too, and I have to agree with her. These past ten days have been the best in my life. I feel more relaxed and happier than I can ever remember.

I'm sure that a big part of that is Gavin. We spend every spare second that we can with each other.

He got the other part for my car, and I helped him install it. Then I told him that he looked hot all covered in grease and he proceeded to fuck me in the back seat of my car. It was a bit of a tight fit, but neither one of us was complaining.

He's meeting us at Prim + Proper and I can't wait to see him again. We grabbed lunch yesterday, so it's been almost twenty-four hours. This is the longest that we've gone since I first got to town, and I don't like it.

He's like a drug to me now. I need my sexy mechanic fix.

"Are you going to try to paint here? Or we could take a day trip to Sault Ste. Marie for the craft show one weekend or something," Madelyn offers and I nod.

"I'm not sure what I'll do yet. Iris was telling me about some craft and market type sales down in Mackinaw too, so maybe I'll check those out too."

"You should do classes," Flynn says, and I turn to see him grinning at his own idea.

"Art classes?" I ask.

He nods. "Yeah, there's not much like that up here. I bet parents would pay you to do like a weekly class or something, especially during the summer."

“Yeah, he’s right. You could make a killing,” Madelyn says.

I blink. I’ve never thought about teaching. I was worried about getting close to kids and cursing them, but now that Flynn mentions it, maybe it is a good idea.

“I’ll think about it,” I say as we pull up outside of Prim + Proper.

Gavin is already outside, talking to Sutton and Teller, and I wave as I climb out of the back seat.

“Hey. Missed you,” he says.

I grin. “Missed you too.”

He brushes a kiss against my lips, and I smile.

“You’re in a good mood,” Gavin comments, and I nod.

“Flynn just gave me an idea.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“He said that I should teach art classes here in town.”

I can see him processing that. Weighing the pros and cons and then he nods. “Yeah, that’s a great idea.”

“You don’t seem happy,” I say and he kisses my cheek.

“I am. I was just about to offer you a job with me.”

“Doing what?” I ask with a snort. I’m terrible at cars, and it would take me years before I could be much of a help with him.

“Painting the cars. I’ve been toying with the idea of expanding that side of the business, but it was just me, and I didn’t think that I had time.”

“Painting cars?” I say, blinking as I think about it.

I’ve never thought about that before.

“I suppose it could be fun,” I say as we join our friends by the front door.

“What could be fun?” Lyla asks as she and Hudson open the front doors of the restaurant.

“Painting cars.”

“Ohh, I’m in!” Lyla says and I laugh.

Lyla is up for pretty much anything. She said that she wants to try it all, and I love that she’s such a free spirit.

“For Gavin’s shop?” Sutton asks, and I nod.

“Yeah, you should do it. I think that you would be great at it,” Iris says with a smile.

“We’ll see,” I say, turning to grin at Gavin, but my eyes snag on the figures over his shoulder and my stomach and smile both drop.

“Mom?” I ask, not quite believing what I’m seeing.

“What?” Gavin asks, turning with a frown to see what I’m staring at.

“That’s my mom... and my dad and sister,” I finish as they all climb out of the old SUV that I remember all too well.

They look so much older, and I wonder how that happened. It’s only been a few days, but they seem to have aged years.

My mom is still pretty with her blonde hair and sharp blue eyes. She’s where Callie and I get most of our features from. Callie got our dad’s dark hair though, and her eyes are a darker shade of blue, like his. We both have her full mouth and small nose. I scrunch my own nose as they step out onto the sidewalk.

“Oh, really?” Gavin asks, his voice lethal, and I grab his arm before he can storm over there and tell them off.

Madelyn and Flynn move to stand next to Gavin, and everyone else lines up on my other side so that it’s very obviously us versus them.

“Uh, hi,” I say as they get closer to us.

“There you are,” my mom snaps and I wince, my fingers tightening around Gavin’s forearm.

That’s a tone that I’ve heard too much from her, and I know what it means.

She’s pissed.

“We’ve been calling and texting for weeks!” she snaps again, and I want to roll my eyes.

“I’ve only been gone for less than two weeks, so that’s weird,” I sass back.

That seems to take them all by surprise, and they freeze on the sidewalk.

I’ve never talked back to any of them. I know that it wouldn’t have done me much good. Besides, it was the three of them against me. I was never going to win. Better to just take it and then escape when I could.

“What did you say?” my dad asks, and I straighten my shoulders as I look at him.

“What do you want? Why are you here?” I ask him instead.

He glares at me. “We came to get you. You can’t just abandon your family. Not after all that we’ve done for you.”

“You haven’t done anything for me,” I say, letting go of Gavin’s arm and taking a small step forward.

“We raised you! We let you live with us after graduation!” he spits out, and I feel my fingernails bite into my palms as they tighten into fists.

“No, I moved back because you needed me to work to afford the mortgage!”

He takes a step toward me, and Gavin grabs my hand. I know that he’ll pull me back if my dad or anyone in my family gets much closer to me, and having him on my side only has me feeling more confident.

“I never liked the house, and it’s not mine, so I’m not paying to live there. I’ve moved out and I’m not coming back. Not ever,” I state firmly.

No one says anything for a beat, but I can see my parents sizing me up and trying to find a weak spot.

“I know that you were stealing from me. That’s why I had a different hiding place and a secret bank account. I’ve been putting half of my paycheck there for years so that you couldn’t touch it.”

My mom frowns at that, her eyes flashing. I know that they’ve been taking from my “secret” hiding spot in my room, but really I set that up so that they would stop asking me for money.

My sister, Callie, steps forward. She looks pale and maybe even a little sad. I’m surprised because she always just seemed to go along with my parents, and whatever they said or did to me, she did too.

“Can I talk to you for a minute?” she asks and Gavin’s hold on me tightens.

“Um...” I start and he looks over to me. He shrugs and I nod. “Okay.”

We walk a few steps down and she turns away from our family, giving them her back.

“Please come back,” she whispers and I blink at her.

She sounds like she’s crying. I don’t know what to do in this instance. I’ve never seen Callie cry.

“I can’t take it any longer,” she says and tears start to really come then, spilling onto her cheeks and rushing down to her chin.

“Can’t take what?” I ask.

What could our parents have been doing while I was gone?

“I can’t take being you!” she sobs.

I blink. “What?”

“Ever since you’ve been gone, they’ve been treating me like they did you,” she admits and she looks up at me with red, miserable eyes.

“Oh... yeah, I guess you can’t be the golden child when they need a scapegoat,” I say, and she starts to cry harder. “I’m not coming back, Callie. Never.”

She looks down to her shoes, trying to wipe the tears away.

“So, you knew that they were treating me like shit then?” I say when I realize what she said.

She nods. “Yeah, I’m so sorry. It was just easier to go along. They seemed to love me more when I started doing it,” she admits and I take a step away from her.

She notices and looks up at me with real regret swimming in her eyes.

“I’m so sorry, Record. I’ve been a terrible sister. I should have helped. I should have told them to stop or something. I just... couldn’t.”

I’m probably never going to be able to understand why she didn’t help me, but I can’t leave her with them. Not when she’s sobbing like this after only being alone with them for a few days.

“You’re eighteen. You can move here with me until you start college in the fall,” I offer.

“Mom and Dad will never pay for my college if I don’t stay with them.”

“I hate to break it to you, but they don’t have money for their own mortgage. There’s no way that they’re paying for college.”

She snuffles and I let out a deep breath.

“You can still go though. Do what I did. Take out loans then. Work and save your money. Maybe see if you can get

financial aid or some scholarships. Hell, pick a cheaper school.”

She nods, looking away from me.

“It’s that, or get back in that car with them and drive all the way back to Grand Rapids.”

She actually turns pale at the thought, and I wonder just how bad things have been at home since I left.

She takes a deep breath and then nods as her eyes meet mine.

“Do you know anywhere that’s hiring?”

“I might,” I say with a small smile and she gives me a tentative one in return.

“We’ll have to find an apartment or something. I’ve been staying with Madelyn and Flynn.”

She nods and then surprises me by stepping forward and wrapping her arms around me.

“I’m so sorry. I know that it doesn’t make up for any of it, but I promise that I’ll always keep trying to make it right.”

I squeeze her back and nod against her head.

“Let’s get rid of them.”

She nods and lets me go, and we head back to where my friends are still facing off against my parents.

“Callie is staying, but you can leave,” I tell them and I watch as their eyes widen and their nostrils flare.

They were not expecting that and they’re not happy with the news.

“Absolutely not. Both of you, get in the car. Now!” my father snaps, and I shake my head, my hand squeezing around Callie’s.

Gavin takes my free hand and squeezes, urging me on.

“We’re done with you.”

With that, I turn, taking Callie and Gavin with me. Hudson opens the restaurant doors and we all file inside, leaving my parents standing on the sidewalk, fuming.

As soon as the door is locked behind us, I turn to Gavin and wrap my arms around his neck.

“I’m so proud of you,” he says as I cling to him.

“Me too,” Madelyn says, and I smile as she wraps her arms around Gavin and me.

I laugh when Flynn, Sutton, Teller, Iris, Arlo, Lyla, and Hudson all join in. We pull back and I see Callie standing there, looking unsure.

I’m still not sure about all of this either, but I don’t regret inviting her to stay. Maybe we can finally fix our relationship and even be friends now that our parents aren’t here to mess it up.

I look over Gavin’s shoulder and smile as they slam the car doors and squeal off down the road.

“Guys, I want to introduce you to someone. This is my sister, Callie. Callie, this is my new family.”

Everyone grins at that, and I take Gavin’s hand again as we head over to the table that’s been set up.

“Hey,” Gavin says, stopping me before I can sit down.

Everyone else is still introducing themselves to my sister and so we have a moment of privacy.

“I’m alright,” I tell him before he can ask and he smiles.

“I know you are. You’re so strong. Your parents never stood a chance,” he says and I warm at his words.

“Thanks. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“Yes, you could have.”

I feel tears sting the backs of my eyes and I squeeze his hand.

“I love you, Record,” he says and I suck in a sharp breath, staring at him with wide eyes.

“What?” I choke out.

“I love you. I know that we haven’t been dating long, but I know how I feel about you.”

“How?” I blurt out and he grins.

“You were cursed with such a big heart. I couldn’t help but fall in love with you, Rec.”

I can’t hold the tears back then, he reaches up, helping me brush them away.

“I love you too,” I admit, and he grins.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. How could I ever not love my sexy mechanic?”

He laughs at that, pulling me into his arms and I go gladly.

This right here, this is my home. I feel safe and loved when I’m in his arms and I know that he’s right, we haven’t known each other long, but I know how I feel with him. He’s it for me.

It’s crazy to think that if I hadn’t have broken down here, I may have never met.

Thank God for curses.

NINE



Gavin

FIVE YEARS LATER...

“WHERE’S RECORD AND CALLIE?” Lyla asks as soon as she opens the door and I roll my eyes.

“They’re coming right behind me,” I assure her.

She nods, smiling down at where my daughter, Ivy, is fast asleep in her car seat.

“Did she just fall asleep?” she asks.

I nod. “Yeah, on the way over here.”

She waves me inside and I follow her through the house and onto the back deck. It’s the last day of summer and everyone decided to get together for a barbeque. We’re over at Lyla and Hudson’s place since he was doing most of the cooking, but I can’t complain. They live right on the water and their house is huge, so there’s more than enough room for all of us.

“Hey, man,” Flynn says as I set Ivy’s car seat down in the shade on the deck.

“Hey, how’s it going?”

He's got a kid half asleep on his shoulder and I smile as she starts to drool on his shirt.

"Pretty good. You're the last to arrive. Where's your better half and Callie?" he asks, and I grin.

I married Record four years ago. I knew that she was the one for me after our day together breaking the curse, but Record had a lot of memories and other things to work through. The first summer she was here and living with Callie was pretty rough for her. She's been in therapy ever since her parents left town, and that's actually where she is right now.

Sometimes she and Callie do group therapy, both of them trying to work through the trauma of their childhood. They've both come a long way. Callie went to cosmetology school and works at the salon over in Lilac Harbor. She lives there with her husband. She actually just got married last year and had Record as her maid of honor.

Both sisters cut off their parents and have only grown closer over the last five years. I couldn't be prouder of her, of both of them actually. They've both come so far from when I first met them, but I know that it hasn't been easy for either of them, especially Record. So many things that her parents and sister told her, or rather blamed on her, had to be untangled.

She opened up to me when we were dating more, and every time she did, I would hold her while she cried and reassured her that she did nothing wrong. There were still times when she would try to pull away from me because she was convinced that she was going to hurt me, or rather the curse was. It was hard to see her beat herself up, and I vowed to kill her parents if they ever came near her again.

They haven't. I think that they got the message the last time that they were here because they haven't tried to reach out since. Last we heard of them, they had lost their house and had left Michigan and headed south. Neither girl tried to find out where they went. They were both just happy to be done with them.

I was worried that their lack of a bond or connection would hurt Record, but she's made a new family here, one who loves and supports her no matter what. Callie has become her biggest cheerleader and I know that it means a lot to Record.

There are still times when Record blames herself or stresses about the curse. The first time that I got hurt fixing a car when she was around was a big one, but we've worked on it a lot in the last five years, and now she seems to be better.

The trauma and lies that her family put her through took a while to untangle, but she's happy now and an amazing mother to our little girl.

Ivy stirs in her car seat and I move to unbuckle her as the front door opens and Record's familiar blue hair comes into view. Callie is right behind her, and I stand and give a small wave as they head my way.

"Hey," I greet my wife, and she grins at me.

"Hey, sorry I'm late."

"We just got here too," I tell her. She leans up to kiss me.

Ivy reaches for her right away and I let Record take her from my arms.

"How's my little baby?" she coos at Ivy and I smile as I watch them interact.

Record is exactly the type of mom that she deserved, that we all deserve. She's patient and loving. She would do anything for our girl and for me, and I know that I'm damn lucky to have her as my wife.

"Did you miss Auntie Callie?" Callie coos at Ivy and she laughs, smacking her hands together.

"That's a yes then, huh?" Record says with a laugh.

"Want me to take her?" Callie asks Record, and she kisses Ivy's head before she passes our baby to her sister.

We watch them head down the back porch steps to the beach to join our friends and I pull her into my side more as

we follow slowly.

“Your mom called me on the way over here. They’re thinking about putting an offer in for a house here in town.”

I nod. My parents love Record, Callie too, and ever since we got married, they’ve been talking about moving closer to us. Once we had Ivy, they talked about it a more, so I’m not surprised that they’re finally going to do it.

“That will be nice. They can watch Ivy for us and we can go out for a date night,” I say, nuzzling her neck, and she beams at me.

“Uh, we can watch her too!” Lyla interrupts.

I kiss the top of Record’s head before we turn to face her friends.

“Yeah! We should set up some weekly or biweekly babysitting routine so that we can all get a little break,” Sutton says and I can already see her starting on the project in her head.

“Sounds like a plan,” I say as I lead Record over to where Callie and Ivy are sitting at the patio table.

I pull out a chair for her, and she smiles as she takes a seat. Ivy is busy looking around the backyard, her eyes wide and locked on the water. We both think that she’s going to be a swimmer because she’s always absolutely fascinated by it.

We actually just put an offer in for a house a few doors down from Lyla and Hudson. We probably won’t hear back for a few days, but I think that we have a real shot of getting it.

It will be nice to be close to our friends, and I know that both of my girls want to live by the water.

Record started her art classes the first summer that she was here and they were a huge hit. She loved working with the kids and creating new class plans or pieces of art. We ended up going up to Sault Ste. Marie for some of the craft festivals and she sold some of her pieces there as well.

Once the summer was over, I taught her how to paint cars and she loved it. She has a schedule now where she does three art classes a week, usually at night, during the school year, and helps me out at the shop an additional two days a week.

The mechanic shop has taken off since she joined. I'm more organized, and with her doing bodywork, I can focus on the engines. We ended up hiring someone a few months before Ivy was born, and I'm glad that we did. We could use all of the help that we can get now that our little one is here.

"Who's ready to eat?" Hudson calls, and Lyla grins as she holds up a bowl of potato salad.

"I'll make you a plate," I tell Record as she takes Ivy back from Callie.

"Thanks."

"Anything for my best girls," I say, giving both of them a kiss before I stand to help my friends.

I was always the loner, the one who was happy to get his hands dirty. I never thought that I would have a wife or a kid. No one ever really interested me.

Not until I met Record.

From that first meeting, I was intrigued, and that only grew with each day that I spent with her.

Now I'm cursed with an amazing wife who is smart and strong and loving. One who gave me a beautiful daughter and who makes me laugh like no one else. One who is my partner in everything, who truly is my better half.

It's quite the curse, and I thank the universe every day that she cursed me.

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