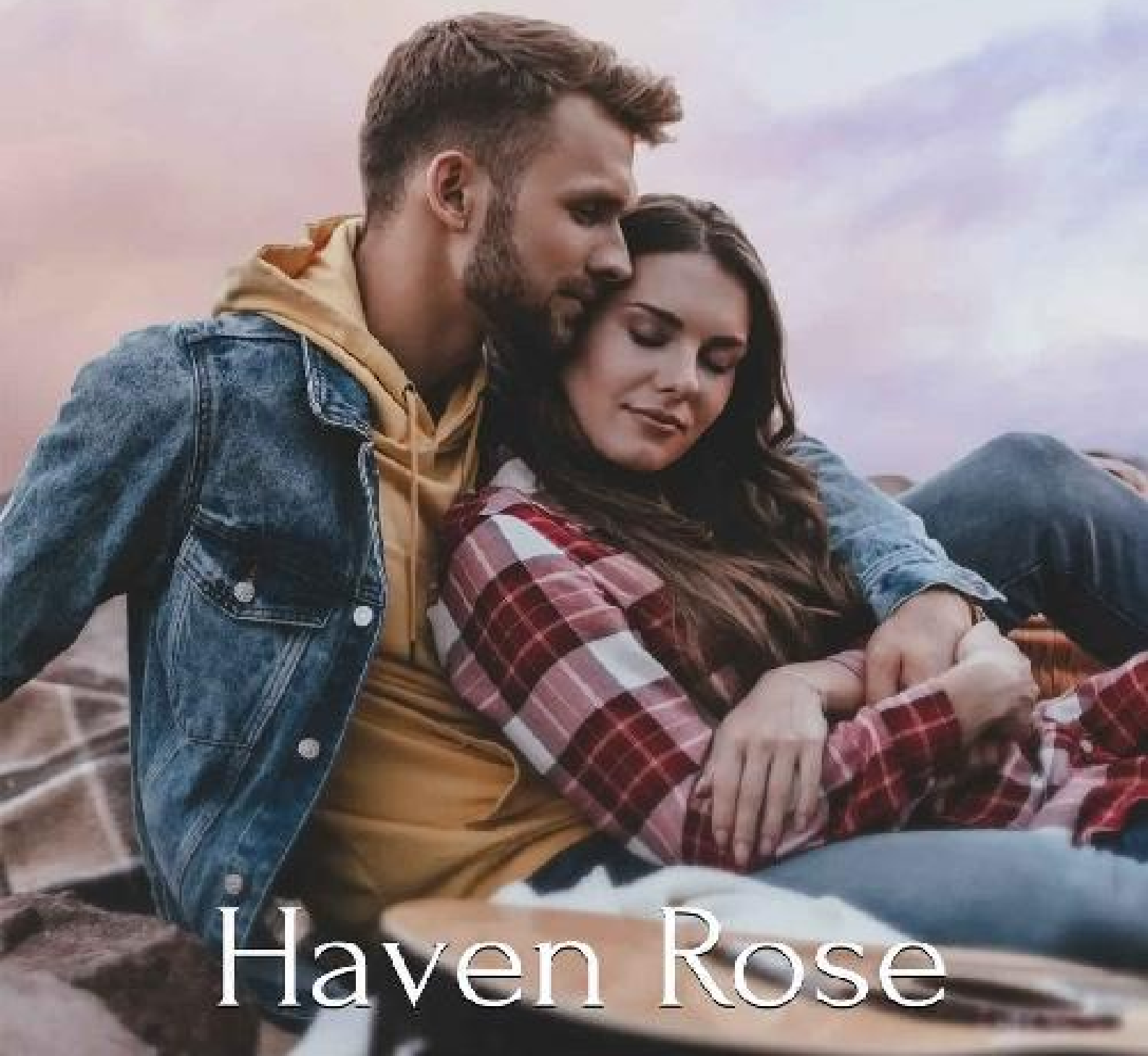




Between the Lines



Haven Rose

BETWEEN THE LINES

Sweetville, Season Two, Book One

HAVEN ROSE



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND DEDICATION

To my readers, I couldn't do this without you. *mwah*

They both moved to Sweetville looking for a new beginning...

After the painful loss of her mother, Molly Dawson resigned herself to being single for the rest of her days. Knowing the ailment can be genetic, Molly doesn't want to put someone through the same suffering if she should get it, too. However, she meets the man who seems created for her, and he's determined to make her see that.

Personal happiness wasn't for Corbin Ogden, but even though his own parents hadn't wanted him, he's content with his life. That is until he sees his soulmate and realizes he's merely been waiting for her. Then she friend zones him, and he needs to prove to her that he's all in, whether in sickness or in health.

Chapter One

.....
MOLLY
.....

January 3rd...

My sister, Lana, and I watch as the men place the last box in the moving van and give us a nod before getting in the front and taking off. “If only our grief could be packed up and taken away as easily,” I muse, making Lana sigh.

“If only,” she echoes.

“Are we doing the right thing?” I ask her. Yes, I’m the oldest, but we’re a team, and our decisions are made as such.

“It’s not the *wrong* thing,” she replies. To most, as in those who don’t know her as well as I do, it would seem non-committal, when in truth, she’s just as confused and unsure as I am.

“Mom always said Sweetville was magical.” She spent a few weeks in the small town every summer when she was younger, though her visits stopped when her grandmother passed. During her time there, however, she’d become close to a resident around her age named Ella. They kept in contact as much as possible, and Mom even resumed her trips when she could as we got older.

“Uncle Warren and Aunt Ella are excited to see us,” Lana reminds me. That’s an understatement. We haven’t seen them in years – too many of them, to be honest – because life got in the way, as it so often does. We did speak via phone and video calls frequently, maintaining the relationship that started when we were kids.

When mom got sick, they didn't hesitate to do what they could to help, including being here whenever they could. Following Mom's funeral, Aunt Ella stayed with us for fourteen days, running interference as needed, giving us time to process everything, and so on. The three of us provided mutual comfort as we mourned the loss of such a beautiful woman, inside and out.

The past couple weeks she's been hinting, then flat out saying, we should move there. Not to start over because that would mean essentially erasing the life we had before. Instead, she told us to think of it as a different chapter.

Lana and I had liked that, so we'd began making preparations. It took time to sell the house, decide what to take with us, what to leave, etc. This is the last step, and the first.

An ending *and* a beginning.

****Corbin****

“What about an exchange program of sorts?” My fraternal twin, Ashton suggests. I shudder at the thought of returning to high school and tell her that. “Don't be obtuse.”

“I would never,” I respond. “I'm more *acute*.” She rolls her eyes, fake gagging. “What?” I ask innocently. “That was punderful.”

“Anyway,” she interjects, completely ignoring my awesomeness, “we need more people in this town.”

“Elvin and Buttercup have been doing a great job of that, thanks to their lodge.”

She nods, conceding my point, but she's not done. “But they're temporary.”

“Sis, the reason behind your idea has merit.”

Her eyes narrow, getting what I'm implying. “Just not the idea itself.”

“Ash, in order to have this program in the spirit behind it, you need to have something – or someone, in this case – to exchange.”

“Like take a penny or leave a penny. You can’t do both at the same time.”

“Which we’d essentially be attempting to do. Get one, give one.”

“I did not see that flaw in my plan.”

“Let’s put a pin in that for now. Instead, I’m curious as to what brought this on.”

She shrugs, but I know better. This isn’t an impulse; she’s been thinking about it. “There’s been a rash of coupledom lately.”

“It’s not contagious,” I chuckle.

“Seems like it,” she mumbles, which I can’t exactly deny. People have been falling left and right. “And I must be immune.” Ahh. There it is, as is danger if I don’t handle this correctly. I know how to comfort my sibling, I’ve been doing that forever and vice versa, yet discussing her potential love life, or lack thereof in her opinion, is not something I want to do. And I’m sure she’d feel the same if our roles were reversed. “So are you.” Okay, maybe not.

“If I put my fingers in my ears and begin la-la-laing, that wouldn’t save me from this discussion, would it?”

She smacks my arm, telling me to man up. “Our business is a success.” This is true. “Our personal lives, not so much.” Again, she’s not wrong.

“What do you suggest? It’s not as if this town has a Find a Sweetie dating app.” I see her eyes light with excitement, causing me to immediately flick off the switch, figuratively speaking. “No,” I block her brewing plan. “Hell no.”

Putting on an air of innocence, she asks, “What?”

“Doesn’t work on me, kid,” she growls at me calling her that since mere minutes separate us. “I know you better than anybody.”

“Think about the possibilities,” she urges.

“The possible catastrophes,” I scoff.

“I’m clearly the fun one,” she taunts. I just stare at her, waiting. “Fine,” she pouts. “Doesn’t change that I feel like I’m, *we’re*, missing out.” I nod in sympathy, surprising her. “You, too?”

“Kinda hard not to,” I admit. “That being said, this isn’t something we can force, Ash. It has to happen naturally.”

“Well, it needs to hurry it’s ass up then.”

Chapter Two

MOLLY

January 4th...

“I can’t breathe,” I croak.

“Ditto,” Lana concurs. This is because we’re both currently being squeezed by Aunt Ella, my face smushed against one shoulder, Lana’s the other.

“Sorry,” she apologizes as she eases her hold on us.

“Guess you’re happy to see us,” Lana jokes.

“Always,” Aunt Ella agrees, “though I wish it was for a different reason.” Us, too. We fall silent, taking a moment to remember what, *who*, we lost. I’m not sure which of us recovers first, or if it’s mutual, but we take a step back, each wiping the tears from our cheeks, not bothering to hide that we’re just doing that. There’s no point trying to pretend we aren’t still heartbroken.

“Ladies,” Uncle Warren calls from the porch, providing a much needed interruption before we get too maudlin. We’ve done that enough, and I’m sure we’ll continue to do so for quite some time, yet being reunited is cause for celebration.

Even if one of us is missing.

But, as mom loved to say, when times are hard, you just put a foot in front of the other and move forward. Granted, she didn’t create that comforting nudge, but the origins aren’t what matter. The sentiment is.

And, as I always considered her brilliant, I decide to follow her advice yet again.

“Your rooms are ready,” Aunt Ella informs us as we follow her and Uncle Warren inside after exchanging hugs with him that are just as tight as his wife’s were.

“With the usual mints on the pillows,” Lana teases.

Uncle Warren laughs, then does so even harder when Aunt Ella smacks his ass for that, causing me to jokingly cover my eyes when she looks at me and screech, “Impressionable eyes here, people. We don’t need to see that.”

Lana, playing along, raises her arm, extends it, and acts as if she’s feeling her way as her other hand blocks her vision. “I can’t risk seeing that a second time. I think I might be scarred for life now.”

“And the Oscar goes to…” Aunt Ella sasses, “the Dawson sisters.” Then she cups her palms around her mouth and begins imitating the “crowd” going wild.

I glance at Uncle Warren and see him watching her in awe. Not because of her silliness, though I’m sure that’s part of it, but with adoration. My heart squeezes, a different kind of pain gripping it this time, though it’s no less a form of mourning.

I used to dream of finding what they have, what my mom was robbed of, until it faded as I got older, my hopes dashed with each dating failure. Eventually, I stopped trying, choosing instead to focus on my professional life and my hopes of becoming an author. And I was doing a good job of it, the words flowing, my inventory of stories to publish when I was ready building to a respectable number. Fine, it was two, but I still stand by it. Mom rooted for me, let me bounce plots off her and encouraged me to publish, whether it be traditionally or on my own.

Then she got sick and I spent as much time as I could tending to her, *being* with her, as did Lana. After we lost her, I couldn’t bear to write. It just wasn’t the same once I couldn’t share it with her.

And it wasn’t just me impacted on that level. Lana was as well. Her joy of cooking, something she and mom did

together, was gone. Watching someone fade, an integral piece of who you are, *why* you are, changes you.

As does learning what took her can be genetic.

I placed my hopes of meeting my forever in a box, locked it up tight, and resigned myself to being single. It was easier that way, just in case Mom passed down more than the color of her eyes to me and her high cheekbones to Lana. I can't risk putting somebody through the pain my sister and I endured.

I'd rather be alone for the rest of my days, no matter how long or short that may be, than do that to the man who entrusts his heart to me.

Chapter Three

CORBIN

January 5th...

Some would find opening numerous boxes, categorizing the contents, and putting them on the appropriate shelves tedious. I am not one of those people. This place is my dream, mine and Ashton's, and the necessary steps to ensure it remains a success are a gift. Regardless of how tired we may be at the end of a shift, how hard we work to bring in new customers, keep those we already have, and attempt to think up fresh ideas. That's all part and parcel of it. Which means in order to love the outcome, we have to feel the same about what goes in to it.

Granted, on mornings when it's a struggle not to throw my alarm across the room and my blankets seem determined to keep me in bed, that isn't always easy to remember. Perhaps if I had somebody lying next to me, the woman I'd be building this all for, my purpose to become financially stable so that I could take care of a family...

But I don't. It's just me and my sister. Has been for years. Even when our paternal grandparents so kindly – insert sarcasm – took us in after learning of our existence when we were ten, we were still alone.

Our parents, and I use that term loosely, created us in a drunken and drugged haze. When our dear mother realized she was carrying not one but two babies, she tried to extort, err get support, from our father, but he was as useless as she was. Seeing no monetary gain for herself, she decided to rid herself of her problems as soon as she could. Which she did shortly

after having us. The ink had barely dried on our birth certificates before we were sent to foster care.

Thankfully, they didn't split us up, though attempts had been made to. The longest those few separations lasted were a day. Within twenty-four hours whichever twin had been taken, they'd be returned with a thanks but no thanks speech. The couples couldn't handle the constant screaming, the inability to soothe. Nothing worked until we were once more in proximity with our other half. The potential adopters would stare in shock, stunned at the sudden quiet coming from us. When it happened a third time, our caretakers decided to test a theory, which we were later told about. Ashton had been taken upstairs while another woman stepped on the porch with me and went so far as the sidewalk. Our ear-splitting cries began almost immediately.

That was the end of that, and since no one appeared to be interested in taking on twins, we stayed there until our grandparents were told their wayward son had children. I do give them credit for finding us and doing what they needed to in order to take us with them. If only it had actually *felt* like a home. If only it had actually *felt* like they took us because they wanted to, not due to it being expected of them. Yeah, we'd accidentally overheard that revelation when they thought we'd gone to sleep. We had, but the noise from below woke us up, their dinner guests not bothering to temper the volume of their voices.

“For appearances' sake,” Grandmother Elaine had confided in her closest “friends,” not realizing that's exactly the same reason why the others aligned themselves with them – or she did and didn't care since they did the same – “we couldn't very well let our own blood be a part of the system. What would everyone think?” She asked, putting a hand to her heart as if the very thought of the gossip that would entail was enough to give her palpitations. From that point on, Ashton and I accepted our roles in their lives and counted down until we hit eighteen and could leave them behind.

Trust me, they were just as eager for that milestone as we were. Hell, they essentially bank rolled our escape, offering a

nice chunk to cover our expenses until we could find jobs. They paid so little attention to us they had no clue Ashton and I had been working since we were sixteen, had earned scholarships to college, and never intended to see them again.

When we left, hugs and well wishes were not exchanged. Instead, our grandfather gave a tip of his head, the greeting he'd share with a stranger passing by, then Ashton and I walked to the car we'd purchased with our earnings and drove off. Our grandmother was inside celebrating, err enjoying a cup of tea – no doubt liberally sprinkled with her choice of liquor – and didn't even bother giving us that stilted goodbye.

Ashton and I agreed we wouldn't touch the cash from them, and we stuck to that. Not once did we dip in to it, and trust me, there were many times we should have, but we couldn't bring ourselves to do it.

However, when we decided to move to Sweetville on a whim and finally open the bookstore we'd always wanted to, we thought it only fitting that they provide the start up. Within three years, we'd reimbursed every cent they'd given us and put it back in the account, then proceeded to forget it ever existed. Perhaps there will come a day we figure out what we should do with it, but that time is not now nor the foreseeable future.

“Stop lollygagging and get back to work,” my sibling teases.

“I beg your pardon,” I retort with a smirk. “I am clearly dilly dallying.” Ashton laughs, then begins helping me in my tasks. She's such a good sister. And I tell her so.

“I'm the only one you have, doofus.”

“That we know of,” I mumble.

She gives me a sharp glance, and I see the moment the truth of my statement hits her. “I hadn't thought of that.” Then she whispers, “Do you really think we have another out there?”

“I honestly don't know,” I tell her. “And it's a question we may never get an answer to.” Once more, she's quiet and we

get back to work, the silence not in the least uncomfortable. Even when she and I aren't speaking out loud, we can do so almost telepathically. Go twin bond.

"Our parents were shitty," she exhales, as if rushing to get it out as quickly as possible. As if even thinking about them is more than they deserve.

"They were." We've never met them, yet it's a statement I can agree to without any qualms of labeling them as such.

"Are we like them?"

"In what way?"

"Neither of us have had any luck dating." This is true. I gave up trying quite a few years ago, as did she. "What if we're tainted due to who we are?"

"Not possible," I reassure her. She's clearly confused by my confidence in this fact, so I explain, "What if that's precisely *why* we haven't?"

"Normally I can follow your train of thought, but you lost me."

"We know what we came from, who, and how. I'd say those three things would make us do whatever we could to be as unlike them as possible."

It clicks. "So, instead of just settling for Mister or Miss Right Now as they did, we're waiting until we find our respective forever?" I touch my nose as if we're playing charades, letting her know she nailed it. Ashton nods, a smile taking over her face, one I know almost as well as I do my own. Satisfied, she breaks down another box, then grabs the stack that's accumulated and heads toward the back. I know she's going to the alley behind the rear of our shop to throw them in the recycling bin next to the dumpster. Every business along this section has them.

With that chore done, I give a look around the place, then move to the door and flick the sign to open. On Mondays, we start a little later, using the earlier hours to take care of administrative necessities and inventory. Since it's usually our slowest time, it works well. Normally, our only other

employee, a high school senior that's worked for us since last year, Winnie Barker, would be here, but school is back in session, so her schedule has been changed to accommodate it.

As customers begin coming in, Ashton and I recognizing all of them, I let my mind wander. It skips from topic to topic, nothing holding its interest until it lands on my joke about the dating app.

It's not a bad idea as it would be nice to broaden the potential for all the residents here hoping to find love. But it doesn't feel like it's a step I should take myself. It feels... wrong. Which makes no sense, yet it's true nonetheless.

That sticks with me as I complete purchases, talk with friends as they stop in, and eat lunch on the bench across the street. It doesn't fade until I stand to return to the store and literally bump into a woman I've never seen before.

One would think I had but simply couldn't remember doing so, but there's two faults with that logic. First, this is a small town, so whether you converse or not, you've met or seen everybody at least once. Second, I would never forget this beauty.

Nor the sadness that envelopes her.

"Hey, man," Declan Butler greets me, clueing me in that she's not alone.

Without removing my eyes from hers, as if our gazes are locked in place, I return his salutation. "Hey, Dec." His mom, Ella, runs the local diner, appropriately named Ella's Eats. By itself, that could account for how well we've come to know the Butler family as Ashton and I spend a lot of time there as we enjoy eating, but the cooking it ourselves aspect, not so much. Add in that Dec runs Tap That, the bar that also serves dinner – Ella's establishment only doing breakfast and lunch – and it's fair to say a good portion of our income becomes theirs.

Jokingly, of course. The low cost of living, hell, everything in Sweetville, was a major perk in us choosing this as our new

home base. When you're starting over, personally and professionally, every penny counts.

Dec either notices that I can't quit staring at his companion or the manners no doubt instilled in him by his parents kick in and he quickly makes the introductions. "Corbin, this is Molly. She's my," then he glances at her, smirking when she shrugs in response, "mom's best friend's oldest daughter."

I extend my hand, the five seconds before she takes it feeling like the longest of my life, then her skin touches mine and I know I'd wait forever just for that slightest contact. "Hi, Molly. I'm your mom's best friend's youngest son's friend." She laughs, and I sense Dec watching me, can almost feel his curiosity at my behavior, but I ignore him. He's a smart man, and a happily married one, so he'll figure it out. "Are you visiting?"

"My sister, Lana, and I recently moved here." It's on the tip of my tongue to ask, but I don't. Dec shaking his head is proof I made the correct choice. At some point, I'd like to know her story, and hopefully she'll give it to me of her own accord. Right now, in the middle of the sidewalk with the lunch crowd returning to their respective jobs, and Dec standing next to her, is not the time.

"I'd offer to show you the sights, but I'm thinking you have that covered," I muse with a tilt of my chin to indicate Dec. "So, instead, I'll invite you on a personal tour of my own slice of the town."

"Which would be?"

"The Little Bookshop." I see the interest at my response, and can't resist engaging her further, not ready for this to end. "Are you a fan?"

Molly cocks her hip, her eyes lighting for a fraction as she asks, "Of you or books?" Is she *teasing* me? Is this flirting? I vote yes for both. Answering her own query, she leans a bit closer and mock whispers, "Getting there and of course."

"I think I'm gonna be sick," Dec mutters, causing Molly to reach over and smack him upside his head.

“What the heck, Mol?”

“You had it coming and you know it. Besides, I’m allowed to as your honorary cousin.”

“I’m revoking your privileges,” he pouts.

“You have no veto powers over this. Aunt Ella, Nora,” that would be his wife, “and Loretta,” his older brother, Thomas’, spouse, “gave me and Lana carte blanche where you and Tommy are concerned.”

“That is so uncool,” Dec states. “I’m gonna request a new family.”

“Good luck with that,” she retorts, not in the least fazed by Dec. Yeah, she clearly knows him well and doesn’t take his crap.

“Milady,” I interrupt with a flourish, taking a bow, then straightening.

She glances at Dec, and he nods. “You’re safe with him.”

“But am I with her?” I tease.

“No promises,” Dec responds, giving me a knowing look, then he walks away whistling.

I have a feeling my initial thought of finding a justice of the peace won’t suffice, so I ask if she ate. “I just finished my lunch, but I’d be happy to keep you company if you’re hungry.”

“You can’t leave Uncle Warren and Aunt Ella’s until your belly is full. It’s against her religion or something.”

“If it’s not, it should be.”

“So, you know I’m a recent transplant. What about you?”

“Ashton and I have been here about five years.”

“And that is...?” She inquires as she attempts to withdraw her arm from where it’s wrapped around my own. I’m taking a wild guess at the reason, an educated one as I’d react the same if she mentioned a man’s name and I didn’t know who, or what, he was to her.

“My twin sister.” The tension in her muscles eases and she allows me to lead the way toward our destination.

As we draw closer, I can almost feel the excitement radiating from her. Oh yeah, this woman is definitely a fan. Once we’re inside, her eyes scan the rows of shelves as her fingers begin skimming the spines that make them up. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say she’s lingering over the section on each containing the author’s name. It’s unusual, but not cause for concern as each reader has their own process and emotions regarding books. Perhaps others have reacted thusly while in here and I’ve never noticed because my attention hasn’t been on them as it is on Molly.

Yet I can’t help but think there’s something more to it and wonder if she’ll ever tell me why.

****Molly****

For so long, I thought I’d eventually see my name prominently displayed in this manner, labeling the story enclosed my creation, knowing, *hoping*, it would bring as much joy to the person reading it as it did to me while writing it.

I didn’t lose my love for reading when Mom passed, but my passion for bringing new worlds to life faded, almost to the point it blinked out of existence. Even the remnant of my drive to do so seemed to evaporate.

Mom wouldn’t want that. In fact, she’d be ticked. I swear, sometimes when I stare at my laptop, willing the words to come, I can hear her tearing me a new one. Urging me to break down the self-erected barrier.

But I’m not ready. I may never *be* ready.

This is not the time, or perhaps I don’t want it to be, to think about this, so I shake off my thoughts and focus on something much more interesting.

Corbin.

And that puts me in quite the quandary. My resolve since learning Mom’s illness could pass to us, and therefore any children we have ourselves, has never wavered. I’d resigned

myself to spending my life alone and had made peace with it. Or thought I had.

Then I literally bump into this man who has me questioning that decision. Am I being a coward by making that choice for somebody else?

I see Corbin smile at me, see his eyes shine when I return it, and realize it's the opposite.

I'm being brave.

Perhaps I can enjoy Corbin's company as a friend? Or at least convincingly pretend I'm content with that status quo. All I know is that from the second he entered my life; I didn't feel as heartbroken.

Can another person, a stranger at that, be an emotional band aid? And is that dishonest to hang around him because of it?

It would be if that's the only reason you wanted to.

Valid point, self.

"This place is great," I tell Corbin. "It's homey. The atmosphere invites the customer to curl up with a good book," then I indicate the various products around me, "which you have a great supply of and indulge in," followed by the offerings of numerous beverages and snacks, "while they do it."

"It was Ashton's idea."

I inform him, "It's a brilliant strategy."

"The goodies were mine," he interjects. "I also rearranged the furniture." I grin at his almost boyish need to be complimented, finding it adoringly charming.

And that scares the crap out of me.

Chapter Four

.....
MOLLY
.....

January 7th...

The fight or flight instinct is a bitch, and I fear the latter turned me into one when it kicked in, causing me to almost literally flee the bookstore. I felt Scooby Doo-ish in my haste to leave, like my feet were spinning as I was trying to run out of there.

It'd be funny if it wasn't so sad.

I didn't even get a chance to meet his sister, though he clearly wanted me to. And knowing how important mine is to me, I can't help but wonder why he did. Does. I need to apologize, and I will, I'm just not sure how. I don't intend to tell him why I left like I did, at least not completely. I hate half-truths, though. In essence, they're still a lie, yet telling him everything reflects poorly on me.

If Mom knew what happened and what I was thinking, she'd be making chicken noises at this point. Calling me out on my behavior. And she'd be right.

She always was.

Deciding to seek out somebody known for giving good advice, I stop at the diner to see Aunt Ella. I don't even need to say anything, she just knows I need help. "I'd ask why the long face, but this isn't a bar and you aren't a horse." I snort, knowing that was her plan. Sliding me a glass of lemonade, she wants to know, "What's going on, Molly-moo?" The nickname sounds insulting, but it's said with utter, or udder to pun, affection. When Lana and I were younger, Uncle Warren

and Aunt Ella had come for a visit. While they were there, he'd told us we could be anything we wanted to. Me, having just seen a cow for the first time when Mom had taken us to a local farm to see the animals, had decided that's what I wanted to be. I then proceeded to speak only in moos, adding inflections and everything.

Or so I've been told. Aunt Ella even purchased a cute little outfit that resembled a cow and sent it to me after they'd returned home. Mom had then taken a picture of me in it. Embarrassingly enough, said photo is still prominently displayed on Uncle Warren and Aunt Ella's fridge.

I confess my shame, and she merely pats my hand, stating that it isn't that bad. Raising a brow at her, I ask, skepticism clear, "Really?"

"It's up there," she admits, "but it can be fixed."

"Do tell, oh wise one," I plead. "I want to make this right."

Leaning her hip against the counter, she scans the booths, making sure she's not needed, then inquires, "Do you like Corbin?" Unable to give voice to just how much I do, even though we spent perhaps thirty minutes together, I nod. "I have what you need. Give me a few minutes, okay?" She doesn't wait for my answer, already knowing I won't leave until she excuses me, then heads to the kitchen. I hear her talking to Eddie, the cook, except I can't make out what she's saying.

It isn't long before she returns with a couple to go bags, and thrusts them at me. "What's in here?"

"An apology."

Lifting it, I notice there's some weight to it. "That's quite heavy."

"I'm calling it The Molly Mistake Fixer."

"I'd be offended if it wasn't appropriate."

"This just might work," she mutters.

"What?"

“I said I need to get back to work.” I side-eye her, knowing what I heard the first time and what she just said do not mesh. But I’m not calling her on it because I love her...and she’s helping me.

After a quick pep talk while sitting in my car, then repeating it when it didn’t seem to get through, I grab the ‘please forgive me peace offering’ and head inside.

“Hello, and welcome to The Little Bookshop. Let me know if I can help you,” a polite voice greets me. Unfortunately, it’s not the deep one I was hoping to hear.

“Actually,” I begin as I go to the counter, “you can. I’m looking for Corbin.”

She stares at me, her gaze appraising and intuitive. “You’re her,” she whispers. “No wonder my brother is all ferbuddled.” Mentally, I have Monica from Friends in my head, saying, ‘That’s not even a word,’ while I’m doing a silent fist pump this lovely woman is his sister, and therefore, no threat – right? – but out loud, all I can do is ask, “Excuse me?”

“Oh, I’m sure he will.” I like her confidence. She knows him best, so that has to bode well for me. “He’s in the back. Go get him,” she encourages with a wink.

“Thank you,” I tell her as I leave the package with her name on it with her.

I go the direction she pointed, my grip on the remaining bag tightening, and rap my knuckles on the closed office door. “Ash, why are you knocking, you weirdo?” I smile at the glimpse of how close they are.

“You have three guesses,” I respond, “and we already know the first didn’t count.” He chuckles as he gives me permission to enter. “Opening with a joke is always a good start.”

“Only if I nailed the punchline,” I tack on as I take the chair across from his desk.

“Your timing was impeccable.”

“Today perhaps,” I mumble.

“All right, we’re just inviting that elephant to join us,” he muses.

“Well, it was in the room, so...” I shrug. “But I didn’t bring enough to feed it,” I inform him as I set the goodies in front of him.

He goes to reach for it, and I smack his hand. “You suck at apologizing,” he taunts me.

“This is a new experience for me.”

“You’ve never had to say you’re sorry? And just when I’d convinced myself you weren’t perfect.” He smiles, letting me know he’s messing with me.

“I meant eating humble pie.”

“Another joke? You’re on a roll.”

“In that case...”

****Corbin****

I watch as she begins removing items from the large bag, one clearly from Ella’s Eats, and places them within eyesight. The scent immediately hits my nose, making my stomach growl. I can tell Molly is nervous, as am I, albeit for different reasons.

It shows a person’s true character when they take the initiative to do as she is, especially considering we aren’t really anything to each other...yet. So, her anxiety stems from that. Mine, though, is because I’d had a fitful night, worried I’d scared her off.

“This,” she points to a Styrofoam container, “is chicken noodle soup.”

“But I’m not sick.”

“True, except legend has it that this cures everything that ails you, so I’m hoping that includes my stupidity.”

Wanting to ease her worries over this, I quickly pop the lid off, grab the plasticware Ella included, and dig in. After a few

spoonfuls, I assure her it's erased as if it never happened. Since I'm still hungry, and I'm curious what else she has planned, I want to know, "What's next?"

"Don't rush the process," she scolds me as I finish the soup. Satisfied that I've cleaned my bowl, she picks up a bigger box, one the size of an entrée, and waits for me to peek inside.

"Pancakes? Not what I'd pair with an appetizer of chicken noodle soup."

"Except if that didn't convince you," she removes a sandwich bag from her purse and hands it to me, "I intended to butter you up. Literally." I throw my head back and bust out laughing when she plops packets of said seasoning? condiment? – let's just go with goodness – and a fork and knife down.

"As I enjoy this deliciousness, can we talk?"

"I'd like that."

"Should we start small and baby step to the bigger stuff?"

"Normally, I avoid the latter." She seems ashamed to admit that.

"Me, too," I reassure her, wanting her to know that merely makes us human.

"Which means if you tell me yours, and I return the favor, we negate the information, making it as if it never happened."

"That's not how that works."

"Why not?"

"We're just making our own rules now?"

"Adult privilege."

"Such as eating cake for dinner?"

"You have cake?"

"Focus!" She urges, snapping her fingers in the air.

I would, if it wasn't for the fact her eyes seem to have glazed over. "You're thinking about cake now, aren't you?" I

ask.

“Yes!”

“Want to go get some?” She instantly rises, probably unable to resist the lure of the icing and the spongy goodness it covers, before resuming her seat.

“Rain check?” She pleads. “I have other plans for this.”

“Well?”

“Finish your dinner first.”

I shovel it in, barely tasting it in my haste to see what else she has. “Mahl whon.”

“I’m going to interpret that as all gone.” I nod in agreement, the suspense killing me. It’s why I can’t read thrillers or anything where you have to figure out who the bad guy is. I flip to the end, needing that spoiler ahead of time. When she finally reveals it, I can’t help but stare at it, and her. “It’s a friendship knot.”

“Looks like a pretzel.”

“That’s because you lack imagination.”

“But there’s even mustard for it.” She huffs, apparently frustrated with me. Of course, as my younger sister can attest to, that just makes me behave worse. Yes, I’m like a little child in that regard. Especially with her in this instance. On the surface, she appears calm, unflappable, but now I know better. I get to her. “All right, how does this it’s *knot* a pretzel work?” She snickers at my pun.

“We pull on our respective end...”

“To break it apart and devour it?”

Her foot starts tapping and I stifle a laugh. I’d feel bad if it wasn’t for the smile peeking through her attempt at an impassive expression. “...as we get to know each other, we’re figuratively tightening the friendship bond growing between us.”

Okay, teasing aside, that is cute. Not only the symbolism of it, but the fact she thinks that’s all we’ll be.

Chapter Five

CORBIN

January 14th...

I hear my phone alert me to a text right before lunch, but Ashton beats me to it. Nosy and not in the least afraid to show it, she glances at the screen and reads it out loud.

Future Mrs.: On my way.

“Someone is going to have a *delightful afternoon*,” she teases.

“Eww. You’re my sister. Shouldn’t the mere idea of me doing *that* gross you out? It would if the situation was reversed.” Then I shudder to prove my point.

“Grow up,” she mutters. “It’s not like I want details – ever – but I do want you to be happy. And the smile that hit your face when I told you what it said means the sender, cough cough Molly, is responsible.”

“Your logic is sound,” I agree.

“Stop trying to mind meld me with distractions.”

“That’s not how that works,” I groan, throwing my hands up in the air in mock, okay, a bit real, disgust. “There’s no hope for you. I’m doomed to have a non-nerd sibling. I’ll have to go into hiding, bemoaning the fact you’re,” I glance around before whispering, “*normal*. They’ll ask when I realized this fact and I’ll have to tell the heartbreaking story.” Resting my head in my palms, I pretend sob, then peek through a finger to see if she’s buying it.

She’s not.

Hell, she isn't even watching me. What she is doing is smirking as she stares at our door, giving whoever is standing there a shrug. To add insult to injury, she raises her hands, smacks them together as if she's washing them of me, and states with mirth, "He's all yours."

"Thanks?" Molly hesitantly responds. Leaving peals of laughter in her wake, Ashton makes a speedy retreat, and I turn to face Molly and perhaps a questioning expression as she wonders what the heck she's doing with a weirdo like me. Except, her eyes are dancing, a saying I've never understood until this moment.

Whether Molly realizes it or not, every day the sadness within them fades. Oh, it's not really a discernible amount, more gradual, in my opinion, so many may not notice it. However, seeing as how I spend an inordinate amount of time staring at this woman, using them and her body language to discern her moods, I do.

She told me that she and Lana were raised by their mom as their father had taken off when they were young. I know she got sick and there was nothing the doctors or anybody else could do.

I also know how deeply the loss affected her. And still does.

Molly and Lana came here, to the only family they have left, even if it's not by blood, to start a different chapter in their lives.

Ironic considering Molly had confessed that she'd dreamed of being a writer. I believe a part of her continues to yearn for it, but she's locked it away, as surely as she has the thought of finding happiness.

With me.

With anybody.

Okay, it damn sure would only be with me. I may be a geek on the inside, but my exterior is more fitting of a boxer. Growing up in the system, I learned very quickly how to defend Ashton and myself. When our grandparents took us in,

we just acquired different bullies, those with the financial backing to hide their activities.

So, the warnings about how appearances can be deceiving and not judging a book by its cover? I'm proof they're real.

She hasn't outright said as much about not being open to the possibility of a forever, but I heard it nonetheless. It was in her stressing the friendship in her pretzel knot analogy. In how she's acted as if our going to the movies, eating together, etc., is merely two buddies chilling.

The thing is, she can label this whatever she wants, I know the truth. Whatever she believes I am to her, I'm actually the man she's falling for.

And I'm falling right back.

****Molly****

"You did not!" I exclaim as Ashton rapidly nods, confirming that Corbin, in fact, did. Following our lunch, Corbin had invited me to hang out, suggesting I might enjoy spending some time amongst the books. Left unsaid was the 'with him,' but I heard it nonetheless. And wanted to do just that. It also gave me a chance to really get to know Ashton. Not to mention hear stories about Corbin. "Her first date? That's..."

"Protective? Smart? Cute?" Corbin suggests.

"Overbearing. Insulting. Annoying," Ashton counters.

I snicker and, almost as one – dang twin powers are eerie – two gazes shift to look at me. "What's up?" I ask, feigning nonchalance.

Ashton gives me an indulgent glance, letting me know I didn't pull it off. "I'm not sorry," I inform them after being busted. Then I tip my head at Corbin, mock whispering to Ashton, "He should be, though." She high-fives me for that.

"Hey!" Corbin protests. "You're supposed to be on my side. Friends have each other's backs."

I know I'm the one that keeps stressing that's all we are, all we can be, yet hearing him say it, as if he's accepted and

agreed that I'm right, hurts. "Yeah," I mumble. "Friends do."

Chapter Six

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MOLLY
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January 29th...

“Sister time!” Lana calls as she bounces on my bed at what must be an insane hour because there’s no sunlight streaming through the window across from me.

“Go away,” I mumble as I shove my head under my pillow.

Not to be ignored, Lana rips it, and my covers, off me and begins shaking me. “Wake up. Wake up. Waaaaaaaaake upppppppppp.”

“You’re insufferable,” I complain. Lovingly.

“I’m adorable and you know it,” she corrects me, dramatically fluffing her hair. Until I snag my pillow back from her and thwack her in the face with it. “Oof.”

Of course, knowing me as well as she does, she came prepared for this possibility with her own weapon and returns the favor. Rubbing my nose, I ask, “Why are they so soft at night yet they can pack a wallop during the day?”

“To knock us out so we can sleep later?” She teases.

“I’m supposed to be the older and wiser sibling,” I retort.

“In your defense, you aren’t firing on all cylinders yet.”

“Which is why you’re trying to get me to join you on one of your adventures.”

A sneaky grin is proof I’m correct, not that she’ll verbally admit it. Instead, she deflects. “You’re always so busy lately.”

Okay, that's not deflecting so much as it's the truth. I grimace, and open my mouth to apologize, but she waves it off. "I'm just messing with you. You seem happy and I would never begrudge you that, nor the person who makes you that way."

"Corbin and I are only friends," I protest.

She peers at me, putting her face right in front of mine, and stares. Beginning to feel self-conscious, and trying not to breathe through my mouth because hello, morning breath, I wait to see where she's going with whatever this is. "Perhaps I should let you sleep longer. You're clearly delusional. That's a common sign of lack of rest, right?"

"When I am home, I haven't exactly seen you puttering about."

"I do things."

"Dangerous ones," I state and scold at the same time.

"To each their own," she mumbles as she glances at the door, probably wondering if she can make it. She won't. Yeah, she and I are as close as siblings can be – a bond Corbin and Ashton share – but this is has been a point of contention since our mom passed.

She believes I quit living when mom did. Heck, when she was diagnosed. Whereas I have accused her of seeking out death with her extreme activities.

Neither of us are wrong, nor do we want to acknowledge it. So, we don't. Denial is strong with the Dawson sisters.

Wanting to make amends, and feeling guilty I ruined her good mood, I extend a verbal olive branch. "What's on the agenda? Do I need to write out a quick will?"

She snorts, as I'd hoped. "You just leave everything to me, and since I'll be with you..."

"Got it. Waste of time then."

"But I could survive," she states.

"I go down, I'm taking you with me," I warn her.

“That’s premeditated.”

“Prove it. You’d be the only witness, and you wouldn’t be able to rat me out.”

“She plotting your demise again?” Aunt Ella inquires as she pokes her head in.

“Depends on how much you heard and who you’re asking,” I respond. She laughs, telling us breakfast is ready and to get our butts in gear before it gets cold. No matter how many times we’ve told her she doesn’t need to feed us, it’s as if it goes in one ear and out the other without stopping to register. Uncle Warren conspiratorially whispered that cooking is her love language and we need to accept it.

She turns to leave and, not hearing us moving, informs us, “At least you can both have a full stomach first. I made waffles and strawberry crepes.” To which Lana and I both scramble to our feet and run out of my room, causing Aunt Ella, who is pressed against the wall – knowing full well this would be our reaction – to crack up. “Never fails.” We reach the kitchen, Aunt Ella strolling in behind us whistling, only to see the preparations out, yet no food actually being made. “Set the table, ladies,” she bids us.

Lana and I swing our heads around, trying to decipher what’s going on, when it hits us. “That’s cold-blooded,” I pout.

“Atta girl,” Uncle Warren interjects with a chuckle as he plops a kiss on Aunt Ella’s head. She beams, feeling proud of herself.

“Faster you get those plates out...” she reminds us as she begins pouring the batter. Once more, my sister and I step on it, almost literally as my foot is seconds from being squished under hers as we attempt to go opposite directions to complete our tasks.

“Almost a cartoon moment there,” Uncle Warren laughs, having caught us. We continue with our mission and soon, everything is in place, mere minutes prior to the delicious scents of Aunt Ella’s creations wafting through the room. In almost perfect sync, as if being led by our respective noses, the

three of us take our seats. Each knowing full well if we tried to assist her, she'd figuratively smack our hands. In her defense, the chances the food would actually make it to the table for all to partake are slim.

The woman can cook.

Many hours later, I have a new appreciation for my sister's energy while simultaneously becoming more scared by the lack of regard for her safety. It's not that anything we did was truly dangerous – leading me to believe she only does those when she's alone, yet another cause for concern – it's that there was so much of it.

That's not to say some of it didn't have me wanting to run and hide, and take her with me, yet she's fearless.

Or likes to pretend she is.

I'm leaning toward the latter, to be honest, but I'm not exactly able to talk. I'm not quite living as my true self either.

By the time we're done and make it back, we're tired. However, I'm glad I went. Our excursion tested me in ways I haven't been before.

And I got to do it with one of my most favorite people in the world.

It made me take a step back, reevaluate how I was living – if it could even be called that – and question the choices I made.

At the time, I may have thought I was doing what was best for me, yet I can't help but wonder if my heart, broken by grief, reacted rashly. If I didn't so much as shut *out* people, those not already part of my inner circle, so to speak, but instead, *I shut down*.

With that possibility making a continuous circle through my mind, and unsure if I'm ready to face it, I ask Lana if she wants to have a sleepover.

And perhaps it's her own version of my epiphany currently working inside her own that has her agreeing.

That night, sharing a bed for the first time in years, Lana and I eat junk food, binge Netflix, and giggle about tons of silly stuff. By silent agreement, we lock up the heavy sentiments for a later conversation. But long after the moon has risen and we decide to get some sleep, they reemerge as we lay there, if they ever truly left, stopping each of us from actually getting any.

Chapter Seven

CORBIN

January 31st...

“If you sigh one more time,” Ashton warns as she glares at me. Clearly she’s fed up with my moping. Not that I can blame her. I haven’t exactly been pleasant company and, being not only my sibling but also my business partner, she’s been subjected to a lot of it.

“Give him a cookie,” Winnie suggests. Ashton glances at her in confusion, causing Winnie to shrug and explain, “Who can be grumpy with a cookie in their hand?”

“She makes a good point,” my twin concurs. “And win-win, she and I get them, too.”

“Exactly,” Winnie responds as she resumes inventorying a recent shipment. It won’t fix my issues, but I am hungry. I’ve been off my feed for a bit, since the last time I had lunch with Molly, to be specific.

“We’ve piqued his interest,” Ashton notices with a smile.

I hear the sound of fingers tapping, the buttons making corresponding noises when they’re touched, and Winnie gleefully announces, “Done.”

“Hey,” Ashton protests. “I was going to order them.”

“Only because you wanted the credit for doing so,” Winnie states, sussing out her motives.

“Busted,” I mutter.

“Mind your Ps and Qs,” Ashton scolds me as she removes her cell and begins doing who knows what. Based upon her mischievous grin as she finishes and puts it back in her pocket, I’m not sure I want to be privy to it. These two are up to something, I just can’t find it in me to care right now.

Be careful, Eeyore. I’m coming for your title of saddest creature.

****Molly****

One of Aunt Ella’s waitresses is running late because her car wouldn’t start, so I offered to cover for her until she got here, and give her any wages I made, including tips, while doing so. She thanked me profusely, and tried to persuade me to keep anything I received. I refused, of course, though I let her think otherwise. Aunt Ella agreed to help me get it to Katia with her being none the wiser.

I know when I look back on this later, when I have every fact pertaining to this situation, I’ll recognize the red flags I missed while in the midst of it. Hindsight and all that. Until that kicks in, I think it’s sweet how Aunt Ella is willing to be tricky when it comes to those she cares about. Mom always said she has a heart of gold.

As the breakfast rush ends and the lull before lunch begins, Aunt Ella’s cell chirps, and she begins furiously responding, the speed with which she can do it puts my own to shame. I assume it’s Katia letting her know she’s on her way, or perhaps Uncle Warren, Tommy, Dec, or their respective wives.

“Molly-moo, Katia is five minutes out.”

“That’s good news,” I respond. “She didn’t miss much.”

“Thankfully, it was just a bad battery. Her neighbor picked up a replacement and installed it for her.”

“That was nice of them.”

“Travis is sweet on her,” Aunt Ella whispers. “A feeling she returns.”

“Then why aren’t they a couple?” Oh my gosh. She’s suckered me in. But I have to know.

“He’s career Army,” she answers, as if that explains everything.

“Okay,” I mutter, “not seeing the connection here.”

“He’s worried they’ll get together and then he’ll get deployed.”

“Happens the world over to military families. They make it work.”

“That they do. Unfortunately, he’s letting his fear that he’ll get injured, or worse, while on a mission stop him from being with her.”

“But they love each other. Shouldn’t they enjoy what time they have just in...” I trail off, seeing where she’s going with this and woman enough to admit she got me.

“What was that? Finish that thought,” she urges. Demands.

“...case that’s all they get.” It may have originally been a question, except now it’s a statement. A revelation. A slap me upside my own head realization that I’m an idiot. “Uncle Warren is right.”

“He usually is,” she agrees, “but don’t tell him that. Or that.” Then she grins and asks, “Why is he this time?”

“You are brilliant.”

Now that her target has been acquired and locked in, she sits beside me and takes my hand. “What are you afraid of, child?”

“Becoming ill like mom and leaving people behind,” I whisper.

“My ears are old, Molly. Speak up.” I repeat myself, knowing full well she heard me clearly the first time. She’s making me say it again to prove a point.

“What if I get sick?”

“What if you don’t? You’ve already given yourself the symptoms, diagnosed it, and accepted your death.”

“But Mom...”

“Would be disappointed in you.” I gasp, hurt she’d think that, let alone say it. “Molly, you know I love you and your sister as if you’re my own, as does Uncle Warren, so this is coming from the heart. And I believe it’s something you need to hear.”

“What’s that?” I ask, pushing my initial reaction aside, knowing it must be important or she wouldn’t broach it, especially in a public setting. Though the few remaining customers are keeping to themselves, giving us as much privacy as possible.

“Yes, you are predisposed to having what your mom did. No, it is not a definite that you will, and you have to stop existing – which is exactly what you’re doing – as if it is.” She stares at me, giving me time to weigh her words before proceeding. “Do you reckon your mom regretted having you and Lana?”

“Never,” I vehemently answer, knowing how much Mom cared about us.

“Since she was a teenager, your mom knew this might be her outcome.”

“What?” I screech as my head jerks up to look at her in shock. “How did we not know that?”

“She didn’t want you to. Your mom was the strongest person I’ve ever known. She chose to live as if she wouldn’t get sick *because* she could. She didn’t want to waste a single moment knowing how easily they could be taken from her. If she hadn’t enjoyed every one to the fullest, she would never have had you and Lana. You both were her world and she wouldn’t have changed that, regardless of how hard it was to raise you by herself. You put your life on hold to be with and take care of her, and while that’s admirable and we’re all thankful you got that time with her, it was only supposed to be temporary, Molly-moo.” As I attempt to digest that mind-blowing information, she adds another. “Do you know why she didn’t hate your father, even after he abandoned the three of you?” I tell her I don’t, though I’d always wondered as I

personally loathe the man. “He was the path she needed to take to have her daughters.”

“I don’t...How can...Wow.”

“If you walked away from Corbin, from what you could have in the future, and settled on just being friends with him, would you regret it?”

“Yes,” I reply without hesitation. I didn’t even need to think about it. My response came straight from the heart.

“With that being said, I need a favor.”

“Name it,” I tell her, ready to do whatever she needs as a thank you for helping me see the light.

“I need you to drop off an order for me.” I nod, on board with it. “Box up a dozen cookies and take them to Winnie.” She gives me the breakdown on the variety, talking to me the whole time as I select each and place them in the container. The customer name sounds familiar, but I’ve met a lot of people since Lana and I moved here, so the reasonable explanation is that she was one of them. Besides, it’s not like Aunt Ella is giving me enough time to figure it out. She’s been chatting non-stop since she gave me this assignment.

And when I see the address on the order slip, I know why.

That’s when the clues I missed earlier register. Aunt Ella would do anything for her family, whether they’re under that umbrella by blood or heart. Hugging her, squeezing a little more to let her know how much I appreciate her, I pick up the goodies and walk toward my destiny. My spine is straighter, my shoulders high, and my steps lighter.

It doesn’t long to reach the bookstore, which is good as it doesn’t give me the opportunity to lose my nerve nor this newfound determination. Winnie – yeah, it clicked after seeing where I was going – and Ashton wave when they see me, and grin upon noticing what I’m carrying. I’m not sure which they’re happier about, me or the treats. Thrusting it at them, I ask where Corbin is and Winnie informs me he’s in the office.

“Go get ‘em, girl,” Ashton encourages me. Reaching the door, I prepare to knock, only to realize it’s unnecessary.

Corbin is staring directly at me, as if he sensed my presence.

He grins, the bags under his eyes seeming to disappear as he watches me come inside, shut the door behind me, and go around the desk to stand in front of him. He gets to his feet, starts to speak, but I don't give him a chance. I merely fuse my lips to his, hoping I'm not making a huge mistake.

That he wants me as badly as I do him.

His arms wrapping around me as he yanks me against him, setting me on his lap as he resumes his seat, tell me he does.

We don't come up for oxygen for a long time, neither of us feeling the need to, as if we'd rather breathe each other in. Like he needs me to survive and vice versa.

I press down on him, the pressure it brings to my center setting off sparks inside me.

****Corbin****

“Corbin,” Molly whimpers without removing her mouth from mine, causing me to swallow the sound of my own name. I've never been fond of it, yet it's now my favorite, and I want to hear her say it over and over again. But first...

“Mol, baby, what's going on?” I thrust up, unable to resist to let her know I'm not unaffected, in case she had doubts.

“Not that I'm complaining.”

“I owe you an apology.”

“No, you don't,” I quickly reassure her.

Molly cocks her head, her eyes scanning, *seeing*... What? “You don't even know why.”

“Doesn't matter,” I tell her. “Whatever it is, you had your reasons and I respect them.”

“Are you sure you're real?”

I don't know how I'm supposed to answer that, or even where she's going with it, so I go with the truth. “Yes.”

“Ironic considering I feel like a fake,” she mumbles. Intent on disagreeing with that statement, I stop when she places a

finger on my mouth to stop me. “It’s true,” she reiterates. “I told you my mom was sick.” I nod, squeezing her in sympathy, knowing how badly it must still hurt. “As you can imagine, it was difficult to watch her fade, heartbreaking to know nothing could fix her.” She takes a deep breath, seeming almost guilty as she admits, “It was a relief when she passed.” Tears rim her eyes, eventually slipping free and rolling down her cheeks as she asks, “Does that make me a horrible daughter?”

“No. It makes you a wonderful one.” She clearly doesn’t see what I do because she’s too close to it. “It meant her pain was over while yours was just beginning. That’s not relief, baby. That’s love.”

“I like when you call me baby,” she informs me as she nuzzles against my shoulder.

Chuckling despite the seriousness of our conversation, I press a kiss to the top of her head, not even questioning how seamlessly we morphed from friends to this, and tell her, “Get used to hearing it then.”

“Aww,” comes from the doorway, Molly and I are so lost in what’s happening that we didn’t hear the telltale squeak it usually emits. I really should oil that. Molly snickers as we both glance up, finding Ashton and Winnie standing there. The latter, realizing they now have our attention, begins clapping.

“Slacker,” Ashton calls me as she taps her watch, reminding me I’m technically supposed to be working. Seeing as how I spend a lot of time here, and she knows it since she does, too, I’m fully aware she’s messing with me. “Might as well call it a day and go...somewhere else,” she suggests with a wink.

“Yeah, you crazy kids,” Winnie tacks on, “you’ll only slow us down. Us adults have stuff to do.” I quirk a brow at that. “Fine,” she concedes. “We just don’t want to see this. You two don’t pay me enough for therapy sessions.”

I nudge Molly, my hand caressing her ass before sliding it to her waist, and ask, “Should we listen to these yahoos and get out of here?”

“Like a date?” She gulps.

“One step at a time,” I whisper to her. “It’ll be just as it was before, two people spending time together. We don’t need to label it quite yet, if you aren’t ready.”

From the corner of my eye, I notice Ashton and Winnie making their exit, leaving me and Molly alone. “We’ve been dating all along, haven’t we?” I don’t respond, taking her question as rhetorical. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“You needed a friend.”

“But you clearly needed more than that.”

I shrug, then take her hand and stare in her eyes. “You come first.” She looks at me with hope, as if she’s not only hearing my truth, she’s seeing it as well, and it’s opening up possibilities she never let herself believe in. So, wanting her to know I’m not going anywhere, I add, “Always.”

Chapter Eight

CORBIN

February 1st...

After we left at Ashton and Winnie's urging – let's call it what it was, they practically pushed us out – we went to the park, a possibility thanks to an unseasonably warm winter. Neither of us said so, but we wanted the public area as a buffer. The bench we chose afforded us privacy, yet it ensured we also maintained the distance required as others could see us.

Overkill? Perhaps. Yet it's as if now that we've acknowledged our mutual feelings, and the kiss she laid on me seemed to ignite our passion, we're chomping at the bit to act on it. Something I have no problem following through on, but only when we're both comfortable with that step.

In the meantime, I'll enjoy every freaking second I get with her, as I have since the beginning. Today will be our first official date. Molly's idea. She beat me to the invitation by like three seconds, and was a little smug about it. I let her have her fun, even enjoyed her victory dance, because all I cared about was being with her.

We'd stayed up late last night, talking. Purging emotions that had been simmering for a while. Mostly hers. She admitted, after coming to the realization herself, that while she'd accepted that she was losing her mom, she'd never actually processed it. Nor the fact that she and/or Lana could suffer from the same plight.

That's what had her running scared from what she knew we could be. What she hadn't understood was that *if* she becomes sick, I'll hurt – as will everyone she cares about – whether she allows us to see her through it or not. Distance doesn't eradicate love. It simply makes it worse because you're going through whatever difficult hand you've been dealt alone.

But to each their own coping mechanism. Shutting herself off from even the possibility of having a future, because then finding out you don't would be a harsh blow to anyone. So, while I may not agree with hers, I *can* understand it. And be extremely thankful she's changed her course and picked me up along the way on her detour.

When she was wrung out emotionally, I'd carried her to my guest room, not wanting to make assumptions yet craving the feel of her in my arms while in my bed, only to have her ask for just that.

Granted, I wasn't expecting anything to happen, and it didn't. Molly needed to be held. I'd shut off my alarm before falling asleep next to her, knowing we didn't have any pressing plans for morning.

Around ten, I'd started stirring, then carefully extricated myself from her, loving when she immediately tried to wrap herself around me again, then walked on silent feet to the kitchen to make my woman breakfast.

There's only a few minutes left until it's ready, so I turn to go wake her, knowing she might want to take care of pressing matters before eating, only to find her watching me. Her gaze takes in the shirt covering me, as well as the gym shorts I slept in, a smile tipping her lips to indicate she appreciates what she sees. Normally, all I can stand is a pair of boxers since I easily get overheated, but I didn't want to take any liberties she wasn't willing to give.

But when she is...

“What can I do to help?”

Marry me. “Grab the plates? They’re in the cabinet to my right.”

“Mugs or glasses?”

“I made coffee, but there’s also orange juice, if you’d prefer.”

“Okay. Which do you want?”

I’m so hyped up on caffeine, this being the second pot, that I should choose the latter, but factor in that I barely slept because I didn’t want to miss a second of having her there and I know I need the boost. “I’ll take the hot stuff.”

I hear the dishes being set down, then next thing I know, she’s standing in front of me when I turn to reach for the salt and pepper to season the eggs. “Hey,” I chuckle, wondering what she’s doing, though I’m not upset at having her this close. She may have just been in my room, but I missed her while I was cooking. I always do when she isn’t within eyesight.

I’m fully aware I resemble a lovesick fool that can’t function without his other half. And I’m okay with that.

What true man wouldn’t be?

“You said you wanted the hot stuff,” she reminds me, “so…” She executes a curtsy, clearly referring to herself as such.

“Damn straight.” Without taking my gaze from hers, I reach behind me and flip off the burner, no longer interested in food.

Staring at her feet, she wiggles her pastel pink painted toes and says, “Less than twenty-four hours ago, we were just friends. Do you think we’re moving too fast?”

****Molly****

Turning my question back at me, Corbin asks, “Do you?”

“No. We, *I*, wasted so much time because I was stuck in my head. When you add those days up,” I shrug, “we’re actually on pace.” He grins at my math.

“For the sake of research,” he begins as he pulls me to him, “we should make sure we’re compatible. You know,” Corbin wags his brows, “sexually.”

“For research,” I agree, the once delicious smelling meal no longer a thought when he sweeps me in his arms, throws me over his shoulder, and begins walking down the hall toward his room. Where there’s a bed. I want to let my usual shyness take hold, and would if this was anybody else, but it feels so right being with Corbin that I can’t muster it up.

Instead, I snake my hands under his waistband and into his shorts where I squeeze his clearly toned cheeks. “Mol,” he groans.

“Do you get these from doing squats with all those boxes of books?” I tease him. “Maybe I should try your workout regimen...” I stop, the squeal emitting from me making it hard to continue talking when he begins tickling my sides.

“You will do no such thing. You are perfect as you are.” I attempt to protest, knowing there’s some extra padding that wasn’t there before, only to lose my breath at the smack to my right buttock. “What’d I say?” I mumble my answer against his shoulder, then laugh when I find myself airborne before landing on his mattress and bouncing from the impact. His smile as he stares at me is so full of awe all I can do is return it. Corbin sees me. He sees past the pain, past the fear that caused me to make a decision to protect myself, not others.

Cupping his cheeks, wanting him to understand this comes from the depths of my soul, I tell him, “I’m sorry.” He’s confused, unsure why I’m apologizing, which steals another piece of my heart and gives it to him. “My cowardice almost cost us this. I was scared. Not to let someone love me, but to let myself love someone else.”

His palm sweeps over my hair, pushing it away from my face as I’d bowed my head, wanting to hide my shame. “Look at me, Molly,” he orders, a command in his voice I’d never heard from him before. Raising my eyes, I stare into his and wait, knowing whatever happens next, it will be life changing. “You may have made that choice for the wrong reasons,” my

breath hiccups as a sob threatens to spill from me, “but nobody can fault you for that. Our first inclination is to protect ourselves. It’s ingrained in us. You lost your mom and instinctively reacted by vowing not to let another in. You accepted that your future would be a lonely one to avoid pain. You think you’re the only person to ever make a permanent decree?” That has me watching him, wondering what he’s alluding to. By unspoken agreement, we each shift on the bed, getting comfortable for the conversation we’re about to continue, one that has already brought up old wounds for me and will undoubtedly do the same for him. The time for intimacy via our bodies may have passed, but this is a different kind, yet it will bind us nonetheless.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I reassure him, hoping that vow will give him the support he needs to share this part of him.

“Ashton and I...our parents were a train wreck in the sense that they never should have met and procreated.” I completely disagree with that sentiment as just the thought of a world without him makes me want to cry. “Our egg donor saw us as her ticket out. However, for that to work, the other half has to give a dang. He split rather than pay up and she foisted us off the second she could, deeming us somebody else’s problem. We went in the system and stayed there until we were ten.”

“What happened then?”

He chuckles, but there is no humor in it. “Our paternal grandparents learned of us and “saved” us.” The sarcasm in that word, the bitterness, is so thick it’s like a third being has joined us in the room. “It was all for show. They didn’t care about us. We were there because it would look bad for them if they didn’t take us in. Appearance mattered, not their own flesh and blood. We left the day we turned eighteen. No pleasantries were shared, no platitudes. All four of us knew that was the last time we’d see each other and we were relieved.”

I hug him, unable to express my sorrow for what he and his sister have gone through. I wish I could say something to take it away from him, but words cannot fix this. I’m not sure

anything can. Whispering his name, I press a kiss to his cheek. “If this is too hard, I don’t need to hear the rest.”

“Maybe not,” he responds, “but I need to say it.” A deep breath in, then out follows, only to be repeated two more times. “I never verbally made the choice, but I knew, with the DNA of those who created me in my veins, I couldn’t risk bringing children into this world.” I’m not seeing his logic, but I, more than most, know how easily emotions can override that, so I let him go on, not wanting to interrupt lest he stop altogether. “What if I was a horrible parent because they were?”

This, this I can answer. “Can you even fathom the idea of abandoning your children?”

“Hell no.”

“You didn’t even hesitate in your response, Corbin. That has to tell you something. You will do everything in your power to be the complete opposite of them. Can’t you see that?”

Taking my hand, he threads his fingers through mine and sets them on his thigh. “Maybe I merely needed the right person to come into my life and help me.”

Though I know he’d make a fantastic dad regardless, I know what he’s trying to say. I’m his person.

And he’s mine.

Chapter Nine

CORBIN

February 10th...

The change in Molly since our talk has been nothing short of miraculous. Hints of the woman she was prior to her mom's illness peek through more and more, giving me a glimpse of the true her. The one that wasn't fractured by loss. Oh, the cracks are still in her heart and always will be. I can understand that pain. She's mourning what she had while mine is what never was. Grief takes all forms and everyone has to work through it at their own pace.

It's a wound that never heals and I can't fathom how much she's hurting. The only thing I can do is be there for her with an ear to hear whenever she needs to unload, arms to hold her when she needs comfort or support, and a mouth to tell her everything will be okay.

"What do you want to do today?" She asks as we lay there, both reluctant to leave the warmth the blankets provide.

"I should probably work," I admit, hating the thought of being away from her.

"Ashton has been pretty cool about it. Don't want to push it."

"Nah," I reassure her. "She's so thankful I'm happy that she isn't complaining and Winnie is fine with taking extra shifts."

"That's good."

“Plus,” I continue, testing the waters, “Ashton wants to be an aunt, so...” I sweep my hand over us, indicating that she and I in bed together is the way to make that happen.

“Wow. You’re just throwing that out there and waiting to see how it lands, huh?”

“Yep. Like tossing spaghetti at a wall to see if it sticks.”

“Did you just refer to our future children as a noodle?”

I grin. “Depends on whether you find it funny.”

She doesn’t respond, so I glance at her, relieved to see her shoulders shaking. Life will be a lot easier if she gets my weird sense of humor. “Oh my gosh,” she wheezes.

Starting to become alarmed, I ask, “What’s wrong?”

“I’m visualizing the spaghetti as a boy and,” she shrugs, “I don’t know, ravioli for a girl.” That has me rolling over from uncontrollable laughter.

“Can’t breathe,” I whisper as I swipe under my eyes to get the tears that leaked out. Once I get enough oxygen to speak again, I inquire, “Which would you rather have?”

“As long as the pasta is healthy, I’m good with either.” She tries to keep a straight face, but completely fails and it takes me a second to process what she said.

Molly starts to add more, but I beg her to stop. “I’ll never be able to look at my favorite food the same.”

“Sorry,” she says with a giggle.

“Not buying it,” I inform her as my fingers begin reaching for her sides.

“Don’t you dare,” she pleads, which, of course, I ignore. My name leaves her as I punish her for her insolence. “I give,” she mutters. “It’ll cost you a pretty penne, though, because the pasta-bilities are endless.” She tries to sneak away, thinking she won. That’s due to the fact she doesn’t play fair. Her hand skates over the rapidly growing bulge below my waist and she wiggles off the mattress and hurries toward the en suite bathroom before I can move fast enough to catch her. Then

again, it's kind of hard to do when I suddenly have a third leg.
"Sweetheart, I'm not done with you yet."

"Pasta la vista, baby," she calls over her shoulder as she shuts the door behind her. She and I both know she wants me to join her, which I immediately do as I shuck my boxer briefs.

"You sure you don't feel like sausage instead?" Her laughter reaches my ears as I open the stall and find her waiting for me, water cascading down her gorgeous body.

Instead of answering, she pulls me inside, shuts us in our own little cocoon, and proceeds to show her appreciation of what I bring to the table. Which I later reciprocate by having her for dessert.

****Molly****

"Stop or we'll never make it in time," I admonish Corbin as I smack his hand away from me. I don't want to, but I want to be late for dinner at Uncle Warren and Aunt Ella's even less. They've mentioned, as has my sister, that they miss seeing me, and the guilt was immediate. Corbin has essentially moved me in with him, declaring that he can't sleep without me...not that we do much of that, if I'm being honest.

While he and Ashton don't live together, her place is next door to his. A fact that makes me jealous as Lana is ten minutes away. It's not a huge distance, yet when you've always shared the same space, it can feel like she's across the country. Unless she and Ashton hit it off and become roommates. Perhaps it's time they meet?

"What is this evil grin for?"

"Who, me?" I ask innocently. Or try to.

"Oh please," he responds. "You're all but doing the laugh." His head dips to where I'm rubbing my palms together and I crack up.

"Busted."

"Spill." I tell him what I was pondering, an idea he seems surprisingly on board with. "Did you think I'd veto it?"

“It’s not weird how close she and I are?” That has him looking at me in disbelief.

“Mol, I work with my sister. We lived in the same house until a year or so after moving here, and when she got her own place, she chose one I could reach in five seconds.”

Relieved he understands, I tell him for added measure, “She’s my...”

“Best friend,” he finishes. “I know. Ashton is mine, though she’s going to have to start sharing that role,” he states with a smile.

“Little ol’ me?”

“Well, you will have to audition, but you do have an in with the judge, so...” he teases me, his words trailing off as I purposely smooth my sweater, knowing my breasts are being emphasized as I do so. He chokes out a, “You win,” as he pulls his collar from his throat like he’s burning up.

“I know,” I smugly inform him as I head toward the door. “And I’ll collect my prize when we get home.” I suddenly find myself scooped up and cradled against his chest as if I’m the most precious thing in the world. A fact he reiterates by shoving his face in my hair and inhaling. But those aren’t the things that have me worried. The realization that he’s shaking does. “Corbin, what’s wrong?”

He’s silent so long I assume he’s not going to say, then he whispers, “You said home.” And now I feel as if *I* can’t breathe.

“Should I not have?” Corbin digs in his pocket, amazing me with his strength as he does so since he’s still holding me, and thrusts something at my face. It’s a key.

“I should have given this to you much sooner.” He chuckles. “Wanted to the day I met you,” he sheepishly admits, making him even cuter than usual.

Taking it, knowing how important this moment is, I inform him, “I think I would have taken it.”

“Glad you two could join us,” Lana teases with a glance at her watch when she answers my knock. Granted, I could have just walked in, but standing there as a couple felt like the thing to do.

“Your sister can’t get enough of me,” Corbin boasts, giving an oof at the elbow I dig into his side. Lana being Lana, laughs at his statement, then gives me a wink and a thumbs up. They’ve met before, of course, but this is her silent way of acknowledging that she sees how happy he makes me. She’s letting me know she’s okay with where he and I are heading and she doesn’t feel left out.

That could also be because I’ve seen the looks she and Kellan Pace, the Fire Chief, have been exchanging. Hers are impish, intentionally egging him on, while his are clearly born of frustration at the risks she takes. Ironic, I know, coming from a man who has and, at times, still does, run into burning buildings. Pot, meet kettle. Watching that unfold is going to require popcorn because it’s a toss-up on which of them is more stubborn. Despite having a lifetime of experience with Lana, I have a feeling she has finally met her match in Kellan.

I can recognize it now that I have Corbin.

Pulling her in for a hug, one handed as Corbin is grasping the other like I’m going to disappear, I give her an extra squeeze, hoping to convey all the love I have for her. “Stop hogging her,” Aunt Ella hollers. Her eyes take me in and she turns to Uncle Warren, stating with an exaggerated whisper, “It’s been so long, I forgot what she looks like. Is that Molly-moo?”

Corbin eagerly steps forward, his nervousness from seconds before gone, and urges, “Please tell me this story.”

In her element, Aunt Ella bids him to follow her and they walk inside, her voice carrying back to us as they head toward the living room, “I can show you a picture, too. It all started when Warren told our nieces they could be whatever they wanted to be.” Corbin turns and peeks at me, a smile already curving his lips in anticipation of what comes next. “Molly

had just seen a cow.” The rest is muffled as they’re no longer close enough to hear, thanks to the walls separating the spaces.

“Five, four, three, two, and one,” Uncle Warren counts down in perfect timing when Corbin’s bark of laughter reaches us.

“Is nothing sacred in this family?”

“Nope,” Lana cheerfully replies.

Narrowing my eyes, I warn her, “Remember what paybacks are, sis.”

She gulps, though she rallies quickly. “No one to spill this kind of stuff to about me.”

I look straight at her and mouth, “Kellan.” For a split second, she beams at his name, but it’s gone almost immediately, a resignation taking its place. Yeah, she’s smitten with him, yet just like me, fears what that means. “I promise you, it’ll all work it out exactly as it should. Mom was right, Lana. This town is magical.”

Chapter Ten

CORBIN

January 17th...

“Thank you for meeting me,” I tell Warren as he sits across from me at a booth in his wife’s diner.

He shakes my extended hand and informs me, “I knew it was only a matter of time.” Ella comes over, fills our cups, knowing from years of marriage that her husband would want coffee without him ordering it. Warren thanks her with a smile. She watches us for a minute, leaving when we nod to let her know we’re good. I’m sure she knows what’s going on, or has an idea as I have no doubt Warren told her of his suspicions. “I’m assuming my niece doesn’t know we’re meeting?”

“She does not.” He nods. “She’s at work,” I let him know, then clarify on the off chance she hasn’t mentioned it. “Mol has been helping at the store. I’m hoping,” I tack on as I let him in on a secret, “that being around the books will bring the writing bug back.”

He doesn’t seem surprised that I know she lost her passion for it and her mom at the same time. “Molly doesn’t talk about it,” Warren says, “but we can tell she misses it.” We’re each quiet after that, united in wanting Molly to follow her dream again. Warren breaks the silence first, giving me the nudge I need as he urges, “Go ahead and ask me.” Deciding to show him instead, I remove the little box that’s been burning a hole in my pocket since shortly after meeting Molly. She may have labeled us as only being friends, and I accepted because it’s what she needed, but I knew we’d reach this point. I just didn’t know when. Warren seems pleased I already have it, even

more so when he opens it and peeks inside. The engagement ring is a simple solitaire. However, when it's paired with the one she'll get when we take our vows, the yellow gems of that will surround the chocolate diamond of the first, coming together to resemble a flower. A sunflower, to be exact. Her mom's favorite and the nickname she had for Molly. "It's perfect, Corbin." A deep exhale leaves me, so thankful he agrees. I knew I was taking a chance in choosing this, but I wanted her mom to be a part of this, and this was the only way I could think of to make that happen. This time, Warren is the one extending a hand and as I take it, he says, "Welcome to the family, son."

****Molly***

I'm not sure why Corbin appears so nervous, but the man can't sit still. Ashton is watching him, a grin on her face, so I know she's aware of what's going on. That makes me wonder if it's work related, except she keeps watching me like she can barely contain herself.

Winnie, too, as she waits for her boyfriend, Jason, to pick her up. She isn't scheduled to be here, though I've learned it's not unusual for her to stop in on her days off. The three of them are up to something, I just know it.

"You ready to go?" Corbin asks, startling me from my thoughts. We'd stopped in because he needed to handle payroll, that being one of his tasks as he and Ashton split the office duties. Now we're heading home where he's informed me he has dinner covered. Which, honestly, is a given as I suck at cooking unless he wants a peanut butter and jelly sandwich or a grilled cheese. Even then, the chances the latter isn't burnt are iffy.

"Yep," I say as he guides me toward the door.

"Talk to you later," Ashton and Winnie say as we walk out. Again, not unheard of as I've gotten quite close to both of them since moving here. In fact, Ashton and Lana have as well and have been discussing becoming roommates. I wave at them, not missing the huge smiles on their faces nor the high-fives they exchange.

“Way to be cool, ladies,” I hear Corbin mutter as we get in the car. His tone is indulgent, not truly bothered by their actions. As the town is fairly small, it doesn’t take long to get home. Corbin ushers me inside, his hand lingering on my back, the heat from it seeping through my coat.

The table is set, unlit candles placed almost in the middle, as if he doesn’t want to risk them obstructing our view of each other. Turning to him, I ask, “When did you do this?” I’ve been with him all day. Wait, Lana and I had lunch at the diner, her idea. Hmm...awful suspicious. “Clearly you had help. A certain woman that looks a bit like me perhaps?”

Corbin grins as I piece it together. “There’s no I in team.”

“But there is in I love you.” This isn’t the first time I’ve said it to him. Him dropping to one knee after I do, though? That’s new.

“I had this all planned out. Wanted to make it special.” Oh my gosh! Is this happening? “Until I realized, as long as you accept, it doesn’t matter where we are. All that does is you agreeing to make me the happiest man in the world by saying you’ll be my wife. Molly Dawson, the moment I met you, my whole reason for being was revealed. I was put on this earth to love you and I do so with every beat of my heart. Will you marry me?” I’m prepared to say yes before he even starts, but I let him finish, knowing this is a memory that we’ll eventually share with our children. “Let me give you the HEA you deserve.”

Any man that throws in that kind of vernacular to a woman that once again dreams of being a writer is not only one of a kind, he’s perfect for me. “Yes!” I shout, unable to contain my excitement at becoming his wife. Then I tackle him, causing him to fall backwards as we both laugh from happiness. I feel the coolness of the metal as he slides it on my finger, the warmth of his lips as they press against mine, and the hardness pressing at the seam of my jeans as I straddle him.

By the time we come up for air, hair disheveled, half of our clothes missing, and a light sweat covering our skin, the sun

has long set, our stomachs are pleading for food, and our smiles might never fade.

“How soon can I make you mine?” Corbin asks as I trace a heart above where his resides in his chest.

“I already am,” I remind him.

“And don’t you forget it.”

EPILOGUE ONE

Corbin

May...

I watch my wife with pride as she signs yet another copy of her book for a fan. We got married in the small ceremony we both wanted with our friends and family in attendance. Molly made Warren cry when she told him that he was more like a dad to her than an uncle, and she'd be honored if he'd fulfill that role by walking her down the aisle. As for Ella, she and Molly shared a similar conversation, with Molly letting Ella know that she thought of her as a bonus mom. The tears were so plentiful that day that Lana and I feared we'd need to put on rain boots. Not that either of us was any better. It was an emotional experience and I'm thankful to not only have been a part of it but to also now be considered family.

Within a few weeks of our ceremony, Molly told me she wanted to start writing again. That she had, in fact, already done so. When I'd wanted to know why she hadn't said so, she'd admitted that she'd been scared to. I knew then it was her old fears resurfacing. This was something she and her mom had shared, a way they'd strengthened their connection, and then her mom got sick. It wasn't hard to figure out that she was scared the same might happen to me. Rational? No, but when you've suffered such a great loss, the heart tends to override the head. I didn't push her, instead letting her process it on her own, and I knew she'd conquered it when she handed me the manuscript to read. I was surprised to discover it was a children's book as she'd told me before that her focus had been romance. But as soon as I opened it and began the story, I knew exactly why she'd gone this route.

The main character was a little girl, Mona – Molly and Lana combined – who'd recently lost her mom and was struggling to accept it. Recognizing this, her uncle and aunt wanted to do something to help and found a calf that had suffered the same tragedy. Unbeknownst to them, the animal, whom the child named Ellen – a mix of Warren and Ella – could talk. They comforted each other and eventually had adventures on the farm that Mona had moved to that was owned by her uncle and aunt. The book's title? Moo-ving On.

Writing it was cathartic for Molly and reading it was the same for everyone else. It didn't ease the pain they all still held at losing what was clearly an amazing woman, but it did act almost like a salve. Smoothing out the scar, so to speak.

It turned out to be a huge hit, shooting to number one on various retailers, an orange banner, numerous accolades, and garnering a plethora of five star reviews. The majority from parents that applauded her for addressing such a natural part of life in a way that children can understand. She's considering turning it into a series to continue Mona and Ellen's story. I support her in whatever she does and told her so.

Ella introduced Molly to Cydne, another resident here that happens to edit, and the two became close as they worked together and have already agreed to team up for all future endeavors. With the two of them spending so much time with one another, Cydne's husband, Curtis, and I have also become friends. He's a local lawyer and has joined Team Molly to act as her attorney as needed. Free of charge. Naturally, Molly and I balked at that, wanting to ensure he was paid for his work. Curtis and Cydne ganged up on us, both refusing to accept payment from those they deemed family. Coming to a compromise that satisfied all parties, Molly agreed to create a character for each child they had and personally sign all titles involving said girl or boy. Now we just need to wait for them to make us an honorary aunt and uncle so she can get started on their stories.

EPILOGUE TWO

Molly

Ten years after meeting...

“Good day?” I ask my husband as he opens the door. Of course, my question is drowned out by the squeals our kids emit when they see daddy is back. The man who once doubted his ability to be a parent because he’d never known his own is such a great dad that our son and daughter think he hung the moon, the sun, *and* the stars.

Of course, I agree with them, though Corbin insists I’m the one that did that.

“Yes, but it’s even better now that I’m home,” Corbin answers as he strides toward where I sit on the couch, Dawson and Penelope following him. All three scrunch on the sofa with me after Corbin drops a welcoming kiss on my lips.

“What a coincidence,” I tell him. “Mine improved when you walked in, too.” He and I share a look, a promise of what’s to come when we’re alone, then I urge Dawson and Penelope to let daddy know what they did while they hung with Uncle Kellan and Aunt Lana earlier as school is currently out for summer break.

“Uncle Kellan made us fiwefighters,” Penelope shares. At five, she’s very good with her letters, but when she’s excited, they don’t always come out as clearly as when she’s calmer.

Corbin raises a brow in my direction. He knows my sister and brother-in-law would never do anything to endanger their beloved nephew and niece, so he’s merely curious to get the

full story. “Go get them,” I suggest, their little feet pounding on the floor to their rooms before I finish speaking.

Some parents would take this opportunity to sneak in a passionate peck or maybe some groping, but Corbin and I quickly learned that our offspring seem to have sensors when we even attempt it. Five seconds haven’t even passed and they’re thundering back to join us.

On top of their heads, the official logo of the SVFD – Sweetville Volunteer Fire Department – prominently displayed in the center, are miniature helmets of the adult version. They then began talking over one another as they start telling him everything Uncle Kellan let them do. “And what did you do with Aunt Lana?” Corbin wants to know.

“We baked cookies!” Seven-year-old Dawson shouts. It’s a toss-up which part they enjoyed more, the head gear or the treats.

“I’d say that explains their excess energy, except we know this is normal for them,” Corbin jokes. He’s not wrong.

Once the house is quiet, Corbin and I collapse on our bed, exhausted yet neither wanting it any other way. “How do parents with more than two do it?” He wants to know.

“Well, I guess we’ll find out in about seven months,” I respond, shifting to see his face as he processes the news.

“You’re...” he can’t even finish asking. Not because he’s choked up, though he is, but due to his face being buried in my neck, his arms squeezing me from happiness. “I’m going to be a daddy again,” he whispers in awe. We weren’t actively trying, nor were we doing anything to prevent it either, choosing to let fate decide when the time was right.

Apparently, that’s now. Or eight weeks ago, to be exact, when we celebrated the release of my newest title and he and Ashton expanding the bookstore after purchasing the empty space next to them.

“I have an appointment next week.”

He removes his cell from the nightstand and uses his fingerprint to open it. “Day and time?” I tell him and listen to the sound of him adding it to his calendar, followed by more typing. A notification comes almost immediately and he lets me know, “My sister will probably be calling you any minute to start talking about the baby.”

I laugh and inform him, “I doubt I have that long.” True to form, it hasn’t even been half that when my own phone rings.

“Raincheck?” He wants to know. Grabbing my cell, I decline and send her a quick text to let her know me and her brother are congratulating each other on a job well done. I can almost hear her gagging as she reads it, but Corbin easily distracts me as he lifts my shirt and places sweet kisses on my belly. “Thank you for our life,” he says over and over as he continues. Though I’m soon the one exclaiming my gratefulness as he proceeds to put his mouth to use in other ways.

****Corbin****

With my wife wrapped in my arms, my palm resting above our unborn child, and my son and daughter sleeping peacefully down the hall, I stare at the ceiling and grant my forgiveness to those who don’t deserve it. But it’s there’s nonetheless because *I* do.

If Ashton and I hadn’t gone into the system, if our parents and grandparents hadn’t been who they are, I wouldn’t be where I was meant to be. *Who* I was meant to be with. Nor would my sister have found the love of her life and both possibilities would have been a tragedy of epic proportions.

Sweetville is home, a magical place that helps you find your destiny.

Be sure to look for Kellan and Lana’s book, *Smokescreen*, releasing February 22.

If you liked Corbin and Molly's story, please take a moment to leave a review. Not only are authors happy to know they've brought enjoyment to someone's life by providing an escape from reality, even if only for a short time, but they are a way for others to decide if they'd also be interested. The greatest way to share your love for their work is by word of mouth, whether it's literally, or through your own written word in a review.

STAY CONNECTED

You can email the author, if you'd like, at havenroseauthor@gmail.com. Haven has created a Facebook page for those interested in connecting with her or for updates on current works in progress and future books – facebook.com/authorhavenrose/. You can also follow her author page or on BookBub (bookbub.com/authors/haven-rose). Her website is havenrosebooks.com, and she has created a closed reader group on Facebook. If you're interested in becoming a member, please visit The Rose Garden at facebook.com/groups/227103614772999/.

Thank you for taking the time to meet this couple, and those near and dear to them, as well as characters you may see in future books.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Haven Rose spends her days high atop the world in a tower overlooking a beautiful meadow, waiting for her prince to find her. No? That's a different story? Okay. In real life, the author, who prefers to remain a mystery, met her true love at a very young age and the two have been enjoying their lives together ever since. Has it had its ups and downs? Yes, but their love for one another has endured it all and only grown stronger. He is the foundation upon which her Heroes are created. She knows things can never be perfect in a relationship, at least not outside of books, which is why the pen name of Haven Rose was created, allowing readers, such as herself, to escape into a world where problems are easily solved, love is instant and true, and the story is always safe.



MORE BY HAVEN ROSE

A Tangled Web Series

Grave Secrets (books2read.com/u/bzPVA2)

Lethal Memories (books2read.com/u/38r9pV)

Final Truth (amzn.to/2LGHZnO)

Love Found (TBD)

Accidental Connection Series (COMPLETED)

The Hopeful Heart (part of the Forever Safe series)
(mybook.to/TheHopefulHeart)

The Enduring Heart (mybook.to/TheEnduringHeart)

The Patient Heart (mybook.to/ThePatientHeart)

The Redeemed Heart (mybook.to/GetTheRedeemedHeart)

The Believing Heart (mybook.to/GetTheBelievingHeart)

Bastion Defense Series

Learning Curve (see Yours Everlasting Series)

Something Borrowed (see Yours Everlasting Series)

In Favor of Forever (releasing 05/18/22)

Family by Choice Series

Whispers of Love (I'm Yours Collaboration -
amzn.to/2EfrQXf) (mybook.to/GetWhispersofLove)

Love Taps (Silver Fox Collaboration - amzn.to/3t6VjXA)
(mybook.to/GetLoveTaps)

Tapped Out (TBD)

Holidays in Jasper Series (COMPLETED)

Trick or Treat (books2read.com/u/b62Xo6)

Thankfully Yours (amzn.to/2BR31M5)

Marry New Year (amzn.to/2F1iehF)

From the Heart (amzn.to/2GrpkwA)

Shamrocked (mybook.to/Shamrocked)

His Firecracker (amzn.to/2J81A0x)

Summer's End (mybook.to/SummersEnd)

Holiday Ever After (a collection of bonus short stories – TBD)

It's Complicated Series (COMPLETED)

A Home for Noelle (part of the Forever Safe Christmas Series
– mybook.to/AHomeforNoelle)

A Place for Daniel (part of the Yours Everlasting Series –
mybook.to/GetAPlaceforDaniel)

A Family for Garrett (part of Forever Safe: The Twelve Days
of Christmas Series - mybook.to/GetAFamilyforGarrett)

Matter of Hart Series

That Day (books2read.com/u/m0gEnM)

Getting Lucky (books2read.com/u/bP5oVj)

Love's Draw (mybook.to/LovesDraw)

Just Right (TBD)

Made to Order (TBD)

Full Circle (TBD)

Giving Chase (TBD)

Deep Desires (TBD)

The Perfect Position (TBD)

By Design (TBD)

Standalones

Pieces of You (mybook.to/PiecesofYou)

Collaborations

Dude! Where's Your...?

...Shirt

Taylor Made by Haven Rose (mybook.to/GetTaylorMade)

Shirtless in New York by Brynn Paulin (amzn.to/3o1Swvl)

Love's Valley Duet (with May Gordon)

Spark of Love and Lesson in Love
(mybook.to/LovesValleyDuet)

Magical March Series

Spelling Bea (Mates & Mischief #2) by Haven Rose
(mybook.to/GetBiteMe)

Monster Bait by Brynn Paulin

Signed, Sealed, Yours Series

(Series page - amzn.to/3h3oeH7)

Desperate Measures by Annelise Reynolds

His Forever Bride by M.K. Moore

Wild, Wanton, & Wed by Barbra Campbell (amzn.to/2SqzVPU)

Class Act by Haven Rose (mybook.to/GetClassAct)

Farmer Takes a Wife by Brynn Paulin (amzn.to/3w5NQsF)

Steamy in Sweetville Series

August 2020

Measured Love by Haven Rose
(mybook.to/GetMeasuredLove)

Put a Ring on It by Pixie Chica

Postcards in the Sand by Brynn Paulin

Christmas 2020

Count on Me (mybook.to/GetCountonMe)

Cuddle Up Buttercup by Brynn Paulin ([amzn.to/3j7OEHE](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0870EHE))

Stranded Christmas by Pixie Chica ([amzn.to/30c07yk](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0870EHE))

February 2021

All Fired Up (mybook.to/GetAllFiredUp)

Pants on Fire by Brynn Paulin ([amzn.to/3nXHQxZ](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0870EHE))

Ring of Fire by Pixie Chica ([amzn.to/39KDntb](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0870EHE))

April 2021

Cross my Heart (mybook.to/GetCrossmyHeart)

No More Running by Brynn Paulin ([amzn.to/2PTmIhj](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0870EHE))

September 2021

In my Rearview (mybook.to/InmyRearview)

In Plain Sight by Brynn Paulin ([amzn.to/3g90GSn](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0870EHE))

January 2022 (last of original series)

His Sugarplum Kisses by Brynn Paulin ([amzn.to/3gCHJrz](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0870EHE))

Sweetville Season Two

January 2022

Between the Lines (mybook.to/GetBetweentheLines)

Tarpley VFD (a part of Susan Stoker's World)

Series page - [amzn.to/3uJgBfg](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0870EHE)

Fighting for Elena by Silver James ([amzn.to/38lGeGL](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0870EHE))

Fighting for Carly by Deandra Hall ([amzn.to/375rH1I](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0870EHE))

Fighting for Calliope by Haven Rose ([amzn.to/2TpvL8p](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0870EHE))

Fighting for Jemma by MJ Nightingale ([amzn.to/2TEQdTn](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0870EHE))

Fighting for Brittney by TL Reeve ([amzn.to/2R7iOPI](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0870EHE))

Fighting for Nadia by Nicole Flockton ([amzn.to/2NGOZmK](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0870EHE))

Series page - [amzn.to/3uBmo6x](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0870EHE)

Fighting for Amanda by TL Reeve ([amzn.to/3b0wTZ1](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0870EHE))

Fighting for Marcy by MJ Nightingale ([amzn.to/3bIO7tc](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0870EHE))

Fighting for Bree by Haven Rose
(mybook.to/GetFightingforBree)

Fighting for Lorna by Deandra Hall (amzn.to/3uI8LSQ)

Fighting for Justice by Silver James (amzn.to/3kBbBEz)

The Law Trilogy.

Multi-author series featuring myself, Sylvia Kane, Brynn Paulin, Barbra Campbell, May Gordon, and MK Moore)

Beyond the Law Series Page - amzn.to/2QszgsR

Collateral Damage, Beyond the Law, Book One by Haven Rose
(mybook.to/GetCollateralDamage)

In His Sights, Breaking the Law, Book One by Haven Rose
(mybook.to/GetInHisSights)

Settle the Score, Book One by Haven Rose
(mybook.to/GetSettletheScore)

Valentine's Sucks Series

Bite Me (Mates & Mischief #1) by Haven Rose
(mybook.to/GetBiteMe)

Vampire Bait by Brynn Paulin ([My Book](http://MyBook))

My Vampire Mate by Pixie Chica (amzn.to/327lphd)

XOXO Series

(Christmas 2019).

Ex Scrooge Me by Brynn Paulin (amzn.to/37RukoB)

Mistletoe Magic by Haven Rose (Meant to Be #1)
(mybook.to/MistletoeMagicBook)

Candy Covered Kisses by Loni Ree (amzn.to/2OYFqQ6)

His Christmas Delivery by Pixie Chica (amzn.to/2LjfEm)

(Valentine 2020).

Sweet Surprise (Meant to Be #2) (mybook.to/SweetSurprise)

(Spring Love 2020).

Billionaire Bunny by Brynn Paulin (amzn.to/2yA51dP)

A New Start by Haven Rose (Meant to Be #3)
(mybook.to/ANewStart)

Mr. Boss Man by Loni Ree (amzn.to/2UHcyQg)

A Royal Payne by Pixie Chica (mybook.to/ARoyalPayne)

Yours Everlasting Series (YES!)

Brynn Paulin, Dakota Rebel, Haven Rose,
May Gordon, Pixie Chica, and Rachelle Stevensen

Learning Curve by Haven Rose
(mybook.to/GetLearningCurve)

A Place for Daniel by Haven Rose
(mybook.to/GetAPlaceforDaniel)

Something Borrowed by Haven Rose
(mybook.to/GetSomethingBorrowed)

Step Above the Rest by Haven Rose
(mybook.to/GetStepAbovetheRest)

TO BE CONTINUED IN MAY AND NOVEMBER 2022

Upcoming Standalones

Final Countdown (TBD)

Pardon Me (TBD)

Future Series (with more planned):

Aftereffects Series

Deadly Acts (TBD)

Deadly Intentions (TBD)

Deadly Hope (TBD)

City of Angelis Trilogy (subject to change)

Titles to be Decided

Coming Home Series

Titles to be Decided

Danger Duet

Cuts Like a Knife (TBD)

The Key to His Heart (TBD)

Perilous Love Series (subject to change)

Running from Peril (TBD)

Hidden Peril (TBD)

Triple Peril (TBD)

Reluctantly Royal

Reign Interrupted (TBD)

Other Titles to be Decided

Saints & Sinners MC Series

Dangerous Curves (TBD)

Other Titles to be Decided

Shadow Men Series

Titles to be Decided

Stone Siblings Series

Set in Stone (TBD)

A Fresh Slate (TBD)

Other Titles to be Decided

The Four Seasons Series

Titles to be Decided

Weathering the Storm Series

My Sunshine (TBD)

A Touch of Frost (TBD)

Other Titles to be Decided