

*Destiny Falls*  
*Short Story*

SAY  
You'll  
STAY

ALEXA RIVERS

# **SAY YOU'LL STAY**

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DESTINY FALLS

ALEXA RIVERS

Say You'll Stay

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Recommended for age 18 years and up.

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Also by Alexa Rivers

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## PROLOGUE

### *HANNAH*

When I'd suggested this outing to a vintage motorcycle show with my dad, sex had been the last thing on my mind. But now, thanks to my dull-as-dirt ex-boyfriend, who'd dumped me for someone better suited to his country club lifestyle, I needed a rebound before my ego capsized, and this seemed as good a place as any to find one. Some people might consider it strange to troll for a man while out with my dad, but we'd never had a conventional relationship. He'd spent a good portion of my childhood behind bars, but he'd done everything he could to make up for it when he'd gotten out, and we didn't have any secrets from each other. Besides, I knew he was hoping the gorgeous woman who did custom motorcycle paint jobs might accept his invitation for a date tonight, so we were both prepared for the other to disappear, if either of us got lucky.

We strolled along the grassed paddock between rows of motorcycles that were being displayed by their proud owners. Old school rock and roll played in the background from a cover band, who'd set up near the food trucks. I scanned the bikes, appreciating the nicer ones and glancing at the people beside them in case they were of interest too. Dad and I often attended these events when they happened near our home in Wellington. He was motorcycle mad, and we'd bonded over them when I was a teenager, although I was

more into vintage scooters than the beasts he liked.

I stopped beside an exquisitely restored Vespa with a paint job that made it seem to shimmer different shades of pink. I stepped closer, studying the detail.

“It’s stunning.” I looked around to find the owner. When I did, my mouth went dry and my body heated with interest. The man resting with his legs apart on the back of his Ute was as impressive as the Vespa. I greedily drank up the sight of his broad shoulders, tattooed forearms, and dark hair with just a few grays at the temples. My gaze lingered on his face, a punch of lust hitting me in the gut as I realized he was staring right back. His cheeks and jaw were covered with stubble, and his lips were full for a man, but it was his eyes that really got me. They were a deep, bright green. Based on the crinkles around them, he was older than me. Maybe in his late thirties or early forties. My heart gave a pitter-patter. I’d always been attracted to older men. Perhaps because I subconsciously thought they’d give me the stability I hadn’t had as a child—who knew?—but it was an undeniable fact that this guy really did it for me.

His lips twitched. “You like her?”

His voice was deep and rumbly, and sent shivers racing over my skin.

“She’s a beauty,” I agreed, moving closer to get a better look.

“I did the work myself,” he said. “She was a hunk of scrap when I found her.”

“You’d never know it,” I replied.

He stood, his thick thigh muscles bunching beneath his faded jeans as he made his way over. “You have one?”

“Not a Vespa,” I admitted. If I could afford to indulge my obsession on a teacher’s salary, I’d have a garage full of different models, but as it was, the only reason I had a garage at all was because Dad had been kind enough to let me stay with him after Ethan told me to pack my things and get out of his house. “I have a ’52 Ducati Cruiser.” I blushed. “It’s not in original condition

though. Dad”—I waved a hand behind me to indicate who I was referring to —“refurbished it, and a friend of his did a custom paint design.”

“Really?” His eyebrows shot up. “Do you have a photo?”

“Sure. Hold on.” I got my phone out of the small, over-the-shoulder black-and-pink clutch I’d brought with me and swiped until I found a photograph. I offered him the phone.

He whistled. “She sure is pretty.”

“She is.” I glanced at him from beneath my lashes just in time to see his eyes do a sneaky perusal of my body. I took the phone back and offered him my hand. “I’m Hannah.”

“Warren.” Those beautiful green eyes locked onto mine and heated as his massive hand engulfed my smaller one. His palm was calloused, and the roughness of it against my softer skin felt divine. He held on for a beat longer than necessary, and my heart rate sped up. A persistent throb began between my legs, telling me we were on. All systems go. Everything about Warren’s body language said he returned my interest.

“I’m Sam,” Dad said, as Warren finally released me. “But I can’t stay to chat.” He caught my eye. “See you tomorrow?”

I grinned. Good old Dad, reading the moment right. “Say hi to Petra for me.”

He nodded, and strode away.

I turned back to Warren, glancing surreptitiously at his ring finger. Bare. Yes.

I fought the urge to do a happy dance. I had a feeling this mountain of a man could be exactly what I needed to get Ethan off my mind.

“You’re not here with him?” Warren sounded confused.

“We came separately.” I laid a hand on his forearm, feeling the cords of muscle shift beneath his inked skin. I was being forward, but no one had ever accused me of not going after what I wanted. “Are you from around here?”

He tapped his chest, and it took me a moment to realize his T-shirt was

advertising a motor shop in Destiny Falls, a tourist town that was a ferry ride and several hours' drive away.

“Ah, right.” Silly me. I should have noticed. “Are you staying for the night?”

He crowded me, his hand coming to rest on my hip. Heat rushed to my core, and I had to crane my neck to look up at him. “Why do you want to know?” He dropped his head so his lips were beside my ear and murmured, “The way you’re looking at me is giving me dirty thoughts.”

“Then we’re on the same page,” I whispered back.

He cocked his head, looking intrigued but wary. “I don’t do relationships, or repeats.”

“Perfect.” I ignored the disappointed part of myself that screamed how unfair it was not to have the chance to spend more than one night with this sexy stranger. That needy little voice in my head was the reason I always ended up getting dumped. I came on too strong and scared men away. “All I want is a good, hard roll between the sheets.”

He winked. “Oh, darling. I can give you that.”



## SIX WEEKS LATER

### **WARREN**

I wiped my palms on the front of my jeans as I jogged up the steps into the Destiny Falls school building. They were covered in oil because my daughter's new homeroom teacher had called while I was at work and asked me to come in as soon as I'd finished for the day. When Ruby, my thirteen-year-old, had arrived at the garage after school, she hadn't shed any light on the matter, just looked uncomfortable and changed the subject when I asked, but her eyes had been red-rimmed, as though she'd been crying.

If Miss Olson, whom Ruby had been raving about ever since she'd arrived two weeks ago to fill in while Ruby's usual homeroom teacher was away on maternity leave, was responsible for Ruby's tears, I was going to rain hell down on her. Based on the way Ruby had been going on about how cool her new teacher was, that seemed unlikely, but being summoned for a meeting on the same day my daughter had been upset couldn't be a coincidence. Something had happened, and I was going to get to the bottom of it.

I strode down the hall, past several doors, and checked the numbers as I went. Miss Olson had said she'd be in room eleven. I found the classroom near a bend in the corridor, opposite a wall of lockers, and knocked before entering. The teacher was sitting at her desk, head bent over her laptop, but

there was something familiar about the strip of pink hair nearly hidden within her thick blonde tresses.

My stomach tightened.

Oh, God.

Oh, hell no.

Miss Olson—*Hannah*—looked up, and a smile died on her pretty pink lips. Lips that had formed a pouty ‘O’ around my cock as she’d sucked it only a few weeks ago. Her hazel eyes widened in surprise, and if I’d been under any illusion that she’d expected to see me, it died a swift death. She looked as horrified as I felt.

“Warren?” she asked, her breathy tone shooting straight to my dick. It reminded me of the way she’d sounded screaming my name when I’d been deep inside her, and the little hitches in her breath with every thrust I’d made. There was a tightening behind the fly of my jeans. I dropped my hands to rest casually in front of the bulge, hoping she wouldn’t notice.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I demanded.

She winced. Rightfully so—my tone had been overly harsh, but I couldn’t seem to recover from the shock of seeing her.

“Clearly, teaching homeroom.”

“But...but...” I tried to make sense of this. “You live in Wellington.”

“Lived. Past tense,” she corrected. “I needed a change after I broke up with my ex, and when I saw the position advertised here, I went for it.”

“You must have remembered—”

“What?” She stood and rounded her desk, all five and a half feet of her in strappy sandals with a two-inch heel. Her outfit was more demure than the one she’d worn at the motorcycle show, a pale pink blazer and black pencil dress, but she still didn’t look like any teacher I’d ever known. “The fact that a guy I hooked up with once lives here? Come on, Warren. Even if I had remembered—which I didn’t—how could I have known your daughter would be in my class? Or that you even had a daughter? It’s not as if we wasted any

time talking about our personal lives.”

I yanked a chair out from behind one of the desks and dropped into it, partially to conceal my erection, and partly because she was right. We’d done many things, but talking hadn’t been among them, except for when it came to expressing just how good we made each other feel. She was very vocal in bed. Incredibly sexy. But apparently, she was also my teenaged daughter’s favorite teacher, and most likely much younger than me. Her age hadn’t mattered for a hookup, but if she was under any illusion we might pick things back up now that she was here, that wasn’t going to happen. She’d been an indulgence, since I was away from Ruby for a night, but she couldn’t become a habit.

“If you didn’t know it was me, then why am I here?” I asked.

She pulled out another chair and sat. “We need to talk about Ruby.”

That got my back up. Ruby was a good girl. She’d never had problems before. “What about her?”

Hannah hesitated, looking pained. She cleared her throat. “Is Ruby’s mother in her life?”

“No.” I scowled. “She wasn’t interested in being a parent. It’s just me.”

Hannah drew circles on the desk with her finger. I watched, mesmerized, knowing that there was a tiny heart tattoo beneath the chunky metal ring on the middle finger of her right hand. I knew because I’d sucked it into my mouth. *Damn.*

“What about an aunt or a grandmother?” she asked, her finger never stilling.

“My mum is around, but Ruby doesn’t have any aunts. I’m an only child, and my ex-wife’s family decided it was best to keep their distance, given the circumstances.” My jaw clenched. I really didn’t want to be talking about my ex-wife, and my personal problems, with this off-limits bombshell. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

Hannah straightened, and drew in a deep breath. “We had an incident at

school today. I wanted to make you aware of it, but it's up to you what you do with the information. Ruby may be more comfortable talking about it with a woman."

I frowned. I'd done my best to be whatever Ruby needed, and I hated her insinuation that it might not be enough. "Get to the point."

"Right." She rested her elbows on the desk and leaned forward. "Ruby got her period during class. From what I understand, it was the first time. She didn't realize it was happening and bled through her uniform. I had one of her classmates take her to the health nurse to make sure she had whatever she needed, but some of the other kids teased her. Especially the boys. We managed to get her a fresh skirt so she wouldn't have to wear the stained one, but it was rough for her, and she might need to talk about it with someone who understands."

My face flushed. My poor little girl. I'd tried to have a talk with her about periods and hormones a while ago, but she hadn't wanted to listen. She'd told me that school had everything covered and she didn't need me embarrassing her more. I should have tried harder. Ruby didn't have many female friends, so I could imagine how confused and alone she'd felt. No wonder she'd been upset earlier. But why hadn't she talked to me? I'd told her hundreds of times she could come to me about anything.

"Thanks for letting me know."

Her expression turned sympathetic. "She hasn't said anything about it, has she?"

"No." The word came out sharper than intended. Something about Hannah made me feel defensive. She reminded me of everything I couldn't offer Ruby. Softness, understanding, a female perspective. I'd tried to be everything for Ruby, but apparently I'd come up short. "I'll ask her about it later today. She's in the car at the moment. She didn't want to come in." Probably because she'd known what this was about and was embarrassed. The teenage years were hard, especially for girls, and I guessed even more so

when they didn't have a woman around to normalize it for them. "Is that everything?"

Hannah nodded. "Thanks for coming in."

I stood, grateful that my hard on had subsided. "I appreciate you calling me." I hesitated, wondering if I should address the remaining tension between us. "I'm sorry for how I reacted earlier, but when you left the hotel in Wellington, I never expected to see you again. If I'd known this would happen, I wouldn't have gone there with you."

For a moment, hurt flashed across her face, but then it vanished. "Understood. I don't make a habit of sleeping with my student's fathers either, so we're on the same page."

Of course we were. I doubted she wanted her new employer knowing anything about it, and gossip in Destiny Falls traveled fast, so it would be best if neither of us mentioned it again. I tipped my head to her and left.

**HANNAH**

The next day, I still hadn't recovered from the shock of seeing Warren again. He'd been stuck in my mind all evening. God, he'd been even more striking last night than he'd been at the motorcycle show, all mussed up and covered in engine oil. Especially when I saw how much he dotes on his daughter. The man clearly adores her, and even if he was prickly toward me, I've always turned into a marshmallow around men who love kids. But what was with his attitude? He acted as though I'd tracked him down or something.

The humiliating thing was, while I hadn't consciously remembered that he lived here, I was afraid my subconscious mind had made the connection and that it might have fed into my decision to apply for the short-term maternity cover position. I tended to be clingy. I fell fast and hard for whomever I was dating, and it would be just typical for me to subconsciously recall that the gorgeous alpha male who'd made me come several times over the course of a night lived in this little tourist town, setting me up to see more of him. If I couldn't even trust my own mind, how was I supposed to make sensible decisions and protect myself from more heartbreak?

I looked up at the class, who were working on essays about a young adult novel they'd all had to read, checking whether any of them were lost or off

task. They'd been fidgety earlier. It was Valentine's Day, and they were at the age when a few of them had brought treats or cards to class for their crush. Fortunately, they now all seemed to be doing something that at least resembled essay writing. I glanced at the clock, noting there were only a couple minutes remaining before the school day ended. Much as I loved working with kids, I was always grateful for the brief period of silence at the end of the day. The bell rang, and I instructed the kids to pack their bags and place the chairs on the tables so the cleaner could vacuum the floor. They left in a rush, some of them calling goodbye or waving as they went, others not bothering with any niceties. But one girl lingered. Ruby Atwater.

"Um, could I talk to you for a minute, Miss Olson?" she asked, chewing nervously on her lower lip.

"Sure thing, Ruby. Pull up a seat."

She grabbed a chair and sunk into it. Ruby had the same dark hair and green eyes as her father, but where he was a solid, commanding presence, she seemed like she'd be perfectly happy blending into the wallpaper. From what I could tell, she got on well with most of her classmates, but wasn't especially close to any of them other than a sporty boy named Baxter. She rarely raised her hand in class, but never misbehaved either. She was polite and friendly, but didn't engage a lot. I got the feeling her heart was in sports rather than academia.

"What can I help you with?" I asked.

Ruby looked down at her lap. "I just, um, wanted to say thanks for talking to my dad." Pink spots appeared on her cheeks. "I felt way too awkward to do it myself. We had the most cringe-worthy conversation ever when we got home yesterday, but we, uh, cleared up some things and I think it really helped."

"That's great." I was so glad I'd been able to assist, even in a small way. I offered her a smile. "I was raised by a single dad too, so I know it isn't always easy, no matter how much you love each other."

She looked surprised. “You were?”

“Yeah.” I paused for a moment, wondering how much to share. I’d only been teaching for a couple of years, and sometimes, I still wasn’t sure how much to let the kids know about my personal life. “I can tell you a bit more about that, if you’d like.”

Ruby nodded shyly.

“Right, well.” I grabbed my coffee mug, realizing belatedly that it was empty. “My dad went to prison when I was little.”

Ruby’s eyes bugged out. “He did?”

“Yes. He stole a car. My mum looked after me while he was away, but she didn’t do a very good job of it, and once he was out, he got custody of me.”

She frowned. “Wouldn’t that have been hard since he’d been in jail?”

I smiled wryly. “It might have if she’d fought it, but she was happy to sign me over.”

“Kinda like my mum did?”

“I can’t say I know much about your personal situation, but it’s possible. Anyway, Dad turned his life around and I lived with him until my second year of university, when I moved in with some friends. He’s the absolute best, but he was pretty useless when I was going through puberty. He tried really hard, but there were so many things he just had no idea about.”

“Like what?” Ruby asked, obviously interested.

“Like periods, makeup, fashion, my crushes, buying my first bra. That kind of stuff.” She looked thoughtful, so I added, “Your dad can’t know what’s going on if you don’t tell him though. I know it’s difficult, but sometimes you’ll have to talk to him about things you’d rather not and trust that he’ll be supportive. From what I could tell, it seems like he cares about you a lot.”

“He does.” Her soft smile said a lot about their relationship, and my tummy dipped and swooped again. She turned her hands over on her lap and



studied her fingernails. “But there are things I need to talk to him about that I’ve been putting off because of the cringe factor.”

“Such as?” I prompted, hoping she’d trust me enough to open up, but also not knowing if it was my place. I wanted to help, but I didn’t want to get overly wrapped up in Ruby’s issues when it was clear her dad would rather have nothing to do with me.

She shrugged. “What clothes we buy, the fact my hair gets cut by a barber instead of a stylist... It sounds really shallow to bring it up, but I want a nicer haircut, and maybe some color like what you have. But Dad and I never talk about that kind of stuff and I don’t know how to mention it without it being weird.”

I pressed my lips together. Changes like that could be a big deal, and I didn’t want to overstep. “All I can say is that you should tell him how you feel. Even if it’s super awkward, the awkwardness won’t last, and you’ll both be glad you did.”

“Okay.” She straightened and got to her feet. “Thanks, Miss Olson.”

“No problem.” I smiled warmly, pleased she’d felt able to talk to me. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Bye.” She lifted a hand in farewell and headed out.

I refilled my coffee and returned to planning for the next few days of work, not emerging until there was a knock at the classroom door an hour or so later. I glanced up, then froze, surprised to see Warren Atwater framed in the doorway. My heart pitter-pattered.

*No, I told it. You don’t get to have him.*

But I wanted him. Badly.

“Hey,” he grunted.

“Hi.” I stacked my hands neatly on the desk and studied him, wondering whether he came in peace. Had Ruby rushed home to speak with him and he’d been upset by my interference? But he didn’t seem angry. On the contrary, he looked...nervous. One of his hands was out of view, but as he

walked haltingly forward, I saw he was holding a box of chocolates. My heart leapt with excitement.

“What’s this?” I asked.

He thrust the box toward me, and I scanned the front and set them down. “A thank you and an apology, all in one. I acted like a bit of an ass when I first got here yesterday, but you did me a solid with Ruby, and I wanted to make sure you know I’m grateful for that.”

“Oh.” So, nothing romantic then. Not that I’d expected as much after our previous encounter, but deep down I might have secretly wished for it. “Have you talked to Ruby yet tonight?”

“No. Why?” He sounded suspicious.

I winced. “No reason. Just asking.” I gestured toward the chocolates. “Thanks for these. They’re the closest I’ll come to getting a Valentine’s gift this year.” I’d been purposefully trying to ignore the date, focusing on work so I wouldn’t have to think about all the lucky people out there who were spending tonight with someone they cared for.

One of his eyelids twitched. “It’s not a Valentine’s gift.”

“I know.” I hid a smile. His response should bruise my ego, but his caginess was strangely endearing. “But it’s the only gift I’ve gotten today.”

His lips pursed, and he looked squirrely. “Don’t read anything into it. I’m grateful, that’s all. This isn’t romantic. You’re my daughter’s teacher, and I’m not interested in dating. Even if I was, you’re too young and—”

“And what?” I asked, mentally daring him to continue, because yeah, now my ego was bruised. I’d been making a stupid joke, and he’d taken it out of context and gotten his underwear twisted up over it. He’d said nothing could happen between us, and I respected that. But my teeth ground together because he clearly thought I wanted to be all over him. Plus, what was the deal with saying I was too young? What, so I was old enough to mess around with but not date? That was some bullshit logic.

“Aaaand I should get going.” He dragged a hand down his face and

sighed. “I can’t seem to get anything right. I’m sorry if I offended you, but what I said yesterday still stands.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Do you see me asking you to change your mind?”

“No,” he conceded.

“I didn’t think so.” I looked at my computer, effectively dismissing him. “Have a nice night, Mr. Atwater.”

As he left, I couldn’t help but wonder which was the real Warren. The passionate man I’d met in Wellington? The doting single father? Or the iceberg who consistently pushed me away?

I shouldn’t care, but I did.

**WARREN**

I'd been an ass. Again.

I just couldn't seem to help myself around the woman. She drove me insane. I hadn't meant to hurt her, and despite her snarky response, I knew I had. I'd read too much into something and overreacted. Story of my life. Usually, I had myself under control. For years, I'd compartmentalized work, home life, fatherhood, and who I was as a man. I'd never brought a woman around Ruby. As far as I knew, she'd never met any of my occasional hookups, so having Hannah suddenly occupying an important role in her life threw me for a loop. Everywhere I turned, she was there, intruding on my peace of mind.

My hands tightened on the steering wheel as I pulled up to my house, an old weather board place one street over from Destiny Falls Motors. Based on the lights shining through the window, Ruby was already there. She was a responsible kid, so I didn't mind if she hung out at home for a while in the afternoon, as long as she followed the rules. No guests. No alcohol or drugs. Nothing that would require repairs to the house or for me to apologize to the neighbors.

I parked and got out of the car, a cool breeze nipping at the exposed skin around my neck and hands, then made my way to the door and tried the

handle, pleased when it was locked. Even in Destiny Falls, bad things happened—as evidenced by the recent kidnapping of an actress who’d moved to the area—and I’d taught Ruby to always take precautions. I inserted my key into the lock and entered, smelling something delicious coming from the kitchen. Sometimes, Ruby cooked dinner. I rarely asked her to, but she knew it put me in a good mood and often cooked when she wanted to butter me up. My eyes narrowed as I followed the scent of spicy meat, wondering what she wanted.

“Hi, Dad,” she said, looking over her shoulder from where she stood at the kitchen counter, a block of cheese in one hand and a grater in the other. “Did you finish up everything you needed to at work?”

“I did.” I flicked the kettle on, figuring a cup of herbal tea wouldn’t go astray. I tried not to have caffeine after work. Ruby had been on my case about it being unhealthy. Much as I preferred coffee to tea, there wasn’t much I wouldn’t do for my baby girl. “What’s cooking?”

“Nachos.” She finished with the cheese and replaced it in the fridge, then washed her hands. “It’ll be done in a couple of minutes.” She noticed that I’d switched the kettle on. “I’ll have one too, please.”

I placed two mugs on the counter and added a teabag to each. When the kettle finished boiling, I added water. Meanwhile, Ruby served spicy ground beef onto two beds of corn chips, then added guacamole, tomato salsa, and sour cream around the edge, and lastly, sprinkled cheese on top. My stomach grumbled loudly, reminding me I hadn’t eaten since lunch.

Ruby rolled her eyes. “I swear you’re a bottomless pit.”

I rubbed my belly. “I’m a growing boy.”

“Outwardly, maybe,” she mumbled under her breath.

“Hey,” I protested. “Don’t take potshots at your old man.”

She heaved an overly dramatic teenage sigh. “I’m kidding. Mostly. You know all the mums think you’re hot.”

I pulled a face. It wasn’t the first time she’d said something like that, but I

was pretty sure she was delusional and seeing me through the rose-tinted glasses of familial love. I wasn't ugly, and I didn't tend to get self-conscious around women because I knew I could have them screaming my name regardless of how I looked, but I was realistic. I had more lines and gray hairs than I used to, and my tummy had started to soften a little, a layer of padding over the abs I used to have from hours of hard labor. It wasn't as if I was fending off the ladies with a stick. I'd given the best years of my life to Ruby, and I had no regrets about that.

"So," she said as she carried our plates to the dinner table. I joined her, placing a cup of tea in front of each of us. "There's something I wanted to talk to you about."

"Oh?" I tried to keep my tone light, but inside, I couldn't help wondering if Hannah had known this was coming, and it was why she'd asked me if I'd spoken to Ruby yet. "What's up, Rubes?"

She hesitated, looking suddenly uncertain, but then she squared her shoulders. "I want to get my hair cut somewhere else."

I sagged with relief. Thank God. She'd had me worried for a moment there. "Of course, sweetheart. I know we've used Destiny Falls Barber Shop for years, but if you want to swap to somewhere else, that's absolutely fine. You just tell me where, and we'll make an appointment."

She beamed, her teeth appearing from behind her lips. My heart warmed. I loved to see Ruby smile. She could be an overly serious kid, and sometimes I worried my surly temperament didn't help with that. "Thanks, Dad. And, um"—she drew her lower lip into her mouth, worrying it between her teeth—"next time we get new clothes, can we go out to Queenstown?"

I hesitated. Queenstown was a bit of a drive away, and more expensive than Destiny Falls, but I supposed we could make it work, as long as she had realistic expectations. "Okay. We'll need to make sure we plan out the timing though. Anything else?"

"Not exactly." She scooped up a corn chip and dipped it in guacamole.

“Just, um, yeah. So this is awkward, but I might need a bra soon.”

Frowning, I looked her up and down. She was whipcord lean. It hadn't even occurred to me to think about bras. But if that was what she wanted...

“We can talk about that when we next go shopping for clothes, unless you're in a rush?”

She shook her head, her cheeks flaming. “No rush, it's not as if I have much to work with.” Her cheeks turned even redder and she clapped a hand to her mouth. “Oh, my God, I can't believe I said that!”

I chuckled, even though it was awkward as fuck. “Don't stress, Rubes. We'll get you whatever you need.”

She peeked out from between her fingers. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” I shoveled a loaded handful of nacho meat and cheese into my mouth. “Thanks for dinner. Thought you'd soften me up?”

“Maybe,” she admitted. “But mostly I was just nervous.”

Something uncomfortable plunked in my gut. I didn't like the thought of her being anxious to approach me about anything. “Why's that?”

She stared at her meal. “It's just that we've always, like, thrown rugby balls and fixed cars together, and I love that, but I kind of want to make my hair prettier and maybe learn to paint my nails and stuff as well, and we've never done that or talked about it, and I didn't want to disappoint you.”

*Ouch.* That hit home.

“Ruby, sweetheart,”—I reached over and took her hands in mine—“you could never disappoint me. I'll always love you and accept you for who you are. If you wanted to quit rugby tomorrow, that would be okay, as long as you're happy.”

“I don't,” she said quickly. “I'm just, maybe, not as obsessed with it as I used to be.”

“There's nothing wrong with that.” Guilt squeezed my chest. Had I said or done something to make her think I wouldn't be happy if her hobbies and interests changed? “You're growing up. You're bound to want to do new

things. As long as that doesn't involve drugs, alcohol, or piercing anything other than your ears, it's fine with me."

She looked up and narrowed her eyes mischievously. "What if I wanted a tattoo?"

My mouth dropped open and I sputtered.

She burst out laughing. "You should see your face!"

"It's not funny, young lady." I used my sternest voice, but it didn't have the desired effect. She continued to giggle. "If you want a tattoo, you can damn well wait until you're eighteen."

"Sounds fair." She cocked her head, studying me with interest. "Miss Olson has tattoos. I think they make her look cool. Do you like them?"

I schooled my expression, determined not to let my impressionable daughter see exactly how much I liked her teacher—and how much I'd seen of her tattoos. There was the script on the inside of her wrist, a delicate vine of flowers on her other upper arm, and a real stunner twisting around her hip. My mouth went dry.

"I haven't noticed them," I lied. "But I'm sure they're fine."

They were better than fine. *Much* better.

"Did you notice how pretty she is?" Ruby persisted, like a dog with a goddamn bone. "I love her hair, and the way she dresses. She's not like the other teachers. She just does her own thing."

Yeah, Hannah did seem the type to do exactly what she wanted regardless of what anyone else thought. I supposed that's how we'd ended up in a hotel room together for one of the most intense nights of my life.

"Dad?" Ruby prompted. "She's pretty, right?"

"I guess so," I conceded. "I didn't pay much attention when we met yesterday."

Lies. All lies.

Ruby seemed to sense it. She smirked. "Sure you didn't. Everyone else thinks so though. Rumor has it that Mr. Carswell and Mr. Brennan both asked



her out.”

“They what?” The thought of either of those smarmy bastards—who were actually perfectly nice guys—hitting on Hannah made me want to punch something. “How do you even know that?”

She shrugged. “It’s school. Everyone gossips, even the teachers. I heard Mrs. Winston and Mrs. Trove talking about it.”

“That’s inappropriate,” I grumbled.

“What do you care?” she challenged. “You didn’t even pay attention to her.”

I sighed. Called out by my thirteen-year-old daughter. And to think, I had years more of this to look forward to.

**HANNAH**

For the next week and a half, I couldn't get Warren out of my head, even though the few times I'd seen him, he'd been distant and couldn't have seemed more disinterested if he'd tried. Ruby took to catching me after school most days to give me updates on how things were going, and in some cases, it seemed, just to chat. She managed to bring her dad into nearly every conversation, and if I didn't know better, I'd have thought she was trying to talk him up to me.

On the last Friday of summer, I met my friend, London, at the local pub, aptly named Drunken Destiny. London was also new to town. We'd met at the coffee shop and bonded over a love of caffeine and this little town we both now inhabited. Although, technically, London didn't live in Destiny Falls. She'd purchased a ramshackle farm property a few miles out of town and intended to turn it into a dog shelter and horse trekking operation.

I arrived at the pub before London, so I grabbed a menu and found a table in the corner. When London tumbled through the door, nearly tripping over her own feet, I grinned. I'd already figured out that my new friend had the coordination of a drunk puppy. She righted herself, blushing ferociously, and glanced around as if to make sure nobody had seen. Of course, everyone had. Her blush deepened, made more obvious by her fair complexion, and she

scuttled over to me.

“Hey, Hannah.”

“Hi, London.” I rose and greeted her with a hug. “Having a nice day?”

Her dark eyes darted left and right before focusing on me. “There were a few mishaps, but everything is okay now.”

I fought the urge to smile. Not only was London clumsy, but she was also accident prone. It was a sore point for her. “I’m glad it’s sorted.”

“How about you?” she asked, sinking onto a chair. “Have you had any run-ins with Sexy Daddy lately?”

I sighed. “Alas, no.”

Not that I should want to cross paths with him. It was probably for the best that he was keeping his distance, since he clearly regretted anything ever happening between us. Unfortunately, I just couldn’t seem to stop thinking about him and wishing things were different.

She pulled a face. “Never mind. Let’s get a drink and pretend we don’t care.”

“Sounds good. I’ll get them while you decide what you want to order.” I stood, ready to head to the bar, but at that moment London’s eyes boggled and she gaped in horror at the pub entrance. I looked over my shoulder and noticed Warren coming in with another man, just as gorgeous as he was. His friend stood a couple of inches shorter than Warren, and was a little leaner, with neatly trimmed blond hair and a face that wasn’t hard to look at.

London shoved her chair back and dropped to her knees, ducking behind the table.

I frowned. “What are you doing?”

“Don’t look at me,” she hissed. “Act like I’m not here. I have to go.”

I tried hard not to stare at her, but it was difficult not to acknowledge her unusual behavior. “Um, okay.”

“Can you distract them for me?” she asked, gesturing toward the men at the door.

My stomach plunged. I didn't really want to approach Warren and his friend, but London was distressed, and I couldn't leave her in the lurch. "I want an explanation later."

She nodded furiously and motioned for me to move. Plastering a smile on, I made my way to the duo and stopped in front of them.

"Hi Warren. Nice to see you here."

Grooves appeared in his forehead. He looked surprised. "Hannah."

We stood there for a moment, neither of us adding anything else.

I cleared my throat and turned to the other guy. "I don't think we've met."

"We haven't. I'm Cal." He stuck out a hand and I shook it. His grip was warm and firm. "Are you new in town?"

I nodded. "Just moved here a few weeks ago." I glanced at London and saw her crawling toward the exit. She didn't do subtle as well as she thought she did.

"Do you have someone with you?" Cal asked, glancing at our empty table.

"Nope." I hoped I sounded convincing. "Just me. All by myself. That's how I roll."

He frowned. "I could have sworn..." He shook his head. "Must be imagining things." He offered me a smile. "Would you like to join us?"

I swallowed a groan. "That would be lovely, thanks."

Warren stiffened, looking for all the world like he wanted to rescind the invitation on his friend's behalf.

*London, you owe me.*

"Let's get drinks while we look over the menu," Cal suggested, either oblivious to the tension or ignoring it. We went to the bar, waited for drinks to be poured and then returned to the table London and I had been sitting at.

"How's Ruby doing?" I asked, desperate for a topic of conversation that wouldn't get me glared at.

Warren's expression softened, and I reminded myself not to get gooey over him just because he was a doting father. "She's really good. I think whatever you've said to her has helped. She's getting better at communication, which means I have to up my game too."

"Not necessarily a bad thing," I said, remembering the times he'd been a little more abrupt with me than needed. Sure, he'd apologized, but it would be easier to avoid any unpleasantness to begin with.

Warren gave me a teasing smile. "I don't remember you having any issues with my communication the first time we met."

A spark zinged through me. Was he flirting? "I didn't."

"How do you two know each other?" Cal asked.

The gleam in Warren's eyes vanished. He straightened, breaking eye contact, and cleared his throat. "She's Ruby's new teacher."

"Oh." Cal sounded surprised. "The way you were talking, I thought it might be a more interesting story than that."

I hesitated, unsure how much Warren would want his friend to know.

"It's not," he said firmly. "She's Ruby's temporary homeroom teacher. There's nothing else between us. That's it."

Despite myself, I flinched. I'd understood that he didn't want Ruby to know about our night together, and that he'd prefer for there not to be any gossip about us. To be honest, that was probably for the best in terms of my career too, even if I didn't like staying away from him. But the way he'd shut down Cal's question shocked me. He could have said we were casual acquaintances, or any number of other things. Not to mention that Cal was apparently his friend, and he didn't seem the type to tell tales. Yet Warren had sounded angry at the mere suggestion there might be anything personal between he and I, which made it painfully clear he didn't want to be associated with me. Full stop.

Perhaps I was overreacting, but thanks to my broken childhood, mum's abandonment, and a string of shitty relationships, I didn't take rejection well,

and I wasn't about to stay where I wasn't wanted. I got to my feet.

“It's been a good chat, but we've finished catching up about Ruby, so I should leave you guys to it. I have essays to mark.” I sent them both a false smile and spun on my heel. “Have a nice night.”

**WARREN**

Damn. I'd gone and put my foot in my mouth again. My knee-jerk reactions were getting me into trouble lately, especially with a particularly pretty schoolteacher. I hated that she felt like she had to leave—even more so because I know I drove her to it. It wasn't even as though I needed to worry about Cal gossiping. I was just sensitive, and my initial reaction was to push her away. Thirteen years of not dating and making sure to only hook up with people I'd never see again had taken their toll. I didn't know how to behave like a normal person around her, but I could at least have said we were friends. I had other female friends, so Cal would have taken it in stride.

"If you have any interest in her whatsoever, you'd better go after her," Cal said. "I think you hurt her feelings."

I debated whether to go. Staying away from her would be smart, but I hated the pain I'd seen in her eyes as she'd gone. I got the impression she really was done with me as anything other than Ruby's father, and I should be grateful for that, but I wasn't. I didn't want her to give up on whatever compelling attraction existed between us. I wanted to spend more time with her. To take something for myself after years of putting Ruby's needs first.

"Damn." I stood. "Sorry to ditch you, mate, but I think you're right."

"No problem." He waved a hand. "Go."

I hurried out the door, relieved to see Hannah stalking down the street. If she'd driven here, she might have already been gone by now and I wouldn't know where to find her. For some reason, that felt unacceptable.

Her hair bounced around her shoulders as she walked, shifting every now and then to reveal a glimpse of the pink streak. As I raced to catch up with her, my gaze lingered on her backside, which was clad in tight jeans with a pink skull emblazoned on the back pocket. Definitely nothing like the teachers I'd had in school.

"Wait!" I called. "Hannah, hold on."

She glanced over her shoulder but didn't stop. If anything, she sped up. Puffing, I broke into a run. I was strong from working with my hands all day, but my aerobic fitness wasn't what it used to be and I was gasping by the time I caught her.

I put a hand on her shoulder. "Stop."

Spinning around, she cocked a brow, emotion blazing in her eyes. "Why?"

"Because..." My mouth opened and shut as I struggled to come up with a decent reason for her to give me the time of day. Clearly, 'you're my daughter's teacher' wasn't an option, and based on how badly I'd fucked things up since we'd first met, I doubted citing the screaming orgasms I'd given her would fly either. I sighed. "Just hear me out."

"Fine." She crossed her arms over her chest, shivering a little as the breeze touched her bare arms. I shrugged out of my leather jacket and offered it to her. She shook her head. "Come on," I said. "Just take it so you're not freezing while you listen to my sorry ass apologize."

Grumbling under her breath, she put it on. The jacket swamped her, falling halfway to her knees. A surge of satisfaction rushed through me at the sight of her in my clothes. The possessive monster I liked to keep under lock reared its head. Nobody could mistake the jacket for being hers, which meant everyone would know she was taken. Mine. Even if that was utterly fucking



ridiculous because she was glaring at me like she wished looks could kill. But with her little pout, it was kinda cute. Not that I'd say as much.

"I'm sorry," I said, shuffling from one foot to the other. "I didn't mean to upset you. I had a knee-jerk reaction that was uncalled for."

She folded her arms over her chest and lifted her chin. "Why did you react that way?"

I hesitated. I didn't have a good explanation at the ready. "Honestly, I'm not completely sure."

"I wouldn't have said anything about that night. You didn't have to act as though we're basically strangers."

"I know," I grumbled. "I'm sorry. I think... It's just that...." I growled in frustration, unable to find the words. Instead, I hauled her closer and kissed her. She was stiff for a moment, but then melted into the embrace. I inhaled her sweet scent and reveled in the sensation of holding her, but then she was pushing away from me, putting distance between us.

"What was that?" she demanded.

Damn. I'd screwed up again.

I dragged a hand through my hair. "I want you," I said. "I know you wouldn't have given anything away back in the bar, but *I* might have. I haven't been able to get you out of my mind, and every time I see you, it gets harder to remember why I don't do relationships."

"Oh." She deflated, her face puckered with confusion. "You know, you haven't really explained to me why you don't date. Is it because of Ruby?"

I glanced around, noticing a few people in the vicinity. "You mind if we walk while we talk? I think we have an audience."

Her lips pursed, but she nodded. We walked side by side along the pavement. I followed her lead, not sure if she was taking us back to her place or somewhere else.

"The reason I've chosen not to date anyone seriously is partly because of Ruby." I scrubbed my hand over my jaw, feeling spiky stubble against my

palm and fingertips. “I already told you how her mum left after she was born. When she got pregnant, she didn’t want to keep the baby. I persuaded her to carry her to term, and then I adopted her. She signed away parental rights, and we got a divorce. We’d been high school sweethearts and married young. We hadn’t meant to get pregnant, and there had been lots of other things she wanted to do. Travel, live footloose and fancy free. A baby got in the way of that.”

“I’m sorry, that can’t have been easy.” The sympathy in her voice felt like progress. “For you to suddenly become not only a first-time dad, but also a sole provider must have been a massive learning curve.”

“You can say that again. I wasn’t completely alone though. My parents helped out. They were amazing.”

“You’re lucky to have them.” Something in her tone sounded wistful. “So, the no-dating thing. It’s because you don’t want Ruby to get attached to someone and lose them?”

“I’m not sure how I could handle it if we started caring about someone and they left,” I admitted. “But I also don’t have a lot of time to dedicate to a relationship. I couldn’t take a woman out and give her the attention she deserved.”

“If you found the right person, it wouldn’t matter.”

I sighed. “There’s also the fact you’re young and carefree. You deserve better than to be tied down with someone like me.”

She scowled. “Shouldn’t that be for me to decide?”

I kept my mouth shut because she had a point, but since it would affect my daughter, if I dated Hannah only for her to later take off, it was a factor I couldn’t ignore.

“Besides...” She stopped walking and turned to face me. A quick check of our surroundings showed that no one was paying attention to us anymore. “My life isn’t carefree, and it never has been.” She drew in a slow breath. “You met my dad.”

“Briefly.”

“I’m not sure if Ruby has told you this or not, but he’s an ex-con. He served time for car theft.”

She outlined the whole story, including how her mother hadn’t cared enough to want to see her after her father got out. The woman’s careless attitude made me unreasonably angry. At least my ex had removed herself from Ruby’s life from the beginning, so she’d never rejected her personally the way Hannah’s mother had done to her. I didn’t understand how any parent could do that.

“So,” she concluded, “You’ve got the wrong impression of me if you think I’m the type of flake who’s going to take off when things get hard, and I like to think I know more about single parenthood than most, even if I haven’t experienced it myself.”

I was at a loss for words. When I’d chased after her, I hadn’t imagined us having this conversation. Although, to be fair, I hadn’t known what I would say if I’d caught her.

“I misjudged you,” I said eventually. “Made a generalization. I’m sorry.” I winced. “I feel like I’m always apologizing to you. How about I try to stop doing things that require an apology?”

She laughed, the sound of it lightening my spirits. “That’s a solid plan.” To my surprise—and pleasure—she smiled. “So, where’s Ruby tonight?”

“Staying at a friend’s.”

“That’s great. She deserves a little fun.”

My heart squeezed. I loved that Hannah seemed to care about Ruby. Perhaps her big heart hadn’t been the thing that had initially drawn me to her in Wellington earlier in the year, but it certainly made it more challenging to resist her. But then, was there even any point in resisting her? She wanted me, I wanted her, and she’d made some good points tonight. Besides, we could see where this went without telling Ruby, and then share the truth if we decided to pursue a relationship seriously.

After hearing Hannah's background, I trusted her not to do anything to hurt Ruby. After all, she'd once been in Ruby's shoes. If she knew what it was like to be raised by a single dad, she'd be careful about not letting Ruby down. She'd also understand that I only had so much time to go around.

I smiled. We deserved to steal a little joy for ourselves.

"So do we," I said, my nerves fizzing as I waited for her response. I moved closer to Hannah, inhaling her bubblegum scent. "Can you forgive me for being an ass?"

She placed her hands on my chest. She must have been able to feel how wildly my heart was hammering. "Only if you promise to talk to me any time you feel the urge to push me away. I know I've been a bit defensive, which hasn't helped things, but we can talk our way through any problems."

"Good." I curved a hand around the back of her neck and rested the other on her hip. "Can I kiss you?"

She smirked, although the way her pupils dilated let me know she wasn't immune to my nearness. "You're asking permission this time?"

I flushed. "Yeah."

"Good." She grinned. "You might want to take us somewhere private. I feel like I've been waiting to get you naked again forever."

I grinned. "You got it, sweetheart."

**HANNAH**

Warren took me to his place, because he wanted to be home in case Ruby needed him. When we arrived, I soaked up every bit of information I could glean from it. The house was a small weather board, similar to mine, but far homier inside. I didn't see much of the living areas as we passed through, except to note that they were a little untidy and well lived in, and then Warren was leading me into his bedroom and shutting the door. I closed my eyes and inhaled. The room smelled of him, masculine with a hint of engine oil. Surprisingly, the bed was neat and there wasn't any dirty laundry on the floor. From what I'd seen, it was the tidiest room in the house. Perhaps it was his refuge.

He turned after the door clicked shut and I pressed myself against his strong body, burying my face in his chest. It was as broad and strong as I remembered.

"Hannah," he murmured, steering me back toward the bed. "Do you want me to make you scream again?"

I nodded eagerly, overcome by his nearness and gloriously male scent. "Yes." My hands explored the planes of his chest and journeyed down to his waist. I grasped the bottom hem of his shirt and yanked it up. Eyes on mine, he pulled it over his head, exposing miles of sexy, tattooed skin, covered by a

layer of body hair. I ran my fingers through the hair, loving how rough it felt against them. Everything about him appealed to me, from his wide shoulders to his tapered waist, the slight softness of his abdomen, and his thick thighs. I wanted to climb him like a tree. To rub myself against him shamelessly, and to roll around in his bed until I was covered in his unique scent.

I settled for pulling his head down to mine and claiming his lips. We kissed wetly. Hotly. All clashing tongues and gasped breaths. He continued to back me toward the bed, peeling his jacket off my shoulders and tossing it aside before pausing long enough to get my approval to strip off my shirt. My lips parted as he stared at my upper body in awe. His eyes were nearly black, with thin green rings around dilated pupils. I threw my shoulders back to give him a better look. My breasts were encased in a sheer pink bra, and his gaze lingered on them until my nipples formed peaks, then it dipped to follow the winding cherry blossom branches that started at the center of my torso and wrapped around my left hip.

“You are so sexy,” he muttered. “Even better than I remembered.”

While his eyes were on me, I undid the fly of my jeans and wriggled out of them, revealing the panties that matched my bra. I was a big believer in wearing things that made me feel good, and matching underwear fell into that category, regardless of whether I expected someone to see them or not. They were something I wore for myself.

Spurred into motion, Warren thrust his own jeans down. His erection tented his boxers, impressive in its length and girth. My mouth watered.

“See something you like?” he asked gruffly.

I raised my eyes to his. “You know I do.”

The smile that curved his lips was softer than I expected. “Always nice to be reminded. It’s not like I’ve seen much action since Ruby was born.”

I liked knowing I was one of the few he’d allowed to see this side of him; especially when I was pretty sure I was the only one he’d wanted more than one night with.

“You’re gorgeous,” I told him, smoothing my hands over the curves and angles of his body. “The hottest man I’ve ever been with.”

His smile turned wry.

“I mean it,” I told him.

He tipped my head back and kissed me. I moaned as his tongue stroked mine and my entire body went up in flames. My bra and panties came off, and his boxers hit the floor. I started to drop to my knees, eager to get my mouth on him, but he picked me up and tossed me onto the bed. Before I could recover from the caveman move he’d pulled, his shoulders were wedged between my thighs and his tongue was buried in me.

“Oh, God.” I threw my head back, my hands gripping the ends of his hair.

“Yeah,” he growled, his voice vibrating against my sensitive flesh. “Just like that. Take what you need from me.”

I raised myself onto my elbows, then trembled, overwhelmed by the sight of his dark head against my pale skin. His eyes burned into mine as he lapped and sucked and teased.

“Please,” I said. “I need you inside me, but only if you promise not to freak out tomorrow.”

It wasn’t fair of me to ask, but I wasn’t sure I could handle the sting of rejection after I’d opened myself up to him.

“I won’t,” he said, pulling away for long enough to rustle in a drawer for a condom and sheath himself. Then he was back, pressing into me, bit by bit, filling my body at the same time as his tender smile filled my heart. That smile promised all kinds of things, and I was just fool enough to believe them.

I cried out as he settled deep within me. Holding his weight off my body, he leaned over and kissed me. Then he started to move. I clasped him tight, rocking with him, urging him on with sounds and touches. Even though we’d only spent one night together, we moved as though we’d done this a hundred times before. Seamlessly, our bodies perfectly in sync. I dragged his face

back to mine for a desperate kiss and the taste of him drove me over the edge. I whimpered and shuddered as pleasure tore through me. Warren stiffened, and I felt him jerk inside me before he stilled.

For a moment, we caught our breaths in silence, then he got off me and disposed of the condom. The sweat cooled on my skin, and nerves began to crowd my stomach. Was this the part where he changed his mind about everything?

But he didn't ask me to leave. Instead, he crawled onto the bed behind me and wrapped his arms around me, kissing the side of my neck.

"Want to order some dinner?" he asked.

I giggled, recalling that neither of us had yet managed to eat, even though we'd both gone to the pub with that intention. "That sounds really good."



**HANNAH**

“Wakey wakey, beautiful.”

I murmured in my sleep and rolled over, burying my face in a pillow.

“Come on, sweetheart.” A hand landed on my shoulder. “Time for breakfast.”

That voice. Why was it so familiar?

I became rigid as the events of last night rushed back to me.

Drunken Destiny.

London crawling for the exit.

My awkward conversation with Warren and Cal.

Warren coming after me.

Our heart to heart.

Falling into bed.

All the deliciousness that followed.

I stretched, enjoying the way my muscles loosened, and rolled onto my back, looking up into a pair of bright green eyes set in a rugged face. My cheeks flushed as I realized I’d have beard burn today from that sexy black scruff rubbing over my skin.

“Hi.”

He smiled back, his expression soft. “Hi.”

If I'd been worried how he'd react this morning, those concerns evaporated. He clearly wasn't upset, and he didn't seem to be blowing hot and cold, or to have any regrets.

"I'm making pancakes," he said. "The first one is about to go into the pan."

"Pancakes?" I perked up. I didn't usually do much for breakfast beyond coffee, but I loved a good pancake.

"With chocolate chips," he added sheepishly. "Because that's how Ruby likes them, and they've grown on me too."

"Sounds good." I sat up, the sheets pooling around my waist, and enjoyed the flare of desire in his eyes. Ignoring the urge to tempt him back into bed, I got up and pulled on yesterday's clothes.

"Sorry I don't have a change of clothes for you," he said. "I doubt anything of Ruby's would fit."

"Probably not. But it doesn't bother me. I wouldn't mind brushing my hair and using some mouthwash though."

He nodded. "Go for it. You know where the bathroom is. Come find me in the kitchen when you're done."

"Thanks." I stretched onto my toes to kiss his cheek, then excused myself to take care of business and do a little primping.

When I joined Warren in the kitchen, he was pouring two mugs of coffee, adding a spoonful of sugar and a splash of milk to mine.

I grinned. "I can't believe you remember how I like my coffee."

He looked a little embarrassed. "It wasn't that long ago we shared a breakfast."

I pressed my lips together to refrain from pointing out that most people wouldn't remember someone's coffee preference from nearly two months ago. It was sweet that he did. "So, do you have pancakes often? They smell great."

He passed me a mug and took the other for himself, glancing at the

skillet. “Most weekends we’ll have them either Saturday or Sunday. It’s kind of a tradition.”

I melted a little more inside. “That’s a nice tradition. When are you expecting Ruby home?”

“She messaged earlier to say it would be just after lunch.”

“I’ll make sure to clear out before then.” We had a new ease with each other, and I didn’t want to ruin that by hanging around and making him uncomfortable.

“Thanks.” He leaned over and kissed my cheek, then flipped a pancake. He went to the pantry and returned with a bottle of maple syrup and two plates. I sipped my coffee, then froze, hearing faint noises outside. There was a metallic click and the sound of a door opening, followed by a voice.

“Hi, Dad. I came home early because the Carswells had family drop by to visit.” Footsteps bounced through the entrance and then Ruby appeared in the kitchen doorway. Her eyes widened almost comically, darting back and forth from her bare-chested father to me.

“Oh, wow,” she squeaked, throwing her hands over her eyes. “Oh, my God. I didn’t need to see that. I’m mentally scarred.”

An inappropriate laugh burst out of me, and I covered my mouth and turned to Warren, horrified that we’d been outed so quickly after all of my reassurances that we’d make sure Ruby wasn’t hurt by what we were doing. I wasn’t sure whether I should leave so he could explain this to his daughter—or deny it. His jaw was slack, and he looked stunned, but then he straightened his shoulders.

“Morning, Rubes. This is unexpected.”

“Put a shirt on!” she exclaimed. “Jeez, Dad.”

He glanced at me and rolled his eyes. “Not like you haven’t seen it before.”

“Yeah, but not when Miss Olson was here, staring at you like a tasty snack,” she snarked back.

My face heated. “Should I go?”

“No.” He held up a hand. “Wait a sec and I’ll grab a shirt.”

He hurried away, and Ruby dropped her hands from her face, which was blazing red.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” she said. “I didn’t bother sending a message to say I was coming home earlier because I didn’t know he’d have company. He never does. Like, ever.”

“Thanks, Rubes,” Warren said, striding back into the room. “Way to make me sound like a loser.”

“You’re not.” She turned to me. “He’s really not, I swear. He’s an awesome dad, and I know the mums think he’s good looking.”

Warren released a hard-done-by sigh. “You’re not selling me, kid.” He turned off the cooktop and removed the skillet, presumably so he could give his full attention to his daughter. “Right. Okay.” He sounded like a man about to go to the executioner’s chair, but he still hadn’t asked me to leave or immediately denied anything, so I counted that as a win—although I knew this was far from the way—or time—he’d have liked Ruby to find out about us. “Rubes, you know Miss Olson. Hannah.”

She nodded, and waggled her fingers in an awkward wave.

“Hannah and I are dating. It’s very new, and we didn’t mean for you to discover us like this. I know it might be a bit strange for you since she’s your teacher, but we’d like to hear what you think.”

To my surprise, Ruby beamed. “I think it’s great. I mean, it’s kind of a surprise, but as long as I don’t get treated differently at school, I’m happy if you’re happy, Dad.”

“Really?” A furrow formed between his eyebrows. “That seemed too easy.”

Ruby laughed. “I’ve been trying to get you to date someone for, like, months now, but this is the first time it’s worked.”

“Huh?” His frown deepened.

“You’re lonely,” she said. “You hide it well, but I can tell, and I’ve been trying to mention nice ladies whenever I meet them, but you never pay attention.” She ducked her head, then added, “I was kind of hoping you might spark with Miss Olson, but figured you’d probably just not notice her like all the others.”

He looked baffled, and I couldn’t resist the urge to giggle. Poor Warren. Ruby had been trying to parent trap him and he’d been completely oblivious.

“You’re really okay with this?” he asked.

She nodded. “Yeah, Miss Olson is nice.” She smiled at me shyly. “I’m glad she’s the one you finally decided to date.”

“Aw, come here.” I pulled her into a hug that probably wasn’t student-teacher appropriate, but forget that. Ruby was Warren’s daughter, and I wanted her to be more than just another of my students.

When we parted, she glanced at Warren. “Can we do a movie day today? It’d be cool to spend time together, all three of us.”

For a moment, he looked like a deer in the headlights, but then the corners of his eyes crinkled. “Yeah, Rubes. We can do that.”

So instead of eating pancakes in the kitchen, we ate them in front of an action comedy film. Ruby snorted with laughter and gave us a running commentary. My heart felt full to bursting. I couldn’t help thinking that being here, with them, was exactly how I wanted to spend my time. Perhaps I’d finally found what I’d been looking for in Warren and Ruby. It wasn’t the family I’d envisioned for myself, but picturing myself with them into the future, it felt so much better.

**WARREN**

Dating Hannah turned out to be surprisingly easy. She and Ruby got along well, sometimes even ganging up on me. We didn't bother trying to hide our budding relationship since the cat was out of the bag, so we spent a lot of time as a group. For the most part, Hannah joined Ruby and I for dinner and games or television after work. We went out on the weekends twice—once for a hike, and another to visit her friend London, who had horses Ruby had been dying to see.

It was nice—although that word couldn't accurately capture the deep contentment I felt when I saw Hannah and Ruby laughing together. During those moments, I was filled with hope that our relationship might work out and the three of us could be family. I wanted that so badly, but I was afraid to reach out and take it.

I knew Hannah had some issues around abandonment and rejection because of her mother, and while I was careful not to say anything that might trigger her insecurities, I was also hesitant to make the final jump and go all in. Probably because I'd kept my heart locked away for so long. Hopefully she'd be patient with me.

Ruby and I were making pizza when there was a knock at the door and then Hannah entered. She was grinning from ear to ear. I ached to sweep her

into an embrace but settled for kissing her cheek since my daughter was in the room.

“Guess what,” she said, bouncing on the spot. “I have news.”

“What is it?” Ruby asked, setting a flat piece of dough aside and reaching for another.

“The principal pulled me aside after class today and said they’ve had really good feedback about me from the students and teachers.”

“That’s great,” I said, pleased that her efforts were being recognized. She put her whole heart and soul into teaching those kids.

“But that’s not the best part.” Hannah leaned over to sniff the sauce I was cooking for the pizza. “Mm. Smells good. Anyway, she said that the school board has done some rejigging and rearranging of the budget and staffing, and they’re able to offer me a permanent position.”

Excitement and apprehension crashed into me in equal measure. My hands slipped and I nearly dropped the ladle in the sauce. She’d been offered a job. Surely that meant I could stop being so worried she might turn around and leave. But I couldn’t be sure where her head was at. What if this wasn’t what she wanted? Perhaps she was happy because of the positive feedback more so than the offer. Our relationship was so new and I didn’t want her to make any major, life-changing decisions based on it. What if she regretted them and ended up leaving further down the road, after we’d had more time to grow attached to her?

“Yay!” Ruby rushed around the counter and hugged Hannah, apparently having no similar concerns. “Does that mean I’ll get to keep you as my teacher? And that you’ll be staying in Destiny Falls?”

“I’m not a hundred percent sure yet whether I’d keep my current classes after the maternity cover is finished or if I’d move somewhere else. The details haven’t been worked out, but they said they’ll have a contract for me to look over on Monday, if I’m interested.”

“Ooh I hope you’ll keep teaching our class. That would be awesome.”

“I told her about our relationship too,” Hannah added. “She’s going to put it on the record but says it isn’t an unusual situation considering the size of the town, and she didn’t seem concerned.”

“That’s good to hear.” I knew she’d been anxious about how her boss might react.

“It is.” Hannah cocked her head. “So, what do you think? Exciting news?”

“Definitely.” I switched off the stove, so I had something to do with my hands. “We should open a bottle of wine to celebrate.”

“Can I have some?” Ruby asked.

I laughed. “You know the answer to that, young lady. Maybe in a few years.”

Ruby shrugged as if to say ‘worth a shot.’ “Anything else you need me to do before dinner, Dad?”

I noted that she’d already rolled the pizza bases, grated a small pile of cheese, and diced the other toppings. “Nah, you go do your homework, Rubes. We’ll finish everything in here.”

She gave me a thumbs up and left the room.

Hannah rounded the counter. “Should we start assembling these?”

“Sure. I’ll spread the sauce and you can add whatever you’d like.”

She nodded and stood back while I ladled sauce onto each pizza base.

“You don’t seem very enthusiastic about the job offer,” she observed.

“I’m glad they made it,” I said, keeping my tone neutral. “You deserve it.”

“Yeah.” She crossed her arms. “But do you actually want me to accept it?”

I accidentally slopped sauce onto the counter, surprised by the question. My instincts blared at me to yell that yes, of course I would like her to accept it and stay in Destiny Falls with us, but I didn’t want to pressure her. Whatever came next, it was important that it was her own decision.



“Sweetheart,”—I placed my hands on her shoulders and kissed her forehead—“I don’t want you to make your decision based on us. Or for our relationship to be a factor. Just think about what you want, and go for it. If that means staying here, great. If not, that’s okay too.”

She stiffened. “Do you even care which way I decide?”

“Of course I do.” More than she could imagine. Damn, I was fumbling this. “But I don’t want you to choose to stay for our sake and regret it.”

She pulled away. “I *want* to factor you into my decision, but the way you’re talking makes me wonder if you’d do the same for me, and if you actually see a future for us. Because if we’re going to build something together, it should be taken for granted that I’d consider the impact on our relationship.”

I didn’t like the flash of hurt in her eyes. I reached for her, but she slipped away. “I care about what’s best for you, Hannah. And what’s best for Ruby.”

At that moment, Ruby bounced back into the room, interrupting the conversation. She didn’t seem to notice the tension in the air. “Hannah, can you come and explain part of the homework to me please?”

Hannah backed away from me even further. “You got it. I’ll be there in a minute.”

Ruby nodded and hurried back to her room. Hannah turned away. I considered pushing the conversation, but I got the impression it would be better to give her time to think, and then try again.

I cooked the pizzas and then we ate together at the table. Afterward, all three of us huddled onto the couch to watch a movie. When Hannah left at the end of the night, I knew things weren’t resolved. She’d been too quiet.

“What’s wrong?” Ruby asked as the door shut behind Hannah.

I sighed. “Relationship stuff, kiddo.”

She scrunched her nose. “Like what?”

I cocked an eyebrow. “You really want to know?”

“Yeah.” Her expression said I was stupid to ask. “I want Hannah to stick

around, so fixing whatever you did wrong is kinda important.”

I scowled. “What makes you think I did something wrong?”

“Dad, please.”

I rolled my eyes. “I think she was upset about how I reacted to her job offer.”

“You were a bit weird about it,” she said. “Like, you were saying the right things but didn’t seem to feel it. Don’t you want her to stay with us?”

“Of course.” I went to the kitchen and poured myself a glass of water, with Ruby following. “But I want her to do it because it’s what makes her happy, not because she thinks she should, or because we’d like her to.”

Ruby cocked her head as though thinking over my statement. “I see where you’re coming from,” she said. “But think about it from her point of view. She’s used to people leaving, or not wanting her. First, her dad went to prison, then her mum left, and wasn’t she dumped only a few months ago? I mean, maybe she just wanted you to say it’d be nice to have her around. She’s probably not used to feeling like people want her in their lives.” She reached for what was left of Hannah’s glass of wine, and I swatted her hand away. “Don’t you think?”

Huh. Ruby’s words made sense. For someone who was accustomed to being left, Hannah had probably seen my refusal to ask her to stay as another form of rejection. Yet again, I’d unwittingly hurt her.

“When did you get so wise, Rubes?”

She grinned. “So, are you going to fix it?”

“Yeah.” I grinned. “Yes, I am.”

**HANNAH**

I was moping in bed when my phone buzzed with a call from London. I considered not answering, but that would only make her worry, and a worried London was a distracted London. She was dangerous enough to her own health without any assistance.

I picked up. “Hey, London.”

“Hi, Hannah-Banana. Did I wake you?”

“No, you’re fine.”

“Good. Are you okay?” She sounded uncharacteristically hesitant.

“I’m fine.” I would be. I’d overreacted last night. Again. I’d wanted Warren to be as over the moon by the job offer as I had been, and his apparent ambivalence had hit me hard. I could see in hindsight that he’d been trying to approach it responsibly, but damn it, sometimes a girl just needed to know she was wanted.

“Cool, cool. So, are you interested in coming on a hike with me today?”

I laughed. “Who are you and what have you done with my friend?”

While London was an animal person, she was generally not interested in the outdoors unless she was perched astride a horse.

“Hey,” she protested. “It’s a sunny day, and we’ll be heading into winter in a few weeks, so I thought it’d be nice to get out and make the most of it,

but if you'd rather not, that's fine."

"I'm teasing," I said. "I'm up for a hike." It'd be a good way to distract myself from Warren, and the fact I probably owed him an explanation for being so tense last night. "When and where?"

"How about at the trail that begins behind Destiny Fibers in an hour?"

"Perfect. See you then."

I hung up and dragged myself out of bed, knowing I had a bit to do before meeting London. I ate breakfast, changed, finished a few chores, and rode my Ducati to the meet up point. As expected, London hadn't arrived yet. As well as being accident prone, she also seemed incapable of being on time. I found her disorganized nature endearing, but not everyone did.

She pulled up ten minutes late and spilled out of her car, smearing sunscreen onto her face. She took a few steps toward me, then noticed her shoelaces were untied and bent to fix them.

"Sorry, one of the dogs was having a temper tantrum, and I had to deal with him before I left. Ready to go?" she asked.

"No problem." I pointed at a smear of white on her nose. "You've got a little...."

She rubbed the lotion in. "Thanks."

"So, which trail are we taking?" I asked. I hadn't done as much exploring of the local trails as I'd have liked, but I figured I'd have plenty of time to do that now that I planned to stay long term.

"This one." London gestured toward a well-maintained trail that disappeared into the trees. "It splits halfway, part of it leading to the waterfall and the other to the tarn. I thought we could go to Destiny Falls today. Does that work for you?"

"Sure." We started walking. I went first, a water bottle in one hand, scouting for anything that might pose a threat to London's terrible coordination. She tripped and stumbled a few times, but didn't seem bothered by it. I imagined she was used to bumping her way through life at this point.

“Have you heard the old story about Destiny Falls?” London asked from behind me.

I shook my head. “Don’t think so.”

She swore under her breath, but when I glanced back, she appeared to be in one piece. “So, the story goes that when this town was a mining village, one of the miners fell in love with a woman from a higher class who was engaged to someone else through an arranged marriage her parents had set up. Supposedly, the night before her wedding, the woman and her forbidden lover came up to the waterfall and married in secret. They eloped, and rumor has it, they lived a full and happy life somewhere far away.”

“That’s romantic.” I wondered what it would feel like to love someone so deeply that you’d run away from everything you’d ever known to be with them. I’d like to feel that kind of love someday.

We continued up the trail, stopping occasionally to catch our breaths, and once when London slipped in a patch of mud and landed on her butt. Finally, I could hear rushing water.

“We must be getting near,” I said.

London checked her phone. “According to the map, it’s just around the corner.”

As the waterfall came into view, stunning, with several tiers spilling bluish water, surrounded by emerald green moss, so too did something else. Or rather, someone. Two someones. I blinked and rubbed my eyes, but they were still there. Warren and Ruby, each wearing shorts and T-shirts and holding a banner with big block letters that read: ‘Please Stay.’

My hand flew to my mouth.

“Go!” I felt a hand on my shoulder, pushing me toward them.

I moved forward on shaky legs, my eyes darting from Warren’s rugged face to the banner and up to Ruby’s massive smile, then back again. “What’s going on?”

Warren handed his corner of the banner to Ruby and strode to me,

stopping a couple of feet away.

“We want you to take the teaching job and stay with us in Destiny Falls,” he said.

Emotion tightened my throat. “You do?”

He nodded. “Ruby and I talked last night, and there’s nothing that would make us happier.” He took another step forward and grasped my hands in his. “I’m falling for you, Hannah. I know it’s early days, and I don’t want to push you, but it’s important for you to know how I feel—how *we* feel—and the fact that we want you here.” He raised one of my hands and kissed the back of it. “Say you’ll stay?”

Joy overflowed in my heart, and a solitary tear trailed down my cheek. He wanted me to stay. He cared enough to ask for it. And based on the way Ruby was beaming behind us, she did too.

“You’re both so amazing,” I cried, flinging myself into his arms. “Yes, I’ll stay. Nothing would make me happier.”

I buried my face in his chest and sank into him. I could happily have remained there forever because, for the first time I could remember, I felt like I belonged. I drew back and gestured for Ruby to join us. With a shy smile, she piled onto the group hug.

“I’m so glad I met you,” Warren said, brushing a kiss over my cheek and then planting another on the top of Ruby’s head.

“I’m glad I met both of you,” I said, meaning it. Perhaps this wasn’t what I’d envisioned for myself when I moved to Destiny Falls, but I wouldn’t have it any other way.

“I’m your favorite though, right?” Ruby asked, and we all laughed.

## **EPILOGUE – NEW YEAR’S EVE**

### **WARREN**

“Not long to go now,” Sam said, from where he and my father, Jimmy, sat side by side on the sofa in our living room. A game of rugby was on TV, but it was an old one and I didn’t think either of them was paying much attention to it. They were too busy talking motorbikes. This was the first time we’d introduced our in-laws to each other, and it was going better than I could have hoped. Sam and Jimmy had a lot in common, and Mum seemed to like Hannah’s dad well enough, although she’d spent most of the evening with Ruby, showing her how to use the lip gloss and concealer she’d gotten for Christmas.

It still felt strange seeing my little girl with makeup, but she was fourteen now, and it made her happy. As Hannah had pointed out, it was better to introduce things like makeup in small quantities in a supportive environment so she could experiment and figure out what she liked rather than banning her from using it and risking her feeling like she had to keep secrets from us. There were definitely benefits to co-parenting with my now live-in girlfriend, who was far more familiar with the world of teenage girls than I’d ever be.

“Five minutes until the new year,” Hannah said, slipping an arm around my waist.

I exchanged a glance with Ruby, who knew exactly what I was planning

in five minutes. The past year with Hannah had been the best of my life. I was so glad I'd gotten my head out of my ass and opened my heart to her after she turned up in Destiny Falls. I hated to think of a life without her, and hopefully, soon, I wouldn't ever have to again. I held Hannah tight to my side and kissed her forehead. Across the room, Ruby gave me a subtle thumbs up.

We'd opted to spend New Year's Eve at our place rather than going to either the local event at Drunken Destiny or the fancy party at the ski resort, which would cater mostly to tourists. It was nice to get to know each other better in this setting.

"I'm starting a countdown," Ruby said, tapping away on her phone.

I checked my watch. Two minutes to go.

"Thank you all for coming," I said to our family. "It means a lot to have you here."

"Wouldn't miss it for anything," Dad replied, raising a beer. He and Sam clinked their bottles against each other.

One minute.

We gathered in a circle. Sam and Dad on the sofa, Mum and Ruby on armchairs, and Hannah and I standing between them.

Ruby started calling out. "Ten, nine, eight..."

I reached into my pocket and wrapped my fingers around the small velvet box inside it.

"Seven, six, five..."

I turned to face Hannah and dropped to one knee.

"Four, three, two..."

She stared at me with wide hazel eyes. My heart brimmed with love for her. She'd danced into our lives a little less than a year ago and made everything so much better.

"Hannah," I said, flipping the box open as Ruby's countdown ended. "Will you marry me?"

"Yes," she whispered, taking the box from me. Her smile wobbled. Was



that a good thing? “It’s beautiful.” She closed the box and wrapped a hand in mine, pulling me to my feet. I swept her into a kiss, but kept it brief since Ruby and our parents were watching avidly.

“I love you.” I brushed her hair off her forehead and held her beautiful gaze. “Stay with us, forever.”

“I’d love to.”

Ruby pounced on her, breaking the thread of tension between us. “I helped choose the ring,” she said. “Do you like it?”

Laughing, Hannah opened the box again, took the ring out, and slid it onto her finger. The band was platinum, and a little quirky, like her.

“It’s beautiful,” Hannah said. “I love you guys. Thank you for making me part of your family.”

*Family.*

The word settled in my heart and warmed me from the inside out. That’s what we were, and what we always would be. I had faith in our love lasting a lifetime. We may not always be perfect, but together, we were strong enough to get through anything.

THE END

Looking for another feel-good small town romance set in Destiny Falls? In [Everything I Dreamed Of](#), sparks fly between chaotic, accident-prone London and strait-laced veterinarian Cal. [Grab your copy today](#), or check out the excerpt on the next page!

## **EXCERPT FROM EVERYTHING I DREAMED OF**

### ***CAL***

I was beyond curious about my first appointment of the day. I'd heard rumors that a rich woman from the city had purchased one of the ramshackle farm properties outside of Destiny Falls with plans to convert it into a riding school, horse trekking company, and dog shelter, but I hadn't put much stock in the stories at first. In my experience, much of the local gossip ended up having no roots in reality. But when my receptionist had told me the lady in question had requested a full checkup of the first two horses to arrive, I'd realized I'd been wrong.

As I pulled my Ute onto the gravel drive and arrived at the dilapidated farmstead, I shook my head in disbelief. Surely, the woman wasn't actually living here. The house was in terrible condition, with holes in the roof and rotten boards aplenty. At least there was a group of guys from the local contracting firm already working on it. Perhaps the place would be livable in a few weeks.

I parked on a flat lawn near the house and raised a hand in greeting to the contractors, who waved back. I rounded the house, assuming the stables were behind, and hoping against hope that they weren't in the same condition as the house. As far as I knew, the previous owner of this property hadn't had horses. Or, if they did, they'd used a different veterinarian.

I breathed a sigh of relief as the stables came into view. Unlike the house, they appeared to have been recently built. Four stalls fronted onto a corral, and based on the size of the building, the tack and storage rooms must be located behind the stalls. Two mares—one bay and one chestnut—were grazing in the corral. When I approached the fence, the bay mare sauntered over, ears flicked forward, and extended her neck for a pat. I rubbed her muzzle and she snickered. On first inspection, she looked healthy. Bright eyes, a glossy sheen on her coat, and a well-proportioned body. The chestnut mare kept her distance, but from what I could tell, she seemed to be in good condition too.

I considered beginning the checkup but decided I ought to talk to the client before getting started. She'd said to meet her here, but she might have lost track of time. A pet peeve of mine. I headed to the building and knocked on the door behind the stalls. No answer. I opened it and found myself in a dim corridor. I closed the door and walked past a feed room and four stalls before reaching the tack room at the other end of the corridor. A woman was perched on a ladder several feet off the ground, fussing with some kind of equipment. I paused to appreciate the view. Her hair, a rich shade of chocolate brown, hung to just above her backside, which was encased by a pair of faded jeans.

"Hello," I said.

She spun, giving me a glimpse of familiar dark eyes, before she shrieked and toppled off balance. The ladder rocked dangerously. I set down my traveling kit and raced forward, arms out, but I wasn't fast enough to catch her before she hit the ground with a thud, landing on her ass. She groaned and squeezed her eyes shut.

A jolt of recognition hit me. That angular face. Those high cheekbones, and long, slim figure. It was the woman I'd met at the fundraiser a month ago. She'd been having a bad evening, and I'd bought her a glass of wine and tried to get her to open up but she'd been more interested in talking about

animals and the charity than herself. At the end of the night, I'd been tempted to give her my number, but I did my best to keep my personal life a tidy, drama-free zone, and despite her sweet nature, she'd set off all of my longstanding 'danger' alarms, so I'd held back.

"Are you okay?" I asked, hovering over her. "I didn't mean to scare you."

To my surprise, she laughed. "It doesn't take much. I'm easily startled." She picked herself up and dusted off her bottom. A faint blush turned her cheeks pink. "It's Cal, right?"

I backed away, shocked to find myself staring. I'd thought her pretty at the fundraiser, but she was even more attractive dressed in casual clothes and smelling faintly of hay.

"That's right. I'm surprised you remember."

Her lips twisted wryly. "Unfortunately, that night is imprinted on my memory."

"Hopefully I'm not the worst part of it."

Her smile warmed. "Definitely not."

I scanned her, checking for injuries. "Do you need to lie down?" She seemed unharmed, but appearances could be deceiving. "I can get you an ice pack if you tell me where you keep them."

She shook her head. "Please, just let me forget it happened. I wish I could say it was the first time I've taken a tumble this week, but it wasn't, and I doubt it'll be the last. It's just the way I am."

Hmm, was that an indication my gut feeling about her had been right?

I heard a noise outside and frowned. Now that the adrenaline from my initial reaction was fading, it occurred to me that her scream and the ensuing thump might have upset the horses.

"We need to see if the mares are all right," I told her, grabbing my kit and heading for the exit. "Sudden noises can make them anxious. You need to be careful to keep them as settled as possible. Horses can be finicky creatures."

She pulled a face. "It was an accident. Anyway, aren't you here early? I

could have sworn our appointment isn't until ten."

I glanced at my watch. "It's ten-fifteen."

"Oh." Her tone changed from defensive to defeated. "Sorry, time must have gotten away from me."

I pushed the door open and jogged down the steps and around to the corral, where, fortunately, neither horse seemed distressed. "Do you mind if I go in?"

"Go for it." She waited for me to open the gate, then followed me, mumbling an oath as she tripped over a clump of grass just inside the enclosure.

I mentally congratulated myself for past choices. Despite the attraction, I had a feeling I'd been right not to pursue London. She was scattered. Possibly in need of someone who'd take care of her. After a tumultuous childhood, where I'd been more of a parent to my mother than she'd been to me, it was important to me that I be equal partners with anyone I dated. I'd had enough of being responsible for someone else to last a lifetime. My mom was finally on the straight and narrow and I didn't need any more one-way relationships.

Slowly, I moved toward the bay mare, pulling a treat from my pocket. I offered it to her, and when she accepted, I edged closer still and began a slow, methodical assessment of her current state. I talked London through my observations as I worked, but it soon became clear she didn't understand half of what I was telling her.

"Will you be the primary carer for the horses?" I asked hesitantly. "Or is there someone else who should be here too?"

Her eyes narrowed. "If you're worried that I'm clueless, you don't need to be. I've employed somebody to manage the stables and ensure the horses are well taken care of. Unfortunately, she had a delay and won't arrive until tomorrow."

Thank God. Her affection for the animals was clear, but I had to admit, I was pleased someone else would be responsible for their wellbeing.

I finished the checkups and London walked with me back to my car.

“So, what made you want to open a riding school?” I asked, for the sake of conversation.

“Honestly, the horse treks are more the driving force for opening the stables, not the riding school.” For once, she didn’t sound defensive. “Given how many tourists visit the area, it should be popular and bring in some money. I’ve always wanted to run a dog shelter, but they don’t pay for themselves. The stables will hopefully cover the cost of running the shelter and keep me fed and housed. As you may have noticed,” she added wryly, “I’m not an expert with horses, which is why I’ve hired other people to work in that area. The shelter will be my main focus, but it’s important to get the stables operational first, since they’ll pay the bills.”

I nodded, surprised by her candor and businesslike approach. Perhaps she wasn’t as scattered as I’d feared.

As we got to my car, she reached over to help me with my kit and her forehead smacked mine. I rubbed the throbbing skin and winced at the tenderness.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” Her phone beeped and she flinched. “Oh, damn. I’m running late for another appointment. Thanks for coming, but I’d better go.” She gave me a little wave and hurried off.

I sighed. London definitely wasn’t a good fit for me, no matter how endearing she was. She’d drive me crazy within a week.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alexa Rivers writes about genuine characters living messy, imperfect lives and earning hard-won happily ever afters. Most of her books are set in small towns, and she lives in one of these herself. She shares a house with a neurotic dog and a husband who thinks he's hilarious. When she's not writing, Alexa enjoys travelling, baking cakes, eating said cakes, cuddling fluffy animals, drinking copious amounts of tea, and absorbing herself in fictional worlds.

You can keep up with Alexa at:

Website: [www.alexarivers.com](http://www.alexarivers.com)

Goodreads: [www.goodreads.com/author/show/18995464.Alexa\\_Rivers](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/18995464.Alexa_Rivers)

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