

# Story of Us



*Love on The Lake One*



**COLLEEN CHARLES**

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# **STORY OF US**

Love On The Lake

Book One

A Prequel

By

Colleen Charles

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# Chapter One

## *Gibson*

The radio crackles as I manually search for any station that might make its way through the janky speakers of my older Jeep CJ5 Laredo. She's a beauty and my literal ride-or-die. A 1981 model to be exact—everything original and mint. Sans Bluetooth. I named her Roxanne—Roxy for short. Maybe I should install new speakers at the very least, seeing as how my coffee alone doesn't seem to be doing the job of waking me up. I need music. Good music. Some classic tunes to get my blood pumping.

Letting the leather-wrapped steering wheel slip through my hands with ease, I make my way through Go Jump in the Lake, the resort my family owns on the shores of Sunset Lake. With swimming, camping, cabins, and a handful of outdoor activities, it's one of Central Minnesota's most popular resorts, and all five kids in my family help run it.

Mom has this thing for family meetings. Always has, to everyone's chagrin. She forces us to round robin and air our shit right out in the open—no holding back. That can be good, but it's also resulted in some knockdown drag-outs over the years. One time, the whole damn thing devolved into chaos when Ledger accused Hudson of stealing his lucky socks, leading to a comedic scuffle that ended with both my brothers tumbling into the lake ass over teakettle. Fallon screamed, and Mom complained that they reeked like seaweed and dead fish for at least three days.

That being said, meetings at the main lodge provide some family bonding time, though they aren't usually this last minute. I haven't even had time to come up with a list of the litany of things my twin brother, Paxton, has done to piss me off since the last one. As much as I love Go Jump and that it's a local showpiece of lake life, I do have a real job as a mechanic.

I glance at the clock. My best friend, Aiden, and I have to drop an engine today to fix a transmission at his shop Achilles' Wheel, so I really hope this meeting doesn't take long. After finally tuning in to KOOL 108, I take a sip of my coffee, relishing both the hot liquid caffeine and the sound of 38 Special's "Hold on Loosely." But a strange and unwelcome sight obliterates my moment of chill because when I pull up in front of the lodge, my parents' minivan is parked right outside, packed to the hilt.

The sight that greets me is nothing short of a suburban circus act on wheels. My parents' vehicle, a hulking beast of burden, sits squat under the weight of its cargo, looking more like a yard sale on the move. The back is crammed to the point of comedy, with garden gnomes peering out from between camping chairs and a kayak strapped so precariously atop that it seems to wave at passersby. A collection of mismatched luggage, ranging from a bright pink suitcase (a regrettable purchase from a bygone era) to a duct-taped duffle bag, forms a teetering tower that threatens to topple with every breath of wind.

Peeking out from an open window, a surfboard, which has never touched a wave, serves as a testament to aspirational vacationing. As if to crown this masterpiece of overpacking, a

plastic flamingo, undoubtedly snatched from our front yard in a moment of whimsical decision-making, bobs its head in silent judgment from its perch on the rearview mirror. The whole setup looks ready to spill its guts at the slightest provocation, a veritable cornucopia of chaos and clutter, turning my moment of chill into a chuckle at the absurdity of it all.

“What the hell?” I mumble.

Clutching my insulated cup, I make my way inside. Loud voices assault my ears. Everyone talks at the same time around here.

I just dial it up a level and talk over them, making myself known. “What’s with the van?”

Seven people, who all resemble me in some way, turn their attention to me. “The question of the hour,” my sister Fallon shoots out sarcastically, taking a sip of a large, iced coffee from Caribou. “Now that it’s officially been asked four times, maybe we will get an answer.”

My dad, his face a mask of calm indifference, ignores her snarky comment. “Your mother and I are retiring.”

“And you’re gonna go surfing?” As I inhale a ragged breath, the room goes silent.

I think we all saw it coming at some point, though I assumed there would be more talk before it happened, not just a packed car and a *peace out* at the worst possible time.

“So,” my oldest brother Ledger starts in. “Who’s in charge while you’re gone? Because we all know you’ll be back.”

We know the answer. It's obviously him since he's been Dad's head accountant and right-hand man for years.

But Dad's lips tug upward at the corners, and he throws us a curveball. "The new owner."

A slew of matching eyes stare down the unflappable Harold Story. There are grimaces. Militant expressions. Blank stares. Then a brief moment of silence—almost like somebody died—before the room erupts, all of us speaking at once.

"Owner?" I ask. "We aren't the owners anymore? This is our *family* resort!"

"I'm sorry, *what?*" Ledger sounds both angry and hurt.

"You sold our family legacy?" Paxton, my twin brother, looks between me and our mom. "Who does that?"

"Wow." Fallon shakes her head. "Just wow."

"Without speaking to us?" Ledger asks. "Without consulting *me*? What if one of your kids wanted to buy it and keep it in the family? Every single one of us should have had the right of first refusal."

Leo, our family friend and basically brother number four by default, sinks deeper into his chair and clamps his lips shut. Smart kid.

"Everyone settle down," our dad calls out, holding his hands up. "Go Jump is still ours. It will still function as a family business and still have our name on it. That's what it's always been, and it's why people love it. Yes, we sold it, but you kids are still the face of it. Nothing has changed but what goes on behind the scenes with the financials."

“Are you kidding me? *I* handle the financials. Unless the name Story is on the deed, everything has changed,” Ledger retorts before mumbling, “Unbelievable.”

Dad walks over to Mom who sits in one of the chairs, her hands clasped in her lap. Her forehead merges into a web of creases, probably because the room just blew up. She could never abide us fighting. She values respectful communication. But she also looks tired.

Dad places a hand on her shoulder. “We are ready to do something for ourselves now. We want to travel and explore. We’re in our third act of life. Who knows how much time we both have left?”

“Well, that’s only just a little bit morbid. So, what, you’re gypsies now?” Fallon kind of laughs as she flicks her mane of long blond hair over one slim shoulder.

“Sis, watch it,” I warn. If she thinks we’re going to put up with her brattiness during a crisis just because she’s the only girl and the baby of the family, she’s got another thing coming.

“Listen, kids.” My mom speaks up for the first time with her signature smile. “This place was built on heart. And all of you have plenty of heart to give. I know you do. It just means staying connected, getting more involved, and making it your own. A third party will officially ‘own’ it,” she uses air quotes, “But Go Jump will always be ours because that’s the way we set it up in the purchase contract. Put your handprints all over it, and I know it’ll be great.”

My eyes narrow as I stare at Mom, trying to read between the lines. Talk about the heart of the family. Dad has always been the voice, the last say, and the head. He’s very traditional,



maybe too traditional considering the current century we live in and he still believes heavily in gender roles and a more *Leave it to Beaver* family structure. The two of them are polar opposites. While Mom took us fishing individually and talked to us about school, our friends, and things that were important to us, spending time with Dad was more like doing a chore with him in silence. Once in a while, he'd tell us what he thought mattered in life—hard-fought lessons and the character you'd earn from them.

Despite being gob smacked, I think all of us respect their decision, though they could have gone about it differently. Maybe sat us down weeks, or even months ago, and let us have a say. Not just filling a Toyota Sienna to the brim with a “Well, see ya later! Nothing’s changing except everything’s changing! Good luck!” The shock followed by the frustration is a lot to take in on a Thursday morning.

And to top that all off, something fishy is going on here, and I’m not talking about Sunset Lake.

Then again, if they'd hinted even once at this crazy exit strategy, we would have stopped them. And that obviously isn't what they want for their life right now. Both of my parents have worked their fingers to the bone. Mom especially looks old and haggard. I'm not unhappy they're leaving. And with five perfectly capable adult kids and a spare, we can keep things humming along—probably even better without them.

We'll just have to rely heavily on Ledger since Mom and Dad have always been very, very protective about the nuts and bolts of the resort. Mom insisted we didn't need to get involved with the contracts and legalities of Go Jump. And so

far, we haven't needed to. The resort has always been booked solid from April to November. It's one of Minnesota's most popular lake resorts. But since my best friend owns a small business, I know enough about the ins and outs to notice when things aren't adding up. And the tension crackling between Mom and Dad that they tuck under the rug every time one of us walks in the room has been worrying me for quite some time. That usually means financial issues. That Go Jump isn't doing as well as it used to back in the glory days.

We all make our way outside to say our goodbyes. Mom hugs each of us. "You kids can always get ahold of us," she says, hanging onto me. She runs her fingers down the side of my face as if she's trying to commit it to memory. "I'm only a phone call away."

"Keep in mind though, this is a getaway for us," Dad cuts in. "Try to solve problems yourself first." He shakes our hands as though we just made a business transaction.

"They will do wonderful. They always have." Mom pulls Paxton into a hug, her eyes welling up.

After a moment, Fallon pushes me away and grabs Mom. "Are you seriously going to just up and leave?" Fallon pouts. "What if I can't manage school and the resort? What if I fail?"

"You'll do just fine, honey." Mom kisses her on the head and then tucks on her favorite phrase. "This too shall pass."

Eventually, Dad tugs a teary-eyed Mom into the van. She waves as they pull down the drive, and we all make our way back into the lobby.

“Well, there they go,” Fallon says, flopping dramatically into a chair. “Isn’t anyone going to speak up and say how they really feel about this?”

“What’s there to say?” Paxton shrugs. “It’s a done deal.”

Fallon swings around to look at him. She’s gonna blow her lid, and I bite my lip, hanging my head in hopes I can avoid the shrapnel.

“Hope you aren’t too attached to your little farming gig, Pax, because you’re going to have to help out here a hell of a lot more. And you.”

I look up as she turns her attention to me. Well, shit.

“You like downtime? Tinkering around on old cars with Aiden and stuffing your nose in books while you sip whiskey every night while you beat off to fantasies about Avery March?” She snorts out a laugh. “Kiss that goodbye, Gibbs. Oh, and don’t even think about having any kind of a *real* sex life with the town floozies you love so much.”

“That’s enough.” Ledger speaks up, always the voice of reason. “Don’t make this harder.”

“That’s what she said,” Captain Obvious, dad’s white cockatoo, says from its cage.

“Thank you, Captain Obvious,” we all say robotically.

He’s an obnoxious bird, but unfortunately a permanent fixture here at Go Jump. With his odd humor and constant two-cents, guests love him. Most of his antics are wildly inappropriate though, so we have always covered it up and tried to give it more legitimacy by saying *thank you, Captain Obvious*, anytime he gets out of line. Which is basically all the

time. I kind of wish they'd taken him along. But I can also see why they didn't. If Dad had to spend that many hours in a crowded van with his dirty-talking bird, Captain Obvious would end up with a broken neck.

I run my hand through my shaggy, jet-black hair. Mine's much shorter than Pax's, which is long all over. Other than that, we look pretty much the same. "What I don't understand is why they chose to leave now? It's the busiest time of the year and God knows, we all have our own lives to live. Seems pretty self-indulgent if you ask me."

I look over at Ledger. His eyes don't meet mine as he takes a sip of his coffee. There's something behind his look. Whatever it is, he tucks it away. "I'm sure they have their reasons."

"So, what now?" My little sister hops up on the counter and looks between all of us. "I'm not putting my life on hold for this place. All I've ever wanted is to get the hell out of Sunset Bluffs."

"I can still do all the odd jobs and handy work," Leo chimes in for the first time.

I nod. "Thanks, man,"

"I still got the books, I assume," Ledger says. "Unless that part is *sold* too."

"I'm sure Dad still wants you on the books," I say. "If nothing else, to keep a close eye on things."

"And I will definitely step up more too," Paxton adds. "I mean, yes, this is also the busiest time of year at the farm as

well with harvest and markets and everything, but I won't leave you guys hanging."

"Okay but like..." Fallon talks over everyone again, still panicking, "What are we going to do? Everything literally just exploded in our faces and I have the wedding to plan." She's referring to Aiden's upcoming wedding. His fiancée, Iris, asked Fallon to help her coordinate all the festivities.

I sigh. It's a lot, I won't deny that.

"So, you worry about that," Ledger tells her. "I'll keep my eyes on the numbers. And all of us can rotate manning things here at the front desk. It's a lot for the four of us, I know."

"Right?" Fallon's voice drips in satire. "I wish we had two more siblings to help us out. Oh, wait! We do! But they're MIA."

My second oldest brother, Tate, just kind of disappeared after graduating from NYU. He's always traveling for work, though he's never specified exactly what it is that he does. "I'm a modern-day pioneer," he tells us. "Navigating my way through the new world." Whatever the hell that means. I stopped trying to figure him out years ago.

Which leaves Hudson. My third brother barely graduated high school and ran away as fast as his Harley could go. Now, we rarely hear from him.

But I wish we did.

Hudson's absence is like a constant echo in the family's laughter, a missing harmony in the chaotic symphony of our lives. Every roar I hear in the distance, I half-hope it's him,

riding back into our lives as unexpectedly as he rode out, to fill the void his rebel heart left behind.

“Anyone talked to either of them lately?” I ask. “Do they even know what’s going on?”

“Doubt it,” Fallon mumbles.

“I’ll figure it out,” Ledger says. As the oldest, that’s his go-to phrase.

“Thanks, brother.” I pat him on the shoulder, and he heads out.

“Well, I have to work on this wedding planning.” Fallon sighs, hopping off the counter by using the leverage of her long legs, “I hope I can do it justice. After all, the best day of a woman’s life is her wedding day.” She squeezes between Paxton and me, giving each of us a side hug at the same time. “Love you guys,” she says.

“Love you back,” we say in unison and all five-foot-two one hundred pounds of spitfire breezes out the door.

Paxton lets out a breath, rubbing his face and I grin.

“Good god,” he mumbles into his hands. “Talk about a shitshow.” He looks over at me. “For real though, you have time for this?”

“Nope.” I shake my head. “But we have to step up. I’m sure Daisy will help out too whenever she can. And Leo’s always available in a pinch. And don’t forget Dick. He’s actually employed by this place, not just forced into servitude because he got born with the wrong last name.”

“You mean like Tate and Hudson are stepping up?” Pax asks.

I smile but I know it doesn't quite reach my eyes. I have dreams too. Goals. I'd like to just up and leave to chase them. But I don't.

The smile I offer Pax is more a mask than an expression, hiding the simmering resentment that bubbles beneath. It's a quiet acknowledgment of the dreams I've shelved, the ambitions I've had to mute, as our parents chase their wanderlust, leaving me anchored here, tethered to responsibilities that were never meant to be solely mine. Sure, I love this place, but sometimes, I wonder what it'd be like to chase my own horizons, to see my dreams do more than just gather dust on the back burner of family duty.

For a moment, we just stand there. I am closer to Pax than I am to the others. It's probably the twin thing. We are identical and have all the stereotypes of twins. The intuition. The knowing-without-saying.

Paxton sighs again. “Is it too early to drink?”

I laugh, looking over at him. “It's not even nine, you noob.”

His grin matches mine and stretches his face wide. “Damn.”

As I stand to leave, the weight of change presses down on me, a tangible shift in the air between us. “Speaking of that, I need to get to the shop. But let's do that soon. Get a beer I mean.” My voice carries a mix of resolve and nostalgia, an echo of simpler times.

Pax's voice is softer, contemplative. "Everything seems to be changing," he observes, a wistful note threading through his words.

"Not everything," I counter, forcing a smile as I hold up my fist. It's a gesture that speaks volumes, a silent acknowledgment of the constants in our lives amidst the whirlwind of change. He meets my fist with his own, the impact a reassurance, a promise that some foundations remain unshaken.

After a round of final goodbyes, I turn away, my shoulders sagging, a physical manifestation of the emotional load I carry. The act of leaving feels heavier today, burdened with the acknowledgment of his words. He is right, after all. Everything does seem to be changing, not just at Go Jump, but in the very fabric of our lives, in the spaces between our connected stories. The familiar rumble of Roxy's engine is a comforting sound in the sea of change, a reminder of one of the few constants I cling to.

I've been trying hard to forget that Aiden is getting married. Which means his sister will be in town soon. My heart skips around at the thought of her. Avery March has always been a permanent fixture in my mind... and my heart. She wasn't just my best friend's little sister. For years, she was my crush. Secretly, of course. She's off limits and always has been. And despite her moving to LA to pursue a career in screenwriting, I'm not sure I ever got over that.

She chose leaving. When I wanted her to choose me.

Avery March's return is like a storm on my horizon, inevitable and unpredictable. My heart, a traitor to my stoic



resolve, flutters in anticipation, threatening to unravel the carefully constructed compartments where I've stashed away those long-buried feelings. She was never just the background music to my life's chaos; she was the melody that haunted me, the what-if that lingered at the edge of every decision. Now, with her coming back, the fear gnaws at me—will those old feelings shatter the dam I've built? Or worse, have they been silently carving a river through my defenses all this time, waiting for the moment to flood back in? The thought is both exhilarating and terrifying, a tempest of angst I'm not sure I'm ready to face.

But I guess I'm about to find out.

## Chapter Two

*Avery*

“Have you seen my phone charger?” I pace frantically through my apartment. “I literally just had it.”

The sunlight spills across the polished concrete floors, bouncing off the eclectic mix of vintage and modern decor that defines my small but stylish LA sanctuary. The open floor plan allows the light to stretch into every nook, illuminating the vibrant art adorning the walls, each piece a testament to my journey here. The living area, where my lifelong best friend, Sawyer Barnes, lounges, is a cozy testament to many nights of brainstorming and unwinding, with a plush, well-loved couch anchoring the space, surrounded by shelves brimming with books, many of them romance novels with worn spines and dog-eared pages.

“You did.” Her voice, steady and amused, cuts through my pre-travel haze. She’s the picture of relaxation against the contrast of my tension, her mimosa catching the gleam of the morning light that sneaks in through the large, industrial windows that frame my trendy neighborhood’s view. Despite the whirlwind of my departure, the apartment feels alive with the energy of creation, every element a piece of the world I’ve built here, far from the small town I grew up in but still so much a part of who I’ve become.

The kitchen, a sleek line of functionality and design, holds the remnants of our hastily made breakfast, the scent of coffee still lingering in the air. My backpack, a constant companion

on my travels, sits on the reclaimed wood dining table that doubles as my writing desk, a silent witness to the late nights and early mornings spent pouring my heart into stories of love and adventure.

“I did?” My own voice sounds distant as I continue to search, drowned out by the sudden awareness of the life I’ve carved out in this city, in this apartment that’s so much more than just a place to live. It’s a manifestation of my dreams, my successes, and yes, even my moments of doubt.

Sawyer’s laughter, light and easy, fills the space between us, a reminder of the support and friendship that have been my anchor in the sea of my ambitions.

“You’re getting forgetful in your old age, since you keep losing the dang thing. And besides, I’m not driving us out of LA. Definitely not in that old boat you call a car. You are.” Her words are a playful jab, but they resonate with the affectionate truth that underlies our years of friendship through thick and thin.

“You be nice,” I respond automatically, my search for my headphones momentarily forgotten as I take in the apartment once more, each item, each piece of furniture, a chapter in my story. The thought of leaving it, even temporarily, tightens something in my chest.

“That car is a classic.” My defense of my not-so-reliable vehicle comes with a sense of pride. It’s another piece of my puzzle, as mismatched and imperfect as the life I’m living.

I ignore Sawyer’s snark for now because I’m glad I’m not making this trip alone. My older brother, Aiden, who I adore, is set to marry a woman I’ve never met. Or talked to. Or even

seen in person, if I am being honest. Judging from her Instagram, Iris is a bit of a hippy. A social media influencer by trade. How is that even a thing? She lives in her van, something people consider trendy now, traveling the lower forty-eight with her leash-trained orange tabby cat, Sir Floofs-A-Lot. *He adopted her, not the other way around. You'll love him, Av. And you'll love Iris too.* Aiden's words, not mine.

Someone I have zero in common with. But because I love Aiden, I'll do my best to love Iris too.

Apparently, Iris and said cat only made it forty states before her van broke down. As fate would have it, she landed right on my brother's doorstep. And wam-bam-thank-you-ma'am, Aiden the mechanic to the rescue. Long story short—or at least shorter—they're getting married, and Sawyer and I are both in the wedding party.

“So, how long has it been since you've seen him?” Sawyer asks, pulling me out of my own head.

“My brother?” I ask, zipping up my bags. “Too long. I kind of even miss that big lug.”

“I meant his best friend...” she lets her words trail and my eyes snap up to her.

“Why does it matter?” I ask, trying to sound casual. It takes physical effort though. Because obviously, Sunset Bluffs and I have history. And by history, I mean Gibson Story. He was always the hot friend of my older brother, which meant two things.

He was automatically off-limits.

And he was always going to be off-limits.

Aiden made that clear from day one and never even considered backing down, even as we grew into independent adults. As if he sensed the sexual tension that swirled in the air anytime Gibson and I walked within five feet of each other. Hence Aiden's newly minted five-foot rule. He wanted at least that much space between us at all times. This always made me mad and made Gibson smirk.

*God that smirk...*

"You're drooling," Sawyer cut into my thoughts. "And on another planet."

Okay so maybe I was a little obvious back in the day. But I couldn't help it. Gibson Story was—probably still is—a tasty snack, even before he and his twin brother got sleeve tattoos (on opposite arms of course). And maybe said hotness also has something to do with why I am running circles around my apartment like a headless chicken.

Even considering seeing Gibson again is like flipping through an old yearbook—nostalgic, complicated, and a bit unnerving. He's the chapter of my past I've dog-eared and revisited in quiet moments, despite knowing some stories are best left on the shelf. To say he's just my brother's best friend simplifies the intricate web of unspoken words and stolen glances that defined our interactions.

It's not that I've spent my time away pining; I haven't. I'm not the type to dwell on what I deliberately left behind me. I've built a life, a career, on my own terms. But I can't deny the flicker of curiosity, the whisper that accompanies thoughts of him. It's not a yearning, but an acknowledgment—a recognition of the undeniable pull between us, always

tempered by the boundaries set in place. Aiden's five-foot rule wasn't just a physical distance; it was a barrier to what could have been. And now, returning, I wonder if those boundaries still hold the same power, or if we're both finally willing to step across that line.

And if we will.

"You didn't exactly answer my question," Sawyer points out.

I open my mouth to argue when a sudden rapping pounds against my front door. Ha. Saved by the knock.

"This conversation isn't over," she says as I make my way to answer it. "I'll get you to admit that you still carry a torch for him and that no other man has even come close to measuring up."

"Camilla." I move to the side to let my agent in. "How... unexpected."

Sawyer snickers, making her way to the kitchen for another mimosa no doubt. "She's lying. She was expecting you half an hour ago."

"Did she expect me to show up with lunch though?" Camilla asks, holding up to-go bags of sushi from Tokyo Joe's.

"Actually, I'm a little disappointed. I had you pegged as a French pastry kind of girl. But that's okay. Nothing a poke roll can't fix." Sawyer eyes the bags.

"Why is she here?" Camilla asks me and I have to bite back a smile. Sawyer and Camilla are polar opposites. While

Sawyer is salty, funny, and a bit of a loose cannon, Camilla is a dry-humored British transplant, and honestly a bit of a snob sometimes. I love both of them though. Sawyer is my default best friend from Sunset Lake. And Camilla is amazing at her job.

I love Sawyer, but I *need* Camilla.

“I invited her,” I say, “We’re driving to Sunset Bluffs together since my dad had a fit when he found out I was thinking of driving alone. Why are *you* here?”

“To talk you *out* of going to Sunset Bluffs.” She opens the bag of food. “I know your brother is getting married, but with the screenplay and all, the timing is terrible. Can’t you send someone else in your place?”

“Oh, what screenplay?” Sawyer asks, her eyes opening wide.

I shoot Camilla a look. Because other than her, no one really knows that I’m more or less nose-diving in the screen industry. Waving Sawyer aside, I say, “It’s bad luck to talk about it. And besides. I have to go, Camilla. I’m in the wedding, for Pete’s sake. My only *brother’s* wedding.”

“But how will I reach you?” she whines, popping a bite of tuna roll in her mouth with a pout.

“I’m going to Minnesota, not Timbuktu,” I say. “I’ll have my phone.”

“Will there even be cell service up there though?” She hands me a jalapeno ahi roll. Extra ginger, no wasabi, naturally. “Isn’t it like a little lake in the sticks?”

Sawyer lets out a single scoff. “You’re kidding, right? Avery, she’s kidding right?”

“It’s a very populated area on a huge lake,” I explain with a smile. “Nothing stick-like about it.”

“Surrounded by more population and more lakes,” Sawyer chimes in. “Minnesota isn’t nicknamed The Land of 10,000 Lakes for nothing. And we have one of the best right there in Sunset Bluffs.”

“Well, excuse me for being from London and not knowing every inch of this country yet,” Camilla shoots over at her. “Everything between LA and NYC is fly-over country as far as I’m concerned.”

Sawyer just digs into a spring roll and laughs her off. And as much as I just love being distracted by the feisty war of words between Ms. Cavendish and Ms. Barnes when I need to finish packing, I’m ready to get to the point of Camilla’s drop-in. Because I know it’s not sushi.

“I have to go,” I tell her. “It’s non-negotiable. So, you’ll just have to deal until I get back.”

“Fine.” My agent dabs her mouth with a napkin. “But why do you have to drive? That’s so primitive.”

Sawyer snorts out another laugh at Camilla’s expense. Camilla chooses to ignore it this time.

“Because I made a promise. My Nana and Papa let me take their Cadillac to chase my dreams, and I swore one day I’d bring it back. Don’t worry, my return trip will be faster. I’m flying.”



“And more boring,” Sawyer adds, snatching a piece of sushi and popping it in her mouth, “She won’t have me with her on the plane.”

“Well, props to you for traveling across country for your brother’s wedding. My sister goes through a husband a year and I started just sending cash instead of flying to every one of her weddings,” Camilla goes on.

Meanwhile, I make my way around, locking windows and double-checking everything.

Camilla looks over at Sawyer’s mimosa. “That looks tasty. Got any extra?”

“Sure.” Sawyer grabs her a glass. “You sure you don’t want one, Avery? I know you’re driving, but it’s only one and I’ll make it light.”

“She looks like she needs something stiffer.” Camilla takes her drink and sips half of it in one shot.

“Speaking of *stiff*... She’s very anxious, isn’t she?” Sawyer smirks in my direction.

Camilla tilts her head to the side. “About seeing her brother? Is there tension there?”

I double-check my suitcase for the tenth time, ignoring them.

Sawyer’s mouth forms an easy curve. “There is... but not with Aiden.”

Before I can say anything, Camilla’s attention snaps to me. “Is it a man?” She ‘lowers’ her voice and whisper-yells at Sawyer. “*A man from her past?* How droll.”

“Past. Present. Future,” Sawyer answers. “Take your pick.”

“Oh, my god, you two, I can totally hear you!” I let out a sigh. “And I’m anxious because I am about to drive across the country, and I know I am going to forget something. While you two are over there gossiping and drinking like it’s five o’clock somewhere, I am trying to get ready so nothing unexpected happens to ruin my good juju. I’m going to need it to be in the wedding of a woman I’ve never even met!”

“Grumpy too,” Sawyer mumbles.

“Men will do that to you,” Camilla adds.

“Yep.” Sawyer flares her nostrils. “That’s why I tend to avoid them like the plague.”

I glare at both of them and they just laugh. Camilla pounds the rest of her mimosa and walks over to me, hugging me with the whole European double-cheek-kiss thing.

“Alright, dahling. Make sure your phone is on you at all times,” she says, heading for the door. “The art industry waits for no one.”

“Thank you, Camilla,” I call out.

“Yeah, thanks for lunch, love!” Sawyer says with a fake accent and I shoot her a look.

“What?” A less-than-innocent smile stretches her cheeks.

“Let’s go,” I say, lifting my eyebrows.

After double and triple-checking everything again, we load up the Caddy and buckle up. “Gosh, this thing really is ancient.” Sawyer runs her hand along the dash. “You sure it can get us all the way to Minnesota? Safely, I mean.”

“Of course,” I tell her. “This isn’t a hunk of junk. It’s a 1977 Cadillac Fleetwood Brougham. A classic. Everything is original, except the Bluetooth, of course. And if we get into an accident, God forbid, it won’t fold like an accordion.”

“And thank God for that,” she says, clearly not impressed. But this car is sentimental for me. Unlike most people, my Papa believed in my dreams to become a famous screenwriter, enough that he gave me the car to drive to LA to pursue them.

My stomach sinks a little at the reality that things haven’t really gone according to plan. But I guess that’s life. Nothing really ever goes the way you think it will and you have to learn how to navigate challenges and pivot on the fly.

Sawyer lounges comfortably next to me, her casual ease a stark contrast to my tightly wound nerves. She ticks off the list with the confidence of someone who’s seen me at my most neurotic and loves me still. “We have popcorn, grapes, chocolate-covered almonds, and we are stopping at John Galt’s Coffee Shop for iced lattes and scones on our way out. So, I’d say that’s a definite check.”

“Water?” My voice pitches higher with each question, betraying my underlying anxiety about leaving anything behind. “Hydration is important.”

“Check.” Her response is quick, accompanied by a reassuring nod.

“Potty stops?” I can’t help but let a small smile creep in, despite the tension.

“Anywhere Google maps takes us to that has more coffee shops,” she declares, her tone playful. “Check.”

A little giggle escapes, the sound breaking through the fog of my pre-travel jitters. “And of course, our playlists for the drive?”

Sawyer’s eyes light up, a spark of excitement flashing in them. “Everything from 38 Special to Panic! At the Disco. Check and check.”

The energy shifts, anticipation crackling between us like a live wire.

“Alright, let’s roll.” My grin is genuine now, infectious, as I turn the engine over. The familiar rumble of the car, paired with Sawyer’s presence, grounds me. It’s a reminder that no matter where this road takes us, the journey is just as important as the destination.

As we make our way down the highway, music blaring and coffees in hand, I can’t help but feel a sense of freedom and excitement. While the weight of my life is still looming, something about going back to Sunset Bluffs, back to what used to be home, has me giddy.

I tell myself it’s because I get to see my brother again. He’s older than me by a couple of years, but we were always close. I’ve also always loved weddings, just like any other girl, and even though I haven’t met the bride-to-be, Aiden swears she’s the best thing that’s ever happened to him. And for a man that I thought would never get married? That alone coaxes a smile out of me.

Sawyer suddenly turns the music down. “You’re thinking about him again, aren’t you?”

I sigh, looking over at her. “Really? Seriously, Sawyer. Give it up. I was thinking about my brother. You know. The reason I’m headed back home? Can you believe he’s getting *married?*”

But she just clicks her tongue with a tsk tsk sound. “And lying about it too. I’m supposed to be your best friend, Avery.”

“Which is why you should believe me when I say that Gibson Story is the last thing on my mind right now,” I tell her.

*The very last thing.*

“What I don’t understand,” she breaks a mixed berry scone in half and hands me a piece, “is why you had to fall for him anyways.” She takes a bite and continues talking with a full mouth. “He’s an identical twin. Meaning there are two of him. How do you even know he’s the better one?”

I spit out a laugh, covering my mouth with one hand.

“I’m serious. You can’t date your brother’s BFF because he’d never allow it. So, why not go after the other one? Princeton? Preston?”

“Paxton,” I correct her.

“Right. It would totally solve all your problems with the overprotective brother thing.”

“Okay, one.” I hold up a finger. “That’s not how it works. They’re two different people entirely. Not clones that you can make more copies of.”

She takes another bite. “I’m just saying. Double the fun... you could totally reverse harem their hot asses. Make it a real-

life version of the ‘why choose’ trope!”

“You’re crazy,” I tell her with a smile.

“And you love it.” She grins back, cranking the music back up.

I take a contemplative sip of my iced vanilla latte, the coolness a stark contrast to the warmth spreading through me at the thought of Gibson. She’s right, of course. My feelings for Gibson have been a constant undercurrent, a longing that’s lingered far longer than I care to admit. The idea of anything happening between us is ludicrous, not just because of the potential fallout with Aiden, but because of the intricate dance of our interactions. Our banter, laced with an undercurrent of something more, has always been a highlight of our friendship—his way of saying that he sees me as something beyond the sister of his best friend.

Yet, as much as those moments of teasing and the rare, shared glances suggest a mutual curiosity, the reality remains—we are a line that cannot be crossed. The thought of jeopardizing Aiden’s friendship with Gibson, not to mention the strain it could place on my relationship with my brother, casts a shadow over any fleeting fantasy. And still, the anticipation of seeing Gibson again stirs a mix of excitement and apprehension within me. It’s a reminder that feelings, no matter how inconvenient, aren’t easily extinguished, not with distance, and certainly not by will alone.

And that thought scares me most of all.

## Chapter Three

### *Gibson*

The hum of activity at Achilles' Wheel is a constant backdrop to my day, the scent of oil and metal mingling in the air, creating a familiar comfort. The shop, with its high ceilings and walls lined with tools and car parts, has always been more than just a workplace. This messy, noisy, sometimes stinky place serves as a testament to the bond between Aiden and me, a sanctuary of sorts where we've spent countless hours working on engines, sharing stories, and occasionally, butting heads.

"I swear to God, Gibson, if you drop this radiator on my face—" My best friend's voice echoes from beneath the chassis of a '67 Mustang we've been restoring. His tone is half-serious, half-joking, a blend that's become our standard form of communication since we became blood brothers in the woods of my family resort back in the first grade.

"I got you, quit your whining," I respond, my focus split between the task at hand and the nagging pull of my phone in my pocket. It's an odd sensation, being tethered to a device, especially when every vibration sparks a flicker of anticipation.

"Why are you checking anyways?" Aiden's question cuts through the clatter of tools and the soft rock playing on the shop's old stereo. "It's like you're waiting for a text from someone. The flavor of the week blowing up your phone?"

His words draw a quick, defensive retort from me. “No,” I say, more sharply than intended. The truth is, the thought of Avery’s return to Sunset Bluffs has my nerves wound tight, a fact I’m not ready to admit, least of all to Aiden.

I’m not going to tell him how her heart-shaped face appears in my mind at the worst possible times, how she’s the first thought I have when I jerk awake in the middle of the night after dreaming about the past... or how the mere mention of her name sends a jolt through me, stirring up a mix of anticipation and dread that’s hard to shake. Maybe it’s because I’ve never been a fan of what-ifs. But there’s a part of me that’s been quietly holding on to the possibility of something more, a part that’s been tucked away beneath layers of denial and distraction. Yet, with her imminent return, those feelings threaten to surge forth, challenging the boundaries I’ve carefully constructed around my heart.

“No is damn right.” He emerges briefly from under the car, wielding a wrench like a conductor’s baton as he gestures in my direction. His statement, a reminder of the unspoken agreement between us concerning his sister, hangs in the air, weighted with the history and complexities of our friendship.

The shop around us, with its array of vehicles in various states of repair and the walls adorned with faded automotive memorabilia, stands as a silent witness to our exchange. Achilles’ Wheel isn’t just a business, but a legacy we’re building together. It’s a place where the lines between family, friendship, and work blur into a life that’s uniquely ours. But as Avery’s arrival looms, settling a boulder into the confines of my stomach, I can’t help but wonder how the dynamics that have defined us for so long are about to change.



Avery's been on my radar, not just because she's Aiden's sister, but because... well, she's Avery. My Avery. My occasional dive into her social media isn't about keeping tabs—okay, maybe it is, but not like that. It's more like checking in from a distance, seeing her conquer LA in ways only Avery could.

Each post, each glimpse into her life, stirs something in me I'd rather not examine too closely. She's not just the girl next door who stole my heart anymore; she's grown into someone who both intimidates and dazzles me. Admitting I notice her transformation more than I should is not on the table, especially not to Aiden. It's complicated, this mix of protective instinct and unacknowledged longing.

“Gibson!” Aiden growls at me.

“Sorry.” I hold up a hand in a defensive posture.

His eyes narrow into slits. “Seriously, bro. I'm not paying you to fuck up car engines while fantasizing about chicks.”

If he only knew...

Wrench.

Upside.

The.

Head.

“Will you shut up?” I snap back. “I'm just stressed about all the shit going on at Go Jump.”

“Whatever,” he mumbles. “Your mind is so deep in the gutter and I can smell it. Just do your thing and don't even

think about giving me a play-by-play. I'm about to get married."

I want to ask him why he cares. Just to be a dick. But I don't. He'd put me in a not-so-friendly headlock. Or try anyway. The disparity in our size is no longer an issue like it was back in grade school before I had a growth spurt and filled out.

Aiden and I finish up the radiator installation just in time for lunch. I hand the customer the paperwork, and he lets out a low whistle.

"Holy shit." He shakes his head, signing and handing me his credit card. I run it through the chip reader on my tablet. "Want one of my kidneys too?"

"Sorry about that." I offer a grin.

The customer signs the receipt. "Either way, you boys are still cheaper than anyone in town. And I trust you not to take advantage of an old-timer like me. You always do great work for a fair price."

We shake and he makes his way out calling his thanks over his shoulder.

"What time is it?" Aiden asks, wiping his hands on a grease rag.

"Time for beer I think." I make my way to the mini-fridge. But just as I am about to toss him one, a car pulls up.

"Really?" His shoulders slump. "Can't a guy have a midday brew?"

"I'll take this one," I say. "Iris is waiting on you."

He blows some air out his lips. “Nah, you always work through lunch. I bet granny here just wants an oil change. It will be a quick in and out.”

*That’s what she said.* Damn, I’m quoting Captain Obvious in my head now like a crazy person. If Dad were here, he’d clap me on the back and chuckle in his deep voice all while ruing the day he ever brought that filthy bird home.

Shaking that mental image loose, I stare at the vehicle outside the electric eye of the garage door. An old Edsel Bermuda station wagon—a ‘58 if I had to guess—and it’s cherried out. But the noises coming from the engine are scary. “No, something is hanging out in there. My money says it’s a nest. Rodents. I hope they don’t run out en masse. Might give the owner a coronary.”

“You’re on. Loser buys lunch.” He grins.

I bump knuckles with him. “And a growler of Hef from Moonlit Groove. That domestic shit you have in there sucks.”

He lets out a snort. “You and your bougie beer. Beer is beer!”

“And that’s the difference between you and me.” As I hip-check him, we make our way to the car as a cute little old lady with a polyester dress, blue hair, and a handbag almost as big as she is steps out. “What’s going on, ma’am?”

“I don’t know,” the old lady says. “But there is something under that hood, and I’m not opening it! I watched the *Twilight Zone* enough to know better. What if it’s not from this planet? What if it has tentacles?”

She steps back as Aiden pops the hood. We both just stare at the baby raccoon huddled next to the battery.

“Looks like we’re going Dutch.” Aiden carefully pulls it out. “Which works for me since your fancy beer costs too much.”

I admire the engine, checking for any other issues while Aiden calls our friend Josephine. She was always a tomboy growing up and is known for being a bit of an animal whisperer. If anyone knows what to do with a baby raccoon, it’s Jo.

“She’s on her way,” he says, his eyes running over the Edsel. “Sweet car though,”

“Right?” I agree with him. I love old cars. I don’t want to sound like a boomer, but it’s true that they just don’t build them like this anymore. “And check out the back. You could fit a bed in there...”

“That’s what I was thinking.” He grins. We keep our voices low, though I’m pretty sure Granny can’t hear us anyway since I noticed some pretty prominent hearing aids. “Not that Iris and I need a mattress to get the job done.” He steps closer then. “Last weekend we went camping. Totally did it outside against a tree.”

“You did not.” I shove him with a laugh.

“For real. I was tending the fire and she came out of the tent in nothing but hiking boots. Hand to god. She’s always surprising me like that. I can’t wait to make her my wife.”

Aiden has always been a bit of a lady’s man. He’s a flirt. Not that I have a problem getting attention. But I’m pretty

reserved at the same time. I like hot chicks as much as the next guy, but I also like girls who have a head on their shoulders. Substance. Lights in the attic.

And I still have a crush on the one that got away. Everyone else is just a cheap imitation of Avery March.

He did good finding Iris though. She's a hippy, yes, and a bit flighty at times, but overall a major step up from half the women Aiden has been with. Not only will she take care of him, but she'll keep him from taking himself too seriously. They're a good match.

Both Aiden and I have a nice conversation with Granny until Josephine arrives, grumbling about being torn away from her lavender matcha latte at The Morning Dew.

"Let me see." Josephine marches into the garage. She's got one of those baby slings on.

"That was fast," I say, closing the hood of the car.

She throws a thumb over her shoulder. "I was right in the middle of a blueberry muffin, you dolts. And if it's dry by the time I get to finish it, I know who I'm blaming."

I chuckle at that, but the old lady narrows her eyes. "Dry baked goods are no laughing matter, young man."

Aiden looks over at me and I just bite my lip. "No, ma'am. Nothing is ever good when it's dry."

"It's an omen," she says somberly as I cough my laugh into my hand.

Josephine takes the raccoon from Aiden. "Little guy's paws are burnt. I'll fix him up though and then call the

rehabber I know from the DNR. Thanks, boys. You can always call me when you have an animal emergency.” Her phone buzzes, and she pulls it out. “Shoot. Apparently, there’s a raven stuck in the steeple at the Methodist church.”

Granny stares at her though. “You really should consider smudging the church with sage once you get it out. Bad, bad sign, ravens.”

“Sage, huh?” Josephine asks and both Aiden and I can tell she’s going to screw with her. “Will that get rid of the bats in the belfry? And the black cat living under the stairs?”

I am able to compose myself but Aiden lets out a snort.

Granny shakes her head. “Laugh all you want, whippersnappers. Bad juju, those birds. My husband was possessed by one back in ‘68.”

“Is he okay?” I manage to ask.

She regards me through narrowed and intense eyes. “Nope. Eustice is dead as a doornail. And you bet your belt buckle it wasn’t a coincidence. Ravens. No laughing matter. Mark my words.”

Aiden has to turn away as his shoulders shake, but I just nod sympathetically. With another sly nod, she gets in her car.

Once she’s gone, both he and I lose it.

“You two are terrible.” Josephine shakes her head.

“Someday when you’re both old and half deaf, you’re going to rue the day you were a couple of dickheads to a nice old lady.”

“Whatever, JoJo, just take care of Rocky Rococo’s whittle paws,” I toss at her retreating back.

She throws a middle finger into the air. “It’s Rocky Raccoon, you dipshit. Rococo is the pizza joint. And I wouldn’t mind pieing you in the face right now.”

Jo sashays away, but I don’t have time for another round with my old friend because a couple of cars are headed our way.

“Iris is almost here,” Aiden says. “Are you sure you got this?”

“Yep. And some of them are just going to have to wait.” I answer, taking a sip of water.

His phone dings, and he punches in a quick text before shoving it back in his pocket.

“Avery is almost here too. She just has to drop Sawyer off.” At my friend’s words, my stomach bottoms out. I hold a stiff expression though, rummaging around in the fridge.

Memories of Avery, with her cascading chestnut hair that always seemed to catch the golden hour sunlight, flash in my mind. She has this way of moving—graceful yet unaware of the heads she turns, including mine. Every time I see her, it’s like seeing the heart of Sunset Bluffs itself. She’s always been beautiful, unassuming, and impossible to forget. The way she tilts her head when she laughs, or how her deep blue eyes light up with ideas and dreams, it’s always been more than I can stand. Now, with her just minutes away, it feels like every moment I’ve spent crushing on her is culminating in this inevitable collision of past and present.

“Cool. Is she having lunch with you and Iris?” I just barely manage to keep an indifferent tone.

He lifts one shoulder and lets it drop. “Maybe. She needs the stereo system replaced on the Caddy.”

“I thought she had a new one put in?” I ask, glancing back at him.

“She did. But she’s giving it back to Papa. And you know him. Don’t mess with a classic. I swear to God the man only wants AM stations and an eight-track. He can barely operate the remote control on the TV, let alone Netflix and Hulu. So the original needs to be reinstalled. I’ve been hanging on to it all this time just waiting for this very moment to arrive.”

I’ve been waiting for this moment to arrive, too, but for a very different reason.

I bite my cheek with a nod. I can’t disagree with him.

Grandpa March is a pillar—firm in his ways, yet there’s a gentle wisdom in his resistance to the modern whirlwind. His love for the simplicity of the past is as enduring as the land he’s walked all his life. In his quiet demeanor lies the strength of the oak trees lining Sunset Bluffs, and in his laughter, the unfettered joy of its sparkling lake. He’s the kind of man who builds a life with his hands and heart, the kind who teaches you without a word about the value of integrity and the weight of love. Truly, he’s the best of men, his character as timeless as the classic tunes he cherishes on those old eight-track tapes featuring Conway Twitty and Charlie Rich.

He’s the kind of man I aim to be one day.

I run my hand through my hair. “Listen, if you want to chill with Iris, I can do Avery’s stereo.” I force the most casual tone I can manage. But Aiden knows me.



“And leave you alone with my sister?” he snorts out a laugh. “In your dreams, bro. Thought I made that shit clear over a decade ago. The first time you realized that your dick could sport wood.”

I can’t help the hint of annoyance in my nerves. “Dude, I can see why you were worried in high school. Sisters are off-limits. Bro code and all that. I get it. But we’re all adults now. Avery has been living in LA for years. Not a nunnery.”

He shoots me a look. “Watch it. That’s my *sister* you’re talking about. Pure as the driven snow. And even if she might not be after all this time, we’re gonna still say she is.”

I hold my hands up. “I am your best friend. And a good guy. You know that.”

“You’re still a *guy*. With fully operational junk. That you have been known to let out of your pants once in a while. Indiscriminately.”

I can’t help the laugh that escapes. “Emphasis on once in a while. We both know I’m way better at sound systems than you are. But whatever, man. You’re talking crazy.”

The laugh that escapes me has a sharp edge to it, a clear sign of my growing frustration. Aiden’s words are boxing me into a corner for no good reason. We’re not reckless teens anymore; we’re all pushing thirty, for crying out loud. His over-the-top protective streak is not just unnecessary; it’s almost insulting. I respect the guy, I really do, but this—this is absurd. His sister’s a grown woman, and I’m not the hormone-driven kid I once was. It’s like he’s still seeing us through our high school yearbook photos, trapped in the amber of his outdated mindset. I want to respect his feelings, I do, but

damn, he's not making it easy. Aiden's paranoia is not just suffocating, more like flat-out archaic.

Iris walks in a moment later, trotting up to Aiden and pulling him into a hard kiss that he *so* does not deserve. He grins through it, grabbing her ass. I bite back a smile. They are something else. They've been together about a year and the flames never die down. If anything, it's like they're constantly doused in gasoline. Whoever said opposites attract was on to something.

Despite the fact that Aiden truly is my best friend, and I love him, I can't help the small wave of jealousy I feel as I track their movements through my peripheral vision. I'm twenty-seven, which is not old. But I often feel like I should at least be in a serious relationship by now. I just haven't found the right girl.

Avery flashes in and out of my mind. Maybe the problem is my tendency to constantly compare. She isn't perfect. She's just... her. The girl who always made my nerves feel like live wires. Made my stomach knot up. Made me anxious every time I walked into Aiden's childhood home, wondering if she was going to come around the corner in her too-thin, too-tight pajamas. Or if we were going to bump into each other as she came out of the bathroom. Try to avoid each other in the too-small hallway, but always touching anyway. Watching her nipples pebble while her mouth formed a perfect oval with each little pant of her breath.

God, the memories are flooding my mind like a raging river and heading straight south. I'm a grown-ass man. I can control this constant thirst for her.

*I can.*

Okay, I can't. Maybe Aiden's right after all and I can't be trusted. For a few more blissful moments, I let myself fall back in time again. We'd go to the drive-in movies a lot, usually with a group of people. But the three of us were always together. It was usually her, Aiden, and then me, huddled together in the grass. Once in a while, though, when Aiden was either too drunk from pre-gaming to care or had a girl on one side of him, Avery would sit between us.

This worked very well to my advantage one Halloween when the second showing was one of the *Saw* movies. Avery absolutely hated it and spent half the movie covering her eyes, ears, or both. The grosser it got, the more she leaned into me under the blanket. Eventually, unbeknownst to Aiden who had downed six Svedka shooters since sundown and was sucking on some girl's tongue ring, I was able to slip my arm around her. And she let me. She even snuggled into the crook of my arm. I kind of hoped that nasty movie would never end.

"Gibson," Aiden calls over and I come barreling back to earth. "Can you believe this gorgeous woman agreed to marry me?"

Like... I get it. For the love of God. I'm starting to think I made a mistake in the choosing of the best friend department and I should trade him in for a newer model.

"Nope," I retort, my grin teasing, almost daring Iris to reconsider her life choices. "You know you can still back out, don't you, Iris? But if you don't wise up in time, he's your problem now. One less thing for me to have to take care of all the time."

Iris, unfazed and radiant, giggles—a sound of pure joy—and leans in to seal her promise to Aiden with another kiss. “No backing out for me. It was written in the stars.”

Aiden, ever the cynic in matters of the heart, can’t help but shake his head at our exchange, though a reluctant smile tugs at the corner of his mouth. “Screw you too, man,” he retorts, but there’s no heat in it—just the warm banter of lifelong friends.

“So, what’s the lunch plan?” I pivot the conversation, tossing the grease towel over my shoulder in a practiced motion, eager to shift away from the emotional minefield that is my brother’s impending nuptials.

“My lovely fiancée here packed us a romantic lunch,” Aiden boasts, pride swelling in his chest as he nods toward Iris.

“Nothing special. Very DIY. And I think I made too much.” Iris’s smile, bright and inclusive, turns my way, unwittingly throwing me into the line of fire. “You and Avery should join us,” she suggests, oblivious to the storm she’s stirring.

A jolt of tension zaps through me, palpable and electric, as Aiden and I lock eyes. There it is again—that silent Avery-related standoff. “That’s okay. She’s not even here yet and I—we—have to get the car back to Grandpa March’s exacting standards and…” My voice trails off, a lame attempt to skirt around the real issue.

“And it wouldn’t be romantic if they crashed it,” Aiden cuts in, his voice flat, stripping the moment of its earlier warmth. “We need our couple time.” The words hang in the

air, a barbed reminder of boundaries long established and reluctantly respected.

A part of me, the part that's all too aware of those unsaid rules, kind of wants to hit him. Not out of anger, but frustration—the gnawing sense of what ifs and maybes that linger whenever Avery's name is mentioned.

“Well, I think it sounds fun.” Iris's voice is playful, her fingers tracing the path of one of Aiden's stubborn curls that insists on shadowing his face. There's a warmth in her gesture, an invitation to intimacy and camaraderie that's hard to resist. “The more the merrier. And I need to get to know your sister better before the wedding festivities start.”

“There will be plenty of time for that,” Aiden assures her, though his tone suggests a wish to keep his worlds—his sister and his fiancée—separate for just a bit longer.

But Iris, undeterred, lets her lips form a pout, the kind that Aiden finds irresistible. “Not really. Besides, we can't just leave Gibson here in the cold.”

“Sure we can. He likes the cold, don't you, Gib?” Aiden's voice is tinged with humor, a private joke shared between brothers. Our eyes meet, a silent conversation in a glance, before he adds, “We don't want him getting hot...”

*Oh, for fuck's sake.*

The comment hangs in the air, a mix of jest and jab that's quintessentially Aiden. My mind races, thoughts of Avery, the cold, and the absurdity of my current predicament swirling together. As I stand there, caught between wanting to laugh and wanting to escape, I realize this is just the beginning of a

series of events that will undoubtedly spiral into the kind of chaos only family, friends, and forbidden crushes can create.

## Chapter Four

### *Avery*

A red light flashes on the dash of the Caddy as I pull into Achilles' Wheel Auto Shop. I guess I won't just be getting the stereo installed after all. Engine lights always mean something. And that something is never good.

Papa always kept this particular car in pristine condition. He never let anyone drive it. Until me. And my heart melted when he handed over the keys. God, I hope something isn't seriously wrong with it. "What's the point?" Nana would say when he would refuse to take her up and down Main Street on Friday evenings in the summer. "If it's just going to hang in the driveway like a Christmas ornament?"

But he didn't care. He washed it, polished it, and detailed every nook and cranny. And while he'd once in a while take people for a spin, he was kind of Cadillac-controlling. Unless it came to me.

I still think about the night he presented it to me with a flourish. On loan, of course. We were at a drive-in movie—an old Indie film that I had already seen but wanted to watch it again due to the quirky and realistic dialogue. I laughed at the lines I already had memorized and Papa smiled over at me.

"You could write like this, you know," he said. "I've never known a more talented writer than you, kiddo."

"Like *this*?" I pointed at the screen and shook my head. "Nah, I'm not that talented."

He snorted out a laugh and grabbed another handful of popcorn. Popcorn. In his Caddy. “I’ve read your stories, Avery. They’re better than this swill. And what about that National award you won?”

I remember the warmth that surged through me, an ember of ambition stoked into a blaze by his words. Papa’s faith in me was unwavering, a constant I’d come to rely on. “Right,” I said, the edges of my resolve hardening. “I want to go to LA, Papa. I want to be a screenwriter.”

“So, do it,” he urged as if my dream was the simplest, most natural thing in the world. As if my wanting it was all the permission the universe needed to align in my favor.

“How?” The question fell from me, heavy with the weight of my own doubts.

“You have a savings account. No commitments. Just get in a car, drive out there, and do it.” His voice was a gentle push, nudging me toward my future.

“Okay, one,” I countered, raising a finger to punctuate my point, “I have no car. And two—”

“You’re sitting in a car. Take this one.” His suggestion cut through my excuses, clear and uncompromising.

Laughter bubbled up from deep within me, a release of tension I hadn’t realized I’d been holding. “This car? Yeah right. It’s your baby. I think you might love it more than you love my dad.”

“The only time I drive it is with you. And this car needs to do something epic. You’re epic, baby girl.” His words were a benediction, casting me in a role I’d only dared to dream of.



“So, take it. Bring it back when you’re filthy rich, and we will watch your films here on this very screen.”

My mind just won’t stop going there, and I tear up at the memory. He’s my number one fan. And he’s going to be so disappointed. Which is why I need to put the stereo system back and figure out what the hell the flashing light on the dash is about. Even though I’m not an overnight success story, at least not yet, I can at least return the Caddy better than I took it.

Dabbing at the corners of my eyes with a Kleenex, I slide out of the car and make my way inside. Aiden nods up in my direction, though he is busy on the phone with someone. So, I wait in line.

“Don’t worry,” the woman next to me says. “It can be a little slow since it’s just the two mechanics. But they’re the best.”

Even though I nod, I turn away from her. I don’t love small talk. LA has kind of molded me to be annoyed by slow service and chatting it up with strangers. And now I’m back in the very place I couldn’t wait to get away from. A part of me misses California already.

Then I see *him*.

My breath stalls in my lungs as my pulse takes off at a gallop. Gibson makes his way out of the back room until he spots me, and a slow grin, one that I know all too well, crawls across his face. This man—he just does something to me. To my heart. My soul. My lady bits. He was cute in grade school, attractive in middle school, and hot in high school. And now, with his jet-black hair, olive skin, warm brown eyes, and the

tease of a just-before-five-o-clock shadow coming in, well... He's straight-up yummy. Swoon worthy even. I miss almost nothing about Sunset Bluffs other than my friends and family. Hell, I couldn't wait to drive away and toward my dreams.

But leaving him left the only hole in my heart that's still empty.

I attempt to smile back, but the swarm of butterflies going psycho in my stomach makes me lose my cool, and I am pretty sure my expression is pinched and twisted. Awesome.

Aiden laughs into the phone. It's the sound he's always made, boyish and booming, covering his face and filling the room.

"Good lord," the woman next to me says as she fans herself. "Mechanics, am I right?"

I offer a small smile.

She juts out a hip. She really is warm. And pretty. And somewhat familiar although I can't place her yet. "When I first walked in here, I was just looking to get my brakes checked. Now I'm a lifer."

I actually look at her. "A lifer? How long have you been here?"

"Almost a year," she answers.

"Waiting to get your brakes fixed??"

She covers her mouth with her hand and giggles. "Worse. See that cute mechanic over there?"

Gibson looms closer and closer, meandering through the repair bays. "Yeah." My eyes never leave his muscular form.

With that saunter, those skinny jeans, his worn-out band shirt showing off his tats, *and that face*, how could I not see him?

“Not him.” She giggles and points. “The other one. The tall curly-headed one.”

I crinkle my nose. “Ew. That’s my brother. Wait.” I turn to her. “Are you Iris?”

“Avery?” We both shriek before she pulls me into a hug. “Your brother told me you’re amazing, but he didn’t mention how lovely you are!” she says, still hanging on. “God, I should have known it was you. I mean... you’re much more stylishly dressed, but I can totally see the family resemblance.”

“You’re lovely too!” I tell her. And I mean it. With her dirty blond hair and no makeup, she looks like one of those natural beauties in the Cover Girl commercials. But she doesn’t need foundation. She’s warm and organically beautiful, and it almost makes me tear up knowing my brother found someone so transparently genuine. Now I just pray he doesn’t fuck it up at some point.

“I’m just so excited to finally have a sister,” I tell her as we pull away, embarrassed that I didn’t recognize her right away after stalking her social media a bit over the past few months. “Brothers are awful. They smell. And their friends are even smellier.” I add the last part with a snicker, knowing Gibson has reached us and is standing only a few inches behind me. I can literally feel the static electricity.

“You never complained about my smell during *Saw*,” he says under his breath as he makes his way to the Caddy.

“Rain check,” I tell Iris, following Gibson. She bites back a smile with an arched eyebrow. Almost like she can sense something. Like she *knows*.

“Welcome home, stranger.” Gibson pulls me into a quick hug while I take that opportunity to get a whiff of his special smell. Which only takes me right back *there*. The place in my memory bank I shouldn’t ever go. “Aiden tells me you’ve come to your senses and decided to put the old sound system back?” he asks, opening the door.

“Well, right now, I’m more concerned about the light,” I tell him, my voice laced with a mix of frustration and genuine concern. The dashboard’s unwelcome illumination has cast a shadow over my otherwise untroubled day.

“What light?” He gazes up at me through those impossibly thick black eyelashes of his. Like, good god. Why are they always wasted on men?

“The light on the dash.” I gesture pointedly, my finger aimed at the offending symbol that’s been haunting me since I started the car.

“Which one?” he inquires, a hint of amusement beginning to play at the edges of his voice. It’s a sound I know all too well, one that dances between teasing and concern in a way only he can manage.

“I don’t know! The red one! Red is bad, right?” The words tumble out in a hurried stream, my anxiety spiraling as I contemplate the potential severity of the car’s cryptic signals.

His mouth curves into that all-too-familiar smirk, the one that has the dual effect of infuriating and endearing him to me

in equal measure. “I mean... none of them are really good,” he begins, his tone teasing yet not dismissive, acknowledging the gravity of my concern in his own way. “It’s not like you stick a key in the ignition and the vehicle is all... *good job, I have plenty of gas, let’s go for a drive!* But just so you know, lights back in the day of this relic were rudimentary at best and rarely worked as desired. I doubt this means much.”

The tension in me ebbs slightly, replaced by a reluctant amusement. Despite the situation, he has a way of lightening the moment, of making the mundane worries of life seem a little less daunting. It’s one of the countless reasons I find his presence so irreplaceable, even if I’d never admit it out loud.

Because if I was going to indulge in some admissions, my first one would be... *I’ve missed you.*

I shake my head, shoving him playfully. I can feel the flex of his arm muscles. Between that and his laugh, a laugh that hasn’t changed other than getting grittier... deeper... hotter... it feels like I grabbed an electric fence.

“Just start the car so we can find out for certain, will you, before I have a full-on panic attack?” Jangling them, I hold out the keys. He swipes them from me, but not without his fingers grazing my hand. Again, sparks fly. I suppress a shiver and pull myself together.

He turns the engine over, focused on the dashboard. But his face turns to panic when the speakers blare.

Words.

Strung together as sentences.

Filthy sentences.

*“AJ unzips his jeans and his rock-hard cock springs free, pointing toward his chiseled stomach. I lick my lips. God, I want to swallow him down the back of my throat. A bead of pre-cum appears, and I stare. ‘Do you want to suck me off, dirty girl?’ AJ rasps.”*

Shit to the triple power! I forgot I was playing an audio book a few cities back, but then switched to music when Sawyer couldn't handle the heat. My face flushes fifty shades of crimson as Gibson scrambles to shut it off. He can't seem to figure out the aftermarket system and is just punching all the buttons, including the volume up.

*“I walk forward and reach out so I can touch him. Wrapping my fingers around his shaft, I pump...”*

“Let me do it!” I blurt out, leaning in over him and hitting the off button about a hundred times. I'm surprised it doesn't break off. I'm all kinds of flustered as the silence and our shared breaths fill the awkward air. I pull back out. “Um... it's my agent's fault. My agent, um... Camilla. I'm supposed to write the screenplay for um... that.” I literally put the backs of my hands to my flaming face. “They asked me to do a listen-through. Just trying to get familiar with the material.”

He bites the inside of his cheek, running his hand over his mouth. I know he's trying not to laugh, but the smirk almost breaks free. “Um... not the shafts I'm used to talking about at work.”

“What in the actual fuck, Avery!” Aiden stalks over, tugging his hair as if he wants to pull out the strands until he's bald. “That's what you listen to in LA? I'm your *brother*. Emotional damage occurring over here! I feel like someone

poured full-strength bleach down my motherfucking ear canals!”

With that, Gibson laughs. “Yo, Aid, looks like I was right and you were wrong. Avery hasn’t been living in a nunnery. Maybe I’m the one who needs protecting, not her.”

I roll my eyes. “You two are awful. Romance novels are made into audiobooks. People listen to them. All kinds of people. Even ones with a Y chromosome. Grow up.” I shake my head and they both laugh. Iris walks up and Aiden turns to her. But my eyes stay glued to Gibson.

Despite his fading blush, the smile lingers on his face and I find myself taking him in. All of him. Relearning every plane of his face and every sinew of his body. He’s the same in so many ways. The twins are the youngest of the Story boys, and in my opinion, he’s always been better-looking than Paxton. Of all of them really. Ledger and Tate were always too clean-cut for me, too serious. And Hudson was too much of a loner fuckboy complete with a black leather jacket, motorcycle, and bad decisions. Sawyer was right that Paxton and Gibson were basically carbon copies of each other. But at the same time not.

Gibson has an edge. A dry and witty humor that almost makes him seem like a jerk. But he punctuates his sarcastic comments with a smirk because his heart’s always in the right place. And despite the fact we’re not teens anymore and it shows in the newly developed laugh lines on his face, that smile hasn’t gone anywhere. I thanked God for that because the things it does to me....

“What’s got you mooning over there? Besides pointy shafts, that is.” His teasing voice slices through my daze,

snapping me back to the greasy reality of Achilles' Wheel.

And the sad fact that no matter how much I've always wanted this man to be mine, he never was.

I blink away my reverie, slightly embarrassed at being caught gaping. "Oh, it's nothing," I murmur, brushing off his inquiry with a wave of my hand, even as my heart does a little somersault at his attention.

He leans in, one eyebrow quirked up in that way that always makes my stomach flip. "Sure doesn't look like nothing," he probes, his tone light but eyes sharp with curiosity. "You're starting to give me a complex."

Fighting the flush creeping up my cheeks, I straighten up, adopting a more defensive stance. "Just... thinking. About when you're actually going to start on Papa's car," I deflect, hoping my casual tone masks the chaos of emotions his presence always stirs in me.

He laughs. And it pisses me off to no end because that laugh can still ruin me. Gritty and thick. Not too high or too low. Then he takes a step closer, closing the space between us. Not without glancing cautiously back at Aiden of course. But Aiden is in his own world—I hope Iris knows she's just living in it. But my initial impression tells me she can hold her own.

Gibson leans in, his presence enveloping me, and I'm acutely aware of the tight space between us. An electric current fills the air, charged with his nearness, and his scent—lemony—fills my senses, heady and sweet. The corners of his lips tilt upward, a knowing smirk that sends a rush of heat up my spine.



“You’ve changed. I can’t quite put my finger on it. But you have.” His voice is a low rumble, and the words hang between us, heavy with unspoken meaning.

As I fight to keep my composure, I’m sure not to let him see the tremor he’s caused in my pulse. “So have you,” I counter, my voice steadier than I feel. A challenge lights my eyes, daring him to step back, but hoping he won’t. “Almost a whole decade will do that to people.”

Then his gaze sharpens, a playful accusation dancing in his eyes. “Are those crow’s feet?” His finger hovers just a breath away from my skin, close enough to send a shiver down my cheek.

Instinctively, my hand flies to my face, patting the skin under my eyes. “What? No!” My response is more defensive than I intend, and his chuckle, deep and resonant, tells me he’s enjoying how he can so easily crawl underneath my skin.

He’s got this grin on his face, one that’s far too charming for my peace of mind. I need to flip this around, take control of this dance of wits. My eyes dart to his hair, and I latch onto my retaliation. “But what’s that in your hair?” I ask, my tone teasing yet sharp. “I see silver. How old are you again?”

His response is quick, a flash of his old confidence. “Don’t act like you don’t like it,” he says, a flirtatious lilt to his words. “I’ve been told by the ladies of Sunset Bluffs that I’m starting to look distinguished.”

There’s an undeniable allure to the silver threads among the dark that I hate to admit suits him. He wears his age like a medal, a testament to the years that have honed him into the man before me—a man who can still stir the air with just a

look, who can command the space with a word, who can unravel me with the tease of a smile.

I open my mouth to say something when Iris cuts in. “That’s it, you boys close up shop. Tell people they can wait. We are all having lunch together, no excuses.”

Gibson steps back and looks at Aiden. Luckily, he’s oblivious.

“I don’t want to ruin your romantic picnic,” I say, noting the basket by her feet.

“We have plenty of time for romance.” She winks at Aiden. “But I just met you. And I want to get to know you more. And we can’t leave Gibson out,”

“Sure we can,” Aiden says. “He already knows Avery too well.”

I spear my brother with my best glare, and Iris laughs, shoving him playfully. “Oh, stop. It’s going to be fun.”

Fun. Right. Because what could be more fun than trying to ignore the static electricity that hangs in the air between Gibson and me all the while dodging the lasers shooting from my brother’s eyes? Sounds like a blast.

# Chapter Five

*Gibson*

As we navigate the familiar path to Maplewood Park, Avery's voice carries a thread of uncertainty. "Are you sure this is okay? I really do not want to impose."

Probably due to her normally jovial fiancé's permaglare, her gaze darts between the four of us—a silent plea for reassurance.

Aiden's response is instantaneous, a definitive "No," that collides with Iris's optimistic "Yes." Their words tangle in the air, a perfect snapshot of their dynamic, Aiden's protective instincts always at odds with Iris's free spirit.

Ahead of us, Iris turns to playfully chastise him, her hand landing lightly against his chest. "Will you behave?"

Aiden's grin is quick and unrepentant, the same mischievous smirk that I've seen derail many serious moments. He reaches for her, fingers finding her side in a ticklish spot that elicits a high-pitched shriek from Iris, her protest dissolving into laughter.

"Knock it off," she manages to gasp out, even as a genuine giggle escapes her—a sound that speaks of the ease and intimacy between them. "We're not alone."

"Well, whose fault is that?" Aiden retorts, his playful banter an affectionate challenge.

Behind them, Avery's patience wears thin, her voice slicing through their playful bubble. "Seriously, you guys. If

this was supposed to be a date—”

Iris flicks her wrists, a calming hand to Aiden’s playful storm. “He’s just being silly.”

Internally, I’m torn between amusement at their antics and a pang of envy. Their ease with one another, this dance of affection and teasing—it’s something I find myself craving. With Avery beside me, a question burns at the back of my mind: could we ever find ourselves in a moment like that? Carefree and unguarded? Or will Aiden’s watchful eye forever cast a shadow over everything that ever would or could be between us?

I grin and shove my hands in the pockets of my ripped black skinny jeans.

The day is beautiful, the perfect temperature with only a couple of clouds floating in the blue sky. I feel momentarily torn. As much as I often consider running away from this place, do my own thing, create myself like Avery is doing, Sunset Bluffs with its small-town vibe will always feel like my home. And right now, I need that stability—that routine. Especially with Avery standing next to me. It’s like getting tossed into a flood of tender memories. As far as Avery March is concerned, the past still has an iron grip on my heart.

“Did you miss this?” I ask her.

“Hanging out with you? Not really.” A chuckle rumbles up from my chest. The girl can dish it, that’s for sure.

As we meander past the bustling diners indulging in the local food truck’s offerings, our casual waves merge with the hum of Sunset Bluffs’ enviable charm. Iris, ever the

embodiment of serenity, interlocks her fingers with Aiden's, her sigh painting a picture of contentment. When Avery echoes the gesture, my pulse races, a testament to the unexpected thrill her proximity provokes.

“Don't get too close,” I jest, not daring to meet her gaze. “I'm told I smell.”

“Occupational hazard,” Avery retorts, her voice a whisper of amusement that I detect without needing to see her smirk.

“I can't help it. I'm a boy, remember?” My attempt at humor barely veils the tension I feel, a tension Aiden swiftly amplifies.

“Hey. Too close. Five fucking feet, yeah?” His voice slices through the momentary peace, an unwelcome reminder of the boundaries he's imposed.

“Excuse me?” I challenge, unable to mask my irritation. Aiden's proximity, once a source of camaraderie, now feels like an intrusion.

“At any given time, there should be five feet between you two. And my sixth sense is telling me that you two are touching so... back off my sister.” His decree lands with a mix of jest and stern warning, a line he's mastered over the years.

“Hey, Aiden?” Avery's retort is laced with feigned sweetness, “Kindly fuck off.”

“Is there an unkind way?” Aiden parries, unfazed by our exchange.

Avery's laughter, light and infectious, resonates through the crisp evening air, her fingers tightening around my arm in a silent rebellion against Aiden's five-foot rule. The absurdity

of meandering behind her, tethered by an invisible leash of sibling decree, crosses my mind. Aiden, in his ever-so-Aiden way, remains blissfully oblivious to the ridiculousness of it all.

Arriving at the park, Iris, with her innate sense of harmony, selects a spot that feels like an oasis in the midst of our small-town world. The blanket she unfurls becomes our makeshift sanctuary, and as Avery settles onto it with a grace that's all her own, I'm drawn to her side like a moth to flame.

"I don't think so," Aiden interjects, his voice slicing through the moment. The brotherly bond we've shared, once symbolized by reckless bike races and homemade ramps, now manifested in a snap of his fingers, commanding me to distance. "Sit across from her."

Avery's frustration is palpable, a mix of indignation and weariness as she challenges Aiden's overbearing protectiveness. "Oh my God, Aiden!" Her sigh is a testament to the years of navigating his overprotective tendencies. "Enough already. We are adults. Mature, grown-ass adults. Except maybe not you."

Aiden's concern, though cloaked in humor, underscores a deeper unease. "That's what I'm worried about. Two people in their twenties, single and ready to do what single people do just because they can," he muses, half jest, half earnest, provoking a mental eye roll from me. "If I'm not mistaken, you're leaving. He's staying. There will be no wedding hookup for the two of you on my watch."

"So, that's what single people do at weddings?" My quip, a deliberate nudge at Aiden's overprotectiveness, hangs between

us, loaded with years of unspoken boundaries and brotherly banter.

He meets my challenge with a glare that momentarily threatens to escalate, but Iris, ever the peacemaker, anchors him back to reality. Her touch, gentle yet firm, brings him back to us, to this moment of simple joy and complex emotions.

Reluctantly, I comply, taking a seat next to Avery but maintaining a respectful distance. Our mutual avoidance of eye contact speaks volumes, a silent agreement to navigate this social minefield with as much grace as we can muster, under Aiden's watchful eye.

Iris transforms the assortment of cheeses, meats, and fruits into a display worthy of a gourmet magazine, spreading them across the blanket in an elegant charcuterie board arrangement. Avery's eyes widen in admiration, her voice tinged with surprise and a hint of concern.

"This is so fancy." Her gaze darts between the spread and us, realization dawning. "Like a date. Oh, no. This was totally supposed to be a date."

The worry in her voice is endearing, a reminder of the countless times we've navigated the blurred lines between friendship and something more. Iris, ever the hostess, casually brandishes a selection of hard seltzers, offering them to us as if crowning the moment with a touch of lightheartedness. "Keep calling it that if you want," she declares. Then she proposes a toast. "To our double date."

Aiden, ever the contrarian, dismisses the notion with a grunt, his mouth too full to articulate his usual objections. Iris,

undeterred, turns to Avery with genuine interest sparkling in her eyes. “So, Avery,” she begins, a smile playing on her lips. “Your grumpy brother here tells me you write screenplays in Hollywood?”

“Yup. That about covers it.” Avery’s response is measured, her attention momentarily captured by the flavored seltzer in her hand. She takes a cautious sip, her expression subtly shifting as she contemplates the taste—mango, the very flavor she’s always claimed tastes ‘furry.’ It’s one of those tiny, intimate details I’ve accumulated over the years, a testament to the depth of my attention to her, to the layers of our shared history yet to be explored.

The other two don’t notice. Iris loads a cracker with brie cheese and blueberry compote and Aiden checks his phone. I take the seltzer, hand her mine—black cherry—and wink. She blushes, mouthing the words *thank you*.

God that mouth. It does crazy things to my insides. Then that same feeling drifts down to my groin.

“Any I’d know?” Iris asks in reference to the screenplay conversation that I’d almost forgotten about thanks to staring longingly at Avery’s lips.

“No,” Avery says quickly, cracking open the can.

Aiden shoves his phone into his pocket and looks up.

Her curt answer, as Aiden and I know, means whatever is being asked is a no-trespassing zone, but Iris is a rookie when it comes to Aiden’s antics.

“Oh, come on. I watch all kinds of movies,” she presses, “Even Indies.”



“Sorry.” Avery takes a long sip. “It’s not that I don’t want to, but I’m under an NDA for most of the creative things I work on.”

I glance at Aiden, who looks at Iris. Her expression falls a little. “Oh, okay.”

Avery picks up on it. “With all the people worried about their privacy, it gets a bit messy, that’s all. But can we talk about this spread? The heart-finger sandwiches and radish roses are adorable. How do you find the time?”

The way she blew around that tells me there’s more behind her deflection than a pile of NDAs. Judging from his crinkly brow, Aiden knows it too.

Iris is rerouted through and leans into Aiden. “I have a lot more time now that I’m not on the road,” she grins up at him, kissing him on the neck.

I take my chances and lean in toward Avery. “Word on the streets is our digital nomad here is so hung up on your brother she’s hanging up her tires...”

“I might park the van for a bit, yes,” Iris says.

“Parked. The van has been parked,” Aiden corrects her. “And she’s not going anywhere.”

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe after our wedding, we’ll dust it off...”

They kiss and I lean back, bracing my hands on the blanket. One of them accidentally lands on Avery’s hand. I pull away, clearing my throat.

She does a great job at ignoring it. “A road trip honeymoon. I love that.”

Since the other two are still indulging in some blatant PDA, I look over at her. “That engine light tells me your Caddy is all road-tripped out.”

“Guess I’m not going anywhere for a while either then,” she says. And this time, I’m the one who blushes.

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With the shop buzzing at full capacity, the afternoon flies by. Aiden and I don’t talk much, which is normal when he’s irritated. I get that he’s protective. Me and my brothers roast every man to a crisp that shows interest in Fallon. But I feel like this is different. For one, I have known Avery forever. We grew up together. I’d take a bullet for her just like I would for my own sister.

I’ve never quite seen Avery as just a sister, if I’m being honest with myself. There’s always been that low hum of a crush in the background, a melody I tried to mute but never quite managed. And Aiden, he’s my best friend—he should know better. He’s seen how I am with relationships, how sparingly I dive into them. It’s not a revolving door with me. The few girls I’ve ‘officially’ dated, it always ended the same way: me, all in, and them finding the nearest exit. Maybe that’s why Aiden’s so protective. Despite his bluster, he knows I don’t play games with hearts—not even when my own is on the line.

We finally finish up for the day, the last car pulling out of the lot, and we both let out a sigh.

He scrubs a hand down his face. “A cold one before we head out?”

“Totally.”

He grabs two bottles out of the fridge and hands me one. Guess that’s a good sign. Either he’s forgotten how annoyed he is with me, or he’s stalling as he plots how to keep Avery safely away from me until she heads back to LA.

“You know,” he says after taking a long pull, “I love her. Don’t get me wrong about that. But I cannot *stand* that fruity sparkly spiked water shit.”

With a half-hearted chuckle, I take a pull from my drink, the tepid beer barely registering. “Yeah, I don’t know,” I muse, casting a glance at the can cradled between my hands. “But come on, Aid. You can’t seriously think this swill tops a local brew. We’re practically swimming in craft beer here.”

My friend’s laughter echoes in the small space of Achilles’ Wheel, warm and familiar. “Says the guy who thinks drinking from a can is the epitome of beer culture.”

I shoot him a mock glare. “There’s a certain charm to the classics, my friend,” I defend, tapping the can with a grin.

“Okay, gramps.” Aiden chuckles, and the friendly jab lingers in the air, light and easy.

We continue our banter, sipping our beers as the conversation meanders through the mundane and familiar. It’s these moments, the ones filled with laughter and trivial chit-chat, that stitch the fabric of our friendship tighter. Finally, as the last drops of our drinks disappear and the shadows in the

garage lengthen, signaling the end of another day, we reluctantly acknowledge it's time to head out.

“Alright, man, I should get going.” I set the empty can down with a finality that echoes softly in the spacious garage.

“Me too,” Aiden agrees, standing up and stretching his arms. “See you tomorrow.”

With casual goodbyes and a couple of back-slaps, we part ways, the familiar rhythm of our friendship making these departures feel like just another pause in our ongoing conversation.

Leaving the shop behind, I climb into my truck. But as the engine roars to life and I pull onto the road, my thoughts inevitably drift back to Avery. The way her presence lingers in my mind feels like an unsolved riddle, one I'm not sure I'm supposed to solve.

But as I navigate the familiar roads toward home, Avery's image stubbornly paints itself across my mind's canvas like one of those sweet summer days that never end.

I shift uncomfortably, the thought of her sending an unwelcome heat through me. Damn, this is Avery we're talking about—Aiden's kid sister, not that she's much of a kid anymore. They're nothing alike in their appearance either, with her hair catching the sun in golden waves, a stark contrast to Aiden's midnight locks. Yet, it's always there. In their shared laughter, their mutual stubborn streak, and their sarcasm every single time things start to get deep.

As the last rays of the setting sun glint off the rearview mirror, I let out a breath, trying to realign my thoughts. I

thought I was prepared for her to slip back into my life. Turns out I was wrong. Avery March isn't just some girl; she's a part of a family picture I've been in too long to start smudging the lines now.

The bottom line is this. Aiden has been my best friend since grade school. We're the same in so many ways; rambunctious, sarcastic, and mechanical. It makes us clash a bit in the shop. We are both a little bullheaded about things. But at the end of the day, we always crack a beer and get real. We can talk about anything and the conversation is never shallow. I can't imagine my life without him in it.

So, no matter how much I want to claim his sister as mine, she's leaving and Aiden's staying. I have to keep that top of mind even though my body's screaming at me to make a different choice.

I drive through the downtown area of Sunset Bluffs past a clothing boutique and The Morning Dew. One thing I love about this area is how condensed it is. You can literally walk from a bar to the grocery store to the lake and back. It's popular with both the locals and the tourists and there's always a lot going on, and while that can sprout a lot of drama, it's also what makes community.

In less than a mile of space, there are three auto shops. Rev & Restore, Polished Pistons, and Achilles'. We don't take from each other though since we all have different specialties. We help each other out and it's like family.

The familiar thud of my heart against my ribs echoes a conflict that's been simmering within me for as long as I can remember. Sunset Bluffs, with its tranquil lake and the

comforting embrace of Go Jump, has always been home. Yet, there's this relentless pull, an undercurrent of longing that tugs at my soul, whispering of passions and dreams that might just be too grand for the quiet shores of Sunset Lake.

I find myself at a literal and metaphorical crossroads. Continuing straight would take me back to the resort, to the larger house I share with Ledger, Fallon, and Daisy. It's a sanctuary of sorts, but tonight, it feels more like a cage. I'm not quite ready to face the familiarity of home, not when I feel wound so tightly.

So, without much deliberation, my hands steer the wheel right, guiding me toward Moonlit Groove. The need for a drink—something strong and mind-clearing—is overwhelming.

As I pull into the parking lot, the bar's faint hum of music and chatter promises a temporary escape, a momentary reprieve from my swirling emotions. The bars here serve as second homes, so maybe amidst the clink of glasses and the murmur of other lives unfolding, I can find a semblance of clarity or at least the courage to face the questions I've been dodging.

## Chapter Six

### *Avery*

Why does music always sound better with beer? Especially live music. I mean Mel Harmon is awesome on the guitar, so that helps obviously. But as I sit in Moonlit Groove, at the bar by myself since Sawyer couldn't wait to get back to her studio apartment, working on my second craft beer, I feel like all the stress of the day is finally starting to dissipate. A little anyway. Hence craft beer number two.

The first one disappeared quickly, a futile attempt to wash away the layers of frustration clinging to me. I'm a tangled mess of emotions. Embarrassment over my filthy audiobook booming through my speakers and straight into Gibson's ears, happiness for my brother and Iris, nostalgia for my old life here in Sunset Bluffs.

Being here for Aiden's wedding was supposed to be simple, joyful. But it's anything but. Every interaction with Gibson is like a spark to dry tinder. His words, his glances, and even the mere act of sharing the same air feel like an invisible force, pulling me toward an edge I dare not approach.

Because I'm not staying. I'm not.

No can do.

Still, I'm painfully aware of the boundaries my lunkhead brother has drawn around me, lines etched deep over the years. Yet, knowing Gibson is off-limits does nothing to douse the fire. Attraction, I've realized, is akin to a slumbering volcano—deceptive in its calm, but beneath the surface, lies a

relentless building of pressure, an inevitable eruption waiting to happen.

Lost in my tumbling thoughts, I barely register the presence that slides onto the stool beside me. The bar is bustling, and proximity to strangers is expected. But then, a voice cuts through the din, a voice I'd recognize anywhere, and my heart clenches, a mix of dread and an inexplicable thrill. It's him—Gibson. And just like that, the volcano stirs.

I just hope I can escape before the lava starts to flow.

The stool creaks under his weight, and I don't even need to look up. "Hey." Gibson's voice is low, a familiar timbre that sends a shiver down my spine. "You always drink alone?"

My lips curve into a reluctant smirk, betraying the whirlwind of emotions his sudden proximity stirs within me. "I try to," I quip, my voice steady despite the way my heart is doing acrobatics. "But people keep bothering me." The words are light, but there's a tremor of something deeper, something unsaid, as I take a slow sip of my beer.

He orders a Hefeweizen, and his gaze shifts to my almost empty glass, a silent inquiry. "Whatcha drinking?" There's a casualness to his question, but the air between us is charged, thick with unspoken words and memories.

"Well." I turn the glass in my hand, the light catching the rich, reddish hue of the liquid. "My first was the Thermocline Cream Ale. Inhaled that one." I pause, struggling to recall the name of my current choice. The bartender, sensing my lapse, chimes in with a friendly smile.



“Cherry Razz. Kettle sour,” he offers, and I nod in gratitude.

“Right.” I point at him with a playful wink. “And let’s switch it up with a nitro next. The Stouty McStoutface.”

“You got it,” the bartender responds, moving away to pour my next escapade into a glass.

“I like the way you drink, Bee Bait.” The childhood nickname rolls off Gibson’s tongue, a ghost from the past rearing its head. But his tone shifts, the lightness fading as he probes deeper. “But that’s one sad-sounding beer you just ordered. Did something happen since we had lunch?”

His question catches me off guard, grounding me back to a reality we haven’t shared in far too long. The concern in his eyes feels like a jolt, stark against the backdrop of years and miles that have stretched silently between us. Yet, with a simple ‘hey,’ it’s as if no time has passed, our easy banter a bridge over the gap of years.

And hearing that nickname, not uttered in ages, is more like a time machine. Suddenly, I’m yanked back to those sun-drenched, laughter-filled days of our youth. It’s a vivid flashback to innocence and shared secrets, to bee-chased adventures that seemed like the biggest of deals because I was always the one who ended up getting stung. That nickname, more than just a childhood call sign, feels like a token from a time when things were uncomplicated, when our biggest concern was how much we could cram into endless summer days.

His voice, teasing yet warm, churns up a storm of nostalgia and longing within me, representing a time when our

connection was as simple as shared laughter and secrets. For a fleeting second, amidst the low buzz of the bar, the weight of adulthood slips off my shoulders, and I'm transported back to that carefree girl, with Gibson's laughter as my soundtrack.

"Well, my car is broken, my brother hovers like a fruit fly at a farmer's market, my parents kicked me to the curb and this is the closest thing I've had to a vacation since I left this place so..." I make a weighing motion with my hands.

"So, a third beer is in order," he says as the bartender sets our glasses down. Gibson clinks his to mine. "To old friends and old times. Cheers."

As we both take a sip, Gibson's gaze meets mine, his brows knitting together in concern. "Wait, what do you mean your parents kicked you out? They wouldn't let you stay?"

I can't help but draw a parallel to a familiar cinematic moment. "Remember the scene in *Sixteen Candles* where Molly Ringwald's character realizes her whole family forgot her birthday?" I see recognition in his eyes—we watched that movie together once, a shared memory in our trove of countless others.

Gibson cocks his head, a cautious "Yeah...?" escaping him.

"My visit home? Let's just say Molly had it better." The words leave my mouth tinged with a mix of sarcasm and disbelief.

He winces in sympathy. "That bad, huh?"

My foot nudges the suitcase at my feet, a tangible symbol of my current state of limbo.

Gibson leans forward, his voice laced with concern. “Wait, back up. Are you actually homeless right now?”

“Apparently,” I let out a dry laugh, the absurdity of the situation not lost on me. “I mean, I could’ve camped out on the couch, but it was perpetually occupied. My old room, the guest room—every conceivable space was claimed. My mom has lost the plot over Aiden’s wedding. And as you know, the nearest real hotel is three towns over.”

“And all the rooms are booked,” he says, finishing my thought with a nod of understanding.

“It’s not just that it’s their daughter they’ve sidelined since they knew I was coming back. You’d think they could’ve spared a corner, even just a blowup mattress. Even Papa’s house is overrun. When he told me I couldn’t stay there, I thought he might cry. Then I wanted to cry.” The words are out before I can temper them, revealing more vulnerability than I intended.

Gibson’s nod is slow, his eyes reflecting a mix of empathy and something else, something deeper.

“I was even willing to sleep on the damn trampoline and brave the bugs and the elements, which is sketchy as hell considering it’s been there since we were kids, but guess what? Pot-smoking cousin Benny took that. And I’m not about to shack up next to him. He doesn’t understand that we’re related. By blood.”

Gibson nearly chokes on his beer. “Sorry. That sucks. And I forgot your parents still have that trampoline.”

“Remember in high school when you’d stay over and we’d have sleepovers on it?” I ask, letting the beer take me down memory lane.

“I do.” He smirks, staring forward. “And everyone would slide toward the middle because we weren’t really kids anymore and Aiden got pissed because you kept landing on top of me.”

“So, he laid in the middle.” I giggled. “And he woke up with both of us smashed into him. Served him right.”

Gibson snorts out a laugh and covers his mouth with his hands. God those hands. I am a hands girl, always have been, and his are amazing. Olive-skinned, just the right size, and beautiful. His left arm is sleeved out in tattoos but they stop right at his wrist. His twin Paxton has a mirror image sleeve but on his right arm. The only difference is Paxton’s covers his hand too. I dig tattoos, especially sleeves, but I don’t like hand tattoos. I like to be able to see a man’s hands.

Gibson continues, his voice a blend of amusement and something softer, “Your brother is wound too tight.” The light from the bar casts shadows across his face, making him look both mysterious and all too familiar. “He worries for nothing.”

But the alcohol, emboldening me, nudges me to challenge that notion. “Does he though? I mean, you are here having a beer with me.”

“Buying your beer for you,” he corrects with a wry smile, leaning in just a tad closer, the warmth from his body contradicting the coolness of his demeanor.

“Unchaperoned,” I counter, my head tilting slightly, a playful rebuke in my tone, while my heart races at the closeness.

His lips quirk up in that signature smirk, “And definitely not five feet of space between us.”

“Totally unacceptable. I mean... how could we?” I feign shock, my eyes wide, but I can’t ignore the electric charge in the air between us, sparking with every shared glance, every laugh.

“Disgraceful,” he agrees, his smirk deepening, eyes twinkling with mischief as they meet mine. The look speaks volumes, hinting at shared secrets and unspoken promises. “But if it’s chivalry your brother wants, I might have a solution to your homelessness.”

“Talk to me,” I urge, leaning forward, eager for a distraction from the palpable tension. The mention of my predicament, of being a fish out of water in my hometown, brings a grounding reality back to our conversation. “Back in LA, I had an apartment. A car. Both perfectly comfortable and adequate. Here? I’m basically a bum. I bet I couldn’t even hire an Uber.” My words hang in the air, a stark reminder of my current state, yet sitting here with Gibson, it feels like everything might just be okay.

“Oh, stop. You know you can always catch a ride with me. I’ll take you to Go Jump. Hook you up with a cabin. The wedding is there anyway. Two birds, one stone.” He makes a mic drop motion. “You’re welcome.”

“Nah, there can’t be any space available there,” I say skeptically. “Between the wedding and Sunset Days... This is

peak time for the resort.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he says with a wink that could literally stop my heart. “Enough business talk. My best friend’s little sister needs a safe place to lay her head. Now she’s got one. You hungry? I know a guy.”

“Dinner, drinks, and accommodations? This is not Aiden approved at all,” I retort, unable to suppress the amusement bubbling up inside me.

He laughs, a sound rich and warm, and leans in closer, diminishing the space between us. “I’ll take my chances.”

Then he winks again, a simple gesture that somehow sends my heart into a fluttering chaos. I mentally brace myself; who needs a regular heartbeat anyway?

Gibson orders a BLT to share from a food truck parked just outside Moonlit Groove. The place, primarily a taproom, becomes a hub for food trucks in the summer months, each offering their unique culinary delights under the soft glow of string lights.

“You really don’t have to buy me dinner,” I insist as we each take half of the sandwich, the aroma of bacon and fresh lettuce wafting between us.

“I’m not. I bought myself dinner and I’m letting you have a bite,” he counters, a playful smirk dancing on his lips. “An extra-large bite.”

“Such a gentleman,” I reply, my words muffled by a mouthful of the sandwich. A contented “Mmm” escapes me as he passes a napkin my way. “This place literally has the best BLT on the planet.”

“You mean La-La Land isn’t all it’s cracked up to be?” he teases, the light from the taproom casting a soft glow on his features. “Shocking. And not at all what *Selling Sunset* would have a person believe.”

I can’t help but laugh at the absurdity of him actually watching reality TV, the sound mingling with the ambient noises around us. “Oh, don’t get me wrong. LA has incredible food. More than I could try in one lifetime for sure. But something about this sandwich... I think it’s nostalgic, you know? Familiar.”

“Familiar is always better than shiny-new,” he muses, taking a thoughtful sip of his beer. His gaze meets mine, holding it just a beat too long, as if trying to convey something more with his eyes alone. “Take sound systems for instance. Bluetooth is a craze. But the rig I’m putting back in your Caddy?” He lets out an appreciative whistle, his attention momentarily caught by the remnants of our meal.

“I like how you say that like Aiden won’t be involved,” I tease, the edges of my lips tugging upward in a smile that I can’t quite contain.

Gibson meets my jest with a confident, lopsided grin, his eyes sparkling with a mix of challenge and amusement. “I don’t need his help. I got it handled,” he asserts, his voice a blend of determination and casual nonchalance that somehow, in this moment, makes me believe him.

Our conversation gently winds down as we make our way to his Jeep, the familiar, comfortable silence settling between us. Approaching the vehicle, I can’t help but comment, “I have a love/hate relationship with this thing,” while grappling with

the stubborn passenger door handle. “I can’t believe you haven’t gotten rid of it.”

“Don’t be mean to Roxy,” Gibson chides playfully, sliding into the driver’s seat after he’s tossed my bag into the back with a practiced ease. His affection for the rugged old Jeep is evident, even as he feigns indignation at my teasing. The door finally gives way under my persistent yank, and I climb in, settling into the seat with a sense of familiarity that only comes from years of friendship and shared adventures in this vehicle.

“I like old cars. You know this.” I tell him, buckling up. “Just not this one. I swear on my life that Roxy is trying to thwart me just because I exist.”

The moment Gibson turns the key, the space inside the Jeep fills with the unmistakable sound of Van Halen, the music acting as a bridge between past and present. I can’t help but grin. “Good music too?”

“Some things never change,” he replies, a hint of nostalgia in his voice.

I eye the dashboard with playful skepticism. “Is that an eight-track?” My nose wrinkles in mock disgust, but my heart is light with the familiarity of our banter.

“Shut up,” he retorts with a laugh, the sound resonating in the confined space, mingling with the echoes of our shared history.

As we drive toward Go Jump, each turn of the road is laden with unspoken thoughts and unacknowledged tensions. The Jeep comes to a halt in front of the last cabin, its isolation



from the rest a silent reminder of the forced proximity we're about to endure.

“Last one,” he announces, and I can't help but cast a wary glance at the cabin. “Seriously? Gibson. You know how much people would pay to stay here, especially now.”

“There was a cancellation. And it's irrelevant,” he states firmly, unbuckling his seatbelt with a sense of finality. “Family comes first.” His words hang in the air, heavy with implications.

We exit the Jeep, and he effortlessly hoists my suitcase. I ignore how his t-shirt bunches and his muscles ripple underneath the effort. The way he unlocks the door with a master key and pushes it open speaks of a familiarity and authority that only deepens the complexity of this moment.

“I'm not family,” I protest softly, the words barely more than a whisper in the vastness of what's unsaid between us.

“Whatever. You're my best friend's little sister. That's blood to me,” he asserts, his gaze meeting mine, unwavering in its intensity.

The label stings a bit. Sure, being his best friend's sister slots me into the family zone, a place I've occupied too comfortably. Yet, there's a part of me that's always hoped for an upgrade from sisterly affection to something... more. But with my departure looming, craving more from Gibson feels like a recipe for heartache.

I wish I was back in LA. Safe from the past. Each moment with him, every casual touch or shared laugh, fans the flames of a yearning I've tried to smother with distance and denial.

As I ponder the impending return to my life miles away, a kernel of doubt burrows deep. Did I leave all those years ago to chase a dream, or was I fleeing the terrifying possibility of an *us*? The thought that I might have run from the best thing that could have happened is a silent torment, gnawing at the edges of my resolve.

“Thanks,” I murmur, the gratitude genuine but laced with a complexity that stretches back years. An awkward tension hovers between us, a tangible thing, before he shoves his hands in his pockets and steps away from the porch.

“Always. Well... have a great night. Just call up to the house if you need anything,” he replies, his back to me now, walking away. In his wake, he leaves a turmoil of emotions swirling inside me—gratitude, confusion, desire. As I watch him leave, it feels as though he’s taking more than just his physical presence with him; he’s carrying away pieces of my heart, mind, and all the unvoiced truths that lie between us.

As I step inside and close the door, a shaky breath escapes me, my heart pounding against my ribcage like a frantic bird seeking escape. This is madness. I knew seeing Gibson again would stir something within me, but I didn’t anticipate this torrent of emotions, this overwhelming sense of every latent feeling rising to the surface, demanding recognition.

Dragging my suitcase to the bed, I mechanically unpack it, retrieving an oversized Prince t-shirt and cotton shorts. Yet, my mind is a whirlwind of memories from the evening. Gibson’s smile, that laugh, the way he leaned toward me so I could feel his body heat—it haunts me. And God, he’s even hotter now than he was back in the day. The way he looks as a

grown man is etched into my mind's eye. The maroon t-shirt, soft and worn, hugging his lean, muscular frame.

Then there were his jeans—those black, ripped jeans that clung to him, revealing glimpses of leg tattoos through the tattered fabric. They showed off the truth of his well-toned six-foot frame, sending a jolt through my nerves at the mere thought.

I shake my head, trying to dispel these dangerously tempting thoughts. I'm here for two reasons only: to return Papa's car and witness Aiden's big day. Nothing more.

And then there's the undeniable truth—Gibson Patrick Story has always been, according to Aiden, completely and utterly off-limits. Yet, there's a forbidden allure to that fact, like he's a glaring red button marked DO NOT PUSH. But I'm the proverbial Dennis the Menace, itching to do exactly what I shouldn't.

Biting my lip, I can't help but linger on the thought of Gibson's lips. We've never crossed that line even as kids—a kiss, something so simple yet so loaded with meaning. But there was that one time, a moment suspended in time, where it almost happened. The memory seeps through the cracks of my resolve, vivid and haunting.

It happened during one stolen moment, alone, the air thick with unspoken tension. Our eyes locked, hearts beating a frantic rhythm, and we leaned in, so close that I could feel the warmth of his breath mingling with mine. My heart raced, a wild drum in my chest, as his gaze dropped to my lips, and I thought, just maybe... But no, the moment passed, leaving me empty inside.

After I finish unpacking and organizing, I flop down onto the bed. Even though my body is heavy with exhaustion, my mind refuses to quiet down. The room is still, the only sound my own breathing, yet in the silence, memories assault me. It's like a love song about Gibson Story that just won't stop. And as I drift into a fitful sleep, each moment from our past follows me, weaving their way into my dreams, a ghostly echo of a path we never took.

## Chapter Seven

*Gibson*

*I spot Avery across the field, illuminated in neon orange and green. Even in the dim light, her eyes sparkle with that mischievous glint I've always found irresistible. She smiles, a smirk that seems to beckon me, a silent challenge that says, "Come get me, Gibson."*

*Compelled by some magnetic pull, I chase after her, my heart racing with a mix of excitement and teenage angst. She darts into the trees, a glowing specter in the night. Around us, figures dash and weave, creating a kaleidoscope of light, but my focus is solely on her.*

*Always her.*

*I find Avery hiding behind a tree, her breaths coming in quick pants. She thinks she's unseen, but I know better. I approach stealthily, and she peeks out, only to bump into me. She lets out a startled shriek followed by a burst of laughter.*

*My hands instinctively pull her close. "Got you."*

*"Let go." She giggles, her hands on my chest in a playful protest.*

*A grin splits my cheeks. "You're out."*

*"You're out." Her finger pokes into my chest and even that innocent touch burns my skin.*

*I flinch, laughing, as she continues her playful assault. "What's wrong, Gibson?" she teases, biting her lip in that way that's always driven me crazy.*

*“Avery, knock it off,” I say, but my voice lacks conviction as I grab her hands, our playful tussle turning into a mock fight.*

*Somehow, she ends up on top, her fingers dancing across my ribs, sending me into uncontrollable laughter. “Gibson Story has a weakness,” she declares triumphantly.*

*With my dick thickening as she squirms, it takes all my strength to flip our positions, and now I hover over her. Our breaths mingle, the air charged with a palpable tension. “I said knock it off,” I whisper, the words heavy with unspoken longing.*

*“Or what?” she challenges, her green eyes alight with a daring fire.*

*“Or else...” I lean in closer, the space between us closing, her lips mere inches from mine. But then, it twists, morphing into a reminder of reality. Aiden’s voice echoes through the trees, shattering the moment, and pulling me back from the precipice.*

“What the hell, Gibson!” I nearly fall out of my bed when Ledger barges into my room. Just like that, I’m ripped from the dream. Somehow, I always wake up at that part. That delicious moment right before I find out what Avery March tastes like.

I just love living with my siblings. Not.

“What?” I moan, sitting up. Daisy walks by carrying a laundry basket. I pull the sheet up because I am literally only wearing black boxer briefs and probably have morning wood since all I dreamt about last night was Avery.

Avery in high school.

Avery now.

Both versions so different but equally chub-inducing.

Daisy's cheeks turn a delicate shade of pink, her embarrassment evident. She's woven into the fabric of Go Jump in more ways than one, not just as the housekeeper but also as part of our tangled family history. She used to date Hudson, our brother, and was supposedly the love of his life before he vanished without a word. After he went AWOL, Mom and Dad, in a typical move of misplaced but well-meaning kindness, offered the heartbroken Daisy a job and a place to stay. It's an arrangement that might raise eyebrows if pondered for too long. But I've learned the art of not dwelling on the complexities that seem to be a staple in our family dynamics.

"You can't just give away cabins! I had a couple interested and then had to tell them never mind!" he barks out. "I look like an idiot!"

I lay back down on my stomach, covering my face. "I didn't *give it away*." I mock his tone. "It's still there, go look."

I don't have to see his face to know my sarcasm is grinding on every last one of his uptight-suit-and-tie-needs-to-get-laid-at-least-twice nerves.

"You know what I mean," he says through his teeth, ripping my blanket away. "You rented out a couple's suite. Without asking. And for *free*."

"So, put it on my tab," I snap, yanking the blanket back. "It's Avery. She's just as much family as Leo is."

Steam seems to swirl around his head. “And why the hell is Avery *March* squatting in our last available cabin? She actually has family who live in Sunset Bluffs. A lot of them.”

We are literally playing tug of war with this damn blanket, like children. And I would like it noted that he started it.

I tug again until I meet resistance. “She’s the maid of honor and has nowhere to go.”

“Oh, no?” he asks with a tone that makes me clench my jaw.

Here it comes.

He knows my history with her. He’s always given me shit for not making a move. And I’ve told him a hundred times over that Aiden makes that impossible by making it a choice between him and her. Ledger doesn’t understand, of course, because he spends all his time crunching numbers and probably has no love interests and his best friend, mistress, lover, and wife is the stock market app. I don’t even think my older brother has emotions. And even if he does, he won’t give himself permission to feel them.

His lips twist. “You could have easily shared *your* bed for free.”

I shoot out of bed then, not caring that Daisy’s timing is impeccable and she’s walking by again. “Avery is not that kind of girl,” I say right in his face. “And I’m not that kind of guy.” I run my hand through my hair and decide to get under his skin as well. “Besides. What’s the point in offering her a room at a house that we don’t own anymore? Mom and Dad didn’t say



Go Jump is struggling but we all know it is. It's only a matter of time before we'll be sitting on the curb."

"The resort is not going under," he hisses back. "Don't even speak those words out loud, little brother."

"And how do you know that?" I sing-song back.

"I just...do," he says, refusing eye contact.

"Maybe," I say through my teeth, "The resort wouldn't have issues if everyone wasn't so secretive about everything." I walk over and grab a pair of jeans, slipping them on.

"That's cool, Gibs. Blow around the topic." His tone is patronizing as hell and I'm not here for it. It's too early and I'm frustrated... in more ways than one. I need a shower. I need coffee. I need to go check on Avery.

"I'm not the one blowing around anything. You know things the rest of us don't." I pull a yellow Beatles shirt out of my closet. "You and Tate have always acted like this family is a hierarchy and the rest of us just work for you. Hate to break it to you, but we're not slaves."

Ledger lets out a laugh and I make my way to the kitchen with him trailing after me. I know because I can feel his feet stomping like a clodhopper in his gigantic loafers. I need coffee first. Right fucking now in fact. Either to drink or throw at him. I'll decide momentarily.

"You know." Grabbing a mug, I shove it under the Keurig. "If anyone should be sweating, it's you. This place is your whole life. I just sleep here." I turn around and lean against the counter, crossing my arms.

That gets him.

His toe taps on the hardwood. “I’ve seen the damn contract, so no, I’m not *sweating*. We can stay here for the rest of our lives if we want to. But that does not, however, extend to friends. We’re a business. Not a homeless shelter.”

The last part burrows itself deep in my nerves but I backtrack. “Wait. You’ve seen it? How?”

“That’s irrelevant.”

“Who are the owners then?” I ask.

“That I don’t know,” he admits. Which makes no sense. Mom and Dad have always been pretty close-lipped about the business and financial stuff, but this is getting ridiculous. And it would seem on that point, Ledger and I are in agreement. “Bottom line is, *we* are no longer the owners, and we don’t get to decide who stays for free.”

I bite my lips between my teeth and my jaw flexes. “Fine. But that also means you don’t get to push the rest of us around anymore either.”

“I’m not pushing anyone around when I make business decisions,” he insists. “You know what? I’m not having this conversation.”

“Cool. Adios then,” I tell him.

“You don’t own the place, brother,” he says. “Maybe you should slow your roll.”

I grin into my coffee mug. “Neither do you... *brother.*”

He finally leaves and I sigh, running both of my hands through my hair and holding them on my head for a moment as I decompress.

If we have new owners, which we do, Ledger doesn't get to call the shots just because he's the oldest. I think the fact that Mom and Dad are gone has him trying to dictate though. We all knew by their tone and the way they just peaced the fuck out that they don't want to be bothered. A *don't call us, we'll call you* kind of thing.

Maybe I shouldn't have just handed the cabin to Avery without asking. But either way, if money was the issue, I meant what I said. I'll pay for it. Last night, she was desperate, even on the verge of tears when I sat down. She deflected it with booze and sarcasm—something we have in common—but I knew she was upset, especially the part about her Papa who she loves more than any other person on this earth. It all comes down to the fact that I *know* her. And I'll be damned if she gets left high and dry because her parents have their heads up their asses. As their only daughter coming in from out of town, she should have been their first priority.

After I get to the shop, I go straight to work on the Caddy. Aiden is busy with paperwork and we seem a little slow so it's the perfect job. I remove the new sound system and stare at it on the workbench. It looks like it cost a fortune. I wonder what Avery paid for it.

When I'm finishing up, Aiden comes out to have me sign something.

"You think she wants this back?" I ask, nodding at it.

Aiden half shrugs. "I mean I don't know what she'd use it for. I'm sure her Honda has that and better if it's a newer car."

"She could sell it."

“I’ll ask the next time I see her.”

I nod. Or I could text her. I should check on her anyway. Courtesy call from Go Jump. *How was your first night? Were you comfortable? Cold? Lonely? Thinking about any certain someone?*

As Aiden’s announcement about the tux cuts through my spiraling thoughts, I nod, my attention momentarily diverted. An undercurrent of tension ripples as we discuss the wedding details, an event marked by its intimate setting by the lake. Despite my role as the best man, the inclusion of Avery as the maid of honor, someone Iris has never met, gnaws at me.

Curiosity piqued, I can’t resist probing, “How did Avery end up being the maid of honor?” My voice echoes in the open space as Aiden puts some tools away.

He answers with a shrug, the weight of family bonds in his simple explanation, “Iris doesn’t have any sisters.”

“But cousins?” I press, not ready to drop it.

“Not close enough,” he dismisses with a wave of his hand.

“And friends?” The question hangs between us.

He stops, turns, his look piercing. “She’s my sister. And I love her. Iris loves her by default. That good enough for you? Why do you even care?” His words are a reminder of the unspoken rules that govern our lives.

I raise my hands in a gesture of peace. “Just asking.”

Silence falls, heavy and thick, before Aiden’s voice slices through it, a warning wrapped in brotherly love. “Since that means you’ll be spending a lot of time together, don’t get any

ideas. I know all about that best man maid of honor hook-up shit. Not fucking happening.”

His words hit me like a physical blow, nearly making me fumble the sound system. “Are you serious right now? I have never tried anything with your sister,” I stammer, disbelief and frustration coloring my tone.

“Yet,” he interjects sharply, his gaze hardened. “You haven’t tried anything yet. But I see the way you two are. She’s a flirt. I know that. But she’s my sister, Gibson. She doesn’t even live here. If you two hooked up, it would go bad. Then you’d be mad at each other. Then I’d have to choose between you. Don’t put your best friend in that position. If you put your hormones aside for one fucking second, you’ll see that I’m only looking out for the both of you.”

The finality in his voice stings, a harsh reminder of the lines drawn in the sand. “As you’ve reiterated a bazillion times,” I retort, my frustration bubbling over. “And for the record? I would never do anything to hurt her. Or you. My heart is in the right place.” My declaration, fierce and protective, is a testament to the depth of my feelings, a raw acknowledgment of the complicated emotions at play.

He pauses a second before giving a single nod. We go back to work, in silence now. I think about my words. It’s a promise I can keep. I would never intentionally hurt Avery. But I didn’t say I’d stay completely away, either. I mean, we have to dance together at the reception. I get to hold her. Put my hand on the small of her back to guide her.

My heart blips like it’s being tased and my balls start to ache.

So, maybe just one little kiss underneath the stars.

That couldn't hurt, could it?

I hope you enjoyed this exclusive prequel!

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Colleen Charles loves reading and writing stories that entertain and sweep the reader away from their everyday life.