

## Chapter One

From: Harper Donnelly  
To: Chloe Pascal  
Subject: I hate your dad

Hey,

I just got home from your place, or, I guess your *old* place. Is it possible that my house feels emptier with you gone? That visit was way too short. I can't believe you're actually leaving. I can't believe you won't be at Eden's for New Year's. I can't believe you won't be at school. Or in Berne Harbor. Or Maine for that matter. This royally sucks.

I'm gonna go eat all the leftover chocolate from Christmas. Yes. All of it. Then I'll name the 10 lbs I gain after you. "Oh, this roll of fat right here? That's just Chloe."

Tell your dad I think he's a dick for taking the job in Columbus.

Jokes. Your dad's nice. But this still sucks.

Hugs et al,

Harper

P.S. I realize I could've just texted you all of this, but I've kinda always wanted a pen pal, and I figure writing you emails can be the not-that-shiny silver lining to this crappy, crappy situation.

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It was an opportunity he couldn't refuse. At least, that's how he presented it when my best friend's father told her the two of them would suddenly be moving to Ohio of all places over Christmas break. I'm sure he technically could have refused, but Chloe and her dad really needed the money after he'd lost his job a few months earlier. And there was no wiggle room in the offer either. If Mr. Pascal wanted the job, it had to be there, and it had to be then. No delaying until graduation. The company didn't care that Chloe had friends, a boyfriend, and a very important life she'd have to leave behind. Teenage dreams don't speak louder than the almighty dollar, so it was either move to Ohio with her dad, or to Texas, where her mom had moved years earlier, after her parents' divorce.

Chloe and her dad left the day after Christmas. Our other friend, Meera, and I came by for one final visit while Mr. Pascal loaded the last of their things into the rental truck.

Saying goodbye was strange. It felt like we were supposed to spend the time doing something meaningful, something memorable, something that could pay tribute to the years of sleepovers, secrets, confessions, hair braiding, movie marathons, fits of giggles, and silent

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understandings. But instead we sat on the winterized front porch of their modest home, with its peeling paint and scuffed floorboards, and talked about trivial things.

Meera had just broken up with her secret boyfriend, Lewis, having successfully hidden him from her overbearing and traditional Indian parents for the entire three-month duration of their relationship. Dating before college was a big N-O in her house, but Meera had a decidedly different opinion on the subject. The limitations her parents set seemed to only make the forbidden fruit that much juicier and appetizing. I wouldn't go so far as to call her *boy crazy*, but she did seem to have a habit of dating guys for a brief period of time before always being the one to break things off when she got bored or set her sights on someone new.

And then there was Chloe, who, of course, had just broken up with her boyfriend as well. At least, sort of. There seemed to be some confusion on the subject.

"Did Luke agree it was for the best?" I asked, sliding a blue fabric elastic from my pocket so I could sweep my below shoulder-length brown hair into a ponytail.

Chloe frowned. "Not specifically. I don't think he was there yet. At first, he just seemed pissed that I was moving, almost like he thought it was my idea. Because, you know me; I've been meaning to check *ruin my entire life* off my bucket list for a while." She paused to roll her eyes. "Anyway, after we moved past the initial shock and suckiness of it, we started talking about long distance relationships and how they rarely work, and how it wouldn't be fair to each other blah blah blah. But then we talked about how college is only nine months away and if we both end up at UMaine like we planned..."

"So, wait—are you still together?" Meera asked.

Chloe tucked a curl of honey-blonde hair behind her ear. "No. It's more like, we're on hold. Kinda. Except not. We agreed we don't owe each other anything, but, it's not like either of us wanted this to happen."

"I'm sorry, Chloe," I said, though truthfully, a tiny part of me selfishly wasn't. Chloe and Luke had only been dating for about eight months, but they'd gotten pretty serious. I hadn't realized how much she liked him until the day she asked him out. We'd been sitting in the cafeteria eating lunch when she suddenly got up to sit across from him a few tables over. I remember feeling confused, wondering what the hell she was doing. He had his earbuds in and was reading and eating at the same time. He didn't seem to notice her until she started mirroring his every movement, finally eliciting a laugh. They talked for about five minutes; I stared the entire time. I couldn't see her face, but I could see his and he was smiling. The next thing I knew they went to see a movie together, then they started holding hands in the halls, kissing goodbye before class. It seemed abrupt at the time, but I don't think it actually was.

Chloe and I had been much closer before Luke came along. And sure, that probably would've been true with any boyfriend, or if the situation had been reversed, but having to share her with Luke made me resent him a little, even though I knew it was irrational.

"I feel like *sorry* is understating things," I continued. "But I am. Especially for myself cause I'm gonna miss the crap out of you."

Chloe smiled at that, but it was faint. "I'm going to miss the crap out of you guys, too."

Mr. Pascal pulled the back door of the rental truck and the three of us startled as it slammed shut. This was really happening.

"Alright, Chlo," he called from the driveway. "Time to wrap it up, Hun."

Chloe's glassy eyes went wide as they shifted from Meera to me.

"We're gonna text, IM, whatever on an hourly basis," Meera said, bounding forward to draw Chloe into a hug. "You know that, right?"

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Chloe nodded, managing an affirmative squeak as Meera released her. She turned to face me, and suddenly it felt like something heavy had been dropped onto my chest, pressing in on my lungs.

“You should know, I strongly considered asking Nan if you could move in with us, but, well, you know how small the cottage is. Either she’d kill me for asking in the first place, or you for being there when she reluctantly agreed,” I joked, hoping to break the tension.

“I know she would.” Chloe smiled, pulling me into her arms. “I appreciate the thought.”

I’d hugged Chloe plenty of times before, but I’d never given much thought to the moment of letting go, not until I definitely didn’t want to.

“We don’t say goodbye around here,” I said. “There’s no sense in it.”

“This is literally the worst,” she whispered into my shoulder. And as much as that definitely wasn’t true, in that moment, it felt awfully close. Nothing exciting or eventful ever happened in Berne Harbor. Our lives had always been linear, predictable. Now something was finally happening, and all I wanted was for everything to stay the same.

Meera and I waited until the rental truck turned the corner and was out of sight before we said our own goodbyes and headed home.

“I’ll text you!” she shouted before disappearing behind the wheel of her mom’s SUV.

I waved, then crossed the street to where my grandmother’s baby blue passenger van with the *Donnelly Shuttle Service* logo on the side sat waiting. Climbing in, I glanced at the clock on the dashboard. 10:23 AM.

Dammit. I was gonna be late.

## Chapter Two

“I’m so sorry, Nan,” I blurted before I was even in through the pantry door. “I completely lost track of time.”

When I entered the kitchen, my grandmother was standing by the stove, dressed for the season in a heavy parka and matching crimson hat and gloves she’d knitted herself. She swiped her oversized travel mug from the counter, forcing a puff of steam to escape the narrow opening in the lid.

“Keys,” she said, extending her left hand.

I dropped the keys to the van in her palm, another apology tripping over my lips.

She looped the key ring over her pinky finger, then reached out to touch my cheek, tilting my freckled face upward until my gaze met hers.

“Listen. I get it,” she said. “She’s your best friend. There’s no such thing as a quick farewell between best friends. Besides, the truth is, I told you I needed the van back by 10:30 because I knew you’d be late. I actually don’t have to leave for another five minutes.”

I swatted her lightly on the arm. “Nan! That’s so not cool.”

Nan shrugged. “I know you too well, Harper. How are you holding up?”

“Okay. I guess.” I shrugged. “I still can’t believe she’s moving to Ohio. Four weeks ago, we were talking senior ditch day, prom, graduation. Now she won’t be here for any of it.”

Nan pulled me into her arms, a gloved hand smoothing over the back of my winter jacket. “You two will stay in touch. And college is right around the corner.”

“I know,” I sighed. “It’ll be fine. It just won’t be the same without her.”

“No,” Nan said. “But that doesn’t mean it can’t be good.”

She gave me a quick kiss on the cheek and was gone, headed to the airport to pick up another group of tourists. Nan had been shuttling people to the local inns and B&Bs for as long as I could remember. Even in the winter months, Berne Harbor was a hot spot for charming New England rest and relaxation.

Our small two-bedroom cottage on the north side of town used to feel even smaller, back before my dad passed away. He and Nan used to run the business together, but then, during my freshman year of high school, Dad was diagnosed with stage IV Hodgkin’s lymphoma. Six far-too-hurried weeks later, he passed away. It was shocking. Devastating. My memories of that time were foggy, which I didn’t mind, because the memories I had of my dad when he was healthy and himself were the ones I wanted to hang onto.

It took a few months, but eventually I moved all my stuff from the makeshift bedroom in the den, where I’d slept since I was a baby, to dad’s room. I kept his old wooden dresser and rocking chair by the window. It was the first time I ever had bedroom with a door.

So, what about my mom? I never knew her. At least, not that I can remember. She left when I was only four months old, which as far as I was concerned, was way worse than if she’d left on day one. She took the time to get to know me, to teach my newborn self to rely on her—to love her—and then she decided to leave me.

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I guess Dad didn't know what to do with such a little baby, so we promptly moved in with Nan. The cottage had been home ever since.

It was starting to snow as I curled up on the couch to send an email to Chloe. Yes, I'd just seen her, but I missed her so much already. Afterward, I went online and scrolled through all the goodbye messages on her various accounts. The decision to move had been so sudden; she hadn't told many people before winter break, but the news was spreading fast.

The sting of saying goodbye almost made me wish I was one of our classmates, receiving the news casually because I was only a casual friend. It would be surprising. Good gossip. And maybe a little sad, because so many people had known her since elementary school. But they'd get over it quickly. They'd move on. I didn't think I'd ever stop missing her.

Chloe and I had been friends since kindergarten and it didn't take long before we were best friends. Both being only children, we spent a lot of time together growing up. Sometimes it felt more like we were sisters. I stayed with her the night her mom left for Texas, talking her down from placing blame where it didn't belong. And when I couldn't make it through the poem at the end of my dad's eulogy, Chloe got up and finished reading it for me, then held my hand for the remainder of the service, making sure I was the first to let go.

I closed my laptop and pulled a blanket off the back of the couch to cover myself. I'd woken earlier than I otherwise would've during the holidays to say goodbye to Chloe, so I was pretty tired. But it was more than that. I felt emotionally drained. Despondent. I closed my eyes and let myself drift off.

Sometime later, my phone buzzed on the nearby coffee table, rousing me. I glanced at it to see a group message from Eden, with details about the party she was having for New Year's.

*Come after 7pm. Parents will be out, but back after midnight. BYOB. Nothing we can't stash.*

I'd been looking forward to this party. It wasn't gonna be a rager or anything, but a bunch of people from school were gonna be there, and it was our last New Year's party before college. It should've been epic. But now? With Chloe a thousand miles away? I really didn't feel like celebrating.

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Meera came over the afternoon before the party. That was always a given. She needed a staging area where she could change out of the clothes she'd left home in, into something a little more form-fitting or flashy—the clothes her parents didn't realize she owned.

"Where did you tell them you were going?" I asked, holding the front door open as she stepped in carrying a pink duffel bag.

"Eden's," she said. "I prefer to deal in lies of omission. As far as they've assumed, it's going to be an all-girls sleepover with popcorn and PG-13 movies. Why steer them in any other direction?"

"I can think of no reason." I closed the door behind her right as an icy blast of wind tried to hurl snow in through the front entry. "Still winter out there, huh?"

Meera cocked an eyebrow. "Have you been hibernating in your den again?"

She wasn't wrong. I hadn't felt the urge to leave the house much since saying goodbye to Chloe.

"Santa brought me DeathQuest V. I've been busy," I grumbled. "Come on."

I led her to my room, where I had to kick a pile of dirty laundry aside before we could enter. "Sorry about the mess. Cleanliness is not next to vacation-ness."

"It is in my house," Meera said. "Have you heard from her?"

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“A bit,” I said, knowing she meant Chloe. “You?”

“Texts. A few emails. She was never much of a phone person.”

“No,” I said. “Me neither.”

“I think her dad is keeping her busy.”

I nodded. “She said he’s been making daily itineraries.”

Meera set her bag on the bed and began unpacking the wardrobe options inside. “Her locker is gonna be empty on Monday. How weird is that?”

I fell back into the rocking chair and peered out at the rolling white expanse behind the cottage, my response distracted. “Pretty damn weird.”

“How’s this?” Meera said, stealing my attention. She was holding up a red A-line dress with sparkly black nylons.

“Very festive.”

She smiled. “Well, that was easy.”

We had dinner with Nan who, to her credit, always turned a blind eye to Meera’s wardrobe changes and shifty behavior despite the fact that she *had* to be aware of its inherent shiftiness. Nan was never one to stick her nose in other people’s business. She’d give advice when it was appropriate, but she didn’t insert herself where she didn’t belong. It was one of the many things I adored about her.

“Are you gonna be okay all by yourself tonight, Nan?” I asked as we cleared the dishes and grabbed our coats. I found myself worrying about her more and more in the years since Dad had passed.

She waved a hand dismissively. “Of course! This is far from my first Near Year’s Eve flying solo. Besides, I’m planning to watch some of my shows, drink a little champagne, and then hit the hay by ten. In fact, let’s get a move on, huh? So I can get my evening started.”

Ten minutes later, we pulled up outside Eden’s in Nan’s shuttle.

“Here’s twenty dollars for a cab,” Nan said, folding a single bill into my hand. “And don’t you dare call Randy’s Taxi. Those guys overcharge. Now put that in your pocket and don’t spend it on drugs.”

“Nan—”

“Be smart, stay safe, and have fun,” she said. “And don’t wake me when you get in. Nan needs her beauty rest. Happy New Year!”

“Happy New Year!” Meera and I said in unison, waving from the curb.

We waited until Nan sped off, then turned toward the house.

“You up for this?” Meera asked.

“Up for a party where I’ll constantly be reminded that Chloe’s gone? Yeah, sure. Let’s go.” Meera smiled and linked her arm with mine. “Thank god for boys and booze.”

## Chapter Three

From: Chloe Pascal  
To: Harper Donnelly  
Subject: HNY Woman!

Okay, I'm totally digging this pen pal thing. I feel like I'm eight again!

So yeah, here I am in Stupidlumbus (you get that's Stupid Columbus, right?) with absolutely nothing to do on NYE. Okay, not nothing. I'm watching a movie with my dad. He bought a shrimp ring. I can't complain about that, but it's sooooo sad.

I'm supposed to be there, with you guys, having the time of our young lives! I assume you're still going to Eden's? You have to tell me everything. Actually, no. I don't want to hear it. It'll only make me bitter I couldn't be there.

Scratch that. I want to hear everything.

Miss you so much, man.

Chloe

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"It's Harper and Meera!" Eden yelled as she stepped aside, making room for us to enter the front hall. "Can I take your coats?"

I shrugged out of mine and handed it over, taking a moment to smooth out the black cable knit sweater I wore over jeans. Kinda boring, I know. But I was in mourning.

"I love that dress, Meera!" Eden exclaimed, prompting Meera to spin around, showing off the curves she often hid under layers of clothing. "So, can you guys believe it about Chloe?" Eden continued. "It was like, poof, suddenly she was moving. Did you guys have any idea?"

Ah, there it was. Barely twenty words in and we had our first reminder that Chloe was gone.

"No," I said. "She didn't know. It was all very sudden."

"And crappy," Meera added.

Eden placed a hand over her heart. "No kidding. Ugh. You guys have always been so tight."

I nodded. I really didn't walk to talk about it. I was sad enough that she was gone. I didn't need to be told how much it sucked.

We followed Eden into the rec room where a dozen or so kids from school were hanging out. There was a table at the side of the room where Eden's wireless speakers played music amid snacks and a stack of plastic cups. Nearby, a couple of guys played some racing game on the TV while others watched. Everything *looked* innocent—exactly what Eden always strived for. As far as her parents knew, she was a straight-A student who never stepped out of line.

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“Did you girls BYOB?” she asked, and Meera pulled a small, opened, but still mostly full bottle of rum from her purse.

“There’s pop and juice in the fridge, and ice in the chest freezer in the laundry room,” Eden explained. “Help yourself.”

Meera turned to me, her eyes offering me a drink and I nodded. She generously set about preparing our refreshments while I pushed further into the room, coming up behind the group surrounding the TV.

The words, *RACE OVER*, appeared on the screen, causing Damien, one of the guys on the couch, to toss his controller onto the ground.

“Goddammit, I give up!” he said. “Someone else try and beat this automotive wizard.” He hooked his thumb over his shoulder at the other guy, a short kid with dark blonde hair a.k.a. Lewis a.k.a. Meera’s ex. I wasn’t sure if Meera realized he’d be here, but I had a feeling she wouldn’t be too happy to see him.

“I’ll take that challenge,” came a voice from behind. I turned to see Carter, another guy from school, who was looking pretty damn good in a navy sweater and jeans.

“Hey Harpsichord,” he said, winking at me as he passed, before hopping over the back of the couch to plant himself firmly between Damien and Lewis.

This is what Carter did. He was such a huge flirt. As far as I could tell, he was nice to all the girls, but it seemed like he’d really stepped it up with me over the past few months. Maybe it was my imagination. I don’t know. But damn if it didn’t make my heart race.

Suddenly something smacked my arm really hard and I turned to see Meera standing with two drinks in hand, her eyes wide and accusatory.

“What?” I said, reaching to take my drink from her.

She mouthed the words silently. “Lewis is here?”

I shrugged. “Did Eden know you broke up with him?”

Meera considered this for a moment, then took a sip of her drink.

“If anyone should be uncomfortable, I’d expect it to be him,” I continued.

“Yeah, whatever. I’m already over it.” She pushed past me, then tapped Lewis on the shoulder. “Hey!”

Lewis turned around, blinking rapidly as he scanned Meera up and down. “What the—? Oh hey, Meera.” He quickly returned his attention to the screen.

“Oh, you snooze, you lose,” Carter said as his car pulled ahead of Lewis’s on the track.

“Shit,” Lewis murmured. “That’s not fair. Meera distracted me.”

I glanced over to see Meera smiling smugly.

“I think I’m going to make out with him later,” she said, her voice low, so only I could hear.

“What? Meera, you just broke up with the guy!”

She pulled a tube of lip-gloss from her bag and traced it over her mouth. “I know, but it’s New Year’s! It’s a kissing holiday.”

My gaze trailed to Carter in time to see him leap up from the couch and perform an adorable victory dance in front of Lewis.

“Yeah,” I said. “It is.”

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A few hours later, Meera had worked her way into a cozy position next to Lewis on the couch. I admired her tenacity, even if it did leave me open to tackling people’s Chloe questions solo. Everyone wanted to know “what’s up with her moving?” as though I had a clue beyond, “Yeah, I dunno. She moved.”

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With about an hour to go before midnight, I finally, contentedly, found myself tucked away in a corner, chatting with Carter. He'd spent much of the evening cycling through challengers in the game, but to my delight, had declined his last turn after starting a conversation with me by the refreshments.

We mostly talked about school. At least, at first, but then we moved on to movies, video games, the future. He did mention Chloe once in passing but didn't dwell on it. He was there to talk to me about *me*. And as I finished my third drink, I was feeling pretty damn good.

"Do you know where you wanna go in the fall?" he asked, adjusting his position to sit marginally closer than he had been. My pulse quickened, my head buzzing from the combination of alcohol and his scent.

"Not yet," I said. "Probably UMaine. I can't imagine moving too far from my Nan."

He reached out to touch my chin affectionately. "Aww, that's so sweet."

I blushed, immediately breaking eye contact to stare down at my empty cup. When I glanced back up a moment later he was still staring at me intensely.

I needed a minute to digest what was happening. "I think I'm gonna grab a refill. Want anything?"

"I'm good," he said, holding up his can of beer. "But make sure you come back."

Something fluttered in my stomach. "Absolutely."

The room didn't exactly spin when I stood, but I did feel a bit wobbly as I crossed toward the stairs that led to the kitchen. I took a few deep breaths, which helped, but I still felt giddy and lightheaded. Carter and I had been flirting for months; I'd never really expected anything to happen between us.

Someone was already in the kitchen when I entered, his tall form looming over the center island as he poured whiskey into a cup.

"Luke," I said, his name escaping my lips automatically.

Chloe's ex glanced up, but only smiled with the corner of his mouth. "Hey, Harper."

It was so weird to see him without Chloe. I'd grown so accustomed to viewing the two of them as a pair, even if there were times I cursed him for hogging so much of her time. It wasn't that it hadn't ever happened before—me seeing him without her—but it was usually in the context of knowing she was at least nearby. Still linked to him somehow.

Now he was tetherless Luke. Solitary Luke. It'd been a long time since I'd seen him in that context; a lot had changed since the last time I had.

I crossed the room to the fridge, yanking it open to retrieve a bottle of Diet Coke. "I didn't know you were here."

"Only just," he said, looking up at me from beneath a shag of mussed dark hair. "I had to drive my sister back to campus."

"Oh." I paused, bottle in hand as I leaned against the counter behind me. "She's down at UNE, right?"

He nodded then retrieved a small cooler bag from the floor and slipped the whiskey bottle inside.

"Huh." I twisted the lid off the bottle and began filling my cup, leaving space at the top to add booze. "So, how long a drive is—"

"It's about three hours."

The air was prickly between us. Impatient. We'd both experienced something heavy with Chloe leaving town, and we both knew it, making niceties and small talk feel like shoving square

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pegs into round holes. I returned the remaining Diet Coke to the fridge, suddenly eager to get back to Carter.

“Well, good you’re here now,” I said, still trying to be polite. I headed for the stairwell but then froze in my tracks as he spoke again.

“Have you talked to her?”

I pivoted to face him. “I have. Have you?”

He took a sip of his drink before lowering it gently to the counter. His stare was direct. He seemed a lot more comfortable facing me than I felt meeting his gaze. “She emailed me, but we haven’t really talked.”

“She didn’t want to leave,” I said, not sure if I was reading him correctly or not.

“She *really* didn’t want to leave you.”

Luke’s eyes finally cast downward as he fiddled with a stray bread tag that’d be lying on the counter. “Yeah, I know.”

I waited for him to continue, but he just tossed the bread tag aside and took another sip of his drink.

“Okay, well, I’ll see you down there,” I said, then slipped away down the stairs.

It was strange to see someone who was clearly missing her as much as I was, but whom I couldn’t really talk to. I’d known Luke since we were kids, but he’d gone from some guy at school, to Chloe’s boyfriend. I’d never seen him as a friend outside of that. But there he was, one of the only people sharing my exact same pain. And all I could do was walk away.

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I was a bit worried Carter wouldn't still be waiting for me when I returned from the kitchen, but there he was, sitting smack in the middle of the loveseat, checking his phone.

"I'm back!" I said, and he looked up, a smile breaking across his hard jawline. He nodded toward the seat beside him, indicating I should rejoin him, and I happily obliged. We were now sitting even closer than before.

"Shoot, I got distracted and forgot to grab the rum from Meera," I said, about to hop back up when Carter placed a hand on my arm, keeping me in place.

"I think she's a little busy," he said, and I looked over to see Meera full-on making out with Lewis in a chair across the room.

*Oh, Meera.*

"Well, then," I said. "Maybe I'll wait on that."

"Want a beer?" Carter offered.

I shrugged. "Might as well."

He reached down to grab one from a backpack beside the loveseat. "Sorry, it's not that cold anymore. I never made it to the fridge."

I set my Diet Coke aside and took the bottle, thanking him before the sight of Luke descending the stairs caught my eye.

"When did he get here?" Carter asked, waving at Luke as he passed.

"Um, I'm not sure," I said dismissively. I didn't want to talk about Luke because that made me think about Chloe being gone and I just wanted to enjoy the evening. I removed the cap from the beer bottle and took a long swig. "Yikes. That *is* warm."

Carter smiled sheepishly. "Sorry again."

I tried not to make a face. "It's fine."

I was about to take another swig when Carter leaned over and kissed me. I was so shocked I nearly dropped the bottle.

When he pulled away, I asked, "What was that?"

"Just wanted to get one in before midnight," he said. "I thought it might be less weird...but it was still weird, wasn't it?"

"No," I insisted, my voice thin and breathy. "It wasn't weird at all. I've always been a big fan of trial runs."

He laughed, and for a moment, I thought he was going to kiss me again, but instead, he grabbed his beer and took a drink.

We talked a while longer, and when midnight struck, did have a long and lovely second kiss, but then we rejoined the group and spent the following hour socializing—not that it was a problem. It was a party after all. But it was a little confusing. I didn't want to think he'd only been interested in having someone to kiss at midnight.

I didn't talk to Luke again all night, but every now and then I'd catch him looking my way with this complex expression on his face. I think I highlighted Chloe's absence for him as much

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as he underlined it for me. None of this was easy, but there were moments when I could pretend it wasn't happening.

Shortly after 1 AM, I pulled Meera away from Lewis and insisted we head home. Carter paused his conversation with Damien and offered to come outside while we waited for a cab. That eased my previous concerns a little.

Meera, having apparently polished off the remainder of the rum, promptly took a seat in the large pile of snow at the end of Eden's driveway.

"Probably best you get her home," Carter said.

I nodded, burying my gloved hands in my coat pockets. "She's had her fun."

Carter took a step toward me. "Cold out here." He reached out with both hands and rubbed my arms to warm me up.

Headlights appeared at the end of the street. Our cab was almost there.

"Carter—" I started, but then he silenced me with a kiss.

"Whoooooooooooo!" Meera drunkenly cheered from where she was now lounging in the snow.

I laughed against his lips as they slid from mine. "We have our own studio audience."

"To be continued another time," Carter said. "I'll call you."

"I'd like that."

The cab pulled up alongside the curb and I dragged Meera out of the snow and into the backseat.

Carter waved as we pulled away.

"Where to?" the driver asked.

"Driscoll Bluff Road." I reached out to steady Meera in her seat. "Last cottage on the right."

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The following morning, Nan mercifully let me and Meera sleep-in. I wasn't really that hung over, having stopped drinking after the warm beer Carter gave me—I'd nursed that thing until we left—but Meera was another story. The girl had consumed a lot of rum, and she was a lightweight to begin with.

Right before noon, Nan knocked softly on my door. I crawled out of bed, stepping over Meera sleeping on the floor, and into the hall, closing the door behind me.

"You girls have fun last night?" Nan whispered.

"Yeah, it was alright," I said. "A lot of people were there. It was good."

"Good." Nan smiled. "I made you girls some pancakes. And then when Meera's ready to head home, I thought we could go visit your dad."

I'd been so focused on New Year's Eve and Chloe being gone that I'd completely forgotten our annual tradition of visiting Dad's grave on New Year's Day.

"That sounds perfect," I said, feeling like I needed a bit more time to mentally prepare.

Nan gave my arm a squeeze then headed back toward the kitchen. I re-entered my room and gave Meera a light kick in the butt.

"Wake up, sleepy!"

Meera stirred and then rolled onto her back. "Uggghhhh."

"Wake up, Meer. Nan made her famous pancakes."

Meera's mouth curled into a smile. "Mmmm Nancakes." Slowly, she sat up. "Huh."

"What?"

She ran a hand through her long, tangled black hair. "Did you kiss Carter Wilking last night or did I dream that?"

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I could feel myself blushing at the very mention of his name. “Oh, that happened,” I said. “It was very dreamlike, but it definitely happened.”

“Hell yeah it did!” Meera clapped her hands together, appearing to instantly regret it as she rubbed her forehead, and I realized something had changed since the party.

I was no longer dreading school on Monday.

## Chapter Five

It was snowing when we arrived at the cemetery. But that didn't stop us. Nan and I walked arm in arm through rows of headstones until we reached the small rectangular block that marked where my father's ashes were buried. The stone stood out amongst the ones surrounding it, being so relatively new. Dad's name always looked like it didn't belong.

I remembered the first time I saw it, on the day he was interred. I felt like I'd been sleepwalking for weeks, the world around me a blur of sound and harsh light. And then I saw his name, and everything came into focus. *Hey, that's the same name as Dad's*, I'd thought. And then I'd stared at it, dumbfounded as the fact that it *was* Dad's name washed over me in anguished waves. I couldn't believe it. My hero. My lifeline. He was gone.

He'd died in the spring, but the following year, Nan brought us to the cemetery on New Year's Day. She'd always seen January 1st as a good day to center yourself, reflect on where you'd been, and where you aimed to go. I think she figured my dad would always want to be a part of that. So, a new tradition was born.

Nan reached down to brush the light dusting of snow off the top of the grave, placing a stone from our garden in its place.

"Hello Ben," she said. "Happy New Year."

I shuddered as the wind picked up, spraying us with tiny, icy flakes. A chill ran down my spine, deeper than the cold. We were the only two people for as far as I could see. The only two living.

"I'll give you a few minutes," Nan said. She gave my arm a squeeze and then headed toward the path that wound its way through the grounds.

I glanced down at the snow-covered earth. The previous year, it'd been mild enough for me to sit on the grass, but no such luck now. I lay my scarf down as a barrier and kneeled, my eyes on the letters of his name.

"Hey Dad," I said, my voice cracking already. "I miss you. I know a lot of people save that for the end, but it's one of the first thoughts that goes through my head every morning. It only seems fair I give it top billing."

I lifted a gloved hand to dab at my eye. "Chloe moved away. It was really sudden. Really unexpected. But maybe I should've seen it coming, you know? First mom, then you. I have a tendency to lose people. Gee, that sounds like I've misplaced them... School's good. I'm graduating in June. I haven't received any acceptance letters yet, but I've applied to six schools. Good ones. I think you'd approve. And don't worry, I plan to stay close by. I know Nan needs me. I definitely need her."

I looked up and peered across the rows of headstones. Nan's silhouette was just a smudge against a sea of white.

"I kissed a boy last night," I continued. "It's funny. If you were here, I definitely wouldn't have told you that. But... yeah. I think I like him. His name is Carter. He's really charming and funny. I guess we'll see what happens." I leaned forward and touched the tips of my fingers against the grave. "I should come see you more often. Maybe when it's not so cold out. I wish I

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could hear your voice one more time. I think I remember what it sounds like... I wish I had more videos of us together. I guess you were always the one holding the camera.”

For a few minutes, I just sat there, remembering my dad. The clothes he wore. The places he took me when I was a kid. The way my room used to look when it was still his. Every time I recalled these things, the memories got a little fuzzier. Suddenly I could feel the cold seeping through my jeans.

I stood, brushed the snow off my shins and shook out my scarf. Nan was almost back, and she'd want some time alone with Dad too.

“I can't believe you've been gone for almost three years,” I said. “It feels like I should have stopped breathing at some point too. Like when you cut a tree from its roots. Every day, even if it's only in the smallest ways, I feel like something's missing. I love you, Dad.”

“You doing okay?” Nan asked, coming up behind me. I nodded but didn't turn to look at her. I wasn't fully crying, but I knew I would if I locked eyes with Nan.

“I'm going to go wait in the van,” I said, touching her lightly on the shoulder as I turned and headed for the parking lot.

The doors were unlocked, and I grabbed the keys from where Nan had stashed them above the visor. I started the engine and cranked the heat, eager to thaw out my legs. The radio came on. The same country station Nan always had it set to, but I switched it off.

It was a new day, a new year. Things would probably get better. They usually did. But I didn't want to think about that just then. You can't be optimistic until you're finished being sad.

I leaned back in the driver's seat and watched the snow fall.

## Chapter Six

From: Harper Donnelly  
To: Chloe Pascal  
Subject: Re: HNY Woman!

Hey,

Happy New Year! Except, let's be real. It's not that happy. I mean, are you happy? I decidedly am not. Although...I do have something good to share. Something that should brighten your day.....I kissed Carter. Multiple times. He was flirting with me at Eden's, which isn't anything new, but I dunno. There was something different about it. It was more purposeful. And then, out of the blue, he kissed me. It was pretty awesome. We kissed again at midnight, and then before I went home. School should be interesting on Monday :)

Oh, and get this—Meera made out with Lewis. She says they're not back together, but I wouldn't be surprised if that changes.

I wish you could've been there. I saw Luke. He seemed okay. Maybe a little sad? He mostly just mentioned that he'd driven his sister back to school that day. I didn't talk to him much. But I figured you'd want to know.

Are you nervous for school on Monday? Definitely tell me all about it. I hope the kids there aren't terrible.

Miss you miss you miss you,

Harper

\*\*\*

I thought about Chloe being gone about a dozen times before arriving at school on Monday but was somehow surprised when she wasn't at her locker. It's weird how your brain can know one thing, but still expect another.

I grabbed my books and headed around the corner to where Meera's locker was located. She was sitting on the floor, knees up, finishing the final pages of an English text we were meant to have finished over the holidays.

"They all die. The end," I said, breaking her concentration.

She glared up at me. "I kinda wish they *would* all die. Then this book wouldn't ramble on for," she paused to check, "oh man, 594 pages!"

My phone buzzed in my pocket and I retrieved it to glance at the lockscreen.

*Calendar Reminder: Back to school!*

No kidding. I unlocked my phone and opened my ongoing text conversation with Chloe.

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*Are you there yet?* I typed. *How is it?*

“Have you talked to Lewis?” I asked Meera, slipping my phone away.

Meera stood, opened her locker, and tossed the book she’d been reading onto the top shelf.

“Yeah, we chatted online last night.”

I waited for more details, smacking her lightly on the arm when she didn’t continue.

“I’m still done with that,” she said. “Fun’s fun, but when it comes to talking, the guy is kinda boring.”

I laughed. “Okay, so maybe stop making out with him.”

Meera shrugged, but then her gaze traveled past me and down the hall. “Speaking of making out...”

I glanced over my shoulder to see Carter unlocking his locker.

“You gonna talk to him?” Meera asked.

Something about that felt too forward. Which was strange because only days earlier, his tongue had been in my mouth. But I couldn’t seem to shake the feeling that Carter wasn’t really interested. That he was only a casual flirt who kissed girls when it suited his needs.

“I think I’ll wait for him to talk to me first,” I said, but then Meera’s eyes went wide.

“Hey,” came Carter’s voice from behind me.

I only let my jaw drop for a second before I spun around and was met by his gorgeous brown eyes and a smile that could crack your bones.

“Heeey,” I said, failing to sound casual.

“I’m gonna head to class.” Meera started toward her first period room, but then turned back to give me a double thumbs-up from behind Carter’s back.

I stifled the urge to return the gesture. “So,” I said, returning my attention to Carter’s super handsome face. “How’s it going?”

“It’s going good,” he said. “Busy. I crammed the whole break’s worth of homework into the past 48 hours.”

“Oh yeah? I did mine at the beginning. My grandmother pulled the whole *do it now and thank me later* thing.”

“That’s smart.” Carter tilted his head to the side and oh my god I just wanted to grab him and kiss him. But I was far too nervous.

“Excuse me,” sounded a voice to my left. I turned to see Luke glancing impatiently at the ceiling.

“I’m sorry?” I asked, not understanding what the problem was.

He set about unzipping his parka and sliding his backpack from his shoulder before feebly pointing at something behind me. “You’re standing in front of my locker.”

“Oh! Sorry!” I said, taking a big step back so he could move in. Carter skirted around him, clearly amused by the exchange.

“I should get going,” Carter said. “I have shop on the other side of the building.”

My heart sunk a little. “Okay.” I nodded dumbly. “I’ll catch you later.”

He waved and then dipped around the corner. I stood there for a moment, feeling a little like I’d had the wind knocked out of me. Then Luke slammed his locker shut, glancing my way only briefly before heading in opposite direction.

\*\*\*

I had Chemistry first period, and we were halfway through a lab when the intercom buzzed beneath the clock, immediately followed by the voice of Ms. Wild, the school receptionist. My

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heart started racing the instant she said my name. They needed me in the office as soon as possible. That was never a good thing.

The short walk to the front of the building was a blur. When I arrived, Ms. Wild directed me straight to the principal, Mr. Holbrook's office. He was hovering by the door and escorted me in. As he closed the door behind us, a woman stood from where she'd been sitting in the corner of the room. I recognized her immediately, but she seemed so out of place there in my principal's office.

"Carol?"

My next-door-neighbor's expression was teeming with apprehension. I wasn't used to seeing it that way. It was usually all hellos and how ya doins over the fence that separated her yard from ours.

"Hi Harper," she said, her words measured.

I looked at Mr. Holbrook who indicated that I should take a seat.

"I'm sorry to have to call you out of class on the first day back, Harper," he said. "There's been an incident involving your grandmother."

*What? No. No. Nothing can happen to Nan.*

"Oh my god," I breathed.

"I'll let Mrs. Ryan here fill you in."

My face felt like it was being pricked with pins and needles. Tightening. Going numb. It was like someone had placed a mask made of ice over my skin, blurring my vision, smothering my ability to breathe.

"Listen Harper, don't panic," Carol said. "She's okay. She just had a bit of trouble with her heart this morning. Not a heart attack—less severe than that. Thankfully, she could tell something was wrong and she came knocking on my door."

"Where is she now?" I asked, my own pounding heart not slowing.

Carol adjusted her purse strap on her shoulder. "At the hospital. Thankfully, they didn't have to operate on her or anything, but they are running some tests and may need to keep her overnight. I can drive you."

I looked at Mr. Holbrook, some part of my brain requiring his approval before I could be dismissed. He nodded solemnly.

Carol walked me to my locker so I could grab my coat and bag. I'd left my Chemistry books in the lab, but whatever. I'd get them later.

Nan was the only family I had left in the world. I couldn't lose her. I just couldn't.

## Chapter Seven

The hospital was only a five-minute drive from school. Carol tried to start a conversation as we drove, but I wasn't really paying attention. I just stared out the window and prayed to anyone who would listen.

We checked in at the nurse's station and were directed to the room where Nan had been admitted.

"You go ahead," Carol said. "I'll be in the waiting area if you need me."

I nodded and headed in the direction the nurse had indicated. The door to Nan's room was ajar and I could hear someone coughing inside—someone who definitely wasn't Nan. I opened the door enough to see a heavy elderly woman sitting up in bed.

"Hello darlin'," she croaked in a smoker's voice.

"Oh sorry, I was looking for my grandmother," I said.

The woman nodded toward the green striped curtain that ran alongside her bed. "Try the back, Sweetie."

I thanked her and entered, crossing the room until I could gently pull the curtain aside. There, lying in an identical hospital bed, was Nan. Her eyes were closed, a monitor hooked up to her heart gently beeping beside her. She looked so small like that, wrapped in a blanket, devoid of her usual pep and fire.

Every muscle in my body clenched tight at the sight of her, as though every ounce of my strength was required to hold myself together.

Nan stirred as I passed the foot of the bed to sit in the chair below the window.

"Oh Harper," she said, her voice barely louder than a whisper. "You're here."

"Hey Nan." I forced a smile. "Of course, I'm here. There's no place I'd rather be."

"You're supposed to be in school—but oh, I'm also so glad you're not." She shifted slightly, and I could tell she was trying to sit up. I reached out to stop her.

"Don't." I took her hand in mine and gave it a squeeze. "You need to rest. Go on and close your eyes again. We'll have plenty of time to talk to later."

A small smile appeared at the corners of her mouth, and then slowly, she closed her eyes. I watched as her body relaxed, sinking into the bed beneath her.

After I was confident she was asleep, I headed back out to the waiting room to thank Carol and let her know she could head home. She promised to check in later to see if I needed a ride. I hadn't thought that far ahead. Right then, all that mattered was that I was with Nan and she was okay.

I tiptoed back into her room and reclaimed my chair by the window, sliding my phone out of my pocket before I sat. The lockscreen was blank. No reply to my earlier text to Chloe. I guess she was busy acclimating.

I went online for a bit, but it was quiet too. I stood and slipped off my coat, then grabbed my backpack, which thankfully still contained the novel I was reading for American Lit. Just as I flipped to the page I'd bookmarked, my phone buzzed with a text from Meera.

*Where were you at break? I wanna hear about Carter.*

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*Sorry, I texted back. I had to leave halfway through Chem. Nan had some trouble with her heart (not a full heart attack) and now I'm at the hospital. They're running tests.*

Meera: *WHAT? Tell me you're joking.*

*Sadly no, I typed. I'll call you tonight and fill you in.*

Meera: *I'm sorry, Harper. Let me know if there's anything I can do.*

*Thanks. I hit send and then tucked my phone away in my bag.*

I managed to get through a few chapters of my book while Nan slept soundly beside me. At one point a nurse came in and fiddled with the machines beside Nan's bed, but she left without saying much.

Shortly before noon, Nan's doctor, Dr. Kim, came in, introduced herself, and then asked if we could speak privately in the hallway.

"Is my Nan gonna be okay?" I blurted as soon as we were outside the room.

"Your grandmother should be fine," Dr. Kim said, and I instantly liked her. "We believe she had a bout of angina, which isn't as critical as a heart attack, but that doesn't mean it's not serious. Thankfully she didn't require surgery—this time. But your grandmother needs to rest—and I need *you* to make sure she does. Heart problems are a warning she needs to slow down and start taking better care of her body. As I understand it, it's just the two of you at home?"

I nodded.

"Can I rely on you to make sure your grandmother takes care of herself? She seems like a very lovely woman, but that doesn't mean I want to see her back here anytime soon."

Again, I nodded, like one of those birds perpetually drinking water. "Anything. I'll do anything."

Dr. Kim smiled. "Excellent. I have some literature on cardiac health that I'll give you before you leave. There are also some medications your grandmother can take to help keep things in check. I'll go over everything in more detail before we discharge her tomorrow morning."

"So, she definitely has to stay here overnight?" I asked.

"I'm afraid so." Dr. Kim looked down at the clipboard she was holding. "We're going to run a few tests and keep an eye on her to make sure she's good to go. You're welcome to stay with her. We only ask that you keep the noise level down, especially after visiting hours are over."

"Thank you, Doctor." I shook her hand before returning to Nan's room.

She was still asleep when I entered so I grabbed her purse from where somebody had hung it on a nearby hook, along with her coat. The cell phone I'd made her get a few years back was in the front pocket, and I loaded up the booking app I'd taught her to use shortly after. It was programmed to communicate with the server that took all her shuttle reservations, so Nan no longer had to keep a paper schedule.

She'd been due to pick up a party at the airport over an hour earlier. *Crap*. So much for *that* positive Yelp review. I stepped back into the hallway and dialed the contact number the party had provided with their reservation.

"Please don't pick up," I muttered, thanking my lucky stars when the call went to voicemail. I hated talking to people on the phone, hated confrontation, but this had to be done. I left a polite message, apologizing profusely, and citing a medical emergency in the hopes it might make the whole screw-up a little more forgivable.

I then logged back into the booking app and sent out email cancellations for everything Nan had booked for the next 48 hours. After that? I had no clue. These cancellations were bad for business, and that shuttle service was our livelihood. I had to think of something.

## Chapter Eight

From: Harper Donnelly  
To: Chloe Pascal  
Subject: Scary

Hey,

So how was your first day? I texted you earlier but didn't hear back. Hope everything is okay.

I ended up having quite the eventful day at school myself. Actually, I don't think you can even call it a day at school since I was only there for like an hour. Nan had something called angina (like a prologue to a heart attack) and I've been at the hospital with her all day. We just had dinner. My neighbor, Carol (you probably met her that summer we were painting the fence?) brought me something to eat and now I'm just sitting here while Nan sleeps. I think I'll stay here tonight. The chair reclines, and this really nice nurse brought me a pillow and a blanket.

It was scary, Chloe. Not outward, scream your head off scary, but the kind of scary where your heart sinks into your gut and you're suddenly faced with the possibility of losing the last of your family. The doctor said she's gonna be okay as long as she takes it easy. But you know Nan. When has she ever taken it easy? I really wish you were here. Call me when you can. Maybe sometime tomorrow?

Love you, dude.

Harper

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"Okay, careful on the step here." I clung to Nan's arm as we moved into the kitchen. We'd only been in the hospital overnight, but it still felt incredibly good to be home. "Here, sit at the table. What can I get you? Some water? Tea?"

I pulled a chair out for her and she sat in a huff, shaking off my grip.

"Some tea would be fine, Harper, but you don't have to treat me like I'm about to fall apart. They wouldn't have released me from the hospital if I wasn't okay."

I grabbed the kettle from the stove and began filling it with water. "That may be true, but things are gonna have to change around here, Nan. You need to take better care of yourself."

She waved me off, then started to shrug out of her winter coat.

"Hang on," I said, placing the kettle on the stove and setting the element to high. "Let me help you with that."

I crossed the room and pulled her coat free before hanging it on the back of her chair.

"I was fine, Harper," she grumbled. "I can take off my own damn coat."

## IT FALLS APART

Maybe it was that I hadn't slept much the night before. Or maybe it was all my nervousness and fears from the past 24 hours finally bubbling to the surface, but something in me suddenly snapped. I struck the tabletop hard, so hard my palm stung, causing Nan to jump in her seat.

"Goddammit, you need to listen to me! What happened yesterday wasn't nothing. The doctor said it was a warning. Do you have any idea how scary it was to be called to the office at school and have Carol tell me you were in the hospital? I was worried you were going to die."

Nan's expression softened. "Oh Harper, you know I'd never go and do something like that—"

"You're not invincible, Nan! You need to slow down. I realize I'm the child in this relationship, but I'm putting my foot down. Things *are* going to change around here, whether you like it or not. I did a lot of thinking last night and as far as I can see, there's really only one solution."

Nan glared at me defiantly. "And what's that?"

"I'm going to start helping you run the shuttle service."

Nan opened her mouth in protest, but I wasn't willing to argue.

"You can resume your day runs," I continued. "But I'm gonna start taking shifts after school and on weekends. We divide up the work, so you can have more downtime."

"Harper, don't be ridiculous." Nan held up a hand to bar me from cutting her off. "You said your piece, now it's my turn to talk. I made a promise to your dad that I'd keep you fed, and clothed, and keep a roof over your head at least until you graduated, if not longer."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "Plenty of kids have part-time jobs—"

"Yes, part-time! A few hours a week!" Nan said. "Not every day after school and on weekends. You need to focus on your studies!"

"What I need is for you to keep breathing!" I blinked back tears as I turned and grabbed two mugs from the cupboard above the sink. I placed them on the table between us, then leveled my gaze to meet hers. "I can't lose you too. Don't you get that? Mom left, Dad's gone, and now Chloe...I refuse to let you do yourself in. This is how it's going to be from now on. It's not up for discussion."

Behind me, the kettle began to whistle on the stove. Nan glanced at it, then returned her eyes to me and nodded.

I returned to school the next morning after cancelling a few more of Nan's appointments so she could rest another day before going back to work. She wasn't happy about that, but she also didn't argue. I synched the booking app to my phone, so I could manage reservations and take on some of the administrative tasks. Nan was right; it wasn't going to be easy balancing school and the shuttle service, but as far as I was concerned, I didn't have a choice. That business was our livelihood.

When the final bell rang, I headed for my locker in a hurry. I had my first run booked for 4 PM and as if I didn't feel rattled enough already, I needed to hustle if I was gonna make it to the airport in time.

"There you are," called a familiar voice as I threw my jacket on. I turned to see Carter striding down the hall toward me. Crap. I didn't have time for this. This new schedule was already sucking.

"Carter," I said. "Hey."

"I came by looking for you yesterday," he said. "I noticed you weren't in class."

He was looking for me? Huge internal squeal.

"Yeah, sorry. I had a family emergency."

## IT FALLS APART

His brow furrowed. “Nothing too serious, I hope?”

“No,” I said, in no position to get into it. “Nothing too serious. Look, I’m really sorry to have to do this, but I have to go. Definitely come find me tomorrow if you don’t hate me by then?”

He smiled, an adorable dimple appearing beside his mouth. “I will—find you, that is. Not hate you.”

I smiled, wishing more than anything that I could stay and talk, but I had a job now, and that had to come first. I grabbed my bag and practically ran out the door.

Thankfully, the drive to the airport was without incident, and I pulled into the designated shuttle parking area right as the couple I was picking up exited the building with their luggage. The bundle of nerves in the pit of my stomach grew even bigger. I’d ridden along with Nan plenty of times before, but this was different. This was all on me. With a small business like ours, every party’s experience mattered. We survived on good reviews and recommendations. I couldn’t screw this up.

“Welcome to Berne Harbor!” I greeted them, offering to take their bags. The woman handed over her carry-on and a larger wheeled suitcase, which I immediately let topple over where a cab narrowly missed running it over.

“I’m so sorry,” I said, scrambling to set it upright again. I was so embarrassed I forgot everything else I was going to say, then made two far too similar jokes asking if they were glad they came here to relax while gesturing toward the chaotic parking lot. The woman chuckled mercifully both times, but then I made things even more awkward when I offered to load the man’s bags in the back of the van not once, not twice, but three times, despite his insistence that he could handle it.

It was disastrous.

Once they were finally settled in the back of the van, I pulled out my phone to check where they were headed, realizing I hadn’t read the full reservation earlier.

*Destination: The Coleman Country Inn*

*Great.* Luke’s family’s inn—a big, fat reminder of Chloe’s absence. And here I’d thought things couldn’t get worse.

## Chapter Nine

From: Chloe Pascal  
To: Harper Donnelly  
Subject: Re: Scary

OMG Harper, I'm so sorry to hear about Nan. I just tried to Facetime you, but you're probably super busy. I wish I was there, so I could give you a big hug. I realize this is kind of a stupid question considering where I am, but is there anything I can do to help??

I'm sorry I wasn't in touch sooner. I've been absolutely swamped. The teachers at my new school have loaded me up with textbooks and reading assignments despite the fact they're still deciding whether I should just audit the classes here and write my exams for Berne Harbor remotely. Seriously. Exams are only a few weeks away and while the curriculum is similar, it's not the same. What a mess. I'll be much happier when second semester starts, and I can begin on day one like everyone else.

Oh, and I somehow completely missed your email from New Year's. Excuse me, but you kissed Carter?!? Hot damn, woman! That boy is mighty fine. I can't believe I missed that! Please continue to share details. Not surprised to hear about Meera and Lewis. That girl hates to be alone.

I've already met a ton of people. There's this girl Gloria who kind of reminds me of you. But nobody here is quite as awesome as you J A few cute guys, but I dunno. I keep thinking about Luke and wondering what he's doing at any given moment. Have you seen him at all since NYE?

BIG VIRTUAL HUGS SERIOUSLY THE BIGGEST,

Chloe

\*\*\*

"And here we are," I said, my voice wavering as we pulled into the long driveway. "The Coleman Country Inn."

"Oh, it looks just like it does in the pictures!" the woman exclaimed. "Look at the snow on all the little cabins. They're like gingerbread houses!"

The man nodded vaguely, appearing disinterested. Meanwhile, I was feeling much better, having made up for my initial clumsiness with a pretty damn good tour of the area en route to the inn.

As we approached the main house, we passed by Luke's mom, who was walking up the long driveway with a baby carrier strapped to her front. That seemed kinda odd. I knew Luke had a sister, but I thought she was in college.

## IT FALLS APART

I parked the van and hopped out to open the door for my passengers just as Luke appeared on the wide porch that wrapped around the old yellow clapboard farmhouse.

The man reached for his wallet, but I assured him there was no need to pay now. We'd invoice him electronically. He seemed to appreciate that, then folded a five-dollar bill into my hand. Nan usually made bigger tips than that, but she was also able to work the old-lady-driving-a-shuttle-for-a-living angle. I was only a teenager, and nobody ever seemed to want to tip teenagers much.

As the couple took in the grounds, I came around the back of the van to retrieve their luggage.

Luke suddenly emerged from the other side. "Let me help you with that."

"It's okay," I said, wishing he'd go back into the house. "I've got it."

I foolishly grabbed the two bigger suitcases first, which threw me off balance. Luke reached out to help steady me, taking one of the suitcases in hand before he grabbed the remaining two bags.

I glared at him. "I said I had it."

"Oh yeah." Luke smirked. "You really had it."

He headed back toward the house, me trailing behind, carrying the only bag he didn't take.

"You can set that down there," he said, nodding toward a wagon hitched to a golf cart that was parked alongside the porch.

He set his three bags inside, and then helped me load mine.

"You really didn't need to do that," I said.

He turned and stared at me curiously, one eyebrow raised. "What do you think happens when your grandmother drops people off here? You think we make her carry all the luggage?"

Truthfully, I hadn't thought about it. Carrying people's bags was just part of the job. But what really threw me off, was the fact that it'd never occurred to me that Luke would know Nan—not only know her but interact with her. Help her even. Weird.

"I'm sorry, by the way," he continued. "My mom told me what happened. I'm guessing that's why you're driving?"

"Yeah," I said, my brain still struggling to comprehend these two worlds colliding. "Thanks. But yeah. I'm going to be helping out whenever I can."

"I'm sure she appreciates that."

I stifled a laugh. "Maybe on some level."

Luke's dad came down the front steps and walked over to greet their new guests. They appeared to discuss the expansive grounds a bit before he invited them inside to check-in.

"You don't like me very much, do you?"

The question made me realize I'd just been standing there, completely zoned-out and staring like an idiot.

I turned to look at Luke. "Huh?"

"You don't like me very much," he repeated. "I can tell."

"I don't have a problem with you," I said. And as the words left my mouth, I realized they were true. At least, they were now that Chloe was gone. My only beef with Luke was a jealousy that didn't exist anymore.

He shrugged. "It's fine if you do."

"I don't," I shot back.

He raised his hands defensively. "Okay..."

## IT FALLS APART

“If anything, you seem to have a problem with me,” I said, recalling how cold he’d been at school the other day.

He took a moment before replying, shuffling his heavy boots in the snow. “No, I don’t. I’m sorry if it seemed that way. I’ve been... I dunno.”

“Chloe,” I said, her name somewhere between a statement and a question.

He nodded.

I still didn’t know what to say to him about her. She was gone. We were sad. There wasn’t much more to it.

I squinted as the sunset appeared through a gap in the trees. “I should go.”

“Okay.” Luke shoved his hands in his pockets, rocking back on his heels. “See ya.”

I waved then headed back toward the van, spotting Luke’s mom again as I came around the driver’s side.

“Hey there,” she called out.

“Hi,” I said, lingering as she closed the gap between us.

She pulled off her mittens and ran a hand through her short red hair. “You’re Eleanor’s granddaughter, right?”

I nodded. “I’m Harper.”

“Harper! Right. Of course.” She smiled. “You’re Chloe’s friend.”

“That’s right.”

She moved her hand up and down the length of the baby carrier, soothing the baby’s back. “I’m Luke’s mom, Clara. I think we’ve maybe met a few times in passing. How’s your grandmother doing?”

“Much better, thanks,” I said. “I’m making sure she’s taking it easy.”

“Oh, you’re a good granddaughter.”

The baby squirmed, kicking out a foot clad in the tiniest boot I’d ever seen.

“Who’s this little guy?” I asked.

“This is my little Isaac.” Clara turned sideways so I could glimpse the baby’s face amid the heavy snowsuit he wore.

“He’s so cute! I didn’t realize Luke had a baby brother.”

In retrospect, Chloe had probably mentioned it at some point, but I was beginning to realize how much I’d unfairly not retained everything when it came to Luke stuff.

Isaac cried out and Clara resumed soothing his back to calm him. “He was something of a surprise to us too. With my eldest in college and Luke not far behind, I thought my little kid days were long over. Funny how life can throw you the most amazing curveballs when you least expect it.”

“That’s crazy,” I said, unsure of what else to say. What did I know about life plans and child rearing? “Well, I should get going.”

Clara was now bouncing up and down to keep the baby from fussing. “Say hi to your grandma for me. And I suppose we’ll be seeing you around?”

“That’s the plan,” I said, and with a final wave, I climbed into the driver’s seat and headed home. It felt much later than it was, the extended day weighing on me. And to think, I still had a few hours of homework to look forward to. It was going to be a long night.

## Chapter Ten

From: Harper Donnelly  
To: Chloe Pascal  
Subject: zzzzz, the sleepy kind

Hey,

So this whole work thing is quite possibly going to be the death of me. I've only been at it for two weeks and I'm so tired I want to claw my eyes out. But I know it's for the best. Fretting over me aside, Nan seems more relaxed than I've seen her in years.

Did you get your exam schedule figured out? I currently have three scheduled for the same day. Gonna have to get that changed.

It's almost been a month since you left. That seems impossible. I think time is flying faster because I've been so busy. Maybe that's a good thing. Are you still thinking about heading back this way for spring break? Please say yes.

Have you weeded out the cool kids from the losers yet?

Exes and ohs,

Harper

\*\*\*

"Earth to Harper."

Something hit me in the face and I opened my eyes to see Meera's scowl. I lifted my head off my folded arms on the cafeteria table just enough to growl noncommittally at her before returning to my prior position.

*Thwap!*

This time it was a plastic bottle cap that bounced off my temple.

"You're supposed to be quizzing me for my Calc exam," came Meera's voice.

Dammit. She was right. But I was so, so tired.

"I'm sorry," I said, reopening my eyes and straightening in my chair. "I had last minute passengers last night and didn't get home until well after ten. Then I was up until almost 2 AM working on practice essays for American Lit."

"Jesus, Harper." Meera's eyes went wide as she took a sip of milk. "That job is gonna kill you."

"No," I said. "That was a special circumstance. It's not normally that bad."

## IT FALLS APART

“Not *that* bad.” Meera started to roll her eyes before something near the entrance caught her attention. I followed her gaze to see Carter step through the double doors with a few friends, the group headed to join the lunch line.

“Tell me,” Meera continued. “Has this new schedule of yours allowed any time for you and Carter to follow up on your New Year’s Eve...tryst?”

“Tryst?” I shot her a look, but then let my shoulders fall. “No. We’ve messaged back and forth a bit. Exchanged a few texts. But yeah, between work and finals coming up... we just need to find a weekend when we’re both free.”

Meera paused mid-sip. “You realize that’s probably never going to happen, right?”

I sighed, the doom and gloom of it all sinking in.

“Yeah. I do.”

\*\*\*

Despite my protests, Nan helped me survive the following weeks by forcing me to take fewer shifts until finals were over. It wasn’t pretty, but we survived, and the arrival of February provided a clean slate—new semester, new classes, and an opportunity to try my damndest to make all the oddly-shaped pieces of my over-stuffed life somehow fit together, starting with the bit I’d neglected most—my social life.

“Knock-knock,” I said, rapping on the front of Carter’s open locker door as he shuffled books around behind it.

He took a step back to peer around the edge, a smile smoothing out his lips when he saw me standing there in a definitely-planned-to-look-hot tight gray sweater dress.

“Hey pretty girl,” he said, closing his locker door so he could casually lean against it. Take one smile. Add a perfectly placed dimple. This guy belonged in a *J. Crew* catalogue, not a high school.

“Hey, any chance you’re in Mr. Ansen’s Bio class in—” I checked my phone, “two minutes?”

He grinned, but then shook his head. “Sorry, I just took that final. Brutal multiple choice.”

“I’ll make this quick then. Look, I realize my schedule has been a nightmare and I’m really sorry for that, but...I like you. I had such a great time with you at Eden’s. And Valentine’s day is coming up on Saturday, and I know that’s kind of a weird first date type thing. I mean, we’re talking about a day when people expect big gestures, or at the very least those little stuffed gorillas holding bananas with hearts for eyes because somehow that’s supposed to define a relationship? But I don’t have to work that night, so if you’re free, I’d really like it if we could do something. Anything. Your choice. That is, if you want to. And don’t think I’m completely crazy for rambling on about stuffed gorillas.”

For a moment, he just stared at me, studying my expression, possibly waiting for me to shove my other foot in my mouth, but then, finally, he spoke. “Sure. I think we can make that work.”

I released the breath I’d been holding. “Great.”

“Minus the gorillas,” he added. “That part was a little weird.”

“Duly noted.”

Above us, the bell buzzed against the painted cinder block wall, causing both of us to jump.

“Catch you later,” he said, leaning in to plant a quick kiss on my cheek. I didn’t consciously do that thing girls do in movies where they fall back against the wall and touch a hand to the spot where a guy kissed them. But yeah, I totally did it. Only briefly though, before Mrs. Walner stepped into the hall and yelled for everyone to clear out.

## IT FALLS APART

\*\*\*

I'd hoped to catch Carter once more before heading out for the day, but he wasn't at his locker when I passed by after last period.

"Do you think school will be cancelled tomorrow?" Meera asked, grabbing her coat from her new locker beside mine. It had previously been Chloe's, but Meera put in the request to switch at the start of the new semester.

"Why's that?" I asked, only half-paying attention as I sorted out which books I needed to bring home with me.

"Because of the ice storm," Meera said. "We're supposed to get dumped on tonight while we sleep."

I shoved my Bio text into my bag and zipped it shut. "Sorry—who's getting dumped on?"

"We are." Meera slammed her locker shut and slid her backpack over her shoulders. "It's supposed to be bad. Do you think school will be cancelled? I really don't feel like doing my lab assignment..."

"Not until later, though, right? I have to run a group to the Colemans'. Crap—what time is it?"

Meera checked her phone. "It's almost three. And yeah, like overnight, I think."

"Okay, cool. Sorry, I should go." I closed my locker, then shrugged into my coat. "Let me know if you hear anything about school being cancelled. I'll text you later."

I headed for the student parking lot, where the van sat waiting under a light dusting of snow. The sky was gray, and only getting darker. As I slipped into the drivers' seat, a chill ran down my spine—probably from the cold, but it felt ominous, like when you're in over your head. I had to ignore it, though. I had work to do.

## Chapter Eleven

From: Chloe Pascal  
To: Harper Donnelly  
Subject: Who names their kid Brazley?

Yeah, that's not a typo. Brazley. I'm serious, man. BRAZLEY. Some kid in my English class. I think he's the kind of kid who should probably be at some private boarding school, but his dad effed up on the stock market and now he's stuck here in Columbus with the rest of us commoners.

Hope all your new classes were cool today—did you get Ansen or Fisher for bio? Did I tell you I got my last exam thing all sorted? Cause, yeah, I did. It was fine.

Also, I got an email from Luke yesterday. Which was kinda unexpected. We stopped texting about a week after I moved, and then the interactions slowly went downhill from there. I thought maybe he was mad at me, or stewing about the whole sitch, so I didn't reach out, because really, what is there to say? But then, there it was. An email. It was short. Mostly about school and stuff. But just seeing his name at the bottom made me miss him. I'm starting to wonder if breaking things off was the best idea. Maybe we should've tried long distance. It's not like we're poised to be separated for years. I dunno. Have you seen him at school lately? Please tell me he isn't randomly making out with other girls in the hallway. I need details. You're officially my little spy LOL.

Alright enough about that. Man drama. Who needs it? That said, anything with Carter? Please tell me you two have hooked up. I need to live vicariously. All the guys here are lame (see above: BRAZLEY).

I'm going to go and distract myself so I don't call Luke. I'm seriously thinking about it.

Misses and kisses,

Chloe

\*\*\*

Nan was calling for the fourth time, so I answered and put her on hands-free.

“Hey Nan.”

“Where are you?” she asked, her voice tinny through the speaker.

“I'm driving. I'm almost at the airport.”

“It's starting to snow here,” she said. “That weather's moving in faster than they predicted.” I glanced out the van's windows in every direction. “It's not snowing here.”

## IT FALLS APART

For a moment, it was silent on the other end of the line, and I thought maybe she'd hung up, but then, "Okay, well, keep me posted. I don't like the look of that sky."

"I'll be careful," I said.

"I mean it, Harper. Don't drag your heels."

I smiled. "I won't. I'm pulling into the lot now so I gotta go."

After greeting the Nelsons and their ten-year-old son, I got them settled, their luggage loaded, and we headed for the Coleman Country Inn. The faster-than-forecasted weather Nan had mentioned made itself known the minute we neared Berne Harbor. An angry sky dropped an abrupt curtain of snow and ice pellets, causing me to flick the wipers on to their highest setting.

"We're almost there," I assured the Nelsons as we pulled onto the rural road and made our way past the battered 'Jesus Died for our Sins' billboard that had been a fixture along that road since I was a kid. "Then we'll get you inside, safe and dry, ASAP."

Snow was blowing across the nearby fields, causing me to have to slow down as I neared the driveway. The sign for the inn was already coated in a blanket of snow—not that it would have been easy to spot anyway, with visibility being so bad.

We rambled up the drive and I waited until we were as close as possible to the main house before cutting the engine and hopping out. Shards of ice struck the exposed skin of my face as the wind tried to push me back into the van.

"Ho there!" Luke's dad called from the porch. He hurried down the steps to greet the Nelsons and then quickly ushered them inside.

I made my way around the back of the van to grab their luggage when Luke appeared beside me, as he had every time I'd dropped off passengers.

"Just let me," he said, before I could even say hi, and he grabbed the two largest suitcases.

A strong gust of wind nearly knocked me off my feet and I braced myself against the back door of the van. "Okay, but I'm taking the small one."

Luke turned and headed for the front porch. "Bring it here," he called over his shoulder.

I trudged through the snow, the strong gusts of blowing ice fighting my every step. When I reached the luggage cart, Luke had already loaded the other two bags and then took the smaller suitcase from me before loading it too.

"Why don't you head in," he said, his voice almost lost in the howling wind as he pulled a tarp across the bags and tied it to the cart.

"What?" I asked, certain I'd misheard him.

He tugged on the tarp to make sure it was secure, then turned to face me. "I said why don't you head inside."

"I need to get back," I said. "My grandmother's waiting for me."

Luke looked out across the sprawling front yard, his eyes squinting against the swirling snow. "I don't think so."

"I don't think you understand," I said. "I can't leave Nan alone. What if the power goes out?"

Luke returned his gaze to me, his face expressionless except for what looked like concern in his dark eyes. "You're not driving in this, Harper. Most of the roads are probably closing as we speak."

I glanced back toward the van, which was already covered in ice and snow. "Dammit," I muttered under my breath. "I can't stay here."

Luke took a step toward me, suddenly very near, and then reached out to grab my hand. *What the—?*

## IT FALLS APART

No, not my hand. My keys.

“Hey!” I protested.

Luke held up the keys for me to see, then made a show of dropping them into his pocket.

“You’re staying. At least until this lets up.”

I opened my mouth to object, but he turned and headed up the porch steps.

With one final glance toward the van, now fully blanketed in white, I followed him, still torn between trying to get my keys back and accepting he was right.

Luke’s dad stepped outside, the Nelsons in tow, just as Luke reached the front door.

“Go on inside,” Mr. Coleman instructed. “I’m gonna get the Nelsons settled in their cabin.”

Luke hitched a thumb in my direction. “Harper’s staying until the storm lets up.”

Mr. Coleman turned his attention to me and smiled. “Good. That’s a good idea.” He glanced back at Luke. “I’ll be back in ten.”

Luke nodded then held the door open as the Nelsons followed Mr. Coleman to the snow-covered golf cart that would take them to their cabin.

“You coming?”

I turned and saw Luke was still holding the door open, waiting for me.

“Sorry, yeah,” I said, and followed him inside. I’d been to Luke’s house for a party once, Chloe’s last birthday party to be specific, but it felt unfamiliar now. Abnormal. Like the shuttle driver isn’t ever supposed to come inside.

“You can dump your stuff over there,” Luke said, gesturing toward a coat rack in the corner. He kicked off his own boots and shrugged out of the heavy parka he’d been wearing. I followed suit, then just kinda stood there while he wrote something in a binder on a nearby table. What was I supposed to be doing? This was so unexpected and weird. And stressful. I kept thinking about Nan, all alone in the cottage, waiting and wondering.

“I should call my grandmother,” I said. “Let her know I’ve been kidnapped.” I shot him a pointed look.

Luke didn’t seem to notice. He slid the pencil he was writing with into the spine of the binder then closed it. “Sure thing. I’ll show you to the family room.”

We headed down a hallway, past the check-in area and the large kitchen to a cozy, rustically-furnished room at the back of the house. It was the first time I’d ever seen it, Chloe’s summer birthday party being mostly confined to the patio out back. One wall was consumed by a large stone fireplace, the mantle above packed with framed family photos, while another wall featured shelves and shelves of books.

“This is nice,” I said, still feeling awkward.

“Feel free to call your grandma.” Luke reached down and grabbed a remote from the plush leather sofa before handing it to me. “Watch TV if you want. I’ll be back in a few. I just need to wash up after mucking around in the barn.”

“Oh, do you guys have horses?” I asked, knowing there was a small barn outside, but for some reason, having never connected the dots.

“Goats,” Luke said, as though it was obvious. “We used to have horses, but now it’s only the goats.”

He stared at me like he was trying to decide something, but then seemed to snap out of it.

“Okay, well, I’ll be back.”

“Okay.”

After he left the room, I tossed the remote back onto the couch and pulled my phone out of my pocket. Nan picked up after only one ring.

## IT FALLS APART

“Harper, where are you?” Her voice sounded strained.

“I’m at the Colemans’,” I said. “The storm got bad just as we arrived, and they’ve insisted I stay until it blows over. Are you okay?”

“Oh, thank goodness,” Nan said, her tone returning to normal. “I’m fine. But I’ve been worrying myself over you.”

“Please don’t worry about me,” I said. “That’s the last thing you need right now. I’m okay. I’ll head back as soon as the worst of it passes.”

“Let me know when you’re on your way. And drive safely when you do!”

I had to smile at Nan’s constant reminders to stay safe. “I will. Love you, Nan.”

I hung up and then pocketed my phone. The house was quiet, so quiet I could hear the wind howling outside, shaking it down. I walked slowly along the length of the fireplace, glancing at the photos of Luke and his family, younger and older, all smiling, most of them taken somewhere on their acres of gorgeous property.

The windows at the end of the room rattled as ice pellets collided with the glass, and I made my way over to peer out, marveling at some of the worst winter had to offer.

“Hey,” said a soft voice behind me.

I turned to see a girl, a bit older than me, who I was fairly certain was Luke’s sister.

“Hey,” I said, smiling as she moved into the room. “It’s Danica, right?”

Danica nodded. “Yep. It’s Chloe, right?”

“Oh, no,” I said, embarrassment warming my cheeks. “I’m Harper. Chloe’s my friend, but—”

“Oh shit.” Danica covered her face for a moment, then swept her dark hair behind her ear. “Right. Of course. Chloe moved. Sorry, I only met her once or twice. But yeah, of course. You don’t even look like her.”

I smiled. “It’s no problem.”

“So, sorry—are you and Luke...?”

“Oh no,” I said, shaking my head vehemently. “No, I drive the shuttle. My Nan’s shuttle. I’ve been filling in for her and, well, with the storm and all, your brother suggested I stay for a bit. Wait it out.”

Danica looked taken aback. “Well, that was uncharacteristically thoughtful of him.” She laughed. “I’m just kidding. Luke’s a good guy when he’s not being an idiot.”

I shrugged. “I don’t really know him all that well.”

As though responding to his name, Luke suddenly appeared in the doorway wearing a fresh set of clothes, his normally wild dark hair slick and wet from what must’ve been the fastest shower on record. For the most part, he looked the way he always did at school, but there was something about the deep turquoise color of his shirt. It suited him. Looked kinda nice even.

“Oh hey,” he said to Danica as he stepped into the room. “I didn’t know you were here.”

“Just got in this morning,” Danica said. “I wanted to get here before the storm hit. The one class I have tomorrow is skipable—assuming campus isn’t closed.”

“It probably will be,” I said, as though I was even remotely an expert on the subject.

“I hope so.” Danica turned and looked at Luke, studying him for a moment while he stared back at her, confused. “I should go check on my laundry.”

“I guess that answers the question of *why* you’re home,” Luke teased, giving his sister a light shove.

Danica grinned, and then winked at me before excusing herself from the room.

I found myself hoping she’d come back. Being alone with Luke, unexpectedly, at his house, felt so awkward. What were we supposed to do? What were we supposed to talk about?

## IT FALLS APART

“Do you wanna watch TV?” I asked at the exact same time Luke asked, “Do you want something to drink?”

“Umm, sure,” I said. “Water would be fine.”

He nodded toward the doorway, indicating I should follow him. He led me to the kitchen, where he grabbed two glasses from a cupboard and filled each with water from the tap.

“Ice?” he asked.

I glanced out the large kitchen window that faced the sprawling snowy grounds and shivered. “No thanks.”

He handed me a glass and then leaned back against the counter before taking a sip from his own. I guess that meant we were staying put.

“Did you get a hold of your grandma?” he asked. “Is she okay?”

I nodded, swallowing some of the water. “Yeah, she’s fine. But I’m worried about her.” I shifted where I stood, unsure if I should grab a stool along the island in the center of the room or just keep standing there. “I don’t like the idea of her at home all alone, especially after what happened...”

“The storm will be over soon,” Luke said. “I’m sure she’s alright.”

“I hope so.” I glanced back out the window, my stomach feeling unsettled as I took a sip of water.

“So, I have a question,” Luke said, catching me off guard. “What’s up with you and Carter Wilking?”

I nearly spit out my water. “Oh, umm. I dunno. Nothing, I guess. I mean, I dunno.”

Luke narrowed his eyes. “Are you two dating?”

“No. Not dating,” I said. Crap. I had no idea how to answer that question. Why was Luke even asking?

“That guy is trouble,” Luke said, pausing to take another sip of water. “You’d be smart to stay away from him.”

“What makes you say that?”

Luke shrugged. “Just stuff I’ve heard. He’s not a good guy.”

“I dunno about that,” I said. “He’s always been nice to me.”

Luke pushed off the counter and gave me a look that said, *give me a break*. “Of course he has. He’s nice to all the pretty girls.”

“I don’t think he’s as bad as you’re making him out to be,” I said, suddenly feeling defensive. *Wait. Did Luke just call me pretty?* I tried to ignore the compliment. He probably blurted it without thinking. “Maybe these rumors you’ve heard about him aren’t true.”

“Maybe,” Luke said. “But I doubt it.”

“I can take care of myself,” I said, but my voice was small, betraying my uncertainty.

“Okay.” Luke shrugged. “It’s probably none of my business. I just don’t want to see anyone get hurt.”

“Yeah, well, you’re right. It’s not any of your business.”

Luke fell back against the counter and took another long sip of water. “Fine,” he said, but then his lips slid into a smirk. “At least I got you to stop worrying about your grandma for a minute.”

Huh. He had me there. We stood in silence for a long moment, listening as the storm hurtled through the world outside.

“Thank you,” I finally said, my voice still small. “Thank you for distracting me.”