

Unlucky
in Love



Unlucky in Love

A SECRET ADMIRER ROMANCE WITH A LITTLE
BIT OF VALENTINE'S DAY MAGIC

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Prologue

Taylor

Taylor Pierce told herself she wasn't nervous. It was just Ryan. Ryan Carter. Emma's brother. The same boy who once duct-taped her shoelaces together because she wouldn't stop humming in the car. The same boy who lectured her for eating questionable gas-station sushi and then bought her french fries so she wouldn't "die of food poisoning."

Not exactly Prince Charming material.

Except her stomach had been doing backflips ever since Emma mentioned he was home from college. Worse, now that he was sitting on the couch across from her—legs stretched out, hair messier than she remembered, voice deeper—her stomach seemed to have joined Cirque du Soleil.

He looked older. Different. He smelled like soap and travel and something unfairly good.

"You're staring," Ryan said without looking up from the magazine in his lap. His mouth tipped in that crooked grin that made her want to throw a pillow at his head.

"I am not," Taylor lied. She clutched her mug of hot chocolate like it could protect her from making terrible decisions.

"You've been staring since I walked in," he said casually. "Do I have something on my face?"

“Yes. Your whole face.” The words slipped out before she could stop them.

Emma wasn’t even here to bail her out; she’d run upstairs to grab something, leaving Taylor stranded in the living room with the one boy she’d spent years convincing herself she didn’t like.

A slow grin tugged at his mouth, and she hated how much it made her heart cartwheel. “Still a smart mouth, huh?”

Still? He was the one who’d spent her entire childhood tormenting her, hiding her shoes, teasing her about her crush on the lead singer of that terrible boy band, lecturing her for eating gas-station sushi.

He’d been infuriating.

Maddening.

Overprotective.

And somewhere in the middle of all that, he’d also become the boy who carried her backpack when it rained. The boy who scared off jerks at the skating rink. The boy who made her laugh until her ribs ached.

The boy she’d spent years pretending she didn’t like.

Her pulse hammered. Emma was still upstairs. It was just the two of them. Ryan looked older, confident, the kind of guy college girls probably lined up for.

And she was just Taylor. Invisible Taylor. Travel-dreaming Taylor.

But what if...what if she wasn’t invisible?

She told herself to wait. To breathe. To say something normal. But the words slipped out instead: “You know what? Forget it.”

Ryan finally looked up. “Forget what?”

Her heart leapt into her throat.

Say nothing. Laugh it off. Do not be insane.

But clearly, she was insane.

Stark raving mad.

Instead, of letting the moment go, she set her mug down on the coffee table, sat down next to him on the couch, and did what she’d fantasized doing since elementary school.

She kissed him.

It was clumsy. Too fast. A press of lips that screamed seventeen and inexperienced. But it was hers, and for one dizzy second, she swore he kissed her back. His breath hitched, his hand twitched like he might reach for her—

Then he pulled away. Hard. Like she'd burned him.

"Taylor," he said, voice sharp. He stood like the couch had turned into lava. His eyes were hard, his jaw tight. "You're just a kid. Don't do this. Don't embarrass yourself."

The words sliced through her.

He left the living room like the place was on fire. Like he couldn't get away from her fast enough.

She had kissed him. He had rejected her. And she would never forget it.

She would never fall for Ryan Carter again.

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Chapter 1

Taylor

The morning rush at Bean There was in full swing, and Taylor Pierce was operating on autopilot. She knew every order by heart, every customer by name, and exactly how much whipped cream old Mr. Hollis liked on his hot cocoa (too much—his cardiologist would not approve).

“Extra whip?” she asked as she slid the mug across the counter.

“You’re a mind reader,” Mr. Hollis said with a wink, fishing two crumpled dollar bills from his wallet.

Not a mind reader. Just a barista who had been serving the same dozen people in this town every day for the past nine years.

The bell above the café door jingled and in breezed Emma Williams, Taylor’s best friend, soulmate, and occasional life coach, with a baby balanced on one hip and a diaper bag that looked like it could double as a carry-on for a cross-country flight.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Emma said, catching Taylor’s raised eyebrow as she juggled baby, bag, and stroller. “Some of us didn’t get three uninterrupted hours of sleep last night.”

“Some of us,” Taylor said, grabbing the stroller before it toppled over, “also didn’t decide to marry a man who thinks three babies in five years sounds like a fun challenge.”

Emma grinned. “Give him time. He’ll beg for mercy before we hit three.”

Taylor smiled, but there was a flicker of something sharp underneath it. Emma had built a whole life, husband, baby, cozy little house on the edge of town, while Taylor was still here, behind the same counter, serving the same coffee to the same people.

It wasn't that she didn't love the café. She did. She'd worked her way up from part-time barista at seventeen to full-on manager by twenty-five. Bean There was hers to run now, in all its chipped-wood-counter glory. But sometimes, when she was locking up at night and staring at the travel map pinned above her desk, she wondered if this was it. If her life would always be measured in cappuccinos and foam art.

Emma deposited the baby into the stroller and leaned against the counter with a sigh. "So guess who's back in town."

"Who?" she asked, sliding a latte toward the next customer in line.

Emma's smile was mischievous. "Ryan. He got in last night. Didn't I tell you he was thinking about moving back?"

The hiss of the espresso machine covered Taylor's sharp inhale. She busied herself tamping grounds into the portafilter, willing her hands not to shake. "Oh. Nice. Vacation?"

"Not exactly." Emma hesitated, adjusting the baby against her shoulder. "You know he became a Marine after college. Several deployments. It was intense. And then there was this incident—" She shook her head. "Something went wrong. Badly wrong. He won't talk about it, but I can see it written all over him. He's not the same."

Taylor's chest tightened. The Ryan she remembered had always been larger than life. Teasing, confident, unshakable. A protector by nature. What could possibly have knocked him down hard enough to send him running home?

"He just needs space," Emma added gently. "Time to breathe. Time to figure out what's next."

Taylor forced her expression back into place, tamping the espresso so hard the handle squeaked. "Well. Everyone needs a change of pace sometimes."

Emma gave her a look, one of those best-friend stares that saw far too much. "You okay?"

"Of course." Taylor pasted on her customer-service smile, sliding a cappuccino across the counter to a waiting customer. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Emma leaned in, her voice dropping, the way it always did when she switched from best-friend mode to truth-teller mode. “Taylor, you’ve been working in this café since...forever. You know everyone’s coffee order, their birthdays, their gossip. But when was the last time you did something for yourself? Really for yourself?”

Taylor kept moving, pulling shots, steaming milk, sliding orders across the counter with mechanical precision. “Running this place is for myself. It’s my job.”

Emma gave her the look. The one that sliced through all of Taylor’s practiced deflections. “Your job isn’t your dream. Don’t act like I don’t know you’ve got half-finished novels on your laptop. Don’t act like I haven’t seen that world map above your desk with pins stuck in every city you want to visit.”

Taylor’s cheeks warmed. She grabbed a scone from the bakery case and plated it for Mrs. Jenkins at table three. “Dreams don’t pay rent.”

“They could,” Emma countered. “If you’d actually send your manuscript to an agent instead of hoarding it like a dragon guarding treasure. You’ve got something, Taylor. You just don’t believe it.”

Taylor ducked back behind the espresso machine, grateful for the shield of hissing steam. Customers called out thank-yous, and she raised a hand in automatic reply. Inside, her chest ached at Emma’s words.

She had dreamed of more once, scribbling stories late at night, promising herself that someday she’d travel the world.

Emma was still watching her with that piercing look, the one that made Taylor want to crawl under the counter. “You can’t hide behind this café forever, Tay.”

Taylor swirled a spoon through the milk foam, watching the white curl disappear into the espresso. “I’m not hiding. I’m... managing.”

“Managing isn’t living,” Emma said gently.

Taylor forced a laugh. “Easy for you to say. You’ve got the husband, the baby, the picket fence. I’ve got...” She gestured around the café. “Coffee and bagels.”

Emma leaned in, lowering her voice. “And manuscripts. And talent you pretend doesn’t exist.”

Taylor’s throat tightened. She focused on wiping down the already spotless counter.

If only Emma knew.

She didn't know about the pen name, or the self-published books Taylor uploaded in the quiet hours of the night. She didn't know about the cheap royalties that trickled into Taylor's bank account each month—a couple hundred dollars here, barely enough to cover groceries.

And Emma definitely didn't know why Taylor had never dared to send her work to a publisher or an agent.

Taylor's mom had always been quick with a drink in hand and quicker with her criticism. A high-functioning alcoholic, charming to everyone else but viciously sharp at home. Every time Taylor tried to shine with good grades, art contests, stories she wrote in spiral notebooks, her mom cut her down with a laugh or a sigh.

Don't embarrass yourself, Taylor. Don't think you're special.

Those words had rooted deep.

Now, even with her own café, her own life, Taylor still lived like she was bracing for someone to tell her she wasn't good enough.

"I'm fine where I am," Taylor said finally, keeping her voice light. "Some people want book deals and Paris. I'm happy with coffee beans and small-town gossip."

Emma didn't buy it—her raised eyebrow made that clear—but she didn't push. She adjusted the baby's blanket and gave a little smile. "Someday, Tay. Someday you're going to realize you deserve more."

Taylor plastered on another smile, but inside her chest the words rattled around, sharp and dangerous.

More.

She wanted more. She just didn't believe she deserved it.

* * *

Emma gathered her diaper bag and stroller, wrangling her baby with practiced chaos. "I'll let you get back to it. Call me tonight—I want to hear if you actually take my advice for once."

Taylor waved her off with a smile, watching her best friend disappear out the door in a whirl of squeaky wheels and baby giggles. The café settled back into its steady hum.

She was just reaching for another stack of cups when the bell over the door jingled again.

And there he was.

Ryan Carter.

It had been years since she'd really seen him. Sure, he came back for quick visits now and then—holidays, birthdays—but Taylor had always found a way to be busy during those trips. Too many shifts at the café. Too many excuses. Anything to avoid that awkward churn in her stomach when she remembered the night she kissed him like a fool.

But now, here he was in her café, tall and broad-shouldered, the boy she remembered sharpened into a man. His dark hair was a little longer than before, his jaw dusted with stubble, his smile lazy but—oh no—directed right at her.

"Taylor Pierce," he said, stepping up to the counter. His voice was deeper now, rougher. "I was wondering if you'd still be here, running the show."

"Ryan." She pasted on the same customer-service smile she used for everyone. Bright. Friendly. Impersonal. "What can I get you?"

"Just like that? Nine years, and I don't even get a how have you been?" His mouth curved, teasing. "Brutal."

Taylor busied herself with the register. "I ask everyone the same thing: What can I get you? Keeps it simple."

He chuckled, low and warm, and leaned an elbow on the counter. "Coffee, black. Unless you want to surprise me. You always did make better lattes than anyone else."

Her cheeks warmed, but she kept her tone breezy. "Black coffee it is."

She poured it, slid it across, and moved on without another glance, calling the next order, greeting the next customer. Just another face in the line. Just another cup.

Ryan didn't press. He took his coffee and wandered to a corner table, where he settled in with that same unbothered confidence that had once driven her crazy.

The morning bled into afternoon, and Taylor lost herself in the rhythm—orders, foam art, deliveries, small talk. Another day passing her by as she worked in the cafe.

Once the last customer waved goodbye, the doorbell chimed softly as the glass door swung shut. The café grew still in a way that always felt like a sigh at the end of the day. Chairs scraped lightly against tile as Taylor nudged them back into place. She hummed under her breath, wiping down the counter, her mind already shifting to the closing checklist she could probably do in her sleep. Cash drawer. Lights. Floors. Lock the front door.

She turned, rag in hand, expecting the corner booth to be empty.

It wasn't.

Ryan Carter was still there.

Taylor froze, caught off guard. For hours he had sat quietly, blending into the background while she worked, and she had half convinced herself he was gone. Yet there he was, one arm stretched along the back of the booth, his long legs stretched out comfortably beneath the table, a nearly empty coffee cup sitting in front of him like it had been forgotten.

Her throat tightened. She adjusted her grip on the rag, clutching it a little too hard.

"Are you okay?" she asked, her voice breaking the silence. "You've been sitting there all day. Most people drink their coffee and leave before I close up."

He looked at her with a slow smile that made something in her chest twist. "Maybe I just like the atmosphere."

She arched a brow. "Or maybe you are a terrible liar."

His grin deepened. "You caught me."

Taylor took a few careful steps toward him, her heart drumming a little harder with each one. She dropped into the seat across from him before she could second guess herself.

"Seriously, Ryan. You do not spend six hours in a café unless you're hiding from someone or writing a novel. And unless you've been keeping secrets from your sister, you're not a novelist."

"Harsh," he said, feigning a wince, though his eyes glinted with amusement.

"Factual."

That earned her a laugh, a real one, and the sound did something strange to her chest. It had been years since she had seen him like this, relaxed, teasing, the same boy who used to torment her and protect her in equal measure.

Her guard slipped for just a moment. She leaned in. "Emma said you needed a change of pace. That's not like you. What happened?"

The laughter faded from his face, replaced by something heavier. He shrugged, but it looked forced, like his shoulders were carrying a weight too big for one person.

"Work got...complicated."

"Marines classified complicated?" she asked, lowering her voice.

His brows lifted. "Emma talks too much."

“She is my best friend,” Taylor said, tilting her head. “It is in her job description.”

He huffed out a breath, but the edge of a smile pulled at his mouth.

Taylor pressed her advantage. “Come on, give me something. I remember you as the guy who never shut up about baseball stats. Sitting here like a broody statue does not suit you. What’s next? A black turtleneck and poetry about despair?”

Ryan stared at her for a beat before the corner of his mouth twitched. Then he laughed again, shaking his head. “A broody statue? That’s how you see me?”

She shrugged. “I call it like I see it.”

He leaned back in the booth, watching her with an expression that made her feel like he was seeing far more than she wanted him to. “You haven’t changed a bit.”

Her smile wobbled. She had changed, though. More than he could ever know. But it was easier to play along. “Neither have you. Still smug. Still bossy.”

“Still devastatingly handsome?” he asked, mock-serious.

Taylor rolled her eyes. “Do not push your luck.”

For a brief moment, it was almost easy. Comfortable. Like they hadn’t spent years avoiding each other, like there had never been a humiliating kiss when she was seventeen that she swore to forget.

But she couldn’t let herself sink into that comfort. Not with him.

She pushed up from her chair, rag dangling in her hand. “Well, statue or not, café is closed. Go home, Carter.”

Ryan stood too, unfolding his long frame from the booth. He towered over her now, broader than he had been the last time she saw him, and that quiet weight settled back into his features. “I’ll walk you home.”

Taylor blinked. “Excuse me?”

“It’s late. Not safe for you to be walking by yourself.”

She barked a laugh, genuinely amused at the idea of anyone worrying about her safety. “Ryan, I’ve been walking home alone for years. It’s two blocks. I think I can manage.”

His frown deepened. “Still. I would feel better if I walked with you.”

“I don’t need a bodyguard.”

“You might not think so—”

“Ryan.” Her voice cut him off, firmer than she expected. She set her rag on the table and crossed her arms. “My mom has been gone a long time. I’ve been on my own since I was nineteen. Believe me, if there was a problem, I would know how to handle it.”

That stopped him cold. His jaw clenched, his eyes searching hers with something raw that made her stomach twist. “You shouldn’t have to handle it alone.”

The words landed harder than she wanted them to. Taylor looked away, focusing on the counter, the chairs, anything but him. “I’m fine. Really. You can go.”

For a long moment, he didn’t move. The silence stretched, heavy and unspoken. Finally, with a reluctant nod, he stepped back.

“Fine. But at least promise you’ll lock the doors behind me.”

She forced a grin. “I manage a café. Locking doors is literally part of my job description.”

His eyes lingered on her for a moment longer before he turned toward the door. “Goodnight, Taylor.”

“Goodnight, Ryan.”

He pushed out into the night, the doorbell chiming softly as it closed behind him. Taylor stood there for a beat, breathing in the quiet that followed, her chest tight in a way she couldn’t explain.

She shook it off.

Closing up took another twenty minutes. She counted the cash drawer, stacked chairs, wiped the counters again even though they were already spotless. Anything to keep her hands busy, to keep her thoughts from circling around the fact that Ryan Carter had been sitting in her café all day.

Watching her. Teasing her.

Laughing with her like nothing had ever happened between them.

When everything was finally in order, she slung her bag over her shoulder and flipped off the lights. The café plunged into darkness, only the soft glow of the streetlamps filtering in through the glass. She locked the front door, double-checking it out of habit, then stepped out into the night.

The air was cool against her cheeks, carrying the faint scent of pine and the distant hum of traffic from the highway. The small town had already tucked itself in for the night. Windows were dark, streets quiet, only a stray cat darting across the road to break the stillness.

Taylor pulled her jacket tighter and started down the familiar two-block stretch toward her apartment. Her footsteps echoed softly on the sidewalk, a rhythm she knew by heart.

Halfway down the block, a chill rippled across her skin.

She paused, glancing over her shoulder. The street was empty. Nothing but shadows stretching long beneath the streetlamps.

Still, she couldn't shake the feeling. Like eyes on the back of her neck. Like someone was there, just out of sight.

Taylor forced a laugh under her breath. "You are imagining things."

She adjusted her bag, quickened her pace.

But the unease lingered, curling low in her stomach, following her all the way home.

Chapter 2

Ryan

Ryan lingered outside the café longer than he meant to. The night air was cool against his face, carrying the smell of roasted beans and the faint vanilla syrup that seemed to cling to the café walls. He shoved his hands into his jacket pockets, glancing back through the glass as Taylor flicked off the lights inside.

She hadn't changed. Not really. She still moved with that brisk determination, still smiled at people like she meant it, even when he could see exhaustion at the corners of her eyes.

But she had changed too.

There was a weight about her now, a quiet resilience that hadn't been there when she was seventeen. She carried herself like someone who had been holding up the world alone for far too long.

And that bothered him more than he wanted to admit.

He told himself to walk away. To head home, let her lock up, mind his own business. She'd made it perfectly clear she didn't need him.

Except the thought of her walking alone through dark streets gnawed at him. Maybe it was the job still clinging to his bones. Maybe it was the failure that never left him, the one that had sent him back to this small town in the first place. He had sworn not to let anyone else slip through his fingers.

Taylor's voice echoed in his head. My mom has been gone a long time. I've been on my own since then.

He hadn't known that. Not the full truth of it, anyway. He remembered her mom vaguely, remembered polite conversations when he picked Emma up, remembered a woman who smiled brightly in public. He hadn't realized Taylor had been left to fend for herself so completely.

That knowledge sat in his chest like a stone.

The café door opened. Taylor stepped out, jacket pulled tight around her, bag slung over her shoulder. She locked the door with quick, practiced movements and turned down the street.

Ryan followed at a distance. Not close enough for her to notice, not close enough for her to accuse him of smothering her, but close enough that if something happened, he could close the space in seconds.

Her stride was steady, confident, but he saw the way her shoulders stiffened halfway down the block. She glanced back, scanning the shadows, her hand tightening on her bag strap. For a moment, Ryan thought she had spotted him.

But she shook her head and kept walking, muttering something he couldn't hear.

He stayed until her apartment door clicked shut behind her, the light flicking on in the window. Only then did he let himself exhale.

Ryan waited until the light in Taylor's apartment blinked off before turning away. The night had grown colder, the air sharp against his lungs as he shoved his hands deeper into his jacket pockets and started the walk back to his rental.

The small apartment sat above a hardware store on Main Street. It smelled faintly of sawdust and mothballs, the kind of scent that clung to old buildings with drafty windows and too-thin walls. Not home, but serviceable. Temporary. That was all he needed.

He dropped his keys on the counter and flicked on the single overhead light. The space was bare except for the essentials: a couch, a table with one chair, and his duffel bag shoved against the wall. He had been living light for so long that the idea of decorating or settling in anywhere felt foreign.

He sat heavily on the couch, elbows braced on his knees, and pressed his palms to his face.

Images he had tried to bury surfaced with cruel clarity. The last deployment. The chaos in the dust-choked village. The intel that had been

wrong. The ambush that had come too fast. The men he had not been able to get out in time.

He still woke up some nights with the ringing of gunfire in his ears, with the sight of blood-soaked sand burned into his vision. He had replayed it a thousand times, searching for what he could have done differently. He always came back to the same conclusion. He had failed them.

The fallout had been swift. He had put in his papers, left before anyone could push him out, told himself he was just tired and needed a change of pace. The truth was simpler. He had nothing left in the tank. No strength to keep carrying the weight of lives depending on him.

So here he was, back in his hometown, the place he had once been so desperate to leave behind.

The quiet was supposed to help. The stillness of small-town nights. The comfort of familiar streets. A chance to remember who he was before the world demanded too much.

But already he felt restless. Like the silence would swallow him whole.

And then there was Taylor.

He had not expected to see her like that, running the café with brisk efficiency, smiling at customers as if she belonged completely in that space. But underneath the practiced calm, he had seen the flickers of something else. A tiredness she tried to hide. A loneliness that clung to her in unguarded moments.

He had thought he knew her, once. He had thought he had seen enough to understand her life. Clearly, he had missed more than he realized.

Ryan leaned back against the couch, staring at the ceiling.

He needed to slow down. To stop living like every shadow held a threat. That was why he had come back, after all. He told himself he was here to breathe, to take things one day at a time, to find some kind of footing again.

But as much as he tried to push it aside, he knew the truth.

He was back in this town because he was tired of losing people.

And whether Taylor liked it or not, he was not about to let her be the next.

The apartment was too quiet. Ryan stretched out on the couch, but his body refused to relax. He stared at the ceiling until his vision blurred, and still his thoughts circled back to Taylor.

It had been almost a decade, but some memories had teeth. He could still see her as clear as if it had happened yesterday: seventeen years old, cheeks flushed, eyes shining with nervous courage as she leaned toward him.

And then she kissed him.

Just like that. No hesitation, no warning.

Her lips had been soft, unsure, but the jolt that went through him had mattered. For one insane heartbeat, he wanted nothing more than to pull her closer, to deepen the kiss, to forget the lines that made her untouchable.

But he had shut it down.

He had pulled away like she had burned him, said the cruelest thing he could think of, made it sound like she was nothing more than a silly kid.

He could still see the way her smile cracked, the way her laugh sounded brittle as she brushed it off like a joke. But her eyes had told the truth. He had hurt her.

The guilt of that moment had lingered, but he had forced himself to bury it. Because the alternative, acknowledging what he felt, was too dangerous.

She had been seventeen, on the cusp of her own life, and he had been nineteen, desperate to leave this small town behind. He had wanted more, wanted adventure, wanted to test himself in the world. The last thing he'd needed was to be tied down by feelings he wasn't ready for.

So he'd made sure she would never try again.

And then he left.

Ryan scrubbed a hand over his face, exhaling slowly. He told himself he had done the right thing. He told himself that cutting her down quickly had spared them both something messy and impossible.

But tonight, seeing her again, hearing the strength in her voice and the loneliness underneath, he wondered if all he had really done was prove himself a coward.

He had wanted to experience the world, and he had. He had seen more than he ever imagined, done things he never thought he would do, lost people he could never get back. And after all of it, he was here again, sitting in an empty apartment above a hardware store, thinking about the girl he had left behind.

Ryan closed his eyes, but sleep didn't come easily. The past pressed in on him, sharp and unrelenting.

He told himself he had come home to slow down, to rest.

But he was beginning to realize he had also come home because of her.

Chapter 3

Taylor

The smell of fresh coffee clung to Taylor Pierce's clothes the way perfume might linger on someone else. It was the scent of her life, embedded in every fiber of her sweaters, every strand of her hair, every late-night load of laundry that never seemed to chase it away. She supposed there were worse things to smell like, but some mornings she longed for something different. Vanilla lotion. A woodsy cologne. Anything that did not scream you spend twelve hours a day pouring caffeine for other people.

Bean There was already busy, though it was barely eight o'clock. The bell over the door had not stopped chiming since she flipped the sign to "open." The clatter of ceramic mugs and the steady hiss of steaming milk filled the air, underscored by the tinny pop songs playing from the café speakers.

She slid a caramel latte across the counter without even looking up. "Two pumps, not three, Mrs. Hughes."

The older woman blinked, startled. "How do you do that?"

Taylor gave her usual smile. "Barista magic."

It was not magic. It was routine. Mrs. Hughes came in every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, ordered the same thing, and sat at the same table to knit the same unfinished scarf. Just like Mr. Hollis came in every day for hot chocolate with what had to be half the can of whipped cream. Just like the college kids shuffled in with earbuds and laptops, ordering iced coffee they never finished.

She knew all their drinks. She knew their habits. She even knew their favorite seats. Yet most of them did not know her at all. To them, she was “the girl at the counter,” smiling, efficient, forgettable.

That had been the story of her life for as long as she could remember.

“Order up!” called one of the younger baristas, sliding a pastry bag onto the counter.

“Thanks, Jenna.” Taylor kept her smile in place, handing off the bag to a customer who barely looked her in the eye before disappearing out the door.

Invisible. That was how she felt most days. Not in a tragic, melodramatic way. More in the practical sense, like wallpaper. You noticed it only when it was peeling.

By the time the morning rush trickled down, her muscles ached from constant movement. She retreated behind the counter for a breath, grabbing her water bottle. A glance through the front windows made her stomach sink.

Valentine’s Day was coming.

The street outside was already decorated. Paper hearts fluttered in shop windows. The florist across the street had draped pink garlands around the doorway. Someone had tied a cluster of red balloons to the lamppost.

Taylor turned away quickly, focusing on stacking clean mugs. Valentine’s Day had a way of pressing on her like a bruise. Couples would fill the café, holding hands across tables, exchanging chocolates and flowers. And she would be behind the counter, serving them drinks and reminding herself she was twenty-six and had never had a real Valentine of her own.

At lunch, she ate her turkey sandwich in the staff room by herself. Jenna and Kyle, the two college baristas, had gone to grab food together, leaving Taylor in the silence. She opened her phone, scrolling halfheartedly through social media. Engagement posts. Vacation photos. A pregnancy announcement from a girl she had once sat next to in English class.

She tossed her phone back into her bag, appetite gone.

The truth was, she had dreams. Big ones. She wanted to travel. She wanted to see the world beyond this small town. She wanted to write stories that mattered. And in secret, she had. Late at night, after closing the café, she sat at her little desk with her secondhand laptop and typed until her eyes blurred.

She had written entire novels. Fantasy romances full of daring heroes and heroines who were never invisible. She had even self-published them online

under a pen name. A few strangers had bought them. Enough royalties trickled in each month to cover groceries, but it wasn't enough to make her believe she was really an author. She never told Emma or anyone else. It was safer that way. If no one knew, no one could mock her for daring to think she had talent.

By the time the day ended, her feet hurt and her head pounded faintly from the constant noise of the café. The last customer waved goodbye, and Taylor breathed a sigh of relief as the doorbell chimed behind them.

Closing time was her favorite part of the day. Not because she hated the café. It was hers, in a way. She had worked here since she was seventeen, climbing from part-time barista to manager. She took pride in it. But when the café emptied, when only the hum of the refrigerator and the quiet tick of the clock remained, she could finally breathe.

She wiped down the counters, stacked the chairs, and counted the register. Her movements were automatic, her mind drifting. She thought about the stack of Valentine's cards already cluttering the store shelves at the grocery. She thought about how Emma's husband would probably surprise her with flowers. She thought about her own empty apartment waiting for her, with nothing but a stack of laundry and her laptop for company.

She switched off the overhead lights, leaving only the glow of the string bulbs that looped across the windows. A soft, cozy glow filled the room, and for a moment, she stood in the quiet and let herself feel how tired she was.

Then she noticed something.

Her favorite corner seat, tucked near the window, was not empty.

On the chair, folded neatly, was a piece of paper.

Taylor frowned. She was meticulous about clearing the café at night. No trash left behind, no crumbs, no mugs unwashed. She crossed the room, picked up the paper, and unfolded it.

Her heart stuttered.

It wasn't trash. It was a note.

The handwriting was neat and looping, not rushed like a scribble. The words were simple, but they curled through her like a spark.

For the girl who thinks no one notices. Start here. Tomorrow will bring your first clue.

Taylor blinked at the page, her breath catching. She read it again, and then again, as if the words might rearrange themselves into something ordinary.

But they did not.

Someone had written this for...who?

It couldn't be for her.

Could it?

A shiver skated down her spine. She glanced around the empty café, her pulse quickening even though she knew she was alone.

It was probably a joke. A silly prank. That had to be it.

But the handwriting was steady, almost elegant. The words weren't mocking. They were gentle. Playful. Romantic, even.

Her heart thudded as she folded the note carefully and slipped it into her pocket.

Tomorrow. A clue.

For the first time in a long while, Taylor walked home with something bubbling under her ribs that felt dangerously close to hope.

* * *

The next morning felt ordinary in all the ways Taylor had grown used to. The alarm buzzed at six, her apartment was cold because the radiator had given up the ghost sometime around Christmas, and her first thought was that she should have gone to bed earlier. Same routine, same fatigue. She brushed her teeth, threw her hair into a messy bun, and pulled on her work sweater that smelled faintly of roasted beans no matter how many times she washed it.

By the time she trudged through the icy streets to the café, Main Street was stirring. Cars idled in driveways, exhaust puffing into the pale morning light. A dog barked from somewhere down the block. Taylor breathed into her scarf and tried not to notice the shop windows still plastered with Valentine's decorations. She had noticed them yesterday, and the day before that, and every pink balloon seemed to mock her.

She unlocked the café, flicked on the lights, and let the familiar smell of coffee grounds, syrup, and pastry dough seep into her bones. It should have comforted her. It usually did. But today there was something else. A tension buzzing beneath her skin, like anticipation or maybe dread.

Jenna arrived a few minutes later, earbuds in, hair sticking out from under her knit cap. She gave Taylor a distracted smile before ducking into the

back. Kyle wandered in fifteen minutes after that, yawning so wide Taylor worried his jaw might pop out of place.

Everything was ordinary. Except it wasn't.

Because her eyes kept flicking to the corner seat by the window.

It was her seat, though she would never admit it aloud. She always sat there after closing, notebook in her lap, pretending she was writing café schedules while secretly scribbling stories she would never show anyone. It had been her spot since she was seventeen.

The morning rush picked up, and she hardly had another moment to think about it.

Until lunch time hit.

She glanced at the seat again and decided to take a closer look. Just in case it hadn't been a joke or a fluke.

Taylor's chest tightened. She walked slowly, pretending to check the chairs, pretending she wasn't already certain of what she would find.

There it was. Another folded piece of paper, sitting squarely in the center of the cushion.

Her palms dampened as she reached for it. She half expected it to vanish, to dissolve into a coffee stain, but it was real. Crisp paper, carefully folded, waiting just for her.

She unfolded it.

Stories are your secret escape, but you never leave the same shelf. Go to where your favorite heroines wait, and look on the third row where you always reach first.

Taylor blinked. Once. Twice.

The words blurred and then sharpened again. Someone had not only noticed she spent hours at the bookstore, but they knew exactly where she went, which shelf she gravitated to, which row she reached for first.

A laugh bubbled out of her, sharp with disbelief.

She folded the note quickly, shoving it into the pocket of her apron just as Jenna came back out front with a tray of muffins.

"You good?" Jenna asked, arching a brow.

Taylor pasted on a smile. "Fine. Just checking the chairs."

Jenna shrugged and went back to arranging pastries.

Taylor spent the rest of the morning in a fog. She brewed lattes and called out orders and rang up customers, but her mind kept circling back to the

folded paper in her pocket. Her fingers itched to pull it out, to read it again, to make sure she hadn't imagined it.

She hadn't. She knew she hadn't.

But following it? Actually going to the bookstore? That was a different thing entirely. That was admitting something. That she wanted this to be real. That she wanted to believe someone, somewhere, saw her.

By noon, the internal debate had exhausted her more than the rush of customers. When Jenna offered to handle the counter for a while, Taylor didn't argue. She hung up her apron, pulled on her coat, and slipped out the door.

The February air was sharp, the kind of cold that stung her cheeks and made her wish for gloves. She walked quickly, boots crunching against the salted sidewalk, heart thudding faster with every step.

This is ridiculous. It's probably a prank. You're going to look insane pawing through books like a lunatic.

But her feet carried her forward anyway.

The bell over the bookstore door jingled as she pushed it open. Warmth wrapped around her instantly, along with the familiar scent of paper and ink. The store was quiet, the way it always was on weekday afternoons. A man browsed in the history section. An elderly woman tucked a mystery novel into her basket.

Taylor exhaled, her pulse still jittery. She nodded politely to the clerk at the register, who was leaning on the counter with a half-empty cup of tea.

"Looking for anything in particular?" the clerk asked, her voice friendly but distracted.

Taylor shook her head too quickly. "Just browsing."

Her voice cracked, and she winced, but the clerk only smiled and went back to her tea.

Taylor made her way toward the back. The romance section waited, a cluster of shelves crowded with bright covers and bold fonts. She crouched by the third row, the one she always reached for first, and ran her fingers along the spines. Her heart hammered so hard she was afraid the clerk would hear it.

Nothing. Just books.

She almost laughed. Of course it was nothing. She was being ridiculous.

Then her fingers landed on a glossy paperback, the newest release from her favorite author. She pulled it from the shelf, and a slip of paper fluttered

to the floor.

Taylor froze.

Her breath caught as she crouched to pick it up. Not paper. A bookmark. Handmade, with a heart drawn in careful ink strokes. On the back, another note.

Every story needs a heroine. Maybe this one begins with you.

Her throat tightened.

The store tilted around her, just for a second, and she had to press her hand against the shelf to steady herself.

Someone had done this. For her. Someone had seen her at her most invisible and decided she deserved a story of her own.

She pressed the bookmark to her chest, eyes closing. For the first time in longer than she could remember, she smiled without forcing it.

The clerk glanced over as Taylor walked back toward the front. “Find what you were looking for?”

Taylor laughed softly, clutching the bookmark in her pocket. “I think so.”

She stepped back into the cold afternoon air, and the world looked different. The streets were the same, the balloons and paper hearts still mocked her from the lampposts, but for the first time, she didn’t mind.

Because someone, somewhere, had decided she was worth noticing.

Chapter 4

Ryan

Ryan had not done much to make his rental apartment feel like home. The furniture was borrowed, the walls were bare, and the only decoration was a battered duffel bag that leaned against the corner like it might bolt for the door at any moment. He had told himself he would add things later, once he decided if he was staying. For now, he kept it sparse, clean, and easy to walk away from.

The knock at the door came just as he had poured himself a cup of coffee. He frowned at the sound, set the mug down, and crossed the small living room.

Emma stood on the other side, her sweet, drooling baby strapped to her chest in a sling, looking like a little angel in sleep.

Emma's hair was pulled into a messy bun that could only be described as battlefield chic.

"Do not tell me I look tired," she warned as he opened the door.

Ryan stepped back, gesturing her in. "You look radiant, little sister."

"Liar." She trudged inside, dropping a diaper bag on the couch with a sigh of relief. "I figured I would check in on you while the baby finally napped. Consider yourself my adult interaction for the day."

Ryan smiled faintly and shut the door. "Glad to be of service."

She took in the apartment with a critical eye, then turned back to him. "This place is depressing. You need curtains. And maybe a plant. Something

alive.”

“I am alive,” Ryan said dryly.

“Barely.” Emma poked at the duffel bag in the corner. “Still living out of this thing?”

“It works.” He shrugged. “I don’t need much.”

Emma’s expression softened, though she tried to hide it. “How are you doing? Really?”

Ryan reached for his coffee and took a sip before answering. He hated this question. Hated the way people asked it with too much sympathy or too much curiosity. Emma’s voice was gentler, though, not pitying, just steady.

“I’m fine,” he said finally.

“You came back from God knows where with dark circles under your eyes and a smile that looks like it’s in witness protection. Forgive me if I do not buy ‘fine.’”

Ryan gave her a wry look. “You always were bossy.”

“And you always avoided straight answers.” Emma adjusted the sling, rocking the baby lightly as she sat on the arm of the couch. “You’ve been back two weeks, and you spend most of your time browsing shops and overdosing on coffee. That is not you.”

Ryan stared into his mug. “Maybe I’m tired of being me.”

The words slipped out before he could stop them. Emma’s brow furrowed, and he could see the questions forming, the worry gathering. He held up a hand. “I just needed a break. I needed quiet.”

Emma let the silence stretch for a moment, then nodded. “Okay. Quiet I can understand. This town is practically allergic to excitement.”

Ryan almost smiled. Almost.

She studied him for another beat before her expression shifted, sly now. “Speaking of coffee...you ran into Taylor the other day, didn’t you?”

His stomach tightened, but he kept his tone casual. “I saw her.”

“And?” Emma prodded.

“And nothing. She was working.”

Emma narrowed her eyes. “That woman practically grew up in our house. Us three were inseparable growing up. You are not seriously telling me you had nothing to say to her after all this time.”

Ryan leaned back against the counter, playing it off with a shrug. “She looked the same. Maybe a little more tired. Still running circles around everyone else in that place.”

Emma's mouth twitched. "She doesn't give herself enough credit. That café would collapse without her. I keep telling her to finally bite the bullet and go to Spain like she's always wanted. She's saved up enough for it, but she's afraid everything will fall apart without her."

"Right. I forgot she was so fascinated with that place." Ryan sipped his coffee, keeping his face blank. "She seeing anyone?"

The question dropped out of his mouth more abruptly than he meant it to. Emma's eyebrows shot up, and Ryan cursed inwardly for sounding too interested. He quickly added, "I mean, she is twenty-six now. Surprised nobody has snatched her up."

Emma folded her arms, smiling like a cat who had cornered a mouse. "Why are you asking?"

Ryan kept his expression bored. "Just making conversation."

"Sure." Emma rocked the baby, eyes gleaming. "Taylor has never been one to date much. She keeps her guard up. I think she had a few boyfriends here and there, but nothing serious. And honestly, she likes things safe. Predictable. She doesn't exactly put herself out there."

Ryan felt something twist in his chest. The thought of Taylor keeping herself hidden away, never letting anyone close, tugged at him in a way he didn't want to name.

"Why so curious?" Emma pressed.

Ryan kept his voice steady. "I'm not. Just asking. You brought her up."

Emma tilted her head. "Right. Because you've always been so fascinated by her love life."

He scowled. "Drop it."

She grinned, clearly satisfied. "Fine. Dropped."

But the knowing look in her eyes lingered, and Ryan hated how it made heat creep up the back of his neck. He turned away, staring out the small window at the street below.

Emma shifted the baby in the sling, smoothing the blanket. "You know, for someone who claims he wants quiet, you sure seem restless."

Ryan didn't answer. He couldn't tell her the truth, that the quiet only made the noise in his head louder. That sitting still gave the memories room to crawl out of the dark. That sometimes the only thing keeping him from drowning in it was the sound of Taylor's laugh, sharp and unexpected, like it had been yesterday when she called him a broody statue.

Emma pushed off the couch and slung the diaper bag over her shoulder. "All right, I will leave you to your moody brooding. But Ryan?"

He glanced over, wary.

"She's not a kid anymore. Try to remember that."

With that, she kissed his cheek, muttered something soothing to the baby, and left.

Ryan stood alone in the silence of his empty apartment, coffee cooling in his hand, and let Emma's words sink into the hollow place he had been avoiding.

* * *

The apartment was too quiet after Emma left. Ryan stared at the closed door for a long moment, then set his half-empty coffee cup in the sink. He rubbed the back of his neck, rolling the tension out of his shoulders, and tried to shake the weight of his sister's words.

His phone buzzed on the counter. He didn't recognize the number, but the area code made his chest tighten. He swiped to answer anyway.

"Hello?" His voice came out rougher than he intended.

"Well, damn. I thought you were hiding in a cave somewhere." The voice on the other end was gravelly and familiar. Sergeant Danny Ruiz. One of his platoon brothers.

Ryan's stomach knotted. "Ruiz."

"I tracked down your number through Higgins. He said you were back in your hometown, pretending you're retired." Ruiz chuckled, but it wasn't unkind. "You gonna tell me how you're really doing, or you sticking with the standard 'fine' routine?"

Ryan pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'm breathing. That's about it."

"That's something." Ruiz's tone softened. "Listen, I know what's going through your head. I know because it went through mine too. That day was a cluster. You did what you could."

Ryan clenched his jaw. Images rose without invitation: the dust-choked street, the sound of gunfire, the faces of the men he hadn't been able to pull out in time. "I should have seen it coming. Should've—"

"Stop," Ruiz cut in, firm. "We all should've done something different. But we didn't. You can't keep replaying it like a damn movie. It'll eat you alive."

Ryan's throat worked, but no words came.

Ruiz went on. "You were a good leader. You still are. You kept more of us alive than you lost. Don't dishonor them by drowning in guilt."

Ryan sank onto the couch, staring at the empty wall. He wanted to believe it. He wanted to let the words settle. But the guilt clung like a second skin.

"You need to come back," Ruiz said after a pause. "There's a place for you. The Corps doesn't just let men like you walk away. We need you."

Ryan barked out a laugh, humorless. "You don't need a man who freezes when he closes his eyes. You don't need a man who sees their faces every night."

"You need time," Ruiz said simply. "But don't bury yourself. Don't let one bad day make you forget who you are."

Ryan's grip tightened on the phone. He wanted to say he wasn't sure who he was anymore. That all he had left was exhaustion and regret. But the words stayed locked in his chest.

"I'll think about it," he muttered.

"Good. That's all I ask. Think about it." Ruiz hesitated, then added, "And hey, don't spend all your time staring at four walls. Live a little. Last time I checked, you weren't dead."

Ryan managed a faint smile. "Working on it."

They said their goodbyes, and when Ryan hung up, the silence pressed in harder than before.

He sat there a long time, staring at the phone in his hand, Ruiz's words echoing in his head.

Live a little.

Easier said than done.

But when his mind drifted, it wasn't to the desert or the gunfire. It was to a woman with ink-stained fingers.

Taylor Pierce.

Chapter 5

Taylor

The lunch rush thinned to a manageable murmur, and Taylor finally ducked into the corner table with a bowl of tomato soup and a grilled cheese that had gone lukewarm while she plated pastries for everyone else. Emma slid into the seat across from her with a salad and a sigh that sounded like it came from her toes.

“Ten solid minutes without a diaper,” Emma said, stabbing a cherry tomato. “This is luxury.”

Taylor smiled and reached into her apron pocket. The paper felt crisp against her fingers, the handmade bookmark a gentle weight she couldn’t stop touching. She set both on the table between them.

Emma’s eyes went wide. “Ooh. Is this it?”

Taylor nodded, suddenly self-conscious. “The first note was two nights ago. This one was waiting for me yesterday. And the bookmark was tucked inside a book at the shop.”

Emma picked up the folded paper and read it twice, mouth curling. Then she flipped the bookmark over and traced the ink heart with her thumb. A laugh slipped out of her, bright and delighted.

“This is cute,” she said. “Like, a real swoon. Not a prank. Someone actually planned this.”

Taylor tried to hold on to her guarded smile, but warmth pressed at her throat. “I told myself not to get excited.”

“You are allowed to be excited.” Emma tilted her head. “Did the secret admirer leave anything else? A name? A hint that he is the town librarian with forearms of justice?”

Taylor snorted. “Sadly, no forearms. Just the heart.”

“Classic. Understated. Romantic.” Emma slid the note back across the table. “Do you have any idea who it is?”

Taylor shook her head. “I mean, it has to be someone who knows me. Or watches me, which sounds creepy when I say it out loud, but the notes do not feel creepy. They feel...kind.”

“Someone who knows you always go for the third row at the bookstore,” Emma said. “Which I only know because I have been dragged there a hundred times.”

Taylor broke off a corner of her sandwich and stared at it like it might answer for her. “Part of me thinks it’s a joke. Then I read the lines again, and it feels like a gift.”

Emma leaned in. “Could it be a regular? That guy who orders honey cinnamon lattes and tips in exact change? Or the substitute teacher who reads poetry to his students?”

Taylor laughed. “Mr. Exact Change barely makes eye contact. And the teacher is married, remember?”

“Right. Cross him off the vision board.” Emma chewed, eyes dancing. “What about the contractor who fixed the back door. The one who looked at you like you were a puzzle he wanted to solve.”

“That man talked to my collarbone the entire time,” Taylor said. “I’m not giving the scavenger hunt prize to that level of bravery.”

“Fair.” Emma swirled her fork through greens.

“Whoever wrote this knew exactly where in the store to look. That is very specific.”

Emma tapped the note again. “Someone has paid attention to you for a while.”

Taylor smoothed the edge of the paper. The idea felt fragile and impossible. “Maybe I should ignore it.”

“If you ignore it, I will personally staple the next clue to your jacket,” Emma said. “What does ignoring it get you? Another year of serving heart shaped cookies to couples while pretending you don’t care?”

Taylor made a face. “That was savage.”

“I’m a mother who hasn’t slept through the night in months.” Emma sipped her iced tea. “There is no filter left.”

Taylor folded the bookmark and slid it back into her pocket. “Besides, we don’t even know if there will be another note, and I really don’t want to get hurt.”

“You don’t have to marry your secret admirer,” Emma said gently. “You only have to walk to the next place. One step. See what happens. If it feels wrong, you stop. If it feels right, you keep going.”

Taylor nodded, throat tight. “I can do one step.”

“That’s my girl.” Emma brightened. “Tell me everything about the bookstore. I want details. Did the clerk notice? Did the lights glow a little brighter? Did a choir of paperback angels sing?”

“The clerk drank tea and looked bored,” Taylor said, laughing. “No angels. But I pulled my favorite author off the shelf and the bookmark fell out like magic. I thought my heart would fall out with it.”

Emma pressed a hand to her chest. “I am living for this.”

Taylor leaned back in her chair. The café noise rose and fell around them, blending with the soft clink of cups and the hiss of the steamer. For once she wasn’t counting down to the next order. For once she wasn’t bracing for the afternoon slump. There was a string of light inside her, small and stubborn.

Emma watched her for a long moment, her teasing expression softening. “You look different,” she said. “Lighter.”

Taylor rolled her eyes to keep them from stinging. “Do not get sappy on me.”

“Too late.” Emma nudged her foot under the table. “I will say one more thing and then I’ll stop. You’re allowed to be the heroine. Not just the barista who knows everyone else’s order. Not just the friend who solves everyone’s problems. The heroine.”

Taylor swallowed, then managed a wobbly smile. “You’re supposed to be eating. If you make me cry in my own café, I will ban you for life.”

Emma saluted with her fork. “Noted.”

They ate for a minute in comfortable silence. The front bell chimed as a couple came in holding hands.

Taylor stood and gathered their plates, grateful for an excuse to move. “I need to get back behind the counter before Jenna starts sculpting foam

swans again. We had a customer post one on the internet and call it a goose.”

“Tragic.” Emma rose too and reached for the bookmark, then stopped and smiled. “Keep it close.”

“I will.” Taylor tucked it deeper into her pocket like a secret. “If another clue shows up, I will text you.”

“You better.” Emma leaned across the table and kissed her cheek. “And Taylor?”

“Hm?”

“Try to enjoy it.”

Taylor watched her best friend weave through the tables and out into the afternoon light. The door swung shut, the bell gave a cheerful ring, and Taylor drew a slow breath. She pressed her palm flat over her pocket. Paper crinkled under her fingers.

Cute, Emma had said.

It was more than cute. It was a beginning.

“Order up,” Jenna called from the counter.

Taylor slipped back into the rhythm of the café with a smile that didn’t feel borrowed. As she poured a cappuccino and slid it onto a saucer, she let herself imagine who her secret admirer might be.

* * *

The café bell jingled as the last customer of the evening left, bundled against the February chill. Taylor locked the door behind them, pressing her palm against the glass for a moment before flipping the sign to Closed. The silence that followed was like a long exhale.

She turned back to the counter and surveyed the mess. Plates stacked in the bus bin. Coffee rings staining the wood. Crumbs littering the floor. A mountain of dishes waiting in the sink. Closing time was always the same, a little exhausting and a little soothing.

She rolled up her sleeves and got to work.

It took her an hour to wipe down the tables, run the dishwasher, count the register, and sweep the floor. Her muscles ached, and the smell of espresso clung to her sweater, but she didn’t mind. There was comfort in the rhythm of it. Comfort in knowing that when the lights went out, the café would be spotless and ready for another day.

By the time she slung her bag over her shoulder and flicked off the overhead lights, the only glow came from the string bulbs along the front

windows. She stepped outside, locked the door with a practiced twist, and stuffed the keys into her pocket. The street was quiet, the cold air sharp enough to sting her nose.

Then she saw him.

Ryan Carter, leaning casually against the lamppost near the corner.

Taylor froze, hand still on her bag strap. "What are you doing here?"

He pushed off the post with an easy grin. "Waiting for you."

"Why?"

"To walk you home." His tone was matter-of-fact, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Taylor shook her head. "I told you, I don't need an escort."

"And I told you, it isn't safe for you to walk alone at night." He shrugged, slipping his hands into his coat pockets. "Humor me."

She sighed, fighting the urge to argue. He looked annoyingly confident, standing there like he had all the time in the world. And truthfully, the quiet street did feel colder, darker, more isolated than usual.

"Fine," she said, starting down the sidewalk. "But only because I don't feel like wasting breath convincing you to leave."

He fell into step beside her, his stride easy. "You always were stubborn."

Taylor glanced at him. "And you always were bossy."

"Somebody had to keep you and Emma from getting yourselves killed."

The corner of her mouth tugged upward despite herself. "Oh, please. We were fine."

"Fine?" Ryan laughed. "You climbed onto the roof of the shed to prove you could fly. Emma tied a blanket around your shoulders and told you to jump."

Taylor groaned. "I was eight. And it was her idea."

"You jumped, Taylor."

"I sprained my ankle. That hardly counts as reckless."

He shot her a look. "You bounced off the grass like a rag doll. I had to carry you inside while you screamed that you were dying."

Taylor covered her face with one hand, laughing despite the flush creeping into her cheeks. "I forgot about that."

"I didn't." Ryan's smile softened. "You were a handful."

She lowered her hand, meeting his gaze. For a moment, something unspoken passed between them, warm and oddly fragile. She looked away quickly, focusing on the icy sidewalk ahead.

“Do you remember the lemonade stand?” she asked, her voice lighter. “We made two dollars, and Emma spent it all on candy cigarettes.”

Ryan snorted. “And you tried to resell the candy cigarettes to the neighbor kids for double the price.”

Taylor grinned. “Entrepreneurial spirit.”

“Scam artist.”

“Same thing.”

Their laughter drifted into the night, mingling with the crunch of their boots against the pavement. The silence that followed was comfortable this time, filled with memories that wrapped around them like an old blanket.

As they turned the corner onto her street, Ryan glanced sideways at her. “Are you going to Emma’s for dinner this weekend?”

Taylor nodded. “She invited me yesterday. Said it’s the big family dinner. I’m bringing dessert.”

“Good. I’ll see you there.” He paused, his voice quieter now. “She’ll like having both of us around. Like old times.”

Taylor’s chest tightened. The thought of sitting around Emma’s crowded table, laughing and sharing stories, sounded nice. Dangerous, but nice.

They reached her apartment building, the small brick complex with peeling paint and a squeaky front door. She stopped at the steps, turning to face him.

“Well,” she said, clutching her bag strap. “Thanks for the walk. Even though it was unnecessary.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, smile tugging at his lips.

For a heartbeat, they stood there in the cold, streetlight pooling around them. Taylor’s breath fogged in the air, and Ryan’s gaze lingered on her just long enough to make her pulse quicken.

Then he nodded, stepping back. “Goodnight, Taylor.”

She swallowed. “Goodnight.”

He walked away, his figure fading into the shadows of the quiet street. Taylor stood there until he disappeared, her chest humming with an ache she didn’t want to name.

When she finally unlocked her door and stepped inside, she leaned back against the wood, heart pounding. The apartment was as quiet as always, but it felt different somehow. Lighter.

She pressed her hand to her pocket, where the bookmark still waited, and let herself smile in the dark.

She reached for the lock on the screen door, but something caught her eye.

A folded note had been slipped between the frame and the mesh. It fluttered faintly in the draft as though waiting for her. There was something attached to it.

Her pulse stuttered. Slowly, carefully, she tugged it free.

This time, it wasn't just a note. A pen was clipped neatly to the paper. A sleek, expensive-looking fountain pen in deep navy, the exact shade of ink she always used when she journaled. She uncapped it with trembling fingers and swiped the tip across her thumb. A streak of purple-blue shimmered there, familiar and startling.

Her throat went dry.

Attached to the pen was a sticky note, square and simple, but the words hit her harder than anything so far.

Don't stop writing, even when no one is looking.

Taylor sat down hard on the arm of the couch, note and pen clutched in her hands. Her heart thudded in her ears.

How could anyone know?

Her writing was her secret. She scribbled on pages stuffed in notebooks she never left lying around. She had guarded that part of herself for years, convinced that if anyone found out, they'd laugh.

And yet here it was. Proof that someone not only knew but cared enough to remind her to keep going.

She stared at the elegant swirl of ink across her thumb, emotions knotting in her chest. A mix of awe and dread and something far more dangerous.

Hope.

"Who are you?" she whispered into the empty room.

The silence didn't answer, but the pen gleamed in her hand, heavy and solid, as if it had always belonged to her.

Taylor set the sticky note on the coffee table, uncapped the pen again, and pulled one of her journals from the shelf. The words spilled onto the page before she could stop them. Not a story, not a draft, just a raw flood of thoughts.

Someone sees me. Someone knows.

Her chest ached, but she kept writing until her hand cramped. The pen glided smooth and effortless, like it was made for her.

When she finally set it down, exhaustion wrapped around her, but the fear of invisibility didn't feel quite so sharp anymore.

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Chapter 6

Ryan

Ryan balanced the pie dish in one hand as he climbed Emma's front steps, his other hand buried in his coat pocket against the February chill. The dish was still warm from the oven, thanks to his mother's insistence. She had pressed it into his hands earlier that afternoon with a knowing smile and the comment, "At least bring something so you don't look like a stray dog showing up for scraps."

The smell of cinnamon and apples seeped through the foil. Comforting. Familiar.

But Ryan still felt strangely out of place. This house, with its tidy shutters and cheerful porch light, had been his sister's home for years now. A part of him felt like a visitor, a man passing through, not someone who belonged to the chaos inside. Still, the sounds drifting from the kitchen—the laughter, clinking dishes, Emma's voice calling for someone to set the salad on the table—pulled at something deep in his chest.

He braced himself, knocked once, and stepped in.

Warmth and noise hit him immediately. Coats hung crookedly on hooks by the door, the baby's toys scattered across the living room rug, the scent of garlic bread wafting from the kitchen. For a moment, Ryan let it wash over him, reminding himself he could do this. He could face chatter, teasing, family noise. It wasn't gunfire, not desert heat. Just dinner.

He moved toward the kitchen, setting the pie on the counter, and that was when he saw her.

Taylor.

She stood by the table with Emma, smoothing a tablecloth and balancing Emma's baby on one hip like it was the most natural thing in the world. Her hair was pulled back in a loose knot, strands slipping around her face. The soft light from the chandelier brushed over her skin, and Ryan's chest tightened.

She looked at home here. Effortless. Like she belonged in this house, in this family.

Except she didn't see it. He could tell by the way she hovered at the edge, helping but not claiming space, always ready to fade into the background. She laughed at something Emma said, quick and bright, but Ryan caught the way her eyes darted toward the floor, as if making sure she wasn't in the way.

Nostalgia tugged at him. She had always been around, woven into their childhood like an extra thread. The third musketeer to him and Emma. Except to him, she had never been just Emma's friend. Not really.

"Ryan!" Emma spotted him and grinned. "Good, you brought the pie. Mom will be thrilled. She already made brownies, but you know she likes to feed us until we can't move."

Ryan leaned against the counter, slipping back into the role of big brother with practiced ease. "You're lucky. If I had baked it, we'd all be at the emergency room."

"Truth," Emma said, smirking.

Their mom swept in just then, apron dusted with flour. "Stop pretending, Ryan. You can boil pasta and fry eggs. That's practically gourmet in some places."

Taylor laughed softly, adjusting the baby. The sound hit Ryan low in the chest, like an echo from another life.

Dinner gathered momentum quickly, voices overlapping, dishes passing from hand to hand. Ryan found himself seated across from Taylor at the long dining table, the clatter of silverware and the scent of roasted chicken filling the air.

"Ryan," his mother said halfway through, her eyes sparkling. "Now that you're back, maybe you can finally think about settling down. It would be nice to see you with someone at this table next year."

Heat prickled the back of his neck. He opened his mouth to deflect, but before he could, Emma jumped in.

“And Taylor too,” Emma teased. “She’s been our honorary Carter forever, but she never brings a date either.”

The table chuckled. Taylor smiled, rolling her eyes as she speared a piece of broccoli. “What can I say? I prefer your family’s cooking to awkward small talk with strangers.”

Laughter rippled around the table, but Ryan saw the flicker in her eyes, the faint stiffening of her shoulders. She had laughed it off, but not comfortably.

Something protective stirred in him, sharp and unexpected. “Or maybe she just has better taste than the rest of us,” he said easily, setting his fork down. “Why waste time on bad dates when you can have chicken this good?”

That earned another round of laughter, and the spotlight shifted. But Taylor’s gaze flicked to him briefly, surprise softening her features before she looked down at her plate again.

Ryan took a sip of water to cover the tightness in his chest. He hadn’t planned on stepping in. But watching her shrink under the attention had twisted something in him, and deflecting the teasing felt like the only thing to do.

Conversation flowed easily as everyone reached for seconds. Ryan leaned back, letting the rhythm of family chatter wash over him. He was halfway through another piece of chicken when Emma’s voice cut through the noise.

“So,” Emma said, eyes twinkling. “Tell me, Taylor, how’s your secret admirer treating you these days?”

Ryan nearly choked on his water.

Taylor froze, fork suspended midair. “Emma.”

Emma grinned. “What? You told me about the notes. Don’t act like this isn’t the most interesting thing happening in town right now.”

The table went quiet for a beat, then their mother gasped. “Secret admirer? Taylor, you didn’t say anything about that when you helped me with the brownies earlier.”

Taylor sighed, setting her fork down. “Because it’s not a big deal.”

“Not a big deal?” Emma scoffed. “Someone is leaving her handwritten clues, people. Actual clues. Like a Hallmark movie, but without the snow.”

Laughter rippled down the table. Their father chuckled, shaking his head. "I like this already. Did he leave flowers too, or is he easing into it?"

Taylor groaned, covering her face with one hand. "I should never have told you anything."

"Too late," Emma sing-songed. "This is family dinner. We share everything."

Ryan watched Taylor's cheeks flush pink, her lips twitching between annoyance and reluctant amusement. Something about the way she tried to shrink into herself made his jaw tighten again. He hated how easily she brushed off attention, as though she wasn't worth being fussed over.

"Do you have another note?" Emma pressed, leaning forward. "Come on, show us. You brought it, didn't you?"

Taylor hesitated, then reached into her bag at her feet. She pulled out a folded piece of paper, cheeks pinker than ever. "Fine. But only because you won't shut up until I do."

Emma snatched it the second it touched the table and read aloud in a dramatic voice.

"To see the world as you dream it, you must first stand where the sky feels close. Follow the path you've walked since childhood to your favorite lookout point. The next clue waits where the horizon touches the trees."

"Ooooh," Emma said, waving the paper like a flag. "Romantic. Very romantic."

Taylor rolled her eyes, but a small smile tugged at her mouth. "I don't know what I'll find there, but this has definitely been fun."

Ryan blurted out the words before he could think it through. "You're not going up there alone."

The table went still.

Taylor blinked. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me." Ryan set his fork down, leaning forward. "If some guy is luring you to an isolated spot in the mountains, I'm going with you."

Emma snorted. "Ryan, it's not a crime scene. It's a crush."

"Or a creep," Ryan shot back. "Do you know how easy it is for predators to hide behind cute notes? All he has to do is get her somewhere out of the way—"

Their mother swatted his arm with her napkin. "Ryan Carter, stop scaring her. Taylor is not being hunted by a serial killer."

Their father chuckled. "He's got a point though. The woods can be dangerous."

"Not helping," Taylor muttered.

Emma shook her head. "Ryan, you're overreacting. This is sweet. Whoever this is clearly knows her well. Nobody's dragging her into the woods with candy hearts. Besides, what if the guy is hiding somewhere to see her reaction, and he sees her show up with you? Not cool."

Ryan crossed his arms, unamused. "You want her going up there by herself at night?"

"She's not helpless," Emma argued.

"I never said she was helpless," Ryan shot back. His voice was calm but firm. "I said I'm not letting her walk into a secluded area alone because some guy thinks cryptic notes are charming. Either I go with her, or she doesn't go."

The whole table erupted at once.

"You're ridiculous," Emma said, laughing.

"Bossy as ever," their mother added, rolling her eyes.

Taylor threw up her hands. "I've been walking around this town alone for years. I think I can handle a hiking trail."

"Not at night you can't," Ryan said.

"Then I won't go at night."

"Serial killers strike during the day too." He set his chin stubbornly.

"Listen to yourself," Emma said between laughs. "This isn't a mission. It's a mountain with a bench."

Ryan didn't flinch. "And benches are where creeps wait."

Taylor stared at him, half exasperated, half amused. "You really think my admirer is some kind of criminal mastermind?"

Ryan arched a brow. "Do you know who he is?"

"No," she admitted.

"Then yes. Until we know otherwise, he's a potential creep."

The family howled with laughter again.

"Once a big brother, always a big brother," Emma's dad said.

Ryan held Taylor's gaze, steady.

Taylor sighed, throwing her napkin on her plate. "Fine. But only because you're unbearable."

"Good," Ryan said, sitting back with satisfaction. "We'll go tomorrow during your lunch break."

Emma leaned toward Taylor and whispered loudly enough for everyone to hear, “If the guy ends up being there and tries to kiss you, just have Ryan take pictures for posterity’s sake.”

“If some unknown creep tries to lay a big wet one on our Taylor, his fist will meet my face.” Ryan said it with deadly calm.

Taylor buried her face in her hands while the family roared with laughter, and Ryan bit back his own smile. Protective or not, he couldn’t deny one thing.

He was looking forward to tomorrow.

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Chapter 7

Taylor

Taylor was halfway through reorganizing the pastry case for the afternoon rush when the café bell chimed. She glanced up, already rehearsing a greeting, but the words stuck in her throat.

Ryan Carter leaned against the counter with that infuriatingly calm smile, like he hadn't thrown down a gauntlet in front of her entire extended family two nights ago. He was dressed in hiking boots, cargo pants, and a flannel rolled at the sleeves, a backpack slung easily over one shoulder.

Her heart gave a traitorous kick.

"You're late," she said, mostly to cover the way her palms went damp.

"It's noon exactly," he replied, glancing at the clock behind her. "And you're stalling."

She huffed. "I wasn't stalling. I was working."

Ryan tipped his head toward the door. "You ready?"

Taylor grabbed her jacket, feeling both cornered and oddly relieved. The truth was she had been thinking about this hike all morning, nerves tangling with a fizz of excitement she refused to admit aloud. "Fine. Let's go."

The drive to the mountains took less than twenty minutes, but every second stretched. Ryan's truck smelled faintly of leather and pine, and the hum of the engine filled the space between them. She stared out the window at the bare February trees whipping past, determined not to notice the way his hand rested casually on the gearshift, strong and steady.

“So,” he said after a while, “any theories on your secret admirer?”

Taylor crossed her arms. “Plenty. All of them bad.”

“Bad how?”

“Like maybe it’s a prank. Or maybe it’s someone who doesn’t actually know me at all and just got lucky with the clues.”

Ryan glanced at her, amused. “That’s what you’re going with? A lucky stalker?”

“I didn’t say stalker.”

“You thought it.” His grin tugged at her. “I still say I’m right. This is someone who knows you well. Too well. An unhinged stalker who has finally made his move.”

She bristled. “You are not helping.”

“Look, I don’t mean to ruin the romance, but I’ve seen too many situations where women get tricked by someone who pays a little too much attention.”

Taylor rolled her eyes, though her chest pinched at the seriousness in his tone. “You really can’t let yourself enjoy a mystery, can you?”

He shot her a sidelong look. “Not when it involves you heading into the woods alone with a stranger waiting.”

Her cheeks warmed, though she fought to keep her voice breezy. “So that’s why you packed half a sporting goods store?”

Ryan smirked but didn’t answer, and she bit back a laugh.

By the time they pulled into the trailhead parking lot, the air had shifted, crisp and tinged with evergreen. Taylor inhaled deeply, nerves settling a little. She had come up here dozens of times over the years, sometimes with Emma, sometimes by herself. The lookout point had always been her place to breathe, to write in her journal without anyone looking over her shoulder.

She wasn’t prepared for how it felt to climb out of the truck and see Ryan already pulling a backpack onto his shoulders, steady and capable, like he belonged here as much as she did.

“You’re ridiculous,” she said as he handed her a walking stick he’d apparently stashed in the back.

“You’ll thank me when the trail gets icy,” he said.

She took it, muttering under her breath. “Bossy.”

“Prepared,” he corrected. His eyes glinted. “Big difference.”

The hike started in silence, their boots crunching over gravel and leaves. The bare branches overhead let winter sunlight spill onto the path,

flickering across Ryan's broad shoulders. Taylor tried not to notice. Tried not to let her gaze linger on the easy way he moved, like every step was second nature.

"You used to drag Emma and me up here every summer," he said after a while, voice thoughtful.

Taylor smiled despite herself. "She complained the whole way. You bribed her with granola bars."

"I bribed you too," he reminded her. "You nearly fainted from heat exhaustion once."

"Dramatic," she said, laughing. "I was fine."

"You were twelve. You got halfway up and declared yourself a martyr."

Taylor's laughter echoed through the trees, bright and sharp. She covered her mouth, but it kept spilling out. "I did not."

"You did," he said, grinning. "I carried your bag the rest of the way while you lectured me about how unfair life was."

Taylor shook her head, smiling as warmth spread through her chest. She had forgotten that day, but now the memory tugged at her, vivid and bittersweet. Ryan had always been there, teasing but steady, the one who made sure she and Emma didn't roll down the mountain or forget their water bottles.

They walked for a while in companionable silence, the kind that felt like slipping back into an old rhythm. Taylor let her gaze wander up through the trees, where the sky stretched pale blue. She thought about the note folded in her pocket, the promise of something waiting at the top, and her stomach fluttered.

"You're quiet," Ryan said, glancing at her.

She shrugged. "Just thinking."

"About what?"

"About who could possibly think leading me on a scavenger hunt was a good idea."

His mouth quirked. "Seems to be working."

Taylor narrowed her eyes. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're smiling."

She quickly wiped the smile off her face, heat prickling her neck. "I am not."

"Sure," he said, but the grin tugging at his mouth betrayed his amusement.

The trail steepened, and they fell into a rhythm of breath and movement. Taylor's legs burned, but she refused to complain. If Ryan noticed, he didn't comment, though at one point he reached out and steadied her elbow when her boot slipped on a patch of ice. The touch sent a jolt through her, and she pulled away quickly, muttering thanks.

Taylor's legs were burning by the time they crested the last incline, but she kept her pace even, determined not to give Ryan the satisfaction of hearing her huff and puff. He hadn't broken a sweat, which was both irritating and unfair.

The trees opened suddenly, and there it was: her lookout point. The valley spread wide and endless beneath them, streaks of silver water winding between bare trees, the horizon layered in shades of blue and gray. Even in February, it felt timeless, like the mountains were holding their breath.

Taylor slowed, chest aching for reasons that had nothing to do with the climb. She'd always come here when she needed quiet. It was her place to breathe, her place to write when the world felt too heavy. Now she was sharing it, not with her admirer, but with Ryan.

"Well," Ryan said, scanning the area, "let's see what your mystery man left for you this time."

Taylor moved to the old wooden bench. Her fingers trembled as she reached underneath, half-expecting to find nothing. But there it was: a note taped neatly to the underside, a small velvet pouch tied to it with string.

Her heart kicked. She pulled it free and sat on the bench, unfolding the paper.

"Even the strongest roots need a reminder of how far they've come. Carry this with you, and remember you're braver than you believe."

Taylor untied the pouch. Inside was a smooth river stone, polished until it gleamed, with a tiny star carved into the surface. She traced the etched lines with her thumb, a lump forming in her throat.

"It's a perfect skipping stone," she said. "I always complained I couldn't find the right one, and Emma always told me I was just being a poor sport because I couldn't skip my rock as far as you guys could." Taylor let out a chuckle.

"What's with the star on it?" Ryan asked.

"The north star. Remember how I always talked about true north and argued that your stupid compass was broken?"

Ryan chuckled. "You got lost all the time out here and always blamed it on that compass."

He stuck out his hand, and she handed him the stone. He analyzed it, turning it over. Then he scanned the tree line with sharp, assessing eyes.

Taylor frowned. "What are you doing?"

"Waiting for him to make his appearance," Ryan said flatly. "Besides, who gives a girl a rock, anyway?"

She blinked. "You're ruining this beautiful moment for me."

His gaze swept the shadows, shoulders tense. "If he knows your routines this well, he could be watching. And if he's smart enough to plan this whole hunt, he's smart enough to keep his distance until he sees how you react."

Taylor laughed, but it came out a little shaky. "I'm pretty sure he isn't hiding behind a tree with binoculars."

Ryan glanced at her, expression dead serious. "You don't know that."

She sighed, tucking the stone into her pocket. "And here I thought you were going to let me enjoy this without turning it into a criminal investigation."

"Better safe than sorry," he said, sitting back down. He met her eyes, and the edge of humor finally slipped in. "Well, looks like I scared the stalker off. Guess it's safe enough to eat lunch."

Taylor's lips twitched. "Lunch?"

Ryan shrugged off his pack, pulling out a folded blanket, foil-wrapped sandwiches, and a thermos. "What? You thought I'd drag you up here without food?"

She blinked, caught between laughter and disbelief. "You're unbelievable. You didn't drag me up here. I dragged you."

"And look who came prepared," he said, laying out the sandwiches.

Taylor shook her head, but when he handed her one of the warm foil packets, she took it. The bread was crusty, the cheese melted, the kind of simple comfort that tasted like heaven after a climb.

For a while, they ate in silence, gazes drifting out over the valley. The wind tugged at her hair, and Ryan poured hot chocolate from the thermos, passing her a steaming cup.

"Remember when Emma pretended she was going to run away to these mountains?" Taylor said finally, her voice lighter. "She packed a duffel with Pop-Tarts and comic books and made it as far as your front yard."

Ryan laughed, a low rumble in his chest. "She was seven. She thought she could survive on sugar and Spider-Man."

"She would've tried," Taylor said, smiling.

He leaned back on the bench, stretching his long legs out. "You followed her everywhere back then."

"She's my best friend," Taylor said.

"And you're hers," Ryan said quietly.

Taylor glanced at him, caught by the warmth in his voice. For a moment, neither of them looked away. Then Ryan cleared his throat, breaking the spell.

"Do you remember when you brought that notebook up here and wouldn't let either of us read it?" he asked.

Her cheeks warmed. "I was twelve."

"You glared at me like I'd asked for state secrets."

Taylor laughed, shaking her head. "I still have that notebook. It's terrible."

"Bet it isn't," Ryan said, sipping his hot chocolate. "What was in it?"

Her stomach flipped. She could still picture the cover: pink and glittery with a broken spiral binding, pages stuffed with ink-blotted hearts and overwrought dialogue. A story that was half-fantasy, half wish-fulfillment. A story about a girl who got swept away by a boy who looked a lot like him.

Absolutely not. He could never know.

Taylor forced a shrug. "Just stories. Nothing special."

"Come on." His eyes narrowed, amused. "You're still deflecting. If it was nothing, you wouldn't be acting like I just asked for nuclear codes."

Heat crawled up her neck. "Maybe I was writing about unicorns."

"Unicorns, huh?" His grin widened. "That explains the death glare when I tried to peek. You were protecting state secrets about rainbow horses."

"Exactly." She lifted her chin, daring him to challenge it.

Ryan chuckled, shaking his head. "You were always dramatic."

Taylor managed a laugh, though her pulse still raced. Dramatic was safer than the truth. If he ever found out she'd filled pages dreaming about him older, unattainable, infuriatingly handsome Ryan Carter, she would never live it down.

He leaned back on the bench, still smirking. "One day you'll tell me."

"Don't hold your breath," she muttered, taking another sip.

But even as she tried to steer the conversation away, the star-carved stone in her pocket felt heavier, like it knew she was lying.

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Chapter 8

Ryan

Ryan woke before dawn, staring at the ceiling of his rental apartment, listening to the old radiator clank and hiss like it was arguing with itself. He had hoped exhaustion would finally catch up with him, but instead his mind wouldn't let him rest. It kept circling back to yesterday.

Not the hike. Not the view, though the sweep of mountains and the pale winter sky had been something out of a postcard. No, what kept him awake was Taylor.

Her hair loose in the wind, cheeks flushed from the climb, eyes bright as she turned that small stone over in her palm like it was treasure.

She'd clutched it as though someone had given her a crown, not a simple polished rock. And the look on her face...it had hit him low in the chest, left him unsettled.

He dragged a hand down his face, groaning softly. This was exactly why he'd stayed away so long. She had always been too much—too stubborn, too smart, too sure of what she wanted, even as a kid. And now? Now she wasn't a kid. Now she was a woman with a laugh that still knocked him sideways and a smile she tried to hide when she thought no one was looking.

That laugh. He'd replayed it a dozen times in the dark. It had lodged under his skin, familiar but changed, like hearing a favorite song in a new key.

And then there was the notebook.

When he'd asked what she'd been writing all those years ago, she'd dodged him with a story about unicorns. He hadn't bought it for a second. Taylor never lied well. She got shifty-eyed and clipped her words, the way she had on the bench yesterday.

Which meant whatever she had written mattered. Which meant it was something she still didn't want him to know.

Ryan turned over, punching the pillow, but it didn't help. The questions just crowded closer. Why was she hiding? What was she afraid he'd see? And why the hell did it matter so much to him now?

Because you can't seem to stay away, a traitorous voice supplied.

He sat up abruptly, scrubbing his hands through his hair. Fine. He couldn't stay away. He didn't want to. The scavenger hunt was still going, and if she thought he was going to let her wander into another secluded spot alone, she was out of her mind.

Ryan swung his legs over the edge of the bed and reached for his jeans, pulling them on without bothering about the cold floor. He told himself it was about safety, about caution, about common sense. But even as he jammed his arms through his jacket, he knew better.

It wasn't just about the notes.

It was about Taylor.

And the fact that every time he closed his eyes, he saw her on that mountain, hair wild, cheeks flushed, fingers wrapped tight around something that had been left just for her.

Ryan grabbed his keys and headed for the door. He needed coffee, sure. But mostly, he needed to see her.

The bell over the café door jingled as Ryan stepped inside, shaking the cold from his shoulders. The place smelled like coffee beans, sugar, and something faintly citrusy from the soaps Taylor sold at the counter. Today, though, there was something different.

Taylor was behind the register, handing a cup to a regular, and she was smiling. Not the polite little curve she usually gave customers, not the dry smirk she saved for him, but a wide, unguarded grin that lit her whole face.

Ryan stopped mid-step. He hadn't seen her smile like that in years.

Something was definitely up.

When she spotted him, her grin faltered into something smaller, but it didn't disappear. She waved him over with a flick of her wrist.

“You’re here early,” she said once the last customer moved off with their latte.

“You’re in a good mood,” Ryan countered, narrowing his eyes.

She bit her lip like she was trying not to laugh, then reached under the counter and pulled out a folded slip of paper. She smoothed it flat on the wood and slid it toward him like it was contraband.

Another note.

Ryan leaned in to read.

“Some stories never make it to the shelves, but they still matter. Look where forgotten words are kept, and you’ll find the next chapter waiting.”

Then she pointed to an image of the local library on the note. Taylor’s eyes sparkled as she looked up at him. “It’s the library basement. The archives.”

Ryan groaned. “The archives? You’ve got to be kidding me.”

She laughed, low and bright. “Why do you sound like I just got drafted for jury duty? I worked a part-time job down there in high school. Don’t you remember?”

“Basements are where horror movies begin, Taylor.” He tapped the note with one blunt finger. “You’re not going down there alone. I’m going with you.”

Her shoulders shook with laughter. “You really think my secret admirer is hiding out in the library basement with a chainsaw?”

Ryan gave her a flat look. “Don’t joke. You don’t know who this guy is. All you know is he keeps leading you into isolated places and leaving gifts.”

She leaned her elbows on the counter, smiling like she knew exactly how to push his buttons. “And all I know is you keep showing up to play bodyguard. Again.”

Ryan didn’t blink. “That’s right. Again.”

Taylor shook her head, still smiling. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Prepared,” he shot back automatically.

Her laugh broke free, soft and infectious. “Fine. If it’ll help you sleep at night, you can come, but you’re ruining any chance I might have of getting swept off my feet and thoroughly kissed by my secret admirer.”

“I’m willing to risk it.”

Ryan didn’t say it, but the truth was, he didn’t intend for anyone to sweep Taylor off her feet but him.

Yeah. He wasn't about to let her go to the library archives without him.

"Fine. Meet me this evening at the library entrance at seven. Don't be late or I'm going in without you."

* * *

By the time the sun dipped behind the rooftops, Ryan was already restless again. He met Taylor outside the library, bundled in her jacket, cheeks pink from the cold. She jingled a small key in her gloved hand, eyes glinting with mischief.

"You still have a key?" Ryan asked, incredulous.

Taylor grinned. "Perks of working here during college. Technically, I was supposed to return it when I quit, but they forgot, and I... didn't remind them."

Ryan shook his head. "So we're breaking and entering now."

"We're not breaking. We're entering." She fit the key into the lock with a satisfying click. "And it's not a crime if it's for love."

Ryan muttered something under his breath but followed her in, his flashlight already in hand. The library was dark, hushed in a way that felt heavier than daytime silence. Their footsteps echoed too loud against the tile as the door clicked shut behind them.

Taylor looked back, her smile still teasing. "You okay? You're gripping that flashlight like it's a weapon."

"It is a weapon," Ryan said. "If anything jumps out, I'm taking it down."

Taylor snorted. "Like who? The ghost of Dewey Decimal?"

They made their way down the main aisle, the shelves looming like shadowy guardians. Dust motes drifted in the thin stripes of moonlight cutting through the high windows. Ryan kept scanning the corners, half-expecting to see someone lurking.

When they reached the narrow door to the basement, Taylor pulled the key again and pushed it open. The scent of old paper and damp stone rushed up at them. The staircase creaked beneath their boots as they descended.

Ryan swung the flashlight beam across rows of metal shelving, boxes stacked high, a few old tables with broken legs shoved against the wall. "This is it? This is where forgotten stories go to die?"

Taylor grinned. "Romantic, isn't it?"

"Creepy," Ryan corrected. He moved ahead of her automatically, the beam cutting a path. "Stay behind me."

"Bossy," she murmured, but she stayed close.

They moved slowly down the rows, Taylor's fingers trailing the edges of dusty boxes. Ryan tried to keep his breathing even, but the air was heavy with mildew and age. The silence pressed in, broken only by the squeak of a distant pipe.

Then came the noise.

A sharp rustle from the far corner. Ryan froze, flashlight jerking toward the sound. "Did you hear that?"

Taylor stiffened. "Maybe just—"

Another rustle, louder this time. Something clattered to the floor.

Ryan shoved Taylor gently behind him, every muscle taut. "Stay here."

"Ryan—"

He ignored her and edged forward, flashlight slicing through the shadows. The beam landed on a pair of glowing eyes.

Ryan swore.

A raccoon blinked at him from atop a stack of newspapers, one paw buried in an open box. It hissed, unimpressed, before scurrying into the dark.

Taylor burst out laughing. She doubled over, hand braced on her knee, her laughter echoing wildly through the basement. "You—you were ready to fight a raccoon!"

Ryan turned, scowling, but his ears burned. "That thing could've been dangerous."

"It was looking for snacks." She wiped at her eyes, still grinning. "Big bad Marine, defeated by a raccoon."

Ryan tried to hold his glare, but the sound of her laughter softened him against his will. He shook his head and muttered, "One day, you're going to thank me for being paranoid."

She straightened, still smiling, and pointed. "Look."

Tucked onto one of the shelves, resting on a pile of forgotten ledgers, was a small leather journal. The cover was supple and worn, the kind of thing someone would pick out carefully. A thin ribbon tied it closed.

Taylor reached for it reverently, brushing away dust. Her breath caught as she opened the cover.

Inside, in the same neat handwriting, was the message:

Fill this with the stories you're too afraid to tell.

Her lips parted. She ran her hand over the page, eyes shining in the dim light. For a moment, she looked utterly undone, as if someone had reached

into her chest and pulled out a secret she hadn't shared with anyone.

Ryan watched her, a strange ache settling in his chest.

He swallowed. "What kind of stories?"

Taylor blinked, tucking the journal against her chest. "Nothing important."

"You're lying."

"I'm not."

Ryan stepped closer, flashlight beam lowering. "You've been writing since you were a kid. You think I didn't notice the way you hoarded notebooks like gold? You used to bite my head off if I even tried to look."

She gave him a small, defiant smile. "I was writing about unicorns. Remember?"

He snorted. "Right."

Her smile widened, but it didn't reach her eyes. She wasn't going to tell him, not tonight. Ryan let it go, but her unwillingness to open up gnawed at him. He knew her better than she thought, but getting her to trust him with things she kept close to the vest was becoming his favorite challenge.

Taylor broke the silence with a laugh, lighter now. "Well, good news. No stalker. Just one raccoon with a taste for vintage newspapers."

Ryan shook his head, fighting a smile. "I still say it had murder in its eyes."

She tucked the journal into her bag, looking lighter than she had when they walked in. "Thank you for coming, Ryan."

He glanced at her, surprised. "You thought I wouldn't?"

"I thought you'd tease me the whole time."

"I did," he pointed out.

She laughed again, and the sound filled the basement, chasing away the last of the shadows.

Ryan adjusted the flashlight, leading her back toward the stairs, but his thoughts stayed tangled. Because the real danger wasn't the raccoon, or even a mystery admirer.

The real danger was that every time Taylor smiled, every time she clutched one of those gifts like it mattered more than anything, Ryan wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss her like he'd wanted to when she was just a teenager.

And he wasn't sure how much longer he could keep pretending otherwise.

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Chapter 9

Taylor

The night air was crisp as they stepped out of the library, their breath fogging in the glow of the streetlights. Ryan still carried the flashlight, even though the streets were quiet, and when Taylor teased him about it, he only grunted, scanning the shadows like danger might spring from behind a mailbox.

She hugged the journal close to her chest, the leather warm from her hands. “You don’t have to walk me home, you know.”

“Yeah, I do.” His tone left no room for argument.

They fell into step together, boots crunching over patches of ice on the sidewalk. For a while, silence stretched between them, but Taylor’s thoughts were buzzing too loud. He hadn’t just shown up at the café this morning. He hadn’t just gone into the creepy archives with her. He had been... there. Consistently. And she couldn’t help but wonder why.

She glanced at him, his jaw hard, eyes trained on the road ahead. “Ryan,” she said softly, “why did you really come back home?”

His stride faltered for half a beat, then picked back up. He didn’t answer right away. Finally, he blew out a breath, the sound rough in the cold. “An operation went wrong. My call. People got hurt. My men...” His voice caught, and he shook his head. “I can’t go back to that. Can’t be the one calling the shots anymore.”

Taylor’s chest tightened. She slowed, searching his face. “Ryan...”

He shrugged, shoulders broad and tired. "My enlistment ended, and I didn't sign up again. Didn't matter how many times they asked. I needed out. I thought coming home might help me figure out what's next."

Taylor pressed the journal against her heart. "You've always been good at leading people. Maybe you just need to do it in a way that doesn't break you."

He gave a short, humorless laugh. "You make it sound simple."

"It isn't," she admitted. "But you can't keep hiding from what you love, Ryan. If calling the shots used to mean something to you, then find a new way to do it. Something that makes you feel alive again."

As they reached her front porch, he glanced at her then, eyes sharp, almost searching. And then he said, quietly, "Funny. That's exactly what you should be telling yourself."

Taylor blinked. "What do you mean?"

"You're a published author, Taylor. Why are you hiding it like it's a dirty secret?"

Her heart stopped. The journal nearly slipped from her grip. "How—"

"I've read your books," Ryan said simply. "Every one of them."

Her knees went weak, and she had to grab the front porch rail for support. "You...you have not."

He met her stunned expression with maddening calm. "I have. And you're good. Better than good. You've got a gift, and instead of owning it, you publish under a pen name and pretend it doesn't exist."

Taylor's mouth opened and closed, but no words came out. No one knew. Not even Emma.

Ryan's mouth quirked, the ghost of a grin. "My favorite was the one about the girl in love with her best friend's brother."

Her breath caught. Heat flooded her face.

"Any chance that was about me?" The teasing, challenging edge to his voice left her trembling.

"Why...why would you think it was about you?"

Ryan's gaze darkened, unreadable. Then, without warning, he stepped forward, cupped her face in his hands, and kissed her.

The world tilted. His mouth was warm and fierce, stealing the breath from her lungs, sending a rush of heat through her veins. She clutched at his jacket, pulling him closer, and for one wild second, it felt like every buried wish she'd ever made was exploding into life.

When he finally pulled back, they were both breathing hard. His thumb brushed her cheek, lingering for one beat longer than necessary.

“Did you ever think that maybe I came back for you?” He kissed her gently this time, wrapping his arm around her waist and pulling her flush against him.

She let out a soft moan as she kissed him back. Enjoying the moment and wondering how her lifelong fantasy had just become a reality.

She nearly cried in protest when he pulled back, a satisfied smile on his face.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” he murmured, voice low and rough.

And just like that, he turned and strode down the street, leaving Taylor rooted to the spot, lips tingling, heart racing, clutching her secret journal like it might anchor her to reality.

* * *

Taylor was useless with the pastry display. She’d dropped a muffin, nearly spilled a tray of scones, and spent the better part of three minutes staring at a cinnamon roll like it had personally wronged her.

All because of Ryan Carter.

Her lips still tingled. Her chest still ached with the memory of his mouth on hers, the way his hands had framed her face like she was something precious, something he couldn’t stop himself from touching. She’d barely slept, tossing and turning like a teenager after her first kiss. Except she wasn’t a teenager. And this wasn’t her first kiss.

But it felt like the first one that mattered.

The bell over the café door jingled, jolting her out of her daze. Emma breezed in with the stroller, juggling a diaper bag, her phone, and a pacifier in a way only Emma could. She spotted Taylor immediately, narrowed her eyes, and grinned.

“Well, well,” Emma said as she parked the stroller near the counter. “Somebody looks suspiciously... glowy this morning.”

Taylor blinked, heat rushing to her cheeks. “Glowy?”

Emma leaned on the counter, smirking. “Yes. Glowy. Giddy. Radiant. Like someone just got kissed under the mistletoe, except it’s February and you’re usually a Valentine’s Day grinch.”

Taylor fumbled with the pastry tongs, dropping another muffin. “I’m fine.”

Emma arched a brow. "Fine? You're practically floating. Normally this week you're sulky and snarky about heart-shaped chocolates. But right now you're humming."

Taylor froze. She had been humming. "I am not."

Emma grinned wider. "Oh, you definitely are. Spill it."

Taylor busied herself with arranging croissants, avoiding Emma's knowing gaze. "There's nothing to spill."

Emma tilted her head, eyes sharp. "Taylor Pierce, you've never been good at hiding anything from me. So who is he?"

Taylor swallowed hard, her heart racing. Her mind flashed to Ryan's mouth, Ryan's voice murmuring I'll see you tomorrow. She tried for casual, tried for deflection, but her smile betrayed her.

"No one," she said weakly.

Emma let out a triumphant laugh. "Oh, it's someone. And judging by that look on your face, it's not just anyone."

Taylor pressed her lips together, cheeks blazing. She wanted to tell her, to gush like they were teenagers again, but the words caught in her throat. How could she explain that it was Ryan without unraveling everything?

Before Emma could push further, a customer appeared at the counter, and Taylor gratefully turned to take the order, her heart still hammering.

But as she glanced out the window, she caught sight of Ryan leaning against his truck across the street, arms folded, watching the café like a man with a mission.

And her lips curved into a smile she couldn't contain.

Emma slid into a chair at the corner table once the baby settled, still watching Taylor with that insufferably knowing grin.

"So," Emma began, drawing out the word like she was savoring it, "is it anyone I know?"

Taylor carefully stacked napkins, keeping her eyes anywhere but on her best friend. "It's no one."

"Uh-huh." Emma tapped her chin, pretending to think. "Tall? Brooding? Ex-Marine with a bad habit of storming into your life?"

Taylor's head whipped around so fast she nearly gave herself whiplash. "What?"

Emma burst out laughing, clapping a hand over her mouth to keep from waking the baby. "Taylor, please. You've had a crush on my brother since you were ten. Did you really think I didn't notice?"

Heat seared Taylor's cheeks. "I—I did not—"

Emma arched a brow. "Give it up. I caught you doodling his name in your notebook once. And don't even get me started on the way you used to stare at him in high school."

Taylor was mortified. "That was years ago. Ancient history."

Emma leaned forward, whispering like she was letting Taylor in on a scandal. "So it is Ryan."

Taylor opened her mouth, ready to deny it again, but the bell over the café door jingled before she could get a word out.

Ryan strode in, sunlight at his back, like he owned the place. He spotted Emma first, gave her a nod, then crossed to the counter where Taylor stood frozen.

"Morning," he said casually, leaning an elbow on the counter. And before Taylor could even process, he bent down and kissed her. Not a quick brush of lips, but a warm, confident kiss that left her knees weak and the entire café buzzing.

When he straightened, Taylor's brain was scrambled eggs. Emma, however, looked like Christmas had come early.

"Oh. My. Gosh," Emma squealed, bouncing in her seat so hard she nearly jostled the stroller. "I knew it! I knew it was you two! This is the best day of my life."

Taylor sputtered, "Emma—"

"Nope. Don't even try. I am so telling Mom and Dad." Emma scooped up her diaper bag with terrifying efficiency. "Actually, I'm telling everyone. By dinner tonight, the entire Carter family will know that my best friend and my brother are finally making out like hormonal teenagers."

Ryan smirked, utterly unfazed. "Morning, sis."

Emma wagged a finger at him as she wheeled the stroller toward the door. "Don't you dare mess this up. She's family, Ryan. Family."

Taylor was still stuck somewhere between mortified and melting into a puddle behind the counter.

Emma grinned wickedly at her on the way out. "I told you you were glowing."

The bell jingled again as she left, her laughter trailing behind her like a victory song.

Taylor groaned and dropped her face into her hands. "I'm never living this down."

Ryan just chuckled, reached across the counter, and stole one of her muffins. “Told you I’d see you today.”

Taylor’s hands flew to her mouth. “Are you crazy? You can’t just kiss me in front of the whole town like that. There will be repercussions.”

Ryan leaned on the counter like he’d just ordered a latte, unbothered. “God, I hope so. If I openly stake my claim, then maybe your secret admirer will run away.”

Her jaw dropped. “Stake your claim? This isn’t medieval times! And hey —” she jabbed a finger at him “—I happen to like all the fun gifts I’m being given. What if he’s my soul mate and you’ve run him off?”

A throat cleared loudly behind them.

Taylor turned and found Mrs. Abernathy from the quilting circle standing there, arms crossed, glaring at Ryan like he’d just tracked mud across her best rug. “Young man, you do not stake claims on women. That’s barbaric.”

Ryan blinked. “I didn’t mean—”

“And you,” Mrs. Abernathy said, swiveling to Taylor, “soul mates don’t leave notes under café chairs like cowards. They bring flowers and pies and show up on your doorstep.”

“How did you know about the notes—”

“Unless,” Mrs. Abernathy added, lowering her voice like she was imparting state secrets, “Ryan is your soul mate, in which case you should keep the one who actually kisses you instead of the one hiding in basements.”

Taylor made a strangled noise. “What basements—?”

“I vote for Ryan!” called Mr. Nelson from the corner booth, not even looking up from his crossword. “The boy finally grew a spine.”

“Thank you.” Ryan nodded his head in amusement.

“This is not a town hall debate,” Taylor hissed.

“Yes, it is,” Mrs. Abernathy said crisply. “Everything in this town is a town hall debate.”

Taylor’s protest died as Mrs. Abernathy marched right up to the counter and slapped her hand down like a judge calling for order. “All right, everyone, we’re settling this right now. Taylor Pierce’s love life is officially on the docket.”

Taylor gaped. “This is not on the docket—”

“Order!” Mrs. Abernathy barked, and to Taylor’s horror, the café actually quieted. “I leave the floor to you, Nelson.”

Mr. Nelson lowered his newspaper. “Let’s review. Option one: the secret admirer, who is creative, thoughtful, and possibly romantic. Option two: Ryan Carter, who is grumpy, bossy, but willing to walk her home at night.”

“I like option one,” called a college kid by the window. “Mysterious. Keeps things interesting.”

“Mysterious equals dangerous,” Mrs. Abernathy said. “You want poor Taylor lured into a basement by some creep? Ryan’s a Marine. He knows how to handle danger.”

“He also knows how to scare himself half to death over a raccoon,” Taylor muttered, but no one listened.

Nancy, the barista, raised her hand. “Pro for the secret admirer. He clearly knows Taylor well. He leaves gifts that mean something. Pro for Ryan. He actually shows up in person, not just on sticky notes.”

“I like a man who shows up,” Mr. Nelson agreed. “Presence counts.”

Ryan leaned against the counter, smug. “Should we put it to a vote?”

Taylor spun on him, jaw dropping. “Don’t you dare—”

But it was too late. Mrs. Abernathy raised her hand. “All in favor of the secret admirer?”

Three tentative hands lifted.

“All in favor of Ryan Carter?”

Nearly every other hand in the café shot up, along with a chorus of “Aye!” that rattled the pastry case.

Taylor groaned, sinking behind the counter like she could melt into the floor. “Unbelievable.”

Ryan snagged another muffin and took a victorious bite. “Mandate from the people.”

“This is not a democracy!” Taylor hissed.

“Sure feels like one,” he said, smirking.

The café erupted into applause, and someone shouted, “Kiss her again!”

Ryan gave her a grin before leaning across the counter and locking his lips with hers. The hoots and hollers were drowned out by the fierce beating of her heart.

Someone near the window shouted, “When’s the wedding?” and the whole café broke into laughter.

Taylor pulled back and shook her head. She was certain her soul tried to escape her body. She glared at Ryan, who only leaned in and stole another muffin off her tray.

“Found this note from your secret admirer taped to your door this morning after you left for work,” he said, unruffled. Taylor’s jaw dropped as she stared at the pink note he held out. She tried to grab it, but he stuffed it back in his pocket. “Let me know when you’re done working, and we’ll go figure out the next clue together.”

“Why you—”

He kissed her lightly on the mouth again and then sauntered out of the cafe to the backdrop of hoots and whistles, leaving Taylor feeling happy, confused, and completely overstimulated.

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Chapter 10

Taylor

Taylor locked the café door with a sigh so heavy it felt like it carried the weight of an entire circus. All day she'd endured sidelong looks, smirks, and unsolicited congratulations from townsfolk who apparently believed her personal life was community property.

She was ready to crawl into bed, hide under the covers, and never emerge.

Instead, Ryan was waiting by his truck, leaning against it like he had all the time in the world. His hands were shoved into his jacket pockets, his posture easy, but his eyes tracked her every step.

"Don't you have somewhere else to be?" she asked, tucking her café keys into her bag.

"Here's good," he said. Then he held up a folded note.

Her heart stuttered.

He crossed to her and placed it in her palm, his fingers brushing hers deliberately. Taylor opened it, breath catching as she read:

"Even heroines need a soundtrack. Go where the music plays, third button from the top. The story continues there."

She stared at it, pulse racing. "The diner."

Ryan's mouth quirked. "Good deduction, Sherlock. Let's go."

The diner was nearly empty, just a few regulars nursing coffee and the tired-looking waitress refilling cups. Taylor's nerves jittered as she walked

to the old jukebox against the wall.

She pressed the third button from the top. The machine whirred, and a familiar song crackled to life—her guilty-pleasure, cheesy love ballad she only ever played when no one else was around.

Her cheeks burned. “Oh, no.”

Ryan grinned. “Oh, yes.”

She turned to scold him, but he was already holding out his hand. “Dance with me.”

“What if I was supposed to dance with my secret admirer, and you just keep running him off?”

“I think it’s pretty clear that this is my intent. You gonna go against the town hall edict and pick some creeper who won’t show his face?”

“You wanna dance together in public?”

He leaned closer, his voice low. “Pretty sure after today, your love life is already a public broadcast.”

She wanted to argue. She wanted to say no. But when he closed his hand around hers and tugged gently, her body betrayed her.

They moved to the open space near the jukebox, the fluorescent lights buzzing overhead, the linoleum floor sticky in places. Hardly romantic. And yet, when Ryan slid an arm around her waist and guided her into the slow sway of the music, the whole world fell away.

Taylor let herself lean into him, her head brushing his chest. His heartbeat was steady, his warmth seeping into her until her bones felt molten.

Taylor’s cheek brushed against the fabric of Ryan’s jacket, the faint scent of cedar and soap clinging to him. The song crooned through the diner’s scratchy speakers, syrupy and dramatic, the kind of ballad teenagers slow-danced to in gymnasiums decorated with crepe paper.

She smiled despite herself. “God, this song is so embarrassing.”

Ryan’s laugh rumbled low in his chest. “Embarrassing maybe. But kind of perfect.”

Her head tilted back so she could look up at him. “Perfect? It’s a prom cliché.”

His lips curved into a smirk. “Exactly. Don’t you remember? This was the song you taught me to dance to.”

Taylor blinked. “What?”

He leaned in a little closer, his voice quieter, almost coaxing. “Junior year. I was supposed to take Madison Reed to prom, but I didn’t know how

to dance. You caught me panicking in the gym the week before, remember? You said you'd help me figure it out."

Memories bloomed, sweet and sharp. The gym had been nearly empty after school, sunlight streaming through high windows, the smell of floor wax thick in the air. She'd laughed when Ryan admitted he had two left feet. She'd placed his hands on her waist, guided him through the steps, her heart racing so fast she thought it might burst.

And yes, this ridiculous love song had been playing on the stereo someone left running.

Taylor's throat tightened. "I didn't think you remembered that."

Ryan's eyes softened. "Of course I remembered. I remember everything about that day. Especially how much I didn't want it to end."

Her heart thudded. "Then why didn't you just...take me to prom?"

His gaze held hers, steady and unflinching. "Because you were Emma's best friend. And I'd already screwed up enough by wanting you when I shouldn't. You were off-limits."

Taylor's breath caught, her fingers tightening in his jacket. The jukebox warbled through another verse, but all she could hear was the pounding of her own heart.

She whispered, "You wanted to take me?"

Ryan's jaw flexed, as if he was wrestling with whether to hold something back. Then, finally, his mouth tipped into a wry half-smile. "More than anything."

The words landed in her chest like fire, like truth she'd been aching to hear for nearly a decade.

And for a long moment, as they swayed in the glow of neon lights and half-empty coffee cups, it felt like the years between them disappeared.

Taylor's heart was still hammering as she tried to breathe around what Ryan had just admitted. More than anything. He'd wanted her more than anything.

She swallowed, needing to lighten the air before she floated away on the weight of it. Her eyes swept the room, the checkered floors, the worn vinyl booths, the chrome trim dulled from years of use. "It's weird being back here at night. I feel like we spent half our childhood in this diner."

Ryan's mouth curved. "More than half. Emma practically lived off grilled cheese and milkshakes for three years straight."

Taylor laughed, the memory slipping out before she could stop it. “She used to dunk the French fries in her strawberry shake and make us both do it too. Said it was the ultimate food combo.”

Ryan chuckled. “Yeah, until she got sick in my car and swore she’d never touch strawberry again.”

Taylor winced, grinning. “You were so mad at her.”

“I had just washed the car,” Ryan said, but there was no heat in his voice. “Besides, I should’ve expected chaos. Anytime you two were together in here, something went wrong.”

Taylor gasped in mock offense. “Hey, I was the responsible one!”

Ryan arched a brow. “Responsible? You climbed on the counter one night to switch the jukebox songs while Emma dared you to do a tap dance while you were up there.”

Taylor pressed her lips together, trying not to laugh. “That was a very important mission. The jukebox had been stuck on country for an hour, and the tap dance was for kicks and giggles.”

“And you nearly broke your neck.”

She shrugged. “Worth it.”

Ryan shook his head, but he was smiling at her in that quiet way again, like he was remembering not just the chaos, but the way she’d always been right there, woven into his family, into Emma’s laughter, into his life.

“You know,” Taylor said softly, “Emma and I used to sit in that booth—” she pointed to the corner one with the cracked red vinyl “—and plan out our futures. She’d say she was going to marry a rock star. I said I was going to write books and live in Paris.”

Ryan’s smile faded into something gentler. “You’re halfway there, Tay. You are writing books.”

Her stomach flipped. She hated how much it meant that he’d said that, so casually, so confidently, like it wasn’t a secret shame. She looked down at the USB drive in her hand, her throat tightening.

Ryan’s fingers brushed hers, steadying her. “And Paris...maybe that’s still waiting.”

Taylor blinked at him, her chest aching. This was supposed to be a silly jukebox clue. A ridiculous dance. Instead, it felt like the whole diner had shifted, all their memories crowding in to remind her how much he’d always been part of her story.

The song faded, but Ryan didn't let her go right away. He just looked at her, as if memorizing something important. Finally, he pointed to the side of the jukebox, to something she hadn't noticed before. Taped to the side was a USB drive, labeled in neat handwriting: For the heroine.

Her breath caught.

Ryan's voice was low, teasing, but there was weight behind it. "Guess your admirer wants to make sure you've always got music to go with your story."

Taylor's fingers closed tight around it.

"Music, yes, but what if there's more to it?" she asked.

Ryan gave her a wide grin. "Only one way to find out."

* * *

The ride back to her apartment was a blur of neon signs and the USB clutched tight in her hand. Taylor's nerves buzzed with anticipation, half from the dance, half from the thought of inviting Ryan inside. When she unlocked the door and pushed it open, she tried not to think about how it had been years since anyone but Emma had stepped foot past that threshold.

Ryan lingered just inside, hands shoved into his jacket pockets as he looked around. "Cozy," he said.

"It's small." She tossed her bag on the counter and booted up her laptop. "Don't get too comfortable. We're just here to see what's on this thing."

He smirked, watching her fumble with the USB. "Sure. Just business."

Taylor shot him a look, but her cheeks betrayed her with heat. She plugged it in, the drive humming to life. A folder appeared on her desktop labeled: For the heroine.

She clicked it open.

Music files filled the screen. Song after song, each one painfully familiar.

Taylor's hand flew to her mouth. "Oh, my God. These are..."

"Our high school playlist," Ryan finished quietly, stepping closer.

It was true. Each title jolted her with memories. The song Emma made them scream-sing in the car on the way to football games. The ballad Taylor had once scribbled lyrics to in the margins of her math notebook. The track Ryan had blasted on repeat the summer he got his first truck.

Taylor's chest ached. "Whoever's doing this...they know everything."

Ryan's eyes flickered. "Yeah," he said roughly. "They do."

She clicked the last file in the list, expecting another song. Instead, a PDF opened. A single line of text scrolled across the screen:

“Back to where wishes begin. Look beneath the fountain.”

Taylor’s breath caught. “The park.”

Ryan nodded once, already moving toward the door. “Let’s go.”

The park was quiet under the moonlight, swings creaking faintly in the cold breeze. Taylor’s boots crunched on the gravel path as she led the way toward the old stone fountain at the center. Its basin was cracked, water shut off for the winter, but the place was thick with memories.

She crouched, fingers brushing the underside of the ledge, and found a huge manila envelope taped there. She pulled it free and tore it open.

Inside was a small glass jar filled with pennies, a folded note tucked against the lid.

“Every wish counts, even the ones you never say aloud.”

Taylor’s throat tightened. She sat on the fountain’s edge, turning the jar in her hands, watching the copper coins glint in the lamplight. “We used to come here all the time,” she whispered. “Emma and I would throw pennies and make the dumbest wishes.”

Ryan sat beside her, close enough that their shoulders brushed. He plucked a penny from the jar and held it up. “And what did you wish for?”

She smiled faintly. “That Emma would pass her math class. That I’d get a dog. That my mom would...you know, get better.” Her voice trailed off.

Ryan’s jaw flexed. “I remember. You always tossed your penny in so fast no one could see what you wished for.”

Taylor looked at him, surprised. “You noticed that?”

He dropped the penny into her hand. “I noticed everything, Taylor.”

Her chest tightened so painfully she almost couldn’t breathe. She turned the penny over in her palm, then flicked it into the fountain’s dry basin. It clinked against the stone and rolled into the corner.

Ryan took another penny and studied it. His voice was softer now, vulnerable in a way she’d never heard before. “You want to know what I wished for?”

Taylor’s throat went dry. “What?”

He tossed the coin, watched it spin into the basin. “That I’d figure out how to stop wanting what I couldn’t have.”

The air between them pulsed, heavy and alive.

Taylor gripped the jar tighter, her heart pounding. “Did it work?”

Ryan turned to her, eyes dark, voice low. “Not even close.”

The silence stretched between them, filled only by the winter wind rattling the bare branches above. Taylor's breath came shallow, her pulse thudding like the echo of every wish she had ever whispered into this fountain.

Ryan's words hung heavy in the air. Not even close.

Her fingers trembled against the glass jar. She wanted to say something witty, something to cut through the gravity of the moment, but all she could do was look at him. The hard lines of his face softened in the lamplight, his jaw taut with restraint, his eyes locked on hers with an intensity that stole the air from her lungs.

Her voice came out barely above a whisper. "Ryan..."

And then his hand was at her cheek, warm and sure, tilting her face toward his. She had a split second to see the decision in his eyes, the way his walls cracked open, before his mouth was on hers.

The kiss was fierce, nothing tentative about it. Years of frustration, denial, and unspoken longing poured out in the press of his lips. Taylor gasped against him, her hands clutching his jacket, pulling him closer even as her heart spun out of control.

The cold night vanished. The cracked fountain, the empty park, the jar of pennies — all of it faded until there was nothing but the heat of him, the steady strength of his arms around her, the wild rush of finally having what she had once only wished for.

When he pulled back, they were both breathless, their foreheads resting together, neither ready to let go.

"For the record, I also made a second wish over and over again."

"What was that?" she asked.

"That someday I'd be able to come back here and kiss you like this. Hold you like this."

Taylor pulled back just far enough to look at him, her breath mingling with his in the cold night air. Her fingers tightened in the fabric of his jacket, grounding herself, because what she was about to ask had lived in her chest for years.

"Did you know?" she whispered.

Ryan's brow furrowed. "Know what?"

"How much I cared for you. Back then. In high school." She swallowed, her voice trembling. "You had to know. I was terrible at hiding it."

His jaw tightened, eyes shadowed in the glow of the lamppost. He didn't answer right away, and that told her more than words could.

Taylor's throat ached. "So if you knew...why did you act like I was invisible? Why did you brush me off like I was nothing? Why did you—" her voice cracked "—why did you leave me?"

Ryan closed his eyes, exhaling a long, rough breath. His hands stayed firm on her, one at her cheek, the other resting on her waist, as if he was afraid she'd slip away if he let go.

"You weren't nothing, Taylor," he said finally, his voice low and hoarse. "You were everything I couldn't let myself want."

Her chest clenched. "Because of Emma?"

He nodded once. "She was my kid sister. You were her best friend. I was already the older guy, already leaving for college. You were seventeen. I told myself the best thing I could do was stay away. Pretend I didn't see it." His mouth twisted. "Pretend I didn't feel it."

Taylor's heart slammed. "You felt it?"

Ryan's gaze locked with hers, unflinching. "Of course I did. I wanted you, Taylor. God, I wanted you so bad it scared the hell out of me. But you deserved better than me at the time I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life, and I knew I couldn't take you with me. For me, it would always be you, but you deserved to experience more than just me."

Her breath hitched, hot tears stinging her eyes. "So you thought leaving me behind was better?"

"I thought it was the only way to protect you." His voice broke, the honesty raw. "I thought I'd ruin you if I stayed. And then...I kept going. Deployment after deployment. Orders. Operations. I told myself you'd move on, that it was better for you if I stayed gone."

Taylor shook her head, her voice fierce through the tears. "You didn't protect me. You hurt me. Do you have any idea how small I felt when you wouldn't even look at me? How stupid I felt for wanting you?"

Ryan's thumb brushed a tear from her cheek, his own expression pained. "You were never stupid. I was the coward. I left because I was too scared of what it meant if I stayed."

The words cracked something open inside her. The years of silence, the ache of being unseen, the longing she'd buried. And suddenly she was kissing him again, desperate and fierce, because no explanation could erase the hurt, but the truth at least made the wanting real.

When they broke apart, gasping, Taylor pressed her forehead to his. “Don’t leave again.”

Ryan’s grip tightened at her waist. His answer came without hesitation. “I won’t.”

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Chapter 11

Ryan

Ryan had been in loud rooms before. Barracks. Airfields. Briefings that turned into arguments. None of them prepared him for the sound that hit when he and Taylor stepped through Emma's front door together.

"They're dating!" Emma shouted from the foyer like a town crier announcing a royal decree.

Taylor made a distressed noise that might have been his name. Ryan bit back a laugh and shut the door behind them, bracing for impact.

The impact arrived in the form of his mother first. She swept in with her apron still dusted in flour, eyes bright and already glossy. "Sweetheart," she said to Taylor, taking her hands. "Finally." Then to Ryan, with a pointed look. "About time."

His father clapped him on the back hard enough to rattle a rib. "Took you long enough, boy."

"Good to see you too, Dad," Ryan said, steadying himself.

Cousins popped up from the living room like prairie dogs. An uncle leaned over the back of the couch. Someone whistled. Someone else said, "Pay up," and a crumpled ten changed hands near the mantle.

Ryan arched a brow. "You people placed bets?"

"Of course we did," Aunt Lila said cheerfully, pulling Taylor into a hug. "We are a family of realists. And romantics. Realistic romantics."

Taylor's face had gone pink. She mouthed help at him over Aunt Lila's shoulder. He grinned and held up both hands in surrender. He had warned her. There was no gentle entry into a Carter dinner once Emma had a piece of gossip.

"Kitchen," Emma said, steering them like a tugboat, the baby balanced on her hip and glee in her eyes. "Mom made three chickens, two pans of potatoes, and whatever that green thing is that appeared next to the salad."

"Green beans," his mother called. "Do not fear them."

The table was already set, candles flickering, platters steaming. Ryan pulled out a chair for Taylor and took the seat beside her. She gave him a quick, grateful look that tugged at something in his chest he did not want to examine while relatives hovered.

"Ground rules," Emma announced, planting herself at the head of the table like a general about to brief her troops. "We will keep teasing at a level that does not make Taylor run away. There will be no baby name suggestions yet. And no one is allowed to say I told you so."

A cousin raised a hand. "Counterproposal. One I told you so each."

"Denied," Emma said.

Ryan hid a smile. Taylor pressed her napkin to her mouth to smother a laugh. The room settled as people took their seats, plates were passed, and the first volley arrived from his father.

"So," his father said, carving a chicken with unnecessary flourish, "which one of you made the first move?"

Ryan took a roll. "Define move."

Taylor choked. Emma slapped a hand on the table, delighted. "Knew it. I knew it would be him. He has been mooning at the café windows like a watchdog."

"Watchdog?" Ryan repeated dryly.

"Loyal. Growly," Emma said. "Snacks motivated."

"Accurate," Taylor murmured, eyes dancing.

His mother leaned in with the bowl of potatoes. "Was it the coffee shop kiss I heard about from Mrs. Abernathy?"

Ryan paused with the serving spoon. "You heard about that already?"

"This is a town," his mother said. "News travels faster than the internet."

Uncle Dave wagged his fork. "I saw it on the neighborhood Facebook group. There were three angles and a slow-mo edit."

Taylor dropped her forehead to her hand. "I am moving."

“No you are not,” Emma said, gleeful. “Sit in your joy.”

Ryan served Taylor potatoes and slid the plate back to her, brushing his knuckles against her wrist. Small touch. Calming touch. She gave him a look that said thank you and I cannot believe your family all at once.

His father poured wine and passed the bottle down the table. “Ryan, you remember Tommy Myers from the shop?”

“Unfortunately,” Ryan said.

“Tommy asked me this morning if your girl needs a security detail now that she has two admirers,” his father went on, deadpan. “I told him yes. A very large one. With your name on all the jackets.”

“That man once glued quarters to the gas station floor,” Emma muttered. “No one should take advice from him.”

A cousin leaned forward, eyes bright. “Speaking of admirers. Are we going to talk about the secret scavenger hunt? Because I would like to congratulate whoever is doing the old-fashioned courtship thing. Bold. Slightly creepy. But bold.”

All eyes flicked to Taylor. She tensed almost imperceptibly, then relaxed. Ryan felt the shift and wanted to reach under the table for her hand.

“It has been nice,” she said carefully, sliding her gaze to the mashed potatoes. “Thoughtful. Very...personal.”

Emma waggled her brows. “And yet somehow, Ryan still wins the town vote.”

Ryan took a sip of water. “Mandate from the people.”

Taylor elbowed him, which felt like victory.

“Speaking of votes,” Aunt Lila said. “How did the tally go at the café?”

“Unethical,” Taylor said quickly.

“Historic,” Emma countered.

“Landslide,” Ryan offered.

His mother dabbed her eyes. “I always knew you two would find your way. The way you used to bicker. It was textbook. He only bickers with people he can’t stop thinking about.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Ryan said.

“And Taylor only ever got that particular shade of pink when someone said his name,” his mother added, unhelpfully and accurate.

Taylor covered her cheeks with both hands. Ryan felt his mouth twitch. The urge to drag her chair closer rose like a tide. Not the time. He settled for nudging his knee against hers under the table. She nudged back.

Plates circled. Stories started. Family dinners worked like a current. Once you were in, you drifted with it. Tonight the current rushed toward memory.

“Remember when Ryan taught Emma how to drive in the church parking lot?” Uncle Dave said. “We needed hazard pay.”

“I learned,” Emma said, proud. “We only hit two cones.”

“Three,” Ryan corrected.

“Two cones and a trash can,” Taylor added, laughing now.

His father pointed his carving fork at Taylor. “You were there.”

“She filmed it,” Ryan said. “For leverage.”

“Historical documentation,” Taylor said primly.

“She has always been the responsible one,” his mother told the table. “We should have put her on the insurance.”

“Actually,” Emma said, stabbing a green bean, “Taylor was also the one who climbed on the diner counter to fix the jukebox because she didn’t like the playlist. Then she fell off in the middle of a tap dance and sprained her ankle.”

“Y’all have a faulty memory. I broke my big toe.”

“Speaking of diner,” a cousin piped up. “Are the rumors true? Slow dance by the jukebox last night?”

Emma gasped. “You danced?”

Ryan tried to outpace the heat at his collar. “We swayed. A little. There was a song.”

Taylor took a very serious drink of water. “Purely hypothetical swaying.”

“Hypothetical in full view of half the town,” Uncle Dave said. “I saw a video with ketchup bottles in the foreground.”

“Why does this town film everything?” Taylor whispered.

Emma leaned across the table, eyes shining. “Because we love you. And because Kyle from the hardware store thinks he is a director.”

His father clinked his glass. “To hypothetical swaying.”

Everyone lifted their glasses. Taylor hid a grin behind hers. Ryan lifted his along with the rest because resisting was pointless.

“To Ryan not being an idiot,” Emma added, then pointed her fork at him. “And to Taylor not running away even though my brother has the subtlety of a foghorn.”

“Hey,” Ryan said.

Taylor’s hand found his thigh under the table and gave a small, quick squeeze.

“Question,” a cousin said, already smirking. “Who asked who out officially?”

Ryan opened his mouth, but Taylor beat him to it. “He kissed me in my place of work like a hooligan.”

“Romantic hooligan,” Emma corrected.

“Criminal,” Taylor said, but she was smiling now.

“Spoken like a woman who has been kissed properly,” Aunt Lila said with great satisfaction.

Emma turned to their mother. “All right, Mom. You can get the Pinterest board out.”

Their mother perked up like someone had offered her front row seats to a concert. “It is already out.”

Taylor made a strangled sound. “Already?”

His mother pulled a notebook from the sideboard drawer with a flourish. The cover was floral. Tabs peeked from the edges. “This is simply a vision repository. Nothing binding. Seasonal inspirations. Floral moods.”

“Floral moods,” Ryan repeated, half to himself, because the room had turned into a weather system he could only ride.

“Please tell me there is not a mood board,” Taylor said faintly.

“There are three,” Emma said. “One of them is called Champagne Blush.”

Ryan watched Taylor turn to him with the expression of a trapped creature and felt an unhelpful rush of fondness. He leaned toward her, voice low. “We can fake our deaths. Tonight. I know a guy who can print new passports. We’ll hit up Paris and never look back.”

Her mouth twitched. “Do the passports come with new families?”

“Unfortunately no,” he said.

“Then we are doomed.”

He let his knee press into hers again. “If it gets bad, we pull the fire alarm.”

“You would not,” his mother said without looking up from her tabs.

Ryan blinked. “How do you do that?”

“Mother senses,” she said.

Dinner rolled on. Plates lightened. The baby woke up long enough to squeal at peas and smear potatoes on Emma’s sleeve. Three separate relatives asked Taylor about her favorite flowers, each pretending they were not asking about hypothetical bouquets. Someone said venue and someone

else said elopement, and Uncle Dave said the justice of the peace behind the bowling alley has availability on Thursdays.

Ryan fielded questions with easy nonanswers and watched Taylor find her footing in the chaos. She started to throw lines back. She teased his father about carving like he was auditioning for television. She threatened Emma with photos from the braces years if the Pinterest board reappeared. She laughed, freely now, and the sound settled something in him that had been knotted since the day he came home.

He kept catching himself looking at her. It was a problem. In the military, you learned to scan, to assess, to move on. Tonight his eyes kept returning to the same point. The curve of her mouth when she fought a laugh. The way she lowered her gaze when talk got too pointed and then looked back up when she had a quip ready. The familiar, stubborn set of her shoulders when she decided to stand her ground.

Off limits, he had told himself for years.

Now he was nothing but on.

“Hey,” Emma said, snapping her fingers in front of his face. “Earth to Ryan.”

He blinked. “What?”

“Your face looks like poetry,” she said, delighted. “Make it stop or I am going to cry.”

“Do not make your sister cry,” his mother warned. “It will add salt to the green beans.”

“Speaking of poetry,” Uncle Dave said. “Taylor, I saw a book in the Little Free Library with your pen name on it.”

The table quieted for a breath. Ryan felt Taylor go still beside him, the shift so small no one else would notice. He nudged his knee into hers under the table again. She looked at him. He nodded once, calm and certain. He had her. She breathed.

“Oh,” she said, casual as she could make it. “That is nice. I...I didn’t know you guys knew about that.”

“You have fans,” Aunt Lila said, beaming. “I found one at the hair salon. We are a whole street team now.”

Emma clasped her hands. “I knew it. You are a local legend.”

His mother leaned forward. “Do we get signed copies for Christmas?”

Taylor laughed, relief loosening her shoulders. “Only if you promise not to leave reviews that start with the phrase ‘as the mother of the groom.’”

“I make no such promise,” his mother said.

Dessert came out with the same ceremony as a parade. Pie and brownies and something lemon that his mother had invented with the confidence of a woman who believed butter could solve anything. People drifted between chairs, refilled coffee, traded seats. At some point Emma plopped the baby in Ryan’s lap and stole his spoon. He juggled the child on one knee and used the other to keep Taylor’s chair pressed close to his. She leaned into him like it was the most natural thing in the world.

“Okay,” Emma said, standing again like a conductor about to cue an orchestra. “Final agenda item. We love Taylor. We love Ryan, most days. We approve of this relationship. Do we have consensus?”

A chorus of ayes rolled around the table like a wave.

Emma nodded solemnly. “Motion carries. Meeting adjourned. Please take a leftovers container and the realistic expectation that I will be involved in everything for the rest of your lives.”

“Everything,” his mother echoed, collecting plates.

Taylor rested her head against Ryan’s shoulder for the length of a heartbeat, then straightened with a mortified smile. “I do not think we will ever survive this.”

“We will,” he said low, so only she could hear. “You already won them over a long time ago.”

She looked up at him, a question in her eyes he couldn’t quite read. He didn’t try to answer it with words. He just held her gaze until her mouth softened into that unguarded smile that had wrecked his morning.

When they finally escaped to the porch with a foil-wrapped pile of leftovers and the winter air prickling their cheeks, Taylor exhaled like she had been holding her breath for an hour. Emma’s laughter spilled through the door behind them. The porch light gave everything a warm halo.

“That was a lot,” Taylor said.

“Welcome to the family,” Ryan said.

She tipped her face toward him, eyes bright. “I have always been here.”

He could have said me too. He settled for taking her free hand instead. Warm. Sure. Right where it belonged.

“Ready?” he asked.

“For what.”

“For whatever comes next,” he said.

She squeezed his fingers. “Yes, but what about my secret admirer? What if he keeps leaving me things?”

He gave her a wide grin. “I’ll just keep laying claim to what is mine. Eventually, he’ll get the picture.”

He walked her down the steps into the cold, feeling, for the first time in a long time, like forward was a direction he could trust.

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Chapter 12

Taylor

Valentine's week at the café always felt like someone had shaken a glitter bomb over her life and then handed her a mop. Pink napkins. Heart sprinkles. Boxes tied with ribbons that never stayed put. The pastry case gleamed with chocolate-dipped strawberries, red velvet cupcakes, and sugar cookies iced within an inch of their lives. The whole place smelled like cocoa and vanilla and a little bit of panic.

"Cupid called," Jenna announced from behind a mountain of meringues. "He wants you to stop making him look lazy."

Taylor snorted and kept piping tiny roses on a cake shaped like a heart. "Tell Cupid he can clock in and help close, then we will talk."

The bell jingled. A cluster of teenagers swooped in for lattes, giggling over a printed list of class crushes. Mr. Nelson claimed his corner booth and his crossword. Mrs. Abernathy gave Taylor a wink so saucy that Taylor nearly dropped her pastry bag.

"Your cheeks are pink," Jenna sing-songed once the rush settled. "Is that from the oven or from a certain town debate that ended with a public kiss?"

"Steam," Taylor said primly. "From the dishwasher."

"Right. Steamy Ryan Carter." Jenna fanned herself with a stack of to-go lids.

Taylor laughed and reached for the box of satin ribbon she kept under the counter. One roll had slipped free and tumbled into the open space where

she usually tucked extra pastry boxes. She knelt to fish it out and saw something that was not ribbon at all.

A white envelope lay flat against the wood, edges smooth, her name on the front in that same careful handwriting.

Her heart pitched. For a moment, the café sounds drifted into a blur. She slid the envelope out and stood slowly, shielding it with her body like someone might snatch it from her hands.

“Is that what I think it is?” Jenna whispered, eyes going wide.

Taylor swallowed and slipped the edge of her thumb under the flap. Inside was a single card.

When the day felt loud with other people’s love, you made a quiet place for your own. Go there now, to the spot you kept only for yourself on Valentine’s Day. Come alone.

Beneath the words sat a tiny pressed violet, taped to the card with care.

Her breath caught. Her secret place. Not the fountain. Not the lookout. The little footbridge by the river where she used to sit every February fourteenth with a thermos of cocoa and a brownie from yesterday’s batch. She had watched the water slide under the wooden slats and told herself that not having flowers did not mean she was unworthy of them. No one knew she went there. Not Emma. Not anyone.

Except someone did.

Jenna leaned on the counter, chin in her hand, shameless. “So. Are you going to tell Ryan and let him be your terrifyingly handsome bodyguard again?”

Taylor traced the pressed violet with her fingertip. “It says to come alone.”

Jenna wrinkled her nose. “That sounds like the beginning of a horror movie.”

“It is a public park,” Taylor said, though her stomach did a small flip.

“Public parks are where raccoons live. And also men with trench coats in mystery novels.” Jenna pointed a frosting spatula at her. “Text Ryan. He will lurk at a respectful distance and pretend he is not lurking.”

Taylor stared at the note again. Come alone. The words sparked and stung in equal measure. The scavenger hunt had been tender and a little wild and sometimes a little scary, but always it had felt like someone had placed a hand at the small of her back and guided her forward. Part of her wanted to

honor the instruction. The other part heard Ryan's voice in her head listing every reason isolated places after sundown were a bad idea.

"Jenna," she said quietly. "My secret place. How would anyone know?"

Jenna softened. "Maybe because he knows you. The way you think. Where you go when you need air. And maybe that should give you the biggest hint as to who your secret admirer is. Maybe he isn't so secret after all."

Taylor folded the card and slid it back into the envelope. The pressed violet felt fragile, like a truth she had not given herself permission to keep.

Taylor pulled her phone from her apron and typed, Deleted a second later. Typed again. Deleted. She tucked the phone away with a sigh.

"I will go before sunset," she said. "There will be joggers."

"I'll watch the clock," Jenna replied. "If you aren't back in an hour, I am calling Emma, the mayor, and possibly the National Guard."

"Please do not call the mayor."

"We follow protocol in this house."

The bell chimed again. Orders flowed. Taylor moved with muscle memory while the note throbbed like a pulse against her ribs. She boxed cookies, frosted cupcakes, laughed when Mr. Nelson declared himself the official taster of chocolate-dipped strawberries. She told herself she would tell Ryan afterward. She told herself this was hers for a moment. Not the town's. Not her coworker's. Not even Emma's.

When the afternoon lull finally arrived, she pared the pastry case into neat airtight tubs, washed her hands, and hung her apron on its hook. The envelope went into her coat pocket. The pressed violet slid safely into the tiny notebook she kept for inventory notes that were not inventory notes at all.

Jenna watched her tie her scarf. "Text me when you get there."

"I will."

"And if you see anyone in a trench coat, throw a cookie at them and run."

"I am not wasting cookies on criminals."

"That's my girl."

Taylor smiled, small and nervous and excited all at once. She stepped into the winter light, the doorbell chiming behind her, and turned toward the river where a wooden footbridge waited like a secret she used to keep only for herself.

Taylor smoothed her hand over the folded note again, tracing the words as though they might rearrange themselves into something less dangerous. Come alone.

Her secret place. Her ritual. Her one corner of the world where Valentine's Day had belonged to her alone. Nobody knew about it. Not Emma, not her coworkers, not her mom when she was alive. It was hers.

Except...someone knew. Someone who had been watching close enough to see beyond the cheerful barista smile and the quiet manager routines. Someone who saw the girl who slipped away with cocoa and a brownie and wished on river water.

Her chest squeezed. In her heart of hearts, she already knew. Who else would go to this much trouble? Who else would know her favorite seat, her favorite author, the shade of ink she liked in her journal? Who else had been shadowing her through these clues, half-protective, half-irritated, but never really letting her out of his sight?

And yet the note's words pulled her in a different direction. Come alone. A rule. A promise. A dare.

Taylor pressed the violet to her lips, then tucked it carefully back into her notebook. For once, she didn't text, didn't over-explain, didn't look for someone else to give her permission.

This time, she would play the game exactly as it was meant to be played. Alone.

And maybe she'd find the one person she'd been wishing for on the other side.

* * *

Taylor's boots crunched softly over the gravel path, the February air biting at her cheeks. She hugged her coat tighter. The pressed violet was safe in her pocket, and the words of the note beat like a pulse in her head. Come alone.

Taylor followed the path by instinct more than sight, guided by the soft ribbon of moonlight that spilled between bare branches and turned the river into a sheet of silver. Frost squeaked under her boots. In the distance the town glowed, a low necklace of windows and streetlamps. Here it was quiet. The kind of quiet she had always come to on this week in February, when the rest of the world felt loud with other people's bouquets and candlelit dinners.

She had almost texted him. Twice in the kitchen, once by the pastry case while Jenna whistled something suspiciously like a wedding march. She had typed his name and erased it each time, palms damp, the note in her pocket thrumming like a second heartbeat. Come alone.

The little footbridge appeared the way it always did, a silhouette first, then a shape, then the familiar slats that creaked in the third and sixth boards. Her bridge. Her spot. She had stood here on cold nights and warm ones, with a thermos of cocoa and a brownie pilfered from yesterday's batch, feeding herself softness because no one else had thought to. She knew the splintered place on the rail that caught mittened wool if you were careless. She knew where the light pooled and where the shadows tucked themselves in to listen.

Tonight there was something new. An envelope rested against the railing at the center, anchored by a flat rectangle wrapped in clear plastic. Even from a step away, her body understood before her mind did. The same careful handwriting curved across the envelope. Her name. Not the polite version she used for formal introductions, but the one Emma yelled through a house. The one Ryan used when he forgot to be careful.

The world narrowed to the size of her hands. She slipped the plastic free, slid a nail beneath the envelope flap, and breathed through the tremble in her fingers. Paper whispered. Inside was another envelope, heavier, official, the kind with perforated edges and a barcode. She opened that too and then everything tilted for a second, as if the river had shifted its course.

Round trip. Paris.

She stared until the letters blurred and reformed. Departure in April. A date that made sense for the café schedule if she traded a weekend and bribed Jenna with every leftover pastry on earth. A second sheet, tucked behind the first, announced a conference badge purchase. International Romance Writers Conference. Keynote Speaker: Elise Marquette.

Elise. The dog-eared author of teenage Taylor's contraband paperbacks. The one whose acknowledgments she read until she could quote the dedications. The one whose characters had kept her company at tables where she felt invisible. Taylor pressed her thumb to Elise's name and felt her vision sting. Then she noticed the second boarding pass.

There was a name printed there in crisp letters.

Ryan Carter.

She didn't know she said his name aloud until the sound of it startled the ducks downstream. She turned so fast the envelope rustled like wings. The bridge behind her was empty. The path was shadow. The trees stood close and bare.

She tried his name again, softer now. "Ryan."

No answer. Just the river and the hush of winter leaves and her pulse thudding at the base of her throat. She looked down at the tickets, at the conference confirmation, at the clean certainty of the booking codes. She could feel the weight of choices in the paper. The ache of an old dream that had never truly died.

Someone moved at the mouth of the bridge. The boards creaked the way they always did on step three, then step six. Taylor felt it before she saw him, an awareness up her spine and the sudden warmth of certainty settling under her ribs.

He appeared where the lamplight from the path fell across the first length of railing. His coat was unzipped despite the cold, his hands tucked in his pockets like a man trying to look casual and failing. His hair was damp at the edges, as if he had run a hand through it too many times. His eyes were on her the way they had been lately, intent and unguarded.

"It was you," she said. The words came out like a truth finally allowed to breathe.

Ryan stepped into the moonlight, then kept coming until they were a breath apart. "It was always me."

The river should have kept speaking. The wind should have pushed across the water. For a heartbeat, the whole night held still.

"Why?" Her voice was steady, though she felt anything but. "Why now?"

His mouth lifted at one corner and then dropped again, like he had prepared a hundred jokes and none of them would do. "Because I'm out of excuses," he said quietly. "Because I have been in love with you for a very long time, and I finally grew up enough to say it out loud."

Her fingers tightened around the tickets. "Ryan."

"I know." He exhaled, and the breath left his chest like it had been trapped there for years. "I should have told you then. At the gym when you taught me to dance to that ridiculous song. On the porch the summer you and Emma spray painted your names on the driveway and blamed the neighbor kids. At the fountain when you hurled pennies like you could bully a wish into coming true. I should have said it a thousand times, and I said

nothing. I walked away. I let months turn into years because I convinced myself you were safer without me.”

He searched her face to make sure she was still with him, that he had not knocked the air out of her with the force of all the words he had held back. She was with him. Tears had gathered and not fallen. Her fingers were white where they pinched the paper, but she didn’t look away.

The practiced speech he must have rehearsed in the empty apartment thinned into a confession. “And then I came home, and you were moving through rooms like a ghost. You were kind to everyone, and you kept the whole town running on caffeine and comfort, and still no one seemed to see you. They saw their orders. They saw what you gave them. But not you.”

She lifted her chin a fraction. “You saw me.”

“Yes.” He swallowed. “I always saw you. Back then I pretended I didn’t because I was nineteen and a fool and leaving and absolutely obsessed with all the wrong ideas about what it meant to be good. Then later I kept my distance because guilt is a heavy, stupid thing. I thought leading had to mean never asking for anything. I thought wanting you made me a liability.”

Her laugh broke raw in her throat. “You left to protect me and I learned how to disappear. What a pair we were.”

Something like pain flashed through his eyes. “I am sorry.”

The apology landed without fanfare, simple and square as a stone. He didn’t pack it in justifications. He let it sit between them with the rest of the truth.

Taylor looked down at the tickets again, the crisp edges softened now by her grip. “Paris,” she said, half wonder, half accusation. “You really bought tickets.”

“I did,” Ryan said. “One for you. One for me. The conference is in April. Elise Marquette is giving the keynote. There is a panel on pen names and another on distribution and three on craft that I don’t pretend to understand, but I read the schedule like it was a field manual and built you an itinerary that doesn’t look like an itinerary because I know you hate being told where to be. There are quiet mornings and afternoons for writing. There is a bookstore quarter with a cat that sleeps in the window. I found it on a blog. The cat’s name is Monsieur Biscuit and I can’t compete with that.”

A startled laugh burst out of her. He took it like a prize and kept going, careful now, threading intention through every line.

“You don’t have to take me,” he said. “You can take Emma. You can go alone if that is what feels right. I’ll eat the cost and never mention it again if I’ve misread anything. This is not pressure. It’s a door. I’m standing beside it, not in front of it.”

Her eyes burned and cooled in the same breath. “You thought of the bookstore cat.”

“I thought of you,” he said simply. “And all the things you love that you talk yourself out of. The third row at the bookstore. The violet ink you use for first drafts. The bench on the mountain where you get quiet. The diner jukebox when you pretend you don’t care who is watching. The bridge where you taught yourself that you matter even on days when the world is late to the party.”

“How did you know about the bridge?” she asked, voice low. “I never told anyone.”

He didn’t move closer. He didn’t reach for her yet. “I saw you once,” he said. “Years ago. I was home for a weekend and restless. I walked until I found the river, and then I saw you here with a thermos and a brownie that was probably the day old special. You were flicking a penny like it had insulted you. I should have turned away. I stood under that tree and watched the water move and thought if I stepped onto the bridge I wouldn’t be able to step off without carrying you with me. I stepped back because I was a coward with a schedule.”

Her throat closed around a sound. He heard it, and his own breath faltered.

“The scavenger hunt,” she said after a moment, words careful. “You planned all of it.”

“I did,” he admitted. A rueful smile touched his mouth. “The bookstore clerk owes me a favor because I carried her new shelves in from a delivery when the driver bailed. The diner waitress cried when I asked her to queue your song, then threatened to disown me if I hurt you. The library was your key, not mine, but I called the janitor and told him if he found two raccoons on the camera feed he should let them finish their research in peace. The fountain was easy. Everyone knows you and Emma grew up there. The pressed violet came from Mrs. Abernathy’s garden. She told me to get out of the way so she could tape it properly.”

Taylor let the list wash over her. Each piece had felt like magic. Hearing the practical scaffolding beneath did not make it less tender. It made it

more, somehow, a structure built with hands and time and the kind of attention that still felt new on her skin.

She made a helpless motion with the tickets, an arc between them. “And Paris is what, then?”

“Paris is me saying out loud what I could only say sideways before,” he answered. “It is me putting my shoulder under your dream and lifting. You don’t need me to do it. I know that. You have been doing hard things alone for a long time. But I want to be the person who says yes every time your fear says no. If you want me there, I will carry bags and order croissants and sit in the back row of panels like a very tall houseplant.”

She had known in the café when the envelope slid like a secret into her hands. She had known when the playlist played not just their school years but the years inside her she never showed anyone. She had known at the fountain when he said not even close and kissed her like a wish finally granted. But knowing and hearing are different currencies. Hearing it landed in her bones.

“The fact that you found the part of me I kept behind every locked door and decided it deserved a plane ticket makes me want to cry and also throw you in the river.”

“Don’t throw me in the river,” he said softly. “I have a leather wallet.”

A wet laugh escaped her. He smiled like he had been waiting for it. The hurt was still in the air, but the joke gave it a handhold and it climbed down a notch.

The tickets crackled as she loosened her grip. She slid them back into the plastic sleeve with a care that felt ceremonial and then put the sleeve on the railing like an offering. The river moved under their feet, black and steady. She reached for him.

His hands came up as if he were approaching a skittish animal, and then he set them against her face, palms warm, thumbs gentle at the hinge of her jaw. Taylor stepped in until her coat brushed his. She could smell cedar and laundry soap, the same clean scent she had breathed in at the diner, the one that had made the fluorescent lights feel like stars.

“Tell me,” she whispered.

“I love you,” he said. The words fit his mouth as if he had been shaping them in secret for years and had only now remembered they were meant to be spoken.

She rose into him. The kiss landed like a promise and a homecoming at once, firm and sure and then softer, a slow press that said more than any speech could. Heat chased the cold along her skin. He tasted like the winter air and the hot chocolate they had shared on the mountain, a memory curled into the present. Her fingers went to his collar, then fisted there, not because she thought he would disappear but because she couldn't bear for him to be any farther away.

He broke for air and did not go far, his forehead resting against hers, his breath rough. The bridge creaked approval. Somewhere a dog barked, indifferent to the fact that the whole world had just changed shape.

"Tell me if it is too much," he said. "Tell me to slow down. Tell me to shut up. Tell me anything and I will do it."

"What about the town that thinks my love life is a group project?"

He huffed a laugh. "Let them make a spreadsheet. We'll do what we want."

"What about Emma?" she said, because the thought of her best friend mattered like air.

"Emma is already planning matching luggage tags," he said. "She cried when I told her I had a plan. Then she threatened to take my kneecaps if I hurt you. I told her to pick a limb and get in line."

"Of course she did."

He nodded toward the tickets. "So. Paris. With me. Without me. Later. Sooner. Any answer works except the one where you give up on yourself."

Taylor slid her hands free of his gloves long enough to take the plastic sleeve again.

"I want you there," she said. Each word a rung rung on a ladder she had been afraid to climb. "I want the croissants and the cat named Monsieur Biscuit and the way you pretend to be a plant in the back row. I want to walk by the river in a different city and not feel small. I want to kiss you in a place where no one knows our names, and then I want to come home and let Mrs. Abernathy grade our technique."

"Sold," he said, relief and joy cracking his voice open.

She held out her hand. He took it. Their fingers interlaced like a knot that had been waiting for this tug.

"Walk me home," she said.

He threaded their joined hands into the pocket of her coat and drew her close as they stepped off the bridge. The third board creaked. The sixth

followed. The path welcomed them back with a dust of frost and the sound of water at their backs.

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