



Never Landing

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Everett Bailey loves his job. No, really.

Well, he loves the idea of his job. It's just that the reality of marketing isn't a creative joy, it's a soul-crushing corporate rat race. His boss keeps taking credit for his work, and his coworkers couldn't be less sympathetic if they tried.

When he's forced to use his vacation days or lose them, he visits the town he grew up in to check in on his grandparents' old house. Just because he has time off doesn't mean he has to waste it with cocktails and poolside relaxation. He arrives in Cider Landing, and all he can see is his lost childhood. Even more strange, he keeps seeing his first love, Peter, everywhere he looks.

Before long, though, he realizes that he's not glimpsing his past, but a second chance to learn to fly . . .

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Everett

I loved my job.

At least, that was what I kept saying to myself as I sat through the tenth meeting of the week.

What was quickly becoming my last-straw meeting.

Unlike most of them, it wasn't one of those "this could have been an email" meetings. No, it was the big one. The one where we talked about all the work I'd done on the Crosslife account over the last two months. Eighty-hour weeks, every night and weekend consumed by research and art and writing. Crosslife was a trillion-dollar life insurance conglomerate, and I'd come up with their entire new ad campaign. The slogan, the storyboard, the art, it was all mine. All out of my brain, without a single bit of input or help from anyone else.

It was unheard of in the company. It was supposed to be a writer and an artist, every time. A team of creatives, working in concert. But my boss had told me he didn't have anyone else to help. That he had faith in me. He believed in me, and when I finished and secured the Crosslife account, imagine the bonus. The credit. The money Crosslife would be giving the company.

And yet, somehow I was entirely unsurprised as I sat next to him while he smiled at the CEO of Crosslife, nodding. "Thank you so much. It really is some of the best

work I've done in years. I don't usually get down in the trenches anymore, but for you guys, of course. And I guess Everett here just couldn't handle the stress of coming up with something new. You know these young guys, always biting off more than they can chew."

The CEO didn't even glance my way. A woman to his right was looking at me, sad-eyed and knowing. Part of me wanted to see it as pity and lash out, but I recognized the look. It was empathy. Understanding. She'd been there. Probably thanks to the asshole next to her, who was eating up my boss's ass-kissing and nodding along like it was simply his due.

I glanced across the table to my boss's right, to Tom Smith, one of our most experienced writers, who'd agreed to sit in on the meeting despite not having even glanced at my work before the presentation. He'd told me a dozen times since I'd started that I needed to learn to play politics. I could hear his ancient, gravelly voice in my head in that moment, low and bored and so very tired of my dramatics. "Being in advertising is more about playing the game right than doing the job right, Everett. You need to learn finesse. Give the boss what he wants, and you'll get what you want back."

But that wasn't how it had gone. I'd worked the eighty-hour weeks. I'd done the job alone when I was supposed to have help. I'd done it faster and better and more and...now I was getting nothing. No credit. Not even a glance from my boss. Fickle betrayal, thy name was James Warren.

Yeah, fine, Warren's name was on the building and mine wasn't. But that didn't mean he ought to steal my credit. It meant he should be happy he'd hired someone who got the job done. Right?

Finally, after what felt like hours of meeting and being entirely ignored except when someone had to ask me a question because they were talking about my goddamned

work while pretending Warren had done it, the CEO of Crosslife stood up and shook Warren's hand, then Tom's, while telling them he looked forward to seeing them with the completed campaign plans in January. Then, ignoring me, he turned and walked out.

The woman who'd spent the meeting sitting next to him gave me a nod as she stood. "Good work, Mr...."

And fuck me, that was when I realized Warren hadn't even introduced me. "Everett Bailey, ma'am. And thank you."

She glanced down at my computer, then back up at me, and I couldn't help but feel like she was trying to communicate something to me. The computer was in front of me, of course. It was my personal laptop—the company hadn't even bought it for me, but required me to provide my own, since "you artists are always so picky." It was the only computer on the table and had been connected to the overhead to project the plans to show the CEO.

That was probably how she'd known that the work was mine.

Fuck knew why her CEO couldn't be bothered to pay attention to a little thing like that.

I slid the computer closer to me, and she nodded sharply, like she thought I'd understood her. Did she think I should hold the files hostage until Warren gave me credit? I was pretty sure that my employment paperwork said anything I produced on company time was company property. It wasn't like I could go behind Warren's back and sell it to them.

On the other hand, she didn't even shake their hands. Just turned and marched out on her terrifying looking four-inch stiletto heels. In the hallway, she started talking to the

CEO, who suddenly seemed more animated than he had during the entire meeting, waving his arms and smiling at her and looking...hell, almost fatherly. Wish I'd met that guy and not the one who'd ignored me.

Maybe it was just me. Everyone ignored me. Overlooked me. Stole my work and took credit for it. If I was the one who kept getting stepped on, didn't that mean I had to be complicit in some way?

"Well then," Warren said, sounding self-satisfied, leaning back and clasping his hands over his middle. "I guess lunch is cancelled. You've got a lot of work to do if you're going to have final print ads ready for Crosslife by January."

When I continued to just sit there for a moment, he turned and motioned at me, waving both his hands in a scat motion, like he was telling a dog to get off his couch. "Off you go, back to work."

I unplugged my computer from the projector and left the meeting room in a daze.

That was it. He'd taken credit for the last two months of my life, now get back to work. Spend the next month working on something he'd already taken credit for.

I went back to my desk and sat there, unseeing, at my closed laptop for...well, I didn't know how long.

Tom passed by, stopped, gave a deep sigh, and turned back to me. "Don't make this a big drama, Everett. You did fine, now get back to it and finish the job. That's what you make the big bucks for."

Big bucks?

How the fuck much did he think Warren paid me? It wasn't "big bucks," that was for

sure. It was enough to pay my rent and eat, but that was about it. If I hadn't worked full time through college, my parents graciously paying the five thousand dollars a semester I still couldn't afford while working full time, I'd have had student loans I couldn't pay for on top of that.

Suddenly, I felt an icy wind flow over me. Grabbing my computer and holding it against my chest like it was the only thing I had in the world, I went to Warren's corner office. The door was open and he was alone, so I walked in.

He glanced up from his computer at me, then back. In the reflection on the enormous windows behind him, I could see that the only thing open on his computer was a game of solitaire. What was this, the nineties? Did he not know if he was going to sit around playing computer games during work hours, there were way better ones these days? Zombies to kill and hot vampires to romance and not crappy 2D card games that hadn't been updated since freaking nineteen-ninety-two.

But no. Warren was of the generation that used the term "new-fangled" and thought computers alone were silly and frivolous.

"Well?" he asked. "I'm busy here."

To my credit, I didn't laugh. Busy playing the most pointless card game known to man. It wasn't even a game of skill or talent. You could beat it or you couldn't, depending on the random way the cards were dealt.

I couldn't worry about that, though. There was a reason I'd come to his office. "My bonus. The bonus you promised me if I secured the Crosslife account."

His smile in return was predatory. "Now Everett. It wouldn't look good if I gave you a bonus after telling Crosslife I made the ads, would it?"

“Crosslife doesn’t check your books. And you didn’t make the ads. I did. I’ve been working on this account for two months, and I did literally all the work.” When his expression didn’t change, I pointed out, “And now you’re asking me to do more work on it. Without giving me the bonus you promised me.”

“Well you haven’t finished the job yet, have you?”

His smile didn’t flag, and we both knew the truth. He was never going to give me a bonus. Worse, he knew that I knew, and he didn’t care.

At some point, when I kept letting everyone step on me, did I start to deserve it? Had I earned that?

I turned and walked away, clinging to my laptop like it was a lifeline as I went.

Next thing I knew, I was standing in front of my apartment door. I’d somehow left the office, walked the half-mile to my apartment, and gone up three flights of stairs without even noticing. Shrugging, I pulled out my keys and unlocked the door, going in to collapse on the couch.

It was true. If I kept letting everyone walk all over me, I was asking them to do it more. Maybe I still didn’t deserve it—maybe no one deserved it—but as long as I continued to allow it, it was going to keep happening.

I sat up, opening my laptop and logging into my email. Beatrice from HR had sent me an email the day before warning me that due to a new company policy, if I didn’t take my three weeks of vacation before January, it was going to be gone. Vacation wasn’t going to roll over anymore, so I’d start the new year with none, and nothing to show for all that accrued vacation time.

I’d ignored it at the time. I’d been busy, working on the Crosslife account. I’d had

enormous dreams of dollar signs. Tom said when he'd secured a big mutual fund company account in the nineties, he'd gotten a five-figure bonus. I'd imagined what I could do with a five-figure bonus, and no vacation could be worth more than that.

But there was no bonus, and there never would be.

But legally, there was vacation. Three weeks of it. And with just under four weeks left in the year, which included some pretty major holidays, I had just about enough to get me to January.

So I opened an email to Beatrice, sending her a long, flowery professional email thanking her for pointing out my oversight, and informing her that I'd be taking all the vacation I'd accrued, starting with a half day today, and that I'd see the folks at Warren Advertising after New Year's.

It was less than ten minutes before a clearly shocked Beatrice sent me a response, saying she was happy to be of help and hoped I had a lovely vacation and had plans with my family.

No reason to tell her that my parents were probably somewhere in Switzerland, living what they were calling their "SKI"—spending kid's inheritance—life, spending every last dime they'd accrued in their lives, and I hadn't seen them since the day I'd graduated college. Not that they were bad parents or I begrudged them their happy retirement, but we didn't really talk much.

The only other family I'd ever had and known personally, my mother's mother, was gone.

But what she'd left me? I still had that. An old three-story colonial house in the small town of Cider Landing, four hours' drive from the city.

My phone rang: Mr. Warren.

“Bailey,” I answered by rote.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, Bailey?” My boss growled down the line.

I smiled, a half-mad, feral kind of smile, but I knew he couldn’t see it, so I shook myself and answered. “Beatrice from HR said I need to use my vacation or lose it. So I’m using it. I’m sure you’re not calling to try to illegally coerce me into not using my job benefits, Mr. Warren.”

There was silence on the line for a moment, then a deep sigh. “I’ll postpone the Crosslife meeting as long as I can, but you’d better be back in the office the second your vacation is done, and I expect utter perfection this time.”

Of course. He was expecting me to work while on vacation. The jackass.

I didn’t answer, just hung up.

A moment later, Tom called. This time I was already speaking when I accepted the call, “I’m not playing this political bullshit, Tom. I wanted to do my job and get paid for it, and apparently that’s not an option. He told me I’m not getting a bonus for the Crosslife account. You want the account? Have it.”

Without waiting for him to respond, I hung up. Then I turned my phone off. I wasn’t required to answer my phone. I was on vacation.

I threw casual clothes into a duffel bag, then thinking about three entire weeks away from my apartment, filled another as well. One bag in my left hand and another slung over my shoulder, I paused on my way to the door, and looked at where my computer was still sitting on the couch.

My computer, with every bit of work I'd done for Crosslife on it, and not backed up on a company server or in the cloud, because Warren didn't approve of clouds of information he couldn't see and control. A grin on my face that probably would have gotten me shoved in a straitjacket and padded cell in some places, I snatched the thing up and stuffed it into one of my bags.

If James Warren wanted Crosslife ads, he could make new ones himself.

Fuck that guy.

I was on my way to my grandmother's old house in Cider Landing, and no one could stop me. No one was there to step on me, and I was fucking done being stepped on.

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Peter

“P eter, Peter,” Will sang, “gangly, awkward Peter.”

I stalked through the trees, my fists clenched at my sides. I couldn't roughhouse with the kids anymore—not now that I was bigger than them. What could I do when they came for me? I didn't want to hurt them, even if I sometimes thought about strangling them and chucking them out of the highest parts of a tree.

Wasn't like they'd get hurt. We could all fly.

It just didn't look right. I was bigger than they were. Hadn't always been, but I was now, and it'd made everything...worse.

The lost kids weren't supposed to grow up. We weren't supposed to change at all.

“Tall as a tree trunk, stinks like a real skunk, Peter's halfway grown.”

The other kids broke down in peals of laughter. I spun on them, glaring.

“Shut up.”

“Whatcha gonna do if I don't, Peter?” Will asked, brandishing his wooden sword above his head.

I wasn't in the mood to play.

"Leave me alone." I marched through the woods, leaves wet and cold underfoot. Weird, how the cold only bothered me at times like this, when I was angry and lost in the wrong kind of way. Not the fun, adventurous sort of lost, but the sad kind that hurt and made you want to cry.

It was a stupid kind of lost. I hadn't even realized it was a thing until Everett's grandma's dog, Bandit, got lost and he'd been sad about it. He'd cried, and we'd gone to find him.

But before that? Lost was good. Lost was the way we were supposed to be.

I'd never thought it'd make anybody cry.

Maybe people only cried over dogs.

At times like this, when the ground was wet and cold and the sky turned bleak and my body felt too heavy to fly, I went off on my own.

Sometimes, I went into town.

I didn't know what to do with myself in Cider Landing, not really. The people there weren't my friends, weren't my family. Not like the lost kids were. Not like Aurora.

But it was nice to go into town and not see friends or family. Nobody knew me, so they didn't realize that I was different than I should've been. Different than everybody else.

Sure, sometimes shopkeepers looked at me strangely, their eyes narrowed like I was going to steal something. Honestly? Seemed fair enough. Sometimes I would steal

something—a ball, a toy. I'd bring it back with me into the woods, and I'd tuck it away in the knot of an old, hollow tree and keep it to myself.

We had toys in the woods, wooden swords and pirate hats and swings and adventures, but I wanted a piece of the town. Hadn't always, but some things were harder to let go of than others.

The suspicion the people of Cider Landing cast on me wasn't all that bad, either. Thing was, the shopkeepers in town seemed to glare at all teenage boys like they might cause trouble. Or most teenage boys got that narrow-eyed look.

Never Everett. They'd all smiled at Everett and asked after his grandma, and when we went to the candy store, they let him take an extra scoop of chocolates, and I'd stood there in awe of him.

Point was, it was normal for me to get those looks from people in Cider Landing, and normal was...I didn't know. I didn't know if it was nice or terrible or both, but it was different, like me.

Sometimes, I just shoved my hands in my pockets and scuffed my feet down the sidewalk to be around people. Families. Moms and dads and kids and?—

Well, they all reminded me of stuff I'd had once. Stuff I'd really thought was worth changing for while I had it, but then it was gone, and now I was stuck.

Going into town made it feel less like I'd made a huge mistake. People in town changed all the time—every day. It seemed exhausting. If these people weren't doomed, maybe I wasn't either.

Well, except when they looked at me, really looked, sometimes the kinder ones would ask if I was all right. They'd wonder where my shoes were, where my parents

were.

I told them I didn't have parents, and they'd go pale and blink a lot. They'd look for a police officer, promise to help, and the second they turned around, I'd disappear.

Magic came in handy sometimes.

All I could ever do in Cider Landing was stand at the fringes and look in. I wasn't a part of town, but I wasn't sure I was part of the lost kids anymore either.

Somebody had found me. I'd had a friend here once: Everett.

I'd found him in the woods, sitting in the sun, drawing. We didn't have colored pencils in the woods like he did. No fancy paper and notebooks and stuff. We had sticks to draw in the dirt, but Everett? He made magic on paper.

I'd been running away from the other kids, crying because, well—I didn't remember anymore. Didn't want to think about it. Definitely didn't like crying.

But there Everett had been, and he hadn't been like the others. He'd looked up at me, calm and in a kind of daze. Then he'd smiled and said, "Hey."

I could've watched him draw for hours, for days, but that wasn't everything he did. He had pizza. He watched movies with his mom and dad and grandma. He ate popcorn on the couch and licked the butter off his fingers. He had toys made of plastic that were robots and trains and cars that zipped across the pavement when you pulled them back.

Most of all, he grew up, and for the first time in my life, I hadn't wanted to get left behind.

Inch by inch, little by little, I'd grown up with him. As long as I had Everett, I didn't care that the lost kids thought I was getting even weirder.

Everett hadn't. He'd liked me as I was, no matter if I grew an inch or ten.

And then, he'd left.

His parents were moving back to the city and he was going with them. I'd told him to stay, begged, even shouted. He had to stay. Didn't he understand I—I'd given up so much for him? Wasn't it enough?

But he had to go, and he gave me a stupid picture of Bandit folded in half and then again, and he told me he'd come visit his grandma the next summer and we could play then.

Only...he hadn't. Or he had and I'd missed him because I didn't want to come out of the woods and change even more. I didn't want him not to show up and leave me feeling like a fool for nothing.

What I wanted was my friend, and I couldn't have him, so what was the point?

When I got to town, I didn't know where I was going. My thoughts were all swirly and dark, and I wanted them to go away. Far away. Fly farther than any of me or the other kids ever had and just disappear.

But they were stuck in my head, and my feet carried me toward Everett's gran's house.

I hated him. Every single day, I hated him for leaving me. But at times like this...well, I missed him too. I had to, or my heart wouldn't squeeze like this, all hard and hurting.

The house was different than it'd been when Everett lived there. Quiet.

I didn't know how long it'd been since Everett's gran had left. A while, probably. I'd walked out here half a dozen times, but she was never there.

The dog had gone away a long time before that.

Now, the paint was peeling. The shutters hung at odd angles. The roof had a strange sag in the middle.

It felt like Cider Landing had forgotten this place, just like it'd forgotten me. And, well, the house was mine then.

With a heavy sigh, I dropped into the rusty, creaky swing in the side yard where Everett and I used to play, and I swayed this way and that. It was too much work to stretch out my legs, to try and get higher and higher.

Nope, my feet were stuck on the ground.

I didn't look up at the sound of a car driving over damp pavement. There were so many cars now, their wheels all fat and black. I liked the old kinds with thinner wheels, how they bumped and jostled over the roads, how high and funny their horns were.

"Thank you," a man said.

Something about the voice?—

I looked up, and a man was waving off the driver, looking down at an illuminated brick phone thing in his hand.

Then he raised his head, and those eyes?—

I knew those eyes. Blue as cornflower and a clear day's sky.

Everett.

Oh god, he was even more different now, with his hair neatly brushed back and a hard jaw and—and he was tall.

He was grown up.

My stomach dropped. I froze, staring, because?—

Because Everett .

He looked up at the house, and something came over his face. “Jesus,” he whispered.

I flinched. My feet scrambled through the muddy earth, but I couldn't stop myself moving fast enough. The chains of the swing squeaked, and Everett looked my way.

For one split second, our eyes met.

Then, I disappeared, racing back to the woods on a rush of magic.

No, I was not going to throw myself into his path and greet him like an old friend. The last time Everett was here, things started changing. I started changing.

And I couldn't imagine anything worse in the world than that.

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Everett

A pparently, I was losing my shit.

Seeing ghosts of the past standing around the yard seemed especially healthy. When the kid turned and ran, I tried to shake it off. It hadn't been him. It couldn't have been him. The kid had been...well, a kid, and Peter was my age. He'd be pushing thirty by now.

It wasn't the world's biggest surprise that I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown, really. I'd put myself in a truly terrible situation. Yeah, fine, my boss had put me in a terrible situation, and I'd made it worse by not going along quietly and agreeing to work eighty-hour weeks in exchange for no extra compensation.

When I got back to the office, I was either going to be fired or told that I was required to work even more hours to make up for my vacation, and there was no longer any chance I was going places in the company.

But . . . had there ever been a chance?

I'd been there for years, and watched the revolving door of young artists and writers coming in, working their asses off, getting disillusioned, and leaving. I'd just lasted longer than most of them, convinced that if only I proved myself, my loyalty, to the company, I'd be the next Tom. I'd someday be the venerable artist who had made it and was a mainstay at the company.

I'd be the one telling people they just had to work harder, and they too could earn five-figure bonuses.

Except I was starting to think that Tom was a carrot on a stick, and no one under the age of fifty was ever going to earn more than the smallest amount James Warren could get by with paying them.

So there was a good chance that in three weeks I was going to be looking for a job.

Maybe it was a good idea to start during my vacation, in fact. I had my computer with me, so it wasn't an unreasonable thought.

The moment I stepped into the driveway of my grandmother's fabulous old house, though, all thoughts of cleaning up my CV and looking for a new job fled my mind.

The house was falling the fuck apart.

When grandma's lawyer had told me about the inheritance, he'd said the taxes on the property were low because "its value had been impacted by some necessary repairs," but I'd clearly had no idea what he'd meant. The charming old place where I'd spent years of my childhood now looked like a house from a horror movie, where the main characters had been dared to spend a night, and if they succeeded, they'd be given a million dollars.

Of course, no one ever succeeded. They were always brutally murdered by ghosts or Oscar Mayers or something. What could I say? I didn't really watch horror movies. The real world sucked too much; I preferred my fictional worlds to be happy ones. Or at least fun. Not murderous. Cartoon mouse universe for the fucking win.

Too late to think about staying home instead, though, so I trooped up to the front door, let myself in with the key I'd been given, and stepped inside my grandmother's

house for the first time since I was eighteen.

A breeze blew through the foyer, hitting me as I stepped inside. There must be an open window somewhere in the house. Or just as likely, a broken one. Either way, that probably wasn't good, since the place had been empty since my grandmother's death some five years earlier.

I'd wanted to come back every summer of my teen years—no, the truth was that I'd never wanted to leave. We'd lived with my grandmother for four years in my childhood, starting when I was ten. And then my dad had gotten a new job in the city, and that had been the end of that. It didn't matter that all my friends were in Cider Landing, or that I'd have been perfectly happy to stay with my grandmother forever—I'd always gotten along with her better than my corporate shark lawyer father and MLM-loving, PTA-attending mother. It didn't matter that my grandmother had agreed, and said she'd be happy to have me stay. My parents had decided to go, so I'd been required to go too.

I'd begged and wheedled, shouted and cried, and it hadn't mattered. I had been a kid, and I didn't get a say in my life.

At first, they'd promised to let me come back in the summer. Then summer had come, and when my father had found me in my room packing a bag the day school ended, he'd laughed and said he'd just agreed so I'd stop being so melodramatic, and he'd expected me to be over it by now.

No, of course I wasn't allowed to go spend the summer with my grandmother, now go play outside.

Wandering through the halls, looking for the source of the breeze, I was almost inundated with memories of the place. We'd lived with grandma for four beautiful years. The best years of my life. We'd eaten holiday meals in the old formal dining

room. She'd taught me to cook in the homey gold kitchen—something I still absolutely loved to do, and didn't get to do enough of, because I was too busy working. I ran my hand along the wide banister as I went upstairs—at age ten, I used to hop up onto the sturdy wood and slide down.

After we left when I was fourteen, I hadn't been able to step foot back in the house again until after my eighteenth birthday, when my parents no longer held sway over me. I'd rushed out there, bag packed, and gone in immediate search of...of Peter.

My first friend.

My best friend.

The first boy I'd ever kissed.

My first love.

I'd asked my grandmother about him, and she'd given me a funny look and said she didn't really know all the kids in town, but he didn't sound familiar.

Didn't sound familiar.

I'd spent four years wandering the woods around the house with Peter, bringing him home for movie night, refusing to spend time with anyone but him at my birthday parties, and...well, he'd been more important to me than my mostly absent parents, who'd wanted me to be more self-sustaining, so they could have social lives. He'd been more important than anyone.

How could she not remember him?

And I'd spent the entirety of my eighteenth summer wandering Cider Landing, asking

after him. No one remembered a Peter my age. Maybe his family had moved away, they had suggested. He didn't sound familiar at all. Maybe I'd known him somewhere else—like I didn't remember sitting on my grandmother's back porch eating snow cones in the summer and trying to make her porch swing into a blanket fort in the fall.

But no.

There hadn't been a sign of him.

And that had been when I'd truly realized that my childhood was lost. I didn't know Peter's last name. Hadn't ever met his family, except once, there had been an angelic little blonde girl he'd called Aurora, who I thought was maybe his sister. She'd given me a sad smile and said if I was taking Peter away, she hoped we were happy.

I wished I had taken him away with me.

He'd never taken me home with him, or even told me where he lived.

In short, Peter of no last name and no home...had never existed.

I'd spent the following year, my first year of college, in twice weekly therapy, half convinced I was schizophrenic and had made him up. My therapist had assured me that it wasn't all that strange for children to fail to exchange last names, but I knew better. I knew better than anyone, Peter had been the most important person in my life for four years, and there was something wrong with me not knowing more about him.

I'd recalled odd conversations with him about where he lived—conversations where he'd sort of awkwardly changed the subject. My therapist thought maybe he was poor and ashamed of his home. It wasn't that unusual, she said, over and over. Wasn't unusual for me to not know his name, or where he lived, or what his dad's name was.

We'd been children, after all. It hadn't been serious.

Nothing a fourteen-year-old ever did had the ability to be serious, it seemed.

The upstairs of the house was in even worse shape than the downstairs. I could smell mildew, and finally found the open window—not broken, thank goodness—in the previous main bedroom where my grandmother had lived and died. The window next to the bed was sitting open, and the rain must have been getting in for five years. I sighed and went over to close it, but the damage was done. The carpet and mattress and everything would have to go. Not that I'd expected anyone to ever again sleep in the bed my grandmother had died in.

I'd never been able to make my therapist understand that Peter had been the most real, most serious person in my life. Closer to me than my parents, more important than any other friend or boyfriend or family I'd ever had.

That couldn't possibly be true. Family was always the most important, I was assured again and again, by everyone. An absent, manipulative father and a mother more interested in wine night with her PTA friends than me—they were who I should care most about. That was “normal.”

And somehow, I had a hard time remembering what color my father's eyes were. Everyone told me he and I looked exactly alike, so blue, I supposed. They would know better than me.

Peter's clear, hazel eyes that had seemed to become more green or brown with his moods? Those, I could never forget. Especially filled with tears as he told me that if I really loved him, I would stay. I'd stay forever, and never leave.

They'd been so green that day; almost as green as a stormy, wind-swept sea.

I found myself in my own childhood room. The purple room, my grandmother had called it, and she'd argued with my father constantly about whether it was appropriate for a young man to sleep in a room decorated in purple. The purple had been why I'd loved it, even though sadly, most of it was so pale that it looked white now, bleached by the sun after so many years. Even when I was younger, it had been a pastel purple, which was never my favorite shade.

I ran my fingers over the windowsill, having to swallow down the emotion that welled up at the sight. It was still nailed shut. My father had done that when he'd caught me with a duffel bag of clothes, trying to squeeze myself out the window and down the tree outside it, to run away. To stay with Peter forever, even though I still had no idea where he had lived.

Even more strangely, there I was, more than a decade later, with a college degree and a career, and still wishing I'd managed it. That I'd been able to sneak into the woods and stay there. At the time, I'd have lived in a freaking tree to stay with Peter.

I wasn't sure it wouldn't have been a better life, even now.

It wasn't like working for James Warren was a prize of a life. No doubt my father would say something about how he warned me that being an artist wasn't a real job, even if I dressed it up in marketing to make it look respectable.

I scanned the backyard as I stood there, but there was no sign of the young man from before. I'd been imagining it. He hadn't looked like Peter at all. I'd just made a mistake in the dark.

Peter was gone, and maybe...maybe he'd never existed at all. Maybe coming back to Cider Landing had been a mistake, even for just three weeks. Already, it was making me long for things I could never have back.

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4

Peter

It was strange, to watch the lights flicker on in Everett's grandma's house for the first time in years. Finally, the place was something other than a dark, empty nothing, a void surrounded by the full lives of everyone around it.

For the first time in years, it wasn't my place. It fit in with their world again, not mine.

All along the street, houses had been draped in twinkling lights. The holidays were coming. Sometimes, people would sing in the streets.

Seeing people do something different, something silly, just for the sake of it, always made me feel a little lighter. I was looking forward to that—caroling or whatever. I'd never done it, but I watched most years, hiding in the trees.

It was just Everett in the house—not his parents or a dog or a friend. Not a...well, Everett looked like the right age to have a person he loved, to start a family, to have all that. But he'd come back alone, and a sharp, brittle shard deep in my heart wanted to laugh aloud. He'd left me, but he was still alone too! See? I wasn't the only one. Nothing was wrong with me.

And then there was the other part that was sad, that felt lonely and forgotten. That part was afraid Everett had gotten lost too. That...hurt. Everett's smile was the brightest thing in the world, even on a clear summer day. I didn't want him to have

lost it.

I wanted?—

I wanted to snatch him off the sidewalk, fly high into the sky, and let him go so he'd know what it was like to feel like he was falling, doomed, helpless. And I wanted to pin up a blanket and crawl under it with flashlights and cheese crackers and apple slices and him , and never come out.

Mostly, I didn't know what I wanted, but I knew what I had to do.

I had to sit right there in that old swing, the rubber dry and cracked with age, and watch him move around his grandmother's kitchen. Watch him pace with his phone pressed to his ear, a furrow on his brow. Watch him argue with someone on the other end.

I had to watch him drink tea alone at his kitchen table and sit in front of a folding lit screen on the table for a long, long time and run his fingers through his hair in frustration.

I had to wait and hope that he saw me and pray that he never did. I had to know that he'd left me, that I wasn't anyone to him, and that I should go back to the woods.

I had to sit there anyway, stuck.

“Whatcha doin’?” Jessie asked from behind me, wrapping their arms around my neck and dropping their sharp little chin on my shoulder to look where I was looking.

When I pushed the balls of my feet into the ground and swung back and forth, they picked their feet off the ground and squeezed harder, their little arms almost choking me. Almost. If I could be choked.

“Don’t hurt him,” Aurora chided, sitting in the seat beside me, her skirts billowing out as the swing swayed.

Jessie puffed out a breath and put their feet back down. “I’m sorry,” they whispered in my ear.

I shook my head. “It’s okay. It didn’t hurt.”

No, it was just the tight, choking feeling that I was already used to. Just seeing Everett made me feel like that. I couldn’t even say it was Jessie’s fault.

Jessie held onto the bar of the swing set and let themselves fall, twisting around it with a put-upon sigh. Aurora looked at me with her brow cocked.

“They missed you,” she said quietly.

“Sorry,” I whispered back, no feeling behind it.

She shrugged, glancing toward the house. “You’ve been spending a lot of time here since he came back. Is that the same one as before?”

My turn to shrug. “I guess so.”

No, I knew, but she didn’t need to realize how far gone I was. We didn’t have to talk about it.

Aurora sighed through her nose as Jessie spun around and around the bar, their arms outstretched, leaning back to look at the purple sky.

“It’s okay, you know,” Aurora said after a while. I felt her gaze on the side of my face and swallowed.

“What’s okay?”

“If it’s time.”

A pile of rocks dropped in my stomach. “Time for what?”

Another sigh, this one even quieter. “We can’t all play forever,” she mumbled, almost like she didn’t want Jessie to hear, or Will, wherever he was. This was just for her and me. “Maybe”—she shifted her swing to the side and bumped against me gently—“maybe I’ll even grow up one day, and it’ll be a new adventure.”

At that, I couldn’t avoid looking at her anymore. What she said was impossible, sick, even. I threw out my hand to feel her forehead, and she giggled.

“I’m fine, Peter, really. I’m just saying that it’s okay?—”

“It isn’t. I’m not going anywhere, Rora. I’d never leave you and the kids. Never ever, so don’t even say—just don’t say that, okay? Don’t ever say it again.”

Her smile softened and softened until it disappeared completely. “I won’t say it, but it’s still okay, no matter what.”

“Yup!” I sounded too bright, too chipper, as I got out of the swing and held out my hand for Jessie. “Everything’s fine. But we’re going home, which is extra fine. More than okay. Home is great, right, Jessie?”

They beamed up at me, squeezing my hand hard. “Can we play pirates?”

“Yes. Absolutely. We are definitely playing pirates.”

And we weren’t ever going to think about what was okay and what wasn’t ever again.

5

Everett

The grocery store in Cider Landing was exactly as I remembered. Not a major national chain, but a tiny mom-and-pop shop, or in this case, grandmom-and-pop shop, as the couple who ran it were older than literally anyone else I'd ever known.

I wouldn't have been surprised if someone told me they were both over a hundred, but still, he was in the produce section, arranging heavy watermelons, and she was at the register, ringing up orders with fingers that were nimbler than mine. I could only hope to be in that kind of shape at their age.

She looked up as I watched, and winked at me. "Don't you worry, young man, I know how to handle a cucumber."

I had to work not to wince at what had to be an unintentional innuendo. Right? "Of course, ma'am."

"You call me Marsha," she insisted. "And that old coot who's pretending he can't hear anyone who asks for help is Ezra."

"You let me work, woman," he called over, though he had a grin on his face. "The customers leave me be, so I don't know why you've got to make everything harder."

She absolutely cackled at that, shooting back that she liked things hard, and he stopped and facepalmed.

Dear gods. They were sexual innuendos.

Were they a hundred, or twelve?

“It’s young Mr. Bailey, isn’t it?” Marsha asked, dragging my attention, however unwillingly, back to her. “Living in Mimi’s old house?”

It was weird hearing my grandmother called a real name, let alone a nickname for one. My parents had both always called her “Mother,” not “Mom” or “Marilyn” or anything even mildly less formal. So the least formal thing I’d ever heard her called had been “Grandma,” by myself.

I nodded. “Yeah, I...think I am, anyway. I’m a little worried the place is going to fall apart under me, but I guess that just means it’s good I arrived when I did. I didn’t realize the house was in such awful shape.”

Marsha’s wicked expression turned soft and sympathetic, and she nodded. “Mimi started to struggle at keeping the house up at the end, poor dear. And now it’s been a couple years, so everything is even worse. We all tried to help while she was alive, but”—she motioned to a bulletin board posted at the front of the store—“as you can see, everyone in Cider Landing is looking for a handyperson these days.”

I glanced the board over, and sure enough, it was covered with requests. Carpentry, drywall, painting...Was there no one at all in town who fixed things? That was going to be a problem for me. I could get someone to come in from the nearest town, but I suspected that was going to be ridiculously expensive. Expensive, while I was in the middle of considering leaving my job.

Fuck me.

I shook it off and turned back to her. “I saw a kid out behind my house when I got

here. He, um, he reminded me of an old friend of mine. Peter. You don't remember him, do you?"

She cocked her head to one side, considering. "The last Peter I knew in town was Peter Hawking. Strange man. Town doctor for years and years. But he was old when I was a girl. No Peters I know of now."

"I remember him," Ezra said, coming over to set one of the watermelons with my groceries, even though I hadn't taken one when I'd chosen my food. They did look excellent, though—odd, for this time of year. "Worked hard to make it okay to have a head doctor here in town, even way back when I was a boy. Everyone said it was because his mother went round the bend, so he wanted people to have help with their brains."

Given they were talking about small-town America in...hell, I didn't know, anywhere between the thirties and the seventies, that was impressive. There were grown-ass progressive city-dwellers I knew currently, who still thought psychology was the next best thing to witchcraft.

"I remember the stories," Marsha said, staring off into space, eyes seeing something much farther than the back wall of the shop. "She kept telling everyone that the fairies had stolen her son, even though he was right there. Poor man. She never did accept him."

I shivered at the thought. My mother had never been the most demonstrably loving person, but to have a mother who outright said I wasn't her child? That was true nightmare fodder. If he'd managed to go become a doctor after that and change things for the residents of Cider Landing regarding their mental health, he had been a hell of a man.

Marsha shook her head. "Anyway. Nope. No Peters in town I know of. No Petes. No

Peteys. Sorry.”

I sighed and frowned, crossing my arms over my chest. “He was here, though. When we lived here fifteen years ago, my best friend’s name was Peter. I don’t think he was driving in from the next town over, since we were fourteen at the time.”

Marsha didn’t look surprised or even seem to reconsider whether she was right or not, just shook her head and gave a light-hearted shrug. “Maybe he’s one of those fairies that stole Mrs. Hawking’s son.”

Ezra’s expression was sympathetic as he stuffed the melon into my cart along with the bags of groceries, but he didn’t say anything.

I opened my mouth to tell him I hadn’t bought the melon, but he shook his head and patted me on the shoulder. “It’s Cider Landing, kiddo. Sometimes imaginary friends are less imaginary than our parents think.”

Marsha laughed, and as I left, turned and spoke to her husband. “You know, I had had an imaginary friend as a child. Aurora, the forest princess. I’d almost entirely forgotten that.”

When I looked back at Ezra, his smile was strained and sad as he looked at his wife.

I couldn’t get that expression out of my head the whole drive home, or as I unloaded the groceries into the kitchen cabinets and fridge—a fridge that thankfully still worked, even if it sounded a little like it had a jet engine instead of a tiny home appliance motor.

Finally finished, I decided I needed to wash Grandma’s kitchenware. I was sure she’d done it before putting everything away, but that had been years ago, and since, they’d been sitting in the cabinets gathering dust.

Just as I finished the first load of dishes and started the old dishwasher, I caught a flash of something white out in the backyard. Lace?

Yes, lace. A frothy white lace dress, on a little girl with perfect golden curls.

Aurora, my brain supplied. She looked just like Peter's sister Aurora.

Aurora, the forest princess.

But that was fucking ridiculous, because Marsha the grocery store owner's imaginary friend hadn't been real, and if she had been, she'd be a hundred years old, like Marsha.

But a second later, my eyes were snatched off the lovely little girl, because there he was. The boy who looked just like Peter.

Before I even formed a plan in my head, I was racing for the back door. Maybe everyone in town was going to pretend there wasn't and hadn't ever been a Peter, but this boy wouldn't. I didn't doubt that for a second. He knew Peter—he had to.

And if Peter was married with a teenage son...well, he'd gotten started on that pretty early, but that could be okay. If—if he was married, I could learn to deal with that. And if he was divorced, well, I'd never thought about having kids before, but I wasn't absolutely against it.

Fuck me, I didn't even know if Peter was alive yet, and I was considering adoption of random kids just to get him back.

But I was. I was totally considering that. I hadn't been truly happy in my life since the last day I'd seen Peter. I would give anything to have him back. Anything at all.

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6

Peter

I was staring in Everett's window again.

Since he'd come back to town, I could hardly do anything else.

I tried to shake myself out of it sometimes, go back to the kids and play and be the same Peter I always had been, but just like before, Everett had put a hook in me and was tugging me along, ruining everything just by being there.

Well, back then, I hadn't thought he was ruining everything. He'd been like the sun, shedding new light on all my games and all my toys and everything I wanted. He'd made it all better .

And then he'd left. That was when he'd started ruining things.

"Are you going to talk to him?" Aurora asked quietly.

This time, she'd come alone. I was standing in the backyard at the edge of the tree line. Between us and the house, there was one big oak where his grandma had hung a tire swing. It was gone now, but me and Everett would sit on it together and spin back and forth, this way and that.

Now, he was in the kitchen doing something that looked like the exact opposite of swinging.

“Why would I talk to him?” I snapped.

Aurora shrugged. “Because it’s probably better for you than standing out here alone.”

My eyes only narrowed into smaller slits.

“And because he’s your friend,” she added, even quieter.

He had been my friend, sure, but that was a very different thing than staying my friend.

Friends didn’t leave. Friends stayed with you and played forever and never, ever asked you to change.

Not that Everett had asked, exactly . . .

“He is not my—” I started, turning my glare on Aurora at the same time that her eyes went wide.

“Uh oh,” she whispered.

A second later, the back door banged open, hitting the kitchen wall, and Everett himself leapt out into the yard.

Aurora spun and disappeared, but me? I was stunned. I wasn’t thinking clearly. I just stood there, frozen in—in something like terror, as Everett staggered over the soft ground toward me.

Even if he was different now, taller and more—more like his dad, I wanted him to rush up to me. I wanted him to throw his arms around me and say he was so happy to see me. I wanted things to go back to how they’d been before he’d abandoned me and

ruined everything.

“Hi,” Everett said, out of breath, tipping forward but with his hands outstretched like he was trying to calm down a spooked dog. “Hi, please don’t run. I’m—I’m Everett.”

That knocked me out of my shock, at least a little.

“Yeah,” I said, “duh.”

He nodded fast, straightening his back, trying to smile even when it wavered on his lips. “So you...know who I am?”

What the heck? “Obviously.”

“Great. That’s...That’s so great. I—I think I knew your dad? He must’ve told you about me?”

Um, no he didn’t. I didn’t have a dad.

I scowled at him, leaning back and crossing my arms.

“I’d really like to—to see him again. You see, I just got back to town, and we—well, we were friends, back when we were your age. Really good friends.”

Yeah, before Everett had gone and gotten all stubbly on his face and weird. Why was he so tall now? I hated how much taller than me he’d gotten. That wasn’t fair. None of this was fair.

“It’d mean the world to me if we could catch up,” he said, “and I was hoping maybe you could—if you could let him know I’m looking for him?—”

“Why are you looking for my dad ?” I spat. There I was, right in front of him, and he wanted my freaking dad? Was that all he had to say to me?

“Well, yeah. Like I said, we were friends.”

I stared at him, unsure what to say. Did he...was he talking about me ? Couldn't he recognize me?

He couldn't want to see me enough to get all tongue-tied and sparkle-eyed like this. If he did, then why had he left ?

“What's your name?” Everett asked, leaning in again, like he was afraid I'd bolt and he wanted to catch me before I could. His eyes were wide, the whites obvious all around that sparkly blue.

“Really?” I shot back at him. “You don't even know my name ? I?—”

What the heck was I supposed to do with that? It was one thing for Everett to have left me, but to have forgotten me completely? We'd been best friends for years .

I remembered sitting there in the dark in front of the box television when his grandma was asleep and his parents had gone out to dinner for a date night, both of us on the floor in front of the couch with our legs stretched out under the coffee table. We said it was because it was easier to get the snacks, but it was more than that.

Really, it was just easier to sit close to each other if we sat on the floor. It was easier to sneak our hands together under the coffee table without wondering who was going to catch us or if they'd have something to say about it.

We could sit there and watch a movie and bump our knees together. And I could still remember watching him from the corner of my eyes as the blue glow of the television

fell over his face, remember catching him looking back at me and the way it felt when everything fell away and we stared at each other, the movie forgotten. I remembered biting my lip and feeling a spark in my chest that was almost, almost like flying. I remembered the thrill of knowing that something was going to happen but not knowing what, the rush of warmth in my cheeks as I started to smile.

I remembered when he turned my way, the way his throat bobbed when he swallowed, how slowly he leaned in. Close and close and closer still.

And then, I remembered the warmth of his lips, how they tasted salty-sweet like the Cracker Jacks we'd been eating. We hadn't known what we were doing, but that hadn't mattered because kissing him felt nice, felt right. He was Everett and I was Peter and I could hold tight to his hand while he closed his eyes and his dark brown lashes fanned across his cheeks.

I could close my eyes too, and then there was just his mouth on mine, the warmth of his breath against my skin.

He'd made a little sound, almost like a hum, and my heart had swollen big in my chest and I'd been so, so damned happy because this —this was something new for both of us and it was fun and tingly and perfect and ours .

And then the light in the foyer had come on, and we'd both jumped back, turning to the TV with red cheeks. The credits were rolling when his parents came in, but I didn't know for how long.

They checked on us, asked about the movie, asked if I was staying the night, and when they left, even if we were too embarrassed to kiss again, Everett had reached for me under the table and threaded his fingers between mine.

That night, I'd hoped for so much .

Now, my lips trembled. My eyes stung as I stared at him. And gods, I hated that tickling track down my cheek when I started to?—

I wasn't crying! I didn't cry . That was stupid. I'd have to be an idiot to cry over a boy who couldn't even remember my name.

“Don't you dare ,” I hissed, my voice hitching even as I stuck out my chin. “Don't you dare say you don't remember me, Everett Bailey.” He flinched at the way his name came out of my mouth, hissed and angry. “I won't ever forgive you. I swear I won't.”

He blinked at me, and I watched the color drain out of his face. His hair was darker now, or maybe it was just the twilight sky that'd turned the strands of golden-brown invisible. It made his face seem all the paler.

“Do you . . . know Peter?” he croaked.

A growl tore out of me. “You're so stupid !”

I spun and took off into the trees, running fast, no thought for the branches that lashed out and scratched at my skin. They didn't matter. The cold underfoot didn't matter.

All that mattered was getting away. Away from him, away from Cider Landing, away from everything .

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7

Everett

I stared after where the young man had disappeared into the woods, my head and heart aching, eyes stinging in a way that was almost entirely unfamiliar.

Was I crying?

I didn't cry. How many times had my mother reminded me in my childhood that boys weren't supposed to cry? I thought I'd gotten over the urge. I hadn't even cried when Warren had taken credit for my work like I would have as a kid, those hot tears of frustrated anger and helplessness that used to boil over when something was hurtful and out of my control. Like when my parents had told me we were moving away from Cider Landing, and no, I didn't have a say or any recourse.

But there it was, that familiar sensation, like something hot pricking at my eyes.

Why had he been so angry?

Don't you dare say you don't remember me, Everett Bailey .

Him? The boy? He looked like Peter, sure, but he couldn't be Peter. It wasn't possible. He was a preteen, or at most a teenager. He looked just like Peter had the last time I'd seen him, more than fifteen years ago. It simply wasn't possible for a person to remain a teenager for that long.

My mind went back to Marsha at the grocery store.

The last Peter I knew in town was Peter Hawking .

He'd been old when she was a child, she'd said. Still, it was a place to start, and since the boy was gone, and I was no kind of runner—I loved myself too much for that brand of torture, thank you very much—I wasn't going to chase after him.

So instead, I went into the house and opened my laptop.

It took a moment, since I also had to hunt down my charger, but thankfully, the electricity in the house worked just fine, so once I found my stuff, I got right down to business, researching Peter Hawking in Cider Landing.

It hardly took any effort at all, because the man truly had done impressive things, and even had his own Wikipedia page. He'd spent a long career as a doctor championing mental health among a class of people who often ignored it even now, a hundred years later. He'd been a literal contemporary of Sigmund Freud, born in the late eighteen-fifties, so he'd been doing this during the birth of the idea of psychology as a science.

Most of the pictures available of him online were like Freud's when he was older, with gray hair and sad, knowing eyes.

But there, tucked into the article about his life, was one photograph of him in his early twenties, with a forlorn older woman who stared off into space to one side of the camera, while he looked at her. The paragraph under the picture said it was Peter and his mother Eloise, circa eighteen-eighty, soon after his father's death.

Peter's mother believed that her son had been taken away by the fairies, the article said, and she never acknowledged him, his work, or the care he took of her, claiming

that he was a changeling the fairies had left in her son's place, and that she could still see "the real Peter" sometimes, playing in the woods.

The article would have simply been sad, if it hadn't been for Peter Hawking. In the black and white photo, you could only tell that his hair and eyes were dark, but the elfin features, sharp nose, chin, and cheekbones, were unmistakable.

The twenty-something young man could have been a clone of my Peter, just a few years older. My Peter, who had spent the entire time I knew him playing in the woods.

By some impossible miracle of technology, the printer on the desk in my grandmother's office still had ink in it, and even more shocking, it connected to my computer and worked. On the first try. It was almost like when an actor in a movie put a USB drive into a computer, and you couldn't help but roll your eyes because it just automatically went in on their first try, and they didn't have to flip it over, and then flip it over again when it still didn't fit.

Either way, it only took about ten minutes before I managed to print out a copy of the picture of Peter Hawking and his mother, full size. Then I sat and stared at it for a long time.

It was him. It wasn't a man who could have been his brother, or his father, or anything so simple and explainable. It was Peter.

No one else would have the exact same features, unless they were fucking twins, and given that Doctor Hawking had lived from eighteen fifty-seven to nineteen fifty-three, well...twins wasn't really a rational option either.

So what was?

Magic?

Motherfucking fairies, kidnapping Eloise Hawking's son and replacing him with a different baby, and Peter, my Peter , spending the last hundred and sixty years playing in the woods, never aging?

It would explain why he'd been so pissed about me asking for his father. Because if I was Everett and he was Peter and I was asking for someone other than him, that was awful and hurtful. It made my heart twist just to think about it; the idea that seeing my best friend again for the first time in so long, I might have asked for his father while looking right at him.

But also, it was ridiculous. Fairies weren't real and magic didn't exist and Peter was my age. He was thirty. Not still fourteen, and not a hundred and sixty-seven.

I was losing my mind. That was the problem. Peter wasn't a fae kidnappee who hadn't aged since before my great-grandmother was born.

Yes, mental illness was a much better explanation.

Grabbing one of the bottles of wine I'd bought at the store and uncorking it, I didn't bother to grab a glass before heading out to the back porch and sitting there on the rickety old swing with my printed picture and my bottle.

Maybe the boy would come back, and I'd be able to get a real explanation out of him. Or maybe the boy didn't exist, and I'd imagined him up because I missed my best friend.

Or maybe...maybe Peter had never existed, and my parents had dragged me out of Cider Landing kicking and screaming because they'd been worried I was imagining up friends who didn't even exist. Friends who looked like doctors who'd died of old

age forty years before I was born.

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8

Peter

I didn't stop running.

Not when I ran past clearings I played in with Timothy and Will and Jessie and Aurora.

Not when I leapt away from trees where I hid my things, the roots packed tight with blankets we would sometimes nap on when the sun was high and warm on our faces.

“Peter!” Jessie called as I ran on. “Are you okay?”

“Did you see him?” I heard Will bark out a laugh. “He looks even older now. He’s ancient .”

Was I? I didn't know. There'd been a lot of sunrises and sunsets in my life, but every day went by like the one before it. Well, every day until Everett had come and things started to change.

I wanted to be alone, and I didn't want to stop where anyone could find me. It wasn't even the other kids that I was afraid of. It was?—

It was Everett, rushing out of his house and asking for my dad .

It was the idea that I'd ever had a dad at all, when clearly, somehow, I'd lost him.

Was that a thing? There were lost kids and we played and it was great. But were there lost dads and lost moms, just like Everett's grandma's lost dog?

All the sudden, sadness crashed over me. It was agony—a branch laden with snow breaking overhead, that chill that got deep in your bones and left you gasping for air.

I hadn't just lost Everett, I'd lost everything, and I couldn't even remember having it. I never...I never had.

I'd had the kids and games and forever; why did that feel so bitter now?

I folded myself into the roots at the base of a big tree and gasped into my knees. I couldn't breathe. Was I?—

What happened when people stopped playing? What happened when they couldn't breathe and couldn't breathe and couldn't breathe and finally, it was too late and they stopped trying?

Had it happened to me? Was it happening right then?

I sobbed into my legs, shivering when small, warm fingers brushed the nape of my neck. I stayed there, like that, knowing Aurora was beside me the whole time. I couldn't stand to lift my head, to meet her eyes, to know that things were different and no matter how hard I wished, they could never go back to what they'd been before.

Now, I knew what it was like not to be able to breathe. I—I knew what it was like, not just to be lost, but to lose...to lose everything.

And I was losing them too! I was—I was going to be something beyond lost, and I was scared. I hadn't ever been scared, not before Everett. Not before he said he was

going away.

I'd pushed it down and down and down and all the while, I'd fallen into that hole I'd carved trying to bury my fear. It was closing over me.

My sobbing got louder, and Aurora whispered soothing noises, finally falling to her knees at my side, wrapping her arms around me tight, pulling me close. Did she know what happened after getting lost? Did she know what came next?

Sometimes, it'd seemed like she knew everything.

"It's okay, Peter," she whispered, her chin pressing into the top of my head. "I promise, it's going to be okay."

"No it's not," I whined, turning into her. My tears soaked the frills of her dress. "It's going to be different. I don't want—" I shivered. If I said the words, that'd make them real, and while they'd been hanging over me for a long time, I—I didn't want them to be real.

"I don't want to leave," I choked out. "I don't want to go."

A fresh wave of tears swelled up inside me, and Aurora hugged me tight. "You don't have to, Peter. You never, ever have to."

My breath shook, but I nodded. Good. That was good. Maybe I just wouldn't, and things would go back to how they'd been. Time would stop feeling heavy, and the hook in my chest that Everett had buried there would disappear, and I'd play. I'd be like I was, not grown up or growing, but just Peter.

"But I think you know it's time," Aurora whispered, her hand on my face, tilting it up. "And that's okay, Peter. It's good."

“It’s awful,” I whispered back. “I’m scared.”

“Yeah.” She nodded, and there was sadness sparkling in her bright blue eyes that I’d never noticed before. “It’s awful and scary too.”

“I don’t want to be different. I don’t want to be alone.”

She shook her head. “You won’t be.”

I flinched. Did she mean Everett? “He left,” I spat, angrier than I could ever be at her.

“He came back too, but I’m not just talking about your friend. Everybody grows up, Peter. We’re the weird ones, and we have a great time, don’t we? But it’s not forever and ever. It’s just for a little while.”

“You haven’t left.” My voice shook when I said it, but Aurora had been there already when I—I didn’t even remember getting there, but some of the kids had come after. All—all of the other kids had come after. I hadn’t remembered that until right then, because once they were there, it was like they always had been. But they hadn’t.

First, it was just me and Aurora out here by ourselves.

“Not yet,” she said, blinking slowly, her chin tucked down a little. “You’re my oldest friend, Peter. I could never leave you.”

“And I can’t leave you! I won’t!”

She laughed, but her eyes were shining strangely and it broke my heart. “You’re not. You won’t. You can stay and you can change—I promise, you can do both. Just...maybe you won’t stay in the woods anymore.”

She had a point. The wind was colder than I remembered it ever being, the ground was wetter, the creatures out in the shadows sounded louder.

“Then where do I go?”

“There’s something out there, outside the forest, that you want, isn’t there? Maybe start there.”

“With Everett?” I couldn’t think of anything else I wanted. Sure, I nabbed the toys from Cider Landing and hid them away, but that was because I missed Everett. He was the reason I went back.

Aurora nodded. “He did come back. Not everybody does.”

I wanted to ask her if she really thought he still wanted to be my friend or remembered me. I had so many questions bouncing around in my heart, but Aurora wouldn’t be able to answer them.

Maybe I...Maybe I did want answers. So I’d have to go back and hear out the only person who could give them to me.

Before I left, Aurora pressed a coin into my hand, strangely warm and heavy. “For whatever you need,” she promised, folding my fingers around it.

It took me a long time to get back to Everett’s house. I wasn’t sure that I wanted to go. My legs were heavy, and my toes were cold in the mud.

When I got back to Everett’s house, I saw him sitting on the porch, but I didn’t realize he was asleep until I got up close and heard the soft rumble of his breath. A bottle had rolled across the old floorboards, and as I sneaked closer, I saw he had something in his hand. A paper.

Gingerly, I plucked it from his grip, and there was an old picture. It was black and white, and the people were strangely familiar.

I stared for a long time, until I remembered her face. It'd started with honey cakes that she'd make and set on the windowsill. They'd smelled so good, so I would sneak up and snatch them, and she'd always bake more. I must've stolen a dozen before she caught me, but when she had, she hadn't seemed angry. She'd just smiled and sat down on her porch and offered me another. She'd said my name like she'd always known me, and she'd asked me questions—where I slept and what I did and who my friends were.

I'd tell her everything, because we had such grand adventures. But sometimes, her smile would turn sad and she'd ask about my parents. I didn't have parents, I'd told her. They were stupid. Parents didn't let you play and made you do chores and go to bed before the sun was even down. I was glad I didn't have parents, but I did like her cakes.

She said that she'd keep making them if I'd come back and visit her, so I did.

The last time I'd seen her, she'd had wide, pleading eyes. There were always purple circles beneath them, and her smile had been harried. It'd made me uneasy, when she grabbed my hands so tight and said that she was leaving. Her husband was making her leave, she said, and wouldn't I please, please come with them?

I'd torn my hands from hers and run into the woods while she cried and cried. It'd been a long time before her husband had come to gather her up.

The next day, I'd watched from the shadows as he'd packed up his whole family—the sad-eyed woman and the dog and the young man in suspenders who'd loaded most of their luggage—and they'd left.

I could still feel her eyes on me as she looked over her shoulder. She stared unerringly, like she knew right where I was and would always find me, and her face had been so soft and so sad as they'd taken her away.

My breath shook on an inhale, and my hands shook as I gripped the paper, but I'd cried so much already. I didn't want to cry anymore.

I sat down on the porch swing slowly, not wanting to wiggle it too much. I hadn't figured out what to say to Everett yet, and I—I just wanted to sit there for a little while and pretend that it really was okay and I wasn't alone and things weren't changing too much.

The only thing that was different was that my friend had returned, and how could I ever be upset about that?

Biting my lips between my teeth to keep them from trembling, blinking faster than I wanted to, I leaned against his arm and shut my eyes, and if I cried again, it was only a little.

9

Everett

I woke to vague light in my eyes, which was weird, because I had blackout curtains in my room.

Grandma's house , a voice in the back of my head reminded me.

But when I blinked my eyes open to the reds and purples of early dawn, it wasn't even Grandma's house. It was Grandma's back porch swing. I'd slept the whole night on the porch swing? I suspected I was going to pay for that in back pain later.

When I lifted my head, it reminded me why I'd fallen asleep on the porch swing. I had an entire bottle of wine in me when I did it. Maudlin and weirdly pathetic, mooning over a picture of what Peter might have looked like in his twenties, if he'd been a doctor in the fucking nineteenth century.

That was when another sensation accosted me. Warmth. Almost like I had a blanket on my legs, except I didn't. And also, the blanket was breathing.

Slowly, I panned to look, half worried I was going to have a coyote or something sleeping on my lower half.

But no, it was...it was a living version of the picture I'd gone to sleep staring at. A picture that was now held in the hands of...of Peter Hawking? A living, breathing, twenty-first century version of Peter Hawking. Who was asleep on my legs.

He was beautiful. Even more beautiful than he'd been as a boy, those childish, elfin features translated into more grownup, masculine ones. Full pink lips, sharp cheekbones, eyelashes so long he could comb them. There were slight tear tracks down his face, dry and mostly gone, but still apparent through a healthy layer of dirt on his cheeks. Oh, not filth. He hadn't been rolling in the mud or anything. I might not have even noticed the dirt, but for the completely clean spots the tear tracks had left behind.

As I watched, he blinked groggily, looking up at me with Peter's hazel eyes. All those years, and there was still no mistaking them. It was too bad the picture of Peter Hawking had been black and white, because if I'd seen the color of his eyes, there'd have been no mistaking it. They were the color of warm amber and summer leaves, and right then, with the first rays of dawn were striking them, they were even brighter. Honeyed gold.

He gave me a tiny, sleepy smile, and pushed up off my legs.

He frowned when he realized that the picture of Peter and Eloise Hawking was almost crushed in his grip, wincing and letting it go. "I'm so sorry, I?—"

He cut off with a strangled noise, eyes going round and hand reaching for his throat. Strangely, though. Clumsily. He almost hit air, overreaching his throat by a few inches and having to pull back to get to it, like his arm was too long. When he managed it, his fingers flexed, like maybe he'd found something wrong there.

"Are you okay? Should I call for an ambulance?" I pulled back, started to stand, to look for my phone, but he flailed, reaching out for me and almost falling off the swing entirely when his whole body was thrown off balance by the motion.

He caught himself, bracing his hands on the swing in front of himself and then staring at them.

“P—Peter?”

He swung his head up to look at me, his voice coming out breathy and hoarse this time. “You...you know me now? You remember me now?”

I let myself fall back onto the porch swing, curling my knee under me and leaning in to wrap my hands around his face. His cheeks were smooth under my hand, not like he’d shaved, but like he’d never once in his life had to shave. But if he was Peter, he was thirty, so how did that work?

Still, it was undeniable. It was Peter. My Peter.

Gods, I’d missed him so much.

“I never forgot you, Peter. Not for a second, not ever. I came back looking for you, but I couldn’t find you anywhere. I spent the whole summer before college asking everyone in town about you, but they treated me like I was nuts.” I shook my head, trying to ignore that prickling in my eyes that had come back, and...Dammit, I didn’t care. This was my best friend ever, the guy I hadn’t seen in more than fifteen years, sitting right in front of me.

He was the last great thing in my life.

Yeah, it was pathetic that I hadn’t ever had anything better in my life after fourteen, but I fucking hadn’t. High school had been hell, alone with a bunch of strangers who hadn’t been interested in welcoming a new kid to their pre-arranged cliques. College had been a slog, trying to do my very best and get the best grades, working a full-time job all the while to prove to my parents that my master’s degree in art wasn’t just about wanting to laze around and paint naked ladies all day. Then a year-long unpaid internship with one agency, that had led to a job at another: Warren.

I hadn't dated anyone for longer than a month or two, because none of them had been right. None of them had had golden-green eyes and sharp cheekbones and the softest lips and...

"But there was a boy. Last night, there was a boy who looked like you, but younger."

Peter looked down at his hands, and his eyes went glossy. "But I...I'm old now," he said, as though it was a reasonable response. As though it was about...

Fairies.

I smiled at him, as hard as it was through the lump in my throat and tears in my eyes. "You're really not. You're...fuck, you're still younger than me." I snatched the paper out of his hands and tapped it. He looked precisely like the man in it now. "Twenty-three. He was twenty-three in this picture. With his mother. Your...mother?"

Peter stared at her, swallowing hard, then leaning back. "I don't have a mother. I never—I knew her, that lady. She was nice to me. Sad. But I don't have a mother. Or a father."

Through all of this, he continued staring at the woman on the page.

"I didn't before. Remember her. I'm starting to—I'm starting to remember a lot of things. So much."

I blinked and stared at him, and his legs tensed. His whole body was tense, in fact, ready to bolt. Again? Had it really been him the night before, still a child?

That was ridiculous . . . probably.

Still, every part of me screamed with protest at the thought of him running away from

me. I couldn't lose him again. Never again. But how could I convince him to stay?

"Pizza," I blurted out, ineloquent and random, but not wrong. Peter had always loved pizza. That would make him stay. I had the ingredients, even the yeast for pizza dough, since I'd been planning to make some bread. "We can make pizza. In the kitchen." I waved toward the back door, and he turned to look at it.

When he looked back at me, his eyes were sparkling with that old Peter impishness. "With pineapples?"

I laughed. "I'll freaking put bananas on it if you want."

His grin was perfect. It was Peter. "Nope. Just the pineapples. And ham."

10

Peter

B ananas on pizza sounded awful, but I ate a banana anyway.

I was starving , and Everett’s kitchen was full of all kinds of things—snacks I’d forgotten I liked and drinks that fizzed on my tongue. I couldn’t remember being hungry before. Sometimes, we lost kids ate honey cakes that the people in town made, but that was all.

All I’d had until Everett.

Now, I wanted to open my mouth up wide and eat everything in his kitchen.

“You okay?” Everett asked, his dark brow arching higher up his forehead as he laid ingredients out on the counter between us.

My cheek was round with the better half of a banana, and I nodded.

“Want some crackers?” he asked.

I swallowed the soft lump of fruit and screwed my lips up on the side. “How long until the pizza’s ready?”

Everett hummed, fiddling with the ingredients, sliding the bag of flour back a little. “The dough should sit for a little while before we bake it, so maybe an hour?”

“Then yes, please.”

The crackers were cheesy, salty perfection, and I ate them by the handful while Everett mixed the dough ingredients. Then, he asked if I wanted to knead it, which was fun and surprisingly hard and reminded me of that one time we’d made cookies with his grandma.

I’d forgotten that too. How much, over the years, had tumbled out of my head? Why hadn’t Everett?

I stared at him as he put the dough in a bowl and covered it. Then, he came over and got a couple crackers for himself.

He was watching me, smiling, but he almost looked wary. I didn’t think he was afraid of me, but he was afraid of something, and I realized that was just the same as I felt, like there was a snake coiling around and around in my belly.

“How long has it been?” I asked. Sure, he looked older now, but not so much that I couldn’t recognize him.

He bit his lips and they disappeared between his teeth for a few seconds. “Fifteen years?”

“Right,” I whispered, looking down into the cracker box. My stomach rumbled, but it wasn’t hunger this time. “And the—the guy in the picture, with that woman?”

“Eloise and Peter Hawking?” Everett offered. He wasn’t eating the crackers anymore either, and he reached out. My breath shook when he put his hand on my elbow, and it was nice, to have someone there and know they understood where I was coming from without me having to explain it all.

It'd been a long time since I'd had that with the other lost kids. They thought I was too serious every time I said we should pick up our things or find shelter out of the rain.

Whatever was in my head now, Everett had always understood better than anybody, so it didn't matter when I had a hard time asking all the questions I wanted to.

"Yeah. Can you—do you know . . ." I grimaced.

Everett's expression softened, and I could only stand a glance at his face before looking down again. "Peter Hawking was born in eighteen fifty-seven."

"Okay. And it's . . ."

"Twenty twenty-four."

That...felt like a long time. Eighteen and twenty had a pretty big gap when you were talking about—was it a hundred years every time the first number went up by one? I wasn't sure.

My head was swimming, and I didn't know how to track the way time stretched out. I wasn't sure I could count that high, or count down from the bigger number. Definitely not right then, when my heart was squeezing so hard in my chest that it ached.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I don't know how long it's been. Could you...Do you know?"

"A hundred and sixty-seven years, Peter." His thumb brushed my inner elbow, and I took a long, slow, shaky breath. "Has it really been that long?"

Everett didn't fully believe it either, but the days and months and years were beginning to untangle in my head.

I shrugged. I didn't really know, but it must've been, because I knew the woman in that picture. I knew Eloise and I remembered when she left town.

Then, I remembered how they'd come back, just her and—and Peter. She hadn't baked cakes anymore. She hadn't looked at me or at anything, really.

And he'd been sad too, even when he had a family of his own. There was a hole there, something missing.

Was it missing in me too?

"I guess? There've been more days than I can even imagine counting, but—but I don't know. It's like I've been frozen the whole time." I licked my lips. They were dry, and all the sudden it was all I could feel. I was terribly thirsty. "But then I met you, and time...moved. You grew up, went to school, did things . You learned so much stuff, and I wanted—" I shrank down into my shoulders. Was this too much to admit to? Everett was my best friend and I should be able to tell him anything, but it was hard. The next time I tried to speak, my voice cracked. It was still so strange in my throat, the new, deeper sound of it. "I wanted to learn it with you. I wanted to try new stuff and grow up and live a life that had you in it. But then you were gone?—"

I looked up, and Everett's eyes were shining with tears. My mouth parted, and Everett sniffed. "God, Peter, I'm so sorry."

I shook my head fast. "Don't be. Really. It was...good, I think. Wanting all that stuff. I just...got stuck again when you weren't here. I don't know how to do it alone, but I'm—I'm really glad you're back now. Really, really glad." That felt like such an understatement, but I didn't know how to tell him that my world only turned when I

could hold his hand. “Can”—I shuffled toward him a half step, lifting my arms a little—“Can I?”

He nodded, his arms open wide, and I fell into them and hugged him tighter than I’d ever hugged anybody. Maybe I was too big now and it felt wrong and right and confusing and exciting and terrifying all at once, but when I hugged Everett, I fit with him just like I always had. I could tip my head forward and bury my face against his shoulder, and it was perfect.

“I’m so happy you’re here,” I whispered shakily into his T-shirt. “I missed you so much.”

“Me too,” he whispered back.

And when the timer went off that said the dough was ready to go in the oven, we ignored it for a long time.

11

Everett

When we were kids, Peter always seemed older than me. He knew more than I did about everything. All the types of trees and plants, and when it was going to rain, and when the sun would go down.

Now, here he was, an adult...or was he? Was he fourteen, a hundred and sixty-seven, or—or something else?

He wasn't acting like a child. Not shouting and running away again, or demanding to play hide and seek like when we were kids. But also, he didn't know a lot of basic things. How to use an oven. How old he was.

Fuck me, math enough to count his age.

Now, some of that was simply that apparently, he'd never gone to school. Which was odd, because we'd done some of my homework together when we were kids, and he'd always seemed to grasp technical things more easily than me. Math and science, he'd ended up helping me with. I'd been convinced he was the smartest person I knew, and there he was, confused about how long he'd been alive.

But then, he'd forgotten his mother, and seemed to remember her now, at least some. Maybe that was part of it—maybe he'd forgotten things over the century and a half he'd been alive.

When we eventually pulled apart, he wasn't crying, but thoughtful, biting his lower lip and staring off into space. I didn't want to press for answers he might not even have, not when this was so new, and we were both fumbling in the dark for a light switch.

Hell, I was still reeling from the notion that this was real. Peter was here and alive and maybe...maybe he'd been kidnapped by fairies almost two centuries ago, and lived as a child in the woods that entire time.

Whatever was happening, it was important not to push things, not to make this harder, at least not right away. For now, it was pizza time.

So I set the oven to preheat, then showed him how to stretch the dough out into a large round with slightly thicker edges, setting it on a pan with a sprinkle of cornmeal to keep it from sticking, and finally pulling out the ingredients to put on it.

We spooned on tomato sauce, smoothing it into an even layer, and totally not having a mutual fit of laughter when I accidentally flipped some onto my nose. Hell, was he growing up, or was I reverting to childhood?

It didn't matter, because whatever it was, Peter was there. So I cut up fresh pineapple chunks into little pieces, then the same with some ham, and we scattered it all over the pizza, and covered it with cheese before sliding it into the oven, then starting on a second pizza, this one with some sausage I fried up before scattering it across the sauce.

Peter sneaked a piece straight out of the pan into his mouth, and the look on his face at the taste of it was pure bliss. I grinned and grabbed one of my own, and before long, we were practically just eating the sausage out of the pan, and only half made it onto the pizza.

By the time we finished making the second pizza, the first was finished, the cheese bubbly and slightly browned at the edges.

I found Grandma's old pizza cutter and sliced it up, then paused. Peter frowned and reached for a slice, but I grabbed his hand. "It's really hot. You'll burn your mouth."

He cocked his head at that. "Burn?"

Holy fuck. How did I explain burn? How had he never burned himself? Any five-year-old I knew understood the concept of burning oneself, even if they didn't know all the situations to expect it in.

"It's...it's too hot. It'll hurt. And cause an injury, so it'll keep hurting for a while. Days, maybe, if it's bad enough."

He turned and stared at the pizza in shock, like it was something entirely different than it had been a moment before. Not frightened, like he was worried about it, but like it was unexpected and fascinating.

That was when I realized something.

Peter's ears were...long, and pointed at the end. How the fuck had I missed that? I'd stared at him when I woke before him, thinking about how beautiful he was.

But there they were, pointy and obvious and a clear sign that yes, the most ridiculous possibility was indeed true. Peter was Peter Hawking, who'd been kidnapped by fairies a hundred and sixty years ago, replaced with someone else who went on to become a doctor, while Peter himself continued to run and play in the woods for...forever?

Except not forever. He was here now. An adult, not a child, even if there were some

things he needed to learn to really be an adult. An adult with pointed ears, and no identity.

How the fuck were we going to get him a driver's license? A birth certificate?

People right there in Cider Landing might manage with it. It was a small town, and you could walk just about anywhere. No one was going to demand to see ID for someone buying groceries or walking down the street. But what about when he got a job? Or if he ever wanted a car? People in books and movies were always creating fake IDs and false identity trails, but I was a fucking advertising executive. I didn't know how to do any of that.

I sure wasn't going to go to the government like "hi this is my boyfriend who was kidnapped by fairies for a hundred years, please give him a social security number." Either I'd end up in a mental hospital or Peter would end up in area fifty-one, being vivisected so that the government could discover the secret of eternal childhood. I might be a sucker who mostly didn't think the government was out to get him, but I wasn't dumb. People were afraid of death, and they'd do anything to avoid it. Even if Peter knew fuck all about immortality and how to get it.

When I pulled the second pizza out of the oven, I figured the first had had long enough to cool, and pulled two pieces out of it, sliding one onto a plate for each of us.

Peter lit up when I handed it to him, and immediately turned the slice, folded it, and took a huge bite. He closed his eyes in rapture, grinning around the pizza, and letting his head fall back. "I missed this."

"Me too, Peter."

12

Peter

We ate so much pizza that my stomach felt round and tight and I thought I might never have to eat again, but that'd be a shame because pizza was delicious. I wanted to try other stuff too, and Everett was happy when he talked about all his favorite foods. He listed stuff I'd never even heard of, like pho that was spelled P-H-O but pronounced with a kind of bit-lipped "F" sound.

When we were kids, it'd all been pizza and chicken nuggets and canned green beans, but now he'd gone out and he'd tried so much. A rippling cloud of jealousy and excitement swirled through me. I hated that I'd missed out on doing all those things with him—on going to school and seeing him develop his art and eating pho for the first time—but I hoped we could make up for it now that he'd come back. Maybe it'd still be special, even if it was just my first time trying everything.

I hoped he wouldn't get bored or think I wasn't interesting because it was all new to me. Ugh, I wanted to catch up to him and impress him like he impressed me, and I wanted to see all the art he'd made so much .

The only problem was it felt like too much to do too fast, and I wanted to pack it all in at once so it felt like we hadn't lost anything. The feeling of losing something was new, and I didn't like it very much.

Still, pizza helped. There was something more magical than flying mixed up in the combination of melty cheese, pineapple, and ham. It settled inside me, warm and full.

“Can I ask you a favor?” I said when we’d finished eating and fallen quiet, lulled into a stupor by full bellies.

Everett nodded. “Sure. Anything.”

“Would it be okay if I slept over, maybe for a little while? I can’t really go back to the forest. It’s...not as welcoming to grown-ups. But even if I could—” I wanted to stay there, with him. I didn’t want to lose him ever again.

“Of course, Peter, yeah. I don’t want you to go anywhere else.”

I sighed and couldn’t help a big smile that stretched across my lips. “Good. Then that’s settled. It’ll be so much fun.”

Everett bit his lip. I’d missed that twinkle in his eye. He’d always been quieter than the lost kids, but that was just because he spent time alone. He was different, just like me.

“Yeah,” he agreed, licking his finger and dragging it through the crumbs on his plate before popping them into his mouth.

“Was that Aurora, with you last night?” Everett asked, as he leaned back into his grandma’s old couch so the springs squeaked. His empty plate was still on his chest, and looking at him now, I could see his face was kind of sallow and his eyes looked puffy and tired like he hadn’t slept well. I suppose he hadn’t, being out on the swing all night. Everett always gone home at bedtime, slept in a proper bed with a Spiderman comforter. He wasn’t used to napping in trees.

“Yeah, she...she was out in the woods way before I came along. Then it was me. There are other kids out there too—Will and Jessie and Mary and some others. I—I think there were more, but some of them left?” They were fuzzy spots in my memory

now, but I hadn't realized there'd been so many.

Maybe that meant I wasn't doomed after all.

"Are they...okay out there?" Everett sat up a little and set his plate on the coffee table in front of us. He was actually worried about them.

I grinned. "Oh, yeah. Definitely. I was never cold or hungry or lonely. Not—well, not until I started to grow up. That part's hard. It set me apart from the other kids back—back when you were here the first time. When somebody starts changing, it really stands out. But we're protected in the forest. Nothing can hurt us—Aurora said so, and she knows everything there is to know about magic."

"So it's really faeries?"

I shrugged. "I didn't see any little flying people or anything, but I'm sure it's magic. You'll see."

Even though I was different now, I was so happy. That light, bubbly feeling in my chest that accompanied magic was just as strong as ever. Surely I wouldn't lose that too.

I paused, staring as he reached out. His eyes were narrowed and intense as he shifted closer. Then, his warm fingers brushed over my ear and my breath caught. I remembered holding his hand, leaning against his arm—all those little touches that'd made me feel like flying. This was that and more, and I stayed very still so he wouldn't pull away.

"Were your ears always like this?" he asked, his voice so quiet when it was just the two of us.

I reached up then, touching the pointed tips. “I think so?”

“I don’t remember them.”

I grinned. “Maybe it’s the magic. It helped you forget. Helped me forget a whole lot more than a pair of ears.”

The sound of his laugh was warm and homey. “Fair point.”

He dropped his hand in his lap, but I wasn’t done yet. I wiggled closer to him, my legs folded on the couch between us.

When I reached out, he didn’t pull away, so I pushed his dark hair back. It wasn’t too long, but it curled at the ends and hid the tops of his ears. They were round and just like normal.

“I didn’t forget you though,” I promised. I wanted him to know it always, that even if he’d come back and hadn’t found me, I’d never stopped missing him.

“I know. I’m really sorry, Peter.”

I shook my head. “Stop saying that.”

“Okay, but I am, so whenever you need to hear it?—”

I didn’t want to hear it. I didn’t want to think about losing him. “Just don’t leave me behind again?”

He gripped my hands, even as I traced his silly ears. “I won’t.”

I don’t know what came over me then, except that bubbly magic pizza feeling, and

how nice it was to hold his hands and have him close and know that I wasn't too lost and too alone, at least for Everett.

I just—I wanted a piece of that joy I'd felt the night we watched a movie on the floor and ate Cracker Jacks. I wanted a piece of all the years I'd missed out on.

So I kissed him, quick and soft, my face burning hot when I leaned back. “Good,” I said, and I let him go, but only for a very good reason. “Do you want another slice of pizza?”

13

Everett

Kissing.

We'd done it when we were both fourteen, of course. Or maybe I'd been fourteen and he'd been a hundred and fifty. And now he was still...okay, no, he wasn't still fourteen. But still, something about kissing him felt odd.

I'd had the opportunity, even if I hadn't really taken it, to kiss dozens, even hundreds of other people. College, especially with art students, was practically one long opportunity to kiss people. And drink. And do various illicit substances.

Peter? He just had me. Clearly the other kids in the woods weren't big into kissing—and the kids in the woods were something Peter and I were going to have to discuss at some point, since, well...kids didn't belong in the woods.

Fuck, I was a boring, responsible grownup.

And that was part of the problem, I realized, as I grabbed more pizza for both of us. We'd completely finished one of them, and were working on the second, stuffing ourselves beyond capacity and loving every moment of it.

But the children.

Until Peter understood that children being lured into the woods away from their

families was a bad thing, it was going to be hard for me to see him as an adult.

I pressed a finger to my lips, considering him kissing me. It had been chaste and innocent, just like our first kiss, so many years ago.

I hoped it wasn't me creepily grooming a teenager in an adult's body.

We were going to have to have a discussion about it, I realized, as much as that was going to be awkward and terrible.

Peter came bouncing into the kitchen after me, DVD in hand, holding it out to me. "Can we watch this one?"

One of my grandmother's extensive romcom collection. Was he interested in the bright colored cover, or had something else drawn him to it? Well, there was no reason to say no. It was a cute enough movie, and frankly, I was going to have a hard time saying no to anything Peter wanted for a while.

Possibly ever.

No, I hadn't abandoned him on purpose. I never would have done that. I didn't bear fault in the situation. If anyone did, and I wasn't sure anyone did, it was my parents, for forcing me to leave even when I wanted to stay and my grandmother offered to let me.

But that didn't mean I didn't want to make it up to Peter.

So I smiled at him. "Sure. Sounds good. I also got a tub of rocky road for later."

He cocked his head in confusion, and that was when it hit me, the enormity of what we had ahead of us. Even if Peter was an adult in age and mannerisms, which I

wasn't sure about at all, he was from the fucking eighteen hundreds. He'd lived his whole life in the woods, playing with children.

The lost kids, he'd called them, and I was sure as shit going to lose sleep about that until we had a long talk about it, and maybe did something about it too. Lost children were not something I could learn to live with. Were they all kidnapped and replaced, like Peter had been?

Nope, that wasn't a conversation for today. Soon, definitely, but not right then.

"Rocky road is a kind of ice cream. You...remember ice cream?" Surely we'd had ice cream together sometime in our four years. That was a normal thing to do, especially in the summertime. I distinctly remembered Cider Landing's drugstore selling ice cream.

He perked up. "Like the cold sandwiches you used to bring sometimes? With the sweet black bread and cold drippy white insides?"

Ice cream sandwiches.

This was the problem. The man didn't even know what ice cream sandwiches were called. It was going to take time to integrate him into society because he didn't know simple, basic things any five-year-old modern kid would know. And at the same time, he remembered a woman who had died before the turn of the twentieth century.

"Those would be ice cream sandwiches," I agreed, then considered for a moment. "Rocky road is similar, but...different. You'll see."

He grinned in response, but accepted his plate of pizza and didn't demand to know now, now, now, which struck me as a good sign. Maybe it didn't mean he was definitely an adult, but it was the adult way to react to a promised treat—pleasure, but

also patience.

It was going to take time and work and lots of patience for both of us, but...we could do this, me and Peter. We were us again, and together, we'd always been able to do anything.

I had to explain some things about the movie to him, like why the woman was embarrassed by, oh, anything, and what "black tie" meant, but in the end, he loved it. He finished the movie leaning against me as the couple kissed, and smiling sweetly.

"That was nice. I'm glad they stopped fighting and she caught him before he left."

I squeezed him tight against me, nodding. "Me too. They deserve to be happy. Now how about that ice cream?"

He hopped up off the couch, so light on his feet it was a wonder they even touched the ground, and then held a hand out to me. "I thought you'd never offer."

I accepted his help and leaned into him, kissing him on the cheek instead of the lips, but still, it was warm and hopeful and felt so right. I'd been away from my best friend for too damned long. Never again. "I promised you ice cream, and I always keep my promises. Especially to you."

He grinned that sweet grin of his and nodded. "Best friends?"

"Best friends," I agreed. "Forever."

I wrapped an arm around his shoulders and led him into the kitchen, where I proceeded to teach him the joys of rocky road. Marshmallow, it turned out, was his new favorite thing. I couldn't wait to make him s'mores.

14

Peter

Rocky road was basically the best thing ever, with fluffy marshmallow and chunks of chocolate that melted on my tongue. Not quite the best thing—that was having Everett back—but pretty darn good.

That first day, we spent kind of quiet and sleepy, watching movies and snacking. For one reason or another, we were both exhausted, but for the first time maybe ever, I didn't feel like I needed to shove that feeling down and pretend that everything was great. It was great, but it was also okay for us to just be exhausted together, to do nothing more than flop around and talk and put on another movie when we didn't feel like talking anymore.

There was a lot to talk about. It turned out Everett had gone to school for a long time. Now, he worked in marketing, and I'd thought of that as, well, selling wares at a stall at a local market or something, but when I said that he'd laughed—not at me, the way Will often did, though.

He'd shaken his head and said he'd never really thought about it like that, but I wasn't wrong. It was just on a bigger scale. He tried to get people to see the value in things, to want to buy them, but it wasn't just a market stall. It was everyone everywhere, and from the way cities looked in movies, there were a lot of people out there to convince.

I loved the idea of it, Everett out there swaying the masses with his creativity, but I

was weirdly jealous too. They'd gotten to keep him all those years and?—

And, well, he'd gotten to be out there in the whole world. What was I, against hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people? My life was small. I'd never influenced anybody, unless you counted making the lost kids feel better when something bad happened, which was hardly ever.

All of this was so, so great, and also, I was so scared that it couldn't last. I didn't know what to do with the whole big world, and Everett moved masses of people just by sharing his art with them.

They'd all gotten to see it, and I hadn't, and that made me want to cry again except that I'd cried way too much in the past couple days and I couldn't anymore. So in the late afternoon, I'd asked him to show me some of his work.

It was clever and funny, sometimes surprisingly understated, and I was—I was so proud of him. He pulled out his computer—after telling me what a computer was and how the internet worked, which sounded like another thing that was way too big for me—and showed me commercials and brand logos and all kinds of things.

When he'd taken his sketchbook out into the forest to draw, I'd never thought his art would end up in videos and on shelves and everywhere . I just hadn't thought about it. He'd been so good, but I hadn't thought about a whole big world out there waiting for him.

When it was time for bed, I was still thinking about it, so I didn't notice his awkward shuffle until we were standing in the hallway. "There's the guest room..." he said, frowning at the door of his parents' old room. "Do you want to sleep there tonight?"

I bit my lip. "Can't I stay with you?"

“Yeah, Peter. If you want to, you definitely can. But you can have your own space too. I just wanted to make sure you knew that.”

I smiled at him and nodded. “Do you...want your own space?”

He shook his head. “You can stay with me if you want.”

We both slept in his bed, each wrapped up in our own blanket, and it was nice to be there with him. I could wake up in the middle of the night and reach out and Everett was there . My Everett.

For a few days, we went on like that. Sometimes, Everett would try and fix something in the house, or call around looking for a contractor or an electrician or a plumber, but mostly, we just spent time together.

It worked out pretty well that I was his size, though I didn’t know if that was just luck or magic. I wanted to be like Everett, have everything he had and bring just as much to the table.

In the end, I mostly borrowed his clothes, but he didn’t mind sharing.

And showers were really, really nice. I’d forgotten those too.

Mostly, I was getting used to everything and we were falling back into being best friends. There was something niggling in the back of my mind, but I didn’t want to think about it too hard, so I kept pushing it away, and everything was great.

I didn’t even think about it when I came into the kitchen to Everett putting out all the stuff to make tacos, which he said I’d love, and I kissed him. It’d just felt normal. He worked hard and made all this for us and—and it felt right. I was happy and I wanted to show him. Wasn’t a kiss the best way to do that?

But then, Everett put his hands on my shoulders and eased me back, his eyes conflicted.

“Is it okay if we don’t do that for now?” he asked, sounding so gentle that my first impulse was to assure him everything was fine.

“Yeah. Of course.”

It only took another second for it to start hurting, and I didn’t know why. Sure, I wanted to kiss Everett. It felt nice. But I definitely didn’t want him to do anything he didn’t want to do, and it only took a second’s thought for me to realize that if we never kissed again, that’d be okay. I wanted to be with him, but that didn’t have to look any particular way.

So why was I so sad all the sudden?

Something heavy was spreading through my body, making me feel wrong and lost all over again, and it couldn’t just be because I wasn’t getting exactly what I wanted. Right then, I had so much—I had Everett back in my life, and he was all I’d wanted for so long.

My thoughts swirled until they all came together in some kind of order.

It was...because we’d kissed before, and it’d felt like hope burning in my heart. Hope and excitement and anticipation and all the good things that came with growing up.

Then he’d left, and I’d lost all that. I’d been stuck. I hadn’t fit in with the lost kids anymore, and I hadn’t had anyone else.

That whole trajectory, that whole world of possibility, had shriveled up, while Everett had gone out into the world and lived a whole life without me.

Someone had stolen my whole life, a thousand sweet moments and wonderful chances and— oh god .

“Peter, are you okay?”

I blinked at him, my eyelids fluttering. “Yeah. Um, can I ask...why no kissing?”

Everett’s front teeth pressed into his lip. “It’s just...a couple days ago you were a kid. I don’t want to, I don’t know, take advantage or move too fast or—I feel like we still have some stuff to work out before we can talk about that kind of relationship.”

“Oh.”

“But if it’s really important to you?—”

He reached for me, and I jerked back, and I didn’t know why because that was the last thing I ever wanted to do. If he touched me right then, though, I was going to crumble.

And he was only doing it because—because he felt sorry for me.

Because something terrible had happened to me, and I’d never even realized it.

“It’s not about kissing you,” I said, my voice catching on a sob I couldn’t let out. “I mean, I like that. Kissing you feels like flying. It—It made me feel warm and safe and—and...” Wanted , was what I couldn’t say out loud, because if he didn’t want me around, I didn’t know what I’d do. I didn’t have anything, anyone, else.

But that wasn’t Everett’s job to fix, I just...wanted him to be there. Only now, that niggling feeling in the back of my head grew three times its size, rushing out until I knew?—

I was too much.

My breath shook when I inhaled, and I looked up at Everett. “It’s not about kissing. It’s that I missed everything . I wanted to try everything with you, but you got to go out there and you did it all without me. And that’s how it’s supposed to happen, I think, but I’m not—I’m not what I was supposed to be. Everett, I wanted to grow up with you and try new things and learn stuff. I want to be like you—someone incredible that the whole world gets to see, not somebody everyone forgot. And now I’m so behind and I’ll never catch up and everything I want to try with you is stuff you’ve already done or that—that you don’t feel right doing with me, and you shouldn’t have to do it all over again, but I don’t know how to do it alone. I don’t want to do any of it without you, but I’m lost .”

Everett was staring at me, his eyes wide and shining.

I closed my own so tight the dark started to look red around the edges.

“You’re not lost anymore, Peter, and you’re not alone.”

All I could do was shake my head. It wasn’t the same and he knew it. He’d grown up like he was supposed to. He had a life .

“Can I hug you?” he whispered.

I shook my head harder. “It’ll make me cry. I don’t want to cry.”

“Okay.”

We stood there, and I couldn’t tell if I was tense and frozen or about to shake out of my skin, but after a minute or two, I forced myself to take a few deep breaths and open my eyes. The world was only a little swimmy.

“I—I think I want to take a walk.” That’s what I did when the forest got too much and I was sad. I walked until I felt better.

Maybe it’d work this time too.

“Can I come with you?”

I shook my head again. “I want to be alone for a little bit. Just—save some tacos for me for later? They smell really good.”

“I will,” he promised.

“Thanks,” I whispered back, then I slipped out the back door into the dark.

15

Everett

I left the tacos, uneaten, on the kitchen counter. It smelled delicious, and carne asada was one of the best things I made, but I didn't want it anymore.

I wanted Peter.

Part of me wanted to go back in time and let him kiss me and not bring up my concerns, but that wasn't it and I damn well knew it. There had been a hundred, a thousand emotions behind his eyes, and none of them had been plain old childish "I want the thing you're not giving me."

It had been longing, and loss, and this deep, deep sadness that I couldn't begin to fathom. Because how the hell could I?

Sure, my parents kind of sucked. They were cold and selfish and I had no relationship with them as an adult because they didn't much care to try. I'd lost Peter as a teenager, but he'd lost me too. And my career had been...sometimes emotionally rewarding, but not monetarily rewarding, and sometimes it made me feel hopeless and worthless.

But someone had taken everything from Peter. Not just their own love or money or job prospects, but everything . His family, his life, his home, his future—even his past, as the more we spoke, the more it was clear that he was remembering things that he'd long since forgotten.

I'd been worried about Peter still being a little young in some ways, and I'd been worried about integrating him into the modern era or real life, when really, what I should have been thinking about was how to get him some freaking therapy.

Wait.

Peter...the boy who had replaced Peter, had worked his whole life to destigmatize mental health concerns in the area. So surely, there would be someone in Cider Landing who could help people. I just had to find a way to let him talk to them without them throwing him in an institution for saying he was a hundred and sixty-seven, and he'd spent most of those years playing in the forest with lost children.

Lost children.

It was even more sinister than I'd been thinking before. How many children, just like Peter, had been taken from their homes, their families, everything they knew and loved, to play in the woods forever? It wasn't a children's story; it was a fucking horror movie.

I pulled out my phone and searched for therapists in Cider Landing. I shouldn't have been surprised at the first thing that popped up: The Peter Hawking Clinic. Jesus. I couldn't take Peter there.

Still, their website was very nice. Professional and slick, someone with a lot of skill had done it, so they'd probably paid through the nose for it, which meant they were doing well. They had a heck of a list of specialties, from substance abuse counseling to a list of common ailments including PTSD and anxiety to...lost children.

Just that, all by itself, a bullet point on the list.

Normally, I'd have dismissed the notion because I assumed they meant it in the sense

of grief counseling for losing children, but this was Cider Landing. And Peter had called his friends that more than once in the last few days, when he spoke of them.

On a whim, I clicked over to their staff page, and there at the top, was Doctor Liza Hawking. Holy fucking shit.

Her picture showed a young woman, maybe a handful of years older than me, with Peter's elfin features, high cheekbones, and chestnut hair.

Before I had any idea what the hell I was doing, I had clicked on the button for their phone number, and my phone was dialing.

"Hawking Clinic, how can I help you?"

For a second, I froze like a deer in headlights. What the hell could I say? I couldn't just make an appointment for Peter, that wasn't up to me. He was my best friend and maybe...but not my child.

"Hello?"

Okay, I had to get myself together. Yes, it was scary, but I'd called them, and it was rude not to speak up. As always after how my parents raised me, the fear of being rude was what got me moving. "Sorry, I just...needed a second."

"That's okay, take all the time you need. Is there something we can do for you?"

I cleared my throat and took another second, then nodded, resolute. "Your website says—it says lost children. Is that...there are children. In...in the woods."

When she spoke again, her voice was infinitely softer. "Given the way you said that, I suspect it's exactly what you're thinking."

“You—you help them? Lost children? I’m not one. And I didn’t ask him before calling you. He went for a walk because this is...it’s so freaking much.” Fuck, I was crying again. Would it ever stop? “I just...I don’t even know where to start. There’s so much he needs and I don’t know how to help and I’m afraid I’m not enough.”

“We do help them, yes,” she said, voice still soft and so reassuring. I wished she was telling Peter this, and not just me. He was the one who needed them. Needed some path back to a life he could lead in the modern era, without family and identity and, hell, anything but me. “Do you think he wants our help?”

I considered for a moment. Peter hadn’t given me any indication he wasn’t willing to accept help. He was a little nervous about other people, but these people understood. They’d spoken to people in his exact situation before, and they knew what this was like. Better than I did, for sure.

You’re about to be out of a job , my brain reminded me. How are you going to pay for him to have therapy then?

And it only took me a second to realize that it didn’t matter. I’d sent my CV to a dozen companies over the last week, and even had a few somewhat interested emails. If I had to sell my soul to some random company—hell, if I had to go back to James Fucking Warren—Peter was worth that. He was worth a million times that.

I would do whatever it took to give him a life back, even if it wasn’t the one he’d been born to.

Finally, I thought back to Peter as he left, sad and overwhelmed and so disillusioned. “I do think he wants help. I have to wait for him to get home or...I might go looking for him if he doesn’t get back soon. I—It’s a lot, and he knows it. He’s overwhelmed right now, and so am I, but I know he can do this.”

“I’m sure he can,” she agreed, and I could hear the smile in her voice. “They’re a surprisingly resilient lot. Still with all that elasticity of a child’s mind, but enough life experience to be an adult. It takes some time to reconcile, but it works.”

She understood. She really did.

“If you want, both of you can come down and meet Doctor Hawking...tomorrow? She has an hour free at four. Could I get a name?”

I bit my lip, considering. “I’m Everett Bailey. He, um...” This was a little bit of a mess, wasn’t it? It wasn’t exactly private information, but it might be on the touchy side, considering.

“It’s okay if you only have a first name for him. We get that a lot. It won’t cause any problem at all.”

“It’s not that. It’s . . . Peter. Peter Hawking.”

On the other end of the line, the phone made a thunk as she dropped it.

16

Peter

My walk didn't take as long as it normally did. I didn't want to walk and walk and walk until everything felt numb. In fact, I had what I wanted.

He'd even made me tacos.

There was nothing I could find walking around Cider Landing that'd make me feel better than being with Everett. I could only hope that it was okay for me to need him like that. I didn't want to be too much. I didn't want to make his life worse .

When I slipped in the back door, he was still in the kitchen, sitting at the round wooden table by the window and turning his phone over in his hands. He looked up at me, eyes wide, when I came back inside.

"Hey," he said, making a move like he'd get out of his seat before he second-guessed himself. "How are you feeling?"

I shut the back door and leaned against it. A glance at the clock on the stove said I hadn't even been gone half an hour.

"I don't know," I admitted. "Sad. Kind of okay. I changed my mind."

"About what?"

“Can I have a hug?”

He was out of his seat one second, and his arms were around me the next. I didn’t think Everett could fly on his own, but he sure was fast.

For a few minutes, I just let him hold me like that, and I pressed my face against his chest and—and I didn’t cry this time, but it was still nice to have him hold me.

“If I ask you some stuff, will you answer honestly no matter what?” I asked without lifting my face, my voice a little muffled with my nose pressed into his chest.

“I promise I’ll try?”

I nodded. That was good enough.

“Are you glad I’m here?”

Everett’s arms tightened around me reflexively. “Yes, Peter. God, I’m so, so fucking glad you’re here.”

I nodded again, my throat working around a lump. “Is this...am I too—too much for you?”

“Not even a little bit.” Now his voice was muffled, his mouth pressed against the top of my head. “Not for one second. I know it’s a lot, but you’ll never be too much for me. Can you hang on just one minute?”

Feeling awfully pitiful, I nodded. When he stepped away, I shoved my hands into my pockets.

He moved around the kitchen fast, piling the plate with tacos. Some other time, I

wanted to make them with him, laugh over dripped salsa and the mess of shredded cheese. Right then, I just felt heavy.

When he was done, he wrapped an arm around me and led me into the living room. He sat down first and patted the spot right beside him. I squirmed in close, and he lifted the plate out of the way.

“Do you want to put your legs in my lap?”

I nodded, and when I pulled them up, he cupped his hand on my knee and adjusted them closer. I curled toward his shoulder, and he pulled the throw blanket over us both before settling the plate on my lap.

“Hungry?”

I nodded again.

He picked up a taco and let me take a bite before he took one of his own. They weren't huge, and I finished it off with one last bite from his hand before he said anything else.

“You won't ever be too much for me. It's okay for this to be hard. It's going to be. But I don't mind hard things, Peter. You're worth it. Always have been.” He smiled at me like he meant it, and I blinked too fast and looked down at the plate.

So he held out another taco, and I wasn't going to say no to that.

“You are the best thing that's ever happened to me, Peter. Ever. There's been some other good stuff, but nothing that even compared to how happy you make me.”

I blinked. But he'd gone out and done so much . “Are you serious?”

“Completely. You’re—I care about you, a lot. We have fun, and you always listened to me, and you’re so fucking smart. I want to talk to you all the time. You have no idea how many times I’ve wished I could just call you and talk to you about stuff that happened to me or—or just hear how you were doing.”

“I—” I twisted the edge of the blanket between my thumb and first finger. “I didn’t realize you missed me that much.”

“Well, I did. All the time. I don’t ever want to lose you like that again. But I know this is hard and I—I maybe did something? I think it’ll be good, but if you’re not ready, I totally get it.”

I reached out and took the taco from him to finish off the second one. “What’d you do?”

“I called someone we can talk to. I think they can help. If you want to, we can go tomorrow. It’ll just be talking, nothing major, and if you don’t like it, we don’t have to go again, but they help lost children—kids who come back.”

“Okay,” I said, taking another bite.

“Okay?” He seemed to doubt I meant it.

I shrugged, a weak smile on my face. “Talking to somebody can’t hurt. Who is it?”

I expected to feel stranger, walking into a building with my name on it, but it wasn’t really my name. I was just Peter, not Peter Hawking. Weirdly, I didn’t want to take the guy’s life away from him.

I’d always wanted this one, with Everett. Peter Hawking could keep his.

It was a little weirder to sit on a couch beside Everett, looking at Dr. Liza Hawking, whose hair was the same shade as mine, whose eyes were a familiar hazel.

“It’s really nice to meet you, Peter,” she said, her voice calm and placid, almost comforting. “And you, Everett. Peter’s lucky to have a friend to help him through this transition.”

Everett swallowed. His face went pink.

I reached for his hand. “Everett’s my best friend. The very best.”

I felt better when he squeezed my hand back.

Dr. Hawking nodded. “That’s wonderful. Is he why you came out of the forest?”

I bit my lip, looking down at my lap, not sure how to answer that. When I was silent for a long time, Everett spoke up.

“I lived in Cider Landing for about four years when I was a kid. Peter found me in the woods, and that was it. We clicked immediately. Back then, I didn’t even realize there was anything different about him.”

When I looked up, Dr. Hawking was looking Everett square in the eyes, nodding. “That’s pretty normal around here. Sometimes kids will find friends their parents think are imaginary. They’re the kids in the forest. When you’re playing, everything seems so normal.”

“We grew up together,” I said, “but then?—”

“My family moved,” Everett continued when I stumbled.

“And I got stuck again.”

“And when was that?” Dr. Hawking asked.

“When I was fourteen,” Everett said.

“You too, Peter?”

I nodded.

“And you were stuck until . . . ?”

“A couple days ago.”

“That must’ve been really confusing and hard. Growing up is hard enough, but to start and stop like that...”

I nodded. “I didn’t fit anymore, with the other lost kids. But I—I wasn’t sure what else to do.”

“You were out there for a long time. Was it the only home you ever knew?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“I’m sure the other kids in the forest appreciated you staying with them.”

“I guess so. Maybe.” I hadn’t thought about it like that, but I hoped the kids liked me, that me being there had been good for them. Mostly, it had been for me. They were my family.

I'd just missed so much.

"If it's okay with you both," Dr. Hawking said, "I'd love to talk to Peter alone for a little while."

I stared down at where my fingers laced with Everett's. I didn't want to let him go, ever really, but right then, it felt...okay.

Everett was staring at me when I looked at him, and I realized he was going to take my lead on this. I could ask him to stay, and he would.

"That's fine," I said.

"Okay." Everett stood up when I let him go. "I'll just be right outside in the waiting room."

"Okay."

He gave me one more smile before he slipped out.

"He's a really good friend, isn't he?" Dr. Hawking asked.

"The very best," I repeated.

"Are you staying with him right now?"

I nodded.

"And are you happy there?"

"I don't know that I've ever been happier. I mean, all of this makes me kind of sad,

but having Everett? That could never make me sad. I always want to be with him.”

She nodded, and then she went quiet for a second. I didn’t know if I’d said the wrong thing, but I’d definitely told her the truth, so I wasn’t going to worry about it.

That was all we did for most of the hour—we talked.

She’d ask me questions about the kids in the forest and what they were like. She wanted to know what it was like meeting Everett for the first time, and why I started to grow up.

It was like we were getting to know one another, but it was also...nice, like talking about some of this stuff made it feel less tight and hard in my chest.

When I started feeling kind of tired, our time was up. Dr. Hawking stood up with me and led me to the door of her office.

“It’s been really nice to meet you, Peter. I’d love to talk to you again soon.”

“Yeah, that’d be nice,” I agreed, sticking my hands in my pockets.

“Could we talk again on Monday?”

I nodded.

“Great. Same time?”

“I think so, if it’s okay with Everett.”

“I’ll double check with him.”

She opened the door, and he was sitting there in the waiting room just like he'd promised. He got up when we came out, fidgeting a little like he wanted to ask about what he'd missed but didn't think he should.

"Everything okay?" he said.

I nodded. I felt kind of empty and tired, but not bad.

"I don't have any more clients today," Dr. Hawking said, "so if you have a couple minutes, I'd love to have a word with you, Everett."

"Oh, um, yeah. Sure." He patted his pockets, almost like he thought he'd forgot something. "Will you be okay for a minute, Peter?"

"Yup."

I sank into the chair he'd been sitting in. It was pretty comfortable, still warm from his butt.

Everett had a cute butt.

I smiled as I leaned down in it. I'd just shut my eyes for a minute until it was time to go.

17

Everett

For some reason, I felt like I'd been called to the principal's office at school.

No, not some reason. I knew why. Because Peter was a child, and she was about to tell me that my love for him was too much. Codependent and way out of line and inappropriate and?—

“Are you planning on staying in Cider Landing?”

That hadn't been the first question I'd expected. “I—” Heck, I hadn't even thought about it. “I own a house here. But I'm—I'm having trouble finding anyone who's willing to come out and fix what's wrong with it. We're talking some pretty bad stuff, not just leaky pipes or a broken window. Part of the roof looks like it's about to cave in.”

She didn't respond, just continued to sit there, waiting for her answer.

“I want to,” I finally admitted. “I want to fix up my grandmother's house and stay there. I just don't—I don't have any clue how I'm going to do that. I'm an artist. It's not exactly a thriving small town job market.”

At that, her expression finally changed, going sympathetic. “That's an understandable concern. And frankly, so is finding a contractor, or even a simple handyman here in Cider Landing. Hal Logan retired last year, and he was the only one. Since then,

everyone has a broken something and a breaking something else, and we're far enough from any larger city that it's hard to get people to come out. But you have to be firm in your choice here. Peter needs an absolute."

"You're not bothered by—by us?"

Oh shit, that had been a terrible way to put it, hadn't it? She was going to think I was some kind of?—

She was smiling, though, and it wasn't some kind of enigmatic thing that I had to guess what it meant, but sympathetic and understanding. "I'm not going to pretend this dynamic would be the healthiest thing for most people. You're literally the center of Peter's world, and that's downright dangerous for anyone. For both of you. And eventually, yes, I'd like to see him expand that circle to include other people. You too, since what you've said implies maybe yours isn't so big either. But I don't think I need to explain that this situation is unique. I've only seen a few lost children manage to make it back, and it's an immense struggle. The real world sets in, and it's very easy to look back to the woods and think...things were a lot easier out there."

It was easy to imagine. It was what every single adult I knew dealt with, daily. How many jokes and memes were there about people wanting to go back to the days when they didn't have bills, or jobs, or a need for therapy? I myself had longed for my time with Peter constantly, despised my job and my apartment and...well, everything.

Meanwhile, Peter had proof beyond doubt that he could just run back into the woods and play forever. He'd done it.

I swallowed hard and nodded. "You're basically saying if I plan to leave, to go right now instead of dragging it out and hurting him in his recovery."

Her grimace was apologetic, but she nodded anyway. "It doesn't help either of you,

for you to walk out in the middle of this. Our experience with lost children is that they have an incredibly accelerated adolescence, because their muddled memories start to come back. They don't get to the age they would have been, which in this case is a good thing, but they do catch up with things they've missed. We had a young lady a few years ago who was married three years after leaving the woods, and it was a very healthy progression from lost to marriage for her. But it's fast and enormous and...entirely related to the person she came out of the woods for."

I took a moment to consider that, and realized what she was saying.

And why.

I swallowed hard and turned my face down to stare at my lap. "He, um, he was my first love. I won't lie, I'm feeling a little creepy about that right now. Even though I'm also...I mean, he's still Peter." I glanced up at her, and then away, and I could feel the justifications sliding off my tongue, oily and strange. "He's not exactly the same as when we were fourteen. He doesn't only look older. He acts older. He had a bad moment, went for a walk to think about it, and he was back less than an hour later. He didn't just run off and brood all night or something."

She leaned forward, all the way down, till I was once again looking at her. "It's okay, Everett. He came out of the woods because he feels the same way. That connection between you two isn't a bad thing in this case. It's good, and strong, and important. Given your reaction, I don't need to tell you not to press for more and faster than he wants. Peter is a smart man. And I do mean man. You need to trust him to know what he's ready for, and let him take the lead. He's not fourteen. He's not a teenager at all. He's a hundred and...seventy?"

"Sixty-seven," I said, nodding.

She blinked and shook her head in amazement. "You know, we've done some

research, and he was the first. Not anywhere obviously, but here in Cider Landing. He was the first, and since then, it's happened sometimes. It was just hard to follow the progression because at first it was mostly parents who thought their child wasn't their child. Then about thirty years ago it switched. No more replacements, only disappearances."

I shuddered at the thought. Only disappearances. Parents who would forever think their child was probably, if not certainly, dead. What a nightmare.

"Anyway," she went on. "That's probably not relevant to you and Peter. If you need someone to talk to, I'll make arrangements for you. We already break a lot of rules with lost children because—I mean, technically, I shouldn't be seeing him at all. He's not quite my great-great-great grandfather. He is, he isn't, and he's going to be someone else entirely in the future. My point is that you can trust Peter to know his mind, and take care of himself, as long as you're also there for him. Because like I said, he came out of the woods for you. It's good if he continues to have you as a reason to stay out. Then when he's better, you'll both be good and attached. So the only proper time to make a run for it is now. If not? Well, like I said, I had a client who married the boy she came out of the woods for a few years later. If you can see yourself in that situation? Congratulations. And...thank you, actually." My head snapped up and I stared at her as she surreptitiously reached up to wipe one eye. "We always thought Peter was one of the children in the woods, but we didn't know. No one can just wander in and find them, so it was only ever a guess."

"And your . . . your great-great-great grandfather?"

"He was who he was. A good man. Strong. Smart. Changed the world in his small way. And his personal story was tragic in a different way than he realized, but tragic nonetheless. But he had a long, mostly happy life, and he was satisfied with it. That's all that matters. Peter isn't him. He could be part of the current Hawking clan as a cousin pretty easily if he wants. We're a big family, and it's easy to slip someone in

there. You know, from Great Aunt Eloise's side, or something like that. But that's entirely up to Peter. I can understand him wanting that, or wanting nothing to do with it. All we can do is offer him his options, and let him decide."

It sounded so easy when she said it like that. Give Peter the options and let him decide. Funny thing was, I'd been doing that for years. When I was a teenager, my parents had been the ones with the options, and they'd decided to take everything I cared about away from me. Then the same with Mr. Warren. He'd been the one with the choices, and he'd chosen to fuck me over.

Peter being the one with the choices?

That actually didn't worry me.

The house still worried me. My job, or probable lack thereof come January, worried me. But Peter making decisions? That didn't scare me at all.

18

Peter

Next Thursday night, I found Everett at the kitchen table on his laptop. He'd been spending more time there, searching for freelance jobs, which could actually be any kind of job and didn't have anything more to do with freedom than jobs, in general, seemed to have.

Finding a freelance job would just mean that Everett could work for himself. He'd be his own boss, and he'd be able to work from home if he wanted.

Well, from here.

Everett hadn't lived in Cider Landing in years, but he was talking about staying. He said his grandma's house needed his attention, but I knew it was more than that. It was me, too, but...well, I wasn't going to tell him to leave, and I wasn't sure that I could stand any more change than growing up all at once.

Heck, even going to sleep in a proper house with walls and a roof and a real bed was different from anything I'd ever done before. I liked it—it was way more comfortable than the ground, even when I hadn't really felt cold or wet or misery like I could now.

Wherever Everett was turned cozy and warm and welcoming in my head. I didn't want to leave. But if Everett did—well, I'd go with him. If he wanted me to be with him, I'd go anywhere.

“Everything okay?” Everett asked as he looked up from his computer screen. He had a mug of tea beside him, but it looked empty now. Still, the room smelled kind of floral and herby and nice.

“Very okay. Can I ask you something?”

When I sat, Everett pushed his laptop back a couple inches to give me his full attention. “What’s up?”

“Could we do Christmas?”

Everett watched me, his brows curving down into concerned little “u”s. “What do you mean? Like the whole baby Jesus in a manger thing or?—?”

A laugh burst out of me. “Oh, um, no. I...don’t think anything religious? And I have some pretty mixed feelings about a bearded fae guy slipping down our chimney to take or leave anything in our house.” I shrugged and fiddled with the handle of his mug. “Nothing major. Just...like, maybe we could put up some lights? And make cookies. We don’t need to do presents or anything.” Truth told, I had more than I’d ever dreamed of already. “Dr. Hawking said it’s important to make traditions, even if they’re not attached to anything religious.”

She said it might help me develop a sense of purpose and find my footing outside of the forest. I was struggling with that some. Sure, I’d gone to therapy a few times now, and I liked talking to Dr. Hawking well enough. Then Everett and I had gone to the store together a couple times, but Everett had projects.

I felt like I should try to find some of my own, but I wasn’t sure where to start. Dr. Hawking said the holidays were a good place to try out some new things.

“Sure. Cookies are easy enough.” Everett’s smile softened. “I’d totally have planned

something, I just...kind of got out of the habit of doing the whole Christmas thing.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Yeah, it kind of seemed like you and your grandma were the only ones who ever got excited for it?”

One of those funny, distant looks passed over Everett’s face like he was remembering something sweet. I liked that expression; it made me feel like things weren’t really that hard and I wasn’t the only one who had a lot of lost memories to catch up on. It wasn’t quite the same, but it made me feel less alien.

Everett laughed. “Definitely. I stopped trying after grandma died, but—well, not for any bad reason. Yeah, it’ll be fun. Do you want to maybe do small presents? Like stuff we make each other? We should have some craft stuff here.”

I blinked. “You want to make me something?”

Everett’s cheeks turned bright red. “Yeah, if that’s okay?”

My grin stretched so wide my cheeks ached. “I’d love that. Can I show you something?”

“Sure.”

He waited, sitting at the kitchen table, watching me as I disappeared down the hall to his bedroom and came back with an old piece of paper.

It’d been folded up in the pocket of the ripped pants I’d worn in the woods for years, the corners bent and edges browned. I hadn’t worn those pants since Everett had taken me in, but they were still there, folded up on top of the trunk at the end of his bed.

I scowled down at the paper. It was crinkled in a few places and looked pretty rough. That wasn't the way I remembered it at all.

When I came back to the kitchen and sat at the table beside him, I unfolded the paper and smoothed it out flat, erasing the edges and folds that'd turned brown and thin from wear, that threatened to tear. By the time I was finished, the paper looked good as new, the very same as the day Everett had handed it to me.

"I carried this around forever—" I whispered. It was a picture of Everett's grandma's dog, Bandit. Everett had let me keep it, and I'd looked at it a lot, always smoothing it out and making it good as new again, because I didn't ever want to lose it.

Only, when I looked up, Everett wasn't staring at Bandit. He gripped my hand and lifted it up.

"Peter, how the hell did you?—?"

"Make it new?" I wiggled my fingers between his. "It's magic, silly. Maybe...kind of similar to staying a kid all the time? I just feel what the thing was, or what I want it to be." I shrugged when he stared at me, mouth hanging slightly open. "We never had a ton of stuff in the woods and, believe me, it was a big freaking deal when William broke his wooden sword. It was easier to fix it than to watch him hurt about it. It's...weird?"

Everett was still staring, his eyes swimming with something I didn't fully understand.

"Yes," he breathed. "I mean, no. It's not weird. It's just...I've never seen anyone do anything like it before."

"Really? I never did magic around you before?"

“I...guess I just thought we were playing. I’m not sure I realized?—”

“Or maybe you grew up a little too much?” I laughed, tugging on his hand so he leaned closer to me and I could kiss his cheek. “What I was going to say is I love it when you make stuff for me. I’ll come up with something awesome for you too, promise.”

Everett’s laugh was still breathy and a little distant. “It doesn’t have to be anything big.”

“I know, I know, but I still want to give you something that’ll make you happy.”

“You don’t have to give me a single thing to make me happy, Peter, I already am.”

Ugh, when he said things like that it made me want to kiss him, a lot. But we hadn’t talked about it since the last time, and even though I sometimes caught his eyes going all hazy and hooded, I didn’t think he wanted to?—

Well, Dr. Hawking said he was trying not to take advantage of me, which is what he’d said too, and I wasn’t sure what to do with that, really. If he said he didn’t want to kiss, I thought the right thing to do was respect his wishes. I just—well, it would’ve been nice if he’d wanted to kiss me too. I wouldn’t have felt so stopped up and stuck.

But I could wait, and there were a lot of things we hadn’t discussed yet. Most of them had to do with “what’s next,” and we were both so exhausted by what’d already happened that we didn’t have answers.

“Did you want to do anything other than bake cookies and put up lights?” Everett asked, still holding onto my hand on the tabletop.

“Would it be okay if we made honey cakes? They’re—” I swallowed around the sudden lump in my throat. “My mother used to make them and we’d eat them together, and the other kids—they know the smell. They’ll come out of the woods for them. So I, uh, asked Dr. Hawking if she had a family recipe. I don’t know if it’s the same, but I thought we could make some for the kids?”

“Yeah, of course.” Everett reached out and put his hand on top of mine. “Are you okay?”

I bit my lip, staring down at the table in front of us. “I think so? They’re my friends, but partly, I just don’t want them to feel like another person forgot them. Or—heh, they might not remember me at all? I know I forgot a lot of the kids who left. Like if they weren’t there, I couldn’t think about them clearly? But that’s okay. If they ever come out, they might remember me and know they have somebody they can turn to? I’d like that, I think—to be here for them if they ever need somebody.”

“Definitely.” Everett’s thumb swiped across the back of my hand and my breath caught.

“Then yeah, that’s all I want.” The kids and Everett. Dr. Hawking said the traditions we made didn’t have to start off big, but we could build a life together slowly, piece by piece.

I’d never wanted anything so bad, and I hoped Everett did too.

Everett

The honey cake recipe was simple, which I supposed shouldn't be shocking. It wasn't like they had tons of exotic ingredients back in the nineteenth century, that Peter's mother could have used in her cakes. The strangest thing in there was lard, and Marsha at the grocery store both had it, and said we could replace it with butter, when she read the recipe.

"Or even coconut oil if you're one of those vegans," she promised, glancing in our cart and seeing the ground beef and Italian sausage, then giggling. "But I guess you're probably not."

"What's a vegan?" Peter asked, coming up with a giant bottle of honey. "Is it a kind of vegetable?"

"It's a person who doesn't eat anything that comes from animals." I had a horrible thought, suddenly, that maybe Peter didn't know his hamburgers were from cows. Shit, was he about to declare himself a vegan, because no one had warned him?

He cocked his head, looking down at the jar of honey. "Even honey?"

"Even honey," Marsha agreed. "But some people are vegetarians and eat honey and eggs and milk, but not meat or fish."

Peter's eyes narrowed, trying to make sense of the difference, and I couldn't really

launch into it in front of people. The explanation would doubtless come back to Peter's past, and I didn't think it was a conversation to have in front of people. Instead of asking the expected question, though, he just turned to her and shook his head. "But fish is meat."

Her shoulders hunched, trying to keep herself from laughing. Finally, she looked up, nodding. "I agree, sweetheart. But I guess some people don't."

Peter just shook his head the same way we always had at adult antics as children, turning to me. "People are weird."

Marsha cackled. "You've got that right."

"You harassing those poor boys?" Ezra asked, pushing a cart with cantaloupes toward the produce section. He held up a melon, waving it a little. "You boys should eat one of these. Best melons in the state."

Peter had frozen in place, blinking at him.

When Ezra met Peter's eye, he stilled, and they stared at each other for a moment. "Peter?"

Marsha frowned at her husband. "Honey, we don't know Everett's friend. Remember? Hasn't been a Peter in town in decades since old Doc Hawking died."

Peter stepped forward, looking at Ezra and holding the honey to his chest. After a long, tense silence, he smiled. "Ezra. It's been so long."

The old man blinked repeatedly, but a tear slipped down his cheek anyway. "I—I missed you all."

I knew from what Peter had told me that the children often didn't remember each other when they left the woods. He'd been remembering others who came and went in his time there, since he'd left, and there had been dozens over the nearly two hundred years. Dozens that had come and gone, and been forgotten. I was frozen. I couldn't coach him, couldn't tell him how much it would hurt a person to hear that he'd been forgotten. But I also couldn't expect Peter to understand?—

“We missed you too, Ezra. You were always the best at playing pirates. Remember the time you came back with a whole blueberry pie as booty?”

The old man clasped a hand to his mouth, nodding. He motioned to Marsha. “Stole it from her mother's windowsill.”

Marsha had frozen in place, her head cocked, glancing between her husband and Peter. “She thought you were homeless,” she whispered after a moment of silence. “She invited you to live with us.”

He turned back to her. “And she made the best blueberry pie in the world, and her daughter was the prettiest lady I'd ever seen. How could I say no?”

Peter passed me the bottle of honey and rushed Ezra, leaning in and giving him a hug. “I'm so glad you found a family.”

Ezra looked over his shoulder, meeting my eye. “Me too. And now it's...it's your turn, is it?”

When Peter pulled back, his face was bright and animated. “Yes. You know Everett. He's my best friend. And maybe...well. We'll figure things out.”

“I'm sure you will,” Ezra agreed, smiling at us both. “You picked a good time to come out. Cell phones and computers and—there's a lot of magic in the world

nowadays.”

Peter beamed. “There is. But there’s always been magic in the world. We just knew where to look, and most people didn’t seem to back then.”

Ezra nodded, wiping his eyes. He motioned to the cart. “Going to make honey cakes?”

Peter nodded. “I am. We are. Maybe...maybe sometime you could come. William is still out there. You—you were best friends.”

“We were,” Ezra agreed. “I’m not sure any of them would want to see me anymore.”

“You’re wrong.” I’d never heard Peter so serious in all our time together, not even when he was talking about what he wanted out of life, tense and sad and thinking about running off into the woods. “We’re family, Ezra. Always will be. Always.”

The old man almost fell forward, hugging Peter again, nodding. When they pulled away, both were wiping their faces. Marsha was staring at Peter like she’d seen a ghost. Or like she’d entirely forgotten he existed until that moment.

I took the melon Ezra was still holding in one hand. “I think we will try this. If you say they’re the best in the state, obviously that’s worth trying out.”

Ezra nodded. “Almost as good as the ones I grow in my garden in season.”

“We’ll have to get you one of those in the summer, so you can compare,” Marsha suggested. She sounded hopeful, and I realized she was feeling me out, not Peter, for whether we were staying.

“That sounds amazing,” I agreed. “Maybe we’ll have a barbecue in the summer,

invite everyone, and you can bring one with you.”

“We would love that.” She reached out and grabbed Ezra’s shoulder. “My mother taught him how to make that blueberry pie. We could bring one of those too.”

Peter leaned against me, his head on my shoulder. “It’s a plan. I can’t wait.”

20

Peter

“Can we...really have a barbecue this summer?” I asked as we unloaded the groceries back at home.

Everett seemed to know that wasn't really what I was asking, but his smile was serene, not edgy. He nodded. “Yeah, I think it'd be fun. I've never gotten to do one before. Sometimes my apartment complex would have cookouts on the roof or something, but that's not the same. Do you...want to?”

“Yeah! For sure. I'd love to have Ezra over, and I want to get to know his person. Marsha seems so nice. I think that'd be really good.” And mostly? I was just happy Everett was staying. Maybe it wouldn't be forever and we'd have some other adventure in the future, but maybe this would be our place. I couldn't wait to find out.

He left out the stuff for baking, and we prepared the batter for the honey cake first.

That went into a round pan, greased and covered in flour.

There was a patch of dust at the very tip of Everett's nose, and I stared at it for a second too long. I desperately wanted to kiss it, to catch that dust on my lips and then let them drift lower to taste his again. Ugh, I wanted to kiss him and hold him and let my heart fly.

And I didn't want to make him feel weird or like he was hurting me or doing

anything wrong.

“Are you okay?” Everett had caught me staring and he tipped his head to the side.

I blinked, straightening my neck. “Totally. Absolutely great. Best ever.”

He grinned and handed me the cake pan. “Want to put this in the oven?”

“Sure! How long?”

“Hm...” Everett leaned over the recipe card. “It says fifty-five minutes, or when a toothpick comes out clean.”

I set the timer and leaned back against the counter. The cookies we were making were oatmeal with pecans instead of raisins, because only grownups put raisins in cookies. The whole kitchen smelled like honey and cinnamon and warmth.

“Why are you smiling like that?” Everett looked up from where he was scooping out mounds of cookie dough one by one.

I shrugged. “This is perfect.”

When he was done and put the baking sheet in the fridge to chill, we each took a beater and licked the batter clean. With the oven going, it was a little warmer in the kitchen than it would’ve been normally, and I cracked open the window, something twisting in my belly. Would they come?

If they did . . . would they remember me?

Since Everett had come to Cider Landing all those years ago, I’d stuck out from the other kids. Now, I wasn’t even a kid. Most days, I wasn’t totally sure what I was, but

I didn't want to hear how awful growing up was, how much I'd given up and how pathetic it was for me to want something other than to play forever.

Sure, playing was great, but—but Everett and I had fun, and sometimes that was playing a game but sometimes it was just being together or cooking a meal or thinking about the future.

Still, I wanted to do this. It was worthwhile, to make sure the kids knew I was around if they ever needed anything. Even if they acted like, well, kids, and even if they hurt my feelings, it'd be okay.

I had Everett, and everything would be okay.

I wandered over to him and looped my arms around his middle. He hugged me back. "You okay?"

I nodded without lifting my head. "Just thinking about how happy I am to have you."

I propped my chin on his chest and held his eye. There was something there, sweeter than any cake or cookie, but I wasn't going to push for more, and before I could ask what it meant, Everett caught sight of something behind me.

"I think someone's here," he whispered.

I turned and even in the dark, I could see a cloud of fluffy white lace.

I sighed. "Aurora."

"Do you want to go talk to her?"

I nodded, but I—I didn't have words right then. Everett let me go.

“Call if you need anything,” he said, but he didn’t follow me out there. Maybe this time, he wasn’t afraid that I’d go back to the woods.

My throat was tight when I went out into the side yard, where Aurora was already sitting on one of the old swings. She didn’t look up as I approached, but her shoulders stiffened.

When I was standing right in front of her, her feet digging into the dirt as she swayed back and forth, I could barely hear her whisper, “Are you mad at me?”

Shit—was I?

Aurora knew everything. She’d been out there the longest, knew everything about magic and the best games and—well, everything. She was something more than the rest of us, but deep down, she’d always been another lost kid too.

“Are you the one who took me from my family and—and put that other boy in my place?”

Without lifting her head, Aurora shrugged. “I don’t know. I think I must’ve been, but I don’t remember much about life before playing with you. After that, nothing else was important.”

I nodded, scuffing my feet through the dirt too. After a moment, I sat in the swing beside her.

“Well, either way, no. I’m not mad at you.”

Finally, her head popped up, and I glanced at her from the corner of my eye. She was staring at me, eyes wide, blinking slow.

“You’re not?”

“Nope.” I dug my foot into the ground to push myself back. “I have the best life, Rora, and I always have. I got to play and have adventures. Now, I have Everett and there are movies and so many things to do and see, and I’m excited for all of it.” I twisted on the swing with a creak. “And I have you too, right? Best friends?”

Everett was first in my heart, maybe, but Aurora had been there the longest. Anyway, he was...something more than my best friend. At least, I hoped he would be.

“If you want to be,” Aurora whispered.

“Yup. I don’t want to give up anything. I want it all.” I stopped swinging, dragging my foot to slow down. “Do the other kids remember me?”

Aurora shrugged. “Maybe a little? It’s hard to think about people leaving, but when we smelled the honey cake, William asked if we could come and have some.”

“Of course, yeah. We made it for you guys. I’d love if you came. If you stay a little while, we’ll have cookies too, and I want everybody to meet Everett.”

“Really?” A bright voice came from behind a tree, and Jessie stuck their head out. “I love cookies!”

“Yeah!” I got out of the swing and held out my hand to them. “Come inside and you can help us put them in to bake.”

They took my hand, and it—it felt like something was stitching together in my chest, a hurt part of me that I hadn’t wanted to look at too closely before, because I’d been afraid it’d never heal.

I caught Aurora's eye, and she smiled too.

21

Everett

P eter came back in after just a few minutes, trailing a parade of children. I wasn't sure if it was cute, or a little scary.

These were children—or not children—of indeterminate age, who lived in the woods, never growing older. They'd been taken from families who loved them, who might still be missing them, and the most adult part of me wanted to lock them in the house and insist on calling the authorities until we could get them sent home.

The girl I'd thought was Peter's sister gave me an adult, knowing look, though, and I knew it wouldn't work. She couldn't be held in by a door lock.

Also, she didn't have human parents out there waiting for her to come home. Some tiny, trembling part of my brain looked at her and sent me an alert. Like she was a mountain lion or a crocodile, and if I made the wrong move, she'd snap me in half as easily as she accepted a glass of milk from Peter.

"This is a real nice house," the other girl, Mary said as she sat at the kitchen table, sipping at her milk.

I smiled and inclined my head to her. "Thank you." There was no reason to point out the peeling linoleum and stained ceiling that needed at the very least painting. I glanced up at it, remembering when the stain had happened. Something about a leaky pipe in the upstairs bathroom. The leak had long since been fixed, but the messy

yellow stain it made had remained. Heck, we'd painted over it, and it had come back. Too bad I couldn't just run my hand over it and make it as good as new, like Peter with the picture of Bandit.

Magic. I shook my head and turned back to where Peter was handing out slices of honey cake. The littlest one, a kid Peter called Jessie, was leaning over and looking at the window on the oven, clearly invested in the idea of the cookies. "You promise there's no raisins? My daddy used to buy raisin ones. They were gross."

Daddy. That was interesting. Looking back at our childhood, I had realized that Peter had never spoken of his parents. Like they hadn't existed. Being a child myself, I had just brushed it off and not worried about what that might mean.

Now I was older, better able to consider subtleties.

"Your mom didn't give you chocolate instead?" I asked.

Jessie turned, head cocked one way, then the other. "What's a mom?"

Oh, so much for that. I supposed they didn't remember all that much.

But then, they leaned in conspiratorially. "My other daddy would give me ones with chocolate chips, and tell me not to tell, because he'd get in trouble. But all kids deserve chocolate instead of raisins."

That sounded like something they were quoting, and that...oh that was very interesting. There probably weren't a lot of ways to tell how long these kids had been in the woods, but two daddies? That meant something. That meant that Jessie was a recent addition. There was only so long having two daddies had been possible in this country.

Those daddies might still be alive.

Once again, I had to swallow down the urge to snatch the kid up and run to the authorities.

This time, though, the situation had gotten Peter's attention. "Other daddy? You had...two dads?"

Jessie nodded, watching like a hawk as I pulled the cookies out of the oven and slowly used a spatula to move them, one by one, over to the cooling rack. "I'm afraid we didn't have chocolate chips," I told them. "Wonder if your dad still makes them."

Everyone in the kitchen stopped moving, and Jessie looked at me like I'd spoken in a foreign language, but then nodded thoughtfully. "Me too." Then they turned to Peter and nodded. "Two daddies. They were married, like you and Everett."

Peter blinked at them, looking from Jessie to me and back. Maybe waiting for me to deny it. I thought it was best to let him take the lead, since they were his friends, and he was the one who knew how this all worked.

"Maybe I'll get married someday," Jessie speculated, pushing up on their toes to watch the cookies. Like maybe they'd disappear if they weren't watched continuously.

I picked one up and handed it to them. "Careful, it's still hot."

They grinned at me, so beautiful with their blond hair and clear blue eyes that the one missing front tooth only made them look like a freaking perfect Norman Rockwell painting of a five-year-old. I'd never thought about having kids, but something about Jessie made me consider it.

Not that I'd take them. They had parents. Two daddies, who probably still missed them terribly. "You can come by anytime, and I'll make cookies," I told them. I couldn't snatch them out of the woods and away from the fae, or any of the children, but I could try to make a life outside the woods seem like it was a good choice.

They grinned at me, blowing on the cookie. "Thanks, Mr. Everett!"

When they went to sit at the table with their cookie and milk, the other boy was glaring at me like I'd pissed in his breakfast. "We don't want to get old like you."

"Will," Aurora said, warning in her voice.

"Will?" I asked, interested. "Ezra's best friend, Will? He asked about you today. He owns the grocery store now with his wife."

They all stared at me for a moment, and I watched the emotions cross Will's face. Doubt, then shock, and horror, and finally, heartbreak. An understanding that he'd lost something, and it was still out there. The point of this whole thing was the opposite of that, after all. They played with their friends forever. Never losing anything.

But Will had lost something. And worse, he'd forgotten it. The heartbreak turned quickly to frustration and anger, and he turned away from me. "I don't care about Ezra. He picked stupid Marsha over me. We're not friends anymore."

I took it in stride. "Okay. I can let him know if you want. Or you could tell him yourself. He and Marsha are going to come this summer, for a barbecue."

I didn't press any further than that, and he didn't answer, but there was calculation in his eyes. Interest. I only hoped he wouldn't react badly to the fact that Ezra was pushing a hundred years old.

“What’s a barbecue?” Mary finally asked, after swallowing the last of her cake.

And that was how we ended up sitting through Peter’s vivid description of what I’d told him about a barbecue. I wasn’t sure how, coming from him, it sounded a thousand times more appetizing than anything I’d ever done. Maybe he was the one who should be in advertising, instead of me.

With how little luck I’d been having finding a freelance job, I’d been considering walking away from the racket altogether. Maybe I just wasn’t cut out to do the job. Or any job. I’d wanted to be an artist for a living, but the last few years in advertising had shown me that wasn’t ever going to fill my artistic drive. I always ended up sketching and painting on my time off anyway, and that was a thousand times more fulfilling than making art to sell stuff. Not that making ads sucked, it just wasn’t the kind of art that made me excited.

Peter showed the last of the kids out of the house, and I had to hold myself in place. Aurora gave me one last look back, and a tiny smile that seemed almost approving. Approving of what? That I’d pushed down my morals and not tried to snatch the kids up and protect them, when I knew I couldn’t?

She had let Peter go when he’d decided to. I had to believe that she’d do the same with the others. That if I convinced them to come home, she wouldn’t interfere.

It was just a little overwhelming, trying to decide where to start. Especially when I was already trying to find a way to both retain and fix grandma’s house without a freaking job, and help Peter, and sort out?—

“Hey,” he said, tapping me on the nose, dragging my attention back to him. “Everything okay? You seem a little...sad.”

I looked up at him, and it was perfect. In that moment, I knew I could tell him

everything, and he would be with me to deal with the fallout. “I’m a little worried about making enough money to keep the house up,” I explained. “There’s a lot that needs fixed, and I’m not handy. Apparently no one in Cider Landing is. And if I don’t find a new job, I won’t be able to hire anyone anyway, and I just...I want to take care of you.”

Peter’s smile was small, but genuine. “Everett. I’m pretty sure we’re going to take care of each other. Best friends, remember? Partners.” He cocked his head, gaze drifting off into the middle distance for a moment. “Daddies. That means married, right? Could we—I know not right this minute, but—” He broke off, cheeks flushed, and looked away. “Sorry, I know you’re worried I’m still a kid. You don’t have to?—”

That couldn’t be allowed to stand. I swooped in and pressed my lips to his for a second, before pulling back. “Partners,” I told him. “I mean, Jessie’s daddies might be married. Men can get married and adopt kids nowadays, if they want to. And maybe it’s a little premature to go talking about kids, but you’re my partner in all this stuff, Peter. I don’t think you’re a kid.”

He bit his lip, looking into my eyes, maybe searching for the sincerity behind my words. So I leaned forward and kissed him again.

This time, he pushed into the kiss. Not that cute chaste way kids do. No, he pressed against me, eyes closed and arms wrapping around my neck as he tentatively nudged his tongue against the seam of my lips. Suddenly, I felt like a kid. A teenager getting kissed for the first time. I opened for him, and he pressed in, claiming my mouth, forceful and demanding, and somehow not the slightest bit awkward or sloppy. He’d skipped right over teenage fumbling and straight to unholy hotness.

When he pulled back, his cheeks were flushed pink, and he grinned at me. He looked me over, and I imagined I had to look much like he did. Flushed, lips swollen, hair

mussed. Debauched. There was something sly and satisfied in his smile at that.

“Perfect,” he said, finally.

Fuck me, I was completely in love with this man.

22

Peter

We kissed .

I wanted to punch the air. I wanted to lean my head back and shout so the whole world knew that I'd kissed Everett Bailey.

He was mine . He wanted me to be his partner .

And when I pulled back, he looked...unreasonably tasty. Better than pizza or cookies or anything else I could imagine, because he was just the slightest bit rumpled and his lips were pink and beautiful and swollen in a way that drew my eyes straight down to his perfect mouth.

It felt like I'd won. I wasn't sure what I'd won, exactly, but I was Peter not-quite Hawking and I was supremely freaking victorious.

Then we cuddled on the couch and watched some silly TV show about people singing, and before we went to sleep, I sneaked one more kiss.

Patience, Dr. Hawking said. I couldn't do everything all at once, and I wasn't even sure what everything meant, but I could do a lot and I'd figure it all out in time.

In the morning, Everett made coffee. It was artist fuel, he said, and I only liked it with a bunch of cream and sugar—so much that when I dumped it in, he raised an eyebrow

at me and I told him in no uncertain terms that I was an adult and could do whatever I wanted.

He said something about cavities, but I was going to trust in magic to keep all my teeth in tiptop shape.

I ate cereal and Everett returned to his computer. I figured he was back to hunting for a job. Before last night, I hadn't known what exactly to make for Everett for Christmas. Now, I knew.

Maybe I wasn't a genius like him, with all his staggering talent, but I could make things easier. I could remove some of the problems that were stuck in his head so he could focus on what really mattered. And yes, maybe I'd twisted things around to convince myself that repairing things was basically the same as making new things, but I couldn't make beautiful art like him. I could only try and make things right.

We were sitting there when his cell phone buzzed on the table beside him. He stared down at it for a few seconds, a frown on his face, and I thought he might not even answer.

Then, he sighed and shook his head. "I should take this."

"Can I...use your laptop then?" I'd used it a couple times. It was interesting and all—kind of overwhelming, the way you could just type something in and get an answer in a second, but I liked it. Everett and Dr. Hawking were encouraging me to think about what I'd like to have and do.

Now that living had a time limit, it seemed wise to figure it out.

Still, most jobs required school and certificates and things I didn't have and wasn't sure I really wanted to get. I wanted to spend time with Everett, have fun together, do

things that mattered to us both. Starting to try and catch up with school wasn't just overwhelming, it felt like turning my back on the stuff that really mattered to me right then.

Maybe one day, I'd want to learn more in that kind of setting, but just learning how to live was enough for now.

Still, I did want to fill my day with things, and I hadn't quite figured out what. Everett would have to work eventually, and I liked the idea of taking the pressure off him. I was even thinking about asking Ezra and Marsha if they needed some help at the store. I could stack stuff, haul boxes, that kind of thing.

I might not be exactly like I was in the forest, but certain things didn't bother me. I didn't seem to get tired the way that other people did. It was more than just my ears the woods had changed, but I'd figure it out one day.

Or maybe I wouldn't, and that'd be okay too.

In any case, Everett let me use his laptop to try and figure out the things I liked and wanted to try, so he turned it around to me with a smile and a nod. "Of course. Be right back."

He grabbed his phone and walked down the hallway toward the bedroom.

I couldn't type half as fast as he could, and this time...well, I really had meant to look up something interesting and useful, but what came out was, "two men kissing."

That's what I searched for, and it turned up all kinds of websites for LGBTQA+ people. And then it turned up pictures , and—and oh.

They were lovely and my face felt tingly and warm and I thought about kissing

Everett again and how we might smile like the people in these pictures and how wonderful that was and?—

“Peter? Everything okay?”

Everett stood on the other side of the table, his head tilted curiously. With a squeak, I snapped his computer shut and slid it back across the table.

“Totally good. Awesome. Completely, totally good. You?”

He hummed. He didn’t seem thrilled, and his jaw looked kind of tight, but he also wasn’t crying or shaking or angry, so he’d tell me when he felt like talking about it.

“Yeah. That was just my boss,” he said, voice subdued.

I waited for him to say more, but he only slumped into his chair at the kitchen table and opened his laptop, and a sly smile crept across his face. He glanced over the top edge of his computer at me. “Whatcha thinking about, Peter?”

“Oh...” My face got even hotter. “Nothing, really. Just what’s, uh, next I guess.”

“Okay,” Everett said, biting his lip and glancing back down at the screen. “You’re not really used to this stuff, so it’s not fair for me to tease you. And I’m not, really. I...think I like what you’re thinking about. But when you close a laptop? That doesn’t close the windows you had open.”

“What?” I rushed out of my seat around to his side of the table, craning over his shoulder to look at all those pictures of men kissing men. “Oh crap,” my hands pressed my cheeks and I caught Everett’s eye. He seemed like he was trying really hard not to laugh.

He twisted in his chair to loop his arm around my back and pull me closer. Even though I was standing and he was still sitting, it was nice to lean into him. I draped my arms over his shoulders.

“Why are you embarrassed?” Everett asked, looking up at me.

Upon reflection, I...didn't really know. Everett didn't make me feel small or stupid for not knowing all the same stuff everyone else seemed to. And really, I just wanted to think about kissing him. So why did it make me squirm to know he'd caught me thinking about it?

“I...want you to think I'm cool,” I whispered. “Or, like...I want you to be able to trust me to know what I'm doing? I want to sweep you off your feet. I don't ever want you to catch me fumbling.”

Everett hummed again, his chin against my stomach and his eyes on the wall beside me as he thought it over. After a few seconds, he caught my eye again.

“Well, first off, you're cute when you fumble. I like it, like you, so please don't deny me your fumbling because then I'll feel like I'm the only one who ever does it.”

I huffed, pushing on his shoulder. “No, you never do.”

He laughed. “I do all the time. But second...you said you wanted to figure everything out with me—all the big firsts and stuff?”

I bit my lip hard. I did, even if I didn't want to make him go through stuff he'd already been through. Everett was why I'd come out. I wanted everything with him.

“Yeah,” I whispered.

“What if I said that’s good for me too? I could use a redo on figuring stuff out. I don’t think either of us needs to know it all right away, but we can work together on it.”

“Okay.” My voice came out even quieter, trapped behind a knot in my throat. What he said was everything I wanted, and I was scared it wasn’t real or that he was just trying to take care of me, not himself.

“I’m serious,” he pressed, pushing a kiss into my stomach through my T-shirt. “I like that you’re thinking about it, and you can absolutely use my computer whenever you want to research whatever you want, but I don’t want you to be perfect. I just want you to be Peter.”

And, well, if I drew him out of his seat and kissed him after that, savoring the bitter taste of coffee on his lips, who could blame me? He wanted me, and nothing had ever felt better.

23

Everett

“Tom doesn’t have the Crosslife ads,” was how James Warren greeted me when I picked up the phone.

I paused, considering. Halfway through December.

It took Warren until halfway through December to even think about the Crosslife account enough to look for the files and realize he didn’t have them.

“Why would you have expected him to have them?” I asked. “He didn’t make them. Didn’t help with them. Didn’t have anything to do with them. Just like you.”

He huffed out a frustrated sigh, and I could hear his fingers tapping on the other end of the line. “Now is not the time for cute games, Bailey. Where is the Crosslife file?”

I waited a moment. How should I handle this? It wasn’t like I could sell the files to anyone else. Technically, I’d done the work while in Warren’s employ. On the other hand, he’d broken trust with me, so I also didn’t have a reason to give him files I wasn’t going to get the promised bonus for. “Well, I haven’t looked, since I’m on vacation, but I assume it’s right where I left it when I was working on it. You know, on my computer.”

“And where’s that?” he demanded, tone suggesting he was speaking to a recalcitrant child. “We checked your desk, but it seems like you took company property out of

the office.”

“No, I didn’t. You didn’t give me a computer. Artists are too picky and you couldn’t be bothered, remember? I’ve never removed so much as a stray paperclip that belonged to you from the office. Only my own property. Like my personal laptop.”

There was a loaded silence where he digested the information, realizing how much of a barrel I actually had him over. I’d never heard anyone speak to him this way in my years with the company, but I had watched one person after another leave suddenly, and then be mocked around the office as “weak” and “unable to handle the pressure.”

I wondered if he’d go sickly sweet and once again promise me the imaginary bonus he had no intention of giving.

How long, and with how many brand-new college grads had he and Tom run this con? Here kid, pay for your own tech and take this barely living wage, and give us the hard work that pays for our jaguars and yachts, then we wait till you get jaded and leave, rinse, repeat.

Instead of trying to lure me back with honey, though, Warren went ice cold. “Now you listen here, you little shit. I own you. I own every bit of work you’ve done on that account. And your contract says you can’t go work for another ad company for five years after leaving me.”

I knew that. It was why I’d been looking for freelance work instead of trying to find another nine-to-five job, because that was the one loophole I’d found in the contract—Warren was old school enough that he hadn’t accounted for freelance work at all.

“I thought you made the ads for Crosslife yourself,” I reminded him. I was digging my own grave, but seriously, calling me a little shit, when he’d lied and used and

manipulated me? Fuck that guy. “That is what you told their CEO, if you recall. You had to get down in the trenches because I was too much of a wimp to do the job. If that’s true, there’s no reason you wouldn’t have your very own copy of them. I mean, why would I even have them at all if you made them?”

When he answered, he was panting, like he was on a fucking treadmill or something. “You want to get fired? Is that it? You make me fire you, you’ll never work in this industry again. I’ll blacklist you, and you won’t be able to get a position sweeping floors at an advertising agency, in five years or fifty, it won’t matter.”

And that was it.

I didn’t even stop and think about it. Didn’t consider my future prospects, didn’t give a fuck about my fucking future in advertising, even though I had no idea how the hell I was going to pay for the repairs on Grandma’s house or the property taxes, even as low as they were.

The man was threatening me with complete ruin for the crime of pointing out that he was a liar.

But he was a liar. And a thief. And a swindler.

“If the rest of the advertising industry is anything like working for you, I’d rather be blacklisted. Fire me. I’ll have you in court for wrongful dismissal and be collecting unemployment for the next year. I’m the one who has the files, remember? Good luck recreating the entire Crosslife campaign without my help before January.”

And then I hung up.

And turned my phone back off.

When I went back in to discover Peter looking up men kissing on my computer, it was like...like stepping into a different world. He always talked about the magic in the woods, and part of me, a part that had been grounded in an adult job and responsibilities, had doubted. Even with his pointed elfish ears and the fact that I was convinced he was a hundred and sixty-seven years old, I had doubted magic.

But I'd been wrong.

So wrong.

Peter was magic, whether he was forever a child or not. Whether he had magical powers that let him turn a paper from faded and worn to perfect and pristine with just a wave of his hand. He could make me go from terrified, with a pit of dread forming in my belly like a ball of writhing snakes, to completely charmed, in ten seconds flat.

Maybe as much as Doctor Hawking and I were helping Peter grow up, he was helping me...grow up a little less. Or maybe just a little different than I had the first time. Because why did growing up mean that all joy had to take a hike? Why did it mean there was no more magic?

Screw that. I turned, smiling at him, and leaned in for another kiss.

They were almost all cute and chaste, the kisses, but it didn't matter. It was me, and it was Peter, and we were together. Just like when we were fourteen together, and frankly, I felt a little like I was fourteen again, too.

That was where it had all started going wrong, after all.

When I'd had to go to high school with no friends, no Peter, and no Grandma to be there supporting me. My parents had never really been the supportive types. Or...emotionally there at all. I'd always felt like I'd grown up wrong, because it had

never felt like everyone said it should. Kisses under bleachers and first loves and broken romances and success and failure and...I'd done none of that. It was like I'd just drifted through high school, college, and into adulthood, without really changing.

I'd just assumed everyone had lied about how a person changed when they became an adult. All I'd gained when I'd "become an adult" had been even more anxiety.

And standing there in my grandmother's kitchen, arms around Peter's waist, pressing my lips against his, all that melted away. We weren't fourteen or thirty. Weren't thinking about jobs or house repairs or stress upon stress upon stress. I wasn't worrying about how soon I needed to look into unemployment or see a lawyer. I didn't even know if Warren was going to follow through on firing me yet, and frankly, it didn't fucking matter.

I could mow lawns for money if I had to, like back when I was fourteen. There was a functional lawn mower in the shed, last I'd checked. Peter and I could do it together.

He giggled and pressed his forehead to mine, grinning that perfect, mischievous grin of his. "I always knew it," he whispered to me, meeting my eye with his own sparkling hazel ones.

I couldn't help it. I followed where Peter led. I always had. "Knew what?"

"That you're magical, Everett Bailey." He glanced aside, down toward the floor, and I half expected to look down and see Bandit sitting there, waiting for us to finish with our silly human things and get back to playing.

Instead, all I saw was the linoleum kitchen floor. About three feet further away than it should have been. Because Peter and I were floating in midair.

We were flying.

24

Peter

We were flying, and given how kissing Everett always felt a little like flying, that came as less of a surprise than it should've.

Still, Everett's arms tightened around me, and I couldn't tell if he was afraid we'd fall, or he was just delighted. He should've known I'd never ever let him fall without me.

With my hand curled around the nape of his neck, I dragged him in for another kiss. I pressed into him, claiming more and more and more. I'd make him mine forever and I swore, then and there, that I'd make him so freaking happy he'd come back to Cider Landing. I'd do whatever it took, because he was my Everett and he?—

“Ow—” He flinched, rubbing the back of his head.

I'd maybe pushed in too hard, because we'd flown into the top corner of the kitchen and I had him pinned against the wall. His head had hit the ceiling.

I grimaced. “Sorry.”

He was quick to shake his head. “No big. But should we maybe get down?”

We found our way to the couch, and Everett sat down first. He looked up at me, a soft smile on his face. “Do you want to keep going?”

My breath caught. Could I really have more? I didn't want to push him before he was ready, but when I searched his face, I didn't see a trace of doubt on his face.

Biting my lip, I nodded. "Definitely, yes. A lot."

I hopped onto the couch, magic catching my weight before I could take the old springs out with me. Then, I was sitting on my knees beside Everett. He twisted, leaning back into the corner between the couch back and its arm to look at me.

"I want more," I whispered, nervous to ask for too much. But I reached for him, slid my hand up his chest, and he didn't push me away. His hand settled on top of mine, fingers spreading between my own. "But I don't know what's next."

Admitting that was hard, even with Everett. Some parts were instinctual—kissing him made my head fuzzy, made my blood rush, made me want to get closer to him—but there was more to all this than instinct. I wanted him to be happy and feel nice. I really wanted him to want me back.

"That's okay," Everett promised. He leaned up for another kiss, his fingers still tangled with my own. "We don't have to rush and we don't have to be perfect, but you can touch me, if you want?"

My breath caught. "You'd . . . like that?"

His laugh sounded so perfect. "Yeah, Peter. I would."

I surged forward, tipping my head so my mouth fit against his perfectly. We kissed slow and deep and—and Everett opened beneath me, letting me taste him. His eyes fluttered shut and mine too, but I heard his quiet moan and it—it did things. It made my heart pound. I wanted to press every inch of myself against every inch of him and just feel each other.

And I wanted his skin on mine.

I shrugged out of my T-shirt and dropped it on the floor. At the rustling, Everett looked up. His cheeks had turned beautiful and pink, standing out beneath all his dark hair. His eyes were blown, his pupils large and dark so there was only a sliver of light blue all around.

“This okay?”

Everett was staring, and at first, he just nodded. Then, he seemed to catch himself, clear his throat, and he said, “Yeah, Peter. Very okay.”

“Awesome.” When I pressed him down into the couch again, I let my hands drift below his shirt. I didn’t have any specific destination in mind, but I wanted to touch him—just...enjoy the feel of his skin, the way his inhale shook when I teased him with the very tips of my fingers dancing across his ribs, how smooth and warm and beautiful he was.

He made a sound like a whimper, drawing back from my lips. “Can I touch you too?”

I wanted to laugh. It shouldn’t have even been a question, but, well, maybe it was good that he was asking. I only wanted to make him happy, and clearly, he wanted the same.

Impossible, to think I wouldn’t want more of him, but all too easy to tell him that I did.

“Please,” I whispered against his lips. I caught his bottom one between my teeth and gave it a soft pull that made his whole body arch, his legs wiggling higher up the couch.

His hands were more magical than flying. I should've known, after seeing the incredible art he could make with them, but—but I hadn't realized his touch would feel like this, all tingly and melty and perfect.

My body rolled, chasing the feeling of his touch and the—the way something hot and urgent rushed down to my groin. My dick was so hard in my borrowed jeans, and I wanted?—

I wanted to touch it, but I wanted Everett to touch it more. I'd crumble to pieces if he didn't.

But I had to know I wasn't the only one first. I dragged my hand down his chest, and he stretched beneath me, pressing onto my touch until I got to the very tops of his pants. He was still wearing his pajamas, and I paused there at the drawstring.

“What about here?” I whispered. “Can I go lower?”

I swallowed, nervous as he held my eye. But then, he nodded, and Victorious Peter was back!

At first, I just ran my hand down, over the tops of his soft flannel pants, and—yes! His dick was hard too. I'd done that! He wanted me .

I grinned, and it turned my kiss awkward.

“What?” he rasped, his voice strained as I stroked him.

“Nothing.” I buried my face against his neck and kissed the smooth skin there. “You want me.”

He laughed, pulling me closer. “I do.”

Just hearing that sent a shiver down my spine. I wanted to give him the whole world—magic and my past and my future and all of it. I wanted to make him feel better than he'd ever felt. I wanted?—

Him.

I wanted him so fucking much.

I slipped my hand into his pants, and he was warm. I touched his dick, and it was smooth and silky but also heavy and nice and I liked it so much. I liked him so much.

When I started to rub him, Everett reached for the fly of my jeans. “You too?” he asked, breathless.

I nodded. I wanted to fall into him, sure, but I wanted to do this—do everything—together.

He was quick to open my pants, and he pushed them down a few inches as I shimmied my hips to get them out of the way. There was no time to pull back, no need to remove every piece of clothing—though I thought sometime I'd like to do that, to see all of Everett and have him close.

Right then, all that mattered was the buzzing pleasure that kept my hips moving mindlessly, thrusting into his clever hand.

And my own palm, fingers wrapped around him. There was a dribble of precome on the side of my palm, and Everett whined. “There,” he hissed. “Just—holy shit, the tip, I?—”

I focused there, and he went rigid beneath me. Then, his cock pulsed in my hand and shot out and he whimpered and holy freaking shit, that was the hottest thing I'd ever

seen. He was so perfect and amazing and—oh, his hand flexed on my dick, my ass clenched, and?—

When I followed him over, I saw stars.

I came back to myself, panting into the crook of his neck, pressed on top of him with one of his legs between mine. If I never moved again, that'd be okay.

“I love you,” I whispered against his neck. I'd never been surer of anything in my whole life.

Everett made me want to be a part of the world. Sure, maybe there was other good stuff out there, but he was the best.

He turned his head and kissed my temple. “Love you too,” he mumbled back.

We stayed like that for a long time, his hand sweeping soothingly over my back, pressing into my lower back just enough to feel so relaxing and leave me wiggling even closer.

I was in a daze, happy to stay there forever, when Everett asked, “Come to the city with me?”

I started. “What?”

Before I could spiral, I realized he was smiling, calm. “Just for a couple days. I want to pack up my stuff so I can stay here for good, but I just...don't want to leave you behind, even if I'm coming back. And maybe we could do some fun stuff while we're there?”

“You want to take me with you?” I bit my lip, trying to hide the biggest grin I'd ever

had.

“Yeah.”

He wanted to take me with him .

Everett didn't want to leave me behind.

He never really had wanted that.

“Yes!” I surged forward, kissing the corner of his jaw and shimmying my arms under him to squeeze him tight. “Yes, I'll help you pack and everything.”

25

Everett

I decided that the best thing to do was to rent an entire moving truck. Not an enormous one or anything, just big enough for the stuff at my apartment, which...if I was honest, wasn't much.

Hell, it was kind of pitiful when all totaled, since my apartment had come with the basic furnishings, so I didn't even own a bed or a sofa. I did have a nicer TV than the one at Grandma's old house, because that was a basic life requirement. And a coffee maker. And...linens.

Yeah, it was the smallest moving truck available for rent. Almost more of a van. Fortunately, I was able to pick it up at their location just outside Cider Landing, so the travel itself wasn't complicated.

Heck, the thing even fit in my apartment's assigned parking space, so I didn't have to figure out how to park a moving truck on a busy city street.

Meanwhile, it was all new and exciting for Peter.

He wasn't exactly an excited kid on Christmas, but...practically that, anyway. Picking up the truck was fascinating. Paying with a credit card was interesting. The largely rural drive to the city, past farms and fields and forests, was the most fascinating thing ever. He knew about farms and farm animals, but didn't know much about the areas we drove through, so he started asking questions. After the first few questions,

most of which I couldn't answer, I handed him my phone.

He'd already gotten good at using Google to effect, and his reading and writing skills were better than most people I knew, so I let him at it, and before long, he was educating me on the areas we passed by, the intricacies of farming in the modern era, and the history of the state.

It was...actually a fun way to pass the drive. I'd ask random tangentially related questions, and he'd look up the answers, leading down new and different paths of inquiry.

Before I knew it, we were pulling into the parking spot in the underground lot in my apartment building, and Peter was looking around, confused and fascinated.

"This is . . . dark."

"Underground parking is dark sometimes. This is underneath the apartment building, and it doesn't really have windows. Only electric lights."

He looked up at the flickering bulbs overhead, nodding. "Weird ones, too. Nothing like the ones in the house."

It was fair, but I had no idea what the difference was, having precisely zero electrical knowledge.

The apartment, again, was interesting, but not in the same way as the rest of it. We walked in, and after wandering the room for a moment, Peter turned and looked at me, confused. "You live here?"

"Yeah. For like three years now."

“Why?”

And that...well, I didn't have any idea how to answer that question. I'd rented the apartment because it was cheap enough for me, and close to work. Then I'd mostly ignored it, only going there to sleep. Or sometimes, to do more work at home when the office was creepy and dark after everyone but me was done for the day.

Somehow, I didn't think any of that was the answer he was looking for. I couldn't imagine what answer would satisfy him, in fact. I couldn't think of a single thing that made sense.

Why the hell was I living there?

Because it was what people did. They got terrible apartments, lived in dingy, unpleasant surroundings, because it was what they could afford.

But...I had Grandma's house. Even in desperate need of repair as it was, it was better than this. Brighter, homier, and with more memories of a beloved past that I never wanted to let go of. More of Peter, and Grandma, and Bandit.

This place? It was like a hotel room that I'd existed in, but never lived. Never had friends over for holidays or thrown a dinner party or watched movies with my best friend. That fact was made even more obvious as we emptied the drawers of my clothes, and my whole life just...lifted right out of the apartment. It didn't even take us eight hours to pack everything in the boxes I'd bought at the place where we'd picked up the moving truck. And we had boxes left over.

My whole life since college didn't even fill the smallest moving truck available.

Peter kept shooting me concerned looks as we worked, every time he asked if something was mine or if it stayed with the apartment, and nine times out of ten, I

answered the latter.

Still, he was unfailingly positive as we sat down to lunch, sandwiches I'd ordered from the deli on the corner. "This isn't too hard at all. We'll have you moved right into the house tomorrow, like me. All done."

Like him.

Because he was moved into Grandma's house. Still, part of me wanted to press on that. To be sure. "There's nothing out in the woods you want to go get?"

He cocked his head, considering as he chewed on his pastrami sandwich. Then he shook his head. "It was...it was all kid stuff, Everett. I don't need toys I played with when I was a kid. Wooden swords and sailor hats and—none of it is for tomorrow. It's all for yesterday. The other lost kids can keep it. Until they realize they want to leave the woods too, and have their own lives."

For some reason, the whole idea brought tears to my eyes, and I almost wanted to say the same of my own things. No, they weren't children's toys. But they were mostly cheap kitchen utensils and clothes I'd been wearing since high school and just...part of a life I felt I was leaving behind, moving into Grandma's house with Peter.

Sort of like I, too, was leaving my childhood. Just, the childhood I was leaving was "broke college student" rather than "nineteenth-century feral child." I'd spent the last decade growing older, yes, but I wasn't sure I'd spent it growing up any more than Peter had. It was here and now that I grew up. Making adult decisions for the first time, moving forward instead of just accepting the hand I'd been dealt and sitting, stagnant, in my own filth.

That was when I started throwing away the older clothes, and burned utensils, and...well, everything I knew Grandma's house already had one of. No need for

cheap wooden spoons when I knew there were ten waiting back at the house. No dish drying rack, no holey high school mathlete T-shirts.

Peter had left his childhood behind. It was time for me to do the same.

The rest of the useful things went into the truck. The trash went in the dumpster behind the building. Then we put together a box of the stuff that was still useful, and walked it down to the local consignment shop as a donation, and we were done.

I picked a decent restaurant, set it as a destination on the phone, and took my boyfriend's hand, to lead him to the first meal of our new life. Our adult life. Together.

26

Peter

We spent one night in Everett's packed up apartment. I still didn't completely understand how this was his home—it was nothing like the place he'd shared with his grandma and parents growing up. It felt empty. The only parts of it that mattered were already in the back of a moving van; they were coming with us.

The art supplies and clothes and, yes, even Everett's old Spiderman comforter—though I'd been the one to insist he keep that.

It wasn't like the city wasn't nice or anything. The food was great! We hadn't eaten out in Cider Landing, though we probably could. There just weren't as many options, but did I really care about that?

I liked cooking with Everett best.

Otherwise? Well, it seemed like there were interesting things to do—stores and theaters and that kind of stuff. When Everett drove us out of the parking garage, I peered out the window.

Everett caught me doing it. “Do you want to stay here longer?”

I tipped my head to the side as I stared at him. Sure, I was interested in everything—the buildings were freaking crazy big—but...“In the city?”

Everett nodded. I watched his profile, and his jaw flexed and his throat bobbed.

“Nope,” I said simply.

Everett furrowed his brow. “Why?”

I shrugged. “It’s not my place. I mean, I’m not saying I’d never want to visit again, and it’s interesting to see how much bigger the world is than I thought—cities are different than they are in the movies. Louder, definitely. But I love Cider Landing. I love that I know the streets, that I have friends there and I’m meeting more people every day. I love how quiet it is, and how there’s magic everywhere. And here, well...” Frowning, I looked out the window again. “I can’t say there’s no magic in a place like this, but it’s too much, like there’s a hard shell around it that you can’t pick off to get to the magic beneath. In Cider Landing, it’s like pulling back a curtain. Here, it feels like I’d need a chisel. I think it’d be exhausting, trying to keep your magic in a place like this.”

When I met his eye again, Everett was blinking at me. He glanced at the road, but only long enough to keep us safe. After a while, he turned back to look out the front, a frown playing at the corners of his lips.

“It is,” he whispered.

I reached across the center console, and he dropped one hand from the wheel to thread his fingers through mine.

“I’m glad we’re going home,” I whispered back.

It was early afternoon when we pulled the van up outside the house and started unpacking. Having all of Everett’s things there was really nice. He’d called his landlord before we left to do a walkthrough of the apartment, and the guy seemed

okay. He'd let Everett pay extra to break his lease early, at least.

And that was that. Everett Bailey was mine, and he belonged in Cider Landing.

Everything else, we'd figure out.

We were carrying his things inside—boxes and suitcases and an easel and stuff, when I heard a strange sound behind me, kind of a scuffle and creak.

“Shit!” Everett cried.

I turned at the sound of a crash. Everett's foot had caught on one of the loose porch boards. Now, it stuck up, a rusty nail exposed.

Worse, he'd dropped everything he was carrying, the large plastic crate's lid popping open and spilling art supplies across the porch.

Everett's brow furrowed, and as he picked up a little wooden man with configurable parts, he looked upset, almost heartbroken.

That couldn't stand.

“I broke it,” he whispered, like everything he'd ever done had inevitably led to this one thing being broken, like he was somehow at fault for a loose board.

A memory washed over me—Everett breaking some toy and his mother scowling as she snatched it away and told him if he wasn't going to take care of his things, he shouldn't have them.

It'd been a tiny wound, but I could almost hear her words echoing around us now.

I'd meant to give him this as a Christmas present, but I couldn't stand one more second of Everett feeling like anything he had or had ever done was wrong.

Everett was all things good in the world. He made life worth living, even if that meant accepting change and fear and doubt, because he also offered love and acceptance and beauty and pleasure and fucking pizza. He was the best, and all I wanted in the whole world was to make things around him better.

I took the figurine from his hands, fiddled with the arm for a moment, and felt the magic rush through my fingers. The little wooden body snapped right back in place and swirled around.

Everett's eyes widened, his lips parting beautifully.

I wanted to kiss him, but as the magic rushed, warm and full and joyous, I pressed the wooden figurine back into his hands instead. "I'll fix it," I promised.

Beside his foot, the wooden board skittered across the porch and flew back into place, new and smooth as it'd been when the house had first been built. From there, that restoration spread out and out, turning the whole house new again.

"What are you doing?" Everett asked, his voice soft and breathy, full of wonder.

I grinned at him. "Magic, silly."

The house already knew what it wanted to be, the boards knew their proper places, the rot stood out in my mind like a black smear. All of it was so easy to reach out to, and in a rush of glittering gold swirls, it all righted.

27

Everett

Magic.

Just like that, like something I hadn't even believed in a week earlier could answer all the world's problems, and...and it did.

The old, gray, weathered board didn't just reconnect to its other half, fitting together, the seam between the pieces disappearing as though it was a single board again. It unweathered right before my eyes, lightening and brightening until it was a pale gold once again, just as it had been when the porch had first been built, before I was born. The way it looked in the pictures on the mantel, with my grandparents looking young and beautiful and in love, Grandma looking like Betty fucking Crocker in her red and white gingham dress, standing on the porch of their new-built house.

And then the board next to it was pale gold too. All the ones next to it.

There were creaks and groans all around us, a feeling almost like an earthquake beneath our feet. Well, my knees, since I was still practically sprawled on my ass where I'd fallen. I was lucky I hadn't landed right on that rusty nail...except it wasn't rusty anymore, but shiny and new.

The faded paint on the wooden siding all along the front of the house was fresh and crisp and white again, pristine as the day it had been painted.

The window fittings were perfect, the shutters and front door the bright cherry red they'd been in the pictures.

I didn't pick up the spilled objects from my plastic tub, but stood and wandered inside, almost unable to truly process what was happening right in front of me. It was like the special effects from a cartoon. Golden sparkles swept past, and left behind perfection.

Perfect untouched carpeting, a shining unscratched whorled mahogany dining table, fuck me it was just...it was like we were my grandparents, walking into the house on that first day, when it had just been completed. The smell of mildew and rot was gone. The way the wood of the dining room floor had faded after years of sun, gone.

I raced upstairs, the magic flowing before me, and watched as the water damage in the main bedroom just washed away, like the magic was a fucking squeegee, and it was just a few stray drops.

I'd thought my grandmother had been one of those old ladies who loved all things pastel and delicate, but it turned out it was just faded over the many years she'd lived there. The purple bedroom was suddenly decorated in the most vibrant shade, from the comforter to the carpeting to the silk flowers in a vase on the dresser.

It was incredible and . . . perfect.

I turned to see Peter following after me, smiling, looking just as charmed as I was by all the purple.

"This is nice," he finally said, looking around. He seemed just the tiniest bit winded, like the magic had cost him something, but he didn't look pale or sickly or even especially bothered. No, he was happy.

And he was watching me, waiting for a reaction.

Fair. I didn't even try to hold it back. I rushed over to him and swept him up in my arms. "Peter, this is incredible. It's...it's like the day my grandparents moved in. I've never seen anything like it."

"You like it?"

I didn't know how he could even ask, but there was no reason to play coy about it. This was Peter, and we were adults, not flirting teens afraid of being rebuffed by our crushes. "I love it, Peter. It's amazing. You're amazing. And now we don't have to worry about where we're going to live, because the house is...everything is fixed. Everything I was trying to find someone to do repairs for, it's just...done."

And that stopped me short.

The bulletin board at the grocery store popped into my head. One paper layered atop another looking for someone, anyone, to fix things, from broken appliances to sagging rooftops to weathered porches.

I grabbed Peter's hand and dragged him downstairs again to the kitchen, where the refrigerator was humming contentedly, like it wasn't about to take off and go flying through the window with its painfully loud jet engine.

Fixed. Fixed. Everything fixed.

And just a few days earlier, Peter had been worrying that he'd never be able to be a real adult, because unlike me, he hadn't spent years in school and didn't know about marketing and such. He was literate, but he didn't have my vocabulary. So what could he ever do to contribute to society?

I'd spent hours assuring him that he was a valid person and deserved to exist even if he never contributed a damned thing, but here it was. His ability to contribute in a way that he, and everyone else, found meaningful.

Maybe he didn't need to work to deserve to live comfortably and have food in the fridge, but he wanted to work. He wanted to accomplish things. And here, he had.

He'd performed easily a few hundred thousand dollars' worth of repairs on my grandmother's house in under five minutes.

I spun to face him, grinning. "How would you like to have a job?"

He cocked his head, then looked around. "Did I leave something unfinished? I'm sorry, I?—"

I grabbed his chin and turned him to face me, then pulled him in for a kiss.

That got his attention off any perceived failure, as he fell into me, kissing me for all he was worth, till both of us were breathless. He was panting when I broke away, eyes closed and a tiny smile on his lips.

"You didn't leave a single thing unfinished. It's perfect. You're perfect." I leaned my forehead against his, just breathing for a moment before continuing. "But there's no handyman in town. No one to do this stuff for anyone. You were worried about being able to get a job, remember? Well I'm pretty sure fixing things for other people in town constitutes a job. If you—if you can do it, and it doesn't hurt you. Doesn't use up all your, um, magic. Half the people in town need house repairs."

His eyes rounded and he stared at me a moment, his breath catching. "R—Really? I could...people would call that a job?"

I almost wanted to cry. No, I did want to cry. Screw my parents and their “men don’t cry” nonsense. This sweet, perfect, kind man, questioning such an incredible gift was a goddamned tragedy, and I was going to see it made right, no matter what I had to do.

28

Peter

I had a job .

An actual, bona fide, whole adult job.

Sure, it wasn't like Everett's, with his computer and stuff, but that was fine. I didn't mind using his laptop, but it felt weird to me, constrained in a way that I didn't fully understand.

But working with my hands? That was fucking great.

Okay, my hands and magic.

We'd gone down to the store and took a look at the bulletin board, where people were asking for help with everything that'd broken in their homes, and Everett had looked at me sidelong.

"Are you sure you're up for this? Maybe we start with something small."

But looking over the board, there was nothing that I thought was impossible. I didn't flatter myself to think I was good at everything, only that things knew the shape they wanted to be and I could give them a push.

It was the same kind of magic that'd kept me young for almost two centuries, and the

same kind that'd let me grow beside Everett. It'd been simple, and while one day I might get bogged down in the complexities of why things were the way they were, in that moment, it felt right.

“We can, but it's going to be fine,” I promised, slipping my hand into Everett's.

He took pictures of the board with his phone so we could call everyone, and I was letting him handle that part.

By the next morning, he was using his laptop not to check his emails or hunt for other freelance jobs, but to arrange my schedule, which seemed, honestly, horrible. I didn't want to keep track of times and dates and phone numbers. But the magic? I freaking loved the magic.

More than that, I loved watching the relief wash over people's faces when something they'd been tolerating for ages was fixed . Then, they'd smile.

I let Everett handle the money stuff too. I had no idea what was reasonable for people to pay for handiwork, and though some larger magic stripped my energy, it felt wrong charging people at all.

Everett assured me that was the way of things—a capitalist hellscape, he called it. I was very happy not to learn too much about it, though Dr. Hawking seemed to think I'd be better served looking after my own schedule.

Truth was, half the reason I didn't want to do it was that Everett came with me to every appointment he arranged. I liked having him there.

It was like the magic came a little easier when I could look up into his eyes, sure that everything, finally, was how it should be.

Right then, he was standing at the front of the supermarket talking to Marsha about—well, I didn't know, exactly. I was crouching in front of a refrigerator along the back wall, the front all glass, rattling furiously.

When I took off the metal grate on the lower part of the front, Ezra narrowed his eyes and leaned in too. "I don't know how you make any sense of this," he grumbled, looking at wires and fans.

I shrugged, reaching my hand in, palm up, fingers lightly curled as I collected the magic in my hand. I didn't let everyone watch this part, but Ezra? He knew about the kids. I'd seen him fly, and his fresh produce was definitely some kind of magic, whether or not he recognized how strange it was to have everything in the store stay fresh and crisp and plump.

Still, when he watched the gold fly out, glistening and beautiful, curling through the components of the fridge, he swore.

"How the hell—" He sat back, his hands clapped down on top of his thighs.

I sat up too, head cocked, watching him. "You really can't do this?"

Ezra shook his head.

"Can you still fly?"

Ezra's eyes narrowed into a scowl, his lips pinched, like he was struggling to remember something.

"We did do that, didn't we? Zipped around everywhere. Slept in trees like little Tarzans."

I snorted. “Yeah. But you can’t anymore?”

Ezra shook his head. “Don’t think so. At least, I haven’t tried, but it...You just knew you could do all this?”

With a rough swallow, I nodded. “It feels natural. I just?—”

I didn’t know what to say. Knowing I still had magic and he didn’t have easy access to it made me feel like a freak, but Ezra just laughed, grabbing his earlobes and stretching them out, wiggling his ears all around.

“Look at yourself,” he said.

I turned to the glass surface of the fridge, frowning. But there I was, same face I’d gotten used to, pointed ears sticking out beneath a tumble of goldish-brown waves.

Ezra bumped against my arm. He looked...old. Not in a bad way or anything. In fact, I rather liked his sparkly eyes and the lines around his mouth that said he’d lived a life full of smiles.

“You were there the longest,” he said softly, staring at us both in the reflection. “Some part of you still belongs to the fae, I think, and you took something from them. But it’s okay to be different, Peter.” He gripped my hand, my fingers still tingling with the warm flicker of magic. “We like you as you are now, as you were yesterday, and as you’ll be tomorrow.”

Somehow, each of those ideas of me felt different, but that—that wasn’t terrifying like it had been. Dazed, I put the metal grate back in place and rose to my feet, drifting to Everett’s side.

I slipped my arm around his and leaned my cheek against his shoulder.

“All done?” he asked, his free hand settling on top of mine.

“Yup.”

“Don’t think the old thing’s ever been quieter. Thanks, Peter,” Ezra said, nodding at each of us. “Everett.”

Marsha paid us with a checkbook she kept under the tray in the cash register, and we made our way home, walking along the same sidewalks I’d trudged when I missed Everett too much to stay away from Cider Landing.

“Everything okay?” Everett asked. My arm was still looped through his, his crooked with a bag of groceries in his other hand. “You seem kind of...contemplative?”

I started, blinking up at him. “Ezra said something that got me thinking.”

“Thinking about what?”

“He said the fae still have part of me. Do you think that’s true?”

Everett tipped his head one way than the other. “Well, that life was all you ever knew. I don’t really have my parents anymore, but they still helped make me. Some of the other kids had lives outside the forest, right? Like Jessie?”

I nodded. But that wasn’t really what bothered me. I didn’t want to go back and change what’d happened, just?—

“Do you think the magic’s going to go away?”

Everett sucked his cheeks in, watching me, giving the question due consideration. “Not that I’m an expert or anything, but...no. It’s hard to imagine you changing that

much. You helped me fly.”

“What if it does?” I knew that magic wasn’t what made Everett like me, but would I change again? Would I get worse? I’d just found a thing I could do.

Everett laughed, letting my arm go to put his around me instead. “Then you’d still be wonderful, and we’ll figure it out, okay? Together.”

“Okay,” I whispered.

I felt a little better going home. He was right. I was Peter, damn it, and whatever magic I had was mine . I’d earned it.

I was holding my chin a little higher when we turned back onto our street, and there, on our porch, stood two men, their arms crossed, their expressions displeased.

And beside me, Everett groaned.

29

Everett

James Warren and Tom Smith were standing on my porch.

It was kind of funny. There was some kind of too-expensive midlife-crisis-mobile sitting in my driveway. A Lamborghini or something, damned if I knew anything about cars worth more than houses.

And there were two men in suits, looking threatening and angry. It was almost like we'd just wandered into a mafia movie, and one of them was about to start complaining about how I'd come to him on the day of his daughter's wedding to ask him to do a murder.

The only problem with that was that the two of them looked like the only ones interested in doing any murdering.

Next to me, Peter had stiffened, and his expression was even more tense than his body. He was always nervous about strangers, especially ones who looked as serious as they did. But this was more than that. He had to know already, some of what this was about.

"Are you quite finished, Everett?" Tom said, his gravelly voice making the words sound so much more important than they were.

Because I didn't even have to think about it.

I had weeks' worth of groceries in my arms. A check in my pocket for Peter's work for the day. Added to the pay for Peter's work the last few days, it...well, it wasn't a miracle. We weren't going to be rich. We wouldn't be buying any Lamborghinis. But it was plenty.

We had the house already, completely paid off by my grandfather long before his death in the nineties. Property taxes in the area were ridiculously low. All we needed was enough money to pay for our expenses, and the money Peter had made was enough to cover months of that. Hell, the money I'd already had in my bank account was plenty for months of that, since I wasn't paying for my apartment in the city anymore, or eating out repeatedly every day. I had the time to make my own food.

I'd been thinking about trying that sourdough starter thing everyone had been doing a few years earlier, since I had time to do things like make bread now.

It'd be a fun experiment.

"You know, Tom, I think I am," I told him, smiling as I tightened my grip on Peter's hand, leading him up the stairs. "Is there something I can do for you guys? I'm pretty sure I've got five days of vacation and two holidays left before I need to be back to work. Marsha said she's going to drop a ham by for us when they close up for the evening. Apparently that's a thing people make for holidays."

"I like ham," Peter said, still hesitant and nervous, but warming to the subject as he often did with food. "It's very good on pizza."

"Isn't it?" I turned to him and grinned bright. That was my Peter. He had no preconceived notions about what it was "acceptable" to enjoy, so he just liked what he liked. Crackers with cheese and jam? Delicious. Pizza with pineapple? Also delicious. I hadn't actually found much he didn't think was delicious yet, but I wasn't trying for that. It was more fun to introduce him to all of my favorite things than test

whether he thought liver and lima beans were nasty.

Tom stared at the two of us like we were speaking a foreign language, but Warren had already lost patience, it seemed. “That’s enough. You’re going to fucking get in your car and get back to work, right now. This is bullshit and you know it. Taking three weeks off right when you need to be working on the Crosslife account? If it weren’t for Tom, I’d have fired you by now.”

My car? I glanced at the driveway, where his ridiculous red car was alone. Then I shrugged it off and turned back to the meat of the comment, lifting a brow at him. “Would you have?”

“We need the Crosslife project finished in two weeks, and you’re wandering around small town nowhere playing at—I don’t even know what the fuck you’re playing at. But it stops now. You need to get back to work.” His eyes narrowed and before I could make a snarky comment, he added, “And don’t you even fucking start with me on how I’ve done the work on the Crosslife account. You work for me. Your work is my work. I own it. If you’re trying to sell it to them independently, you’re in for a rude awakening.”

I waved him off. “I haven’t spoken to Crosslife. I haven’t spoken to another firm. I’m not even looking for a job right now. I’m well aware that you’ve fucked me over for future ad work. Funny thing is, you fucked me over bad enough, for long enough, that I don’t even care anymore, James. I don’t want to work in advertising anymore.”

Next to me, Peter gasped. “But Everett, you’re so good at it.”

“Don’t be a child,” Warren snapped, and I couldn’t help it. I laughed. And laughed. Peter had to take the groceries from my arms, because I was laughing so hard that I had to double over, clutching my sides and gasping for breath.

A child. That was me, a child.

In his mind, because I wasn't folding, wasn't giving up and giving in and sacrificing my morals and morale, I was acting like a child.

Maybe I was. I'd found Peter again, and while he'd grown up since our childhood, maybe...maybe what I'd needed had been the opposite. I'd needed to be reminded that being an adult wasn't all it was cracked up to be, and I didn't need to do it like my parents had. I didn't need to have a job that ate my soul and destroyed my happiness.

I had what I needed. Peter, a home, and a way to maintain both of those things.

And that was it.

I wasn't a rat, who needed to fight with all the other little worker drone rats over the crumbs of cheese James Warren was throwing into our cage, while he shoved the rest of the block into his own mouth, all at once.

If that made me a child, then so be it.

Peter and I could be children together forever.

Or maybe, more likely, there was something else entirely that we could be. Adults, without sacrificing who we were in order to satiate the machine made by men like James and Tom. I could...

Fuck me, I could paint. Just like I'd always wanted to do as a kid, before eventually dismissing it because whenever I'd said I wanted to paint, my mother had answered, "Fine dear, but what are you going to be ? Not some silly hobby. A real job."

I could be a painter. Even if I made a couple hundred bucks a month at it...that could be enough.

I pulled myself up to find Peter biting his lip, looking concerned, and behind him, marching across our lawn, was a big, scary looking guy.

Not, like, a random one. He was our neighbor, for sure. I'd seen him coming and going regularly, but never paid much attention to him. The house had over an acre of land, so it wasn't like we'd ever been within twenty feet of each other on our own property. He looked youngish, maybe a handful of years younger than me, in his mid-twenties, and dead serious. The squared buzz-cut that I associated with Marines and stiff, purposeful way he strode didn't soften that impression.

The look on his face, on the other hand, was concerned when he met my eye. "Is everything okay? I didn't want to interfere if the strangers were your friends, Mr. Bailey, but..." He turned his head and gave James and Tom a cold, calculated twice over that would have sent me running if I were them. Like he was considering how much effort it would require to take them both down, and the answer was probably not much. "They don't seem too friendly."

"I'm pretty sure they're here to fire me, actually," I told him genially. "See, this one is my boss, who's been stealing my work for the last few years, James Warren. He owns the Warren Advertising Agency, and he's tired of me not being okay with him taking credit for my work."

"You are fired," Warren said, almost growled.

I smiled sweetly back. A few months' worth of unemployment based on my salary would help Peter and I get our feet under us for sure.

But then, Warren got a calculating look on his face and turned back to my neighbor.

“Are you so sure you want this guy here, though? Small town like this, don’t you care about family values? Tradition?”

The guy quirked an eyebrow but didn’t say anything, just waiting for Warren to get to his point.

Warren motioned from me to Peter, and back. “You’re aware that these two are probably fucking, right? They’re gay.”

Peter cocked his head, considering, then looked at me. “What’s gay?”

“Us,” I said, agreeing with Warren. Funnily enough, I wasn’t even worried.

Because suddenly, I’d remembered something very important. “I’d say I’m sorry to tell you this, but I’m really not. Jerry doesn’t give a fuck that I’m gay. He’s known that for more than fifteen years, when I used to babysit him when he was a kid.” I turned back to my enormous tank of a neighbor. “That is still you, isn’t it, Jerry Jensen? I know your mom used to call you Jer-bear, but this is ridiculous.”

Jerry’s whole body went loose, and he grinned at me. “Of course it is. Mom lives out at the beach now, but she still calls me that when we visit for the holidays.”

“Also, you calling me Mr. Bailey is super weird. It’s still just Ev. Anyway, yeah, this is my—ex, I guess—boss, who I’m pretty sure was just leaving, since he fired me like he came to.”

Warren clenched his jaw. “The company laptop?—”

“Doesn’t exist, like I said. Also, if what you’re looking for is to steal the work you told the Crosslife CEO you already did, sorry. My hard drive was wiped in a freak accident a few days ago.”

Peter, still on the steps, cocked his head in something that looked like confusion. “It’s called a ‘freak accident’ when you say, ‘I’m going to wipe my hard drive, Peter, so the computer is going to be down a few hours’?”

I grinned back. “Something like that.”

Warren took a step toward me, and like the true newly teen-turned-man he was, Peter stuck out his foot and tripped him. “Oops.”

Once again, Jerry drew himself up. “Okay, so here’s what you were looking for, by telling me Ev is gay. We don’t really like your sort around these parts. You know, puffed up city folk so ashamed of their penis size that they drive expensive cars to make up for it. Seriously, it’s okay. However big or small your penis is, I’m sure it’s fine. People joke, but penis size doesn’t actually mean shit. Some of the hottest dudes out there don’t even have penises. Get some therapy and deal with your issues instead of taking it out on us. And meanwhile, leave town, because we don’t want you here.” He looked up at me. “Good enough?”

“Sounded like a hell of a speech to me,” I agreed. “Always knew you’d grow up to be a stand-up a guy, with a badass mom like yours.”

He beamed at me, then turned a gimlet eye on Tom and James, and watched them leave while I ran up onto the porch to check on Peter and the groceries.

30

Peter

It hadn't even been a question, that Everett would stay.

When had that happened?

Sure, he'd said it. Yeah, we'd picked up his things. But when his bosses showed up to try and drag him back to the city, I hadn't worried for a second that Everett Bailey—my Everett Bailey—was going to leave me behind.

It'd been the worst thing that ever happened to me, and I wasn't scared anymore.

Sure, some people might've said the worst thing was getting taken from my family, but I didn't remember that, and I had a family I loved anyway. But losing Everett? That'd been real loss—the first I'd ever really understood.

And now, he was mine, and I wasn't scared that he was going to leave or drift away. I wasn't scared that I wasn't important, because every single thing he did in some way supported me, and I didn't want anything more than to return that care.

From the tall, dense trees along the property line, a woman came out. "Everything okay?"

I looked over.

“Just fine,” Jerry called out. “Couple of asshole out-of-towners. Nothing to worry about.”

“Oh, good. Glad they’re gone.” When she got close, she crinkled her nose at the retreating headlights of Everett’s boss’s absurd car.

I could understand why the man was so upset, losing Everett. Well, okay, I wasn’t a complete fool. The man was more upset about losing Everett’s work than he was at losing Everett, but that was because he was the fool.

You didn’t get the kind of magic Everett spun out from someone who felt ill-used and disrespected. I wanted—no, I needed —Everett to be able to make his art, but only for someone who knew the value of what they were given.

Heck, Everett could start drawing on our walls in permanent marker if he wanted, so long as he didn’t lose the love of the thing.

Actually, that’d probably look pretty cool.

I spent a few seconds too long watching him, making sure that he was really okay, but even then, I didn’t expect him to fall apart. I just wanted to be there for him if it was hard.

And then, well, I got distracted.

A warm, rich, spicy scent carried through the air, and I turned to look at the woman who’d approached for the first time.

She was a young Black woman with dark brown eyes, and at once, I recognized her.

Every time, it got easier and easier, but with her, well...she’d been one of the

first—the first lost children after me.

“Lydia?” She had her hair done in pretty braids that hung all around her shoulders. She looked different now, but her eyes were still bright, her smile still one of the prettiest I’d ever seen.

“Hey, Peter.” She had that soft way of saying my name, like we were uncovering something secret between the two of us that no one else knew. But Everett did, and Jerry.

I grinned, nodding toward the plate in her hand. “That smells good.”

“Cheese and onion pies,” she said, holding them up. The crust was golden brown and flakey, and I bit my lip as my mouth watered. “They’re for you.”

My breath escaped me, all the tension that’d come over me as I tried to hold back rushing away all at once. “May I?”

She nodded, lifting the plate a little higher, and I took one of the small pies, humming happily at the first bite, nodding and smiling, mouth too full to tell her how freaking awesome it was.

She laughed, seeming to get my meaning anyway. “I don’t really like sweets. One too many honey cakes, I guess. But we wanted to bring something over and welcome you—welcome you both—back to the neighborhood.

Jerry put his arm around Lydia’s shoulders. “My lady’s an amazing cook. She’s got a magic touch with that oven.”

That brought me up short. I blinked at her. “Really?”

Her skin darkened, barely perceptible, but definitely there. “Maybe.”

“Cool.” I grinned, thrilling at the idea that maybe it wasn’t just me and Ezra out here with some kind of freaky forest magic.

Or maybe it was, and that was fine too, because Everett liked me either way.

“We’ll let you head in and put your groceries away, but we’d love to have you guys over for dinner if you’re up for it.”

“Definitely,” Everett said. “Thanks for, you know, looking out.”

He shook Jerry’s hand, and it struck me as a very serious kind of gesture, but then they patted each other’s shoulders and we went inside.

Afterward, as he put some groceries in the fridge, he caught me watching him. “What?”

I couldn’t help it—watching him. He was amazing, but in that moment, it was more than that. I didn’t just trust that he’d be there with me, I’d seen it. Everywhere we turned, we found another little piece of the life we were building together, and I was so excited for more.

I bit my lip, coming around the kitchen table and shutting the fridge. He stared at me, a small smile playing on his lips.

“What is it?” he asked again, a laugh in his voice that I loved hearing.

“I like you,” I whispered, stepping close enough to him that our toes touched. “I like you so much.” Slowly, I let my hands trace up his arms. He was gorgeous, and my best friend in the whole world, and— “Like, I like you so much that I’m completely

sure that I'm in love with you. Forever."

Everett bit his lip, and the look he gave me then, all dimpled cheeks and joy, was strangely uncomplicated. "I love you too," he whispered.

Not sure what to say to that, too happy to stay still, I surged forward and stole a kiss from him, sneaking my hands beneath the edge of his shirt.

"I want you," I breathed against his lips.

When I kissed his neck, his throat bobbed, and I pressed my smile into his skin. It was warm there, smooth beneath his jaw, and at the feel of him nodding, the brush of his head against my temple, a thrill rushed through me.

I kissed him again, his mouth sweet and yielding beneath mine. "Then show me what you like."

31

Everett

What I liked?

What I liked was Peter.

Still, he was counting on me to bridge the gap in his experience, because even if he wasn't a kid anymore, he hadn't done as much of this as I had.

Well...honestly, he mostly had, but I wasn't going to say that. Body count discussions never went anywhere good, unless maybe it was assassins having debates with each other.

He cocked his head. "I almost wish I could read your mind."

"You definitely do not," I denied, then grabbed his hand and dragged him upstairs.

It was still strange, seeing the house all bright and new and perfect. I understood much better why my grandmother had loved the house. Why she'd always refused to leave it and had given it to me instead of my parents, because I'd been less likely to just sell it and be done.

And boy was I grateful I hadn't done that, despite my parents suggesting it.

"It'll give you a great start in life, a chance to buy a car or a condo," my mother had

wheedled...

And she'd been right—it had given me a great start in life. A restart. Like wiping the slate clean, I was leaving the last fifteen years behind and starting over, just where I belonged. With Peter.

I grabbed a condom and lube, and tugged us both over to fall into the bed.

Best to put him on top this time, so to speak, but also, retain control until he got comfortable with the idea. That was easily enough done. I stripped him out of his clothes and pushed him onto his back, then stripped myself and climbed atop him.

His cock was hard already, straining against his belly, so I showed him how to roll a condom on. It occurred to me in the middle of the thing that it was silly. I hadn't ever had unprotected sex in my life, had definitely been tested after my last time sleeping with anyone, and Peter had never had sex with anyone but me.

But that was okay. We'd have a frank discussion about sex and STIs and protection...soon. For now, we'd just use condoms and be safe.

He seemed intrigued with the condom anyway, poking at it as I grabbed the lube and slicked two of my fingers, then started to stretch myself out. That got Peter's attention, his gaze narrowed in on first the motion, then my face, with interest.

He licked his lips. "You don't...you don't have to. If you don't?—"

"I do. Not have to, want to."

His smile at that was clear and bright, and he tugged at my thigh. "I want to see, then. I want to watch what you're doing."

So I turned around, straddling his hips backward, and let him watch. It was a little embarrassing, thinking about what he was seeing, but his intake of breath wasn't the least bit giggly or embarrassing.

"Everett," he whispered, somehow almost . . . reverent? "Can I?"

So I let him. I handed him the lube, and with fingers almost inhumanly dexterous, he slicked up and pressed in beside my own hand. After a moment, I pulled away and braced myself, letting him do the job entirely.

Either he'd managed to watch a lot more porn on my computer than I realized, or the man was a fucking savant at...well, fucking. He twisted his fingers into me, pressing in and around and oh—fuck me. I'd never had a preference between topping and bottoming, but he could fucking change my mind, doing that.

He'd pulled himself upright as he pressed his fingers into me, and he was almost entirely behind me now, his breath ghosting over my back, and it felt like every inch of me was ten times as sensitive as usual.

Peter was the one who finally broke the silence. "Everett?"

"Yeah?" I managed to pant back.

"Can I...can I be inside you now? That's what I want."

"Yeah. Yes, definitely." I'd planned to ride him, to have complete control of the thing, concerned that he'd be uncomfortable and awkward on his first try at this, but Peter was always a surprise.

He pulled himself up onto his knees behind me and slowly, gently, slid his fingers away and his cock into place. It was slow and sweet and fucking crazy-making.

“Fuck me,” I whispered.

Now, he did giggle. “I think that’s the idea, yeah. This is...this is okay?”

“This is perfect, Peter. You’re perfect. Fuck, I love you.”

“You only love me because my dick is bigger than the guys in those pictures online,” he shot back, but there was a smile in his voice, and then, when he bottomed out and his whole cock was pressed inside me—and fuck me, but he might be bigger than the porn cocks he’d been looking at online—both of us groaned unison.

“You’re right,” I breathed after giving myself a moment to catch my breath. “That’s definitely why I love you. Well, one of the things I love about you.”

He slid back and then forward again, experimentally, but it took him no time at all to find a rhythm, fucking into me in short, shallow thrusts that made us both pant and moan aloud.

“That’s how the magic works,” he told me, thrusting in hard and taking hold of my hips. “Aurora taught me how to be whatever I need to be. Do whatever needs doing.”

I shook my head and sat up, pressing my back into his chest. “Fuck the magic.” I turned to press my lips to his, and he responded eagerly, tangling our tongues together for a long, breathless moment. “It’s great, the magic. I’m glad you have it. I’m glad it means you’re still alive and we found each other. But the real magic isn’t fairy magic, Peter. It’s you. I love you. Not it.”

And that, well...that seemed to do it for him. He thrust hard into me, again and again, breathing heavily, but holding my hips in place so that I didn’t scoot forward on the bed as he fucked me. And somehow, that angle was just right, his cock shoving into just the right spot to make me see fucking stars. Without conscious thought, I reached

down and grabbed my cock, stroking it furiously, knowing that at his pace, he was going to?—

His hands spasmed on my hips, gripping almost too tight, as he almost shouted in my ear, leaning forward and biting down on the sensitive skin of my neck. It was too much, and I shot off, lightning zinging through me at the mass of too many sensations, too much, everything at once.

A moment later the room was silent again, and Peter was sliding his arms around me, breathing hard into my neck. “I’m sorry, that was too fast, right? The website said it would be too fast the first time. I can?—”

“It was perfect. Just like you.” Patting his hands where they clasped over my stomach, I gently leaned to one side till we both collapsed onto our sides on the bed, and slid forward until he slipped free of me. Then I turned over and faced him.

Peter.

My life.

My future.

“It wasn’t too fast,” I promised. “And it only gets better from here.”

32

Peter

It did.

It got better every time, and I wanted to try everything .

Sex was fun. Maybe the most fun thing I'd ever done, at least when it was with Everett. Looking at pictures online wasn't the same, and even the people who put up videos...well, they weren't Everett.

It wasn't the two of us together, chasing laughs and gasps and moans and joy.

I got that same feeling I'd gotten when we were kids, sitting on the floor of his grandma's living room, sneaking kisses under the noses of adults. Except it was even better, because there was no sneaking.

There was just heart-racing excitement and his gorgeous skin under my hands and the surprising warmth of his body and Everett. He was all I'd ever wanted.

And it wasn't just sex that got better—though that was great and for a few days after our first time, Everett had had to convince me to do anything else (though I'd gotten to convince him to make pizza with nothing but an apron on, and let me just tell you that little string tied at the small of his back, right above his gorgeous ass, did things for me). Everything got better.

The people in Cider Landing really did need a handyman, and I liked figuring out how stuff worked. Eventually, magic twisted up with curiosity and I wasn't sure where one began and the other ended, but it got easier.

And Everett? He spent a lot of time taking care of the administrative side of things. On Christmas Day, Everett came to me with—oh, it was the coolest thing ever. We'd decided on calling the business Honey Home Services, after the cakes my mother made, and, well, for the kids still out in the woods and the ones who'd come out like me.

And on Christmas Day, he showed me the logo he'd come up with, complete with a tiny honeycomb and the cutest little bee I'd ever seen. He hadn't just drawn me a logo though, he'd set up a website of our own, registered the company—he'd set up everything , and I'd never been prouder in my life.

This wasn't something anyone had given Everett or me; it was something we made together, and I loved every piece of it. I loved that when I stuck my business card up on the same community board we'd gotten those first jobs, that it was Everett's art right beside my name—or, well, the name Peter Bailey, which felt more mine than Peter Hawking did. It was completely ours, our future right there, and I wanted to jump into the air and fly around town, shouting for everyone to hear that we'd done it!

That was...Dr. Hawking said, maybe a bit much for the regular people of Cider Landing. Nevertheless, even she seemed happy for us at the Hawking family reunion we attended that spring.

It was that summer Everett got his first commission from the town. He'd taken up painting again, and he was so freaking good that everyone knew it, and he'd done his first mural on the side of Marsha and Ezra's market.

Now, he was working on one on the wall outside of town hall , and I was there helping him.

Or, well, I was watching him work his own special magic on the plain bricks of the building.

I was staring up at him, squinting against the sunlight, when a girl appeared beside me.

“It looks nice,” Aurora said, her hands clasped behind her back, swaying back and forth on the patch of grass beneath the mural. “He’s good.”

“He’s amazing ,” I whispered back.

Aurora looked between me and Everett’s back. He was measuring out one of the squares—he worked in one area at a time, breaking up the whole wall so he knew how to move the crane we’d rented that hoisted him high enough to work.

“So you’re happy?” Aurora turned toward me, narrowing her eyes. “Like, really happy. Out here with all the normal people. You don’t miss the forest?”

I bit my lip, taking a few seconds to really think about it. “No, I don’t miss the forest. I mean, it’s still there. But if you mean do I miss you, then yeah. I miss you all like crazy when you’re not around, but a lot of us are still in town, and there’s Everett, and I’m not alone. I don’t feel like I don’t fit anymore.”

Aurora nodded. I’d braced for her feelings to get hurt, but she seemed strangely satisfied with my announcement.

“Everett invited us to a cookout,” she reminded me, raising one perfect golden brow. “Jessie keeps talking about cookies.”

I grinned. “Yeah, we’d love that. Everett!”

When I called his name, he started, coming out of a daze as he’d been trying to figure out the exact right way to handle a swoop of color that I already knew would come out perfect. “Yeah?”

“Can we have a cookout with the kids this weekend?”

He turned in the basket of the crane and looked down at the pair of us, seeing Aurora for the first time. I knew he wasn’t thrilled about the kids in the woods, but we’d talked about it—we talked about everything now—and I knew he just wanted to see them safe, which meant keeping lines of communication open.

“Of course,” he called back. “Saturday okay?”

“That sounds lovely, Everett. We’ll look forward to it.” Aurora spun around and I watched, somewhat dazed, as she skipped off.

“Peter?”

“Hmm, yeah?” I looked up at him.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” It took me a second to shake myself out of it, and when I did, Everett was still watching me.

It was weird, to change and grow up and know I’d had a whole long life out there in the woods with Aurora, but it wasn’t bad. I wasn’t sad about it—wasn’t even sad about all I might’ve missed out on.

If I'd never been taken, Peter Hawking wouldn't have done all his work. Dr. Hawking wouldn't exist. I wouldn't have Everett.

I didn't want to take his life any more than I wanted to give up my own amazing future.

"Can you hand me that bucket?" he asked.

It was beneath the crane, and when I snatched it up, I looked around. There was nobody nearby, but it never hurt to be careful, even in Cider Landing.

I floated up to him, taking hold of the safety rail of the crane's workspace when I could.

"Thanks," Everett said, leaning in to give me a quick kiss when he took the paint bucket. "Does she look older?" he asked, glancing off after Aurora, a scowl on his face.

I bit my lip as I clung to the crane basket, considering the way she'd stuck her chin out, the way she'd carried herself, and that, I realized, was why our brief encounter had left me feeling off balance. "You know, I think she does."

And maybe even for Aurora, growing up wasn't the worst thing after all.

33

Connor

No one was running the market anymore.

Okay, that didn't last long , but when Ezra and Martha went out into the woods, just kids instead of the octogenarians they'd been, it'd taken some amount of doing to find someone who was able to run the thing.

We'd... tried to get them to sell it, but they were busy. Playing pirates in the woods. Shit.

Thankfully, Wilson stuck around long enough to help settle matters, which... had turned into him taking the shop over himself. He'd fallen in love with the place, said he was thinking about retiring anyway, and wanted to spend his afternoons fishing close to family.

Then there was Jessamine. She hadn't just disappeared . She came back. She made cookies with Jessie and Mattias and, yeah, it was different, but mostly, it was really good. I wasn't sure how keen I was on Aurora hanging around town like she did, but that was easier to tolerate every day, when the people I loved continued to stick around.

I was finally starting to believe that they would continue to, which was doing wonders for my sex life. When I wasn't obsessively tracking Jessie's every move, sneaking a look into their bedroom multiple times a night just to remind myself they

were there—well, it took a while, but we found a balance, and Mattias was quick to check in on Jessie too, to make sure he could always reassure me when I was being... okay, not quite ridiculous.

My kid had been stolen by goddamn fairies. After that, no amount of worry was ridiculous.

This was the first night Jessie was spending the night away from us in Cider Landing. Everett and Peter had invited them over for a sleepover with the kids from the woods, and god, even though I trusted Everett and Peter, even though Jessamine was going to be there, it twisted up my insides to think about it.

Right up until I took a bite of the sinful baked chicken and cheese monstrosity that Mattias had prepared. I'd tried to help with dinner, but all I'd really managed was the salad, which he was nice enough to compliment anyway.

It was weird to be alone in the house. Even Peanut had accompanied Jessie that night, which I hadn't expected, but it turned out that Everett and Peter liked dogs and when Jessie had asked to bring him, they'd said yes right off.

So it was quiet, the restaurant closed on a Monday night.

The renovations had opened up the space, so there were enough tables now for Cider Landing locals to come and enjoy Mattias's cooking. Reviews were good, and it kept money coming in the door. That didn't matter much to me, but Mattias felt better when he was contributing and who was I to tell him that he didn't have to? I loved that he wanted to take care of me as much as I wanted to care for him, so while we'd gotten a lot busier, we'd done it together.

Fatima was rocking it over at Tadpoles. I'd given Yolanda the basic rundown of finding Jessie, needing time to reconnect with our family and make sure they were

okay. And hell, that was all true. Dr. Hawking was a great resource for Jessie and me both—turned out she’d dealt with “lost children” before—but I stepped back from Tadpoles and begged privacy. Maybe one day we’d have to answer for some of the strangeness around Jessie’s reappearance, but the longer we waited, the less strange it’d seem that they were there and healthy and a bit underdeveloped for their age.

I hoped.

In any case, Cider Landing proved pretty safe for them. And it was... fuck, it was perfect for me. The hiking trail, the candy store, the heron, Houdini, outside our bedroom window.

Mattias.

All of it. I hated how we’d gotten here, but I loved where we’d landed.

And I especially loved getting to eat delicious, home-cooked food every night. “This is amazing,” I mumbled after swallowing the last bite. “Too good. Incredible.”

Mattias’s cheeks pinked. “It’s pretty good.”

“Incredible,” I insisted again.

When he looked up at me again, he was biting his lip. “Well, I wanted tonight to be special. We’ve worked so hard and—and you’ve put so much into the inn.”

I shook my head. “Renovations to our home to make it really ours.”

His lips screwed to the side, but a second later, he nodded. “Fair enough. But I wanted to, ah, thank you. For that. And for everything. For... being here, and for facing all the craziness with me, and I just?—”

He pressed his cheek into his hand for a second, then took a shaky breath. With one deep, steadying breath, he slipped out of his chair to kneel beside mine.

“I asked Jessie for—for their permission first,” he said, staring up at me. His face was bright pink and his eyes were glistening. “They said yes. Well, they said if I let them have a tray full of cookies just for them, but... okay, maybe I need to stop bribing them with cookies.”

I laughed, a joyous, bubbly feeling rushing through me. “At least it’s effective.”

Mattias scoffed. “Can’t argue there.”

He shifted closer to me, staring up with warm brown eyes. I—fuck, I loved him. I loved the soft reddish-brown curls on the top of his head and his big heart and how patient he was even when I was batty. I loved that he didn’t want to parade around the city and impress people, that he was happy here, with his people. Our people.

Our family.

I just fucking loved him, and I wanted to make him the happiest man on earth.

“I kept looking for the perfect time to do this,” Mattias whispered, emotion choking his voice as he pulled out a small jewelry box and my heart fluttered in my chest. “I thought about doing it when we were in the city last week, at that restaurant?—”

A smile slid across my face. “I know the one.”

It was a nice place he’d taken us to while Jessie spent the night with Trevor and Xavier. It’d been romantic and... the wine was good, but the food didn’t make me feel warm and full the way that Mattias’s did and the little velvet box in my pocket had felt stuck there. That place wasn’t it. It wasn’t our story.

“Yeah, it... didn’t feel right. And I kept trying to come up with ideas for some grand gesture and, just?—”

“None of it felt right?”

He bit his lip against a smile. “Yeah. But this? This is our home. It’s you and me here, making it our own. This is where I got to know you, where I saw you rise to every challenge and fall apart and—and where you gave me that first book and it made sense. Here. Just the two of us.”

He was staring up at me, his eyes shining. “So,” he whispered, “what do you think?”

My chair creaked across the floor as I slid it back from the table. The next moment, I was on the floor with him, kneeling with my hand in my pocket.

I pulled out a little box of my own—the same tiny velvet box I’d been carrying around for weeks. I opened the lid with shaky fingers.

“I think I want to marry you, Mattias Hall. I want to raise our family here and grow our businesses and live our life and it is so fucking wonderful that I’ve been scared to rock the boat and ask you this, even when Jessie told me I was being a scaredy cat.”

“Jessie knew about you too?”

I snorted. “Jessie seems to know everything nowadays. They know how to keep a secret too, huh?”

Maybe it was their time with the fairies or maybe I was just that obvious. In the end, it didn’t matter.

“It scares me,” I admitted, “how much I love you. But it excites me too. You’re who I

want, everything I want, for the rest of my life. I'd be honored to be your husband. I—yes, Mattias. Yes, always.”

His lips fell slack. Instead of saying anything, he surged forward, his arms lashing out to twine around my neck and pull me down—down into his lips, his tongue, the hot wet sweetness of his mouth.

And I grinned into his kiss, drawing him closer. My Mattias, my partner and husband.

The man who'd given me the home I'd always wanted.

MATTIAS

My final paycheck from the restaurant was more than seven grand even after taxes. They'd been paying me really damn well, which wasn't a huge shock—head chef at an exclusive New York City restaurant was a good job, and required me to live in Manhattan, where rent on the smallest apartment available, which was basically a closet, cost more than my first car.

But it was my final check, so no more were coming.

And Grandpa's hospital bills added up to something like sixty thousand after insurance covered what they were willing to. Not that it was easy to get to that number, since they seemed to have sent us a separate bill for every single catheter and Band-Aid and IV.

Something about it seemed unjust.

He'd died, after all. They hadn't saved him. And yet we were supposed to pay them sixty grand. Out of seven thousand dollars.

I'd never wanted to balance my checkbook, let alone become an accountant, but even I could tell there was something about those numbers that didn't fit together quite right.

Thankfully, I'd been renting a room from a friend, and he'd been understanding about my need to exit quickly and cheaply, so I'd mailed most of my clothes to the inn and boarded a Greyhound bus for Cider Landing the day I'd gotten the call about Grandpa

going into the hospital.

The restaurant owner had replaced me a week into Grandpa's hospital stay, not out of disloyalty, but because I'd asked him to. He'd argued with me, wanted me to come back when things got better, but I just... couldn't. Even if Grandpa had lived, the doctors were clear: he wasn't going to be able to help run the inn the same way anymore. He was likely to be wheelchair-bound for the rest of his life, so he'd have had to relearn how to do everything, from cooking to taking out the trash. He was going to need more help than Grandma could give.

I'd known, sitting with my grandfather, him looking small and frail in that hospital bed, that my life as I knew it was over.

The only thing that bothered me about it was Grandpa being sick. Grandpa dying. I didn't need flashy clothes or clubs or being head chef at a restaurant that charged hundreds of dollars for a single dinner. That was an ego boost, sure, but I didn't care that much about it. Grandma and Grandpa had saved up to send me to the Culinary Institute of America, and I was good at what I did. They'd been proud of my job in New York, and I'd cared more about that pride than the job itself.

They had raised me.

They were everything.

And now he was dead, and there was no way Grandma could run the Cider Inn without help, so my time in New York was over. I didn't mind that. I loved Cider Landing. I'd been raised there, at the inn, helping run the place. I had always assumed it was where I'd end up eventually, and I loved it.

But it was a little darker, a little quieter, with the only Grandpa I could see beaming out from their wedding portrait on the wall in the dining room. No endless chatter about the great blue heron that had taken up in Raccoon Creek out back, or the family

of goldfinches nesting outside his bedroom window or come look, Mattias, there's a chickadee in the old woodpecker nest.

I'd never imagined how much I would miss it, but hell, I'd even missed seeing birds in New York, since it was pigeons all the way down there, and still, every time I'd seen one, I'd imagined Grandpa giving me a random pigeon fact. I'd actually looked them up on Wikipedia so I'd know the things he might have told me about their habitats and mating habits.

"Honey, you don't need to be worried about that," Grandma said, coming out of the kitchen and sitting down at the office desk across from me. "I'll figure it out. I still... I still have some jewelry. And there should be some insurance money, once they listen to me. He had at—at least ten thousand, I think."

Jewelry. She was going to sell her jewelry to pay the hospital. And ten thousand dollars was going to pay for the cremation and wake we'd arranged, but not a lot else. Certainly not sixty thousand dollars in hospital bills.

Still, I smiled at her. "It's okay, Grandma. I'm not"—the lie stuck in my throat for a moment, but at the tears in her eyes, I forced it out—"I'm not worried. We'll figure this out. We can always sell the Trans-Am."

"That car was a gift from your grandfather for your college graduation," she insisted, shaking her head.

"And it's been in storage here for years, because having a car in New York was silly. I'm used to not having a car."

Before she could argue that I was here now, and I should be getting used to having a car again, the bell over the front door jingled, and she automatically pushed herself back up out of the chair, smiling. "No rest for the wicked, I suppose."

She was moving slower than I remembered, but I didn't know why I was surprised. She was seventy-two. She'd just lost the love of her life, a man she'd been married to for over fifty years. I was moving slower. Why the hell wouldn't she?

I followed her out into the lobby, where she slipped behind the desk and greeted the family who'd arrived with a smile.

Family?

Huh. Two men and a kid. That was... well, Cider Landing wasn't a backward town, but a gay couple with a kid vacationing there was still a bit of a surprise. They were adorable, like something out of a fashion magazine. One angelic kid with curly white-gold hair and huge blue eyes. One dad in fashionably ripped acid-wash jeans (and fuck me but why had that crap come back into fashion?), black leather half-boots, and a shiny smooth silk button-down. And one dad looking like a business casual stereotype, in crisp khakis and a black polo shirt with a bright blue "Darling" stitched above the pocket. Was that a new style, or a company name?

"Mr. and Mr. Darling," Grandma said, smiling at them. Huh. The Darling family. The dude had his name embroidered on his shirt? Weird. "And... Jessie, was it?"

"That's me!" the cherubic child announced. "I'm Jessie."

"It's very nice to meet you, Jessie," Grandma said, her eyes sparkling like they hadn't since Grandpa's death. Maybe... maybe this was what she needed. Maybe working would be good for her.

Gods knew we needed the money.

She turned to me. "It looks like they're in the heron room, honey, if you'll help them with their bags."

I inclined my head to her and headed over. The fashionable dad in the silk shirt waved to a pile of suitcases without looking up from his phone. Business dad winced and gave me an apologetic look. “Let me help you. That’s... a lot of bags.”

He hefted a duffel over his shoulder, then took a suitcase in each hand. That left three more, two regular suitcases and one bright green shiny one. Jessie leapt forward and grabbed its handle. “This one’s mine! It’s Froggo. Daddy got it for me.” As though to explain, they held up a floppy green stuffed creature they’d had tucked under their arm. “See? Froggo.”

“That’s pretty cool your friend has his own suitcase,” I said, nodding and trying to look appropriately impressed. “Do you have one too?”

The kid giggled. “No, silly, this is my suitcase. Froggo doesn’t need clothes.” Their eyes widened and they leaned toward me and whisper-shouted, “Froggo is naked!”

I had never, not once in my twenty-five years, thought about having kids, but Jessie was gonna change my mind. The kid was like the definition of the word adorable, dipped in sugar and cuter than a freaking cat with those huge blue eyes. And Froggo was naked.

I looked the frog over, then turned back to Jessie and nodded. “Froggo is naked. Is that okay?”

They considered, looking at the stuffed animal for a moment, then back to me. “I think so. Frogs don’t wear pants, do they?”

“Nope. I’ve never seen a single frog in pants, and we’ve got lots of frogs around here.” I hefted the two remaining bags and headed for the stairs, motioning for Jessie and the Darlings to precede me. “So is Froggo a boy frog or a girl frog?”

“They’re not. They’re a they frog, like me.”

I paused and stared at Jessie, blinking, where they were shifting uncomfortably all of a sudden, looking at me and waiting for a response. I leaned down and loudly whispered. “You’re a frog?”

That inspired a peal of laughter and a head shake. “No, I’m a they person. Froggo’s a they frog.”

“Ooooh,” I agreed. “That makes more sense.”

Maybe this was why I’d avoided coming back to Cider Landing in favor of that big city job. Because it was this perfect homey microcosm of all the things I’d grown up with and still wanted for myself.

And didn’t have.

“So why is this called the heron room?” business dad asked when I unlocked the door for them and led them in. “I mean, other than the painting.”

“My granddad did that painting,” I informed him, then set the bags down and went over to open the window. “But it’s called the heron room because of the subject of the painting. Him.” I motioned down to the great blue heron wading in Raccoon Creek out back. “Grandpa called him Houdini.”

Jessie and business dad went to the window, and they were sickeningly adorable. Business dad was a seriously hot guy. Sure, he had that generic five-hundred-dollar haircut and the generic business-dad clothes, but his dark brown hair and blue eyes almost as bright as little Jessie’s were something else. And more than that, there was the sheer excitement on his face. “That’s a great blue heron, Jess,” he told the kiddo, holding them up and pointing. “It’s one of the biggest kinds of herons in the world.”

“It does seem pretty big,” Jessie answered, sounding like they were trying to be interested for Dad’s sake, but birds really weren’t their jam. Tears pricked my eyes,

and I had to turn away.

This was not my own childhood I was looking at. Jessie wasn't going to be crying about having lost that font of pointless bird facts in twenty years.

But fuck I wished I had paid more attention to Grandpa's bird rambles back when I'd had him.

Fashion dad hadn't even looked up from his phone to acknowledge the conversation.

I took a deep breath, then another. "I'll just leave you to settle in, then," I managed to get out without fucking sobbing, and sped out of the room.

As I closed the door, fashion dad finally deigned to notice the world around him. "Was the bellhop crying? Weird."