



# Sinfully Sweet (Return to Starlight Bay #15)

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** She's scooping ice cream. He's serving heart eyes. And this summer? Things are about to melt.

Hazel Brown has a plan: open the cutest little ice cream shop in Starlight Bay, keep her head down, and definitely not fall in love. Especially not with Finn Morgan—her best friend since forever, tech genius, and walking definition of “boy next door turned way-too-hot.”

Finn has been in love with Hazel since she first pelted him with a snowball in fifth grade. Now that she's back in town and chasing her dream, he's determined to be the guy who helps her succeed—and maybe, just maybe, convince her that their friendship could be the start of something so much sweeter.

Running a business, navigating small-town chaos, and dodging nosy neighbors was never going to be easy but falling for your best friend? That's the real scoop.

**Total Pages (Source):** 13

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:06 am*

hazel

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I'm halfway through my BLT when I blurt it out: "National Ice Cream Day is exactly eight days away, and I have absolutely nothing planned."

Finn looks up from his club sandwich, a hint of amusement playing at the corners of his mouth. Those green eyes of his—the ones I've known since I was five—crinkle slightly. "And this is a crisis because...?"

"Because," I say, leaning forward across our favorite table at The Coastal Café, "Fourth of July weekend was incredible for Sinfully Sweet. Like, beyond my wildest projections, incredible. But I need to keep that momentum going all summer if I want to make it through the winter."

Finn wipes a bit of mayo from the corner of his mouth with his napkin. "Haze, you've been open for what—two months? And you're already the talk of Starlight Bay. That's not luck. That's you making the best damn ice cream this side of Boston."

I feel warmth spread through my chest at his words, but I shake my head. "That's sweet of you to say, but?—"

"It's not sweet, it's true." He sets down his sandwich and gives me that look—the one that's equal parts supportive best friend and something deeper I'm not quite ready to examine.

“Remember Mrs. Brody? She came in three times last week. Three times, Hazel. That woman hasn’t left her house for anything other than groceries in years. ”

“Okay, fine, maybe the ice cream is good,” I concede, taking another bite of my sandwich. “But good ice cream doesn’t automatically translate to sustainable business. I need events, promotions, something to draw people to the shop consistently.”

Finn pulls out his phone and starts typing. “What are you doing?”

“Looking up National Ice Cream Day.” His fingers fly across the screen. “Okay, so it’s always the third Sunday in July. This year, that’s the twentieth. What kind of crowd are you thinking?”

I pause, pickle halfway to my mouth. “I don’t know. I hadn’t really thought about specifics yet. Maybe a buy-one-get-one deal? Or a new flavor launch?”

“Think bigger.” Finn’s eyes light up with that familiar spark he gets when he’s problem-solving. “What if we made it an event? Like, a real celebration?”

“An event?” I put down my pickle, intrigued despite my initial panic. “What kind of event?”

“Something that gets the whole town involved.” Finn’s excitement is contagious as he leans closer, lowering his voice like we’re conspiring.

“Picture this: ‘Starlight Bay’s First Annual Ice Cream Festival.’ We could set up in the town square, have music, games, maybe even an ice cream eating contest.”

I feel a flutter of possibility in my chest. “That actually sounds... amazing. But pulling something like that together in eight days? I’d need permits, vendors?—”

“You’ve got me,” Finn interrupts, reaching across the table to squeeze my hand. His touch is warm and familiar, like everything about him. “And I happen to know that the mayor owes my dad a favor after that whole website redesign fiasco last year.”

I laugh, remembering how Finn stayed up three nights straight fixing the town’s hacked website before the summer tourism campaign launched. “Always my knight in shining armor, aren’t you?”

“Only for you, Brown.” He winks, and I ignore the little flip my stomach does in response.

“Okay,” I say, pulling my notebook from my bag and flipping to a clean page. “If we’re doing this, we need a plan. I’m thinking we showcase all my bestsellers, plus maybe two or three special flavors just for the event.”

Finn nods enthusiastically. “You should definitely bring back that lavender honey one from opening weekend. Mrs. Reyes at the library hasn’t stopped talking about it.”

“Really? I thought it was too weird for most people.”

“That’s what makes your shop special, Haze. You take risks.” His eyes hold mine for a beat too long. “It’s what I’ve always admired about you.”

I clear my throat and look down at my notebook. “Right. So, bestsellers, special flavors... what else?”

“What about a collaboration? You could partner with other local businesses. Like, I bet Theo at the bakery would love to provide cookies for ice cream sandwiches.”

“And the coffee shop could do affogatos with my vanilla bean,” I add, the ideas starting to flow.

Finn grins. “See? This is happening. And I’ve got another idea—what if we had people vote for their favorite flavor? The winner becomes a permanent addition to your menu.”

“That’s brilliant,” I say, scribbling furiously. “It would give people a reason to try multiple flavors and feel invested in the shop.”

“Plus,” Finn adds, stealing one of my potato chips, “it gives you valuable market research for free.”

I swat his hand playfully. “Always thinking like a businessman.”

“Someone has to balance out your artistic temperament.” He catches my hand, holding it a second longer than necessary. “We make a good team, Brown.”

I pull my hand away, ignoring the warmth creeping up my neck. “We always have.”

“So it’s settled then? Starlight Bay’s First Annual Ice Cream Festival, starring Sinfully Sweet?”

I take a deep breath, the anxiety of eight days ago morphing into excitement. “Let’s do it.”

Finn raises his iced tea. “To brain freezes and business booms.”

I clink my glass against his, smiling. “And to best friends who always know exactly what I need.”

Something flickers across his face—disappointment, maybe?—but it’s gone so quickly I wonder if I imagined it.

“Always,” he says softly.

I spend the rest of lunch scribbling notes while Finn bounces ideas off me. By the time he pays the check, my notebook looks like a tornado hit it, but I can actually see this thing coming together.

“I should probably head back,” I say, glancing at my watch. “Sarah’s covering the shop, but Saturday afternoons get crazy.”

Finn stands and grabs his jacket from the back of his chair. “Mind if I walk with you? I want to take some pictures of the square for the layout.”

“Sure.” I tuck my notebook into my bag, trying not to notice how his hand briefly touches the small of my back as we navigate through the crowded café.

Outside, the July heat hits us like a wall. Starlight Bay in summer is picture-perfect—all-white picket fences and window boxes overflowing with petunias—but the humidity makes my hair curl in ways that definitely aren’t intentional.

“So what’s Helen think about all this?” Finn asks about my big sister as we stroll toward Main Street.

I groan. “Helen thinks I’m certifiably insane. Her exact words were, ‘Why would you want to be a small-town ice cream lady when you could be conquering the world?’”

“Classic Helen.” Finn chuckles. “Still trying to convince you to move back to Boston?”

“Every single phone call.” I kick a pebble down the sidewalk. “She doesn’t get why I’d choose this over some corporate marketing job in the city.”

“And what do you tell her?”

I pause, watching Mrs. Brody tend to her rose garden across the street. She waves, and I wave back automatically. “That some people need skyscrapers to feel alive, and some people need... this.”

Finn follows my gaze, taking in the tree-lined street, the kids on bikes, the lazy summer afternoon feel of it all. “This is pretty great.”

“It is.” I steal a glance at him, wondering if he ever thinks about leaving. He’s smart enough to work anywhere and do anything. “Don’t you ever miss the excitement of the city?”

“I visited you enough times in Boston to know it’s not for me.” His voice is matter-of-fact. “Besides, everything I want is right here.”

Something in his tone makes my pulse quicken, but before I can analyze it, we’re at Sinfully Sweet, and I can see the line of customers through the window.

“Looks like you’re needed,” Finn says, but he’s smiling.

“The price of success.” I dig for my keys. “Thank you for lunch. And for... well, for turning my panic into a plan.”

“That’s what I’m here for.” He steps closer, and for a moment, I think he might hug me, but instead, he just touches my shoulder. “I’ll call you tonight with an update on the permits, okay?”

“Okay.” I watch him walk away, noting the confident set of his shoulders and the way he nods to everyone we pass. This is his town as much as it’s mine, and somehow, that makes the idea of the festival feel even more right.

The bell above my door chimes as I step inside, and immediately, I'm enveloped by the sweet, cold air and the chatter of happy customers. Sarah looks relieved to see me.

"Thank God you're back," she says, tying her apron tighter. "We're almost out of the mint chocolate chip, and that family over there has been debating flavors for ten minutes."

I laugh, washing my hands quickly before jumping back behind the counter. "Just another successful Saturday at Sinfully Sweet."

But as I scoop ice cream and ring up orders, my mind keeps drifting to festival plans and the way Finn's eyes lit up when he talked about us making a good team.

Eight days suddenly don't feel like nearly enough time—for the festival or for figuring out why my best friend's smile makes my heart do things I've been trying very hard to ignore.



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:06 am*

finn

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Back at my office, I drop into my chair and stare at my computer screen. Instead of opening the website mockups that I should be reviewing, I pull up a new document and start listing everything we'll need for Hazel's ice cream festival. Permits, vendors, equipment rentals, marketing materials...

"There he is," Lloyd says, appearing in my doorway with two cups of coffee. He sets one on my desk and leans against the doorframe. "Thought you'd run off to the circus or eloped with Hazel Brown."

I minimize the festival document and try to look busy with actual work. "Just grabbing lunch. You know how it is."

"Uh-huh." Lloyd takes a sip of his coffee, his eyes narrowing as he studies me. "And how's Hazel's ice cream empire coming along?"

"It's not my project, Lloyd. I'm just helping out."

"Right." He pushes off from the doorframe and walks over to my monitor, maximizing the festival document I just minimized. "Ice cream vendor coordination, sound system requirements, parking logistics... Yeah, this looks like 'just helping out' to me."

Heat creeps up my neck. "It's one weekend. The festival will bring business to the

whole town, including us.”

“Finn.” Lloyd’s voice loses its teasing edge. “We’ve got the Morrison contract deadline next week. The prototype demo is on Thursday. And you’re over here planning an ice cream social like it’s your full-time job.”

I lean back in my chair, running a hand through my hair. “I can handle both.”

“Can you? Because yesterday you spent three hours researching biodegradable spoons instead of fixing the user interface bugs we found.”

“Those spoons are important?—”

“To Hazel. They’re important to Hazel.” Lloyd sits down across from me, his expression serious now. “Look, man, I’ve known you since we were kids riding bikes down Maple Street. I’ve never seen you this distracted, not even when we were pulling all-nighters to get this company off the ground.”

I stare at my coffee, watching the steam curl upward. “It’s complicated.”

“No, it’s not.” Lloyd leans forward. “You’re in love with her and have been since high school, probably. Just tell her how you feel and get on with your life.”

“And ruin our friendship? Risk everything we’ve built here?” I shake my head. “She’s focused on her business. She doesn’t need me complicating things.”

“Or maybe she’s waiting for you to make a move, and you’re both just circling each other like scared teenagers.” Lloyd stands up, grabbing his coffee. “Either way, you need to figure it out. Because this company we built? It needs you present, not daydreaming about ice cream flavors.”

“I’m not daydreaming about ice cream flavors,” I mutter, but even to my own ears, the defense sounds weak.

Lloyd gives me that look—the one where his right eyebrow arches just enough to call bullshit without saying a word.

It’s the same look he gave me in tenth grade when I claimed I was joining the debate team because I found “logical argumentation fascinating” and not because Hazel was the team captain.

“Fine,” I concede. “I’ll focus. The Morrison interface will be perfect by Thursday.”

“And the festival planning?”

I glance at my document, feeling a tug in my chest at the thought of stepping back. “I promised Haze, Lloyd.”

He sighs, running a hand over his close-cropped hair. “That’s your problem, man. You’ve been promising her things for years without ever promising her the one thing that matters.”

The words hit like a sucker punch. I turn back to my screen, clicking through to the Morrison files just to have something to do with my hands.

“Look,” Lloyd’s voice softens. “I’m not saying abandon the festival. I’m saying be honest—with Hazel and yourself. Because this half-in, half-out thing you’re doing? It’s not sustainable.”

After he leaves, I sit there staring at code that might as well be hieroglyphics for all I’m comprehending it. My phone buzzes with a text from Hazel.

\*Just tried a new strawberry balsamic flavor. Need your expert taste-testing services. Emergency ice cream situation. SOS.\*

A smile tugs at my lips before I can stop it. Three dots appear as Hazel types another message.

\*Unless you're busy with real work. In which case, ignore my ice cream emergency.\*

And there it is—the perfect out. Hazel is giving me permission to focus on my actual job, to step back from festival planning and her shop. All I have to do is tell her I'm swamped.

Instead, my fingers type: \*On my way. Ice cream emergencies trump all other responsibilities.\*

As I grab my jacket, Lloyd's words echo in my head. Maybe he's right. Perhaps it's time to stop orbiting around Hazel like a cautious satellite and finally risk burning up in her atmosphere.

But first, I have strawberry balsamic ice cream to judge and a Morrison interface to fix by morning.

I lock my computer and sling my jacket over my shoulder, already calculating how I can make up the time tonight. Three hours of coding after dinner should get me caught up on the Morrison project. Maybe four, just to be safe.

“Where are you going?” Lloyd calls as I pass his office.

“Ice cream emergency,” I say without stopping. “Back in an hour.”

I hear him mutter something that sounds suspiciously like “hopeless,” but I pretend

not to notice.

Outside, the spring air hits my face, carrying that distinctive Starlight Bay scent—salt water, pine trees, and possibility.

It's the same smell that convinced me to move back here after college instead of taking that job in Seattle.

The walk to Sweet Scoops takes exactly seven minutes if I cut through Harborview Park. I know because I've timed it repeatedly, always with the excuse that I'm just being efficient.

The bell above the door jingles as I enter, and there she is—hair pulled back in a messy bun, a smudge of something pink on her cheek, and that smile that makes my stomach do Olympic-level gymnastics.

“That was fast,” Hazel says, already reaching for a sample spoon. “I thought you'd be deep in code by now.”

“Never too busy for a crisis,” I reply, leaning against the counter. “Especially one involving ice cream.”

She passes me a tiny spoon filled with pale pink ice cream. “Prepare yourself. This might change your life.”

Our fingers brush during the handoff, and I force myself to focus on the ice cream instead of the electric current that just shot up my arm. The flavor hits my tongue—sweet strawberry deepened by tangy balsamic, with something else I can't quite identify.

“There's a hint of black pepper,” Hazel says, watching my face intently. “Too

weird?”

I take another taste, letting it melt slowly. “Not weird. Surprising. Like it starts one way and then takes you somewhere completely unexpected.”

Her eyes light up. “That’s exactly what I was going for! Lloyd said it would be too sophisticated for Starlight Bay, but I think people are ready for something different.”

I pause with the spoon halfway to my mouth. “You talked to Lloyd about this?”

“He stopped by yesterday while you were at that client meeting.” She shrugs, turning to wipe down the counter. “We got to talking about the festival, and he mentioned your big deadline next week.”

Great. So Lloyd’s been planting seeds of doubt with Hazel, too.

“The deadline’s under control,” I say, perhaps too quickly. “And this flavor definitely needs to be at the festival. It’s... it’s like Starlight Bay in ice cream form. Familiar but surprising.”

She looks up at me, her expression softening. “You really think so?”

“Absolutely.” I set the spoon down. “Put me down for three scoops at the festival.”

“Speaking of which,” she says, pulling out a notebook from under the counter, “I’ve been thinking about the layout. What if we set up the vendor booths in a spiral pattern instead of rows? People could follow the path and try everything without missing anything.”

And just like that, I’m pulled back into her orbit, discussing tent placements and electrical needs, completely forgetting about Morrison interfaces and Lloyd’s

warnings. An hour stretches into two as we sketch layouts on napkins and debate the merits of different local bands for the main stage.

It's only when my phone buzzes with a text from Lloyd—\*Morrison client called. Where are you?\*—that reality crashes back in.

"I have to go," I say reluctantly, already backing toward the door. "Client stuff."

Hazel nods, understanding but disappointed. "Go be a tech genius. I'll handle the band bookings."

"I'll call you tonight," I promise. "We can finalize the vendor list."

As I jog back to the office, I realize I've done it again—prioritized Hazel's dreams over my own responsibilities. But watching her eyes light up when I approved that ice cream flavor felt more rewarding than any successful code deployment ever has.

Lloyd's waiting when I return, arms crossed. "One hour, huh?"

"I lost track of time," I admit, rushing to my desk.

"You're losing more than time, buddy." He follows me into my office. "The Morrison people moved up the demo. They want to see it tomorrow morning."

My stomach drops. "Tomorrow? That's impossible. We need at least?—"

"Two more days, I know. I bought us until Friday, but I had to promise them something special." He leans against my desk. "Which means you need to be here, focused, for the next 48 hours straight."

I nod, already pulling up the code. "I'm on it."

“And the ice cream festival?”

I hesitate, fingers hovering over the keyboard. “I’ll figure it out.”

Lloyd sighs. “Just tell her, Finn. Tell her you’re in love with her or tell her you can’t help with the festival. But stop trying to be everything to everyone.”

After he leaves, I stare at my screen, the festival planning document and the Morrison code side by side. Two dreams, two commitments, two parts of myself pulling in opposite directions.

My phone lights up with a text from Hazel: \*Forgot to ask—what do you think about “Berry Good Time” as the festival slogan? Too cheesy?\*

I smile despite everything. \*Definitely too cheesy. Perfect for an ice cream festival.\*

Then, before I can overthink it, I type another message: \*Need to focus on work for a couple days. Rain check on that call tonight?\*

Three dots appear, disappear, and then reappear. Finally: \*Of course. Your real job comes first. Let me know when you come up for air.\*

I set my phone face-down and turn to the Morrison code, ignoring the hollow feeling in my chest. Lloyd’s right about one thing—something has to give. I just haven’t figured out what yet.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:06 am*

hazel

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The last customer leaves just as I'm wiping down the counter for the third time tonight. Sarah flips the sign to "Closed" and turns the lock with more force than necessary.

"Okay, spill," she says, grabbing a towel to help me clean up. "You've been distracted all evening. I watched you give Mrs. Henderson vanilla instead of mint chip, and she was too polite to say anything."

I groan, remembering the confused look on Mrs. Henderson's face. "I'll make it up to her tomorrow."

"This is about Finn, isn't it?" Sarah starts stacking chairs on tables with practiced efficiency. "You've been weird ever since he left this afternoon."

"I'm not weird." I scrub at an invisible spot on the counter. "I'm focused."

"Focused on pretending you don't have feelings for your best friend."

My hand stills. "Sarah?—"

"Hazel." She stops what she's doing and looks at me directly. "That man is head over heels in love with you. Like, embarrassingly obvious, write-songs-about-you in love."

I laugh, but it comes out forced. "That's ridiculous. Finn and I grew up together. We're like siblings."

"Siblings don't look at each other the way you two do."

"What way?" I ask, even though I know I shouldn't.

Sarah leans against the counter, studying my face. "Like you're both drowning, and the other person is oxygen."

My stomach flips, but I shake my head. "You're imagining things. Finn's just... he's protective. He's always been that way, ever since we were kids. It's not romantic."

"Right. And that's why Finn's spent the last month planning your festival like it's his own wedding."

I turn away, focusing on organizing the napkin dispensers that are already perfectly organized. "He's being a good friend. That's what friends do."

"Friends don't learn your entire inventory by heart. Friends, don't drop everything when you text about ice cream emergencies. And friends definitely don't look like they've been punched in the gut when you mention other guys."

"I don't mention other guys."

"Exactly my point." Sarah's voice is gentle now. "Hazel, when's the last time you went on a date?"

I pause, a napkin dispenser halfway to its spot. "I've been busy with the shop."

"Before the shop. In Boston."

I think back, trying to remember. There was that guy from my marketing class and the barista at the coffee shop near my apartment, but nothing serious. Nothing that made me want to stay in Boston instead of coming home.

Nothing that made me feel the way I feel when Finn walks into my shop.

"That's not the point," I say finally. "Even if.

.. even if there was something there, which there isn't, I can't risk it.

Finn's my best friend. He's been there for everything—when Dad had his heart attack, when I was scared about opening the shop, when I need someone to taste-test weird ice cream flavors at nine in the morning. "

"And you think dating him would ruin that?"

I set down the dispenser and face her. "I think if it didn't work out, I'd lose the most important person in my life. And I can't... I won't do that."

Sarah's expression softens. "What if it did work out?"

The question renders me speechless. For a moment, I let myself imagine it—Finn's hand in mine, not just as friends but as something more. Waking up next to those green eyes. Having someone who believes in my dreams because they're part of his dreams, too.

Then reality crashes back in.

"He's got his company to think about," I say, grabbing my keys from behind the register. "Did you see how stressed he looked when he left? He has real responsibilities and important clients. I can't ask him to keep dropping everything for

ice cream emergencies."

"Maybe he wants to drop everything for your ice cream emergencies."

I flip off the lights, plunging us into the soft glow of the streetlights outside. "That's exactly the problem. Finn's too good a friend to say no, even when he should."

We step outside, and I lock the door behind us. The spring air is cool against my skin, carrying the sound of waves from the harbor.

"You know what I think?" Sarah says as we walk toward our cars.

"I'm sure you're going to tell me."

"I think you're scared. And I think Finn's scared too. You're both so afraid of losing what you have that you won't risk finding out what you could have."

I stop walking. "And what if we find out it's nothing? What if we try and realize we were better as friends?"

"Then you figure it out. Like adults." Sarah unlocks her car and turns to face me. "But Hazel, what if you find out it's everything?"

My heart does that fluttering thing it always does when I think about Finn in ways I shouldn't. I press my hand to my chest, willing it to calm down.

"Sarah, you don't understand. Finn's seen me at my absolute worst—remember when I got food poisoning from that questionable sushi in Boston, and he drove four hours just to bring me soup? That's not romance, that's... that's family."

"Family doesn't blush when you laugh at their jokes."

"He doesn't—" I start to protest, then stop. Maybe he does. Perhaps I've been so busy convincing myself we're just friends that I've been ignoring the way his cheeks turn pink when I tease him or how his voice gets softer when he says my name.

"Look," Sarah says, opening her car door. "I'm not saying you have to march over there tonight and declare your undying love. But maybe stop running away every time he gets too close. Maybe let yourself feel what you're feeling instead of analyzing it to death."

She slides into her seat and then rolls down the window. "And maybe consider that the reason you've never seriously dated anyone else isn't because you're too busy with ice cream."

Before I can respond, she's backing out of the parking space, leaving me standing alone under the streetlight with my thoughts spinning like a broken soft-serve machine.

I get in my own car but don't start it right away.

Instead, I sit there thinking about this afternoon—how Finn's face lit up when he explained his marketing ideas, how he remembered exactly which flavors were my bestsellers, how he insisted on staying late to help me prep for tomorrow even though I could see the exhaustion in his eyes.

My phone buzzes. A text from Finn: \*Hope closing went smoothly. Don't forget to lock the back door—I noticed the latch was loose earlier.\*

Even now, he's looking out for me. My fingers hover over the keyboard, wanting to type something that acknowledges the flutter in my chest —the way his concern makes me feel cherished and protected, and maybe something more than just friendship.

Instead, I type back: \*Already locked. Thanks for everything today.\*

Safe. Friendly. That is exactly what I always do.

I start the car and pull out of the lot, but instead of heading straight home, I find myself driving the long way past Finn's apartment complex.

His living room light is on, and I can see his silhouette moving around inside.

For just a moment, I imagine pulling into his parking space, walking up those stairs, and telling him that Sarah might be right about everything.

But I keep driving because some risks feel too big to take, even when—especially when—they might be worth it.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:06 am*

finn

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Summer passes differently when you're in love with your best friend. Every moment becomes a snapshot preserved in amber, a fleeting treasure I want to hold onto forever.

"You think Mr. Henderson will actually put this up?

" Hazel asks, handing me another flyer from her canvas tote bag.

Her chestnut hair catches the sunlight as she tilts her head, those hazel eyes sparkling with mischief.

"Last year, he said ice cream festivals were 'frivolous nonsense for children and tourists. '"

I laugh, taking the colorful paper from her fingers, our hands brushing longer than necessary. "He also buys two pints of your salted caramel every week like clockwork. Trust me, he'll put it up."

We've been at this all morning, walking door to door through Starlight Bay's main street, convincing local businesses to display flyers for Hazel's second annual ice cream festival.

The event nearly killed her last year—eighteen flavors in three days with just her and

two summer employees manning the shop—but it put Sweet Scoops on the map.

This year, she's determined to make it even bigger.

"That's twenty-seven businesses," Hazel announces proudly as we exit the hardware store. "Three more than last year."

"And we finished in record time," I add, checking my watch. "Which means..."

"Beach time!" she finishes, her face lighting up.

Thirty minutes later, we're stretched out on our usual spot at Lighthouse Cove.

Hazel's already slathered in sunscreen—a necessity for her fair skin—while I'm content to soak up the rays.

The beach is surprisingly empty for a Saturday in July, with just a few families scattered along the shoreline and a group of teenagers playing volleyball further down.

"We should take a trip," Hazel says suddenly, propping herself up on her elbows. She's wearing the blue bikini that makes my heart rate spike every time. "Before summer's over. Once the festival's done, I could close the shop for a few days."

I turn to look at her, trying not to be obvious about admiring the freckles dotting her shoulders. "Yeah? Where to?"

"I don't know. Somewhere, not too far. Cape Cod, maybe? Or that little beach town in Maine you're always talking about?"

"Bar Harbor," I supply, already imagining walking along the harbor with her,



watching sunsets from Cadillac Mountain. Just the two of us. "That could be amazing."

She sits up fully now, excitement evident in her voice. "Should we see if Lloyd wants to come? Or Helen might fly in if I give her enough notice."

The fantasy in my head shifts, adding Lloyd's booming laugh and Helen's city-girl complaints about the lack of decent coffee. My chest tightens slightly.

"We could," I say carefully, brushing sand from my arm. "Or it could just be us. Might be simpler that way."

Hazel looks at me, a question in her eyes that I'm not brave enough to answer yet. "Just us?"

"Yeah," I manage, heart hammering against my ribs. "I mean, when was the last time we took a trip together, just the two of us?"

The moment hangs between us, heavy with possibility. I've been in love with Hazel Brown since I was twelve years old, and at twenty-eight, I'm still waiting for the right moment to tell her. Maybe that moment is finally approaching.

The silence stretches out, punctuated only by the rhythmic crash of waves and distant laughter from the volleyball game. Hazel's fingers trace patterns in the sand between us, and I find myself memorizing the gentle curve of her wrist, the way the afternoon light makes her skin glow.

"You're right," she says finally, and something in her voice makes my pulse quicken.

"It has been forever since it was just us."

" She pauses, then adds with that teasing smile I know so well, "Think you can handle being stuck with me for a whole weekend without Lloyd there to referee our arguments about the best pizza toppings? "

"I'll manage," I say, grinning back at her. "Besides, someone needs to be there to document your inevitable meltdown when you realize Maine lobster rolls aren't made with mayo."

"Excuse me?" She sits up straighter, mock outrage coloring her features. "That's not a meltdown. That's having standards. Mayo-based lobster salad is a crime against nature."

"See? This is exactly why we need Lloyd as a buffer."

She laughs and flops back down on her towel, but not before flicking sand in my direction. "You're terrible. And you're buying the first round of lobster rolls just for that comment."

"Deal." I settle back onto my elbows, watching her close her eyes against the sun. "So when were you thinking? After the festival wraps up?"

"Mmm," she hums contentedly. "Maybe the following weekend? Give me a few days to recover from the chaos." She turns her head toward me, eyes still closed. "Think you can get away from the office?"

"For you? I'd shut down the whole company if I had to."

The words slip out before I can stop them, too honest, too revealing.

Hazel's eyes flutter open, and for a heartbeat, I think I see something shift in her expression—surprise, maybe, or recognition.

But then a seagull swoops down near our feet, breaking the spell, and she sits up to shoo it away from her bag.

"Well, that's settled then," she says, but her voice sounds different somehow, softer. "Just you, me, and the Maine coast."

Just you and me. The phrase echoes in my head like a promise I'm not sure I'm ready to keep.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:06 am*

hazel

. . .

“Carl isn’t going to like you pinning that thing to his store. You know how he goes on about his aesthetic.” My big sister, Helen, shakes her head as she waits for me to finish up.

I chuckle, shaking my head as I carefully tape the flyer to the storefront window.

“He agreed earlier today. I may have bribed him with a lifetime supply of our Maple Bourbon Pecan.” I smooth the corner of the colorful announcement advertising Starlight Bay’s first annual Ice Cream Festival. My festival. My dream.

Helen snorts as she scrolls through the messages on her phone. “By ‘lifetime supply,’ you mean one free scoop per month, which he’ll forget about by September.”

“Still counts,” I say as we head back to Sinfully Sweet, the best damn ice cream shop in Massachusetts. At least, that’s what Finn swears. But he’s a partial owner and may be biased.

The shop is quiet tonight, just the three of us working late. Sarah stands at the industrial mixer, her brow furrowed in concentration as she watches cream and sugar transform into something magical. The rhythmic whirring provides a comforting soundtrack to our evening.

“So,” Helen says, not looking up from her screen, “when are you and Finn finally

going to seal the deal with a much-delayed roll in the hay?”

I nearly drop the stapler. “Excuse me?”

“You know,” Helen continues, her fingers typing away as she updates my website with our new flavors, “have sex. Do the horizontal tango. Make the beast with?—”

“I get it,” I interrupt, feeling heat rush to my cheeks. “And that’s none of your business.”

Sarah glances over her shoulder, trying and failing to hide her smirk.

“It’s been what, twenty years?” Helen presses. “The sexual tension is suffocating. I can barely stand being in the same room as you two.”

“We’re best friends, and I’m not sure we share the same feelings. It’s best to take things slow,” I mutter, suddenly very interested in aligning the flyers perfectly.

“Twenty years is glacially slow,” Helen counters. “Is there a problem? Equipment malfunction? Performance anxiety?”

“Helen!” I hiss, glancing at Sarah, who has abandoned all pretense of not listening.

“What?” Helen shrugs innocently. “I’m your twin. I’m contractually obligated to be involved in your love life.”

“No such contract exists,” I say firmly, though I can’t help but smile. “And for your information, I’m just... waiting for the right moment.”

The truth is, every moment with Finn feels right. Every touch and every late-night conversation that stretches until dawn. But something holds me back—perhaps the

fear that once we cross that line, everything changes. And I've never been good with change.

Sarah clears her throat. "The salted caramel base is ready. Want to try it?"

Grateful for the interruption, I move to the counter, dipping a small spoon into the creamy mixture. "Perfect," I declare after tasting it. "Let's add the chocolate chunks."

Helen sighs dramatically. "Fine, avoid the topic. But don't think this conversation is over."

I know it isn't. Nothing ever is with Helen. But for now, I lose myself in the familiar rhythm of ice cream making, in the comfort of creation, pushing thoughts of Finn—and the inevitable "right moment"—to the back of my mind.

Sarah pours the chocolate chunks into the mixture, and I watch them disappear into the swirling cream. The familiar process usually calms me, but Helen's words have stirred something restless in my chest.

"You know what your problem is?" Helen says, finally setting down her phone. "You overthink everything. Some things are meant to be messy and imperfect."

"Says the woman who color-codes her calendar," I shoot back, measuring out the sea salt with precise movements.

"That's different. That's organization. What you're doing is self-sabotage."

Sarah adds the final ingredients and restarts the machine. "Can I just say," she ventures carefully, "that Finn looks at you like you hung the moon? I've worked here six months, and I've never seen him look at anyone else that way."

My heart does a little flip. “Finn’s always been protective of me.”

“Protective is one thing,” Sarah continues, emboldened. “But the way he watches you when you’re not looking? That’s something else entirely.”

Helen claps her hands together. “See? Even Sarah sees it. And she’s what, nineteen?”

“Twenty-one,” Sarah corrects with a grin. “But I know longing when I see it. My boyfriend looked at me like that for months before he finally made a move.”

I lean against the counter, suddenly feeling exhausted. “What if it ruins everything? What if we try, and it doesn’t work out? I can’t lose him.”

“What if it does work out?” Helen counters, her voice gentler now. “What if you’re missing out on something amazing because you’re too scared to take the leap?”

The mixer winds down, and Sarah begins transferring the ice cream to the freezer containers. “My grandmother always said that regret weighs more than failure,” she offers quietly.

I watch her work, thinking about all the moments with Finn that have felt charged with possibility. The way his hand lingers when he helps me down from a ladder. How he always finds excuses to stay late and help close up. The way he said my name last week when I caught him staring.

“Maybe,” I whisper, more to myself than to them.

Helen’s phone buzzes, and she glances at it. “Speaking of the devil. Finn’s asking if we need anything from the late-night grocery run.”

My pulse quickens. “Tell him we’re fine.”

“I’m telling him to bring coffee,” Helen says, already typing. “And maybe some of those pastries you like from the bakery section.”

“Helen, don’t?—”

“Too late. He’ll be here in twenty minutes.” She gives me a knowing look.

“Perfect timing to test out that new flavor.”

I glare at my sister, but there’s no real heat behind it. Twenty-nine years of being Helen’s twin has taught me that resistance is futile.

“Fine,” I concede, turning my attention back to the creamy mixture. “But no more talk about my love life when he gets here. Promise me.”

Helen makes a show of crossing her heart. “Scout’s honor.”

“You were kicked out of Girl Scouts after two weeks,” I remind her.

“Details.” She waves her hand dismissively. “Besides, I don’t need to say anything. The way you two orbit each other does all the talking.”

Sarah hums in agreement as she labels the container with neat handwriting: “Midnight Mocha Madness – Test Batch #3.” The name had come to me during one of those late-night brainstorming sessions with Finn, both of us punchy with exhaustion, his shoulder warm against mine as we huddled over my recipe notebook.

“This might be the one,” Sarah says, admiring the rich, glossy texture. “The espresso really brings out the depth in the chocolate.”

I dip another spoon in for a taste, closing my eyes as the flavors bloom across my



tongue. “It’s close. Maybe a touch more sea salt.”

The bell above the shop door jingles, and my heart performs its usual gymnastics routine at the sound of Finn’s footsteps.

“Delivery for the ice cream queens,” he calls out, his voice warm and familiar in a way that makes my stomach flutter.

He appears in the doorway to the kitchen, grocery bags in hand, hair slightly damp from the light drizzle outside. His green eyes find mine immediately, and there it is – that look Sarah mentioned, like I’m the most fascinating thing he’s ever seen.

“You’re early,” I say, suddenly conscious of the smudge of chocolate I probably have on my cheek and the mess of my ponytail.

“Traffic was light,” he replies with a shrug, setting the bags on the counter. “Plus, I heard there was experimental ice cream happening, and I’ve never been one to miss a tasting opportunity.”

Helen shoots me a pointed look that I steadfastly ignore.

“Perfect timing,” Sarah says, already reaching for clean-tasting spoons. “We just finished batch three of Hazel’s new creation.”

Finn steps closer, and I catch the scent of rain and that subtle cologne he’s worn since college. “What’s the verdict so far?”

“Needs more salt,” I say; at the same time, Helen says, “Needs more courage.”

Finn raises an eyebrow. “Salt, I understand, but courage?”

“Ignore her,” I say quickly, shoving a spoon into his hand. “Here, try it and tell me what you think.”

Our fingers brush during the exchange, and I wonder for the millionth time if he feels it too – that electric current that seems to run between us, growing stronger with each passing year.

Finn takes his time, savoring the flavor with his eyes closed. I watch his throat move as he swallows, and heat rises to my cheeks when I realize I’m staring.

“Well?” I ask, my voice embarrassingly breathless.

He opens his eyes, and the intensity in them nearly stops my heart. “It’s amazing, Haze. But I think you’re right about the salt. It’s almost there— just needs that little extra push to be perfect.”

“Metaphors,” Helen mutters under her breath, just loud enough for me to hear. “Everywhere.”

I fight the urge to kick my sister under the counter. Instead, I reach for the sea salt, carefully measuring out a small amount to fold into the remaining mixture.

“So, what else did you bring us besides coffee?” I ask Finn, desperate to change the subject before Helen can make another loaded comment.

“Those almond croissants you like,” he says, unpacking the grocery bags. “And some of those weird cheese puffs Helen’s addicted to.”

“They’re not weird. They’re sophisticated,” Helen protests, already tearing into the bag.

Sarah finishes labeling the containers and slides them into the blast freezer. “I think I’ll head out if that’s okay? I promised my roommate I’d help her study for her nursing exam.”

“Of course,” I say, relieved to have one less witness to Helen’s matchmaking attempts. “Thanks for staying late.”

As Sarah gathers her things, Helen suddenly snaps her fingers. “Oh! I just remembered I have that... thing. That important thing I need to do.”

“What thing?” I narrow my eyes suspiciously.

“You know, that conference call with the marketing team in... Japan.” She checks her watch dramatically. “It’s morning there now.”

“You don’t have a marketing team in Japan,” Finn points out, the corner of his mouth twitching.

“Not yet, but Hazel’s ice cream empire has global potential.” Helen is already grabbing her jacket. “Sarah, I’ll walk you out. We can discuss that social media campaign I was thinking about.”

Before I can protest, Helen and Sarah are heading for the door, my sister throwing a not-so-subtle wink over her shoulder. “Don’t wait up, twin! And remember—courage!”

The bell jingles as they leave, and suddenly, the shop feels much smaller with just Finn and me. He’s leaning against the counter now, arms crossed over his chest, watching me with that half-smile that always makes my stomach flip.

“So,” he says casually, “what exactly do you need courage for?”

I busy myself with cleaning the already spotless counter. “Helen’s just being Helen. You know how she gets these... ideas.”

“Ideas,” he repeats, moving closer. “About?”

My heart is hammering so loudly I’m sure he can hear it. “Nothing important. Just sister stuff.” I reach for a croissant, needing something to do with my hands. “Want to split this?”

Finn takes the pastry, his fingers brushing mine again. This time, he doesn’t immediately pull away. “Hazel.”

The way he says my name makes me look up. There’s something different in his eyes tonight—a determination I haven’t seen before.

“What?” I manage to whisper.

“I heard what Helen was saying when I came in.” His voice is low and steady. “About us.”

The room suddenly feels too warm. “You did?”

He nods, breaking the croissant in half but keeping his eyes on mine. “I’ve been thinking about us too. A lot, actually.”

“Finn—”

“Let me finish, please?” He takes a deep breath. “We’ve been dancing around this for years, Haze. Everyone sees it. I think even Carl at the bookstore has a bet going about when we’ll finally get together.”

I laugh nervously. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Is it?” He steps closer, close enough that I can see the flecks of gold in his green eyes. “Because I don’t think it is. I think it makes perfect sense. You and me—we’ve always made sense.”

My mouth goes dry. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying I’m tired of waiting for the right moment.” He sets down the croissant untouched. “I’m saying that maybe we need to make the moment right instead of waiting for it to happen.”

My pulse is racing now, the words I’ve kept locked away for so long threatening to spill out. “But what if?”

“What if it’s amazing?” he interrupts gently. “What if we’ve been missing out on something incredible because we’re both too scared to take that step?”

It’s almost precisely what Helen said, and hearing it from Finn’s lips makes it impossible to ignore. Twenty years of friendship, of longing glances and lingering touches, of being there for each other through everything—it all comes down to this moment.

“I don’t want to lose you,” I confess, my voice barely above a whisper.

Finn reaches out, tucking a stray strand of hair behind my ear. His touch sends shivers down my spine. “You couldn’t lose me if you tried, Hazel Brown. I’m not going anywhere.”

Something shifts inside me then, a quiet certainty replacing the fear. Maybe Sarah’s grandmother was right about regret weighing more than failure. Maybe Helen is right

about me overthinking everything.

Maybe it's time to be brave.

I step forward, close the distance between us, and place my hand on his chest. I can feel his heart beating as rapidly as mine.

“So,” I say, looking up at him, “what happens now?”

His smile is slow and sure, lighting up his entire face. “Now? I think now I finally get to kiss you if that's okay.”

Instead of answering, I rise up on my tiptoes and press my lips to his.

The world doesn't shatter, nor does the shop crumble to dust around us.

Instead, Finn's strong arms encircle my waist, drawing me closer with an urgency that electrifies my senses.

His kiss is a fervent exploration, tasting of rich coffee and untamed possibility, and I am left questioning why I ever delayed embracing something that feels so intensely right.

When we finally break apart, both breathless, Finn rests his forehead against mine.

“For the record,” he murmurs, “that was worth waiting twenty years for.”

I laugh, feeling lighter than I have in months. “Helen's never going to let us hear the end of this.”

“Probably not,” he agrees, brushing his thumb across my cheek. “But I think we can

handle it.”

As if on cue, my phone buzzes with a text. I reluctantly pull away to check it, already knowing who it’s from.

Helen: Did you find your courage yet? If not, I can come back with PowerPoint presentations and visual aids.

I show the message to Finn, who laughs and takes the phone from my hand. He quickly types a response and shows it to me before hitting send.

Me: Courage found. Don’t wait up.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:06 am*

hazel

. . .

I watch Finn set my phone aside, his green eyes never leaving mine. The shop feels electric around us, charged with twenty years of unspoken words and careful restraint, finally breaking free.

“Come on,” I say, reaching for his hand. “Help me lock up.”

We move through the familiar routine of closing—turning off machines, wiping down surfaces, checking locks—but everything feels different now.

Every casual brush of our hands as we work sends sparks through me.

When Finn reaches around me to flip the main light switch, his chest pressed against my back for just a moment, I have to steady myself against the counter.

“Easy there,” he murmurs, his breath warm against my ear. “We’ve got all night.”

The promise in his voice makes my knees weak. I turn in his arms, and suddenly we’re kissing again, deeper this time, more desperate. His hands tangle in my hair, and I press closer, wanting to memorize every detail of this moment.

When we finally break apart, both breathing hard, I realize I’m gripping the front of his shirt.



“We should go,” I whisper, though I make no move to step away.

“Yeah,” he agrees, not moving either. “Your place or mine?”

The question hangs between us, loaded with possibilities. My apartment is closer, just a five-minute walk through the quiet streets of Starlight Bay. But the thought of those five minutes feeling like an eternity makes me kiss him again.

“Mine,” I manage against his lips. “Definitely mine.”

Finn’s truck is parked just outside, and he holds the passenger door open for me like he has a thousand times before. But when he slides into the driver’s seat and reaches for my hand, intertwining our fingers as he starts the engine, it feels like the first time all over again.

The drive is quiet except for the soft hum of the radio and the sound of rain beginning to fall more steadily. Finn’s thumb traces circles on my palm, and I find myself watching his profile in the dashboard light, still hardly believing this is real.

He pulls into my driveway and kills the engine, but neither of us moves immediately. The rain patters against the windshield, creating a cocoon of intimacy around us.

“Hazel,” he says softly, turning to face me. “Are you sure about this?”

The question is gentle, giving me an out if I need it. But looking at him—really looking at Finn—I’ve never been more certain of anything in my life.

“I’m sure,” I tell him, lifting our joined hands to press a kiss to his knuckles. “Are you?”

His smile is answer enough, but he says it anyway. “I’ve been sure for twenty years.”

We make a run for the porch through the rain, both of us laughing as we stumble up the steps. I fumble with my keys, hyperaware of Finn standing close behind me, his presence warm and solid at my back.

The lock finally gives way, and I push the door open, stepping into the familiar comfort of my small apartment. Finn follows, closing the door behind us, and suddenly, the space feels charged with anticipation.

I turn to face him, and whatever I was about to say dies on my lips. He's looking at me with such intensity, such raw want, that my breath catches.

"Finn," I whisper, and then he's crossing the room in three quick strides, cupping my face in his hands.

"I need to tell you something," he says, his voice rough. "Before we... I need you to know that this isn't just physical for me. It's never been just physical."

My heart swells at his words. "For me, either," I admit. "I think I've been in love with you for years, but I was too scared to admit it."

Something fierce and joyful flashes in his eyes. "Say it again."

"I love you," I say, stronger this time. "I love you, Finn Morgan."

He kisses me then, deep and claiming, and I lose myself in the taste of him, the feel of his hands in my hair, the way he says my name like a prayer against my lips.

When we break apart, both breathing hard, I realize we're standing in my living room, still in our jackets, still damp from the rain. The domesticity of it makes me laugh.

“What?” Finn asks, his own lips quirking up.

“Nothing,” I say, reaching up to smooth his damp hair. “Just... we’re really doing this.”

“We’re really doing this,” he confirms, catching my hand and pressing it flat against his chest. “But only if you’re absolutely sure. We can take this as slow as you want.”

The offer is sweet, but looking at him now—hair mussed, eyes dark with want, lips slightly swollen from our kisses—slow is the last thing I want.

Instead of answering with words, I start walking backward toward my bedroom, pulling him with me by his jacket. His sharp intake of breath tells me he understands perfectly.

But as we reach the doorway, something makes me pause. Maybe it’s the magnitude of what we’re about to do, or perhaps it’s just the need to savor this moment before everything changes forever.

“Actually,” I say, stopping in the doorway, “maybe we should slow down just a little.”

Finn stops immediately, concern flickering across his features. “Of course. Whatever you need.”

I smile, loving him even more for his instant understanding. “Not like that. I just... I want to enjoy this. All of it. We’ve waited so long.”

Understanding dawns in his eyes, followed by something that looks like relief. “You’re right. We have all night.”

He reaches for my hand, bringing it to his lips to press a soft kiss on my palm. “How about we start with getting out of these wet clothes? I’ll make us some coffee.”

The suggestion is practical, but the way he’s looking at me makes it feel like foreplay. “I think I have some of those cookies you like,” I offer, my voice slightly breathless.

“Perfect,” he says, and the word carries so much more meaning than just agreement about cookies.

As I head toward my bedroom to change, I feel his eyes on me, and when I glance back over my shoulder, the heat in his gaze nearly stops me in my tracks.

“Finn,” I say, suddenly serious. “I love you. Really, truly love you.”

His smile is soft and devastating. “I love you too, Haze. More than you know.”

I close the bedroom door behind me and lean against it, my heart racing. Twenty years of friendship, of careful boundaries and unspoken longing, and now we’re here. On the other side of everything, we’ve been too afraid to reach for.

Through the door, I can hear Finn moving around my kitchen, the familiar sounds of him making coffee in my space. It’s something he’s done dozens of times before, but tonight it feels different. Tonight, it feels like the beginning of everything.

I change into dry clothes—soft pajama pants and a fitted t-shirt—and take a moment to look at myself in the mirror. My hair is still damp and slightly wild, my lips are swollen from kissing, and there’s a brightness in my eyes that I haven’t seen in years.

I look like a woman in love.

When I emerge from the bedroom, Finn is standing at my kitchen counter, two steaming mugs in front of him. He's shed his wet jacket and rolled up the sleeves of his button-down shirt, and the sight of his forearms makes my mouth go dry.

"That was fast," I say, moving to stand beside him.

"I'm motivated," he says with a grin, handing me a mug. "Plus, I know where you keep everything."

It's true—he's been in my kitchen countless times, helping me test recipes and staying late to talk about everything and nothing. But tonight, watching him move comfortably through my space, it hits me how perfectly he fits into my life. How he's always fit.

"What are you thinking about?" he asks, noticing my contemplative expression.

"Just... this. Us. How natural it feels."

He sets down his mug and turns to face me fully. "It does, doesn't it? Like we were always supposed to end up here."

"Helen's going to be insufferable," I say, but I'm smiling.

"Absolutely," he agrees, reaching out to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. "But she'll also be happy. She's been rooting for us longer than anyone."

The gentle touch of his fingers against my cheek sends warmth spreading through me. I set down my own mug and step closer, drawn by the magnetic pull that's always existed between us.

"Finn," I whisper, not sure what I want to say, only knowing I need to say his name.

He answers by cupping my face in his hands and kissing me again, soft and sweet at first, then deeper as I melt against him. The taste of coffee on his lips mingles with something essentially him, and I could spend forever just kissing him like this.

When we step away, both breathing hard, he rests his forehead against mine.

“I should probably go,” he says, but his hands are still on my face, his thumb brushing across my cheekbone.

“Should you?” I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

“If I stay...” he trails off, his meaning clear.

I know what he’s offering—a chance to take things slow, to build this relationship properly. It’s thoughtful and considerate, precisely what I’d expect from Finn. But looking at him now, feeling the warmth of his hands on my skin, I realize I don’t want him to go.

“What if I don’t want you to go?” I ask.

His eyes darken, and I feel his hands tighten slightly on my face. “Hazel...”

“I mean it,” I say, surprised by my own boldness. “I don’t want you to go. I want you to stay.”

For a moment, he just looks at me, searching my face for any sign of doubt. Whatever he sees there must satisfy him because his next kiss is different—hungrier, more demanding.

“Are you sure?” he asks against my lips.

“I’m sure,” I breathe, and then kiss him back with everything I have, pouring twenty years of love and longing into the connection between us.

His hands slide down to my waist, pulling me closer, and I can feel the rapid beat of his heart against my chest. The knowledge that he wants this as much as I do sends a thrill through me.

But even as desire builds between us, there’s something else—a tenderness, a reverence for what we’re about to share. This isn’t just physical attraction; it’s the culmination of a lifetime of love and friendship.

“I love you,” he says, direct and straightforward.

“I love you too,” I reply, and the words feel like a promise.

He takes my hand, and I lead him toward my bedroom, my heart pounding with anticipation and joy. Twenty years of waiting, of wondering, of careful boundaries and unspoken longing—and now we’re here, on the threshold of everything we’ve been too afraid to reach for.

As we reach my bedroom door, Finn stops and turns to me one more time.

“Last chance to change your mind,” he says softly.

I answer by standing on my tiptoes and kissing him, pouring all my love and certainty into the gesture. “No, my mind is made up.”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:06 am*

finn

. . .

I've spent a lifetime dreaming of Hazel Brown's lips, but nothing compares to the reality of her taste against my mouth.

Her fingers tangle in my hair as I carry her to the bed, her weight perfect in my arms. The soft lamplight casts a golden glow across her skin, making her chestnut waves shimmer against the white pillowcase when I lay her down. I hover above her, suddenly struck by the magnitude of this moment.

"Haze," I whisper, brushing a strand of hair from her face. "Are we moving too fast? I don't want to rush you into anything."

Her hazel eyes, warm and certain, lock with mine. She reaches up, cupping my cheek with a tenderness that makes my heart stutter.

"Finn Morgan," she says, voice husky with desire, "I've waited for this night for far too long. Don't you dare stop now."

She pulls me down to her, our lips meeting again with renewed urgency.

All my hesitation dissolves into the heat between us.

My hands tremble slightly as I unbutton her blouse, revealing inch by inch of the skin I've only allowed myself to imagine.



I press reverent kisses along her collarbone, down to the swell of her breasts above her lace bra.

"You're beautiful," I murmur against her skin, reaching behind to unhook her bra with fingers that suddenly feel clumsy with anticipation. When the fabric falls away, I pause, taking in the sight of her. My childhood best friend. The woman I've loved since before I understood what love meant.

Her breath catches as I lower my mouth to her breast, tasting her with desperate need. Her back arches off the bed, a soft moan escaping her lips that sends heat coursing through me. My hands slide down her sides to her hips, hooking into the waistband of her panties.

I look up at her face, seeking final confirmation. Her eyes are half-lidded, cheeks flushed, lips parted. She nods, lifting her hips slightly to help me as I slowly pull the delicate fabric down her legs.

"I've loved you my whole life, Hazel Brown," I confess, the words spilling out before I can stop them.

At this moment, with Starlight Bay quiet beyond her bedroom window and nothing between us but truth, I finally feel like I've come home.

I spread her legs gently, my hands trembling with reverence as I settle between her thighs. The scent of her desire fills my senses, and I have to pause, overwhelmed by the intimacy of this moment. This is Hazel— my Hazel —trusting me completely.

"Finn," she breathes, her voice a mixture of need and vulnerability that makes my chest tight.

I press soft kisses along her inner thighs, taking my time, savoring every gasp and

shiver I draw from her. When I finally taste her, she cries out, her hips bucking against my mouth. I grip her thighs firmly, holding her steady as I lose myself in pleasuring her.

Her taste is intoxicating and addictive. I work my tongue against her most sensitive spot, feeling her pulse and flutter beneath my touch. When I slide a finger inside her, she arches off the bed, one hand fisting in the sheets while the other tangles in my hair.

"Oh god, Finn," she gasps, her thighs trembling around my head. Don't stop."

I slip in another finger, curling them skillfully as my tongue lavishes her clit with relentless devotion.

Her breathing turns into ragged gasps, desperate little moans slipping from her throat, igniting my desire.

I sense her nearing the edge, her body coiling with tension under my touch, every muscle responding to the escalating pleasure.

"That's it, Haze," I murmur against her heated skin. "Let go for me."

Her climax crashes over her with stunning intensity, her back bowing as she cries out my name. I don't let up, drawing out every last tremor until she's boneless and panting beneath me.

When I finally lift my head, she's looking at me with such raw emotion that it takes my breath away.

"Come here," she whispers, tugging me upward.

I move over her, wiping my mouth against the back of my hand before I kiss her deeply. She moans softly, tasting herself on my lips, her fingers digging into my shoulders.

"I never knew it could be like this," she confesses, her voice fragile with wonder.

I brush my thumb across her flushed cheek, memorizing every detail of her face—pupils dilated, lips swollen from our kisses, hair wild against the pillow. Twenty years of friendship, of longing, of imagining this very scenario, and still reality outshines every fantasy.

"I'm not done with you yet," I promise, my voice rough with desire.

Her hands slide down my chest to the waistband of my jeans. "These need to go."

I stand to undress, suddenly self-conscious under her hungry gaze. But the way she watches me—like I'm something precious and desired—melts away any uncertainty. When I'm finally naked before her, her eyes widen slightly, a smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

"Come back to me," she says, reaching for me.

"I love you, Hazel Brown," I whisper, needing her to understand that this isn't just physical for me. "Not just tonight. Not just tomorrow. Always."

Her eyes shine with unshed tears as she cups my face. "I love you too, Finn Morgan. I think I always have."

I settle between her thighs again, our bodies aligned perfectly.

The heat of her against me is almost unbearable.

I brace myself on my forearms, looking down at her with a question in my eyes.

When I finally push inside her, the world narrows to just this—her warmth surrounding me, her breath mingling with mine, her heartbeat against my chest. Home, at last.

We move together slowly at first, my body trembling with the effort of holding back. Every slide into Hazel's tight heat threatens to undo me completely. Her eyes never leave mine, creating an intimacy more profound than the physical joining of our bodies.

"You feel incredible," I breathe against her lips. "Better than anything I've ever dreamed."

"Finn," she gasps, her fingers digging into my shoulders as I withdraw almost completely before sinking back in. "I never knew... never imagined..."

I capture her words with my mouth, kissing her deeply as we establish a rhythm that feels both new and familiar—like we've been practicing this dance our entire lives. Her legs wrap around my waist, pulling me deeper, changing the angle until she moans into my mouth.

"That's it, Haze," I encourage, bracing one hand beside her head while the other slides beneath her, lifting her hips slightly. "Show me what you need."

Her eyes flutter closed as I hit a spot that makes her gasp. "Right there," she pleads. "Don't stop."

I maintain the angle, watching her face transform with pleasure. The sight of her—flushed and wanting beneath me—pushes me toward the edge, but I'm determined to feel her come apart around me first.

"Look at me," I command softly, and when those hazel eyes lock with mine, something primal stirs within me. "I want to see you fall apart."

My thrusts become more deliberate, more forceful, drawing desperate little sounds from her throat that drive me wild. Her nails rake down my back, marking me as hers.

"Fuck, Hazel," I growl, abandoning the careful control I've maintained. "You're so perfect—so tight around me."

Her breath catches at my words, her eyes widening slightly. I've never spoken to her this way, but the raw desire on her face tells me she likes it.

"Is this what you wanted?" I ask, my voice rough as I snap my hips forward. "To be fucked by your best friend?"

"Yes," she moans, her legs tightening around me. "God, yes, Finn."

My hand finds hers, pinning it above her head as I drive into her with increasing urgency. Our bodies slick with sweat, the headboard knocking rhythmically against the wall. I feel her beginning to tighten around me, her breath coming in short, desperate pants.

"Come for me again," I urge against her ear, nipping at the sensitive skin beneath it. "Let me feel you, baby."

Her release triggers my own, her body clenching around me as she cries out my name. I thrust deeply one final time, burying my face in her neck as pleasure crashes through me in waves. For a moment, the universe contracts to just this bed, just us, just the culmination of years of unspoken longing.

Afterward, I hold her close, our heartbeats gradually slowing in tandem. Her fingers

trace lazy patterns on my chest as I press soft kisses to her forehead, her temple, and the corner of her mouth.

"Twenty years," I murmur against her skin. "Twenty years I've waited to tell you I love you."

Her smile—soft and unguarded—is worth every moment of waiting.

## Page 8

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hazel

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National Ice Cream Day might just be my new favorite holiday, even if my arms feel like they're about to fall off from scooping what seems like the thousandth cone of the day.

"Two scoops of salted caramel in a waffle cone, please!" A freckle-faced little boy bounces on his toes at our ice cream truck window, his mother smiling apologetically behind him.

"Coming right up, sir," I say with a wink, and he giggles at being called "sir."

Our pink truck—which Finn has dubbed the "Sweet Ride" despite my eye-rolling—gleams under the July sun. The festival crowds have been steady since we opened at ten this morning, and it's nearly three now with no signs of slowing down.

"Haze, we're running low on chocolate chip cookie dough," Helen calls from behind me, her hair pulled into a messy bun that somehow still looks Instagram-worthy.

My twin sister drove home from Boston yesterday, claiming she couldn't miss National Ice Cream Day, but I suspect she's more interested in gathering intel on whatever is happening between Finn and me.

"There's more in the cooler under the counter," I answer, passing the completed cone to the little boy and accepting his mother's payment.

As I turn to help the next customer, Finn slides past me in the narrow truck space, his hand briefly brushing against my lower back. The touch is innocent enough that Helen wouldn't notice, but the heat that rushes to my cheeks definitely isn't.

"I've got this one," he says, his green eyes meeting mine with a sparkle that makes my stomach flip. Five hours of stolen kisses and secret touches, and I still can't believe this is happening.

Sarah, my assistant manager, glances between us with a knowing smirk. "I'll restock the napkins," she announces loudly, disappearing to the back of the truck.

The moment she's gone, Finn leans closer, pretending to reach for the scoop. "You look beautiful today," he whispers, his breath warm against my ear.

"We're supposed to be professional," I murmur back, though I can't help the smile that tugs at my lips.

"I am being professional," he protests. "Professionally smitten."

I snort and nudge him with my elbow. "That was terrible."

"You loved it," he grins, and dammit, he's right.

"Less flirting, more scooping!" Helen calls out, making me jump. When I whip around, she's focused on preparing a sundae, not even looking our way. My sister has always had a sixth sense for these things.

The afternoon continues in a blur of ice cream flavors, sticky hands, and the constant dance of four people working in close quarters.

Every now and then, Finn's fingers will graze mine as we pass cones back and forth,



or I'll catch him watching me with that soft expression that makes my heart race.

During a rare lull, I duck into the back of the truck to grab more cups from storage. Seconds later, the curtain rustles, and Finn appears, closing the distance between us in two steps.

"Hi," he says softly.

"We can't—" I start to protest, but he's already pressing his lips to mine, and honestly, who am I kidding? My hands find his shoulders as I kiss him back, tasting the sweetness of vanilla on his lips.

"I've been waiting to do that all day," he murmurs against my mouth.

"Five minutes!" Sarah's voice calls from the front. "The crowds are growing!"

We spring apart like guilty teenagers, and I quickly smooth my hair. "Let's move," I say, trying to compose myself.

Finn laughs, reaching out to wipe a smudge of chocolate from the corner of my mouth with his thumb. "You know, we're going to have to tell everyone eventually."

"I know," I sigh. "But can we just have this to ourselves for a little longer? Once Helen knows, the whole town will know by sunset."

"Whatever you want, Haze." His smile is so tender it makes my chest ache. "But for the record? I can't wait to tell everyone you're mine."

As I step back into the sunshine to greet customers, I can't help but think that maybe, just maybe, coming home to Starlight Bay was the best decision I've ever made.

“What were you two doing back there?” Helen chuckles as she wags a scooper at me.

Henry’s eyes narrow slightly, and I recognize that look—the same one he’d give me when he caught me sneaking cookies before dinner as a kid. Great. Is it that obvious?

Before I can say something snarky, Sarah nudges me. “Boss, we’re out of waffle cones.”

“I’ll grab more from the shop,” I say, grateful for the escape. “Back in ten.”

The festival is in full swing as I weave through the crowd toward Sinfully Sweet, just a block away. The July heat makes the pavement shimmer, and I can feel sweat beading at my temples. I’m halfway there when I hear footsteps behind me.

“Need a hand?” Finn catches up, falling into step beside me.

I glance around before answering. “You shouldn’t have followed me. Helen’s going to notice.”

“I told her I needed to check on the freezer compressor. Very technical, very boring.” His fingers brush against mine. “Besides, I thought you might need help carrying boxes.”

“Is that the only reason?” I raise an eyebrow.

His smile is slow and deliberate. “Maybe I wanted two minutes alone with my girlfriend.”

The word sends a flutter through me. “Girlfriend? Is that what I am?”

“I hope so.” There’s a vulnerability in his voice now. “Unless you’ve changed your

mind in the last seven days?”

We reach the shop, and I unlock the door, the bell jingling cheerfully. Once inside, I turn to face him.

“I haven’t changed my mind,” I say softly. “It’s just... fast. Seven days ago, we were just friends.”

“Twenty years ago, we were just friends,” Finn corrects, following me to the storage room. “Seven days ago, we finally stopped pretending that’s all we wanted to be.”

I grab a box of waffle cones, using the task as an excuse to hide my smile. “When did you get so wise?”

“Somewhere between helping you set up your POS system and watching you lick ice cream off your wrist earlier today.” He takes the box from me, setting it aside before pulling me closer. “Very distracting, by the way.”

“We should get back,” I murmur, even as my hands find their way to his shoulders.

“Probably,” he agrees, but neither of us moves.

His kiss is gentle at first, then deeper as my back presses against the shelving. His hands frame my face with such tenderness that I feel something inside me melting faster than ice cream in July.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, breaking the spell. It’s a text from Helen:

\*Where are those cones? Line forming. Also, where’s Finn?\*

I show him the screen. “Busted.”

He laughs, grabbing the box. “Worth it.”

As we hurry back to the festival, cones in hand, I find myself wondering how long we can really keep this secret in a town where everyone knows everyone’s business before they know it themselves.

Part of me wants to keep Finn all to myself, this precious new thing protected from outside opinions.

But another part—a growing part—wants to shout from the rooftops that Finn Morgan finally kissed me, and I finally let him.

“You’re thinking too loud,” Finn says as we approach the pink truck.

“Just wondering how long until Helen figures it out.”

He glances at the truck where my sister is efficiently serving customers, her blonde head bobbing as she chats with the crowd.

“My bet? End of the day.” He winks. “Your sister doesn’t miss much.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” I sigh, but I’m smiling as we rejoin the chaos of National Ice Cream Day, our secret sweet and slowly melting between us.

finn

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I've seen Hazel smile a thousand times, but tonight, her laughter echoes through Hometown Spirits like a melody I've been waiting my whole life to hear.

The festival left all of us pleasantly exhausted, with that particular kind of tiredness that feels earned and welcome. Now, the four of us—Hazel, Helen, and me—are crowded around a corner table at Hometown Spirits, the jazzy lounge that's become Starlight Bay's favorite weekend haunt.

"I still can't believe you dropped that entire tray of samples," Helen says, nudging me with her elbow. "Twenty perfect scoops of Hazel's signature lavender honey, gone in an instant."

I groan, taking a swig of my beer. "In my defense, that kid came out of nowhere on his skateboard."

"My hero," Hazel teases from across the table, her hazel eyes catching the dim lighting in a way that makes my chest tighten. "Sacrificing perfectly good ice cream to avoid flattening a twelve-year-old."

Helen tosses her hair over her shoulder, looking every bit the city girl, even in our small-town bar. "At least you saved the festival's social media presence with that quick thinking on the stage setup, Finn. Those lights you rigged made Hazel's ice cream station look magical in all the photos."

“That’s our Finn,” Sarah says, raising her glass. “Tech genius by day, ice cream knight in shining armor by night.”

I feel warmth creeping up my neck that has nothing to do with the two beers I’ve had. “Just doing what neighbors do,” I say, but I can’t help stealing another glance at Hazel. She’s wearing that vintage sundress I’ve always loved, the pink one that matches the color of her shop’s awning.

The band in the corner shifts to a slower number, something with a saxophone that feels like it’s speaking directly to the part of me that’s been in love with Hazel Brown for so long.

“Remember when we used to sneak out to the pier during summer festivals?” I ask her, leaning forward slightly.

“And watch the fireworks from the best spot in town?” Hazel smiles, that dimple appearing on her right cheek.

“How could I forget? You always brought that old plaid blanket and a thermos of hot chocolate.” She laughs. “Even in July.”

“Night air gets chilly by the water,” I defend myself, but I’m smiling too. What I don’t say is that I brought the hot chocolate because it was her favorite and the blanket. After all, I hoped we might sit close together under it.

Helen rolls her eyes. “You two and your small-town traditions. Meanwhile, I was dreaming of rooftop parties in Manhattan.”

“And look where that got you,” Hazel teases her twin. “Right back here with us small-town folk.”

“Just visiting,” Helen corrects, but there’s less conviction in her voice than usual.

The saxophone player hits a particularly soulful note, and something shifts in the air between us. Hazel’s eyes meet mine, and for a moment, it’s like we’re sixteen again, full of unspoken possibilities.

“Dance with me?” The words leave my mouth before I can think better of them.

Hazel tilts her head, that familiar crease appearing between her eyebrows—the one that shows up when she’s considering something important. “I don’t know, Finn. I’m pretty terrible at dancing.”

“That’s never stopped you before,” I counter, standing and offering my hand. “Remember junior prom?”

“When I broke Tommy Peterson’s toe? Not exactly a selling point.”

“My toes are sturdier than Tommy’s.”

A beat passes, then another. The saxophone winds around us like a ribbon.

“One dance,” she finally says, placing her hand in mine. Her palm is cool against my skin, but I feel heat spreading through me all the same.

As I lead her toward the small dance floor, I catch Helen making exaggerated heart eyes at us over her cocktail glass. I shoot her a warning look, but I can’t summon any real annoyance. Not when Hazel Brown is following me onto a dance floor, her sundress swaying with each step.

“I’m trusting you with my toes here,” I murmur as I turn to face her, placing one hand lightly at her waist.

“Always,” she replies, and something in her voice makes me wonder if we’re still talking about dancing.

The air changes between us as her hand settles on my shoulder.

The saxophone’s melody wraps around us, creating a bubble that feels separate from the rest of the lounge.

I’ve imagined this moment countless times, but my imagination never captured the subtle scent of vanilla that clings to her hair or the way her fingers occasionally tighten on my shoulder when I guide her through a turn.

“You’re not half bad at this,” she says, surprise coloring her voice as we sway together.

“Don’t sound so shocked,” I laugh. “I may have taken a few lessons.”

Her eyebrows shoot up. “Finn Morgan, did you secretly take dance lessons?”

I shrug, trying to appear nonchalant even as embarrassment heats my face. “My cousin’s wedding last year. I was a groomsman and didn’t want to look like a complete idiot during the reception dance.”

What I don’t tell her is that I practiced with a particular partner in mind.

“Well, color me impressed,” she says, and there’s something soft in her expression that makes my heart skip. “Full of surprises, aren’t you?”

“I try to keep you guessing,” I reply, guiding her through a gentle spin that makes her sundress flare slightly. When she returns to me, she’s closer than before, close enough that I can see the flecks of gold in her eyes.



We move in silence for a moment, finding our rhythm together as naturally as we've done everything else throughout our lives. Over her shoulder, I spot Helen raising her glass to me with a knowing smirk.

"So," I say, clearing my throat, "the festival was a hit. Your booth had the longest line all day."

"It was," she agrees, but there's a note of something—worry, maybe?—in her voice. "But I'm still not sure if it's enough, you know? The shop's summer numbers need to be strong if I'm going to make it through the winter."

Even now, with my hand at her waist and hers warm against my shoulder, she's thinking about the shop. It's one of the things I love most about her—that unwavering dedication.

"You will," I say with absolute certainty. "And I've been thinking about that website upgrade we talked about. I could add an online ordering system for special events. Might help with those corporate summer parties at the bay."

She looks up at me, her expression suddenly serious. "Why do you do all this for me, Finn?"

"Because you're my fucking world, Hazel," I say, completely lost in this perfect moment.

Her eyes widen, and for a terrifying moment, I think I've ruined everything. But then her lips curve into a smile that reaches all the way to those beautiful hazel eyes.

"Why did we waste so much time?" Her thumb traces a small circle against my shoulder. "This doesn't feel risky at all. It feels like... coming home."

The saxophone's notes hang in the air between us, and I have to remind myself to breathe. We're still swaying, but the movement feels secondary to the conversation happening in the spaces between our words.

"Is this real?" I ask, my voice lower than I intended. "Because I need to know, Haze. I've wanted this—wanted you—for so long that I'm afraid I'm imagining it."

She slides her hand from my shoulder to the nape of my neck, her touch sending electricity down my spine. "It's real, Finn. I'm done pretending I don't feel what I feel when I'm with you."

I pull her closer, our bodies moving as one to the music. "And what do you feel?"

"Like I've been sleepwalking, and I'm finally awake." Her eyes never leave mine. "Like all those years I spent running away from Starlight Bay, I was really just running from this—from us."

My hand at her waist slides to the small of her back. "I've loved you since we were kids, Hazel Brown. Never stopped, not even when you left."

"I know," she says softly. "I think I always knew. I was just too scared to believe someone could love me that completely."

We're barely dancing now, just holding each other and swaying slightly. Hazel's fingers play with the short hair at the nape of my neck, and I have to fight to concentrate on her words rather than the sensation.

"So, Maine," I say, changing the subject before I do something crazy like kiss her senseless in the middle of Hometown Spirits. "Should I only book one room?"

Her smile turns playful. "With a king-sized bed, please."

The look she gives me nearly stops my heart. “You’re killing me, Haze.”

“Good,” she whispers, rising slightly on her toes so her lips brush against my ear. “Because I plan to make up for all the time we’ve wasted.”

The song ends, but neither of us moves to break apart. Instead, she stays in my arms, her body warm against mine, as the band transitions to another slow number.

“Think Helen will notice if we slip out early?” she asks, a mischievous glint in her eyes.

“She’ll definitely notice,” I laugh. “And she’ll never let us hear the end of it.”

“Worth it. Besides, I think Helen’s on to us now.”

I glance over at Helen, who’s now openly watching us with a satisfied expression like she’s been waiting for this moment for years. She catches my eye and mouths “finally” before turning back to her drink with theatrical nonchalance.

“She’s definitely on to us,” I murmur against Hazel’s ear, my voice barely audible over the music.

Hazel pulls back just enough to look at me, her face flushed from the warmth of the dance floor. “Then let’s give her something to really talk about.”

Before I can ask what she means, she’s leading me off the dance floor, her fingers intertwined with mine. My heart hammers against my ribs as we approach the table where Helen sits with a knowing smile.

“We’re heading out,” Hazel announces, grabbing her purse from the chair.

Helen's grin widens. "Oh, are you now? And where exactly are you two lovebirds going?"

"To plan our Maine trip," I say, trying to sound casual even though my pulse is racing.

"Mm-hmm." Helen takes a slow sip of her cocktail. "Is that a metaphor for sex?"

Hazel rolls her eyes, but she's smiling. "We'll see you tomorrow, Hel."

"I'll be expecting a full report," Helen calls after us as we make our way toward the exit.

The cool night air hits my skin as we step outside, a welcome relief from the warmth of the crowded lounge. The festival lights still twinkle along Main Street, casting everything in a soft, romantic glow.

"Your place or mine?" Hazel asks, and the simple question sends a thrill through me.

"Mine's closer," I say, my voice rougher than I intended.

We walk the three blocks to my house in comfortable silence, our hands still linked. Every few steps, Hazel glances up at me with that same soft expression from the dance floor, like she's seeing me for the first time.

The next morning, I wake up with Hazel curled against my side, her chestnut hair spread across my pillow. Sunlight streams through my bedroom window, and for a moment, I'm afraid I'm dreaming.

But then she stirs, pressing a sleepy kiss to my chest, and I know this is real.

“Good morning,” she murmurs, her voice husky with sleep.

“The best morning,” I reply, pressing my lips to the top of her head.

She tilts her face up to look at me, her hazel eyes bright despite the early hour. “So, about Maine...”

“Right. Maine.” I reach for my phone on the nightstand. “I’ll book us a flight for tomorrow if you want.”

“Tomorrow?” She sits up, the sheet pooling around her waist. “That’s pretty last minute.”

“I’ve waited long enough. I don’t want to wait another day.”

Her smile is radiant. “Then let’s do it.”

hazel

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The wheels touch down on the tarmac with a gentle thud that sends butterflies racing through my stomach—though I’m not sure if it’s from the landing or the fact that Finn’s hand is still covering mine from takeoff.

“Welcome to Bar Harbor,” he says, his green eyes bright with excitement as he peers out the small airplane window. “Ready for our adventure?”

I nod, trying to ignore how natural it feels when he helps me with my carry-on bag, his fingers brushing mine as he lifts it from the overhead compartment.

We’re just friends, I remind myself for the hundredth time since we boarded the plane in Boston.

Friends who happen to be taking a weekend trip together to scout locations for my second ice cream shop.

The drive from the airport winds through pine-covered hills that remind me of home but with a wilder, more rugged beauty. Finn navigates the rental car with one hand on the wheel, the other gesturing animatedly as he points out landmarks he’s researched online.

“There,” he says, pulling into a gravel driveway lined with hydrangeas. “The Cottage.”

I laugh at the understatement. The “cottage” is a charming cedar-shingled building with window boxes overflowing with petunias and a wraparound porch that begs for morning coffee and evening wine.

It’s precisely the kind of place Helen would call “quaint to the point of suffocation,” but it makes my heart dance.

“Mr. and Mrs. Morgan?” the innkeeper asks when we approach the front desk, and I feel heat creep up my neck.

“Oh, we’re not—” I start, but Finn smoothly interrupts.

“The reservation should be under Morgan, yes. A cottage for two.” He says with a wink.

The innkeeper—a woman in her sixties with silver hair and knowing eyes—gives us a smile that says she’s heard this clarification a thousand times. “Of course. The Driftwood Cottage is all ready for you both.”

She hands Finn an old-fashioned brass key attached to a wooden keychain shaped like a lighthouse. “Breakfast is served from seven to ten on the main house porch. The path to your cottage is just through those gardens.”

As we follow the stone pathway, I’m acutely aware of Finn beside me, our shoulders occasionally brushing. The cottage sits slightly apart from the main building, nestled among apple trees and wild roses. It’s the kind of place that belongs in a storybook.

“This is perfect,” I breathe as Finn unlocks the door.

The interior is even more charming than the outside—whitewashed walls, exposed beams, and a stone fireplace dominate the cozy living area. But it’s when I peek into

the bedroom that my stomach drops.

One bed. A beautiful four-poster king draped with a handmade quilt, but definitely singular.

“I promise not to hog the covers,” he says, lightening the mood. “Now, should we head into town? I found a place that supposedly has the best lobster rolls in Maine. Might give you some ice cream pairing ideas.”

I’m grateful for the subject change. “Lead the way. But fair warning—if this place lives up to the hype, I might spend the whole weekend eating.”

The lobster shack Finn discovered exceeds every expectation. We sit at a weathered picnic table overlooking the harbor, the late afternoon sun casting golden light across the water. I moan embarrassingly loud as I take my first bite.

“That good?” Finn asks, amusement dancing in his eyes.

“I might need a moment alone with this sandwich,” I joke, licking butter from my fingers. “The sweetness of the lobster with that hint of lemon...” My mind already races with ice cream possibilities. “What about a butter-poached lobster swirl?”

Finn makes a face. “Maybe stick with blueberry for the Maine-themed flavor.”

We laugh, and I steal one of his hand-cut fries, dipping it into my cocktail sauce. The harbor bustles with activity—fishermen unloading catches, tourists snapping photos, seagulls swooping overhead. It feels worlds away from the constant stress of my shop back home.

“Look at that,” Finn points to a sign advertising sunset harbor cruises. “Whale watching. Starts in an hour.”



“Should we?” The question feels bigger than it should.

His smile is answer enough.

Two hours later, we’re on the deck of the \*Sea Maiden\*, bundled in sweatshirts against the evening chill, plastic cups of local craft beer in hand. The boat cuts through the darkening water, leaving Bar Harbor’s twinkling lights behind.

“The captain says this is prime season for humpbacks,” Finn tells me, leaning close so I can hear him over the engine and wind. His proximity sends warmth through me that has nothing to do with my sweatshirt.

We’re scanning the horizon when I see it—a massive dark shape breaking the surface, followed by a spectacular spray of mist.

“There!” I grab Finn’s arm without thinking. “Finn, look!”

The whale surfaces again, closer this time, its enormous body arcing gracefully before slipping back beneath the waves. The entire boat erupts in cheers, but none louder than ours. Finn’s arm slides around my waist, anchoring me as I lean precariously over the railing for a better view.

“It’s coming back!” someone shouts, and suddenly the water around us seems alive with movement.

A pod of dolphins appears, racing alongside our boat, leaping and spinning as if performing just for us.

I’m laughing and pointing like a child, my professional composure completely forgotten.

When one dolphin launches itself particularly high, executing a perfect twist before splashing back down, I let out a whoop of delight that has Finn joining in.

“Did you see that?” I turn to him, breathless with excitement.

His eyes aren’t on the water. They’re on me, soft with something that makes my heart stutter.

“Yeah,” he says quietly. “I see something amazing.”

The moment hangs between us, fragile as sea foam, until another whale breaches nearby, sending up a spectacular splash that has everyone gasping and pointing. The spell breaks as we both turn to watch, but Finn's hand remains at my waist, warm and steady as the boat rocks beneath us.

Under a sky turning deep purple with twilight, surrounded by the wild beauty of the Atlantic, I stop fighting the current pulling me toward him. Just for tonight, I let myself be carried along by it, wondering where we might wash ashore.

finn

...

I've spent years memorizing the constellations of freckles on Hazel's shoulders, but watching them darken under the summer sun today aboard the whale cruise feels like discovering them all over again.

We barely make it through the front door of the cottage before her hands are in my hair, pulling my mouth to hers with an urgency that steals my breath. The salt air clings to her skin as I press her against the wall, my fingers fumbling with the knot of her sundress.

"Bedroom," she gasps against my lips, and I lift her, her legs wrapping around my waist as I carry her down the hall.

The late afternoon sun filters through the gauzy curtains, painting golden stripes across Hazel's body as I lay her on the bed. Her chestnut hair fans out against the white pillowcase, those hazel eyes holding mine with an intensity that makes my heart stutter.

"I've been thinking about this all day," I confess, watching a slow smile spread across her face.

"Show me," she challenges, reaching for the hem of my t-shirt.

I pull it over my head and then lower myself to her, savoring the way her breath

catches when my bare chest meets hers.

The sundress slides away easily, revealing the black bikini she's been teasing me with all day.

I trace the edge of the fabric with my fingertips, memorizing the contrast against her sun-kissed skin.

"Finn," she whispers, arching into my touch. "Don't make me wait."

I've never been able to deny Hazel anything. I trail kisses down her neck, across her collarbone, between her breasts. Her fingers dig into my shoulders, urging me lower. I hook my thumbs into the waistband of her bikini bottoms and slide them down her legs, my mouth following their path.

When I taste her, her thighs trembling beneath my palms, I feel like I'm a teenager again. Her hands guide me, showing me exactly what she needs, and I give it to her willingly and reverently.

"I need you," she pants, tugging me back up her body. "Now."

I shed my remaining clothes and hover over her, brushing her hair from her face.

For a moment, we just breathe together, our bodies aligned but not yet joined.

This is what I've always wanted—Hazel looking at me like I'm her anchor in a storm, her hands mapping the contours of my back like she's claiming territory.

When I finally push into her, the sensation is overwhelming. Her body welcomes mine, tight and slick and perfect. I have to close my eyes for a moment, fighting for control.

“Look at me,” she commands softly, and I do.

We move together slowly at first, savoring each sensation. But soon, the tenderness gives way to something more primal. Her nails score my back as I drive into her, her name falling from my lips like a prayer. She wraps her legs higher around my waist, changing the angle until she cries out.

“Right there,” she gasps. “Oh, Finn.”

I couldn’t stop if I wanted to. Twenty years of loving Hazel—from childhood crush to adolescent longing to this consuming adult need—all of it culminates in this moment, in the way she trembles beneath me, around me.

When she comes apart, her body clenching around mine, I follow her over the edge, burying my face in her neck and breathing in the scent that has always meant home to me.

Afterward, I hold her close, our limbs tangled and our hearts beating in tandem. The setting sun casts the room in amber light, and I trace idle patterns on the small of her back.

“What are you thinking about?” she murmurs against my chest.

I could tell her I’m thinking about tomorrow’s schedule or the tech problem I need to solve for her website. But the truth spills out instead.

“I’m thinking that I never want this to end, Haze. I love you so much.” I press a kiss to her temple. “And I’ll love you long after the stars burn out.”

She goes still in my arms, and I feel her breath catch against my skin. For a moment, the only sound is the distant crash of waves against the shore and the thundering of

my own heartbeat. I wonder if I've said too much, pushed too hard against the walls she's built around her heart.

Then she lifts her head, those hazel eyes searching mine with an expression I can't quite read. Her fingers trace the line of my jaw, tender and deliberate.

"Finn," she whispers, and there's something fragile in her voice that makes my chest tight.

"I love being here with you. I wish I could find words eloquent to tell you how much I love you." No matter how many times she confesses her love, it exceeds my expectations.

Over the years, I imagined hearing them countless times, but nothing prepared me for reality—the way her voice wavers with emotion, the vulnerability in her eyes as she offers me her heart.

"Please, don't ever stop," I breathe, needing to hear those words one more time to believe they're real.

A soft laugh escapes her lips, and she leans down to kiss me, slow and sweet. "I love you, Finn Morgan. I fought my feelings for so long, I won't ever pretend again."

I roll us over until she's beneath me again, framing her face with my hands. "You never have to pretend with me, Haze. Not about anything."

She nods, blinking back tears that catch the fading light. "I know. That's what scares me."

I kiss her forehead, her cheeks, the tip of her nose. "We'll figure it out together. We always do."

The cottage grows quiet around us as evening settles in, and I pull the sheet over our bodies. Hazel curls against my side, her head on my chest, and I feel something shift between us—something deeper than desire, more permanent than passion.

“The ice cream shop,” she says suddenly, and I chuckle.

“Now you’re thinking about work?”

“I’m thinking about us,” she corrects, tilting her head to look at me. “About what this means for everything.”

I smooth her hair back from her face. “It means we stop dancing around each other and start building something real. Together.”

Her smile is radiant in the dim light. “I’d love that.”

“Me too,” I say, tracing her lips with my thumb. “More than you know.”

She kisses my palm, her eyes drifting closed. I watch her breathing slowly, memorizing this moment—the weight of her against me, the trust in her surrender to sleep.

The cottage creaks around us as I hold her, my mind racing despite my body’s exhaustion. I’ve wanted this for so long that having it feels almost surreal. The cynical part of me wonders if tomorrow she’ll retreat if the morning light will bring back her hesitation.

But I push those thoughts away. This is Hazel—my Hazel—and whatever fears she has, we’ll face them together.

I must doze off because I wake to moonlight streaming through the windows and

Hazel's absence from my arms. For a panicked heartbeat, I wonder if she's gone, but then I hear the soft padding of her feet in the kitchen.

I pull on my boxers and follow the sound, finding her wrapped in my discarded t-shirt, her hair a wild tangle around her shoulders as she rummages through the refrigerator.

"Hungry?" I ask, leaning against the doorframe.

She jumps slightly, then smiles over her shoulder. "Starving. Mind-blowing sex works up an appetite."

I laugh, crossing the room to wrap my arms around her from behind. "Mind-blowing, huh?"

"Don't fish for compliments," she teases but leans back into me. "Your ego is big enough already."

I press a kiss to her neck. "Only about some things."

She turns in my arms, a container of leftover pasta in her hands. "Want to share?"

We eat cold pasta straight from the container, sitting cross-legged on the kitchen counter, passing a fork between us. The domesticity of it hits me—how natural this feels, how right.

"What?" she asks, catching me staring.

"Just thinking about how many times I've imagined this," I admit. "You, me, some random midnight snack. Being together without pretending we're just friends."



Her expression softens. “I imagined it too, you know. Even when I was telling myself I didn’t want it.”

“Yeah?”

She nods, setting the pasta aside. “Remember last summer when we stayed up all night on the beach watching the meteor shower?”

“Of course.” It had been torture, lying beside her on a blanket under the stars, wanting so badly to pull her into my arms.

“I almost kissed you that night,” she confesses. “When you pointed out Cassiopeia and your hand brushed mine. I wanted to so badly it hurt.”

I reach for her, drawing her onto my lap. “Why didn’t you?”

She rests her forehead against mine. “I was scared. Of ruining our friendship. Of not being enough. Of loving you so much that losing you would destroy me.”

“Hazel Brown,” I murmur, “you could never lose me. Not ever.”

Her smile is tender as she kisses me, slow and deep. I carry her back to bed, and this time, when we make love, it’s unhurried—a gentle exploration, a promise of forever in every touch.

Later, as she drifts off to sleep in my arms, I make silent plans. For tomorrow, for next week, for our future. Because now that Hazel has finally let me in, I’m never letting go.

finn

. . .

The morning mist clings to the pine trees like secrets I've been keeping from Hazel for years.

I adjust my backpack straps and glance over at her as she studies the trail map, her chestnut hair catching the dappled sunlight filtering through the canopy above us.

She's wearing that old Boston University sweatshirt I've seen a hundred times, but somehow, it looks different here in Acadia—like she's bridging the gap between the girl who left for the city and the woman who came home to chase her dreams.

"So, tour guide," she says, folding the map with a grin that makes my chest tighten, "where exactly are you taking me on this grand adventure?"

I point toward the winding path that disappears into the forest. "Great Head Trail. It's got everything—ocean views, rocky cliffs, and just enough challenge to make you appreciate the ice cream we're definitely getting afterward."

"Is that your professional opinion, Dr. Morgan?" Her eyes sparkle with that familiar mischief that's been undoing me since we were kids.

"Absolutely. I've done extensive research on the ice cream-to-hiking ratio." I start walking, listening to her laugh behind me. "Trust me, I'm very thorough in my scientific methods."

The trail begins easily enough, with soft earth beneath our feet and the distant sound of waves calling from somewhere beyond the trees.

But I know what's coming—the steep climbs, the scrambling over granite ledges, the moments where I'll instinctively reach out to steady her even though she's perfectly capable of handling herself.

“You know,” Hazel says, falling into step beside me, “I forgot how quiet it gets out here. In Boston, there's always something—sirens, construction, people shouting into their phones. Even Starlight may have its moments of chaos.”

“Miss it?” I ask though I'm not sure I want to hear the answer.

She's quiet for a moment, and I can practically hear her thinking. “Parts of it. But not the noise.” She kicks at a loose stone. “I missed this. The way the air actually smells like something other than exhaust and coffee.”

The trail starts to climb, and I watch her navigate the rocky sections with the same determination she's always had.

When we were twelve, and she decided to build a treehouse in her backyard, she spent three weeks researching construction techniques and measuring the lumber.

When she was seventeen and wanted to learn guitar, she practiced until her fingertips were raw.

Now she's back home, turning her childhood dream into reality, and I'm trying not to think about how proud I am of her.

“Finn.” Her voice is slightly breathless from the climb. “Can I ask you something?”

My heart does something stupid. “Always.”

“Do you ever wonder what would have happened if things had been different? If I’d never left, or if you’d come to Boston, or...” She trails off, but the question hangs in the air between us like morning fog.

I stop walking and turn to face her, this woman who’s been the center of my universe for as long as I can remember.

The honest answer is that I think about it every single day.

But standing here, with the forest wrapped around us and her hazel eyes searching mine, I realize maybe the question isn’t what could have been.

“I did. But maybe this is how things were supposed to unfold.”

“Do you really believe that?” Hazel’s eyes find mine.

I nod. “Yes. We were inevitable. There was no way I would walk through life without you. I would have found a way to make this happen.” I lift her hand to my lips and breathe in the scent of her skin.

“Inevitable,” she repeats, and something shifts in her expression. The word hangs between us like a promise.

We continue climbing, the trail growing steeper. I instinctively reach for Hazel’s hand when we approach a particularly rocky section, and she takes it without hesitation. Her palm fits against mine like it always has.

“Almost there,” I tell her as we navigate the final stretch. “The view is worth it.”

When we finally break through the tree line, the ocean spreads before us in endless blue, crashing against the cliffs below.

The overlook is deserted—just us and the vastness of the Atlantic.

Hazel's breath catches, and I watch her face instead of the view, memorizing the way wonder transforms her features.

"This is incredible," she whispers, moving closer to the edge.

I follow, standing beside her as the wind whips around us. My heart hammers against my ribs, and it has nothing to do with the hike.

"I've been thinking," I say, my voice steadier than I feel.

"A dangerous pastime," she teases, eyes still on the horizon.

"I'm going to marry you someday, Hazel Brown."

It's not a question. Not even really a proposal. Just a statement of fact, as sure as the tide below us or the sun above.

She doesn't look surprised. Doesn't pull away. Instead, a slow smile spreads across her face, and she turns to me with those eyes that have always seen right through me.

"I know," she says simply.

Two words. That's all it takes to realign my universe.

"You know?" I echo, unable to keep the wonder from my voice.

“I’ve always known,” she admits, her fingers tightening around mine. “Even when I was trying to convince myself otherwise. Even when I was in Boston, telling myself I was building a different life.” She laughs softly. “It’s why I came home.”

I pull her closer, one hand coming up to brush a strand of hair from her face. “And here I thought it was for the ice cream shop.”

“Well, that too.” Her smile turns playful. “A girl needs career goals separate from her inevitable husband.”

The word ‘husband’ in her mouth sends electricity down my spine. I lean my forehead against hers, breathing in the scent of her shampoo mingled with pine and salt air.

“So what now?” she asks, her voice barely audible above the crashing waves.

“Now we finish this hike,” I say, “get that ice cream I scientifically determined we’ll need, and start figuring out the rest. No rush. We’ve got time.”

She nods against my forehead. “We’ve always had time. That’s the thing about inevitable—it happens exactly when it’s supposed to.”

I kiss her then, with the ocean stretching endlessly before us and our future unfolding just as infinitely. And in that moment, I understand that some things are worth waiting for—worth crossing oceans for, worth coming home for.

Hazel Brown was always going to be my home, no matter how many miles or years stretched between us.

And now, finally, we both know it.

epilogue- a year later

...

Hazel

The scent of vanilla and brown butter fills the air as I watch the numbers on Finn's laptop screen climb higher than either of us ever imagined possible.

"Haze, you're not going to believe this," he says, his green eyes practically glowing as he turns the screen toward me. "Revenue is up forty percent from last year, and we're booked solid for private events through October."

I pause in my stirring, the wooden spoon heavy with my latest creation—a maple bourbon swirl that I'm hoping will become our fall signature.

The diamond on my left hand catches the afternoon light streaming through the shop windows, sending tiny rainbows dancing across the stainless steel countertop.

Even after three months, I still find myself stealing glances at it, remembering the way Finn's voice cracked when he dropped to one knee right here in the middle of Sinfully Sweet, still wearing his volunteer apron from the ice cream festival.

"Forty percent?" I set down the spoon and lean against the counter, grinning. "Remember when you said my business plan was 'charmingly optimistic'?"

"I said 'ambitiously optimistic,'" he corrects with a laugh, closing the laptop and

moving around the counter to wrap his arms around my waist. “And I was wrong. You weren’t ambitious enough.”

I melt into his embrace, my sugar-dusted hands finding their way to his chest. “Well, someone did help me set up that new point-of-sale system and redesign the website,” I tease, tilting my head back to look at him.

“I seem to remember a certain tech genius working until two in the morning to get our online ordering ready for the festival.”

“That certain tech genius was properly motivated,” he murmurs, pressing a kiss to my temple. “Something about wanting to impress his future wife.”

The word still sends a thrill through me. Wife. After years of insisting I didn’t have time for romance, here I am, engaged to the boy next door who never stopped believing we were meant to be.

“Speaking of impressing,” I wiggle out of his arms and grab a clean spoon, “try this.”

I dip it into the maple bourbon mixture and hold it out to him. His eyes close as he tastes it, and I watch his expression shift from curiosity to pure delight.

“Hazel Brown,” he says slowly, opening his eyes, “you’re going to put every other ice cream shop on the East Coast out of business.”

“Just the East Coast?” I laugh, already reaching for my notebook to jot down the recipe. “I was aiming for world domination.”

The bell above the door chimes, and I look up to see a familiar flash of blonde hair.

“Helen!” I exclaim, quickly wiping my hands on my apron. “I thought your flight wasn’t until tonight.”



My twin sister strides in with her signature city swagger, designer sunglasses perched atop her head, wheeling a sleek carry-on behind her. Despite living in entirely different worlds, seeing her still feels like looking into a funhouse mirror—same face, completely different packaging.

“Changed it. Couldn’t wait to see my baby sister,” she says, then raises an eyebrow at Finn. “And her surprisingly competent fiancé.”

Finn chuckles, unfazed by Helen’s backhanded compliment. After years of her skepticism, he’s grown immune. “Nice to see you too, Helen.”

“How’s Boston?” I ask, already reaching for a scoop to prepare her usual—dark chocolate with sea salt.

Helen leans dramatically against the counter. “Exhausting. Exhilarating. Expensive.” She eyes my engagement ring. “Not nearly as sparkly as your life, apparently.”

I hand her the ice cream, which she accepts with a grateful sigh. “I’ve taken the week off to help with the wedding plans.”

“Both Brown girls in Starlight Bay at once? Mom’s going to lose her mind,” I laugh, then pause. “Wait—did you say ‘help’ with wedding plans?”

Helen takes a deliberate bite of ice cream. “Well, someone has to make sure this small-town wedding has at least a touch of sophistication.”

Finn catches my eye across the counter, his expression a perfect mix of amusement and horror. We’d been planning something simple—maybe right here in the shop or on the beach where we had our first real kiss.

“Helen,” I begin carefully, “we were thinking something small...”

“Small can still be spectacular,” she interrupts, waving her spoon.

“Besides, I’ve already spoken to that empty warehouse space by the harbor.

You know, the one with those huge windows?

A wedding coordinator is flying in next week to look at it with us.

He says he knows a guy who can transform any space into a ‘dream venue’ in under a month. ”

I shoot Finn a panicked look.

“Helen,” Finn says gently, sliding an arm around my waist, “we appreciate the enthusiasm, but Hazel and I were thinking more along the lines of something intimate. Maybe right here or down at Lighthouse Point.”

My sister’s perfectly glossed lips form a small ‘o’ of horror.

“You can’t get married in an ice cream shop!

What would you even—” She stops suddenly, noticing my expression.

“Fine. Your wedding, your rules. But at least let me help with your dress. And the cake. And maybe just a few tasteful decorations.”

I can’t help but laugh. “I’ll consider the dress help. The rest is negotiable.”

Helen’s face softens as she takes another bite of ice cream. “This is really good, by the way. What is it, a new flavor?”

“Just your regular dark chocolate sea salt,” I reply, turning back to my experimental

batch. “But I’m working on something special for the wedding. Thinking of calling it ‘First Kiss’ – vanilla bean with a strawberry swirl and champagne-infused white chocolate chunks.”

“Now that,” Helen says approvingly, “sounds worthy of a Brown-Morgan union.”

Finn moves back to his laptop but keeps his eyes on me. “Speaking of the Morgan side, my parents want us over for dinner tonight. Dad’s threatening to bring out the projector for baby pictures.”

“Oh god,” I groan, but there’s no real dread behind it. The Morgans have been my second family since before I could walk. “At least wait until Helen’s had a full day to recover from her flight before subjecting her to vintage Finn footage.”

Helen perks up. “On second thought, I’m feeling quite refreshed. Baby Finn pictures sound delightful.”

The shop door chimes again, and Mrs. Abernathy walks in with her grandson in tow. I straighten up, professional mode kicking in, but Finn beats me to it.

“Mrs. A! And little man Tommy! What can we get you today?” he asks, already reaching for the kid-sized cups.

As Finn handles the customers with the ease of someone who’s been working here for years rather than someone who still technically has another job, I watch him, this man who’s become so seamlessly woven into the fabric of my life and business.

The diamond catches the light again, and I remember his whispered words after I’d said yes: “I’ve been waiting to ask you that question since we were kids. ”

Helen sidles up next to me, following my gaze. “You know,” she says quietly, “I always thought you were crazy for coming back here. For choosing ice cream over a

‘real career.’” She makes air quotes with her fingers. “But seeing you now... I get it.”

I bump her shoulder with mine. “High praise from the city girl.”

“Don’t get used to it,” she warns, but her smile is genuine. “So, when do I get to try this experimental maple bourbon whatever? Future maid of honor privileges should include taste-testing rights.”

I grab a fresh spoon and dip it into the mixture. “I didn’t realize you were volunteering for maid of honor duties.”

Helen rolls her eyes. “As if you’d ask anyone else.”

As my sister savors the new flavor, making appreciative noises, I look around my shop—at Finn charming customers, at the chalkboard wall covered in local children’s drawings, at the line of specialty pints in the display freezer bearing the Sinfully Sweet logo Finn designed.

One year ago, this was all just beginning.

Now, it feels like the foundation of everything I ever wanted.

“Well?” I ask Helen. “Verdict on the maple bourbon?”

She licks the spoon clean. “I’d say it’s a lot like your life choices, Hazel—unexpectedly perfect.”