

Hearts

UNDER FIRE

December 22, 1941

Dear Diary

It's nearly Christmas but every household
is in a celebratory mood. Mother set up
a Christmas tree adorned with lights
and decorations. The house is beautiful.

CORI LYNN

CHAPTER 1

Laura gripped the steering wheel for what seemed like the tenth time. Looking at the antique shop in front of her, a recognizable feeling overwhelmed her. The shop had been her escape to find new projects to keep her busy. How long would it be before she could leave her home without familiar memories haunting her at every turn? The only thing that could numb the pain was pouring her energy into work, at least for now.

An elderly couple waved to her as they passed in front of her vehicle. She lifted a few fingers and forced a half-smile acknowledging them. They held hands as they strolled by enjoying the afternoon. Laura turned to grab her purse and paused. She pushed away the unexpected rush of loneliness, grabbed her phone and swiftly made her way inside the shop. All she needed was a diversion and she could ignore the twisted emotions trying to take over.

Laura turned from the leather antique luggage set to see Stanley Tate, the lanky shop owner walking down the aisle toward her.

“Hi, Stanley.”

“I need to hire you to come work for me.” The elderly man smiled. “After all, you’re one of my favorite clients.

“You know I can’t resist seeing the merchandise before anyone else.” Laura assumed a false sense of lightheartedness to cover her true feelings. “I need another project. Anything new come in?”

“Didn’t you say you were looking for a traveler’s trunk?” He stood there a moment before wagging his finger above his balding head, “I know just the thing!” He turned quickly for a man his age and headed back the way he’d come.

Laura eagerly followed, dodging items in her path to the back of the store. Stanley was far from organized, but he did have the best things in town. Squeezing through narrow passages and tripping over light fixtures seemed a small price to pay.

“I’ve always wanted a steamer trunk.” She maneuvered through a maze of objects. Stanley pushed against the back door revealing a potential hoarding situation. She paused in the doorway.

“What kind of condition are we talking about here?” Laura lifted a brow in concern.

“Take a look for yourself.” Stanley put his hands out like a game-show host presenting a prize. He was clearly unfazed by the clutter closing in on them.

Laura walked over to a flat top trunk with a large bronze lock anchored to the front. The metal had lost its original shine, and the fabric would need to be replaced. She knew immediately she’d be taking it home and wondered what stories it had to tell as she reverently touched the metallic corners. It would take some work, but with a little elbow grease she could bring it close to original condition again.

“Have you checked inside?” She looked up.

“Not yet.” Stanley tried to lift the lid and frowned when it didn’t budge.

Laura covered a smile as she watched the small-framed man continue to wrestle with the heavy chest. Not able to watch any longer, she came to his rescue.

“The hinges are broken, but I can use the keyhole as leverage.” Laura slid her finger into the opening and lifted upward. The lid creaked loudly in resistance. She propped the trunk’s bulky top gently against the back wall. The smell of aged wood and metals assailed her senses. She peered inside. Her shoulder-length chestnut locks fell forward as she brushed a strand of hair behind her ear. She discovered a missing hinge and the other damaged. She gazed upon the brittle fabric lining, hesitating to touch it, fearing it would crumble under the pressure.

“How much do you want for it?” Laura stood, masking her excitement.

“Seeing as you’re my best customer, I’ll let it go for \$200.”

“I’ll take it!” Laura looked back down at the trunk, wiping her hands against her jeans. “This is going to keep me busy for a while.”

“You say that now, but I’ll believe it when I see it.” Stanley chided. Laura narrowed a playful gaze in his direction. “I’m not complaining,” he teased. “You’re keeping me in business.”

#

Laura pushed the trunk a little farther into her SUV and closed the hatchback. Her phone rang as she walked around to the driver’s side, the name flashing gave her pause. She tossed her purse into the passenger’s side and reluctantly answered.

“What is it this time?” She said playfully.

“Why do you think every time I call, it’s because I have a problem?”

“Because every time you call, you do.”

“That’s beside the point.”

“So, what can I do for you, April?”

“Listen bestie, tonight the girls and I are going dancing. You in?”

Laura looked in the rearview mirror at the trunk in the back. She knew she should spend a night out with her friends, but she didn’t feel like socializing, much less entertaining whatever idiot would inevitably ask her to dance.

“Hello?”

“April, I’m beat. It’s been a long week and I think I’m going to take it easy tonight.”

“Let me guess, you’re at the antique shop.”

“Why would you—” Laura couldn’t think of a quick excuse.

“I knew it! Laura, you need to stop hiding away and get back out into the world.”

Laura traced her finger along the steering wheel, waiting for the pep talk.

“How much longer are you going to play the introvert card? You spend all your time restoring old furniture, and for what?”

“I appreciate your concern, but I’m happy doing what I love.”

“Ugh. I haven’t seen you in weeks. Your friends miss you. You can’t let a broken heart keep you locked away forever.”

Laura sighed and quietly looked down at the ring she absently rotated on her finger. Her thoughts were lost in her memories while April kept talking.

“Laura?”

“Why don’t I call you later, okay?”

“Tell me what you picked up this time.”

“I finally got my traveler’s trunk. It’s in rough shape, but nothing I can’t handle.”

“Well, if you go out tonight, I can stop by and look at it.”

“Nice try.”

“It was worth a shot—my best friend is acting like a hermit.”

“It’s not that bad.”

“You can’t hide out forever. I won’t let you.”

“I’m sure you won’t. In the meantime, I’m going to give my attention to other things.”

Laura had become accustomed to her friend’s tenacity.

“Yeah, things that can’t breathe.”

“Call you later?”

“One of these days I’m going to come over there and drag you out by the hair if I have to.”

“Bye, April.” Before her friend could say a word, Laura ended the call, shaking her head at April’s audacious spirit. She slowly backed her SUV out of the parking lot and drove home, excited to start a new project.

#

Her two-story blue-and-white bungalow felt like a welcome site as Laura pulled into the driveway. She loved the quaint little porch sporting two white wicker chairs and a small table in-between. Off to one side was a swing with seating for two, covered by a large cushion. A small garden ran along the wood fencing near the bottom, separated by a set of stairs leading to the front door. The flowers were bright and cheery, and the lawn freshly trimmed. The roof had a few cracked tiles, but otherwise, it was perfect. It reminded her of a house one might see pictured on a greeting card.

She opened the hatchback, revealing her antique treasure and took a deep breath. It was extremely heavy and would be awkward to get into the house.

“I should have thought this through.”

With two people it had been easy. However, though strong enough, the trunk’s missing handles made it a problem. She stood with her hands on her hips turning the trunk, so the handle side faced her and assessed the drop from her car to the sidewalk.

“Need some help?”

Laura nearly fell over in surprise. A man about her age stood on the sidewalk with a golden retriever. He wore blue jeans and a steel-gray T-shirt that fit in all the right places. He moved closer; his blond hair tousled by the breeze like he’d just stepped out of a magazine.

He lifted an eyebrow still waiting for her to answer.

“Help? Oh, yes, if you think your friend won’t mind.” She nodded to the dog watching their interaction.

“He’d appreciate the break.” He smiled.

“And what’s your name?” Laura knelt down by the dog, scratching him behind the ears. The dog’s soft fur felt comforting but when she pulled her hand back covered in loose fur, it reminded her she wasn’t ready for the responsibility of pet ownership.

“This is Rufus.” He wrapped the dog’s leash around the mailbox; his large leather wristwatch accentuating his sun-kissed tan. Based on his physique, the trunk wasn’t going to be a problem for him.

“It’s missing a handle on one side.” Laura focused on the trunk hoping to cover her nerves, but the smell of his cologne was an alluring reminder of his proximity.

The man walked up and a second later grabbed both sides of the trunk, pulling it from the SUV like he’d done it a million times. “Where do you want it?” His voice strained slightly under the trunk’s weight.

She had not thought that far ahead. “If you could bring it inside, that would be great.” Quickly she walked around him and head toward the front porch. “Are you sure I can’t get one side?”

“I’m okay as long as we aren’t walking around the block.” He followed her cautiously, checking for each porch each step as he ascended.

Laura beat him to the front door and made quick work of the lock. She swung the door open, and he brought the trunk inside. “Right here will be fine.”

As he set down his load in the hallway, the wooden floors producing a slight creak.

“I’m not sure how I would have done this alone.” Laura began opening her purse pulling out a few dollars she’d found inside.

“No need.” His shirt now sported a few spots of dirt that hadn’t been there before.

“It seems my trunk has damaged your shirt.” Her brow wrinkled. “Are you sure I can’t pay you?”

“It’s an old shirt, nothing to worry about.” He wiped at the spots, but they stubbornly stayed put.

“Well, then, uh...thank you.”

“Caleb.” He rubbed his hand on the front of his pants and reached to shake hers.

“Laura.” She took his hand, and he gave her a slight smile.

He paused as if he wanted to say something, but instead turned and walked down the driveway until he stopped at the SUV, pointing to her trunk. “Did you want this closed?”

“Sure.”

He dropped the hatchback in its place. From the front yard, Laura called out one more time, “Thank you!”

He grabbed the dog leash off the mailbox and waved before disappearing behind the bushes that separated her yard from the neighbor’s. Was it possible Caleb lived in the neighborhood? She wiped the idea from her mind and turned back toward her house. Once inside she leaned against the wall. Letting out a sigh, her hair lifted slightly as she eyed the monstrosity before her. How would she get the trunk into the back room?

CHAPTER 2

The dolly was out of control as the trunk rocked forward, landing with a thud on the floor in the workroom. Somehow, she’d managed to maneuver it down the corridor. The room was filled with sturdy wooden shelves along one side and a large island in the middle. Pegboard lined an entire wall, making good use of the space for her many tools. There was a bench running the length of the opposing side, situated underneath a window, which perfectly framed the afternoon sun.

Even though it was a cool day, she had worked up a sweat. She noticed movement out of the corner of her eye. An orange-and-white tabby cat walked into the middle of a sunbeam shining on the floor. He stretched out his front paws and raised his hind legs as if he had just woken up from an afternoon nap.

“How did you get in here?” She looked around the room and saw the open window. “Ahh,” she murmured. “I thought we had a deal—you stay outside, and I occasionally feed you?” Rolling her eyes, Laura knelt next to the cat as he rubbed his head against her denim jeans. She sighed and began to pet him wondering which of her neighbors he belonged to.

“Should I give you a name?” She pondered the idea before sneezing. She had a minor allergy to cats but had always been a bit of a pushover when it came to animals.

“Dusty it is.” She stood and walked over to the trunk. In one swift leap, Dusty turned a few circles before making himself comfortable on top of the bench. Clearly, he planned to enjoy what was left of the afternoon sun.

Laura propped open the lid of the old chest and laid it carefully against the metal table behind it. The broken hinges would be a challenge to replace but she would deal with them later. She began to pull again at the fabric in the corners along the back. It was like peeling a stubborn hard-boiled egg. She kept chipping away at it until the wood shone through.

“This should be fun.” She positioned herself on a small stool and began to work along the edges. Slipping a trowel between the exposed wood and the brittle fabric, she slowly pushed downward, making sure she didn’t damage the siding.

She had nearly finished the back of the trunk when her doorbell rang. Dusty looked up from sunning himself. Laura couldn’t tell if he was irritated by the interruption or just displaying a natural cantankerous frown.

“Don’t give me that look.” She put down her tools and stood up. “You don’t even live here.” Wiping the dust from her jeans, she made her way to the front door. She cautiously peered through the peephole wondering who could be stopping by unexpectedly. A flurry of activity through the vintage glass told her exactly who had shown up unannounced. “I’m not going.” Laura waited, her hand on the doorknob.

“Open the door, Laura.” April began pacing on the porch, her boots making a sharp clack with every step.

“I’ve made up my mind.” Laura hesitated briefly, then gave in and opened the door.

April pushed past her like a tornado. “You are not going to believe the day I’ve had.”

Laura smiled as her overly dramatic friend unwrapped her scarf. She shut the door and slowly turned to face April, preparing for the conversation to follow.

April was stylishly dressed. Her designer jeans tucked into her leather boots, showing off her shapely legs. A light brown bomber jacket draped a fitted white cotton blouse. She began snooping around the hallway, her hoop earrings swinging with every move. She looked over at Laura standing in front of her, arms crossed. “Why aren’t you ready?”

“Ready?”

“To go dancing.” April stared at her, tilting her head confused. She looked down at Laura’s rumpled pink T-shirt, paint-speckled jeans and giant blue fuzzy slippers. “Please tell me you’re not wearing that.” She wrinkled her nose as she touched Laura’s hair. “And I think we can do better than a ponytail, don’t you?”

“I told you,” Laura shooed her hand away. “I’m staying home.” She began walking back to her workroom, April storming down the hall after her. Laura resumed her position on the stool in front of the chest and began chipping away at the fabric—ignoring April.

“Come on,” April whined, stomping her feet like a two-year-old throwing a temper tantrum. She leaned against the doorframe, crossing her arms. “Laura, it’s been a year since the accident. I think it’s time to move on.”

Laura paused mid-scrape and lowered her head. How could April sit there and lecture her when she’d never experienced a loss of this magnitude?

“I know you’re still hurting. Far deeper than most, but you can’t hide forever.” April walked over to her and put a hand on her shoulder. “I worry about you. We all do.”

“I’ll think about it, but that’s the best I can do right now.” Laura turned away from her, hoping her friend wouldn’t see the tears threatening her resolve.

“I don’t want to push you, but you’re not giving me much choice.” April stood and played with some of the tools on the wooden table near her. She flippantly tossed them on the wood bench, her interest quickly lost. “When you’re ready to date again—”

“Who said anything about dating?” Laura’s voice creaked. An image of Caleb flashed through her mind. She quickly pushed the idea away. If April even got a hint, she’d met someone, she wouldn’t let it go until she’d tracked the man down and grilled him on every detail of his life.

Considering she knew nothing about him herself, it was safe to say April wouldn’t find out anything about him either. It’s not like I’m going to see him again anyway.

“Because it’s like they say, it’s better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all.”

April’s exasperated tone brought Laura back to the conversation.

“Are you even listening to me?”

Laura shook her head missing half of April’s speech on love and hoping she hadn’t read into the look on her face. “Can I get back to my trunk here?”

“Fine.” April rolled her eyes. “I hope you two will be very happy together.”

“At the moment, it’s a bit of a mess.”

“It’s actually a nice piece.” April leaned in to take a closer look. “You’ll make a pretty penny off it once you’re done.”

“If I even put it up for sale. This would look great in my living room.”

“I wondered where it’s traveled and what stories it has to tell?”

“Every piece has a story.”

Dusty meowed from his spot under the window, walking toward the edge of the workbench. He gave the girls an irritable look and jumped to the floor.

“When did you get a cat?” April’s eyes grew wide.

“I didn’t.”

“Then how do you explain that?” She pointed her finger in Dusty’s direction.

“I think he’s a stray. He managed to get in through my window when I was out earlier.”

“Well, thank God! Being single and alone is ridiculous enough. You don’t need to add a cat to the mix.” April leaned away from Dusty. “And a stray of all things...how could you even let him inside? And with your allergies?”

Laura stood and grabbed April by the hand, cutting off her rant. She pulled her along toward the front door.

April continued. “You’re still young; you have a lot of life to live. Don’t resort to becoming a cat lady. I won’t let you.”

“Why are we friends again?” Laura stopped short.

“Because you love my honesty, and I make you a better person.” April fluttered her eyes.

“You forgot one thing.” Laura tapped her foot impatiently. “Your charming humility.” Laura placed a hand on the doorknob and swung it open with her opposite hand making a sweeping gesture in front of her. “I believe you have some dancing to do?”

“You sure you don’t want to change your mind?” April grabbed Laura by the shoulders, assessing her outfit. “I can do magic with your, umm... outfit.” April grinned.

“You’re persistent, if nothing else.”

“I hate it when you use big words.” April stepped onto the porch. “Don’t stay in that head of yours for too long. I’m afraid I’ll never get my best friend back if you do.”

Stepping forward, Laura gave her a playful push towards the yard. “I promise. Now get out of here and go have some fun.”

“I’m going to call you tomorrow to tell you how much you missed out.” She threw her scarf over her shoulder as she sauntered down the porch steps.

“I wouldn’t expect anything less.” Laura laughed and closed the door behind her.

She leaned back against it, the solid wood firm against her shoulders; a sudden emptiness filled her home. Should she have given in and gone with April? She couldn’t wrap her mind around the idea of socializing, but April had a point. It had become too easy to stay at home and if she didn’t do something soon, the empty world could become a prison. As if on cue, Dusty came down the hall and sat in front of her, aggressively whipping his tail from side to side.

“What?” She threw her hands in the air as she strode over to the cat and picked him up. “Not you, too.” She walked him to the front door and put him down on the outside doormat. “I’m not about to be reprimanded by a cat. Now go back to wherever you live.” She shooed her hand in his direction, hoping to encourage him off the porch.

Laura closed the door. A small part of her wanted to let Dusty back in. I AM turning into a cat lady. The quiet brought a familiar sense of loneliness. She slid to the floor, bringing her knees to her chest and folding her arms across them. A vase full of once red roses sat underneath the hallway mirror. They were withered and nearly black in color.

They'd been sitting there for nearly a year, but she couldn't find the strength to throw them away. Instead, they sat as a reminder of that awful night. Tears sprang up again. She pushed away the thoughts like she'd done a million times before and wiped her eyes looking down the hall towards her workroom. The project sitting inside would surely distract her but would have to wait until tomorrow.

Heading to the kitchen, Laura looked for a spoon and pulled her favorite ice cream from the freezer. Walking toward the living room, she caught her reflection in the hall mirror. Disheveled and tired, she couldn't help but chuckle.

"No wonder April was having fits. If I let that cat back in, I'm the ideal stereotype." Laura frowned. "Great. Now, I'm talking to myself."

#

The next morning, Laura rose before sunrise to go for a run. When she returned, the horizon was bright pink like the embers of a burning fire. She grabbed the newspaper from her driveway, pulled out a key from her sports jacket and took the stairs two at a time, hoping to grab a quick shower before breakfast.

The warm water soothed her muscles, but she didn't linger. She had become quite adept at staying busy. Relaxing in the shower gave her too much time to think, and the memories were too hard to ignore. She quickly changed into her casual clothes knowing she would be a mess by the end of the day. Heading straight for the kitchen, she grabbed a yogurt and some granola for breakfast. Her hair still wet from the shower, she sat down to read the headlines in the paper. Not much caught her interest. Mostly town gossip and posted events, none of which concerned her. The clock on the wall rang seven times; time to get to work.

Dropping her bowl in the sink, she pulled her hair back in a ponytail and walked down the hall to her workroom. As she rounded the corner, she noticed the morning light filling the room casting a new perspective on the vintage chest. Dust particles filled the air as they floated around in the sun's glow. Laura resumed her seat from the previous day. How would she bring this chest back to life?

"What's your story?" She caressed the worn edges of the ancient box. Not getting any answers, she continued where she left off, removing the fabric one chip at a time. The interior lining on the sides of the chest flaked away faster than the back and soon she had a pile of brittle chips all over the base. Laura grabbed a brush to sweep it out, then tossed the debris in the trash.

Laura dropped the dustpan back in to sweep some more when it clattered against the wood, creating a slight echo. Laura leaned in, noticing the bottom of the trunk was uneven. The middle looked to be a bit higher than the edges.

“Well, that’s odd.” She used the edge of the trowel to scrape around the lower sides of the trunk. The fabric came up in one piece, revealing a raised wooden panel beneath. She carefully popped it open and discovered what could only be a false bottom. Laura looked around the room as if she’d just uncovered a secret she wasn’t supposed to find.

“I wonder how long you’ve managed to keep this little treasure hidden?” She whispered before ducking to investigate further. The false bottom only seemed to be a few inches deep, but there was definitely something inside.

She reeled at the possibilities, including the idea there could be dead critters hanging out down there, too. Not wanting to touch anything that may have crawled inside and died, she put a glove on before she began to poke around. Feeling a bit more confident, she snatched a flashlight off the shelf and slipped her hand into the dark space. Laura felt something soft and pliable, like leather, and then she brought the item into the light.

The brown, heavily aged leather-bound book looked like it could fall apart at any moment. She carefully wiped a bit of dust from the front cover, revealing the letters A.S. embossed in the lower right-hand corner. A leather string wrapped around it several times, keeping it securely closed, but Laura could see loose papers sticking out from within the pages.

She brought the book to the workbench to get a better look. Cautiously opening it, she looked inside the cover. The name AVA SUTTON was scrolled in perfect cursive. A chill swept through her. So, the trunk did have a story to tell.

Laura pulled over her stool and sat down slowly, her hand shook slightly as she turned the page. She couldn’t resist; she began reading the first entry dated NOVEMBER 6th, 1941.

CHAPTER 3

NOVEMBER 6, 1941

Dear Diary,

Today is my nineteenth birthday. Mother and Father gave me a new journal, and I’m excited to have a safe place to share my thoughts. We are going to have a party on Saturday night, and I’m awfully excited. I love the view from my second-story window. Today, I saw the neighbor boys playing a game of stickball on the street below. They are so cheerful, not a care in the world.

Father has been concerned about the war developing in Europe. I pray it doesn’t reach the United States. This country is an ocean away, so everyone still feels safe. It is unlikely we will become a part of the fight. I pray that is the case, as I fear it would destroy our quaint little town if we did.

Tonight, Dean is taking me out for my birthday. He wanted to take me into the city, but he has to work early in the morning. I was a bit disappointed, but I put on a brave face, as he seemed more upset than I. He told me he'd make it up to me at the party Saturday night. I'm a bit nervous, not knowing exactly what his plans are, but I can't wait to see what he has up his sleeve to surprise me.

I wonder if he will ever grow up, but then I think of his boyish ways and it makes me laugh. It's hard to believe it has been a year since our first date. I could tell he was nervous when he asked me. He tried to portray confidence, but I knew better. I'm not sure why I said yes, but now I can't imagine being with anyone else.

Ava Sutton's bedroom was a perfect reflection of who she was—from the delicate white curtains framing the large bay window to the writer's desk tucked in the corner. An old steamer trunk sat near the far wall next to her. It was one of her favorite places to sit and overlook the neighborhood below. If only she could see the whole world from that spot.

Ava closed her journal and walked over to the traveler's trunk. She lifted the lid with ease as the strong bronze hinges creaked under its weight. Removing a blanket from inside, she stuck her finger in a small hole at the base of the trunk. A wooden plank about ten inches wide popped up, revealing a false bottom. Slipping the journal into the space, she returned the wooden board and placed the blanket on top of it. She closed the lid and locked the big bronze latch on the front of the trunk.

"Do you think, after all these years, I don't know where you hide your journal?"

Ava jumped, surprised by the sudden company. Tessa strolled in and plopped down on the end of her sister's bed.

"It's for that reason I keep it there." She held up the key. "You know where I hide it, so I am forced to lock it away." Ava tucked the key inside her sweater pocket, tapping the outside lightly.

Tessa's self-assured smile turned to a frown. "It's not like you have anything good in there anyway."

"How would you know?" Ava playfully pushed her sister's shoulder as she walked over to her writing desk.

Tessa frowned again, then her eyes lit up. "Are you writing about Dean?"

Ava ignored her as she put away things on her desk, but her smile betrayed her.

"I knew it!"

"I'm not telling you anything." Ava strutted toward her closet.

"At least tell me what you plan to wear. I can't have my sister go out in something terrible."

“Since when are you an expert in fashion?” If Ava was honest, her younger sister did have a better sense of style.

“You know I have better taste than you.” Tessa jumped off the bed and joined her at the closet doors, quickly scanning the contents. She thumbed through shirts and pulled out a white blouse with black stitching along the collar, a plaid black-and-white swing dress, and a pastel-blue sweater. “Done.”

“That was quick. Don’t you want to think it over a bit more?”

“Trust me, Ava. You’ll look great in this.” Tessa pushed her toward the mirror and they both looked back at Ava’s reflection. Tessa held the light-blue sweater up in front of her. “This is the perfect color to bring out your eyes.”

Ava studied herself in the mirror. Tessa was right. Her crystal-blue eyes were framed by long lashes and sparkled against the blue tones in the sweater.

Tessa stared back at her, waiting, her blue eyes the exact image of her sister’s. Tessa moved the sweater in front of herself, turning to one side and then the other. “This sweater doesn’t look half bad on me either. I should borrow it.”

“Okay, you win. I’ll wear it.” Ava grabbed the hanger away from Tessa before she could walk off with yet another piece of her clothing.

“You’ll thank me later.” Tessa waved her hand in the air.

Ava smiled, watching her retreat. Looking back at her own reflection, she noticed her lips and frowned over their lack of color. She grabbed a nearby tube of lipstick and slowly applied her favorite bright red color. The cooler weather had given her pale cheeks a pink hue. She scrunched her nose and turned back to the rest of the clothes Tessa had tossed on the bed. She took a deep breath. She had better hurry. There was only one hour to get ready if she planned to make it to dinner on time.

#

Ava walked inside the diner and stopped near the entrance to look around the familiar scene, her heart beating excitedly. The diner, as always, was bright and cheery with only a few framed pictures on the walls; most of them were of high school football teams that had won championships in the past few years.

Her blonde hair was partially pinned back and held in place by a large white ribbon. The lower half hung loose around her shoulders in waves. She looked around the diner for Dean. The restaurant glowed inside from the reflection of the outdoor neon sign.

“I hope you were looking for me.” He flashed one of his mischievous grins.

Ava jumped. Dean had snuck up behind her. “Really, Dean. It’s a wonder I keep you around.” Ava playfully hit him in the arm.

Laughing, he placed an arm around her shoulders as they made their way to a booth in the back of the diner. He slid in on one side while Ava slipped across from him on the other.

“Are you giving me the silent treatment?” Dean raised an eyebrow.

“You startled me. This is your penance.” She raised her chin.

“Fair enough,” he laughed, the sound filling the small diner. He opened his menu but winked at her over the top of it. “Do you remember the first time I saw you here? It was right after Kingston High beat Mason Prep in the championship game. The whole football team was celebrating their star quarterback.”

“I don’t know if I’d have called you a star,” Ava teased, gazing at her menu.

“Of course, you would! It’s why you fell for me in the first place.”

“Was this before or after you spilled a chocolate milkshake on me?” She narrowed an accusatory look in his direction.

“That was an accident.”

“I’ve never been so embarrassed in my life. I’m not sure why I ever forgave you.”

“I’m glad you did.” Dean reached across the table and touched her hand. At that moment, Charlotte showed up to take their order. Ava watched as he chatted casually with the restaurant owner.

There was a slight bit of stubble on his chin, which accentuated his strong jawline; his brown eyes were warm and endearing. He wore tan slacks, complemented by a button-down vest, but it was his white dress shirt casually rolled up to his elbows that made his style so compelling. Ava loved that he could be relaxed, poised, and charming all at the same time. She’d been staring at him when he looked up and caught her. Her face warmed and she quickly shifted her eyes to the menu.

“My girl seems a bit distracted.” Dean grinned.

Ava chose to ignore him and instead set her menu down. “Honestly, I don’t even know why I bother looking. I get the same thing every time.”

“The usual?” Charlotte smiled, and Ava nodded. “Burgers and fries it is.” She took their menus and left.

#

Dean held the door as Ava walked out into the night air. The evening was cool and brisk as she struggled to put on her sweater. Dean offered her an extra hand before draping his own coat around her shoulders. He entwined his hand in hers as they head towards downtown Main Street.

It had sprinkled during dinner, and the street reflected the lights from the storefronts. The two walked in comfortable silence for quite a while before Ava spoke.

“This is my favorite time of year.” She pulled his jacket closer to her. “Are you sure you’re not cold?”

“I’m made of steel.” Dean posed with his hands on his hips. He looked so ridiculous she couldn’t help but laugh.

“What’s so funny?” Dean held his hand over his heart dramatically before taking her hand again as they continued toward the edge of town. “Even if I was cold, I’d never ask for my coat back, leaving my girl to freeze. Mother raised me better.”

“How is your mom?”

“Asks about you all the time.”

“She does not.” Ava swatted at him playfully.

“She wants to know when her son is going to find a wife and settle down.”

“And?”

“I think mother has good sense.”

Ava smiled. “You do enjoy toying with me.”

“I suppose I could do worse.”

“Dean!” Ava shoved him away.

He tumbled dramatically toward the center of the street. Seizing her opportunity, Ava sprinted in the direction of her home, but Dean ran after her, making quick time. She’d barely made it past the gate when he grabbed her by the waist and spun her around to face him. She set her hands on his chest while he tugged on the collar of his jacket, pulling her closer to him. “You’re trapped, Miss Sutton.” Ava’s heart raced double time. His proximity made her legs go weak. Was he going to kiss her in the middle of the yard?

“I’m not sure I could live my life without you.” His voice was deep as he stroked her cheek. Wrapping his arm around her waist, he lowered his head toward her.

“Ava! It’s time to come in now.” The deep baritone voice of her father cut through the night air like a knife. Dean released her and took a step back.

Benjamin Sutton stood in the doorway of his home. His large frame, illuminated by the lights inside, made his silhouette intimidating. Ava slowly removed Dean’s jacket and reluctantly handed it back to him.

“Next time,” he whispered, and she felt her face warm. Ava stood on her tiptoes to give him a quick peck on the cheek before running to the porch where her father was waiting. She hoped the cool air would mask the blush in her cheeks.

Dean put on his coat and nodded to Ava’s father.

Her father pulled the pipe from his mouth and nodded in return before guiding her inside. Ava watched Dean’s retreating form from the living room window. Her father took a seat in his reading chair. Turning to face him, she stood there waiting for the speech she knew was coming.

“Are you getting serious about that boy?”

“We’ve been dating for a while now, I thought you approved of Dean.” She walked across the room and sat on the couch.

“Of course, but you’re still young, Ava.” Her father smoked his pipe and watched her.

“Plenty of girls younger than me are getting married these days.”

“Married?” Benjamin sputtered, choking on the smoke from his pipe. “Who said anything about marriage?”

“Honestly, Daddy!”

“You’ll have plenty of time for marriage.” He picked up the newspaper next to him.

Ava’s head snapped in his direction as she knew he wasn’t reading a word of the paper anymore. Ignoring the front-page headline about the war, she got up and pulled the middle of the newspaper down, meeting him face to face. “He knows very well he wouldn’t be able to step foot in this house if he didn’t run it by you first.”

Just then, Ava’s mother walked into the room. She carried a vase filled with fresh flowers, which she placed on the table near the window. Her pink floral dress was accented by white lace around the neckline and a slimming white belt to show off her waistline.

“Which one of you plans to fill me in?” She eyed her daughter curiously as she sat on the couch.

“Hannah, your daughter informed me she’s getting married.”

“Ava, you’re much too young.”

“I never said those words exactly, but if you must know, Dean has hinted at the idea.” Her parents weren’t taking her seriously and found herself feeling defensive.

“Oh, honey, men say things they don’t mean all the time.” Benjamin coughed over his wife’s comment, and she ignored him. “What makes you think Dean has marriage on his mind?”

“He told me he wants to spend the rest of his life with me.”

Benjamin dipped his paper and removed his pipe, ready to speak up. Ava noticed her mother give him a look only a married couple could exchange, and he went back to his reading. Her mother turned toward her, speaking softly. “I think you should take your time. Has he said he loves you?”

“Who said, ‘I love you?’” Tessa made her way into the living room, her white blouse perfectly pressed and tucked into her wide forest-green trousers. She hurried around the coffee table, taking a seat on the other side of Ava. “Are we talking about Dean?” Tessa’s face lit and she clapped her hands together waiting for details.

“Tessa, hush, let your sister speak.” Their mother remained focused on Ava.

“Not in so many words.” Ava smiled wistfully. “Had Daddy not interrupted us, who knows what he would have said?”

Her father made a gruff sound. “Based on what I saw, the boy wasn’t saying anything.” He spoke around his pipe in a serious tone.

“Daddy!” Ava squealed, a warmth creeping up her neck. Her father continued puffing on his pipe, pretending to read his paper, but he didn’t fool her. Ava knew he’d heard every word. Her mother’s look told her now wasn’t the time to push the subject.

Tessa broke the awkward silence. “Ava? Let’s go upstairs. I’ll show you the fashion magazines I was telling you about.” The girls got up and Ava leaned down to kiss her father on the cheek. “Goodnight, Daddy.”

Benjamin shook his head and the girls giggled as they took the stairs two at a time.

#

That night, Ava sat at her writing desk and opened her journal. Tessa had spent the last hour going through magazines and talking about her ideas for the perfect wedding, but the thought of planning a wedding made her insides turn. She loved Dean, but was she ready for marriage? Ava absently touched the necklace hanging at her collar before she began to write down her thoughts from the evening.

Dean took my hand tonight as he walked me home from the diner. It was warm and strong, and I knew at that moment I’d always feel safe with him. He told me he wants to live the rest of his life with me, and he nearly kissed me goodbye. We’ve exchanged displays of affection before, but somehow, tonight seemed different. I was partially terrified and partially excited. I saw something more in his eyes. I don’t know if this is love. I’ve never been in love before, but I can’t imagine my life without him. If that means love, then maybe I am.

February 12, 1942

July 23, 1942

When Laura, a heartbroken antique expert, stumbles across an old steamer trunk, she decides it is the perfect restoration project to distract her from her recent loss. She quickly discovers the trunk has a few mysteries of its own, including a journal dating back to 1941.

Laura finds herself caught up in a heroic love story between Ava and her high school sweetheart Dean. Their story of first love is suddenly interrupted when World War II begins and Dean is sent to the front lines; leaving Ava to bravely fight her own battles supporting the war effort from home.

Laura soon identifies with Ava's perseverance and in the process, is challenged to overcome her own hardships. However, the journal unexpectedly ends, leaving Laura with unanswered questions about Ava's life. Laura is determined to uncover the missing pieces from the journal, but will she find the answers she seeks? And can she find the courage to love again?

