



FINDING

Home

A DOVES OF DESTINY SHORT

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ONE

PETER

“Have you heard? Henry moved back!”

My sister fell into the seat beside mine. Her eyes glimmered as she focused her gaze on me as if waiting for a big show. Her actions proved to be useful as my mouth hung open and the piece of toast I'd been munching on fell onto the table.

She laughed and placed a finger under my chin to close my mouth.

“Henry...Huxley? My boss's son? And my...my...”

I couldn't finish the words since Henry wasn't my anything. Well, we were childhood friends, but even that fragile relationship had been cut off when he moved out of Wintertown for bigger, better things. Things that didn't include his childhood friend who was hopelessly in love with him but never had the courage to do anything about it.

Amy gave me a pitiful pat on my shoulder. She was very much aware of my one-sided crush that had spanned almost half my lifetime.

“I thought you would have moved on by now. It's been years since he left town,” Amy said. She grabbed a piece of

toast from the stack I'd prepared and smeared both peanut butter and strawberry jam on it. I wrinkled my nose at the combination.

She saw my disgust and stuck her tongue out at me before continuing to spread a liberal amount of jam on top of the brown paste. Amy was twenty-two this year, but sometimes it was hard to believe that she was only three years younger than me when she showed this playful side of herself.

"How do you know this, anyway? The Huxleys didn't tell me anything about their son returning," I asked, promptly ignoring her earlier statement.

By all accounts, this silly little crush should have ended after losing contact when he left for college on the other side of the country, and I'd stayed in our quiet little town.

If only emotions were that easy to turn off, then all of my problems would be solved.

When he didn't come back to Wintertown after graduation, I'd felt a tinge of regret, and with how infrequent he returned to visit, I honestly thought I'd never see him again. And now my sister was telling me he was back for good.

Amy took a bite of the toast. Her eyes curved with enjoyment as she munched on her horrendous creation. It wasn't until she finished her first slice and reached out to prepare another that she replied.

"I was running an errand in town and saw him leave the grocery store. With a baby in his arms, at that! The town gossip told me he showed up this morning with the baby. Apparently his parents knew nothing about this either!"

Her eyes glittered as she spoke. Amy might have made it sound like she wasn't part of the group of gossips in town, but we all knew she was one of the core members. Knowing everyone's business was her passion, which worked to her benefit as a journalist.

“A baby! Is it his? Did he come back with...a partner?” I didn’t usually care about the rumors in town, but now that it was related to Henry, I wanted to know every single detail.

To my disappointment, Amy shrugged. She finished the rest of her toast, patted the crumbs off her hands, and stood.

“Aren’t those all things you can easily find out once you head to work? Go talk to Henry and ask him yourself,” she said with a hand on her hip. She gave me the look she reserved for when she thought I was being stupid. When I didn’t reply, she sighed and left, leaving me alone in the room with only my thoughts to torment me.

It was only times like these that I felt she was more mature than I was. Amy was the outgoing one who was confident in herself and knew what she wanted. Whereas I was more reserved—timid, as my sister liked to call me. It wasn’t my fault I had aversion to risk.

I didn’t dabble in the stock market or gamble for the very same reason I never confessed my feelings to Henry. Why make waves when things were going just fine...except for when the actions of others caused them to move thousands of miles away and I was still here, unchanging, waiting, passive...

The piercing pain on my bottom lip let me know that I’d bitten myself a bit too hard. I released my abused lip from my teeth and gently sucked on it. It was probably already swollen if the throbbing was anything to go by.

I was aware of this fault of mine but didn’t have the courage to change. It was an unattractive trait, or so I’d been told by the men I’d briefly dated—and that was only because they were the ones who’d initiated it, but it never took long for them to get tired of me and then dump me.

I’d accepted all the changes without complaint. It wasn’t like I didn’t get hurt when they broke up with me—who wouldn’t be sad about being rejected—but it wasn’t like I could

do anything about it. No, it was just that I *didn't* do anything about it. I never even tried fighting for what I wanted in the first place.

Was I going to live my entire life like this?

Amy had said Henry had moved back but for how long? Maybe this was a pit stop before he left for his next destination, and was I just going to watch him leave again without doing anything?

The thought of living like the last few years with only the tidbits of news about him from his parents had my heart aching.

No.

I couldn't let that happen. Not at least without trying to reestablish some kind of relationship with Henry. I didn't want him to disappear from my life again.

Shooting out of my seat, I quickly cleaned up breakfast and left for work. My heart felt like someone had decided to use it to play tennis with. It hurt from how hard it was beating both from nerves and excitement at being able to see Henry again soon.

I started working with Henry's parents as soon as I'd graduated college with a business degree—a degree that was randomly picked because I didn't know what I wanted to do but proved useful with helping out at the B&B.

Business was slower during off-season, but Karl and Tracy were getting older so they decided to hire me on full-time with the eventual idea of me taking over the place when they retired in a few years since Henry didn't seem to have any intention of moving back. Until now.

The drive to Fated Encounters B&B didn't take long even though it was on the other side of town, on the outskirts. That was one of the good things about living in a small town. It never took long to get anywhere and going from one end to the other took twenty minutes at most.

When I arrived at the B&B, Henry's old Buick was already parked in the driveway. My nerves grew as I quickly parked beside it and entered the building.

Henry must have also just gotten back from the store since he was still by the entrance. His parents stood next to him as they cooed in the direction of his chest.

They all turned when I entered, and I saw that Henry had a baby strapped to his front. Large, dark eyes peeked up at me from the side of Henry's chest, and when the baby caught my eye, he broke out in a huge, toothless smile.

There was no doubt the baby was Henry's as he was a carbon copy of him. I peeked up at the man in question, and my heart almost stopped in my chest.

There was my childhood friend, standing right in front of me again. He beamed up when he saw me, and my god, I almost forgot how good he looked. His dirty blond hair tousled in a messy style that complimented his high cheekbones with hard angles that only made his features more prominent.

Exhaustion etched his features with glaring dark circles under his eyes, but even that didn't take away from his handsomeness. It was a different kind of look, one that spoke of being a new father.

He watched me for a few seconds before also breaking out in a huge smile, as if only now realizing who I was. I didn't know if I should be hurt by how long it took him to recognize me or annoyed by the fact that even after all these years, he still had the same effect on me.

I was still hopelessly in love with Henry Huxley.

TWO

HENRY

“Peter? Is that you? Wow, I almost didn’t recognize you by how much you’ve changed,” I said as I took a step closer to him to give him a hug. I stopped at the last minute, remembering my baby that was currently strapped to me. Peter must have realized as he reached his hand out for a handshake instead.

I was still adjusting to having another life basically attached to my hip at every second of the day, and coupled with the exhaustion of not having slept well since Levi was dropped at my apartment and the four day drive back Wintertown, my brain was processing things a lot slower than usual.

The drive wouldn’t have taken so long if not for the constant breaks every two hours to ensure that baby Levi was safe. I’d read online that babies shouldn’t stay in car seats for too long, so we’d stopped at countless rest stops and motels on the way here.

Levi was fine when the car was moving as the gentle sway of our travels lulled him to sleep, but any other time? He was fussy unless I was holding him or in his direct sight.

I didn’t know if babies could comprehend what was

happening around them, but I sometimes wondered if Levi was aware that his mother had abandoned him and was scared I'd do the same—not that there was a single possibility of that happening.

The day Levi came into my life was the day I learned what love actually was.

It was an all-encompassing feeling, and I didn't know it was possible to feel *so much* for such a tiny person.

"Your son is adorable," Peter said softly. The sound of his voice had me moving my gaze from Levi to my childhood friend. He had really changed from my memory of him.

He was no longer all skin and bones. His lanky frame had filled out with lean muscles that made him look similar to the male supermodels I'd seen on social media recently. And his lips...the bottom lip looked plump and so damn kissable that I had a hard time pulling my eyes off of them.

Staring at my childhood friend's lips was not on the mountain high list of things that needed to be done for my move back into town, so I forced myself to look back up to his shining green eyes—not that that helped quell the sudden lust that shot through my body.

I cleared my throat and decided it was best to not look directly at him.

"Thanks," I said. "Bet you didn't expect to see me back here with a baby in tow."

That got a smile out of him. "I did not." He hesitated for a second before asking, "Did you come back by yourself?"

I wondered if he still had a crush on me. It wasn't hard to figure out that he'd liked me in high school, but he never said anything about it so I pretended not to notice either.

Peter wasn't a bad guy. He had his charms and was cute. At one point, I thought something might happen between us, even if it was just physical, but I never saw myself staying in Winter-

town, so I figured it was better to leave without starting anything than risk breaking his heart.

I took Levi's tiny fist and waved it to Peter. "Aren't I here with him?"

"That's true," he said with a chuckle, and I could visibly see the relief wash over him. That made me think his old feelings for me were still there.

That thought caused a strange tingling under my skin, but I quickly refocused my attention back on Levi.

Even if his attraction was still there, it didn't mean anything. I wasn't looking for a fling right now, regardless of how cute Peter was, looking at me with those eyes full of emotion.

I didn't have time for any of that, not when I barely even had time to sleep a full night. There was a saying *it takes a village to raise a child*, I couldn't agree more.

Trying to raise Levi by myself for the past month had me questioning my ability as a parent and applauding all the other single parents out there who made it look so easy.

News flash, it wasn't.

That was the whole reason I'd returned to Wintertown when I thought I'd never live the small town life again. It felt a bit like I'd come crawling home with my tail between my legs, but I was way over my head thinking that I could raise a child by myself in a city where I didn't have anyone.

Fortunately, my parents had welcomed me back with open arms. They were surprised as hell to learn they were grandparents but that was quickly replaced with excitement at having a baby to spoil.

The past month had been so busy with learning how to be a parent and getting all the legal papers finalized that I never had a chance to tell them—or perhaps I'd been too scared to tell them in the first place. Having my ex-girlfriend drop off a child

at my apartment then telling me she wanted nothing to do with him definitely wasn't part of my life's plan.

We only chatted for a few more minutes before I had to feed Levi. He banged his little arms and legs against me the way he did when he was hungry, so I quickly went to make him a bottle before he started crying.

After feeding and burping him, he quickly fell asleep with his cheek pressed against my chest. Mom had gone to help Peter with the morning chores. December was the peak month for business at the B&B with tourists coming from all over the country to experience our small town Christmas celebrations.

I hesitated on whether I should have waited until the end of the busy period before dropping this huge bomb on my parents, but I wanted Levi to have a Christmas in a warm home, not in one that was struggling with the daily care much less have energy to put toward the holidays.

Dad left not long later to purchase a crib and other supplies for Levi. With how excited he looked when he left the house, I wouldn't be surprised if he came home with a car filled with baby goods and toys.

Sitting in the large armchair in the living room upstairs, I watched Levi for a few minutes, still in awe that this little boy was mine.

When Lisa came knocking on my door last month, claiming this child was mine, the first thing I did was get a paternity test. It had been over a year since we'd broken up, so of course I had my doubts. However, the test was mostly a formality since it was obvious with a glance who Levi took after.

He had my dirty blond hair and brown eyes. His facial features were still soft and developing, but I could already see hints of myself. My parents had claimed he looked like a twin version of me when I was a baby, besides the deep cupid's bow on his lips and dimples he'd inherited from Lisa.

It seemed those were the only features he'd inherited from her, which was a pity. Her beauty was what had attracted me to her in the first place. Physical attraction and passion was the extent of our relationship. We were disastrous together as a couple, always fighting about the smallest things, but that didn't stop me from wondering what it would have been like to live with the three of us as a complete family.

Those delusions were never going to happen as Lisa had already signed away all parental rights to me and had basically disappeared from our lives soon after doing so.

Levi let out a soft snore before smacking his lips like he was dreaming about drinking milk. I lightly tapped his soft cheek and laughed when they bounced with the fullness of youth.

How great it was being a baby. All he needed to do was eat and sleep without worrying about anything else but growing up. The stress of everything else, I would shoulder for him.

"Don't grow up too soon. It's not all it's cracked up to be," I whispered, and as if recognizing the sound of my voice even in his sleep, he snuggled closer to my chest.

I wrapped my arms a bit tighter around him, vowing to always allow him to sleep this peacefully in the future. Even if his mom didn't want him, I would give him more than enough love so that he was never lacking for affection.

I would give him the home that he and every child deserved.

THREE

HENRY

It didn't take long to adjust to life back in Wintertown. Within a week, the dark circles that had haunted me the past month had finally lightened, and I didn't look so damn exhausted all the time anymore. That was all due to the huge help of my parents.

Now a week before Christmas, it was difficult to spend a few minutes alone with my son without my parents hovering around despite the B&B being at its busiest time. Not that I was complaining.

I really appreciated how much effort they put in as the loving grandparents. Whatever fears I had of Levi not receiving love from family was quickly put at rest the very first day back home.

Levi seemed to take a liking to them. He was comfortable enough around my parents that I could leave him with them for a brief period of time. It was at least enough time to take a peaceful dump on the toilet without having to juggle him in my arms as I'd had to do in the past.

There was one person Levi seemed absolutely taken with,

and that was my childhood friend. Every time he caught sight of Peter, he would giggle and smile, acting happier to see him than he was to see me. Whenever Peter had a bit of free time, he'd come find me to chat or just play with Levi.

Today was much of the same. Peter entered the upstairs living quarters and as soon as Levi saw him, bubbly giggles filled the air. Peter smiled as he walked toward us and reached out to rub Levi's head, which only made the baby even more excited as he struggled out of my arms to reach for the other man.

"Traitor," I muttered with a sigh and handed the baby over. Peter had a bashful smile as he gingerly held him to his chest while supporting his head. He had a soft look in his eyes as he watched Levi settle in his embrace. It was a similar expression I used when I looked at Levi.

"I didn't know you liked kids," I said as I leaned against the wall with my arms crossed. It felt weird not having anything in front of my body after having Levi basically glued to my chest for a couple months.

"I think they're cute, but I don't think kids are in the cards for me," he said. He flicked his gaze to me before quickly looking back down to Levi.

"Why's that? Babies obviously like you—at least mine seems to be very fond of you. You'll make a great dad."

Even though his face was turned down, I still caught the slight curve of his lips at my words, but his lips soon flattened into a line.

"It's hard to be a dad when I'm only attracted to men," he said with a shrug that feigned indifference, but the slight tremble of his hand as he brushed Levi's hair back told me otherwise.

"So what if you're gay? Have you forgotten who the founders of our town are? They were both men but still raised

plenty of children. Heck, their descendants are still running around town,” I said.

Peter finally looked at me. “Do you really think I’ll be able to find someone to have a family with?” he asked, his voice filled with so much hope.

I nodded without even thinking. It stood to reason that a nice guy like Peter wouldn’t have a hard time finding someone. The nagging voice in the back of my head repeated that his person couldn’t be me even though beautiful images of living with him and Levi together flashed through my mind.

I shook off tightness inside my chest at the thought of Peter holding a baby he’d adopted with another man. The three stood together, making the picture perfect family.

It was so hypocritical of me to think that way for Peter, but for myself I’d always imagined a woman by my side despite being attracted to both genders. I frowned at the realization, only now understanding just how prejudiced my thoughts had turned, and by nobody’s fault but my own. And social media’s.

Everywhere I went online showed the perfect nuclear family—a man and a woman. Two and a half children with the picket white fence. There were no white fences in Wintertown or many options in terms of finding someone to start a family with besides the people I grew up with—people like Peter.

Glancing at him, I was still shocked to see just how much he’d changed over the years. We’d lost contact when I went off to college, with me being busy with school and attempting to live a life that was completely different from the one in Wintertown. I wanted to find a new form of normalcy than the one our small town had offered, and I’d found it in the bustling cities.

But I’d also learned the cold, hard truth of life outside Wintertown. It wasn’t all dazzle and excitement like the TV shows tricked me into thinking. Instead, I found myself within a crowd of people, yet feeling loneliness like I’d never experi-

enced before. Connecting with others was only a notion when we were all our own islands with a sea of differences bridging us apart.

Peter had changed. It wasn't strange that I had as well, and that change had brought me back home to the very place I'd tried so hard to escape.

It was weird what a shift in mindset could do. After being away in the tall confines of the city, being back in Wintertown was almost *freeing*. It wasn't as bad as I'd remembered, nor did I have the bleak sense of emptiness when I thought of a future here.

Knowing that my child would grow up in a place where he could run free and have people like my parents and Peter shower him with love, that thought had my heart filling with an indescribable warmth.

He hugged Levi for a few more minutes before handing him back to me. I strapped Levi back on my chest, and he immediately snuggled into me and fell asleep.

Peter took out something from his back pocket and held it out. "I got this for Levi. I hope that's okay."

I opened the little pouch and found a silver bangle with our town's Doves of Destiny. The Doves blessed people—mostly couples—with happiness, but it wasn't uncommon for people to give newborn these silver bangles to wish the child health and a good life in the future.

I still had my childhood silvers in my bedside drawer. Meanwhile, this was Levi's first bracelet. It had been nonstop crazy since coming back to Wintertown that I'd forgotten all about getting him one, but Peter had remembered.

"Thank you," I said as I gripped the bracelet in my fist.

I hadn't realized how much it meant to me to have Levi have the same joys that I had growing up. That got me thinking of all the other firsts that I'd never given him.

His first Christmas tree experience was given by Peter. He'd shown up one night after his shift with a tiny tree. We sat there for hours as we helped Levi decorate the tree with small and light trinkets the baby could pick up—Peter had thought of everything.

The sound of Levi's happy giggles from the night still reverberated in my ears. Levi might not remember the specifics of the night, but the joy would be ingrained into him as a whisper of a beautiful childhood. It was everything that I wanted for Levi, and Peter was the one to help achieve this.

“Why are you doing all of this?”

The question came out before I could stop it. I hadn't meant to ask it. It was bound to make the entire situation more awkward than it already felt, but I *had* to know.

His eyes widened at the question and his mouth hung open like he was going to answer, but he quickly closed it and nibbled on his bottom lip.

I watched his action, wondering if this had been the reason his lips had been so plump the first day we'd reunited. That thought had my mouth feeling dry as I imagined being the one sucking and abusing said lips until they were swollen from my kisses.

Peter must have seen the heat in my eyes, because his gaze suddenly flicked to the side as the tips of his ears turned pink.

The reaction confirmed my idea. It wasn't hard to figure out that he'd still had a crush on me, but somewhere along the line, things had changed. The feelings that I'd buried deep inside of me long before I'd left this town resurfaced and matured with the new time we'd spent together these past few weeks.

I wondered if Peter and I were inevitable. Just like how we'd become friends as kids, we found each other again as adults.

Maybe it was for the best that nothing ever happened

between us when we were younger, because god knew I was too young and immature for a real relationship back then. I hadn't known what I'd wanted and would have messed up and hurt Peter.

Things were different now.

I wasn't the restless teen who'd wanted to escape anymore, I was a man who had a family to take care of, and Peter could become part of that family...if he was willing.

"Peter, there's something I want to say," I started.

He looked back at me with those bright green eyes, and my heart swelled. This was probably the worst time to confess this growing filling inside of me while Levi was drooling on my chest and Peter probably needing to head back to work soon, but the words were already bubbling up my throat. They had to be let out.

I had to tell this amazing man exactly how I felt, and I'd opened my mouth to do just that...except, Peter held his hand up to stop me.

"Wait, can I say something first?" he asked with a panicked look in his eyes. Emotions must be contagious, because all of the sudden, the panic flooded me as well.

It was all in my head, and I was completely wrong. Peter didn't feel the same way as I did. He was just being a good friend by helping me out in my time of need and nothing more.

I never knew heartbreak felt so...hopeless.

FOUR

PETER

I had the vague sense that Henry was about to tell me something important. What exactly, I wasn't sure, but my gut was telling me it would somehow change our relationship.

Before that happened, I wanted—no, *needed*—to confess my feelings. I was tired of being the person who let the things I'd wanted slip through my fingers because I was too scared to do anything about it. I was lucky enough to get this second chance with Henry, and I knew I wouldn't get another one if I hesitated again.

“Henry, there's something I've been meaning to say for years now,” I started before once again sucking my bottom lip. The fear had me pausing, but I didn't always want to live my life shackled by this emotion. I released my poor lip and met Henry's gaze firmly on.

I will not back down.

“I've always been too afraid to fight for what I want, and that caused me to lose so many years with you. I know it's my fault for not replying to your messages as much until we eventually lost touch, but seeing you live so far away and

having the idea that you'd never come back hurt. I couldn't bear having to watch you live a wonderful life...without me in it."

Pausing, I searched his eyes. Henry's brows were furrowed when I'd interrupted him but they were relaxed now. He didn't look as tense as earlier and there was even a hint of a smile on his face.

It was now or never. I sucked in a deep breath for courage and took the biggest gamble of my life; one that would decide the fate of my long-standing crush.

"What I'm trying to say is...I love you. I've loved you ever since I can remember but realized my love was one they speak about in romances when you stood up for me in the seventh grade. You told me I didn't have to change myself for anyone, that I was good just the way I am."

Realization flashed in his eyes, and it pleased me that he'd remembered. Not the fact that I'd been picked on, but that he remembered a pivotal moment in my life.

I'd always been a timid child, and the boys in our school liked to make fun of me for that. It didn't help that I wasn't into sports like they were and often sat with a book during break instead of hanging out with the other kids.

Henry would stay with me on occasion, but his social nature didn't allow him to miss out on the fun. It was fine, since he'd always come back to my side...until he hadn't.

"My feelings for you are the type of wanting to hold onto you and never letting you go, but clipping your wings would be hypocritical of me. I don't want to change you. I love you the way you are...but I also selfishly hope that you will choose me."

I let out a huge sigh when I finally released the words that I'd held inside me for so long. My face felt hot from the confession, but I also felt liberated as well.

I was still me, the cautious man who hated risks, but I was

someone who could fight for the person I wanted—even if it was years later. I just hoped I wasn't too late.

Henry watched me with what looked like amazement and pride for my speech. He reached out and grabbed my hand, and my heart felt like it was soaring.

“Thank you for loving me all these years. I can't imagine it was easy for you, and I'm glad you told me how you feel now,” he said before pausing.

I waited with bated breath for his next words, anxious but hopeful of his reply. He was holding my hand, which had to be a good sign, right?

“I...I don't want to lead you on and tell you that we can have a happily ever after like in the movies, because quite honestly, my life is a mess right now. Dating me is probably a terrible idea since I come with baggage—”

“Levi isn't baggage. This precious boy is nothing but pure delight. Anyone would be lucky to call him theirs,” I said, gently patting the sleeping baby on the head. He smacked his lips as he snuggled into my hand. I felt warmth spread in my body.

I knew I had no blood relationship with Levi, but that didn't matter. He felt like *mine*, as did his father.

Glancing up to the man in question, I found Henry watching me with so much emotion in his eyes. Admiration, gratitude, and best of all, affection. I stood up taller, pride swelling at basking under the beautiful gaze he shot me.

I wanted him to always look at me like that.

Henry moved closer and took my hand in his. Levi nestled between us, still deep in his dream while I hoped I was about to live out mine.

“Can I kiss you?” he asked gently. I nodded shyly as I counted the seconds until the dream of kissing Henry Huxley finally came true.

It wasn't like this was my first kiss or anything, but it was the one I'd longed for since I was a teen. Now that it was actually happening, my heart was beating so fast I thought I would pass out.

We brought our heads closer, leaning over Levi, and when our lips met, everything around me disappeared. His lips were soft yet firm against my own as they tried to devour me. He tasted of a lifetime of need and desire that had accumulated through my youth until now, and I needed to have more until I could satisfy the deep-seated Henry-shaped hole that had followed me for more than half my life.

Henry must have felt the same as his tongue tangled with mine, pressing deeper as if his need for me was just as strong as mine. That had me humming with pleasure as I drew closer for more, except...

“Ow!”

My eyes popped open as we both pulled back. Levi had his arms above him, and Henry was rubbing his chin with his brows furrowed. I assumed he'd gotten baby punched and the shout had been more from shock than actual pain.

We stared at each other for a minute before laughter bounced throughout the room. Henry grabbed my hand again, the tender action feeling more intimate than I'd expected.

“Do you want to take back your earlier words about this little cockblocker?” Henry asked. His voice was teasing, but there was an underlying caution in his eyes as he watched me.

I wanted to put his fears to rest. I hated knowing that he felt self-conscious about being a single parent, though if I had any say in it, he wouldn't be a single parent for much longer.

“Never. If anything, I was honestly skeptical about you, but Levi sealed the deal,” I teased, and Henry must have seen the glint in my eye. Best of all, his tense muscles relaxed as he chuckled.

He rearranged Levi's arms then pulled me against him once more. I wrapped my arms around his neck, careful not to squish Levi but needing to be close to the both of them.

"What do you say we continue this after the little one is put to bed...tonight?" Henry whispered so seductively that my cock twitched, wanting to be part of the action.

I glanced at the sleeping baby between us and the lust instantly turned into sweet warmth. "There's plenty of time for that in the future. For now, I want to spend more time with my family, you *and* Levi."

Henry smiled sweetly at me, and I knew I'd said the right thing. For him, nothing was more important than Levi, and even though I'd only known the little boy for about a month, he was already a critical part of my life.

My feelings for his father aside, we were destined to be family one way or another. They were both mine now.

As I snuggled closer to Henry, I promised to love and protect them with all my heart.

FIVE

HENRY

Something warm snuggled against my groin, making me come out of my deep slumber. We'd gone to bed late last night trying to console Levi to sleep in my parent's room.

I held the person closer to me and nuzzled my nose into their neck. The scent of citrus enveloped my senses. It was the same scent of soap Peter had used since we were kids, though back then, I never had the pleasure of smelling the tangy notes against his warm skin.

Not being able to hold myself back, I took a teasing bite against the base of his neck and licked his smooth skin as my morning wooden hardened even more. Peter groaned as his butt wiggled against my stiff cock.

"Awake?" I muttered as I gently nibbled his neck up to his ear. "How do you taste so good?"

I felt him shiver under my lips. He turned around in my arms and gave me an eager kiss that had me feeling lightheaded.

Peter said we'd have plenty of time in the future, but god

was I feeling impatient. This past week had been filled with sneaked kisses and quickies in the shower.

Thank fuck Levi was still sleeping with my parents because I desperately needed time alone with my man.

My man.

I never thought I'd use those words, especially toward my childhood friend, but now I couldn't imagine it any other way.

Peter had stayed every night this week since we'd gotten together, but we'd never gotten past him riding my fingers until his moans were echoing against the bathroom walls.

It was a good thing the B&B had really good insulation—which was a must considering all the *fun* our guests were sure to be up to—and the living quarters were split with my parents on one side of the floor and my room and the spare room on the other side with the living room and kitchen in the middle.

We could be as loud as we wanted and nobody would hear a thing, and I planned to make good use of that fact now. Peter looked so delicious coming with my fingers in him, but I desperately wanted to see him come apart on my cock.

I pressed our bodies together and felt that Peter was just as eager as I was for some adult time alone. His hands slid up my bare back, pressing me closer as he rocked himself against me.

“Please,” he breathed onto my lips.

I wasn't going to deny what both of us wanted, so I quickly suited up and prepped him. Peter hungrily sucked in my digits. His muscles tightened when I tried to pull them out.

“Seems you're already satisfied with just my fingers,” I teased as I pulled them out of him.

Peter smirked and wrapped his arms tighter around my neck. “Never. Been fantasizing about this since we were teens.”

It still amazed me that a catch like Peter had continued to love me for all these years. I couldn't help but feel like I wasn't

deserving of this love, but when I looked at the raw emotion and depth in his gaze, I selfishly wanted to claim him all for myself.

“I hope I’m able to live up to your fantasies,” I said with a chuckle. I felt the pressure, but I was determined to make this better than whatever his imagination could conjure up.

“You already have,” he said as I lined myself up. “Being with you is all I’ve ever wanted.”

His voice was soft, but I could hear the sincerity in them. Our eyes were locked as I slowly slid into him. Each inch closer bridged the years that had separated us like they had never happened. We were back to the simple days before the burdens of being an adult had overshadowed our youth.

At this moment, nothing else existed besides the two of us.

When I slotted completely inside him, we both let out a soft sigh as if finally releasing the tension we’d been holding, of finally coming home. And perhaps that was what Peter was and always had been.

“Hurry,” he pleaded, urging me with his words as well as a shake of his hips. His hole held me so tight, feeling so good that I knew I wouldn’t be able to last long. At least not this round.

I took his leaking cock in my hand and jerked him off in time with my hips. This was going to be fast and dirty. We were both on edge, and I was so close to losing all control, but I needed to see him come first.

Another stroke as I thrust deep inside had his head digging deeper into the pillow as he let out a silent scream. I watched him come undone as he shook his hips harder against my raging cock. It was a beautiful sight, and knowing that I was the one who brought him this pleasure had the last of my control snapping as I came inside him.

“Merry Christmas, thanks for the best present ever,” Peter said through huffs of air.

I fell on top of him with a chuckle, and he held me in his arms as I calmed down my beating heart from both the out of this world orgasm and how happy and light I felt.

“I love you,” I said when I’d finally calmed down. Love wasn’t an unfamiliar emotion when thinking of Peter, but the old familial feelings had turned into intense, romantic ones.

“I love you too,” he replied, and I could hear the joy in his voice that matched my own. We stayed like that for a few minutes, needing to feel close to each other and basking in our love that had taken years to reach fruition.

If I had it my way, we’d pass the morning this way, but he pressed soft kisses in my hair and whispered, “We should get up before Levi starts fussing after being unable to find you.”

And as if summoned, a knock came at my door followed by the sound of my screaming baby. My father shouted through the thick wooden door, saying they’d wait in the living room.

I groaned but didn’t move. Instead, I stole another quick kiss from Peter.

“I wish I could stay in bed all day with you,” I grumbled when I finally released those delicious lips.

He chuckled and pushed me off of him. “We’ll have plenty of time in the future,” he said like it was certain. I was sure his words were true. There would be countless more moments like this in our future.

“You should rest some more. I’ll head out first.” I planted one last kiss on his lips before doing a quick cleanup and finding some clothes to throw on.

My parents and Levi were waiting for me by the Christmas trees. Levi’s little Christmas tree that Peter had given him was nestled beside our big one.

“Why is my baby crying on Christmas?” I cooed as I picked Levi up. His big eyes were filled with tears, but he immediately

stopped crying and let out the bubbly giggle that always made my heart melt into goo.

“Merry Christmas, my precious little boy,” I said and blew a raspberry into his cheek. His laughter came out louder as I played with him for a bit.

Peter came out of the shower about ten minutes later. He took Levi and urged me to wash up as well. I was worried Levi would start crying again, but he was too fascinated by his Uncle Peter—*uncle* didn’t sound right, but as Peter said, we’d have plenty of time in the future to figure out what worked best.

When I came out of the shower, my parents and Peter were sitting around the big Christmas tree. Levi sat on Peter’s lap as they looked at all the colorful ornaments that decorated the tree. Peter patiently showed each one Levi was interested in with a loving expression on his face.

Levi laughed as he clutched the Doves of Destiny ornament that was basically a requirement for every household in Wintertown. He looked so happy basking in the attention of the three adults that he’d basically forgotten I wasn’t there.

This was exactly what I wanted for him: to be surrounded by love and happy traditions that I’d grown up with, and now he had that.

Peter must have caught sight of me since he hoisted Levi higher up on his body and twisted my way. The two smiled as they held their hands out toward me with huge grins.

“Come join us,” Peter said, and like a lost ship finally finding the homing light of a lighthouse, I rushed forward.

I’d spent years running away, looking for a place to belong. I’d been so foolish, only realizing now that it was here all along in the little town that once felt so suffocating.

Looking at the people around me, chatting and laughing as they played with Levi, my heart felt full for the first time since leaving Wintertown all those years ago.

This was my family.
My home.

Enjoy your stay in Wintertown with the Doves of Destiny series.

LETTER FROM RYE

I hope you enjoyed this little short in Wintertown! Those who have already read *The Holiday Disaster*, maybe you'll remember seeing Henry at Fated Encounters B&B. He's the one who checked Kingsley and Ethan in :) I'd always planned to write their story but didn't realize it would take me this long to do it, but I'm glad I was finally able to!

Next up will be Levi's story in *The Holiday Fail* coming December 26th, 2024. Are you excited to see their little baby all grown up and living a romance of his own too? Hope to see you there! Until then, take care and happy holidays!

The *Holiday Fail* ebook and audiobook is available for preorder direct from my website at a website discount. You'll also get the benefit of getting the book one week early! :)

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ALSO BY RYE COX

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The Flirty Neighbor

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Doves of Destiny Series:

The Holiday Disaster

The Holiday Boyfriend

The Holiday Fail

Promises, Promises Series:

Promised Vow

Multiauthor Collabs:

Ready, Set, Glow!

Under the Mistle-Foe

Taming the Tackle

The Firedancer

Conall

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rye is an M/M Romance author who is a romantic at heart. She believes that love conquers all, and that's why her stories are guaranteed to always have an HEA. When she's not writing, she escapes to the world of books or daydreams about becoming a future cat lady.



SCAN ME



