

## CHAPTER 1



### Riley

MIDWESTERN AIR SMACKS me in the face the minute I step off the plane onto the Jetway. It's cooler, damper, and greener than I'm used to. Back home—what used to be home, anyway—it's arid and dusty. Trudging up to the gate, I adjust the straps on my overstuffed backpack. The wisps of hair at the nape of my neck curl in the humidity.

Unlike the continuous chaos of our layover in Las Vegas, Eppley Airfield is quiet. There's a reason Nebraska is called a flyover state—you're not supposed to actually land here. And yet, here I am. In Nebraska.

The rest of my family snagged a row of seats together in the front of the plane, so they were able to disembark first. It irritated me to be stuck in the back near the bathroom, but honestly, I didn't want to sit with them anyhow. Their extra-chipper "we're going to have so much fun" attitude is grating on me. As if their positivity could make up for uprooting our

lives and transplanting us to the Midwest with hardly any warning. I was supposed to be sunning myself on Huntington Beach and working some crap part-time job to save up money for college when I wasn't volunteering at the marine nature center or working on my art portfolio. Enjoying my summer before senior year with friends. Nowhere on the list of activities was "board a plane the day after school gets out to fly to Nebraska for some ridiculous weeklong family excursion to kill time while the moving company carts our stuff to our new house."

Instinctively, I reach for my phone, but what's the use of switching it out of airplane mode at this point? Do I really want to read all the *wish you were here* and *having so much fun* messages? Or worse, what if they've already forgotten about me?

Not Quinn, of course. Quinn would never forget about me. We've been friends since kindergarten, when we were both put in time-out for lobbing fistfuls of sand at each other at recess the first day of school. But I think a text from her right now would only make me sadder.

I spy my parents by a bank of cell phone charging stations that remind me of library study cubbies. As soon as Mom makes eye contact with me and waves me over to where they're standing, she makes a beeline for the restroom. Dad takes a moment to stretch his legs. My younger brother, Caleb, hovers nearby, his fingers flying over his phone. He'll be a high school freshman in the fall, so the move is less disruptive to his plans, since he was going to start the year in a new school anyhow.

We're quiet as we shuffle toward baggage claim. The three of them walk together like a cohesive unit and I lag behind. Ever since Mom and Dad announced the big move a few weeks ago, it's felt like three against one. Traitor that he is, Caleb pounced

on the prospect of a bigger room with an en suite bathroom and the promise of a game room in the partially finished basement of our new house. How he could just sit there and take the news with a shrug and a “cool” is beyond me.

Even though the airport is air-conditioned, it’s still muggy. Nebraska must know I’m dehydrated, given how much moisture it’s trying to force into my skin. I don’t even want to think about the humidity hell I’ll have to deal with for the foreseeable future. As if to prove a point, my long bangs start to curl in my peripheral vision, taunting me.

We lay claim to a little spot of tile near the front of the luggage conveyor belt and watch it slither along its serpentine loop. I pull out my phone again out of habit, but can’t bring myself to unlock it. A sharp sting of dread mixed with resignation has me slipping the phone back into my bag. I’m not sure I’ll ever be ready to deal with that level of FOMO.

“The van is scheduled to pick us up at three p.m. sharp,” Dad says, an excited gleam in his eye. “It’s a two-hour drive to Darby and then adventure awaits.”

Mom beams back at him. “We are going to have so much fun.” Her eyes get misty as she wraps an arm around my waist. “This will probably be one of our last family vacations before you’re off to college.”

I swallow down the lump in my throat and fight the urge to remind her that I’m not going off to college next fall. If everything goes according to my parents’ plans, I’ll be enrolling in Alden University, where they’ve both accepted coveted tenure-track professorships—the whole reason why we’re here in the first place. Mom’s been working without a contract at the local community college for the past two years and Dad’s been

unemployed since his last professorship—a short-term stint to cover someone’s sabbatical leave—ended. The opportunity for them both to have permanent jobs is great, but the timing just really sucks.

The screen above Baggage Carousel 2 flashes with our flight number and bags start pouring down the slide. Dad steps forward to grab Mom’s purple roller bag and his navy duffel. Caleb spots his lime-green suitcase and hauls it over.

A few nondescript black suitcases glide past, a set of golf clubs, and a car seat. None of them are mine. We wait. And wait.

And wait for my teal suitcase decked out with purple ribbons and butterfly patches surrounded by metallic Sharpie doodles.

Eventually, the conveyor belt grinds to a halt and the flashing light at the top of the carousel stops blinking. I glance around at the empty baggage claim area, hoping that someone might have accidentally grabbed my bag and set it off to the side, but no luck. If this were LAX, I’d assume that someone walked off with it, but there was hardly anyone here and the vibrant bag is pretty hard to miss.

My head flops back to rest on the top of my backpack, the extra weight causing the straps to cut into my shoulders. Why is the universe against me?

Mom pulls the baggage claim receipts from her purse and scans them until she finds mine. Shoving the rest back into her purse’s outer zipper pocket, she signals for me to follow her over to the lost luggage office. “I’m sure they’ll be able to help.”

“Doubtful,” I mumble, my hands clenched around my backpack straps.

The man working behind the counter gives us a pleasant

smile when we step into the room. “I take it you lost a piece of luggage?”

“Unfortunately, that appears to be the case,” Mom replies in her annoyingly chipper manner. “Here’s the claim ticket for the bag.”

The man—Arnold, according to his employee name tag—keys some info into his computer and then frowns. “I’m afraid the bag was accidentally routed to Tampa from LAX.”

*Of course it was.*

“It’ll probably be about two days before it makes it here . . .”

Mom and I share a glance. For the first time since announcing the Great Upheaval, there’s a chink in Mom’s “everything is going to be great” armor.

“We’re going on an Oregon Trail Adventure tour,” Mom says. “It leaves Darby early tomorrow morning and won’t return for a week.”

“In that case, we can arrange for the hotel to hold your suitcase until your return,” Arnold says.

I glance down at my ballet flats, cutoffs, and destroy the patriarchy not the planet T-shirt and cringe. “I can’t wear this outfit for an entire week in the middle of the Nebraskan wilderness. All my clothes . . . my art supplies . . . my perfectly broken-in hiking boots . . .” My eyes get misty and I furiously blink away tears. I’ve already cried enough in the past two weeks to last an entire lifetime.

Yes, I’m overtired.

And yes, I’m emotional.

In the grand scheme of things, lost luggage is barely a blip on the “horrible things that can happen to Riley” radar, but

heaped up on everything else I'm dealing with right now, it feels like the final straw.

Forced to move from California to Nebraska the summer before senior year because your parents accepted new jobs? Uncool.

Saying goodbye to classmates a whole year before everyone else has to because of said move? Uncooler.

Finding all this out two weeks before the end of the school year? Uncoolest.

And just when I thought my parents couldn't make my life any worse, they went and reserved us a spot on a one-week Oregon Trail Adventure wagon excursion while the movers pack up and haul all our worldly possessions across five states to a house I've never seen that I'm suddenly supposed to call home. To add insult to injury, Dad's been playing the classic *Oregon Trail* video game—and giving us running commentary of his pioneer escapades—ever since.

Mom gives me a reassuring pat on the back and I shrink away. "We'll figure something out, Riles. You won't have to wear that all week. I packed some extra clothes and Caleb has—"

"No way. I'm *not* borrowing clothes for an entire week. And what about underwear?" I hiss, completely skeeved out at the thought of wearing her mom-panties or Caleb's boxer briefs.

Mom nibbles on her lower lip, probably creating a mental list of all the things we'll have to purchase to get me through the next week.

Arnold clears his throat. "Given the extenuating circumstances, I can process a monetary claim. The most I'm authorized to approve is two hundred and fifty dollars, but that

should at least get you a few replacement items until you and your bag are reunited.”

“That would be wonderful,” Mom says, relief easing the wrinkles on her brow. She reaches out as if she’s going to squeeze my hand but opts to brush her hair back from her face instead. “Thank you, Arnold.” She gives Dad a thumbs-up through the office window and then turns to me. “Looks like we’ll be doing some shopping tonight, Riley.”

“Can’t wait,” I mutter.