



## Chapter 1

# Fable

Come on," I mutter, yanking on the handle of Gramps's old Bronco.

Even six months into driving it, I still haven't mastered opening the door, which has me seriously questioning why Gramps trusted me with his beloved vehicle. I watched him open it hundreds of times. Maybe thousands. He'd pull mostly from the left edge, making sure to press his thumb into the top at the same time until he heard the faint *pop* of success.

When he was teaching me how to drive, I'd never get it on the first try. Or even the second. Gramps would circle the hood with his trademark grin, drop a kiss to my forehead, and position his fingers on the handle, nodding for me to place my hand over his as he worked his magic.

"Be easy on her. Baby Blue's got her own timeline," he'd say, casting a tender, reminiscing look toward the sky-blue Bronco. "You'll get there."

"When, exactly, will I be getting there?" I grit out, jiggling the handle again and stubbornly ignoring his advice to be easy on her. The urge to kick the tire jolts through me before I can stop

myself, and the tip of my boot hits the dirty rubber with a light thump.

I immediately regret it. Shame curls in my chest. Baby Blue has been quite the diva over the last few months, requiring more attention and repairs than I was prepared for, but she doesn't deserve to be kicked when she's down.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, placing my palm on the hood. "I didn't mean it." I drag in a deep breath and close my eyes, visualizing his fingers under mine as I try again. Slowly this time.

This time, I hear the *pop*, and the handle opens. "Got it," I announce to a quiet Main Street, pulling open the door to the familiar smell of old leather and the wood shavings caught in every corner and seam of the interior. I toss my heavy Hawkins Hardware shopping bag onto the cracked leather seat—thank you, employee discount—and shut the door again (very gently to make up for the tire kicking).

The cool, misty evening dampens my cheeks as I walk through downtown Fern River, toward the Branch, where my order of coconut chicken tenders should be waiting by now. I pass back by the hardware store, then the dark windows of Wildwood Bakery—home of the best chocolate chip scones to ever exist. I swear Mrs. LaGrande is baking up magic in there.

My phone buzzes in my back pocket, and I pull it out to find a text from my best friend.

**Mia:** Have you seen this photo? How have we never noticed she is the spitting image of human Ursula????

Pausing under the awning for the thrift store, I click the link she sent, and a social media post pops up. My already-empty stomach hollows out even more.

The engagement isn't a surprise. I heard about it last week (and promptly downed an entire pint of Ben & Jerry's chocolate ice cream). But this photo of Philip and Samantha still leaves me unnerved.

It's a cruel sort of message from the universe when the man you were sleeping with six months ago is now engaged to your polar opposite. I stare down at her perfect raven waves. And perfect red lips. And the perfect pink nails pressed against her fiancé's jacket.

Philip Anderson, owner of said jacket, is all movie-star blond hair, sharp jawline, and flawless suit. His teeth are alarmingly white as he beams toward the camera, effortlessly confident, like the world was made to do his bidding. He looks every bit of the future politician his parents have groomed him to be, and now he has the flawless wife to stand by his side.

They're days away from a wedding in Greece, then a whole new life in Portland. A power couple. They'll probably drink red wine right on their \$100,000 white couch while they talk about crypto and other things I don't understand.

Maybe high school Fable would've been the ideal match for him. Valedictorian, captain of the girls' soccer team, big dreams of becoming a doctor, voted Most Likely to Succeed.

But now my gaze dips down my body, to the Hawkins Hardware logo on my shirt, where the *Hs* are designed as hammers and screwdrivers. A layer of dust coats my jeans from where I knelt in aisle three for the last hour, organizing the bins of pipe fittings. I glance at my bitten-off nails and the callus on my palm from helping Dad clean the horse stalls yesterday.

While Philip and Samantha are picking out evening gowns and tuxedos, going to galas and probably shopping for yachts, I'm living in my grandfather's old A-frame, sleeping on a mattress I've had since I dropped out of college. I'm on my fifth job in the

last two years, and I spend my evenings in an empty living room, hunched over a puzzle, listening to an audiobook or a true crime podcast, cuddling with my six-month-old kitten, and shoving spoonfuls of that night's dessert into my face.

We're in completely different worlds, and I'm not sure I could've ever made it in theirs.

Shaking my head, I shove the phone back in my pocket without replying and cross the street to the flickering orange sign of the Branch. A cacophony of voices spills out when I open the door, confirming that half the town is here for coconut chicken tenders night.

A sudden, rowdy *whoop* of laughter echoes above the noise, sending a chill up my spine.

As if my thoughts have summoned him, Philip stands in the center of the room with a group of his friends. I recognize a few of them, but all their faces and names blur together—same guy, different font.

Dammit. I scan the restaurant and assess my options, searching for a way to avoid him seeing me. I could duck back out the door and forget dinner. The bowl of cereal waiting for me at home is nothing compared to coconut chicken tenders, but I'll survive.

Or I brave the path toward the bar and get my food. I'll have to skirt around Philip & Co., but he likely doesn't want to acknowledge that he knows me anyway, so I should make it without an issue.

There's also the option of begging the floor to open up and swallow me whole. Someone would surely remember to feed Knocks—

The universe intervenes. The door swings open behind me, propelling me forward.

Option two it is, I guess.

My boots stick on the linoleum floors as I thread my way through the crowd. The bar is so close that I can practically taste the crispy coconut, but right as the owner, Ethan, makes eye contact with me, Philip's group blocks my path. I come to an abrupt stop right on the edge of their huddle. They don't even notice me. Their volume increases, everyone seemingly bickering about wedding dates. I step to the side, trying to get around them, but with tables bracketing the group, I can't get by.

"Which bridesmaid should I go after, man?" Chad/Brad/Ben—something like that—asks, beer sloshing over the edge of his glass and plopping to the ground.

Philip shifts to stand in front of me, not looking my way. "Don't care as long as you stay away from Kate."

The room narrows around me. I watch the side of his face for a beat, trying to remember what I liked about him. But under the yellow-hued bar lighting, I can't recall a single thing.

All I remember is four months of sneaking around and to-go containers and back roads. He wanted our situation kept a secret, and I'm ashamed to admit I willingly went along with it, hoping that maybe his attention meant something. If the mayor's son had an interest in me, then surely I wasn't a complete failure. Right?

While his group gets even louder, I keep staring, willing him to acknowledge me. *Good to see you, Fable* would be simple enough. It's a hello and goodbye all wrapped into one.

Instead, he looks over me, around me, everywhere but *at* me.

"Fuck you. I'm not going after your sister, you idiot." Chad/Brad/Ben pushes Philip right in the center of his chest.

Suddenly, his broad shoulders seem closer, and he's stumbling back toward me. I barely have time to register what's happening

before I lift my hands to stop his momentum. But the effort is futile.

The overbearing scent of his cologne hits me first. Then his back collides with my hands, and the force of it knocks me off my feet. I'm toppling sideways like a bowling pin, Philip falling with me, and I'm sure we're about to land in a heap on the floor.

But instead.

A strong arm snakes around my waist, tugging me off course. With a startled yelp, I land on a firm thigh and watch as Philip crashes at my feet. He's a pile of khakis and red polo, groaning on the linoleum in puddle of his own spilled beer, and I can't help grinning down at the sight.

My grin falters, though, when I realize there's a hand on my hip and a heady scent in my lungs. Like the woods on a warm summer afternoon. It flashes me right back to sunshine and childhood and sticky Popsicle-covered fingers and splashing into the pond at the farm.

My traitorous brain recognizes it immediately, and I turn to find a pair of gorgeous mocha eyes on me.

The sight of Theo Nikolaou wrenches all the air from my lungs.

"Hey there, Fabes," he says, his deep voice practically vibrating through me. A dark gray baseball cap sits backward on his head, his chestnut hair peeking out around the brim, and a blue plaid flannel stretches across his broad shoulders, rolled up to his elbows.

The loud bar muffles to a faint murmur as an arrogant, lopsided smile curls slowly over his lips. Dimples pop out on his tan cheeks, and my heartbeat goes annoyingly unsteady.

That's the smile that makes me feel like I'm ten years old again, whirling on a theme park ride until my stomach flips. It's the same smile he had when he beat me by one vote for president

of the Ecology Club in eleventh grade. The same one he flashed when his baseball photo was plastered on the front page of the school paper. And the very same cocky smile he's worn anytime we've seen each other since.

Sometimes I want to slap it right off.

Other times well, other times I don't know what I want.

There's an annoyed grumble from the floor, and Theo's attention snaps in that direction. He reaches around me to fist the collar of Philip's shirt. "What the fuck?" he growls sharply. "You could've hurt her, you fucking asshole."

"Let go." Philip tries to swat his hand away.

My heart rate jumps at the flicker of Theo's jaw. The flare of his nostrils. The darkening of his eyes.

"Hey." A calm voice echoes from across the table. Theo's best friend, Maddox, places a hand over Theo's fist. "She's all right."

Maddox's eyes don't leave Theo's as a silent conversation passes between them. It looks like one they've had before, no words necessary. Then, slowly, the fist in Philip's shirt loosens.

Theo blinks a few times and tugs me closer, as if to keep me from falling. His chest rises with a deep breath. "You okay?" he asks softly.

There's a commotion beside us as Chad/Brad/Ben helps Philip to his feet, but I can't pull my attention away from Theo.

"I don't know," I answer honestly, because right now I don't know much of *anything*. Basic math skills would be a challenge. One plus one equals Theo's dimples.

His gaze sharpens, and he wraps his free hand around my elbow. "Are you hurt?"

I open my mouth to answer, but my focus drifts to Philip as he stands beside the table.

Chad/Brad/Ben barks a laugh. "Dude, you got something on your pants."

Philip whips around, checking his slacks. "Dammit," he spits, pushing his friend and storming away. "These are *new*."

My lungs squeeze as I watch his retreating form. That asshole didn't even acknowledge me. Literally ran into me, and I *still* wasn't worth a glance.

Warm fingers settle on my chin, and Theo turns me toward him. His proximity has my mind spinning. I haven't seen him since he moved back to town two months ago, and even before that, when he showed up to a get-together with our families, we were never this close. We're barely even in the same room if I can help it.

But tonight, I'm close enough to see the tiny flecks of gold in his deep brown irises and the small scar across his eyebrow from a bike wreck when he was eleven. His smile lines have deepened over the years and a dark five-o'clock shadow now dusts his jaw, but everything else is exactly as I remember.

His eyes hold the same playfulness they did when I met him on the first day of fifth grade. I took my assigned seat in math class beside him, and an hour later, he sent over a folded note: *Do you want to be my best friend? Check yes or no. [ ] yes [ ] no*

We were always together after that, comparing answers and sharing a pencil sharpener for the entire year. He introduced me to his sister Mia, a fourth grader, at recess one day, and our mothers became friends shortly after, weaving our childhoods together in intricate ways. Along with my sisters, Millie and Tessa, we built forts in the woods behind my parents' farm, spent summers swimming in the pond and picking thimbleberries in the back fields.

The five of us were inseparable.

Until everything changed.