

# Between the Lines

**A Pigeon Grove Novel, Volume 1**

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This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

BETWEEN THE LINES

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Written by Dave Cenker.

*For The Snail Brethren*

*Who remind me that no mountain is too tall to climb*

As soon as you trust yourself, you will know how to  
live.

- Johann Wolfgang von Goethe





# 1

## Mason

**T**he splintered plank of dry-rotted pine bears more than a passing resemblance to my life so far.

A gnarled cut midway down its length may be unsightly to some. To others, it's a sign of character. How the wood grain meanders around the obstacle to continue moving forward reminds me about the value of persistence.

My metaphorical knot twisted into existence years ago. Although it continues to haunt my memories and plague my conscience, I have a plan to complete the wandering path back toward normalcy.

Twelve timber pieces of the same shape and size run parallel to each other, crafting the only bench in Pigeon Grove. Every slat has withstood the unyielding drought conditions and penetrating radiation from the sun, save for this one.

I trace my calloused palm over the plank, identifying with its unfortunate plight. Curling my fingers around the wounded piece, I tug at it with aggression that begs for release. Ripped from its place, the length of lumber succumbs too easily, ready to give up the fight.

That is where our similarities end. External conditions won't wear me down. I will prevail, even if it is taking longer than I expected.

The gaping hole running the length of the damaged bench is like a mirror reflecting a void in my soul. It's what happens when I allow myself to think too much. I read between the lines only to find there's nothing there.



"HIYA, SHAW."

The greeting from Stanley arrives with a southern drawl familiar to our small north Georgia mountain town. He cradles the donated piece of replacement lumber for the bench under his left arm as he exits his hardware store. As he limps toward me, I jump up to relieve his aging limbs from the burdensome task.

"Hi, Mr. Turner. Having a pleasant afternoon, are you?" Although the gentleman is just that, I still shudder whenever I pronounce his last name.

"Am now that it's quittin' time. There's a fresh brewed pitcher of sweet tea waitin' for me on the front porch at home."

The folks in our community are friendly and good-natured. That isn't the reason I have remained here for the first thirty years of my life, but the pleasant people make it an easier decision to accept.

"Anything else I can get for you before I lock up the shop?" He steadies himself on the back of the bench, broken in pieces but still providing a useful service.

"Nope. I have everything I need." That phrase bears repeating daily in some form or another as a mantra. I will take care of myself. By myself.

"Well then, you have a good evening, Shaw."

Typical Mr. Turner, cordial and informal. He charms the pants off any would-be consumer to sell them the most elaborate table saw when a hacksaw would do just fine. His memory, however, is lacking. He refers to everyone by their last name. There's less to remember that way, even if there are only two names in my family he would need to memorize.

"You do the same, Mr. Turner. Enjoy that sweet tea."

I am already laying the plank as he locks the front door and shuffles down the street. As I hammer the line of nails to secure the new board, it's difficult to ignore the stark difference between it and its neighbors. It fits perfectly by geometric standards but is out of place in every other conceivable way. It seems ironic that I find more similarities between myself and a two-by-four than I do with another human being.

The cool breeze at my back is indecisive as the seasonal tug-of-war plays out during this same three-week span each year. Winter has not yet released Pigeon Grove from its clutches, while spring waits to blossom. The wind whispers through the trees along Main Street. It carries memories etched into the bark decades ago toward me, despite my wish to keep them as far away as possible.

The sour taste in my mouth for the Turner surname has nothing to do with the well-meaning hardware store owner.

It has everything to do with his only son, Travis, the pompous ass who, in his own terms, “escaped this godforsaken town.” The only thing we agreed on is that his departure didn’t happen a moment too soon for either one of us.

Like an annoying gnat buzzing around my head, he meddled in every plan I conceived during my high school days. He was, and I would guess still is, a passive-aggressive bully. What Travis wanted, he got, with no regard for how it might affect those surrounding him. How could the metaphorical apple have fallen so far from the tree?

The fruit analogy reminds me it’s Wednesday and time to head to my mom’s place for our weekly dinner date. After testing the integrity of my repair, I lay the old plank behind the bench, pick up the leftover nails and my hammer, and walk home to gather a different set of supplies. Carrots, onions, celery, cooking sherry, and Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese.



I PEEK THROUGH THE dusty windows of the abandoned drugstore that will become my restaurant one day. It needs upgrades to be a workable dining venue, but I have accounted for everything in my master plan. I grab my mail from the metal box nailed to the side of the building and take the steps to my studio apartment upstairs.

The simple decor is sparse on purpose. It keeps me motivated and focused on what I need to do downstairs. I spend most of my time in the kitchen, experimenting with new



recipes. The weekly date with my mom at the house where I grew up provides the perfect opportunity to see how my cooking repertoire is developing.

I skip down the steps with a satchel containing the dinner ingredients slung over my shoulder. I hop on my blue bicycle and pedal the half mile to my childhood home, a few blocks removed from Main Street. I pass a sprinkling of businesses along the way. There's Caldwell's Coffee, Turner's Hardware, Peterson Produce, and the only establishment decorated with a first name: Luca's.

It's the fine-dining establishment where I work, each paycheck providing the financial foundation for my restaurant plans. I turn right before passing Fly Away Home, a clever play on words for the bed-and-breakfast in Pigeon Grove.

As I veer off road on a shortcut through the brush I have taken hundreds of times before, I slam on my brakes. The hybrid parked beside the house is not my dad's old truck, which should be there. A pair of tracks from that pickup, etched into the grass over the years, has created the makeshift driveway. The wheelbase of the yuppie car sitting there now doesn't fit. Neither does the person who drives it.



"MOM?"

I swing the screen door open, listen to it creak in protest, and stop it from slamming behind me. It's been like that for as long as I can remember. I'm convinced she never fixed it

because it served a purpose. I can't count how many times I opened it, one painful inch at a time, in a futile attempt to avoid being caught breaking my curfew.

"Hello, sweetheart. How are you?" She gives me a hug before I look around for the unwelcome visitor.

"I'm okay, where's the truck?"

"About that . . . It's a good thing Mack was on his way back into town. With the spotty cell service, I might still be out there on the side of the road."

Right on cue, he emerges from the bathroom. "Hi, Mase."

In his fifties, Mack Hamilton thinks cutting off the last few letters of someone's name makes him relevant. I may not be up-to-date on the current trends, but neither is he. That Mack is pursuing a romantic relationship with the most important woman in my life and has been in town for under a year? It does nothing to curb my desire to keep him at a safe distance, which would be outside the four walls of my old home.

"So, you swooped in to save the day again, huh?"

"Something like that."

He seems to have missed the sarcasm in my reply. My mom is stirring the contents of a slow cooker that isn't hers.

"I thought I was making chicken tetrazzini tonight," I protested. "I brought the ingredients you said we needed."

"Oh, I'm sorry, dear. Mack had this beef stew simmering all afternoon and offered to share it with us. Why don't we use those vegetables in a salad?"

Mack's dinner offering isn't the only thing bubbling under pressure. Who drives to the outskirts of town in a hybrid

looking for damsels in distress while a delicious concoction simmers at home? Superhero Mack Hamilton, that's who.

"Sweetie, will you get the bowl from on top of the refrigerator? I can't reach it."

Before I can navigate around the kitchen table, the caped crusader has hopped to his feet to grab it. He also leaps tall buildings in a single bound. Enough is enough.

"Mom, this is our one night each week reserved for us. For *family*."

"Mason, it's only right to extend an invitation as a token of our thanks for Mack's gracious rescue, and the food he is offering so generously."

Time to cut my losses and continue this fight later.

"Fine."

Mack is opening and closing various cupboards searching for something.

"Ginny, where are the glasses?"

"Virginia." There is no uncertainty in my quick and terse reply.

"Excuse me?"

"Her name is Virginia, not Ginny."

There is only one person who refers to my mom by that nickname, and he isn't here.

"They're in the cabinet above the microwave. My hip has been acting up, so I moved the stuff I use more often to a lower shelf." She continues stirring without turning around.

At least she hasn't refuted my claim on her proper forename. It might be a small victory, but I revel in it. The ensuing silence widens the grin of satisfaction on my face as Mack fills the glasses with tap water.

“The faucet is leaking again. Would you like me to have a look at it?”

Wait, what? Two thoughts come to mind. First, don’t even tell me he’s a plumber too. Second, what’s with the *again*? How often is he over here to know her faucet is leaking repeatedly? I interject before she can accept Mack’s offer.

“I have tomorrow off, so I’ll stop over and fix it. Everyone ready to eat?”

Another small rebound victory for me as we prepare for dinner. The unwanted visitor takes a seat opposite my mom, the only forbidden spot at the kitchen table. He sits there, pretending he doesn’t know his choice is unwelcome.

“Mackie dear, come sit next to me.”

I don’t appreciate her salutation, and her suggestion does nothing to create the physical space I want between them. Still, I remain composed and outwardly tolerant. My thoughts wander as I sip a spoonful of stew. Mack Hamilton or Travis Turner? Who is the more troublesome knot in that grain of wood leading toward my future?

There’s an easy answer to that question. Mack is the only one present, and it doesn’t help that I’m secretly jealous of him. Nothing I’ve concocted in the past month comes close to competing with his Crock-Pot creation.



## 2

### Sophie

As a young girl, I longed for that ethereal sliver of time before sleep filled with stories of faraway lands and fairy-tale endings. Without fail, those precious minutes slipped through my fingers like grains of sand before I could fully enjoy them. Now, as a twenty-eight-year-old woman, that same span stretches out for endless hours. I know every detail of the recurring nightmare that will play out on the back of my eyelids once I give in to the inevitable.

Things happen. Plans change. And not everything is under our control. Roll with the punches and accept where fate carries you. It might be cliché, but my experiences deliver credibility to those words offered by well-meaning people from my childhood.

Adults know better, and isn't it best to heed the advice of those more knowledgeable than us? Now I'm an adult myself and still looking to others as I try to navigate my way through life.

*Dumbledore* is a funny-sounding name if you aren't aware of its origins, but is there anyone left who doesn't know and admire the wise professor? Those seven books lined my bookshelf, their paperback spines creased with love.

I recall snuggling in bed against Dad's chest while clutching the homemade Sorting Hat created by Mom. Without a shadow of a doubt, I always have been and will be a loyal Hufflepuff.

No matter how long or difficult his workday turned out, Dad always used the most convincing and unique voices while reading dialogue from those stories. His carpentry shop in our struggling Southern California neighborhood wasn't exactly prosperous, so I think our time together each evening was a welcome escape from the real world for both of us.

My favorite character was the headmaster of Hogwarts himself. Dad was never the best at giving advice, maybe because he didn't feel worthy of providing it. But he emphasized certain passages. It was his way of sharing words of wisdom with me. Even if they weren't his own, I cherished them.

*Happiness can be found, even in the darkest of times, if one only remembers to turn on the light.* Now, as I gaze out the window of my glamorous penthouse apartment overlooking Central Park, the imitation British accent from Dad still echoes in my head. As much as I long to remember everything positive about the allegorical passage, my skin crawls each time I hear it. The literal interpretation mocks me as it plucks those precious memories from my grasp. Once a haven of hope, the message inside those sacred words has morphed into a malicious taunt.



I NEED TO MOVE. IT'S a defense mechanism that helps me cope. To sit here stagnant until Travis returns home from work will only make things worse. The anxiety causes me to retreat even further into my silent thoughts.

How long has it been since my last contract? Two months? It appears the well of magazine-modeling opportunities has dried up for me here. I try to rationalize that I live in a saturated market, but a piece of me knows my biological clock is ticking. My winning ticket in the genetic lottery is already worth less than it was ten years ago. I'm shopping for facial cream to suppress the network of lines around my eyes that aren't even there yet. I drink kale smoothies and count every calorie to wage battle against a metabolism that will slow down too soon.

Travis, my fiancé of thirteen months, reminds me that my job is unnecessary. He is more than able to support us and our plans for a family with his income. He is climbing the corporate ladder at the investment firm with surprising speed. I'm interested in learning what he does every day, and I ask him, but he always dumbs it down to buying and selling properties. Maybe he thinks I won't understand the details, but I wish he would share more with me. I may not have a college education, but that doesn't make me unable to carry a meaningful conversation.

My phone vibrates on the table. *Given any thought to what we discussed?* Rachel Stephens is an acquaintance turned friend I met through a classified ad in the paper. She's offered me an opportunity Travis wouldn't approve of, which is why I'm keeping it a secret, at least until I flesh out the details. I realize I'm being hypocritical, wanting him to

be more open with me while I keep parts of me hidden. Secrets become easier to hide the more you do so. Besides, in this case, it's the right thing to do.

*Need more time. Be in touch soon.* I hit send before deleting the thread from my phone's history. Those grains of sand feel like they're slipping through my fingertips again.



OUR DOORMAN, MR. COLLINS, accommodates my special requests. The pink old-style touring bicycle I wheel around the city doesn't fit well in the elevator. He allows me to store it in the maintenance closet on the bottom floor. He even entrusted me with a key and has vowed to keep an eye on my treasured possession throughout his shift.

I pull out the bike and roll it through the front door. Mr. Collins works nights, and I miss his calming presence. The gentleman opposite him during the day is more rigid and makes me uncomfortable. I focus on navigating the convoluted sequence of turns that carries me to the one place I feel something close to myself.

Why do I travel clear across town when an acceptable café sits less than a block away? Who chooses to ride a bike through New York traffic and deal with crazy cabbies who think they own the city streets? It would be simpler to hop underground and take the A train to my destination. Everyone has a reason for their choices. Even when they appear nonsensical.





“LARGE COFFEE . . .” I begin reciting my usual order.

Harry is already filling my cup as he completes my thought.

“ . . . Black. Because black is the new orange.”

It’s a running joke. I watch little television, preferring instead to lose myself in the pages of a book. I botched the title of the Netflix series while trying to sound relevant. My attempt backfired, but it created a pseudo-friendship between the two of us. With his trimmed beard and wire-rimmed glasses, he’s the prototypical barista. Harry is cute, and it seems he thinks the same of me. Just the fact I’m making this observation is embarrassing. I am engaged to Travis. I have been for over a year, even if we have yet to find that perfect date.

“You look sad. City life dragging you down?” I hide my emotions well. I’ve either let my guard down or have been to this café so much that Harry knows me better than I think.

“Something like that.” He hands me the coffee as I tap my phone on the console to complete the purchase.

“Well, don’t forget to smile. It will make both our days better.”

My cheeks flush alongside an involuntary grin. I duck out of line and move toward my usual table against the wall before Harry sees my reaction. Why do I feel so overcome with emotion by a casual comment? In my job, I fabricate smiles for the camera. They’re forced into existence on cue.

It has been a long time since someone coaxed a smile from a place of genuine happiness inside me. In a moment of irony, that thought and the one on my face now saddens me.



PEOPLE-WATCHING IS amusing for city dwellers. I see it as an opportunity to become more experienced in judging someone's character based on appearance and behavior. It's an underappreciated skill that is more useful than most would believe.

The guy in the tailored suit approaching the counter has slicked-back hair with cologne wearing him instead of the other way around. I smell him from my table fifteen feet away. He works more than he should and is going through a rough patch in his marriage. He's doing everything in his power to conceal the tarnished ring on his left hand as he flirts with the blonde waiting to take his order.

Next, there's a forty-something woman in yoga pants who never had the courage to wear a pair in public before today. She's determined to win her husband back and prove she can still be sexy after all the stretch marks from her child-bearing years. The price tag affixed to her new purchase hints at the lack of confidence in her plan, or herself. She'll decide whether it's worth the effort after trying to survive the skinny-latte version of her daily order that isn't topped with the customary extra whipped cream.

If the two weren't in line one behind the other, I might have guessed they were the married couple under scrutiny.

I sip my coffee, believing things are exactly as they appear when you give yourself permission to study them closely. I enjoy coming around this time of day. The crowd is unpredictable, providing a variety of people from every walk of life to dissect.

The guy teetering on the edge of adolescence and adulthood walks through the door with a skateboard tucked under his arm. As he passes, I notice the tattoo of an upside-down number 4 featured on his forearm. He struts with purpose toward the counter, but this young man has self-confidence issues. His ink design is a Chinese symbol for strength. He glances at it often for reassurance.

The teenage girl twirling her locks doesn't know what she wants, from the menu at least. She cranes her neck and squints at the offerings on the wall, unwilling to put her glasses on for fear of how they will make her stand out. She only wants to fit into the mold crafted by society. If I were a matchmaker, I'd suggest she get together with the tattoo guy and share a cup of coffee.

My own coffee is cooling, and it is not yet half empty. It's been a busy afternoon of exploration for me, but I can't help but turn the inspection inward and ponder my future. I won't be the yoga-pant wife, and neither will Travis be the flirtatious husband looking for a little extra on the side. But there is a nagging feeling in my subconscious. Does he listen? Does he notice the things I don't say? Is that even possible? Those silent thoughts inside scream louder to me than the words I speak. Does anyone else hear them through my body language or nervous twitches?

I glance at my phone, realizing I've been here for several hours. It's no wonder my coffee is cold. Travis doesn't like arriving home to an empty place. I scamper out the door, hop on my bike, and set my feet in motion, round and round in circles, not that dissimilar from the thoughts in my head.



FOR THE SECOND TIME today, I lose track of the passing hours. My fiancé drags himself into the apartment, his exasperated sigh letting me know he's had a long day at the office.

"Hi, hon," I offer with as much uplifting sentiment as I can muster. I used to share my emotions without any effort, but it's more difficult now.

"What have you been up to all day?" The words are innocent enough, but the inflection in his tone is accusatory, reinforcing the walls I've become so accustomed to building.

"Spent some time at the coffee shop and am doing a bit of job research." It isn't a complete mistruth. The excursion this morning has led me to further explore Rachel's offer.

"You know—" he begins, but I cut him off, already knowing what he will say.

"I don't have to work, I know, but I want to. It's important. You should understand that with your career." He has no retort this time.

"Well, let me help you with some of that research."

Travis approaches me with an eagerness never shown before today. That observation, coupled with the tone in his

voice, suggests he's less interested in helping and more curious to find out what my job opportunities entail. I make a mental note to delete my browsing history before shutting the laptop lid and redirecting the conversation.

"What do you feel like for dinner?"

"I can see we're not eating here." It's a lighthearted comment, but the undertones carry a caustic admonition for not having a home-cooked meal waiting on the table.

"I thought we might grab something out together. We haven't been on a date in a long time." A smile leaks from his lips that feels more genuine.

"How about the Thai place downtown?" His suggestion is good—I have a taste for curry—but I see Travis is tired, is bordering on impatient, and will insist on taking the subway. So I propose a closer option.

"What about that Chinese restaurant you like down the block? We haven't been there in ages, and wasn't that where we ate after you proposed?"

Travis strategizes everything for his career and our financial future, but with our relationship, he seems to wing it. His proposal came out of the blue, but that's not what surprised me. I assumed he would plan every minute detail of the romantic encounter like one of his coveted project timelines.

Instead, he popped the question while strolling down the sidewalk outside our apartment. In front of some garbage bags ripe with the remnants of a two-day-old fish dinner. With the promise of a ring I'd pick out, not him. The Chinese place was right there, and we were hungry. Everything about it was . . . convenient.

“Sure. Are you ready to go? Because I’m starving and still need to work on some slides before a meeting tomorrow morning.”

No reminiscing on fond memories from our engagement. No widening of his grin to remind me he hasn’t stopped thinking about me all day. Nope. Better to focus on logistics of the professional endeavors that will help cement our future together. Romance at its best. And as it’s always been.

“Let’s go.” I feign a smile and tone that signals I’m fortunate and excited to spend an hour with my husband-to-be.



I PICK THROUGH THE sea of lo mein noodles, searching for the last piece of shrimp that isn’t there. We both focus on the plate shared between us, as if doing so might be a substitute for conversation. I have nothing to voice that Travis will be interested in, and apparently he isn’t eager to share anything with me.

Is this meal like marriage? In the beginning, I’m famished and in need of sustenance. I pick through stuff that gets in the way to find the succulent shrimp that satisfies my needs. But as indulgent as that fleeting moment of discovery is, it quickly escapes me. All that’s left is the unsatisfying filler material, the dregs of a relationship—I mean dinner.

“You look stressed. How was your day?” I try to engage Travis in conversation on a topic I know he will only trivialize and convert to kindergarten-level terms.

“Our primary overseas target is a software company that relies on the run rate of their product subscription model to produce backlog in their service sector. Our investors consider it risky and are threatening to pull out if we can’t provide a suitable alternative.”

I’m dumbfounded, not by the language, but because he’s chosen to share this with me. One of those genuine smiles begins forming inside.

“To put it in simpler terms,” he continues, “it’s like a kindergarten classmate stealing the blue crayon right before you were getting ready to color the sky.”

There is the Travis I know so well. The analogy doesn’t even make sense. Besides, gray would be a better choice and *suitable alternative* for me.

“I see. Sounds complicated.” Someone to placate his ego, that’s what he needs. He gives me what I need. I do the same for him. Continuing to pick through the tangled web of noodles out of habit, or desperation, I’m surprised to find a pink shrimp hiding beneath them. I nudge it back into a safe place, saving it for later when I long for more sustenance.



THE TWO FORTUNE COOKIES wrapped in plastic arrive with the check. I ask the waiter to box up the leftovers. The cardboard container will sit in the refrigerator until it goes bad and I’m forced to toss it in the trash. But until then, that little prawn tucked beneath the noodles serves as a beacon of hope.

There will be no romantic message of destiny in my cookie. It's not what they do here. Each fortune is a humorous rendition of the typical variety. Regardless, I still enjoy pondering its hidden meaning. Travis chooses my fortune by selecting his cookie first.

"Oh, forgot to mention," he offers while slipping his credit card into the sleeve without ever looking at the total, "I have to be in Atlanta on Monday."

Monday. The day he planned to take as vacation. It was two months in the making, convincing him to find a day on his schedule to invest time in the present us instead of what he insists is the promise of future us. He doesn't know I made reservations at his favorite restaurant in Manhattan. I was going to surprise him with those plans during breakfast in bed. Before I can contemplate whether to make him feel guilty for breaking his commitment, Travis steals my thunder.

"I realize I planned to spend the day with you, but this is unavoidable."

It seems to be his favorite word. *Unavoidable*. If it didn't carry with it such a pessimistic connotation of past experiences that *were* preventable, but ignored, I might pressure him on his decision.

"I understand."

The aroma of that lone shrimp seeps through the cardboard box resting in my hands. It awakens in me an opportunity. With Travis out of town, I will be left by myself. A chance to dive into the details of Rachel's proposal with no fear of being found out.



He reaches across the table and lays his hand atop mine. "I'll make it up to you. I promise."

"No, it's okay." As someone who conceals her emotions so well, I'm surprised at how my nonchalance bordering on excitement carries through the tone in my voice. Travis notices it too. Our eyes lock for several seconds before I redirect my gaze to the stained tablecloth.

"I have an idea." Travis's ideas surprise me, and not always in a good way. "Come with me."

"Come with you? But you have your meeting. I wouldn't want to be a distraction. I know how important this deal is for you, and for us."

He can't refute my claims. It's true. Travis will order room service and occupy space in three locations over the course of the trip: the hotel business center, the king-sized bed in his posh suite, and his client's office. And in each of those spots, he'll be tethered to a laptop, a phone, or both.

The wheels are turning in his head as he composes a response that aims to sell me on his idea. He will not persuade me. There's nothing he can say to change my mind.



"WHAT?" I ASK HIM TO repeat the offer, his words blindsiding me.

"Come with me. I want you to meet my parents."

We have been engaged over a year. There is no date set for our wedding. Travis is waiting until we are in the perfect financial situation to tie the knot, settle down, and start a

family. He thinks it would be irresponsible to jump into the deep end of the pool without having a strategy for remaining afloat.

I understand there are people who need a plan. It might not be the way I go about things in life, but everyone is different. There are compromises to negotiate around every bend. Of this, I am painfully certain.

Still, there was never an acceptable reason for not yet meeting Travis's parents. I followed him to New York like a lost puppy dog after we met in Southern California, even if there were other forces at play that made my decision to move a welcome change. It was typical for each of us. Travis had a plan, and I was flying by the seat of my pants.

It has been eighteen months since that cross-country relocation. One Thanksgiving holiday. One Christmas. And various other holidays with extended weekends. Never did he express the desire to share our relationship firsthand with his parents. Work interceded. His folks were on a cruise. The weather was oppressive that time of the year. There was always a reason, or excuse, for avoiding the trip to north Georgia, so I stopped expending the energy to suggest it.

"Your parents?" The look on his face betrays him. Travis believes he has me hook, line, and sinker, but I'm not yet ready to concede.

"Yeah, they live an hour outside the city in a small mountain town. We can spend time with them before my meeting. And I promise to take you to the finest five-star dining experience in Atlanta afterwards."

"Are you sure they are available? They might be on a cruise or something."

I throw in some passive sarcasm. When did Travis last speak with his parents? How he feels it reasonable to pop in on them at a moment's notice is beyond me. Inside, I understand why he's inviting me. Whether it's distrust, fear, or concern, he doesn't want to leave me alone in New York.

Rachel's text appears in my mind, and I consider what could be. I toss Travis's idea around before I realize I'm fidgeting with the unopened fortune cookie. I crack open the shell and read the comical message inside: *It's about time I got out of that cookie.*

It pushes me over the edge of indecision. Despite the controlling motivation behind Travis's proposal, Rachel's opportunity should be available when I get back in town. It's only a weekend. Travis never embraces these spurs-of-the-moment decisions. The rush of adrenaline from somewhere deep in my past, long before everything fell apart, seeps through my pores with excitement.

"When do we leave?"