

**I**t was that damn song on the radio again, *My Unicorn*. *And I thought she was the one, and hell did we have fun, but baby you gotta know, I'm always gonna be looking for my unicorn*. Mila groaned and rolled over in bed, trying to drown out the noise of the clock radio by cramming a pillow over her head.

“That, folks, was Cruz Calloway, the hottest thing to hit the airwaves this summer. His top single, *My Unicorn*, has taken the number one spot for the third week in a row now...”

Mila slammed her fist down on top of the radio, cutting off the DJ's voice floating out of the speaker. How dare he, how dare he get on the radio! His song wasn't even that good. In fact, it actually kind of sucked! And his real name wasn't even Cruz. It was Chris, for God's sake! Plain old, ordinary Christopher, with his bland, cliché songs. How dare he!

As Mila let her head sink despondently back into the pillows, the DJ's voice replayed over and over again in her head, taunting her. *Cruz Calloway. My Unicorn. Number one spot*. She had moved all the way across the damn country, and she still couldn't escape him. If Mila never heard that ridiculous name again, it would be too soon. Though she had once thought he was the man she

wanted to spend the rest of her life with, now all she wanted to do was forget about Cruz freaking Calloway.

Her twin flame. Her perfect match. Her soul mate. From the moment he first stumbled into Los Angeles from Nashville, with his smarmy confidence and cowboy boots, southern drawl and acoustic guitar, he had captivated Mila when she should have known better. She should have known something wasn't right when over and over he seemed to *need* something, and if Mila couldn't provide it, he'd grow angry and hostile. Or maybe Mila had known. She just hadn't wanted to admit it, too caught up with his insufferable good looks and casual charm and enticing, vicious smirk. She should have known.

At first, it was just a place to stay. Mila could only afford a small efficiency on the outskirts of Hollywood, but since she couldn't get enough of Cruz anyway, she was content with sharing. And besides, Cruz promised by doubling up they'd be able to save money for a bigger and better place within a few months, despite his not having a real job that Mila could see.

Cruz was always making promises. But a few months came and went, and instead of delivering on any of his claims, Cruz continued to take and take. He needed to use Mila's car, her credit cards, her studio share, her sound equipment. Mila had come to LA herself four years earlier; eager and fresh-faced with a hot pink electric guitar slung over her shoulder and overzealous dreams of fame in her heart. But after years of playing her angst-ridden, lyrical songs in bars and clubs all over LA, she was no closer to stardom at twenty-seven than she'd been at twenty-two.

After Cruz came along, she finally gave up on hearing her own songs on the radio, or watching herself in a music video. But none of that seemed to matter anymore, because Cruz did just fine as a consolation prize. While he was intent on fighting for a record label of his own, Mila had other plans in mind. After the city chewed him up and spit him out like it had done to her, the two of

them would settle down in the Sierra foothills, maybe produce a couple of cherubic, saucer-eyed children, and visit their families back east for the holidays.

Six months. That's how long it took Cruz to get signed to a record label. And then he was gone. Poof. Like smoke. He packed up his stuff and moved out while she was waiting tables, and wouldn't take her calls. Her own boyfriend had ghosted her. After making her feel like she was the star of her own movie she knew all the lines for without having to rehearse, he had vanished without a text.

Speaking of work, Mila's shift at the diner started in under an hour. After her life in LA had been torn to ribbons, Mila had given notice on her apartment, sold her crappy Toyota Camry, paid off her rent, and bought a plane ticket back to her home state of Vermont. She'd been back for three weeks, and working at the town diner for two, and she was already completely and utterly over all of it.

"Mila!" There was a rap on her door, and Mila groaned into her pillow. "I'm leaving for work in just a couple of minutes. Are you ready? Don't you want a ride?"

"Its fine, Grandma!" Mila lowered her pillow to holler around it. She couldn't take another one of Grandma's pep talks about maybe this being for the best and how wallowing in self-pity never did anyone any good. "I'll take the bike."

"Are you sure, dear?" Grandma persisted. "It looks like it might storm any minute."

"I said its fine!" Mila shouted with just a touch of belligerence, her blood pressure rising. Grandma always seemed to have this effect on her. The woman just couldn't leave things alone. Maybe it wasn't such a great idea after all to move back into her childhood home, but it's not as if Mila had a whole lot of other options.

Finally, Grandma got the hint and left for her job at the library, her old Subaru crunching laboriously down the winding, gravel

driveway. Mila curled back up onto her side. The late July heat wave had finally broken, and it felt good to snuggle up in the blankets. Why did she have to take the early shift at the diner again? Oh, right, that's all they had to offer. Mila sighed and closed her eyes, intending to rest for just a couple more minutes.

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A CLAP of thunder nearly shook the whole house, and rain lashed the screens in the windows, a fine spray making its way inside. Mila's eyes opened groggily, faintly disoriented. She would have to call in for her shift at the diner. She couldn't ride the bike in this.

Except when she glanced at the clock, it was already 12:30 in the afternoon. Her shift was practically over. How had she slept so late? She was still on California time, despite having been back on the East Coast for weeks now. She knew she shouldn't have taken that early shift. This would make the third time she'd missed work in two weeks, and Mila had a feeling she wouldn't be welcomed back at the diner. She tried to muster up the energy to care, but in reality, it was a relief. Serving up eggs and hash to the same people she had gone to high school with, who now had families and mortgaged homes of their own? It was an embarrassment Mila felt she didn't deserve.

Dragging her way out of bed, Mila made her way to the bathroom, where she was assaulted by her reflection in the mirror. Cringing, she took in her face, full of tiny little lines from being pressed down for so long into the creases of her pillowcase, while her eyes were red-lined and swollen. Probably from all the pathetic crying she'd been doing, though she barely knew why she kept wasting her tears. Cruz Calloway certainly wasn't worth them, and she didn't want him anymore anyway. She just wanted the ideal she had created of him. Was that so much to ask for?

Mila splashed some cold water on her face to help the puffi-

ness go down, brushed her teeth, and worked a comb through her short honey brown hair, freshly cut longer on one side than the other. When Cruz first left, she'd gone straight to her stylist for a new look, and for the first time in her life sported bangs, side-swept and asymmetrical. Mila frowned, her russet eyes narrowing in dissatisfaction. In LA, her new haircut was nothing to bat an eye at, but here in the tiny town of Goose Pond, she knew it looked too young for her twenty-seven years. Reaching for a pair of scissors, she did her best to even out first her bangs, and then her bob, hoping it might improve things.

Instead, Mila immediately regretted turning an eighty-dollar haircut into a hack bathroom job. A proportional hairstyle wasn't going to make her feel any better, and wouldn't help make her belong anymore in Goose Pond either.

Mila whirled, examining her body in the mirror, grabbing a fistful of her fleshy saddlebags and ass. Grandma didn't own a scale, but she could tell she had put on weight in the three weeks since being back in Goose Pond. She was short and curvy, with thick hips and heavy breasts to match her full lips and round cheeks. The extra weight didn't look bad on her, but Mila still thought she better go easy on the Ben and Jerry's and Grandma's spaghetti dinners.

Nonetheless, she rummaged through the fridge for leftovers, and plopped down on the couch in front of the TV, even though a workout might have done her mood a few favors. The storm rumbled and roared outside, giving Mila a cozy feel as she bit through the skin of some cold fried chicken. She flicked through the channels a bit giddily; Grandma had the whole cable package, something Mila hadn't enjoyed the luxury of since moving to LA. Regardless, she landed on the local news channel, the all-too-familiar face plastered across the screen hooking her in morbid attention.

"No additional information yet on the reappearance of Sabrina

Carpenter,” the news anchor spoke in a grave, concerned way, while Mila paused in her chewing to catch every word. “The thirty-five-year-old woman returned home to the small, quaint town of Goose Pond, Vermont about ten weeks ago now after vanishing without a trace when she was just seventeen-years-old. No word yet on what she went through during her nearly two decades long absence, and Sabrina’s parents have asked for privacy during this crucial period in her recovery.”

Sabrina Carpenter. Returned home at last. Since her parents provided very little to the news outlets who hounded them nearly night and day, the photo was the one from her senior yearbook, taken just a short time before she went missing. Back then, Sabrina had a vibrant smile, sparkly blue eyes and soft buttery blonde hair, and looked very little like the bedraggled, disoriented woman who had shown back up in the center of town a couple months ago, babbling to herself and making little sense.

The story had garnered nationwide attention, and Mila had been the focus of all her friends back in LA when it first aired. “Really?” they wanted to know. “That’s where you’re from? She was your *babysitter*?” They asked if Sabrina had a drug addiction, a pimp boyfriend, or ties to a cult.

But Sabrina had been none of those things. She was a straight-A student, an only child and the apple of her parents’ eyes, who did her homework the Tuesday evenings she watched Mila while Grandma went to her book club meetings. She had plans to go to some fancy college in the fall, and her high school schedule was jam-packed with sports and extracurriculars.

The news show switched to an intrusively loud, obnoxious commercial, leaving Mila feeling slightly unhinged. Though she’d only been on the brink of her ninth birthday when it happened, Mila remembered the nightmarish weeks that followed Sabrina’s disappearance well. Too well. Police and detectives had swarmed the house, overturning every inch of the yard and the rooms

inside. They'd even brought both her and Grandma down to the station for questioning, over and over and over, looking for holes in their stories. But they never found even the tiniest speck of evidence, despite the fact that it was from this very house Sabrina was last seen.

Grandma had thought she went home as usual after babysitting Mila that night, but the next morning, the phone was ringing off the hook, and Sabrina's car was still in the driveway. Whatever happened to Sabrina that night had happened close, too close. For the years following, Grandma hardly let Mila out of her sight, and most of the other parents in Goose Pond were overly cautious with their own children as well.

To top it off, Sabrina wasn't even the first child to go missing from Goose Pond. There had been a little boy with the last name Budreau years before Mila was born, from a rough, hard-living family always on the wrong side of the law. His own parents didn't even report him missing until weeks after the last time they'd seen him, and ended up the prime suspects in the case. But once again, the police couldn't find any evidence to pin on them, and they'd walked away scot-free, much to the disapproval of the townspeople. It was no wonder the Budreau family got out of Goose Pond as fast as they could, never to be seen or heard from again.