

Chapter Two



Mylze slapped at her alarm clock, the insistent beeping having infiltrated her dreams and pulled her from sleep.

“Stop. Just stop.”

Memories from the night before crashed around her. The failed blind date, Tad’s phone call, the coming wrath from Rachel—it was all too much. It took all her willpower to throw off her covers and get out of bed instead of diving under them again. But hiding from the world wouldn’t fill her bank account. She had work to do. There were articles to write and advertisers to woo.

After showering, she stood in front of her closet, perusing her wardrobe. She slipped into a bright, cheery sundress, imagining herself on Mallorca’s sunny shores. Something—*anything*—to get her feeling more like a travel blogger than a failure.

She barely noticed the rest of the drab apartment as she headed to her oasis. Posters from her travels covered her office walls—white beaches and blue skies, bronzed bodies and white linen as far as the eye could see. A large world map took center stage on one wall, blue push pins for the places she’d been and orange for two that had been next on her list—Dublin and Venice.

Endless freedom, guaranteed. *Not anymore.* Not unless she could get some sponsors.

Mylze leaned back in her chair and sighed. One glance at her

office window told her it was raining. Again. It was almost summer, and the rain had persisted for weeks. The bleak clouds matched her mood, threatening her determination. Shivering, she pulled on the cardigan she kept in her office for such occasions. With the warm wool covering her shoulders, she could almost picture herself strolling the streets of Dublin. Almost. With an Aran sweater and a cup of tea, the rain wouldn't be so bad. Sunshine on her bare shoulders and the kiss of silky sand on her bare feet would be even better. Anywhere would do. Anywhere but here. The world beckoned, and she longed to answer the call. She rolled her shoulders to release some of the tension, then flopped back in her office chair.

Opening her computer, she browsed travel sites for airfare prices, searching for inspiration for new article ideas. Not that she'd actually be going anywhere with no income. The tiny severance package from *Travel* had landed in her account that morning. It would quickly dwindle unless she could get her blog rolling again, and fast.

She sighed, opened a fresh document, and stared at the blinking cursor. Despite her efforts, the words wouldn't come. As she stared at her computer screen, she felt as though she'd exhausted every idea.

She navigated to her website. Her play on words made her smile every time she logged in. Mylze skimmed through a few of her old articles, desperate for inspiration.

Get Outside: 10 Day Hikes Near Seattle, Washington.

Nope.

Get Caffeinated: 10 Best Coffee Places in Portland, Oregon.

Ugh.

Get Away: 7 Amazing Sights to See in Athens, Greece.

Double nope.

I need a vacation. She laughed at the irony. A travel blogger who needs a vacation? Mylze shook her head.

Her phone buzzed and she leaped for it, grateful for a distraction. She glanced at the caller ID, then smiled.

"Hi, Aunt Carol."

"Mylze, honey pie, is that you? I'm sorry, my connection isn't great up here at the lake."

"Yes, it's me. How are things at the cabin?"

"Fine, dear, just fine. I've started working on the guest bathroom this summer."

Mylze sat up straight, all her senses on alert now. "Wait. Did you ever finish the kitchen flooring last year?"

At seventy years old, Aunt Carol was a capable woman, but Mylze worried she would bite off more than she could chew. Lately, she'd started a lot of projects at the cabin and never finished them. Mylze smiled to herself, images of summers at the cabin with her aunt and her sister flickering through her mind. The sixteen-year age difference between Carol and Mylze's mother meant her seventy-year-old aunt had often felt more like a grandmother. Uncle Ben had passed away when Mylze was too young to remember him, but Aunt Carol filled every summer with adventure and joy.

"The floor's almost done. In fact, I've got a nice young gentleman coming over this week to help me finish up that project."

Mylze relaxed a fraction. "That's good, Auntie."

"When are you going to come out? It's been so long since you've been to visit. You loved coming here as a child." The smile returned to her aunt's voice. "I remember how you were always the first to jump in the water the moment you all arrived. Rachel was always so reserved, but you just wanted to swim."

Mylze smiled at the memory. Running straight into the cold water, diving in where the water was deep enough. Her sister, prim and proper, stood on the beach, dipping her toes in but staying clean and dry. Exhilaration and abandonment to the joys of summer rushed through Mylze's body. She could almost feel the brush of lake water on her skin. Endless summer, indeed.

"Besides, I want you to meet Jeffrey," Aunt Carol said.

"Wait ... who's Jeffrey?"

Aunt Carol sighed. "Jeffrey is the young man I told you about. The one who's going to be working on the kitchen? He's the nicest young man. I want you to meet him, so when are you coming?"

Mylze cringed, the disastrous date from the night before fresh in her mind. Her aunt was as bad as her sister, matchmaking at every turn. At least Aunt Carol was well intentioned, rather than trying to force Mylze into a mold she wasn't sure she fit. "I can't come this summer, Aunt Carol. I wish I could, but I simply can't afford it. My job—"

“Pish tosh. I’ll fly you out here.”

The offer was tempting. Summer memories at the lake called to her, her restless feet already longing for a new adventure. Growing up, those summers had been her escape to a different life. She considered Carol’s offer. Three carefree months before starting over again? It might be exactly what she needed. Then she heard Rachel’s voice in her head. *Taking money from Aunt Carol? Mylze, you need to figure things out. You can’t spend your life gallivanting around the world.*

She shook the temptation away. “I can’t. I’d love to, and I miss you, but I have to work. My articles aren’t going to write themselves. Maybe next summer.”

Aunt Carol sighed again, her disappointment evident. “Yes, honey pie. There’s always next year.”

Mylze disconnected the call and turned her attention to her computer. The memories lingered as she sent a few emails to potential sponsors. Once finished, she leaned back in her chair, her thoughts of the lake sparking a fresh idea for an article series. *Hometown Highlights*. It would focus on how to enjoy one’s hometown, sort of a staycation angle. The title wasn’t the best, but at least she’d moved away from the Top Ten idea. Maybe a night out with Lina would spark her imagination. She slapped her laptop closed.

She stood and stretched her back, arching like a cat after a long nap. Her desk chair was murder on her muscles. Her gaze flitted around her office and landed on her bookshelf, filled to bursting with travel guides, memorabilia, and photographs. One picture caught her eye. She reached for the shell-encrusted frame.

Mylze and Rachel stood with their arms entwined, each holding a picture frame, huge smiles on their faces. Aunt Carol stood behind them, beaming her pride into the camera. They had hunted for small shells all morning, searching the shoreline for new treasures uncovered each time a wave came in. After lunch, Aunt Carol had pulled out her glue gun, some craft paint, and two old picture frames. Mylze and Rachel had spent a joy-filled afternoon making their seashell frames just right.

Squinting at the picture, she aimed for a clearer view of the two frames. As expected, Rachel’s was perfect. Four symmetrical shells dotted each corner, and a beautiful pattern emerged down the sides.

She remembered how careful Rachel had been that day, planning out the pattern before committing to any glue.

Mylze glanced at the frame in her hand. She, too, had spent a long time aligning her shells, but to look at it, there was no rhyme or reason to the scheme. She sighed and returned the frame to her bookshelf, reminders of the night before blowing in like a hurricane. In so many ways, she would never measure up to her sister's standards.