



Return to Destiny Preview

Prologue

Despite the bonfire in the distance, surrounded by happy people laughing, eating, and drinking, Cara Collins stood in the shadows taking it all in. She'd known this night was coming; she'd thought she was mentally prepared. But tomorrow her boyfriend of two and a half years was leaving their hometown of Destiny for college, and it suddenly felt ominously real.

With his handsome face illuminated by the firelight, Tyler Fleet stood before the crowd thanking them for coming to the Farris Family Orchard tonight to see him off, and for their support through the years. "Leading the Bulldogs to a state championship last fall for the first time in Destiny High School's history was both a privilege and an honor."

Being the local football star—the first from their humble town ever actually recruited and given a scholarship by a small but respected school in Western Kentucky—had already taught Tyler to shine in the spotlight. He'd adapted to

being in the public eye like a seasoned pro. She was proud of him. And excited for what lay ahead for him. But right now, she also felt a little bit sad for her. It wasn't easy being left behind, even when it was the only plan that made any sense.

When a hand touched her arm through one of Tyler's too-big-on-her hoodies, she flinched, then turned to see Amy Whitaker at her side.

"Amy, you scared me to death!"

Amy only chuckled. She owned Under the Covers, a cozy bookstore on the town square, and served as Destiny's unofficial but always-on-the-job matchmaker—and she had fixed Cara and Tyler up at the beginning of their junior year. Now Cara thought of Amy, in her mid-thirties, almost like a big sister since all of her biological sisters had moved away.

"What's with this weather, huh?" Amy asked good-naturedly as she gave a playful shiver, pulling a fuzzy cardigan tighter around her. It was unseasonably cool for Ohio in August, making it a convenient night for a bonfire, but still a jolt to everyone's systems.

"I think it's supposed to warm right back up tomorrow, into the eighties," Cara said. It struck her that the strange weather, on this particular night, matched her mood—cold and uneasy, ushering in a shocking transition she wasn't really ready for.

Now Amy squeezed her shoulder, her expression changing as she read Cara's. "Missing him before he's even gone, aren't you?"

Cara only nodded.

"It's a tough situation with your mom," Amy said. "You're a wonderful daughter."

Cara's mother's health was failing. A lifelong diabetic, her mom had handled the challenges well up to now, but things had deteriorated over the last year, and she couldn't live alone. And though Cara and Tyler had originally hoped to attend the same university, it had recently been decided that Cara would remain in Destiny to care for her mother, while her older sisters—two of them with young families of their own and another with a lucrative career in Cincinnati—would provide financial support.

“Thanks,” she said to Amy. “And it’ll all work out.” That was the mantra for everyone involved in the situation these days. She said it, Tyler said it, her sisters said it, everyone they knew said it.

“And I’m sure you two will see each other all the time, even if he’s not right across town anymore.”

At this, though, Cara couldn’t help scrunching up her nose. “Actually, he can’t come home until the holidays due to his football schedule. Though I’m supposed to go with his family to a few games.” The school was five hours away, and spending that much time in a car with Tyler’s parents, who’d never seemed to like her very much, wasn’t exactly her idea of a good time, but even getting to see him for just a little while after a game would be worth it.

“I didn’t realize his schedule would keep him away so long, but...like you said, it’ll all work out.” Amy smiled.

There were those words again. It’ll all work out. So Cara tried to smile, too. She had to stay positive here, after all. “We plan to call each other every couple of days. And of course we’ll text all the time. And we’ll send lots of pictures back and forth—even if his will be much more interesting than mine, since he’ll be someplace new.”

Amy kept the positive going. “He’ll cherish any picture you send. And that’s a great idea, a great way to share your everyday lives with each other.”

Cara nodded again, still trying to feel hopeful. She’d kept a brave face on this whole past year, so why was she suddenly so doom-and-gloom? After all, she and Tyler were devoted to each other.

No one knew this, but they intended to get married after he graduated from college. And if football led into a post-college career for him, as he hoped, she would gladly go wherever he ended up, and her mother would come with them—even if Mom didn’t know it yet. If things didn’t go that way, they’d play it by ear, but they would be together again one way or another, and would include her mother in their plans.

This past spring, after two years as a couple, Cara had finally been ready for sex, and adding that intimate element to their relationship had made them even

closer. A thought which made her hope he'd be ready to leave the party soon, even though he was the guest of honor. After all, it would be their last night together for months.

When a breeze made both her and Amy shiver, she said, "Let's go get warm by the fire."

"Sure," Amy replied. "Logan's somewhere over there anyway." Amy had recently wed her lifelong best friend, Logan Whitaker, a handsome fireman, after some drama that had proven to the whole town that true love conquered all. Cara tried to let that inspire her as they started toward the bonfire.

She and Amy both spotted Tyler heading toward Cara in the dark at the same time, and Amy elbowed her to softly suggest, "Or maybe you want to get warm some other way." The two exchanged knowing looks. "I'll go find Logan. You two have a good night."

As Amy disappeared into the darkness, Tyler reached her. "Hey."

Even just that, his voice, his very presence, was enough to warm her up inside. "Hi there." The words came out breathy as she gazed flirtatiously up at her handsome, light-haired, muscular TyGuy, as she sometimes called him. And she was his CareBear. "Your speech was great."

"Thanks," he said. Then, "Um, can we talk?"

"Sure." Was something wrong? Something sounded a little wrong. "What's up?"

He stayed quiet before answering. Quiet enough to tighten her chest, make her heart beat faster. "Cara, I don't know how to say this exactly, but..."

"You can tell me anything," she said quickly. Because surely this was nothing bad about her, them, and she wanted him to get to the point and confirm that.

Still, he hesitated. And she began to feel a little sick to her stomach. "Tyler, what is it? Whatever it is, just tell me."

He blew out a breath and her nervousness escalated, her whole body going jittery with uncertainty.

“I think we should break up,” he said.

And her heart plummeted to her stomach. “What?” she gasped. “What do you mean?” This couldn’t be. They were in love. They were each other’s missing half. She must be somehow hearing him wrong.

He didn’t look at her, seemingly couldn’t look at her—instead he stared at his feet. “Mom and Dad think I need to focus on my classes and football, that it’ll be a lot to get used to, and that I shouldn’t have any distractions.”

She flinched, her back going ramrod straight. “I’m a distraction?”

“No, I didn’t mean it like that,” he said, now meeting her eyes for the first time. He looked sad, desperate. She couldn’t even imagine what she looked like right now. He even reached out to touch her arm.

But she pulled it away, on instinct. An instinct she’d never dreamed she’d have. “Tyler, I don’t understand. Are you serious? Are you seriously doing this?” They’d just had sex last night, for heaven’s sake!

“I know, I know,” he said, sounding tired. “I mean, it’s not like I want to. I love you, CareBear. I just...”

“You just what?”

“I guess I think they’re right. College is gonna be a lot harder than high school, and I have to take it seriously, like Mom and Dad keep saying.”

She pulled in her breath, her mind whirling. She could argue the point, try to dig down and make him explain exactly how the mere act of keeping in touch with her while she was several hundred miles away would prevent him from taking his studies seriously, but instead she leapt to what seemed even more heinous. “Did you...did you know you were gonna do this last night?”

Even in the dark, she saw his guilt-laden grimace, showing her that he understood the question completely. “No,” he said. “I mean, I was trying to talk myself out of it. But damn, Cara, I leave tomorrow. Who knows when we’ll even see each other again? Everything is changing so fast.”

For you, she wanted to say. And, well, now maybe for me, too. Everything I thought I knew about my future.

But she didn't bother saying any of that. She didn't bother trying to reason with him or remind him of their grand plan to be together forever. Instead, she only said, "I can't believe you're doing this to us. I can't believe you're throwing us away."

"I'm not," he argued. And again he reached for her, but this time she even took a step back.

He went on, "It's like my dad keeps telling me—it makes sense for now. And if we're really meant to be together, later, it'll all work out."

It'll all work out. The words just took on an entirely different meaning for her. Now they were nothing more than another way of saying goodbye.

And he could blame this on his parents all he wanted—and she didn't doubt for a second that they were behind it—but he was the one making the final choice. To leave her, for real, for good. To abandon her like so many other people already had. Her sisters. And her father, who'd died when she was twelve. Leukemia certainly hadn't been her dad's fault, but it had started a pattern of losing people, a pattern she'd survived pretty well—until now. Her insides were crumbling, dissolving—she could barely stay on her feet.

"I hope we can still stay in touch," he said. "I mean, I know this is hard, but we can still be friends. I'd hate for you not to be in my life anymore."

Okay, was he for real here? He thought he could have her in his life, whenever or however he felt like it, but not as his girlfriend? Nope, no way. "If it's this easy for you to break up, then I have a feeling you'll get by just fine without me," she said harshly. "I'm gonna go." A split-second decision.

"What? Wait—just like that?"

"Was there more you needed to say? Anything else I need to know?"

He appeared befuddled. She'd caught him off guard by not taking the insulting bone he was throwing her, by not being her usual sweet, docile self. "I...guess not," he finally replied.

"Then we're done here," she said, starting to walk away.

But he caught her wrist in his fist. "Wait. I picked you up—remember? Let me drive you home."

"No thanks, I'll walk," she said, yanking her arm free. "After all, I wouldn't want to tear you away from The Tyler Fleet Show."

"CareBear, that's not fair. And it's too cold to walk that far."

"I'm not your CareBear anymore—you've made that clear. And if we get into a conversation about what's fair here, I'm pretty sure you'll lose." She started away from him yet again.

"Cara, stop—don't leave this way."

At that, she did pause, looking back. "How should I leave? By making nice so you can feel better about dumping me with no warning, about upending my life? I've done nothing but be a loving, supportive girlfriend when the whole world was revolving around you, nothing but be a good sister and a good daughter, no matter what's asked of me. No matter how hard it's been to give up my own dreams of college, no matter how horrible it is to see my mom's health get worse and worse. All I really had to hang onto was...you. Us. And this is what I get.

"So you can feel free to go off to college and have the time of your life without me, but don't expect me to smile and tell you it's okay. We had sex last night, for God's sake." She gritted her teeth for the last part.

"Geesh, keep it down," he warned. "Could you say that a little louder?"

"Why? Are you afraid it might make you seem not quite as heroic if people knew that less than twenty-four hours later, you're dumping me?"

“Would you quit saying it like that?” he complained, having the nerve to sound put out with her. “I’m not dumping you. That sounds so mean, like I don’t even care.”

“If it sounds mean, maybe that’s because it is mean. And it’s exactly what you’re doing.” With that, she began to walk away from him yet again, but stopped on her own this time, remembering he’d given her a hoodie from his car earlier when the sweater she’d worn wasn’t warm enough. Yanking it unceremoniously off over her head, she dropped it on the ground.

“Oh my God,” he said, his voice gone angry now, too. “Put that back on. You’ll freeze to death.”

“It’s yours,” she said, “and I don’t want to have to worry about returning it to you.”

“I don’t care about a stupid sweatshirt. You can keep it.”

“I don’t want it.”

“Would you calm down? You’re acting like a baby about this.”

Her face burned hot at the unbelievable insult. A guy gets mad about something and it’s justified—but when a girl does, she’s considered overly emotional and childish. It was the first time he’d ever seen her angry and she thought she had a pretty good reason for it. “And you’re a jerk. I never want to see you again.”

She wasn’t sure how much longer she could hold back tears—adrenaline would give way to crumbling soon—so she finally turned and started trudging away from him through the rows of apple trees.

Part of her thought he’d call her back again, find another reason to stop her...and maybe, just maybe, magically say something to take this all back and make it right again. Cara, I’m sorry. I was wrong. Of course I don’t want to break up with you. Please let me make it up to you. I love you forever.

But he didn’t.

So she kept going because what else was there to do?

And soon she was skirting the edge of the crowd, grateful for the darkness, praying no one would talk to her, and as tears loomed closer and closer, she began moving faster, almost jogging in order to reach the bridge that led across Sugar Creek and back to the main road through town.

“Cara?”

The voice belonged to Amy, but it came from far away—she must have spotted Cara, through all the partygoers, looking harried and upset. But Cara chose to pretend she didn’t hear and just kept briskly walking.

Shivering from the chill, she soon began to cry. And to run. Crossing the old stone bridge, she ran alongside the quiet road toward town, now praying no one would come along and stop, thinking she needed a ride. Cold tears flowed down her cheeks and humiliation set in, adding insult to injury, as it hit her that soon enough the whole town would know. And here she was, literally running away from the orchard like a fool.

But she simply needed to get as far away from Tyler as she could. So he couldn’t see her cry. Couldn’t have the luxury of comforting her. Couldn’t have the chance to end things on a consoling note and then go off into his new life feeling like he’d made things right with her.

He could never make things right now.

And even as she jogged past the quiet, empty town square toward home, she came to realize that no matter how long or far she ran, she could never really get away from what was tearing her apart.

What was her life even going to be without him in it? She had no idea.

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