

# FAKING IT WITH MY BEST FRIEND



A Romantic Comedy



USA TODAY Bestselling Author  
**KATE O'KEEFFE**

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# FAKING IT WITH MY BEST FRIEND

A romantic comedy

Second Chance Café

Book 2

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KATE O'KEEFFE

Wild Lime Books

*Faking It With the Grump* is a work of fiction. The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental and not intended by the author.

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## About This Book

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***The two of us have been best friends forever. But one of us is faking it.***

### **Ryn**

*Gabe and I are the dynamic duo of Hunter's Creek, the small town in Washington where we live. As best friends, our bond is as tight as a bungee cord. But even though he's loyal, sweet, and totally hot in that flannel-wearing lumberjack way of his, he's always stayed securely in the "friend zone"—despite the fact I was head-over-heels in love with him in high school.*

*Just as I'm complaining that nothing ever happens here, Hollywood comes to town bringing its over-the-top movie madness energy. Along for the ride is Hollywood hottie Joe Turner who turns my head in a big way.*

*Gabe does not seem pleased.*

### **Gabe**

*Do you know what really gets under my skin? No good, full-of-themselves Hollywood guys named Joe Turner who hit on my best friend. Doesn't Ryn know that she deserves so much better than that guy? He'll use her up and spit her out when he leaves town.*

*Yet, no matter what I say, she goes for him anyway. And I'm not happy about it. Who am I kidding? I hate it.*

*What's more, the Hunter's Creek Ladies Committee, aka a bunch of women with nothing better to do, have been trying to matchmake Ryn and me forever. They seem to think that the simple fact we're both single means*



*we're perfect for each other. Listen up, ladies: it takes more to fall in love than to think your best friend is the most beautiful, clever, kind-hearted, and funny woman you've ever met.*

*Wait. Could they be right?*

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## Also by Kate O'Keeffe

Second Chance Café Series:

*Faking It With the Grump*

*Faking It With My Best Friend*

*Faking It With the Guy Next Door*

It's Complicated Series:

*Never Fall for Your Back-Up Guy*

*Never Fall for Your Enemy*

*Never Fall for Your Fake Fiancé*

*Never Fall for Your One that Got Away*

Love Manor Romantic Comedy Series:

*Dating Mr. Darcy*

*Marrying Mr. Darcy*

*Falling for Another Darcy*

*Falling for Mr. Bingley (spin-off novella)*

High Tea Series:

*No More Bad Dates*

*No More Terrible Dates*

*No More Horrible Dates*

Cozy Cottage Café Series:

*One Last First Date*

*Two Last First Dates*

*Three Last First Dates*

*Four Last First Dates*

Wellywood Romantic Comedy Series:

*Styling Wellywood*

*Miss Perfect Meets Her Match*

*Falling for Grace*

Standalone title:

*One Way Ticket*

Writing as Lacey Sinclair:

*Manhattan Cinderella*

*The Right Guy*

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# Prologue

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## Gabe



You know that thing Eleanor Roosevelt said about friendship? Something about how only true friends leave footprints in your heart? Well, the footprints in my heart are Ryn Cole's. They're about a size 7, give or take, never exactly subtle, and always tennis shoe-clad.

One of the greatest things about having Ryn as my best friend is that no matter what time of day or night, she's always there with a ready smile, a witty comment, and advice that fits me just right.

We get one another. We work.

You see, Ryn and I have been best friends since we were kids, ever since she told Macauley Gellert to back off from taunting me over the fact that I had no dad or she'd stab him in the arm with her pencil, at seven years old. She didn't do it. She didn't need to. Macauley dropped his gibes—and me? Well, I found my best friend.

We both grew up in Hunter's Creek, in the great Pacific North West state of Washington, where the trees are tall and the flannel is rightfully plaid. Where you get good, decent, straightforward people who care about one another, even if they do sometimes tend to lean toward gossiping and meddling.

Sometimes? Who am I kidding? It's *all* the time. In fact, I'd go so far as

to say without the anchor of meddling and gossip, Hunter's Creek might get washed away in the famous Washington rain.

But you know what? I've never known another life, and I never want to. Hunter's Creek is where my heart is, and it's where my best friend, with those footprints of hers, is too.

What did I do to deserve a best friend like Ryn Cole?

I got lucky, I guess.

I park my truck in our usual spot, a clearing off the road at the edge of the thick woods just out of town. Hunter's Creek is built on the back of the lumber industry, and without these trees, stretching for mile upon mile, our town wouldn't exist.

The night sky is nothing short of magnificent right now, the only lights coming from town a couple miles away. Framed only by the silhouettes of the towering trees, the night sky canopy over our heads is like a blanket perforated with millions of tiny, light-filled holes.

I know, I'm getting lyrical. It's hard not to when you're surrounded by such beauty. And it's all on our doorstep, waiting to be enjoyed.

Which is what my best friend, Ryn, and I are doing right now.

"Is that the Big Dipper?" she asks, as she points at the sky.

I'm grateful for the heat from the engine against our backs as a cool early-summer breeze chills the night air.

I follow where she's pointing to a collection of stars. When you connect them together it looks a little like a big shovel. I nudge her with my elbow. "You been studying up or something?"

"I'm just naturally gifted," she replies with a smile, her hazel eyes glinting in the dull light.

"You're naturally gifted at knowing constellations? Is that even a thing? I mean it's not like being gifted at math or writing symphonies."

"I can do math."

"And you could sit down and write a symphony if you wanted, too?"

She lets out a light, tinkling laugh. "Sure. Why not? Remember, I played the triangle in the school band?"

"Once, Ryn-Ryn. You played the triangle in the school band once, and we both know it was on a dare."

She lets out a contented sigh, gazing back up at the night sky. "Easiest twenty bucks I ever made."

I laugh as I shake my head. That's the other thing about me and my best

friend: we rib each other. A lot. Rib, tease, make fun of. It's fun and it's familiar and it's a big part of who we are. Big kids, I guess. In fact, we made a pact when we were teenagers that we would never grow up. We are Peter Pan and Petra Pan of Neverland.

We couldn't come up with a better name.

We figured that adulting comes with responsibilities and seriousness, and neither of us wants any of that. We want to live in the moment, never worrying about tomorrow. Live our best lives, the way they are right now.

You may think that makes us immature, stuck maybe. At twenty-three, we should know better.

I think it makes us fearless.

"I'm gonna get a Big Dipper and add it to my home collection," she tells me. "It would really round off the whole celestial sphere I've got going on."

I chortle. "You refer to your bedroom ceiling as a 'celestial sphere' now?"

"It is a celestial sphere, G," she says, using the nickname only Ryn calls me. "It's the Ryn Cole Celestial Sphere, for obvious reasons."

"Original."

"Those famous astronomers name constellations after themselves all the time. I'm just following in their footsteps."

Ever since I've known Ryn, she's had those glow in the dark plastic stars on her ceiling. She arranges them artfully, guided by the actual night sky. Or at least that's what she tells me. We may spend a fair bit of time gazing up at the stars together throughout summer, but I'm here more for the company than some astronomical education.

I sweep my gaze across her out of the corner of my eye. Not in a creepy way, you understand, rather in a *she's my buddy and I'm just looking at her* kind of way. Her face is upturned, her nose straight, her long, thick strawberry blonde hair falling in cascades against the cool windshield behind her head. She wears a tank top tonight with her usual jeans and sneakers. It's figure hugging, showing off her curves in a way her standard t-shirts definitely hide.

Not that I should notice these things, of course. Best friends, remember?

But I am still a guy.

She's completely unaware of how beautiful she really is. I know it's a total cliché, but in Ryn's case it's one hundred percent true. She's beautiful and funny and, evidently, knows where the Big Dipper is located.

Seriously, what more could a guy want?

You know, as a best friend, that is.

I take a sip and the cool, bubbly liquid slips down my throat. “Did you get The Question today?”

“Of course I did. I’m a piranha in a pool of goldfish.”

I chuckle. “Piranha? That’s a new one.”

“When you get asked continually about your dating life and get told you shouldn’t be single, you come up with new ways to describe yourself. You know that. You get The Question every day, too.”

“But being a piranha in a pool of goldfish suggests that they think you’re gonna eat them for breakfast.”

“Maybe I will,” she replies with a grin. “How many times were you asked about your dating life today?”

I think back on my day spent between doing the lunch shift at the Black Bear Bar in town and my apprenticeship at a glass blowing studio on the edge of town. A typical Sunday for me, and never a day of rest. I’ve got too much going on for that, no matter what Mom would have said about the need to relax. This is my relaxation, hanging out with my best friend on the hood of my car.

“I dropped in to the Second Chance,” I reply, mentioning the Main Street coffeehouse where Ryn works these days.

“Right. So, my Aunt Sheila happened.”

“She sure did. She asked me why you and I aren’t dating. Again.”

“What did you tell her? No, wait. Let me guess. You said something like ‘I’m keeping my options open’ because you can’t bring yourself to lie, Mr. Honest-to-a-Fault. Tell me I’m not wrong?”

“I’m not honest to a fault,” I protest. “It’s true, I value honesty above a lot of things, but it’s not like it’s a fault. I’m honest with the people in my life, and I expect honesty in return.”

She snort-laughs. “You’re Captain Honesty. I wonder what your super power is? Ooh, I know, it’d be like Wonder Woman’s rope.”

I’m not sure I want to know the answer, but I ask anyway, “Wonder Woman’s rope?”

“You know, when she wraps it around a person and they cannot lie?”

“I could do with one of those.”

She shoots me a sideways look. “Not everyone is a liar, G,” she says softly.



I pull my lips into a tight, thin line and return my attention to the stars. We both know what she's referring to. My dad left my mom and me when I wasn't even a year old. Not an uncommon story, I guess. Plenty of marriages break up early on, particularly when the couple is young, like my parents were. What wasn't so common was that after he left, Mom learned that he'd lied to her about their entire relationship. He had another family in the neighboring town. She was left literally holding the baby, with a marriage that never existed.

Unsurprisingly, it totally rocked her and she never got over it. What she did do though, was teach me the importance of honesty, and I make sure to surround myself with people I can trust wholeheartedly.

Friend that she is, Ryn changes the subject. "You know, one of these days you're gonna have to get yourself a new girlfriend so that this town can stop matchmaking us with one another. Why they can't see that a guy and a girl can be best friends without complicating things with romantic feelings is beyond me."

"I'll drink to that."

We tap our cans, both take a sip of our sodas, and return to a comfortable silence.

That's one of the other great things about my best friend. We don't always have to talk. She understands that sometimes just being together is enough.

Ryn's phone buzzes and she instantly reaches for it.

"Leave it," I tell her, not wanting our moment to be interrupted.

"But it might be Ivy. You know how she is with forgetting her keys. She might be locked out again."

Ivy Fenwick, Ryn's new roommate—and my ex from high school. We get on fine these days, which is just as well, because you can't exactly be anonymous in a place the size of Hunter's Creek.

Before I can protest further, Ryn hands me her soda can, picks up her phone, and begins to read her message. The bright light from her phone illuminates her face, and I watch as her eyes widen, her features morphing from a look of shock into excitement.

She bolts upright, taking me by surprise. "Oh, my," she says, her voice suddenly breathless.

I lean back, close my eyes, and ask, "'Oh, my' what?"

"It can't be true."

My eyes open a crack. “What is it?”

“She can’t be serious,” Ryn mutters, her eyes glued to her screen as her mouth drops open.

“What can’t she be serious about?” Concern worms its way across my chest. I push myself up so we’re sitting side by side as I balance both of our soda cans.

“But that’s the best thing that could happen to this town *ever*.”

Relieved it’s not bad news, I say, “You know you’re gonna have to tell me at some point, don’t you?”

“Read it,” she declares as she thrusts the phone in my face.

I take it from her and skim over the message.

*You are not going to believe this. I just heard a Hollywood film crew is coming to our boring little town NEXT MONTH. Call me! NOW!!!*

Ivy has definitely used up her exclamation point quota for the week.

“A Hollywood film crew?” I arch an eyebrow at Ryn as I hand her back her phone. “Unlikely.”

“What do you mean ‘unlikely’? Of course it’s likely. Ivy said so right here.” She holds her phone up as evidence.

“Come on, Ryn. Ivy doesn’t exactly have contacts in Hollywood, unless I missed something and she’s a secret Hollywood insider and not in Accounts Receivable at the mill.”

“You can believe what you want to believe, Gabriel Hartmann.”

In one fluid movement Ryn pushes herself off the hood and her sneaker-clad feet land on the dusty ground, like a gymnast dismounting from a beam.

“What’s with calling me Gabriel all of a sudden?” I swing my own legs off the edge of the truck and jump down.

“Because you’re not listening to me, *Gabriel*.”

“Chill out. I’m listening.”

“I believe Ivy. Why would she make something like that up?”

*Because she’s attention seeking and probably bored with her own life?* I don’t say it. Ryn and Ivy are friends and new roommates. Plus, small town, remember?

It’s not that I don’t like Ivy. I do. She’s great. She’s just like a lot of people here in town: ready to believe anything new and exciting to spice up their quiet lives.

Ryn taps out something on her phone and then climbs up into the truck, closing her door. It’s a completely unsubtle way of telling me she wants to

leave.

“I take it you want to go home?”

“If that’s okay with you, Mr. Cynical.” She doesn’t look up from her screen.

I let out a laugh. “I’ve gone from Captain Honesty to Mr. Cynical in one night?” I pull my own door open and climb into the truck. “Think about it. Why would a film crew come to Hunter’s Creek?”

“Lots of reasons,” she replies pointedly. “Lots and lots of reasons.”

“Such as?”

She lowers her phone and taps her leg in irritation. “Are you gonna drive, G? Or do I have to come up with another name for you?”

“Since you asked so nicely.”

She shakes her head. “Don’t go getting all older brother on me. I told Ivy I’m coming home.”

“Because a Hollywood film crew is coming to town *this very minute*?”

“Obviously not this very minute, but we’ve got things to talk about before they do.”

“Like what?”

“You put the key in there and then you turn the ignition to start the car,” she tells me, gesturing at the steering column.

“Where would I be without you?”

“Please?” She pulls her full lips into the smile that gets me every time.

We both know I’m going to do as she asks.

I let out a resigned breath as I turn the ignition and my truck begins to rumble. I drive carefully across the uneven ground and onto the paved road.

“This is going to be so epic.”

I glance at her shining face, alive with excitement. “Let’s think logically here. Why would Hollywood want to come to Hunter’s Creek?”

“Because it’s a beautiful place, especially in the summer.”

“Lots of places are beautiful in the summer.”

“Because of all the trees. I mean, look at them. There are literally millions.” She gestures out the window.

“Lots of places have trees, too.”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s because we deserve some excitement around here?”

“That’s bound to be it. Some Hollywood bigwig was sitting at his desk, looking at a map and thinking, what small town in the middle of nowhere

needs some excitement? Oh, I know: Hunter's Creek, Washington."

"So young to be so cynical." She nudges my arm.

I look at her and we share a smile.

A short drive later, I pull my truck into her driveway. No sooner do I turn to face her than she plants a quick kiss on my cheek, pushes the door open with her feet, and jumps out onto the driveway.

"Thanks for tonight, G. See you tomorrow?"

It's a question, but she's not waiting for my reply. A flash of her smile and a wave of her hand and she dances up the steps and into her house, the door slamming closed behind her.

"See you tomorrow," I murmur as she disappears from sight.

I put my truck in gear, the engine rumbling, and drive away, wondering whether this whole Hollywood film thing is real, and if it is, what it could mean for our town.

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# Chapter 1

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Ryn



~1 month later ~

Nothing ever happens in Hunter's Creek, this teeny, tiny town I've called home for my entire twenty-three years and seven months of life.

Nothing.

Ever.

Happens.

Well, not until today, that is.

I can barely contain my excitement because today is the day everything changes. And I do mean *everything*.

What's happening? Only the single most exciting, totally out of the blue, utterly unexpected thing to happen in Hunter's Creek since the first ever tree was chopped down and taken to the mill that created this town—and let's face it, that's hardly exciting.

Today is the day that Cambri-oh Entertainment—yes, *the* Cambri-oh Entertainment that has made huge box office smash hit movies, such as *Die for Tomorrow*, *Gold for the Soul*, and the total tear-jerker, *Samuel*—comes to town for three whole months to film a rom com.

Three.

Whole.

Months.

That's three months of movie crew and movie stars and everything that goes with it, right here in the town where nothing ever happens.

I could pinch myself.

Ivy was right. She had heard through the Hunter's Creek gossip network that Mr. Cantor, the former owner of the town's mill and the big man around town, had struck a deal with Cambri-oh Entertainment to film a movie on his land.

I've barely met the guy, but I think I love him.

I've tried to stay calm. Believe me. I've tried to focus on making the coffee and arranging the muffins and delivering slices of pie and donuts and all the other things the people of this town like to have mid-morning on a Tuesday. It's been an effort. A freaking *huge* effort. All I can think about is that sometime today forty people—probably more when you think about entourages and makeup artists and stunt doubles and the people who hold those fluffy microphone things overhead when they're filming a scene—will descend on Hunter's Creek, literally changing the landscape of this place. For the better. The *much* better.

Despite my best efforts to focus on my job, I gaze out the window of the Second Chance Café in expectation.

So far, nothing.

"Table 7 said they ordered some hotcakes about half an hour ago," says my aunt, the coffeehouse owner and my boss.

I drag my eyes from watching the empty street through the front window. "Sorry, what did you say?"

Aunt Sheila shoots me a stern look. "Hot cakes, Ryn. Table 7."

"What about them? Oh, do they want some hot cakes? I can go take their order right now if you want?"

I glance at the people sitting at Table 7. It's the members of what I call the Hunter's Creek Ladies' Committee, a group of women with too much time on their hands, who love to get together and gossip about everybody in this town—and matchmake the single folk among us.

Gabe and I are their frequent targets.

All of them turn and glare impatiently at me.

What is with them?

Aunt Sheila throws her hands onto her apron-clad hips. "What's going on

with you today, Ryn? You dropped an order of scrambled eggs in poor Samuel McNaught's lap, you gave your sister an empty plate when she'd ordered a slice of pie, and worst of all, you used decaf beans in the coffee machine and everybody complained."

I scrunch up my face. "Decaf?"

"Decaf. Not one single person in this town has been caffeinated this morning, thanks to you."

I swallow. "That's not good."

An un-caffeinated Hunter's Creek is a grumpy Hunter's Creek.

"No, Ryn, it's not good," she repeats, her features hardened at the dire situation the town now faces.

I'm surprised they haven't called a state of emergency.

"Do better, Kathryn. Do better."

Her use of my full name has my belly tying in a knot. I might not be the best waitress this side of Idaho, but I'm not usually this terrible.

But then it's not every day that Hollywood comes to town. So why aren't they here already?

"Sorry, Aunt Sheila. I'll do better. I promise."

My eyes drift back to the window, one hundred percent out of my control. Seriously. I can't help it.

Aunt Sheila throws her hands on her hips. "Oh, I see. You'd rather stare out the window than do your job?"

Busted.

"It's just—" I begin, but I know I don't have a leg to stand on. "Sorry."

Her face softens. "Sweetheart, we're all eager to see the movie people, but we still have a business to run and customers to feed and *caffeinate*."

I bite down on my lip and nod. "The right beans in the machine and hotcakes for Table 7. I'll get on it." I collect my order pad and pen, but before I get the chance to make my way to Table 7, my aunt puts her hand on my arm.

"They've already ordered their hotcakes and they would like to eat them now. Deliver these muffins to Christopher and Alfred Whitlow at table 4." She thrusts two plates at me. "And then go see Lisa in the kitchen."

"Sure thing, Aunt Sheila." I take the muffins across to Christopher, my sister Harper's boyfriend, and Mr. Whitlow. As usual, the two lawyers are deep in conversation. Christopher bought Mr. Whitlow's law practice when he moved permanently to Hunter's Creek and the two men have become



good friends.

“Apologies for the delay,” I say as I place the muffins on the table.

“No delay, Ryn. In fact, we just ordered them,” Christopher replies with a smile.

He’s always nice to me.

“You’re efficiency itself,” Mr. Whitlow adds.

A rare waitressing win for the day.

I flash them a smile, turn on my heel, and make my way through the swing doors and into the kitchen. I find Lisa frying up bacon, humming a tune. Her graying hair is tied up in a neat, low bun, and she’s wearing the same lemon-colored apron as me, with the words *Get a Second Chance at the Second Chance Café* splashed across the chest.

Cheesy much?

I’ve never liked the tag line, least of all the fact that I have to wear an apron with those very words and a ruffle every day.

So not my style.

I’ve often wondered why Aunt Sheila named this place “Second Chance”. I mean, it’s not like she hasn’t been married to Uncle Johnny for a gazillion years. High school sweethearts, they got hitched at just nineteen and have been happily together ever since. There have been no Second Chances in the love stakes, as far as I can tell.

They’re pretty standard here in Hunter’s Creek. You either leave town straight out of high school to go to college and don’t return, or you stay here and get a job at the mill as you select your life partner from the severely limited pool, marry them, and then spend the rest of your life gossiping about and matchmaking the rest of the town.

Somehow, I managed to escape both well-trodden paths. No trip to college and beyond, and definitely no child bride, straight out of high school.

Us single, never-left types—like me, Ivy, and Gabe—are such a rare breed here I’m surprised a group of psychiatrists in white coats with a row of multi-colored pens in their pockets haven’t stuck us in a laboratory to study us.

It could happen.

And you know what they’ll find when they study me? Someone who’s content with her life, even if it’s maybe a little on the dull side at times. They’ll find someone who’s happy for others to go out there and achieve big things. They’ll find someone who’s comfortable with their lot in life,

someone who knows they'll never amount to anything particularly special. And I'm good with that, because you know what? I'm happy to have left the over achieving to others.

The problem for me is that I have two older sisters who are both contestants in the Miss Perfect USA pageant, and a couple of parents who wonder why I'm not like them. I've told them all I'm working on being a social media influencer so they think I'm doing something with my life, when in reality that's the last thing I would want to do. But at least it made my parents stop hassling me about not having a career, mainly because they have no idea what an influencer actually does.

Did I mention it's super fun to be me?

And anyway, I know I could never compete with my sisters, so why try? My sisters have always been super close, sharing their life secrets—and always leaving me out. To them, I'm the little sister, the hot mess of the family who could never achieve their levels of perfection.

I know, I hear it. You're thinking I'm suffering from youngest sibling inferiority. In fact, that might have been hinted at by some people in the past. But I *know* my sisters have always looked down on me. I'm the baby of the family, the kid sister who is just that: a kid.

You know what? Being the little kid of the Cole family is fine with me. It comes with its perks. I don't need to have a big career. I don't have to have the perfect relationship. I don't have to work my butt off for some tough boss in the big city, or be the best teacher at Hunter's Creek Elementary.

I can just be me.

Carefree, happy, easy-going, fun.

"Hey, Aunt Lisa," I say, because of course we're related. This is Hunter's Creek after all. Limited gene pool, as Christopher likes to point out.

She glances up at me from the sizzling bacon. "Hi, sweetie. Any sign?"

She doesn't need to add the words "of the Hollywood film cast and crew". We both know what she means.

"Not yet," I reply with a sigh. "I'm here for the hotcakes for Table 7."

"Do you mean the ones over there?" She gestures at three plates adorned with stacks of hot cakes, cream, strawberries, and a pool of maple syrup. "They're probably less hotcakes and more *cool* cakes by now, honey."

"I might have forgotten about them," I mumble. "Do you think you could do me a solid and heat them up?"

She tilts her head, her lips tightening.

The bacon sizzles and spits.

“Please, Aunt Lisa?” I ask in my best *youngest member of the family* voice.

I notice my aunt’s features soften. “Sure thing, honey. You scrape off the cream and strawberries and I’ll heat them right up.”

“Thank you so much,” I simper, before I do as she says.

Sometimes using my status as the baby of the family works out nicely for me.

I carry the three plates of freshly heated hot cakes to the disapproving ladies at Table 7, effusive with my apologies and an offer of free coffee for their trouble.

“I’ll even put caffeinated beans in this time,” I tell them, with what I hope is a winning grin.

“You don’t have to do that, honey,” says Mrs. Ashbridge

“You’re wrong on that front, Suzie. We need caffeine,” her friend, Mrs. Jacobson, states as she waves her empty cup in the air.

“Definitely,” agrees the third member of the party at the table, my former elementary school teacher, Mrs. Sommerfeld.

“You know something, Ryn?” Mrs. Ashbridge says in a low, conspiratorial voice and I place my hands on my knees and lean in. “We’re all supposed to be doing the keto diet right now. You know, the one where you don’t get to eat carbohydrates?”

“Sure.”

“These hotcakes aren’t exactly part of the plan. Just promise me you won’t go telling anyone about it.”

“Your secret is safe with me,” I tell her, straightening back up.

“We’re only eating carbs because it’s a special day,” Mrs. Jacobson explains.

“On account of the expected new arrivals, you understand,” adds Mrs. Sommerfeld.

Personally, I don’t need an excuse to eat carbs, but I’m not a member of the Hunter’s Creek Ladies’ Committee, population these three plus Aunt Sheila.

“I wonder when they’re going to get here?” Mrs. Ashbridge asks, and all of us turn to look out the window onto Main Street.

As if perfectly planned for that precise moment, a stampede of black shiny cars slink past.

Is that...?

Could it finally be...?

All four of us share a brief look before the women collectively push their chairs out from the table, and together we dash to the window to get a closer look.

We're not the only ones. Half the coffeehouse and even Aunt Sheila crowd around us as vehicle after vehicle slinks by, like a stream of oversized polished ants. Following black cars come vans and trucks, all shapes and sizes, and all heading in one direction: the movie set they've been working on for two weeks already, on Mr. Cantor's land just out of town.

"Do you think they're going to stop for some coffee?" someone asks.

"Oh, they definitely should. Sheila's coffee is the best in town," someone else replies.

"Only when it's caffeinated."

There's a rumble of dissatisfaction.

"We all know Sheila's coffee is the best in town, but *they* don't."

"Someone really ought to tell them about the coffee here."

Forget the fact there are only two coffeehouses in Hunter's Creek. Competition isn't exactly stiff in the town coffee stakes.

Or in any stakes.

"Everyone drinks coffee, you know. Even Hollywood stars. They're always photographed in the magazines leaving Starbucks, clutching their fancy coffees."

"Stephanie's does pretty good coffee too, you know."

"Shh! You can't say that here."

"Why not? It's the God's honest truth."

I turn to see Stephanie herself standing among the group of eager spectators. I raise my eyebrows at her in question.

She shrugs. "This place is on Main Street. Better view of the newcomers," she says by way of explanation.

And then the impossible happens.

A shiny black limo slows, its turn signal blinking. It pulls into a parking spot right outside the window where we're all gathered.

As though the glass has suddenly mutated into an electric fence, everyone clambers back to their tables, bumping into one another as we clumsily move around. *Ouches* and *ows* and *that's my seat* echo around the room and I make a beeline for the register, figuring if the occupants of that vehicle were to

actually walk into this coffeehouse, I want to be the one to serve them.

And I'll make dang sure to remember their order, too.

Anticipation grips the room.

The coffeehouse door swings open and we hold a united breath as every eye in the place zeroes in on who is about to walk through the door.

It's only Gabe.

There's a collective deflated sigh as eyes swivel from Gabe back to the window once more.

No offense to my best friend, but when you're expecting a Hollywood star and you get a local you've known all your life, it's hard not to feel let down.

He looks around at everyone uncertainly. "What's going on?"

Aunt Sheila elbows me. "Look, Ryn. It's your future husband."

"For the eleven-ty millionth time, Aunt Sheila, Gabe and I are just friends," I protest, and it really feels like it's for about the eleven-ty millionth time.

That's not to say my best friend isn't hot. Because he most definitely is. Even I can see that. Enough of my friends have fallen for his charms to rank him as one of the most eligible bachelors around. He's good looking in that square-jawed, plaid flannel and jeans-wearing, *he really should be a lumberjack*, kind of way, with sandy blonde hair, gray-blue eyes, and broad shoulders. At 6'2" any woman would be lucky to claim him as her boyfriend.

Experience tells me that the woman who does end up with Gabe will be the north to my south, in both looks and personality. Gabe has always gone for the tall, slim, brunette type who has drive and ambition. Me? Short, shapely, definitely not a brunette—strawberry blonde, thank you very much—and as far as drive is concerned, I tend to leave that for when I'm behind the wheel.

Gabe's questioning gaze lands on mine, a half-smile forming on his face as he strides across the coffeehouse floor toward me.

Aunt Sheila, self-appointed leader of the Hunter's Creek Ladies' Committee, waits for him to arrive at the counter before she throws in today's comment. "Solve a riddle for me. Why aren't you two together?"

"Because we're not," Gabe replies.

"Yeah. What he said," I add.

"Look at the two of you. You're best friends. You tell each other everything. What's more, you look super cute together. Why not actually *be*

together?”

“Because...she’s Ryn,” Gabe replies.

“And he’s Gabe,” I add, and Gabe high-fives me.

Aunt Sheila rolls her eyes. “Okay, you two. Whatever you say.”

The door to the limo that had just finished parking opens and a hush descends on the room as all eyes turn to see.

Are the people from the car coming in here?

And, more to the point, who *are* they?

Part of me wishes they were the stars of the movie, the famous and very beautiful Charlene Kemp, or, much more thrillingly, the hero of the movie, none other than heart throb Leonardo Finch, the object of all my teenage fantasies.

“What is with everyone? They’re all acting so weird,” Gabe complains.

“Did you see who was in the car out there?” I ask, my attention back on the door like everyone else’s.

“What car?”

I glance at him in irritation. “The black limo, of course!”

We don’t get a lot of limos here, other than on prom night.

“Nah, I didn’t see who was in it. It’ll be some rich —”

Whatever else he says, I don’t hear because in that moment the coffeehouse door swings open and in walks a group of well-dressed people, people who don’t look like they’re from around here. They’re well-groomed and chic, exuding otherness as they make their way across the floor.

Most amazingly of all—and I could pinch myself right now—the group includes the ridiculously handsome and famous, Leonardo Finch.

Leonardo Finch!

You know when you see a celebrity in the flesh and you get a zap of electricity telling you that you are in the presence of someone you feel you already know, but of course you don’t know at all? That’s what happens to me.

And yes, he’s someone I may very well have had pictures of on my bedroom wall as a teenager—and quite possibly have dreamt of him turning up to take me to prom, of him declaring his love for me and asking me to marry him.

You’ve probably guessed that none of those things have happened.

But then, just as I’m getting my fangirling under control for Leonardo Finch, someone else saunters into the room, totally pulling my gaze.

And with good reason.

This guy looks like Anthony, Lord Bridgerton, only without the formal clothing and frankly ridiculous sideburns. He's probably a few inches taller than me, with thick chestnut hair and piercing blue eyes. He's in a pair of ripped black jeans, a gray t-shirt under a black leather biker jacket, with hair he's just run his fingers through after taking off his motorcycle helmet.

Gabe might be saying something to me, Aunt Sheila might be nudging me furiously with her elbow, the room might be abuzz with excited chatter at the sight of Leonardo Finch, but I'm deaf to everything.

Everything but the guy in the leather jacket.

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## Chapter 2

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## Gabe



I collect another shovel of raw soda-lime silica glass from the tub and chuck it into the glowing red furnace. Immediately, I close the door as a blast of hot air hits me square in the face.

Glass blowing can be blistering work, particularly in the summer, and I pause to wipe sweat from my forehead, using the bottom of my t-shirt as a towel.

My mom would have scolded me if she'd been here to see.

“Whatcha planning on making?” Theo Martin, my mentor, asks as he hangs his knapsack and Seattle Mariners baseball cap on a hook.

With a stocky build and a thick head of dark hair, the owner of Theo’s Glass was about ten years ahead of me in the Hunter’s Creek school system. I got to know him when Ryn and I took a night class on glass blowing a few years back, and we both fell in love with the idea of creating beautiful works of art through the medium of glass.

I was the lucky one, getting the apprenticeship at Theo’s Glass. Both Ryn and I went for the one spot, and Ryn was totally gracious when I was the one to get it.

I know it could have become a thing between us. It didn’t because Ryn is genuinely capable of being happy for me, even when things don’t work out

the way she wants.

With my mom passing away only six months before, for me, the apprenticeship felt like a lifeline at a time when I needed it most. It gave me something new, positive, and challenging to focus on instead of sitting at home, missing my mom, angry at the driver of the car who ended the life of the only family I had.

They were dark days, and being here, working alongside Theo and the other employees, learning a new craft, brought a glimmer of hope to my nineteen-year-old self. I sought solace in the artistry, finding a sense of purpose and belonging.

“I thought I’d make another vase and work on the color accents you’ve been teaching me. I want to make one for a friend.”

Theo raises his brows at me. “A friend, huh?”

“Okay, Ryn,” I concede.

He smiles. He knows Ryn and I are close. “Want some help?”

“Sure. Rowena said she could,” I reply, naming one of the full-time glass blowers at the studio. “But she seems to have disappeared.”

“Good thing I’m here. Anyway, I didn’t think you could make it here today,” Theo says.

“I’m squeezing in some time here before my shift at the bar.”

“You work there every night?” he asks as he pulls the furnace door open and heat punches us in the face.

“Every night but Sundays. They’re short staffed and there are a lot of extra people in town with the movie right now. I figure money is money.”

“Never a truer word said, my friend. You work long hours, though.”

“I do what I need to do. I’ve got bills to pay.”

“We’ve all got bills to pay, but you gotta live as well. You do know all work and no play makes Gabe a dull apprentice-slash-barman, right?”

I let out a surprised laugh. “Thanks a lot, boss. I play plenty.”

My tone may be a little defensive.

Truth be told, “play” has hardly been at the top of my agenda these past few years since my mom’s passing. Between my job at the Black Bear, working as an unpaid apprentice here at the studio, and taking night classes over in Cotown, I haven’t had time for much else.

It works for me. Working nights and a few lunch shifts at the bar frees me up to spend time here, in the studio, pursuing what I really want to be doing: creating beautiful pieces of glass art that someday I hope to be good enough

at to make a living. Then I can give up the bar job and focus solely on my passion.

That's the dream, anyway. Make my own glasswork and sell them around the state, perhaps even around the country. That's why I'm taking the class over at Cotown, to learn how to someday run my own glass blowing business.

Theo inspects the volume of silica in the furnace and closes the door. "Are you ready to start?"

"Sure thing." I collect another shovel load, ready to throw it into the furnace, when he stops me.

"We've got enough for now. Go lay the colors you want to use out in the tray over there." He indicates the long wooden workbench over by the wall.

He pulls one of the long metal blowpipes from the stack and collects some molten glass from the furnace. He rotates it to collect the right amount of glass to begin making the vase, and I watch his process.

Once the weight feels right, he pulls it out and we begin the process of rolling and blowing the glass. He blows down the pipe and I shape and mold. Slowly, the bright orange blob at the end of the pipe, that always makes me think of lava, begins to take shape and we work it and rework it until it's ready to return to the furnace to add some of the colors I've laid out, after which Theo slots the glass into the furnace once more to soften the clumps of color to be worked.

"You say you play, Gabe, but tell me, when did you last go on a date?" Before I have the chance to reply with some lame excuse, he adds, "And for the record, lying on top of your truck and staring up at the night sky with Ryn doesn't count."

"I know it doesn't count. That's friends hanging out," I reply.

He gives me a look I choose to ignore. It's a familiar look whenever Ryn's name is mentioned, the look her aunt gave me at the coffeehouse this morning when everyone was focused on the town's new arrivals. It's the everyone-knows-you-two-will-end-up-together-so-why-don't-you-get-on-with-it-already look. Like they can't understand how two people of the opposite sex can be such good friends without any romantic feelings.

"I'm too busy to date," I tell him.

"Too busy, huh? You can't let life pass you by, you know."

"Life isn't passing me by. I'm pulling in enough to get by while I'm learning my craft."

He regards me across the blowpipe. “Just as long as that’s enough.”  
“It’s plenty.”

We add the colors I’ve laid out and Theo guides me in the process, ensuring I use the right amount of air, the right amount of colored glass.

I’m thankful when he changes the subject.

“I like the interplay between the warm and cool tones you’ve got going on there. It works,” he says.

Theo is a fair but tough mentor, putting me through my paces, molding me into the best artist I can become—pun intended. His compliments are few and far between, so when you get one, you can’t help but feel you’re doing something right.

Once satisfied, I place it in what’s called the glory hole, another super-hot furnace used for reheating the glass. I turn the blowpipe, and then return to the workspace where I give the vase its final shape under Theo’s watchful eye, rolling it on the steel workbench known as a marver.

When we’re done, we take a break to rehydrate. I grab my bottle of water and take a grateful swig, wiping sweat from my forehead, my eyes beginning to sting.

Leaning against the wall, a bottle of coke in his hand, Theo raises the only topic anyone seems capable of talking about, ever since their arrival in Hunter’s Creek.

“I was on Main Street this morning, running some errands. The town is buzzing. I’ve never seen so many people here, and that includes during all the festivals our town seems to love to hold every season.”

I take another swig of water. “We sure do love a festival.” Hunter’s Creek boasts four festivals a year, one for each season. The Summer Festival is coming up soon. It’s popular with people from far and wide and always fun, with rides and games and baby farm animals for the kids to pet and feed.

“The big stars of the movie are here, too. Louisa saw Ryn at the Second Chance,” he continues, naming his wife. “Apparently, Leonardo Finch himself flirted with Ryn when he stopped by to get some coffee. Can you believe that?”

I rub my chin, remembering the way the Hollywood star flashed a grin at Ryn and made some cheesy comment about how he didn’t expect to find such a pretty girl in a small town like Hunter’s Creek. It made her blush full-on beet red.

Feeling as visible to her as Casper the Friendly Ghost, I’d turned and left.

I'm sure she didn't even notice me going.

"Did you hear me, Gabe? Leonardo Finch has been flirting with Ryn."

I plunk my water bottle down on the workbench. "I was there."

"You were?"

"I dropped in for coffee on my way here." Not that I got a cup.

"And it didn't bother you?"

"Why would it bother me?" I scoff.

Theo throws me an appraising look. "Here you are, her best friend, the guy who's always there for her, and in walks some movie star who just goes right ahead and flirts with her. Talk about stepping on your toes. If he flirted with my Louisa—."

"Theo, Ryn's a grown woman. She can do what she wants."

He shifts his weight like an impatient toddler. "But you see, that's the thing. You think you fool us. You think you get away with it. But you don't."

I slide my gaze to his. "What the heck are you talking about?"

"You and Ryn."

"Me and Ryn what?" I ask on a sigh, because again with the matchmaking?

"You and Ryn being together, romantically. You know, *in love*." He uses air quotations, as though talking about being in love is something to be embarrassed by. I guess for a couple of Hunter's Creek guys who wear jeans, work boots, and flannel most of the time, it probably is.

I laugh, because what else am I going to do?

"Why are you laughing?" Theo asks, his face stretched in a grin.

"Trust me. The last thing I want is to be in love with Ryn Cole."

"Sure you don't." Theo offers me a look that tells me he doesn't believe a word.

Which only makes me more determined to prove my point.

"Not that I need to explain this to you, but I'm going to anyway."

He crosses his arms and offers me an amused grin. "This ought to be good."

"We're friends. Best friends. You know that, I know that, heck, the whole town knows that. That is all we are." I wipe the moisture from my forehead and look Theo straight in the eyes.

"Good friends can turn into something more, you know. It happens all the time, way more often than you'd ever think."

I shake my head. "Just because Louisa makes you watch all those

Hallmark movies doesn't mean that sort of thing happens in real life," I reply. Theo's wife is famous for her unflinching love of movies with their unrealistic happily ever afters that no one really gets.

I've got first-hand experience of that.

"Deny it all you like. You and Ryn might just end up together, and I'll be the one right here saying 'I told you so'."

I run my fingers through my hair as I work hard at not clenching my jaw. "You just keep watching those super realistic movies, buddy."

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## Chapter 3

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## Ryn



“Tell me everything.” Ivy’s eyes are bright as we lean back against her chair on the front porch of the house we share.

We’ve only lived here for a little over five weeks when I finally—*finally*—moved out of my parents’ house.

Why didn’t I move out a long time ago?

That’s right. The small matter of money. Now that I’ve got a full-time gig at the Second Chance, I don’t need to worry about that.

The night is mild, the sun low in the sky, as the birds and the crickets chirp their evening serenades.

“There’s not a lot to tell,” I reply evasively, almost bursting with exuberance. I mean, it’s not every day you meet your teenage heartthrob—or a cute new guy in town who definitely threw you flirty looks while you served said teenage heartthrob. The hot stranger whose gaze landed on mine before his lips lifted into a sexy grin.

Butterflies bat their wings in my belly at the thought of him.

“Oh, I know there is, girl, and I want it word for word, down to the very last detail,” she insists.

“He’s definitely charming.”

“I bet he is,” she says on a sigh. “What did he say?”



“He said he didn’t expect to meet such a pretty girl in Hunter’s Creek, but that he was happy he had.”

She places a hand over her heart as though I’ve delivered the most romantic line ever, when in fact it came across as having a definite whiff of cheese to it, as far as I could see. “That is so freaking cute! Then what did he say?”

“He ordered a coffee and I told him how much it was and then he paid me. Well, he tried to pay me. Aunt Sheila told him it was on the house.”

“That’s all that happened?”

“Yup.”

“Wait. That’s him flirting with you? The way I was told, you were practically married by the end of the conversation.”

“Who said that?”

“Louisa Martin told Janey Chesterfield, who told Andrea Bowman, who told everyone in the Accounts Department.”

“So, the entire town?”

“Girl, it’s big news! Only I’d assumed it’d be bigger than some line. How does he take his coffee?”

I give my friend the side eye. “Who?”

She rolls her eyes. “The Pope. Who do you think? Leonardo Finch, of course.”

“Why do you want to know that?”

“Because it shows what sort of person he is.”

“I have never heard of that.”

“Oh, yeah. Everyone knows,” she informs me with authority. “I’ll show you.” She picks up her phone from the table and begins to tap at the screen. “Okay, here it is. It’s in *Hey, Girl*,” she says, naming the magazine that’s virtually her Bible. “Black coffee makes him old school traditional, kind of like your dad. An espresso makes him sophisticated and worldly—”

“Or in a hurry.”

She ignores me. “—and a cappuccino makes him comfort-seeking and adventurous.”

“Comfort-seeking *and* adventurous? Aren’t they opposites?”

“They can be totally compatible. Like...glamping.”

I cock an eyebrow at her. “Glamping?”

“Glamping is the perfect combination of being outside in the elements, which makes you adventurous, while not giving up your style, which makes

you comfort-seeking.”

“You think Leonardo Finch goes glamping?” I fail to picture the movie star doing anything like pitching a tent, even if it is a glamorous one. A tent is a tent as far as I’m concerned, and I’ve seen way too many of them, thanks to my family’s very un-glamping version of camping they subjected me to in childhood. Seriously, you’d think living in a tiny town in the middle of a forest would be enough wilderness for my parents. Apparently not.

“Did he order a cappuccino?” Ivy asks.

“Iced coffee.”

Her face lights up. “Oooh, iced coffee.” She scrolls through her phone. “That makes him someone who likes to live without boundaries, a free soul who is open to exciting possibilities, someone who can’t be pinned down.”

I blink at her in amused disbelief. “I figured it was because it was a warm day.”

She shrugs as she waves her phone in the air. “I’m only repeating what the experts say. It’s basic science.”

I snort laugh. “Science? It’s *Hey, Girl* magazine.”

“They consult experts,” she insists.

“Okay, what do the experts say about the fact that he wanted it made with oat milk but the only milk alternative we had was soy, so he took it anyway?”

She lifts her shoulders in a shrug. “He’s anti-cow?”

I let out a giggle. “Whatever he is, he’s here for weeks and weeks and weeks. We’re probably going to see him again.”

“Correction: *you’re* going to see him again. He won’t be visiting the mill to get his weird milk iced coffee, let alone come to visit Accounts Receivable,” she harrumphs.

“Who knows? Maybe he’ll decide he likes it here so much he’ll stay and become a sawmill laborer?”

Ivy lets out a sharp laugh. “Because so many Hollywood stars do that.”

“He might be the first? We might get Liam Hemsworth moving here next. Or Channing Tatum. He’s burly.”

Channing Tatum was Ivy’s celebrity crush growing up.

“Bring me some Channing in a flannel shirt and work boots.” She gets a faraway look in her eyes, and we sit, both of us lost in the utterly improbable concept that any A-list Hollywood star would ever move to Hunter’s Creek. Sure, *Serious Bite* star Dex Ryder grew up here, but that’s different. And besides, he lives in LA these days, and after he broke my sister’s heart, good

riddance to him, too.

I toy with the edge of my denim jacket. “Leonardo Finch wasn’t the only hot commodity who came to town today.”

Ivy’s face lights up. “Dish.”

“Another guy came in just after him. He was so hot I nearly melted on the spot.”

“Doppelgänger?”

I don’t even have to think. “Anthony Bridgerton.”

She sits up straighter in her seat. “Keep talking.”

“On a motorcycle.”

“Oh, my. Totally your type.”

“I know, right?”

“If you tell me he flirted with you, too, I’m giving up my job to work at the Second Chance, like, *today*.”

I grin, my belly doing weird things as I remember what it felt like to lock eyes with this new guy. “He didn’t say anything to me. He didn’t have to.”

Ivy lets out a squeal. “Did you get his name? His number? Anything?”

“Nope. But I get the feeling he’ll be back.”

“Girl, I hope so. For your sake. What did Gabe think of him?”

“Gabe?”

“You know, tall guy, shoulders like the span of a bridge, built like a linebacker, lives a couple streets over.”

“You mean your ex?” I tease, reminding her of the fact that she dated Gabe for a full three and a half months back in high school. It was a significant length of time back then.

“Girl, that was a million years ago. Hashtag moved on.” She gives a flick of her wrist.

“I have no idea what Gabe thinks,” I say honestly, because somewhere between eye-flirting with the hot stranger and Leonardo Finch placing his coffee order, which allegedly shows he’s a free soul who is open to exciting possibilities—I mean, really?—Gabe was nowhere to be seen.

“You’ll need to get his approval before you go out with certain hot strangers on bikes who eye-flirt with you.”

“Gabe’s *approval*?” I scoff. “He’s not the boss of me.”

“You know what he’s like. He’s always been protective of you. As in super, off-the-charts protective.”

“No, he hasn’t. Just regular-friend-protective. That’s all.”

“What was that old movie with Whitney Houston? She sang the famous song that people on singing shows always mess up.”

“Oh, I know what movie you mean. *The Bodyguard*.”

“That’s the one. Gabe’s like Kevin Whatshisface.”

“Kevin *Costner* was an actual bodyguard in that movie. It was his job to protect Whitney Houston.”

Ivy shrugs. “Same-same.”

I shake my head at her. “Nowhere near the same. And anyway, Gabe’s only protective because we’re besties.”

“Oh, yeah? Remember what it was like when you dated Joshua Payne a while back? He was all like, ‘he’s not good enough for you’ and ‘you can do better.’ He would not shut up about it. It got old real fast.”

Memories flip through my mind. I dated Joshua Payne a couple years back. Like most people in this town, Josh worked at the mill. Unlike most people in this town, he hadn’t gotten married at eighteen or left town for bigger, brighter things. He was in the limited pool of possible dates, and yes, he had that cool, motorcycle-riding thing going on that gets me every time, so when he asked me out, I leapt at the chance.

It didn’t last long. He dumped me after a few months to move onto another girl from our class, and I just knew Gabe was biting his tongue, not saying that he told me so.

I bet he loved being right.

“Gabe’s like an older brother to me,” I protest. “An older, irritating brother.”

“As I said, he’s not like that with me.”

“That’s because you broke his heart in high school. I remember. I was there to pick up the pieces while you were busy moving on to the next guy, and then on to the next.”

She bats me on the arm. “That makes me sound horrible.”

“You were popular, that’s all.” I flick my gaze to her. She’s a couple inches taller than me, with long limbs and a small waist, a head of thick brown hair and a ridiculously pretty face. Totally Gabe’s type. A type he hasn’t wavered from all these years.

“Popularity in high school means nothing when you’re still single at twenty-three,” she moans.

“Twenty-three isn’t exactly old.”

She rolls her eyes. “It is around here.”

She's not wrong. The pool of available men in this town has multiplied exponentially now that the film crew is here. My sister, Harper, snapped up the only new guy in town a few months back, so we're back to Slim Pickings, USA, population me, Ivy, and Gabe (who doesn't even really count because he's a guy). Oh, and Tanya Jacobson, the Hunter's Creek librarian, age sixty-four.

But even with the limited selection, there's no way I'm settling. I want my big love. I want nothing less than someone who sets off fireworks in my heart and makes me feel like I'm the only woman in the whole freaking universe.

So far, the search has resulted in a big fat nothing.

But maybe this new guy might turn into...something?

My heart flutters at the thought.

We sit in companionable silence as the sun falls out of sight and we're left with a glowing sky and the distant sound of frogs in the pond by the mill.

"At least something exciting is happening here at long last," Ivy says.

"The sale of the mill wasn't thrilling for you?" I ask with a wry smile.

We both know the sale of the mill was about as thrilling as doing long division.

"Christopher turning up at the last moment was...entertaining, I guess," Ivy admits.

"And romantic. He totally swept Harper off her feet. That's what I want: someone who loves me so much they'll do something super big for me to prove their love."

"I'm not sure the mill is up for sale again," she teases.

"You know what I mean. I want someone who will move heaven and earth to be with me, like Christopher did for Harper."

I think of my older sister and the man she loves. The thing is, Harper is the kind of person who gets the type of guys who make grand gestures. I know it's not exactly a type, like the outdoorsy type or the city type, but believe me, if there's one person out there for whom grand gestures is a type, it would be Harper.

One of the winning contestants in the Miss Perfect USA pageant, remember?

Gabe's truck pulls into our driveway, the lights temporarily blinding us.

Ivy rises to her feet.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

“It’s my turn to cook, remember?”

“Pizza delivery again?”

Ivy, love her as I do, is much like me: not gifted in the culinary department.

She shoots me a grin. “Those pizzas don’t deliver themselves, you know.”

Gabe closes the door of his truck and steps onto the porch. “Ladies,” he says with a smile.

“Kevin,” Ivy replies as she breezes past him and into the house.

Gabe raises his brows at me. “Kevin?”

“Don’t ask. I thought you were working tonight,” I say.

He plunks himself down in the spot Ivy only just vacated. “The weirdest thing happened at the bar. It was a busy night for a weekday, mainly because the place was filled with out-of-towners.”

“Anyone famous you need to tell me about right now?”

He shoots me a sideways look. “You mean was Leonardo Finch there, don’t you?”

A smile teases the edges of my mouth. “Come on. You’ve got to admit it’s pretty exciting that he’s here.”

“I’m not the one who had posters of him all over my walls when I was a tween. I bet you kissed his picture every night, too.”

I shift in my seat. How the heck did Gabe figure that out? “No, because that would be weird,” I sniff.

“You sure about that?”

“I’m hardly going to admit it if I did. Am I?”

He examines my face, his lips curving into a smile. “You did, didn’t you?”

“I plead the Fifth.”

His laugh is low. “Leonardo Finch, whose picture you never once kissed goodnight, wasn’t there. It was all crew, as far as I could see. No one famous.”

“So, what was the weird thing that happened?”

“Someone spotted a rat scaling Barney.”

My eyes bulge. “A rat climbed up the bear?”

“And it disappeared into his mouth.”

Jaw drop.

Like all the other bars with the word “bear” in their name in Hunter’s

Creek, the one Gabe works at has a large taxidermied bear to greet patrons at the entrance. It's totally creepy and I'm sure not at all politically correct, upsetting more than one visitor in town, but those bears are as much a part of Hunter's Creek's fabric as the mill, each with its own name, given by the townsfolk. The bear at The Black Bear is Barney, the one at The Grizzly Bear is Bernice, and the one at The Bear is Brian Smith. Why that one has a last name I don't know, but it's always been called that.

"Poor Barney!" I exclaim.

"You know what they say, where there's one rat, there's twelve. It was one of the film crew who spotted it, and he kicked up such a fuss we had to close, which we would have done anyway. No one wants to eat their dinner alongside a bunch of rats."

I drink in this new information. "Oh, my gosh. Your boss is not going to be happy."

"He has to get a pest control company to come in before an inspection. Told us all to go home and he'll be in touch once we're back up and running. But you can't tell anyone, 'kay?"

I lift my hand in a Scout salute. "You have my word."

"You were never a scout."

"You've still got my word. So, I'm guessing you're free for the evening?"

"I guess I am."

"You'd better tell Ivy. She's 'cooking'." I make air quotes with my fingers.

"Pizza?"

"How did you guess?" I reply with a laugh.

We fall into silence, listening to toads croaking in the distance.

"Before I forget, Mom invited us to dinner tomorrow. I figured you couldn't go, but if you're not working...?"

"I'll be there, for sure."

"I bet she'll do mac and cheese in your honor."

"Yum. My favorite."

I roll my eyes. "You really are the son she never had. Seriously, I think if they had the choice, they'd trade me in for you in a heartbeat."

"Can you blame them?" he asks and wins a bat to the arm from me.

"Ow!"

"Really?"

"No, but it could have hurt. You pack a big punch for a small package."

I eye his muscular arms. “Sure.”

“Hey, how did it go with Leonardo Finch?” he asks.

“It was fine.”

“Fine? Is that all you have to say?”

“I wasn’t starstruck, if that’s what you think.”

“I heard he flirted with you,” he says and I raise my eyebrows at him. “Theo’s wife.”

“Figures.”

“A guy like that probably isn’t being genuine, anyway.”

“Gabriel Hartmann, I am offended,” I say in mock outrage. “I’m as cute as the next girl, even if *you* can’t see it.”

He gives me a sideways glance, assessing my features, which I keep tightly wound. “I didn’t mean you’re not cute, Ryn-Ryn. I’m passing judgement on him, not on you. You’re plenty cute.”

Ivy’s footsteps tap across the wooden porch. “What every woman wants to hear: ‘you’re plenty cute,’ although I’m sure Kevin would have done a lot better.”

I try to hold back a laugh. I fail horribly. I make a peculiar snorting sound.

Gabe’s attention shifts from me to Ivy and back again. The look of concern he sported only seconds ago is replaced by a self-effacing grimace. “You’re messing with me.”

I get my laughter under control. “It was fun.”

“You’re an easy target, Kevin,” Ivy observes.

“What’s with this ‘Kevin’ thing? Do I suddenly look like a Kevin?” Gabe looks down at his clothes. He’s wearing his usual: a pair of worn-out jeans with practical work boots, that are good for drink spillages and working with glass alike, and a red and black plaid flannel shirt, open over a white tee. It’s a look that a lot of guys in town wear, only Gabe makes it look good.

And I can offer this impartial view as his entirely platonic bestie.

Ivy’s eyes are dancing. “Ask your little sister-slash-girlfriend, Kevin.”

“My little sister-slash-girlfriend,” he repeats. “For starters, Ivy, that’s illegal in the state of Washington, and secondly, I’m an only child, so quit with the weird name calling.”

Ivy lifts her hands in the surrender sign. “Chillax, Kev.”

Gabe shakes his head at her, but I can tell despite his confusion, it’s in good humor.



There's no way I'm telling him where the nickname comes from. Although it's only a joke, and although we all know Gabe is weirdly protective of me, a small voice in the back of my head tells me it'd only make him uncomfortable to hear it.

Some things are better left unsaid.

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## Chapter 4

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## Gabe



“Alyssa, this has to be your best mac and cheese ever,” I say as I swallow my last mouthful, my belly telling me that three servings of Alyssa Cole’s famous macaroni and cheese is more than enough for one sitting.

“Did you eat all your greens, Gabe?” Alyssa asks.

I gesture at my empty plate. “Of course.”

Alyssa raises her brows at her daughter. “How about you, Ryn?”

“I don’t like broccoli. You know that,” she complains, her plate empty but for the spoonful of steamed broccoli her mom served her. “Who even serves vegetables with mac and cheese, anyway?”

“Come on, Ryn. Eat your greens. It’ll put hair on your chest,” I tease.

“Quite happy with my chest as it is, thanks, G,” she shoots back.

I’m not going to go thinking about my friend’s chest, especially not at her parents’ kitchen table.

“Our youngest has never liked her greens,” Ed observes.

“And you’ve let her get away with not eating them most of her life,” Alyssa says pointedly.

Ed winks at his daughter. “She’s turned out pretty good. Don’t you think?”

Alyssa’s expression softens. “She has. Our little girl, only not so little

anymore.”

Ed smiles at his daughter. “Left home, got a job, living with a roommate these days. Quite the young lady.”

Ryn rolls her eyes. “Parents, I’m twenty-three. I’ve been adulting for a while now. It was about time I moved out and got my own place.”

“But you’re always welcome back here, whenever you want. You know, if things don’t work out the way you hoped, sweet pea,” Ed tells her.

“Your dad’s right, honey. You’re welcome home anytime,” Alyssa echoes.

Ryn bristles, sitting forward in her seat. “Why won’t things work out? I’ve got a job and I can pay the bills just as well as Harper or Marlowe, you know.”

“We know you can, sweat pea,” Ed replies.

“We have total faith in you, honey,” Alyssa adds hurriedly.

Ryn’s always had this idea that her parents see her older sisters as the grown-up, successful ones, and her as just the baby of the family who’s never grown up—and never wants to.

Ryn harrumphs, crossing her arms over her chest.

Sometimes she doesn’t help with that stereotype.

“That’s another thing. You always call me ‘sweet pea’, Dad, but you call Harper and Marlowe ‘pumpkin’.”

“So?” Ed asks.

“Pumpkins are bigger than peas,” she replies weakly, like this proves her point.

Now is not the time to remind her that we made a pact to never grow up.

Probably not helpful.

I shoot her a look. “Seriously?” I mouth.

She ignores me, probably because she knows she’s being touchy.

“I call you ‘sweet pea’ because you’re my baby girl,” Ed replies, not helping his case in the least. “If you want, I can start calling you ‘pumpkin’ instead.”

“That would be good,” Ryn sniffs.

“Where’s Harper tonight?” I ask to change the subject. Harper moved back home when she returned to Hunter’s Creek a while back, and she’s a usual fixture at these Cole family dinners, along with her boyfriend, Christopher.

“Harper and Christopher have gone to dinner and a movie tonight,”

Alyssa tells me as she makes her way to the refrigerator. “Now, Gabe, you’ll be glad to know that you’re not going home empty handed.” She pulls the door open and produces a second mac and cheese covered in foil.

“For me? Thank you so much,” I say.

“Of course it’s for you, Gabe. We can’t have you working crazy hours and missing meals, what with all the time you put in at the Black Bear and your apprenticeship. You need to keep your strength up. We don’t want you fading away before our eyes.”

Across the table, Ryn offers me a wry smile. “Are you fading away there, champ?”

I place my hands on my belly. “No fading here. Thanks, Alyssa. You’re too good to me.”

“You know how special you are to us, honey,” Alyssa replies, and my mom’s absence hangs in the air. “Don’t you ever forget it.”

“I won’t,” I murmur.

Ryn takes her plate to the sink. “Did you make one for me, too, Mom? Or is this just something special for the son you never had?”

“I made you and Ivy a lasagna,” she replies, taking a second foil-wrapped dish from the refrigerator and putting it on the counter.

“Thanks, Mom. You’re the best,” she says as she pulls her mom into a one-armed hug, the other balancing her empty plate—empty but for the broccoli, of course.

“How do you find the time to make all these extra meals?” I ask as I clear the rest of the plates from the table. As a regular guest in the Cole house, the least I can do is pull my weight.

“I love to cook, and it’s no trouble. Really.”

“She makes time for her kids, just like any good mom does,” Ed adds, his eyes glowing as he smiles at Alyssa. “And my wife is the best mom in Hunter’s Creek.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” she replies with a flick of her wrist and a small smile. “I do what I can for my family, that’s all. Same as anyone else.”

No one mentions the fact that I’m not part of the family. Well, not officially, anyway. It’s one of the wonderful things about Ed and Alyssa Cole. Not only have they produced my best friend, but ever since my own mom passed away that terrible day back when I was nineteen, they’ve treated me like I’m one of their own, no questions asked. They’re my surrogate family, and I love them. It’s as simple as that.

“How’s the apprenticeship coming along, Gabe?” Ed asks me as I sit back down at the table.

“It’s going great. Theo has taught me so much, and I’ve learned a bunch of new skills.”

“I can tell you’re getting a lot out of it,” he replies. “I always say that a man needs a creative outlet. For me, it’s my tinkering with cars and fixing up old furniture.” He gestures at a wooden cabinet over by the back door. “I found that at a second-hand store over in Cotown for just \$45, can you believe it? I stripped it back, sanded it, stained it, added new handles, and now it houses my wife’s plate collection.”

“You did a great job,” I observe.

“My point is, it’s good to have a project. Something you can get yourself lost in. Like your glass blowing.”

I smile at him. Although it may be just a project right now, I hope one day to make glass blowing my living, only I know that’s a long way off.

Someday.

“Will you show me some of your work sometime? I’d like to see it,” Ed says.

“Sure thing. Just stop by Theo’s studio and I’ll show you ‘round. I’ve done a bunch of vases already, and I plan on moving onto some more artistic creations soon, when Theo thinks I’m ready.”

His smile spreads from ear to ear. “I’ll do that, son.”

*Son.* Although I know he doesn’t mean the word in its literal sense, it stills feels great to be called that by a man I both love and respect—two things I could never say about the man who abandoned my mom and me.

“Guess what? I brought dessert,” Ryn says, rummaging in a shopping bag on the counter and producing a pie.

“One of Sheila’s apple pies?” Ed asks.

Ryn grins and nods her head.

“Thanks, sweet... I mean, thanks, pumpkin,” Ed replies awkwardly.

Not wanting to do another deep dive into the relative size of Ed’s vegetable vocabulary, I say, “I’ll get the ice cream.”

When we’ve all got a plate of pie and ice cream, conversation inevitably turns to the Hollywood invasion of our town.

“I saw a whole bunch of strangers on Main Street today. There were so many of them. I tell you, they doubled the Hunter’s Creek population,” Alyssa declares.

“There were nine thousand extra people on Main Street? I’m thinking you’re exaggerating a bit there, Mom,” Ryn says between mouthfuls.

“Okay, not that many, but you get the picture. I’ve never seen so many people on the streets, outside of one of the town festivals. Them being here is the biggest story in town, other than the Black Bear closing down for a few days. Why was that, Gabe, honey?”

“I’m not at liberty to say,” I reply. My boss understandably didn’t want word to get out about the fact that a rat has taken up residence in Barney, and besides, it’ll all be sorted out by the time the place opens up again.

“You’re not?” she questions.

“Believe me, Mom, you don’t want to know,” Ryn replies. “Did you see anyone famous in town?”

“No one I recognized, but I heard you met the big star of the movie. Leonardo Finch, right?”

“Yup,” Ryn replies with a mouthful of pie.

“How did you meet him?” Ed asks.

“He came into the Second Chance for a coffee. Iced coffee, if you must know, which Ivy thinks makes him the type who likes to live without boundaries. Or something.” She shrugs. “I don’t know.”

Alyssa’s eyes are bright. “So? What was he like?”

“He was fine,” Ryn replies.

“Fine? Didn’t you have pictures of him on your bedroom walls when you were a teenager?” Ed asks.

“She kissed his paper lips each night before she went to sleep,” I say and win a blob of ice cream to the face, launched from Ryn’s dessert spoon.

“Hey!” I complain on a surprised laugh as I wipe it away with my napkin.

“Kathryn Fenella Cole, what do you think you’re doing? We do not throw food at people’s faces,” Alyssa scolds, although I can tell she’s working hard at suppressing a smile.

“He deserved it,” Ryn says. “And for the record, I did not kiss his paper lips goodnight, or anyone else’s for that matter.”

“But you wanted to,” I tease under my breath, and she brandishes her spoon at me once more.

“I retract my comment, your honor,” I say with my hands in the surrender sign.

“Good for you getting to meet your teenage idol, Ryn. I wish I’d gotten to meet mine,” Ed says.

“Who was she, Dad?”

He gets a far off look in his eye. “Molly Ringwald.”

“Archie’s mom?” Ryn asks.

Ed pulls his brows together. “Who’s Archie?”

“From *Riverdale*.” When Ed looks at his daughter blankly, she adds, “The TV show?”

Ed shrugs and shakes his head.

“Dad, get with the current century.”

“Do I have to, sweet pea? I mean, pumpkin?”

I ask Alyssa, “Who was your teenage cru—?”

“Rob Lowe,” she says before I’ve even finished asking. “He was so handsome, and a good actor, too, although I didn’t like the character he played in *St. Elmo’s Fire*. Too loose and disrespectful of his poor wife and child, even if she turned up with another man at the bar where he was playing saxophone.”

Ryn and I blink at her, not understanding what she’s talking about.

“Who’s St. Elmo?” Ryn asks.

“It’s a movie, honey,” Alyssa replies.

“Rob Lowe was great in *Parks and Rec*,” I comment.

“Rob Lowe is great in anything,” Alyssa replies.

“You’ve got some competition there, Ed,” I observe.

“Oh, my husband knows where my heart lies,” Alyssa says.

I sit back in my chair and watch as the two share a smile. Ryn begins telling her parents about the plot to *Riverdale*, and I take a moment to bask in the normalcy of it all. Mom might be gone, and I miss her every day, but being included in this family is one of the most important parts of my life.

There’s no way I’d ever want to lose it.



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## Chapter 5

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## Ryn



I watch from my position behind the counter as Harper and her boyfriend, Christopher, push their way through the door into the Second Chance. Holding hands, they're smiling like they both just won the state lottery—which they kind of have in the love stakes, but it's hard to even think something like that without cringing—with smiles on their faces that only intensify when they catch one another's eye.

I swear I see Christopher blush, and for an uptight suit, that's quite something.

"You two are so cute!" Aunt Sheila declares with a clap of her hands, reminiscent of a seal.

"Cute or totally sickening," I murmur.

"You'll find love soon enough, and then you won't be so cynical, Ryn," Aunt Sheila says with that knowing look she gets when she and her Ladies Committee have come up with a new scheme to matchmake me—and it's sure to be with Gabe.

I smile at her while inside my eyes roll like a couple of marbles in a hamster wheel.

"We'll go with cute, Aunt Sheila, rather than sickening," Harper replies, throwing a short-lived look in my direction.

“I adore young love,” our aunt coos.

“We do, too.” Christopher gazes at my sister like she’s the Mona freaking Lisa.

“What about old love? Do you adore that, too? Or is your adoration only reserved for the younger members of the community?” I ask.

Christopher jumps in with, “I’m sure your aunt means new love. Right, Mrs. Cole?”

“I adore love. Period. And you know you need to call me Sheila, Christopher. You’re virtually part of the family.”

Christopher’s smile broadens. “It would be my pleasure, *Sheila*.”

Aunt Sheila reluctantly pulls her gaze from the happy couple. She turns to me and says, “Kathryn, ask our customers what they want to order. I’ve got to head out for a while.”

Kathryn again, huh? I’ve clearly hit a nerve.

“Sure thing,” I reply brightly. Aunt Sheila might be a fully-carded member of the Hunter’s Creek Ladies’ Committee, aka the Meddling In Other People’s Lives Club, but she’s still my boss.

She unties her apron, flashes Harper and Christopher a smile, and sashays toward the kitchen.

“You got Kathryn-ed,” Harper observes in obvious satisfaction.

I shrug. “It’s my name.”

“But you hate it.”

“I think Kathryn is a nice name,” Christopher adds. “But you’re definitely a ‘Ryn’ to me.”

“Thank you, Christopher,” I say pointedly. “What can I get you lovebirds today?”

They share another one of their in-love looks, and I consider throwing a glass of water on them to cool them off. I think better of it. I’ve already been Kathryn-ed today. I don’t want to add fired-for-being-rude-to-the-customers to the list as well.

“I’ll take one of the blueberry muffins and a coffee with cream, thanks. What do you want, Topher?” Harper says.

“Let me guess: a protein shake with a side order of kale?” I suggest.

Christopher—Topher to Harper—loves his low-carb, low-sugar, low-fun diet, famously ordering a ham and cheese omelet without the ham and cheese when he first came to town. Seriously, Aunt Sheila nearly erupted like Mt. St. Helens at it. But, like the rest of Hunter’s Creek, she got over it when

Christopher saved the mill, and consequently the town, in a dramatic town hall meeting. Now he can virtually walk on water around these parts, the townsfolk love him so.

“Actually, I’ll take a blueberry muffin, too, but with a black coffee for me,” he replies.

“Carbs?” I question.

“Carbs,” he confirms. “I had one with Alfred and it was really good.”

“Carbs it is.” I collect the tongs from under the counter and place each muffin on a plate. “Want those heated?”

“Sure thing,” Christopher replies.

“Good to see you’re using utensils these days,” Harper observes. As a self-appointed coffeehouse expert, she loves to point out when I don’t do my job correctly. The last time she wanted a muffin I didn’t use the tongs, which she made a big deal about.

Sisters. Am I right?

“Oh, I’ve been honing my skills at Tong Club,” I tell her. My hand flies to my mouth. “Oops! I forgot: the first rule of Tong Club is don’t talk about Tong Club, and here I am talking about Tong Club.” I brandish my tongs at her. “Forget I ever said anything. Got it?”

Harper throws me a look that says I’m-only-just-managing-not-to-smack-my-little-sister-upside-the-head before they pay and head to a table at the back, where I’m sure they’ll sit, holding hands and gazing at one another.

Okay, I *know* they will, but I don’t need to think about it.

I busy myself with heating the muffins, pouring coffee, and delivering their order to their table. I really am so much more with it than I was on the day the film people came to town. And even though I know I’m never going to be the best waitress-slash-barista in the PNW, I want to at least try to do it well. I need this job, especially now that I’m giving adulting a shot, sharing a house with Ivy, and having to pay actual bills.

That said, it’s not like I’m one to worry much. I’ve never had any grand plans for my life. I only want to be happy. I want to have the time to have fun and enjoy my life.

My family tells me it’s because I’m the baby—that word again. According to my amateur psychologist sister, Marlowe, the last-born doesn’t have such a strong drive to achieve, never feels like they must have a career at any cost. The youngest child, according to Dr. Marlowe Cole, is happy to simply “be.”

Whatever the heck that means.

As though I've conjured her just by thinking her name, my wannabe psychologist sister makes her way into the coffeehouse, accompanied by Gabe.

"Marlowe, what are you doing here?" I ask.

"Is that any way to greet your sister?" she replies on a laugh.

"I found her talking on her phone outside," Gabe says.

"I mean, aren't you supposed to be in Seattle, working at your fancy job?"

"I'm allowed to take a break now and then, you know."

"Marlowe Cole!" Aunt Sheila shrieks as she pushes through the kitchen door. She collects my sister in a hug and Gabe leans his elbow on the counter.

As my aunt questions Marlowe, I ask Gabe, "Are you here for coffee?"

"Yeah, and I'll take one of those slices of apple pie, too."

I prepare his coffee and slide an extra-large slice of apple pie into a box.

"You're good to me, do you know that?" he says.

I grin. "What are besties for?"

"Ryn, can you get Marlowe a coffee with cream? I'll go get Lisa to start her food order."

"Thanks, Aunt Sheila," Marlowe replies as our aunt heads back to the kitchen.

I hand Gabe his coffee and he says, "You're the best, Ryn-Ryn."

"You know it," I reply with a grin.

Marlowe watches us both, that oldest sister-analyzing-stuff look on her face.

"Coffee with cream coming up." I busy myself with making her coffee.

"Are you dating anyone, Gabe?" she asks, acting all innocent when I know she's not asking an innocent question at all.

"Nope," he replies succinctly as he takes a sip of his coffee.

"How about you, Ryn? Are you dating anyone right now?"

I pass her the cup of coffee. "You know I'm not."

"Huh. Interesting," she replies with a smirk, tapping her chin, as though she's deep in thought.

I roll my eyes at her. "You've been talking to Aunt Sheila about us."

"She may have mentioned something," she replies.

"You know what she's like. She and her friends love to matchmake, and Gabe and I are her pet project. Aren't we, G?"

“I think that’s my cue to leave,” he replies, inching away from us.

“Run away,” I tell him, and he does just that, making a hasty exit from the coffeehouse.

“So? Aunt Sheila is totally off base?” Marlowe asks. “I mean, Gabe is a good-looking guy. Has anything ever happened between you?”

“Because two people of the opposite sex can’t be just friends?”

Marlowe throws her hands in the air. “You’re right. Totally right. I’ll stop listening to her now.” She picks up her cup. “Thanks for the coffee. I’ll go crash Harper and Christopher’s little love-fest.”

I chortle. “You do that.”

I return to my work, but my mind keeps drifting to Marlowe’s question.

*Has anything ever happened between you?*

The thing is, something did happen between Gabe and me, but I pushed it from my mind a long time ago.

We were seventeen and he had been dumped by Ivy only days before. I knew he was heartbroken over it, so when he asked me to go to the movie he had intended to take her to, of course I said yes. He was my best friend and that’s the sort of thing you do for one another.

Afterwards, we ate ice cream and found a photo booth and took a bunch of goofy photos together. I really felt like I’d helped lift his spirits. He seemed lighter, happier even, more the Gabe I knew.

Then, when we got back to his house, we sat on his mom’s porch swing and talked. Conversation turned to my dating life and he asked me if I had feelings for anyone. I couldn’t tell him that I did because that would have given too much away. Because the thing is, I had feelings for him, Gabe, my best friend—and my friend Ivy’s very recent ex.

I know, I know. A total freaking mess.

I remember swallowing down a lump in my throat and lifting my gaze to his, not wanting to answer his question but unable to tell him why. I saw him looking back at me with a look in his eye I’d never seen before.

I’m not proud of what happened next.

I don’t know who started it, but the next thing I knew, we were tangled up in one another, arms and legs, our lips locked in the most breathtakingly wonderful kiss of my life.

I was so wrapped up in the unexpected thrill of kissing the guy I had been secretly hung up on for ages that it took me way too long to pull away.

Way too long.

But I knew I had to.

He was my friend's ex, totally off limits.

What's more, he was my best friend and everyone knows you don't mess around with your best friend—not if you want to keep them, that is.

Of course I knew Ivy had rejected him, so arguably he was fair game. But Ivy was—and still is—my friend, and even though I knew first hand that she didn't want him anymore, I also knew first hand that she didn't want anyone else to have him, either.

But more than any of that, I knew I could be nothing but Gabe's rebound girl. I didn't want to be *that girl*.

I knew deep down inside that when we kissed it meant as much to him as choosing which soda to have with his burger. I didn't want to be just a flavor of soda. I wanted to be his everything, and I knew a rebound kiss could never be his everything.

Any hopes I had that I could be more than a rebound to Gabe died back then, and I've been content to be his friend ever since.

An older man, probably about my dad's age, approaches the counter. He looks familiar, but I can't place where I know him from. He's tall and broad with dark hair that's graying at the temples, and he looks a lot like someone I know, only I can't pinpoint who exactly.

If he was from Hunter's Creek, there's no chance I wouldn't know him. Small town, remember?

I smile at the man. "How can I help you today, sir?"

"Oh, I'll have a...coffee?"

"Is that a question or an order?"

"An order," he replies with more confidence. "I'll have a coffee with cream and sugar, thanks."

"Is that to go?"

He glances uncertainly around the coffeehouse, as though he's trying to work out whether he wants to stay or go. "I guess I'll have it here."

"Any snacks with that?"

"Just the coffee."

I tell him how much it is and he pays. "Coming right up. I'll bring it over to you."

"Thanks." He hesitates, not moving.

"Was there something else you wanted to order?"

He shakes his head before he turns and walks over to an empty table.

Well, that was odd.

I fix his coffee and deliver it to him. He thanks me with a tense smile, looking so uptight he might unravel at any moment. I'm pretty sure a caffeine injection is not going to help matters.

"Enjoy," I tell him as I turn to leave.

"Are you Ryn?" he asks.

"Sure am," I reply brightly, not sure how this stranger knows my name, but this is Hunter's Creek and everyone is friendly with everyone else. "Are you from the movie set?"

"Movie set?"

That'll be a no, then.

"Have you got a moment?" he asks.

I glance around the coffeehouse. It's not peak time, and Aunt Sheila has returned to the counter.

"Sure."

He gestures at one of the free chairs at the table and I take a seat, wondering what this vaguely familiar looking man, who knows my name, wants to talk to me about.

"You're probably wondering who I am," he begins.

Bingo.

"I'm Patrick Hartmann."

Hartmann is Gabe's last name.

"Are you related to Gabe?" I ask.

"I'm...Gabriel's father."

My eyes probably resemble a cartoon character's right about now, balanced on the end of long, thin stalks. "You're Gabe's *father*?" I squeak because it's not every day your best friend's long-departed dad turns up out of the blue.

I sweep my gaze over him. Now that I know who he is, he sure looks like my friend. From his thick head of hair to the shape of his nose and the breadth of his shoulders, he's like an older, lined, and leaner version of Gabe.

An older, lined, and leaner version who not only abandoned his young wife and infant child, but had led a double life with another family all along.

It's a doozy, that's for sure.

"I've been asking around about Gabriel. The butcher down the street told me you're his best friend and that you work here, so I came to see if we could talk."



I cross my arms. “Bernie told you that?”

“He said you two are tight. Real tight. Like best friends.”

I’m having some pretty dark thoughts about Bernie, nice, mild-mannered man that he is.

“I don’t get it. Why did you come to find me instead of your son?”

He furrows his forehead. “It’s...sensitive.”

“I’ll bet it is,” I scoff.

This is the man who did something unforgivable to Gabe and his mom, hurting my best friend, leaving his mom bitter and angry, struggling to make ends meet. He hurt Gabe so deeply that he not only refuses to have anything to do with his dad, but also only trusts a small, tight group of people in his life.

I’m not exactly going to be all rainbows and unicorns with this man.

I’m on Gabe’s side, one thousand percent. No question.

He places his hands palms down on the table. “Look, Ryn. I know he probably doesn’t think a lot of me and I get it. I do.”

I tighten my lips. “Probably? Try *definitely*.”

He lets out a puff of air, his shoulders dropping. “I get it.”

“What did you expect? You did what you did back then. You have to know that kind of thing hurts people, and it doesn’t just go away when you want it to.”

His brow creases. “He told you about it?” He shakes his head. “What am I saying? Of course he did. You’re his best friend.”

I glare at him. “You got that right.”

I’m angry with this man I’ve never met for what he did to Gabe. He can’t expect me to be anything but.

I narrow my eyes at him. “Why do you want to find Gabe now? Do you need a kidney or something?”

He looks shamefaced.

I pull my brows together and stare at him in shocked disbelief. “You *do* need a kidney!”

He scrapes his hand down his jawline in a gesture so familiar, it’s almost like I’ve got the middle-aged version of Gabe sitting across the table from me. “I don’t need a kidney.”

My brain burns rubber on the racetrack of my mind. “Not a kidney, huh? What other organs can you donate and remain alive? You’ve only got one heart and one liver. Oh, I know. You need a lung. We’ve got two of those.”

“I don’t want any of his body parts.”

I scoff. “I’m supposed to believe that? I don’t know you from Adam and you’ve turned up here trying to talk with me because I’m your son’s best friend, and you expect me to believe you don’t have an ulterior motive? I’m not that naïve, you know.”

He lets out a heavy breath. “You’re right. I know you’re right. I can’t expect you to trust me. I’m a stranger to you. Heck, I’ve never even been to Hunter’s Creek. To you, I’m some rando who’s turned up at your place of work and dropped a bombshell on you.”

“Correct,” is my terse, one-word reply.

He takes a beat, his eyes downcast, and I can see his chest expanding with each breath he takes. He looks back up at me, his face stricken, his eyes glassy. “I want to see my son. I know it’s probably too late, and I messed up so badly with him, but I need to see him.”

“And you’re not going to tell me why?”

“With all due respect, that’s between him and me. I hope you can understand that, Ryn.”

A mix of emotions swell around me. I need to protect Gabe and do the right thing by him. He’s my absolute priority. No question. Always has been, always will be. But here is this man, sitting across from me, looking broken, asking for my help to heal this deep wound. To make it right.

I drum my fingers on the table as I cycle through my options. What do I do? This feels very much like an adulting situation, and as a self-professed Petra Pan, it’s way out of my comfort zone.

He wants to see Gabe.

He won’t tell me why.

He doesn’t want anything from him.

Perhaps he’s...dying?

The thought has my chest tightening.

“Ryn, I hope you’ll help me. I would truly love a chance with my son.”

And there it is. He had to go using that word: *son*. It evokes images of men cradling their babies, playing catch with them in the park, advising them, sitting proudly as they watch them graduate from high school. All the things my dad did for me.

But this man did none of those things for Gabe. Not one. He left. He was the very definition of an absent father figure, gone without a trace.

I open my mouth to reply, then close it again.

Sensing me wavering, he says, “I would do anything for a second chance with him. Please say you’ll help me.”

The irony that we’re currently in the Second Chance Café is not lost on me.

I chew the inside of my lip. “Can you give me some time? I’m not saying I’ll help you, but I want to think about it for a while.”

His face lights up in a smile that makes him look so much like Gabe, I’m as startled as a soldier hearing the piercing sound of gunfire in a peaceful village.

This man is Gabe’s *dad*. Gabe is this man’s *son*.

What a strange and perplexing realization.

Suddenly, it all feels like too much. I stand bolt upright, my chair making a scraping sound on the hardwood floor, and declare, “I can’t right now. I-I need to get back to work.”

He too rises to his feet. He’s tall, almost as tall as Gabe. “I’ll come back. Maybe you could think about it?”

I give him a curt nod. “Sure.”

“Ryn, I really hope you’ll help me reconnect with my son.”

*Son*. One last tug at the old heartstrings.

I don’t reply. Instead, I watch as he takes long legged strides toward the exit. Even his gait is similar to Gabe’s. I’m left to my thoughts about loyalty and family and friendship—and about what the right thing is to do for my friend.

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## Chapter 6

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Ryn



Deep in thought, I return to the counter and serve another customer when in walks the cute guy from the time Leonardo Finch came to the coffeehouse. The guy who achieved what I would have thought was impossible, dragging my attention from my teenage idol to *him*.

From Gabe's dad to this guy, I'm having quite the day at work.

His piercing gaze lands on me as he saunters laconically toward me.

*Hello, Anthony Bridgerton.*

Only it's more *hello, Anthony Bridgerton in your hot black leathers* followed quickly with an *oh, mama*.

I've always gone for the stereotypical bad boy. You know, the edgy, cool guy with the permanent scowl on his stubble-lined face. My sisters describe these guys as the type who could ruin my life, and, I'll admit, a few of them have tried to do just that.

But I can't help myself. Throw on a pair of leather pants and a biker jacket and my insides turn to liquid honey.

Bad Boy Lord Bridgerton approaches the counter, his face lighting up into a soft smile that makes that liquid honey tingle.

I bet he has really sexy tattoos covering half his arms and maybe his back, leading all the way down to...

“Hey,” he says.

*Get your mind off Anthony Bridgerton’s alleged tattoos.*

I search for the words, and come up with, “He-hey. Coffeehouse.”

*He-hey. Coffeehouse?*

Kill me, kill me now.

He shoots me a quizzical smile. “Thanks. Cute place.”

Did he just call me cute? No, it was the coffeehouse.

“Thanks,” I gush, as though he actually did.

Again, with that look.

*Be cool, Ryn. Casual and cool.*

I watch him as he scans the bakery case. After a beat, I ask, “What can I getcha?”

At least it’s a full sentence, even if it’s not exactly Shakespeare.

“Hold on a minute.” He lifts his eyes to the blackboard menu above my head and I seize the opportunity to examine his face. He’s got coffee-colored brown eyes, framed by dark brows, with chestnut hair that falls past his ears, with just the right volume of 5 o’clock shadow to show off his strong bone structure.

So very Anthony Bridgerton.

“Are you with the production?” I blurt, even though I already know he is.

He returns those eyes to mine. “I am, and I’m on an errand to get coffee and snacks for Leo.”

“Leo?” I question.

“Leonardo Finch. He’s one of the actors in the movie we’re filming here.”

As if I need to be told who Leonardo Finch is, or the fact that he’s in town. You’d have to be living under a large pile of logs in this town to have missed that.

“You work with...uh, Leo?” I ask, trying this new name out.

This day just got a whole lot more interesting.

Anthony Bridgerton’s lips pull into a fresh smile as he proffers his hand. “I’m being rude. My name is Joe Turner. I’m Leo’s assistant. I saw you when we stopped by the other day.”

I take his hand, enjoying the way it folds around mine. “Yes, you did.” I am totally giving myself away.

So much for being casual and cool.

I clear my throat. “You’re Leo’s assistant? That’s cool.”

“Yeah, it’s cool, as you say.” His smile has morphed into one of amusement, but I figure he gets that a lot when he tells people what he does. After all, it’s not every day you meet a movie star’s assistant, especially not one who looks like he should be gallantly riding a horse through Regency England on his way to a duel to protect his sister’s honor.

“Can I ask you something?” Joe asks, his eyes boring holes into my very soul.

“Anything,” I murmur because really, Joe Turner could ask me anything right now and the answer would be, *heck yes*.

“Do you think I could get my hand back?”

I focus on our hands and immediately pull mine away as humiliation floods my veins. I clear my throat and offer him a sheepish smile, hoping to pass it off as cute and endearing—but suspecting he probably thinks I’m just some weird Leonardo Finch stalker.

“So, what can I get you, Joe?” I ask, trying to reclaim my dignity.

“I’ll take three of those glazed donuts, a couple slices of apple pie, and what flavor are your muffins?”

I collect the tongs and gesture at the case. “We’ve got blueberry, chocolate chip, and this one is really good. It’s peach and white chocolate. Super tasty, and of course good for you on account of the fruit.”

He lets out a light, low laugh. It makes me tingle. “Well, I’m all for being healthy, so I guess I’ll take a couple peach and white chocolate muffins, too.”

“Great choice.”

I busy myself with placing his order in a box, hoping I got it straight.

I chew on my lip. I was sure he wanted donuts, but were they glazed or with sprinkles? Or were they jelly?

He must notice because he says, “It was three glazed.”

“Got it.” I place three glazed donuts in the box. “Do you want coffee with that?”

“Definitely. The coffee on the set is okay, but Leo mentioned your iced coffee here is pretty good. He used the word ‘excellent’ in fact.”

I glow. “The best coffee this side of Seattle.” I’m quoting Aunt Shelia’s second-favorite line after *get a Second Chance at the Second Chance Café*. It’s a line I never thought I would use. It’s super cheesy and doubtlessly wrong.

He lifts his dark eyebrows. “In that case, I’d better get one for myself, too.” He holds my gaze for a beat longer than I was anticipating, and my

belly gives a little flip.

Was that a flirty look? It felt like a flirty look.

“My aunt, who runs this place, will be happy to hear that Leo prefers her coffee.”

Aunt Sheila was totally bummed when a catering company over in Cotown, the much larger town in this part of Washington state, won the contract to supply the film set. Of course, a coffeehouse the size of the Second Chance was never going to be a contender, but this news delivered by Joe Turner, Anthony Bridgerton’s doppelgänger will surely make her smile.

I make the iced coffees and put them in a cardboard drink carrier. He pays and flashes me his ridiculously attractive smile before he turns to leave.

“Thanks for stopping by, Joe,” I call out.

He pauses and turns back to me. “Do you want to come visit sometime? See how they make movies?”

My eyes light up. “Are you serious? I would *love* that.”

Any last shred of hope I had of playing it cool has well and truly flapped its wings and flown away.

“Give me your number and we can work out a time.” He pulls the latest model iPhone from his back pocket and I tell him my number. I hear my phone beep under the counter and feel a tingle of excitement.

“I didn’t catch your name.”

“It’s Ryn, short for Kathryn with a ‘y’, but no one ever calls me that, not unless they’re annoyed with me or I’ve been naughty. You know, like when I was a kid.”

And about five minutes ago.

“Are you naughty a lot, Kathryn with a ‘y’?” he questions with a wry smile.

Well, he is a bad boy, after all. He’s hardly going to ask me my favorite nursery rhyme.

No one—outside of my family—has ever gotten away with calling me Kathryn before and lived to tell the tale. But the way Joe Turner says it? I could melt into a puddle on the coffeehouse floor.

“Not as often as I’d like,” I reply with a coy and entirely fake confident smile, as though I flirt with hot men like this every day of the week.

“We might have to see if we can do something about that.” A low laugh rumbles out of him again, and my cheeks heat.

This conversation has definitely taken a turn for the flirty, and I cannot



say I'm not enjoying it.

I don't want Joe to leave, so I blurt, "Leo sure is hungry."

"I'll let you in on a secret. It's not all for Leo. In fact, only the iced coffee is. The rest is for me and some of the crew. But don't go telling my boss."

"You mean my close and personal friend, Leo?"

"That's the one."

"Promise."

We share a smile. I try to keep myself under control, when in reality I want to jump for joy.

"I'll message you to set something up soon."

"That'd be good."

I'm trying to seem less eager than I feel.

He winks at me—winks at me!—and I swear my knees weaken. "See you later."

And with that, he strides out of the coffeehouse and disappears down the street. Unlike when Leonardo Finch was here, no one watches him leave except for me, but then no one but me has been flirted with and invited to the set by one Joe Turner, aka Anthony Bridgerton, aka one hundred percent my kind of guy.

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## Chapter 7

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## Gabe



It's always hot in the studio, thanks to the fact that the furnace is 2,150 degrees, which is crazy hot in anyone's books. I'm down to my t-shirt and favorite pair of jeans, the sweat dripping from my forehead. With no long sleeve to wipe my face, I tug on my shirt, loosening it from my jeans, and grab the bottom edge to wipe the sweat away before it stings my eyes.

With the Black Bear shut down for another day or so, I have more time to dedicate to my craft and I plan on being here most of the day.

"If there were calendars for glass blowers like there are for firemen, you'd be the cover boy."

My t-shirt balled in my fist, I look up to see Ryn holding a tray of drinks, a grin on her face. "What are you doing here?"

She ignores my question. "Duuuude. Who knew you had abs like those? All firm and glistening and...*there.*"

She gestures at my torso and, self-conscious, I let the hem of my shirt drop.

"Thanks?" I say with a light laugh, because it's always awkward when your best friend, who happens to be female, compliments you on your body. Not that Ryn passes judgment on the way I look much, unless of course I'm showing the world my alleged calendar-worthy abs, it would seem. We might

be best friends, but we don't exactly parade around in front of one another in the buff.

I gesture at the tray. "One of those for me?"

"I figured you could do with cooling down. Iced coffee. I got one for Rowena, too." She waves an iced coffee at Rowena before she places it on the workbench.

Ryn passes me one of the iced coffees and I take a sip, the cold liquid slipping down my throat and cooling me down.

"Iced coffee? You're the best," I say.

Rowena stops what she's doing and makes her way over.

"From the Second Chance?" she questions as she takes a cup from the tray.

"Where else?" Ryn replies with a shrug and a smile. "They're the best in town, and also I get a serious discount."

"As in free?" I question with a laugh. We both know Ryn gets her coffee for free from her aunt. It's another advantage to having her as my best friend.

"Along those lines, G," she replies evasively with a hint of a smile.

Rowena takes a sip and lifts the cup. "Thanks a lot. I needed that. Let me know when you need me, Gabe," she says before she returns to her work.

"I can help him," Ryn offers.

Rowena's eyes flick to mine. She's finished her apprenticeship and works here for pay a few days a week. She's good at her craft. Between her and Theo, I've learned a lot. "If you're sure?" she questions.

"Oh, I'm sure. I've got this," Ryn replies.

"Okay. I'll be over here if you need me," Rowena replies.

"You know iced coffee is *Leo's* favorite."

"Who's?"

"Leonardo Finch."

"You're on a nickname basis with the guy now, are you?"

"Nah. His assistant calls him that, so I figured I would, too."

"You met her?"

She leans back against the workbench. "Don't be sexist," she scolds.

"How is me asking if you met *Leo's* assistant sexist?"

"Because you assumed his assistant is a woman when, in fact, it's a guy."

"A guy?"

Maybe I was being sexist? It wasn't intentional. All the assistants at the mill are women, so you can hardly blame me. But this isn't the 1950s—even

if Hunter's Creek feels like it most of the time.

I raise my hands in surrender. "Yeah, okay. I was being sexist. My bad."

"Joe—that's his assistant's name, Joe Turner—is hot with a capital 'H'," she gushes, like she's a tween talking about her crush. "And guess what? He invited me to come visit him *on set*. Isn't that amazing?"

I arrange the chunks of glass on the workbench that I plan on using in my latest design. "Lucky you."

"I know, right? Joe is so sweet. And hot. Did I mention that?"

"Yeah, you did."

"He's like Anthony Bridgerton level hot, but also super cool."

I ask, even though I'm certain I don't want to know. "Anthony Bridgerton?"

"You know, from *Bridgerton*, the TV show Ivy and I love? All Regency gowns, heaving cleavage, and those ridiculously sexy rakes."

"Sexy rakes? What is this, some bizarre, late-night gardening show?"

She giggles. "No! Rakes as in bad boys."

Ryn has always gone for men she considers "bad boys", guys who think a lot of themselves, who act all cool and aloof, while inside they're probably hoping and praying they can get with a woman like her.

I take another sip of my coffee. "Sounds like something you'd want to watch."

"It's only the best show on Netflix. It's super romantic and full of totally hot people, Anthony being one of them."

"I thought you said his name was Joe?"

She gives an exasperated laugh. "Keep up, will you, G?"

"Between Anthony and Joe and 'Leo,'" I begin, making air quotes with my fingers, "I'm not sure I've got the time to keep up, Ryn-Ryn. Or the inclination, for that matter."

She smirks at me, looking like the cat who orchestrated a successful canary heist. "Want me to tell you more about him?"

Nope.

"Let me guess. He's a bad boy biker wannabe with an attitude problem."

I've seen Ryn fall for this type way too many times. I know how it goes: she falls for him and he treats her like garbage. It's like she's a moth attracted to the wrong kind of flame and nothing anyone says can change that.

As her friend, all I can do is be the one to be there when she needs me, ready to pick up the pieces.

Lucky me.

Ryn bats me on the arm. “Joe’s not like that.”

“Really?” I ask in mock surprise. “He isn’t a bad boy biker wannabe with an attitude problem?”

“Joe is a really great guy.”

“Who also happens to be a bad boy biker wannabe with an attitude problem?” I quickly add, “Don’t hit me again.”

“You make me sound like I’ve got a violence problem.”

I offer her a grin. “If the shoe fits...”

“There’s no shoe in this equation.”

I’m more than happy to move the conversation along. “You said you could help, so want to help me make something?”

“Sure thing.” She pulls off her jean jacket, which she’s teamed with her usual ensemble of jeans, tennis shoes, and a plain t-shirt. She’s got a simple style that totally works on her. She doesn’t need all the makeup and flashy clothes some other women go for. She’s one hundred percent Ryn.

“Watcha working on?” she asks as she takes a sip of her own coffee.

“Theo wants me to try different things, so I watched a video of a guy making a fish last night and figured I’d give it a shot today. I was gonna get Rowena to help me, but since you’re here and ready to work...”

“It takes a village to raise a child and make a glass fish?”

I chuckle. “Something like that.”

“How can I help?”

“Grab me a blowpipe and let’s start.”

We work together, twisting and turning the rod to collect molten glass from the furnace. When the weight feels right, I pull it out and Ryn begins to gently blow air down the tube, causing the hot glass to expand as I shape and mold it with the different tools.

After many iterations in which we add more glass, heat it, manipulate it, heat it, and manipulate it again, it begins to take shape, and we add different colors and twist and shape the fish. Rowena gives us some tips, and by the time we’re done, we’ve made our very first blown glass fish.

I take a deep drink of my iced coffee, now less iced and more room temperature, but it’s still cooling. “I needed that.”

Ryn, too, sucks loudly on her straw and draws up the final dregs of her coffee as she assesses our masterpiece. “It reminds me of something.”

“Something good or something bad? Before you answer, just as long as

it's not a glass clown collectible, we're good."

Ryn and I always used to joke that if I ever made a living out of this, I would start a line of loud, comical glass clowns. Seriously, Google it. They're just as ugly and tacky as you might expect.

She pronounces, "Dora the Explorer's monkey."

I let out a surprised laugh. "The fish we made reminds you of a monkey?"

"Yeah, you know, the annoying monkey with his pink face and big eyes and his blue and yellow body."

"Boots?" I offer. Not that I'm a huge Dora the Explorer fan or anything. I'm twenty-three, not three.

We both look at the artwork. Sure enough, it's got a pink face with a pale blue body. Throw a pair of red boots on its fins and it could be a very strangely shaped monkey. You know, if monkeys had fins.

Ryn tsks. "All that time and effort and you made a cartoon character, G."

"Maybe I'll stick with vases. I'm getting good at those." I gesture at the shelving at the back of the studio where I've lined up a group of vases. I can't help but be proud. There are long thin ones, round, colorful ones, and ones with ripple effects and stripes. Each took hours to create and perfect, and I loved every minute of it.

Ryn wanders over to the shelves, and I'm suddenly uneasy that she's throwing her gaze across my work. When you create something, it's almost like it's a part of who you are that you're offering to others to see. It's deeply personal, and Ryn's opinion means the world to me—in glass blowing and in all things. After all, Ryn had the talent to be in my shoes, only it didn't turn out that way for her.

"G, these are so, so beautiful," she says, her voice breathless.

It makes me smile.

"This one in particular is stunning." She gestures at a wide, mid-century style vase in blue and purple.

"Oh, no!" I exclaim as I make my way over to her. I'd forgotten I'd put that vase there for safekeeping, and now she's gone and found it.

"What?"

"I was going to give that one to you."

Her face lights up. "You were?"

"Not now that you've seen it. I'll need to give you something else."

She picks it up, holding it close against her chest and turns to face me. "You have *got* to give this to me, G. I love it."

“I’m gonna have to think about it,” I tease.

I watch as she turns the vase in her hands, regarding it through soft eyes.

“Don’t you dare, Gabriel Hartmann,” she scolds. “It’s gorgeous.” She places it carefully back on its shelf. “You’re pretty good at this glass making thing. Aren’t you?”

“I’m trying.”

Knowing that I got the apprenticeship and not her makes me clam up about my hopes and dreams. But the last thing I want to do is hurt her or make her feel like she’s not good enough. Because Ryn Cole is *more* than good enough, but experience tells me this new guy she’s all excited about won’t even see it.



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## Chapter 8

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Ryn



I can barely believe I'm here.

It took all my powers of persuasion to get Aunt Sheila to let me have a couple hours off on this sunny morning, even when I explained to her that I'd been invited to go to the movie set, the mythical place at the edge of town that every person in Hunter's Creek wants to visit.

Predictably, she made me promise that the next time I went I would be sure to take her. I have no clue whether Joe will be up for that, but I leapt at it like a bear on its prey, and now here I am, clutching a box of treats and a tray of iced coffees as I wait at the temporary fence encircling the set, nervous and excited.

I'm approached by a man with a bald head and jaw so square he could use it to slice bananas, and a scowl on his face that tells me he can only be a security guard. He looks like he lives at the gym, slurping protein shakes and grunting and beating his chest all day long.

"Who are you?" he asks in a gruff, humorless voice.

"I'm Ryn Cole. I'm here to meet Joe Turner. He's expecting me," I reply brightly.

He eyes the box and iced coffees I'm holding. "Watcha got in the box?"

"I've got a bunch of tasty treats from the Second Chance Café over on

Main Street.” I lift open the lid and he peers inside.

“This is a closed set today,” he sniffs.

“Why? Are they filming a love scene?”

My mind instantly darts to the possibility of catching a tantalizing glimpse of Leonardo Finch’s bare, muscled torso.

Don’t judge me. He was my teenage crush, the star in all my fall-in-love-get-married-and-have-babies fantasies.

“Closed means closed. No one enters,” Mr. Friendly snaps.

Guess who’s not going to win Hunter’s Creek Nice Guy of the Month award? Not that there’s an actual award for Nice Guy of the Month, but knowing this town, I wouldn’t be surprised if they decided to make one.

“Look, I’m not some fan, here to ogle Leonardo Finch in his birthday suit,” I lie, because, let’s face it, I would ogle the heck out of Leonardo Finch in his birthday suit. “I have an appointment to meet Joe Turner, Mr. Finch’s assistant.” To make my point, I brandish my phone at him, showing the string of messages between Joe and me. The string of messages that were more than a little flirty. “See? It says, and I quote, ‘See you on set at 11’ and it’s from one Joe Turner.”

Mr. Friendly gives a cursory glance at my phone. His oversized square jaw locks into place and, combined with his bald head, he reminds me of the guy made of rocks in those superhero movies. What was his name? That’s right: The Thing.

Gabe would find this hilarious, me arguing with The Thing.

The thought of Gabe reminds me of his dad’s request that I help him reconnect with his son. I’m still grappling with what to do, but now isn’t the time to dwell on that. Now’s the time to get onto this movie set to see Joe, STAT.

“I’m not letting you in, lady,” The Thing tells me.

This is clearly not working. I decide to go with flattery.

“I can tell you do your job super well. I mean, you totally look the part, being so big and menacing and all, and I bet you totally win when your bosses hand out bonuses for things like the most crazy super fans turned away in a day. But I’m not that person. Really. I’m a local from Hunter’s Creek. My name is Ryn Cole. I work at the coffeehouse where these tasty treats are from.”

I hold the box aloft once more as evidence.

He is unmoved by my speech. “Time to leave, miss.”

This guy has severely underestimated my desire to get onto the set if he thinks I'm going to simply turn around and leave right now.

"Do you like muffins? Or pies? My aunt owns the coffeehouse on Main Street, the one I mentioned before, and she makes the best apple pies in the state, probably in the entire PNW. Right now, she's gearing up for the Hunter's Creek Summer Festival, which is coming up real soon and happens every year in town, and if you want, I could get you a pie? Or two?"

I smile up at him, hoping... hoping...

"Does your aunt put raisins in her apple pies?"

Does The Thing, like raisins in apple pies? His impassive, appropriately stone-like face is impossible to read.

"She has a very strong opinion on raisins in apple pies," I reply, testing the waters and proud of myself for my ambiguous wording.

"It's nothing short of an abomination to add raisins to a perfectly good apple pie," The Thing states sternly, as though he's making his superhero speech about how bad guys must be stopped before they destroy our planet.

He's against raisins. Got it.

I lean a little closer to him. "I tell you, my aunt would rather close up her coffeehouse for good than put a single raisin in any of her apple pies."

He leans back on his haunches and I swear he almost smiles. Almost.

I hold my breath. Have I won him over? Will he let me on set now?

That question will remain forever unanswered because in that moment Joe arrives, and all thought of raisins or superheroes are forgotten, replaced instead with thoughts of how undeniably gorgeous Joe is.

In his black and white patterned shirt, buttoned right up, his cuffed black jeans and lace up boots, his eyes light up when they land on mine, and my belly does all kinds of crazy flips at the sight of him.

Joe Turner could be the raisin in my apple pie any day he likes.

"Hey, Carl. I see you've met Ryn," Joe says as he slaps the security guard on the back.

The Thing, aka Mr. Friendly, aka Carl shoots him a look that tells him in no uncertain terms to remove his hand immediately.

Huh. He must be super unfriendly with everyone.

Undeterred, Joe continues, "Ryn's my guest. Came to check out a movie set."

"It's a closed set today," Carl repeats.

I've got to hand it to him, he's relentlessly on-message.

“Ryn wants to take a look around, but we probably won’t even go see the filming. It’s over by the pond, anyway, and I’m in my new boots.”

He’s so very un-Hunter’s Creek. No one in their right mind in this town would concern themselves over a bit of mud on a pair of boots.

I like that Joe cares about how he looks.

“Leo knows and he’s cool with it,” Joe adds.

The mention of Leonardo Finch’s name has the desired effect on Carl, who finally stands back to allow me entry onto the set.

“Come on in to the Second Chance and I’ll be sure to give you one of my aunt’s apple pies,” I tell him, and I think Carl almost cracks a smile. Almost, but not quite.

“You showed up at just the right time. He wasn’t going to let me in,” I say.

“Oh, Carl is a pussycat. You just have to know how to work him.”

We make our way over to the group of trailers the production company set up in Mr. Cantor’s field. But these are not like any trailer I’ve seen before. They’re all glistening white and look brand new, each about the size of half my parents’ house. Not exactly the brightly colored, dilapidated trailers a few families live in on the outskirts of town. These are the Dolce and Gabbana of trailers. The Manolo Blahniks.

“It’s awesome to be here, Joe. Thank you so much for inviting me,” I gush.

“It’s my pleasure.” He flashes me that knee-weakening smile of his, the one that has me thinking of sexy Lord Bridgerton winning Kate over with his deep, brooding looks and unbridled passion.

I clear my throat. I can’t start melting like honey all over the set.

“You’re giving Carl an apple pie?” he questions.

“It was my attempt at bribery.”

“So, there’s no apple pie?”

“Oh, there’s apple pie,” I tell him with a grin. “My aunt enters the Hunter’s Creek Summer Festival baking contest each year and usually wins. In fact, I can’t remember the last time she lost.”

“You’re having a summer festival?”

“It’s nothing special, really, just your standard small-town festival with food and rides and lots of animals.”

“Like farm animals?”

“Yup.”

“How quaint.”

If he’s being condescending, I don’t mention it. “Super quaint,” I agree. “They tend to stink the place up a bit, but there are goats and pigs and cows, which people seem to like to see.”

“You know, up until yesterday, I had never seen a cow up close, other than when it’s in the form of a steak on my plate.”

“City boy, huh?”

“San Francisco born and bred. Not a lot of cows there.”

I put my hands up in the air. “No judgement here. I’m sure San Francisco has much more exciting things than cows.”

He lets out that laugh of his that tickles my belly. “I guess that depends on how much you like cows.”

“But you live in Los Angeles now, right?”

“Yup.”

“Because you wanted to work for a movie star?”

“Not exactly. I kind of fell into this work. It pays the bills, and I get to travel to places like Hunter’s Creek and meet the cute locals.”

I give him a coy smile. “What do you really want to do?”

We reach one of the trailers and come to a stop outside the door.

“Why don’t you guess?”

“Well, generally when people move to LA, they want to be actors. That whole Hollywood thing. Am I right?”

Joe is easily good looking enough to be on the silver screen.

“You got me,” he replies with a smile. “Me and every other guy who turns up in town with a headful of plans and not a lot else.”

“Like my sister’s ex. I mean, he did actually make it. He’s on a show called *Serious Bite*, which is hilarious because we all thought vampires were so over, but apparently there’s life left in them still, if you’ll excuse the pun.”

He looks at me blankly.

“Vampires are, by definition, dead,” I explain.

“Right. Yeah,” he replies with a laugh.

“Anyway, all the town has gone crazy for the show. The townsfolk get together to watch it in the town hall. Everyone is there. *Literally* everyone. Seriously, you’d think Dex was some kind of demigod and not the jerk who did the dirty on my sister.”

“Wait. You’re talking about Dex *Ryder*?” he asks and I nod.

“And he dated your sister?”

“Only for like a gazillion years. He grew up here and he and Harper were high school sweethearts. She followed him to LA and then he dumped her for his co-star. Isn’t that about as cliché as a guy leaving his wife for his secretary back in the day? Total jerk move, in my opinion.”

He lets out a low whistle. “Dex Ryder grew up in Hunter’s Creek. Who knew?” he asks, as though I haven’t just told him that the entire town knows.

“What are you talking about? You’re an assistant to a big movie star. That’s way better than having gone to school with the lead in a cringe TV show.”

I’m not going to mention the fact that *Serious Bite* is also seriously addictive. Since it’s on one of the mainstream channels, no one can binge watch the entire series yet, which is a total bummer because the will-they-won’t-they tension between the two lead characters—and the fact that we all found out in the latest episode that Dex’s character can also shapeshift into a demon—is enough to keep anyone glued to the screen for an entire season.

“When’s the next screening?” he asks.

“Tomorrow night, of course.” A thought occurs to me. “Hey, do you want to come?”

Did I just ask Joe on a date?

His face creases into a smile. “With you? I’d love that.”

It would appear that I did just ask Joe on a date, and it would also appear that he said yes.

I have to work super hard at not bouncing up and down on the spot in glee.

I get to turn up at the town hall tomorrow evening with the ridiculously hot Joe Turner on my arm. Not only will it set every gossiping tongue in town wagging like a bowl of Jell-O in an earthquake, but it’ll show that the youngest member of the Cole family might not be the lost cause everyone thinks she is.

And it will make them all shut up about Gabe and me.

“I’d love that, too.” I grin at him and he smiles back at me.

This is going so well!

“So, tell me, you want to be an actor, but you took this job to pay the bills, right?”

“Right. I haven’t quite gotten my big break yet. I figured it was a good idea to at least be a part of the business, even if it’s working for the guy in front of the camera rather than being that guy.”

“You want to be close to the action.”

“You get it, Ryn. You get *me*, which is amazing because we only just met.” He swings his arm around my shoulder and I breathe in his spicy, musky scent. It’s both surprising and wonderful, and it makes it hard for me to put one foot in front of the other without stumbling and falling flat on my face.

My heart begins to drum as our gazes lock. “I...good.”

Great. I’m back to the unable-to-form-sentences-Ryn from the first time we met.

His face creases into a grin, as though he can totally see his effect on me. Which, let’s face it, I’m not exactly doing a great job of hiding.

“Who do you want to meet?”

“Leonardo and Georgia?” I ask.

“Sorry, they’re filming right now down at the pond and as Carl told you, it’s a closed set today.”

I try my luck. “Even for someone who totally gets Leo’s assistant?”

He laughs, and with the side of his chest pressed against mine, I can feel it reverberating through my arm. “I was thinking more like the hair and makeup department.”

I would go anywhere with this guy right now. “Hair and makeup. Sounds good.”

We take the few steps to the next trailer and he unhooks his arm from around my shoulders before he opens the door for me to enter.

I am walking on clouds, my feet not even touching the ground. Coming here today, I had hoped that Joe might be interested in me romantically, and now it seems clear that he is. What’s more, we’ve got tomorrow night’s screening to look forward to.

Joe’s voice interrupts my thoughts. “This is the Vanities, where they do hair and makeup for the talent.”

I look around the trailer. Just like you see on TV, there are rows of seats facing well-lit mirrors lining each side of the trailer, enough to seat an entire scene of actors to make their hair and makeup camera ready.

There’s a woman who can’t be much older than me, dressed in a pair of bright white tennis shoes, black leggings, and a plain black t-shirt, her long hair tied up in a messy bun. She’s leaning over a set of drawers as she concentrates on her task.

“Hayley,” Joe calls out, and the woman looks up at us as though she’s



only just seen us, having been so engrossed in her work.

She straightens up, her face lifting in a smile. “Oh, hey, Joe, and Joe’s new friend.”

“This is Ryn. She’s a local, and has come to see what we do here on set.”

“Nice to meet you, Ryn.”

I notice her perfect makeup, complete with long eyelashes that are just the right length to strike the balance between natural and gone-way-too-far-cow’s-lashes.

“Are you a makeup artist?” I ask.

“My official title is Makeup Assistant, but I prefer the term ‘artist’ because that’s what I am, an artist of the face.”

“Hayley loves her job,” Joe explains unnecessarily.

“An artist of the face. I like that idea. Do you get to decide how everyone’s gonna look in the movie, or do the actors tell you what they want?”

“Oh, the actors do what they’re told, unless they’re super big, and in that case, we sometimes need to listen to them.”

“Someone like Leonardo Finch?”

“He doesn’t get a lot of say, but his look is romantic comedy hero, so he’s pretty happy with what we do for him. My boss, the Key Makeup Artist, defines the vision for the movie. I’m one of the minions, I guess, doing her bidding.”

“You and me both,” Joe replies with a laugh.

“I think your job sounds amazing,” I tell her. “You get to either enhance the way people look or change them entirely. That has to be so much fun.”

“Are you interested in makeup artistry?” Hayley asks.

“I’ve never really thought about it,” I tell her honestly. I’ve always regarded makeup as something I give a last-minute thought to. A touch of mascara, a dash of lip gloss and I’m usually done for the day. But what Hayley’s talking about is makeup as an art, not just something to do so you don’t scare the locals in public.

“There are lots of things you can do, not just work on a film set. I started out doing my friends’ makeup when I was a teenager and then once I had my training, I did weddings and proms until I made the change into working in movies. It’s a super fun and rewarding career.”

She makes it sound like such an exciting thing to do, particularly for someone like me who was never exactly good at academics, let alone

someone who wanted to go to college to train for some stuffy job.

“I guess I always thought makeup was for other people.”

“Why don’t you come sit. I could see what I can do.” She pats the seat in front of the brightly-lit mirror beside her. “If that’s okay with you, Joe?”

“Are you serious?” I ask, flicking my gaze between Hayley and Joe. This is a professional makeup artist, who works on movie stars, offering to do my makeup. *Me*, Ryn Cole, coffeehouse waitress.

“Go for it,” Joe tells me. “I need to make some calls, anyway. I’ll come back to you in about ten or fifteen and we can go for that tour.”

“Fifteen minutes ought to do it,” Hayley replies.

After about twenty minutes and a lot of conversation about what it’s like to work in makeup, I’m gazing at my reflection in wonderment. Hayley has managed to make me look like me but a much more polished, put together version, a version that makes me look a little like the movie star Amy Adams, if I’m entirely honest. And that, people, is no small feat.

“Hayley, you’ve got some voodoo in that makeup kit of yours.”

She chuckles. “You’re a gorgeous woman. I just enhanced what God gave you.”

“You sure about that? I think you’ve got some serious skills.”

Joe walks back in, takes one look at me and says, “You look beautiful, Kathryn with a ‘y’.” He regards my reflection in the mirror, a warm hand on each of my shoulders. “Everyone will wonder who this hot woman is on my arm.”

I smile back at him. This must be what it feels like to be Cinderella at the ball, and tomorrow night I’m going on a date with the cutest guy in town.

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## Chapter 9

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## Gabe



I slip into my usual seat at the back of the classroom and pull my laptop from my knapsack. Usually, I try to arrive before the lecture starts—it’s only good manners—but with the bar reopening tonight I was slammed with work and I’m lucky to have made it here at all.

“—your business plans, which I have reviewed, the feedback for which you should already have seen online,” says the professor, a guy named Kenneth McKinley, who is well qualified for the position as a professor teaching *How to Run a Small Business*, considering he owns a bunch of successful businesses in the Hunter’s Creek and Cotown areas. With his habitual navy and white striped bow tie, neatly cropped gray hair, and brightly-colored shirts, he’s quite the character.

“You’re late,” a voice says softly beside me.

I glance at a pair of brown eyes set in a pretty, smiling face. It’s Natalie Mills, a woman a couple years older than me, who I met on my very first day of this class, and whose notes I’ve had to borrow on more than one occasion when I’ve been stuck at work and unable to make the hour’s drive here.

“You know what they say, better late than serving beer in a bear bar,” I reply under my breath so as not to interrupt the class.

Her smile broadens, making her eyes shine bright. “I thought it was better

late than never, but what do I know? I'm not from Washington state."

The professor's voice grabs my attention. "—and that is the topic for tonight: how to monitor your performance against your business plan with measurable goals, because as I'm sure you've figured out, it's all very well having a business plan, but it's just a piece of paper with a bunch of numbers if you don't put the plan into practice and, crucially, measure yourself against it."

I tap out notes as I listen to the lecture for the next forty or so minutes. By the end of class my fears about how to run a glass blowing business have been confirmed in a loud and clear voice.

That's why I'm taking this class. Having never been to college and not exactly being the type of student to excel at high school subjects like economics or business—heck, I didn't even take economics or business, so it was hard to excel at them—I know I've got a lot to learn if I have even a chance at making a success of it.

"Presentations from everyone next week, and then we'll move onto the wildly exciting topic of promotion and marketing, after which we will cover how to manage your business's finances," Mr. McKinley says to wrap up the class.

I blow out a puff of air as people pack up their belongings and traipse out of the room.

There's so much I don't know. It can be a little overwhelming at times. Who am I kidding? It's totally overwhelming, period.

Natalie nudges me with her elbow. "Why were you late this time? Let me guess. It was either a glass emergency or a beer emergency." She raises her hands in the air. "Don't tell me: definitely glass. Someone needed a vase, STAT."

I stifle a yawn.

"Don't let me keep you up."

"Sorry, Nat. I'm beat, and it was a beer emergency, if that's even a thing. The bar reopened and it seemed like everyone in town wanted to come for a drink, so I got called in."

"The bar was closed down?"

"Don't ask."

Natalie rises to her feet and collects her satchel. As usual, she's in a business suit. Tonight's is a classic navy blue, with a crisp, white shirt. It's a variation on the same theme she wears every week. She comes straight from

her job managing a team of sales staff at a telecommunications company in Cotown. Taking this course is a step toward her dream of running her own business one day. Just like me.

“Want to go for a drink?” she asks.

“I’d love to, but I’ve got to hit the hay.”

“Let me know if you want some company. I’m great at slumber parties,” she purrs with a cheeky grin.

That’s the other thing about Natalie. She’s always flirting with me, but it’s done with humor, and she knows I’m not interested. I set that straight the first week we met.

Sure, Nat’s gorgeous and smart and driven. I can totally see the appeal. But I’ve been with women like her in the past, and although things start out pretty well, they always end in me pulling the pin.

Maybe I’m jaded at twenty-three, but I don’t want to go through that whole thing again: meeting someone, knowing it’s not quite right, hoping the little voice in the back of my head telling me she’s not the one is wrong. The next time I’m with a woman, I want it to be a deep, enduring love, the kind that lasts a lifetime.

Me? A romantic sap? Maybe a little. But I know what I want, and that, my friend, is a great place to start.

I hold the door open for Natalie, who slinks past me in a waft of perfume, her heels clicking on the linoleum. Flowers, I think, with a hint of something else. Something that smells good.

I’m a guy. I don’t take much notice of these things.

“Want to meet up later, Gabe?” she asks as we make our way to the college parking lot. “We can go through our plans and prepare the slides for next week’s presentations. I’m a presentation rock star. I give them most weeks at work.”

Natalie might be flirty, but during this course I’ve also found she’s a great study buddy, too.

“Yeah, that sounds great. I haven’t had a lot of experience doing presentations.”

Like none.

She places her hand lightly on my bicep and smiles up at me. I can feel the warmth through the thin material of my t-shirt. “Don’t worry. I’ve got you, Gabe.”

“Thanks,” I mumble. “I found it easy enough to write my business plan,

the ultimate goal being world domination of course, but—”

“World domination with glass blowing?” she questions with a smirk.

We come to a stop beside her car. A late model German car that makes my beat-up old truck look like something from the last century. Which it almost is, as it just so happens.

“It’s easy to *pie in the sky* things for a business plan, but a whole lot harder when you have to stick measurable goals against it.”

“Those pies have just landed with a splat on the ground?” she asks.

“You get it.”

“I do, but I also think I’ve got some ideas that might help. My place on the weekend? I’ll cook my famous spicy pork tacos for you. Maybe with a margarita or two?”

Spicy pork tacos do sound good.

Margaritas, on the other hand, sound dangerous around a woman like Natalie.

“I work split shifts Fridays and Saturdays.”

“What about Sunday evening?”

“Sunday is my Ryn night.”

“Ryn. Right. Your astronomer buddy.”

I’ve mentioned Ryn to Nat a few times in passing. She’s a big part of my life so she comes up in conversation. I’m sure it doesn’t mean anything, but Natalie’s always a little strange when I mention her name.

Although I am literally surrounded by them, I’m not sure I will ever fully understand women. But they do say that’s the fun of it.

I adjust my knapsack on my shoulder. “I’m not sure gazing up at the night sky, shooting the breeze exactly qualifies her as an astronomer.”

“A dreamer, then.”

I smile to myself. A dreamer is exactly what Ryn is. That and a whole lot of other things. All good.

“Can you squeeze me into your crazy schedule of bars and stars over lunch Sunday? I can make the tacos and you can show me what you’ve got so far.”

“Lunch would be great. Message me your address. Can I bring anything?”

Her eyes sweep over me. “Just your hot bod and cheeky grin.”

I shake my head at her. She’s relentless, I’ll give her that. “I’ll be sure to bring both of those.”

She unlocks her car with a beep and a flash of lights. “See you at noon

Sunday.”

“See ya, Nat. And thanks.”

She flashes her smile. “My pleasure.” To my surprise, she turns, pushes herself up onto her toes, placing her hand flat against my chest, and plants a soft kiss on my cheek. I can’t help but breathe in her pretty scent, the unexpected intimacy taking me by surprise. “You work out. I can tell. Nice and firm,” she murmurs, her hand still stuck to my chest.

“Nat.” Gently, I pull her hand away.

Her smile drops a fraction before she amps it right back up. “You know I’ll keep trying, don’t you? I get what I want. Always.”

The word hangs between us.

I choose to ignore it.

“See you Sunday, Nat,” I tell her before I climb into my truck and drive away.



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## Chapter 10

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Ryn



On my way home, I'm buzzing with the movie set and makeup artistry and, especially, with Joe. He took me around the set, introducing me to people and explaining how everything works. By the time I left, he'd taken me by the shoulders and told me he couldn't wait to see me again, and I left, floating on a cloud.

I'm bursting to tell Gabe about all of it, so I turn down his street and pull my car up outside his house.

I go to open the door to my car when I notice the house is dark.

Weird. I know Gabe isn't working at the bar tonight. Where is he?

I pull out my phone and tap out a message.

*Are you around?*

A message pings back.

*Almost home. Why?*

*I'm waiting outside your house.*

*Be there in a minute.*

True to his word, Gabe's truck pulls around the corner and onto his driveway a minute later.

I climb out of my car to greet him. "Where've you been?"

"Doing stuff," he replies elusively as he closes his car door.

“Stuff?”

“You know, stuff.”

“That’s clear,” I reply with a laugh. I don’t have time to discuss whatever it is he’s being all secretive about right now. I’m fit to burst. “G, I’ve got to tell you about my day.”

He slides his key into the keyhole and pushes the door open. “The movie set, right?”

I grin at him. “That’s right.”

“Come inside. I need to take a load off.”

I follow him into his house and he grabs us both a cold drink from the refrigerator. I stand impatiently and wait for him to notice my makeup. Seriously, I don’t think I’ve ever looked this good.

With the drinks in his hands, he turns, seeing me in the light for the first time since we got here.

He shoots me a weird, unreadable look, like he doesn’t quite know what to say.

I can’t help but beam at him. “At the risk of sounding totally arrogant, I look good, don’t I?”

He just stares at me before he opens his can and takes a sip.

“Well?” I prompt. You’d think your best friend would at least make a comment, if not offer an actual compliment, even if that best friend is a Hunter’s Creek guy.

He clears his throat. “What’s that on your face?”

“It’s makeup, Gabe.”

“Makeup. Right.” He takes another swig of his drink.

I pull my brows together. “Is that all you have to say?”

“It’s...you, uh, look real pretty,” he manages.

I laugh. “Was that so hard?” I tease.

“You look different, that’s all. I didn’t expect it.”

“Hayley did it. She’s this really cool makeup artist I met on the set today. She offered to do my makeup and this is the result.” I do a little strut and pose.

“You know you don’t need that to look good, right?”

“I’m a natural beauty, huh?” I ask with a wink.

“You don’t need me to tell you that,” he replies with a laugh.

I wander to the mirror above the sideboard in the dining room to look at my reflection. “I look better like this though.”

He hands me a can of soda and I take a sip.

“Hayley got me thinking about makeup artistry and whether it’s something I might like to do someday.”

“Makeup artistry? Really?”

“Don’t sound so surprised. I might shock you all by actually doing something with my life one day.”

“You wouldn’t shock me. You could do anything you want. You’re creative and talented. I bet you would make an amazing makeup artist, if that’s what you wanted to do.”

That’s one of the totally awesome things about Gabe: he believes in me, no matter what.

Best.

Friend.

Ever.

I reach up and mess up his hair. “That’s why I love you. You say all the right things.” I plop myself down on his sofa and stretch my legs out, kicking off my shoes. “I hear the Black Bear has opened up again.”

He smooths out his ruffled hair as he lowers himself into one of his chairs. The house looks as it always has, decorated by his mom. It’s homey and comfortable, nothing flashy, and it totally suits my best friend.

“Sure is. They called me into work today, so it’s back to long hours and relying on tips from the tight people of Hunter’s Creek once more.”

“Are you telling me the people of Hunter’s Creek don’t love to splash their piles of cash? Shocking.” I say with a laugh.

The townsfolk might be good people who love to gossip and meddle in others’ lives, but none of them are flush with greenbacks. There’s Mr. Cantor, of course, who until not too long ago owned the mill. He’s by far the wealthiest person around. The rest of us range from “comfortable”, as Christopher refers to himself when really, really pushed—and we all know that’s a euphemism rich people use to describe their towers of money—to not even having two pennies to rub together.

“They’re as tight as Mr. Whitlow’s belt,” he replies and I picture the retired lawyer and his perfectly formed, rounded belly. “The movie types spend, though. I had one guy who came in and ordered ‘your best bottle of champagne,’” he says, putting on an old Hollywood style accent.

I snort laugh. “What did you give him? A bottle of lemonade past its use by date?”

“That would have been a great idea, but no. I simply told him we didn’t have any of that fancy French stuff and suggested he buy a round of beers instead.”

“What did he say?”

“He wasn’t impressed.”

“It wasn’t Leonardo Finch, was it?”

“Nah. One of the other actors. The one who was in that fighter pilot movie we saw a couple months back. The really dumb one.”

“Derek Ealey? I forgot he was in this movie. He’s playing Leonardo’s best friend, I think. At least, that’s what the magazines are saying.”

“And by ‘magazines’ do you mean Aunt Sheila?”

I catch his sly smile. I remember when Christopher moved to Hunter’s Creek and my aunt told anybody who would listen that he was here to make big changes that would cause the very downfall of the town. That was until he started dating my sister, at which point she switched to telling everyone what a great guy he was and how happy she was for Harper to have found someone after what happened with Dex...until he skipped town, leaving a heartbroken Harper in his wake. Then he wasn’t fit to walk on the same ground as our Harper...until he turned up and saved the mill.

Seriously, it was hard to keep up.

“She’s not that bad,” I protest, although my heart’s not in it.

“Yeah, she is,” he responds, and we share a laugh because Aunt Sheila so is. In fact, without town gossip and her Ladies Committee, I’m not sure what she would do with her time.

Once again, my thoughts turn to Gabe’s dad. I haven’t seen him since he visited the coffeehouse that one time. I’m still grappling with what to say to Gabe. Part of me wants to help what seems to me to be this sad, broken man to reconnect with his son. While the other part of me wants to tell him to get lost, to leave my best friend alone and get on with his life. To tell him that he’s doing just fine without him and he doesn’t need to try to scale the mountain of emotional baggage his reappearance in his life will doubtlessly involve.

It feels like I’m wrestling with a tight pickle jar lid that refuses to budge, knowing the answer to my dilemma lies inside.

“I need to tell you something,” he begins.

Immediately, I wonder if he’s seen his dad.

“What?” I try to act nonchalant. This could mean I can drop that pickle

jar to the ground and let it smash.

Horrible emotional dilemma over.

“I’m taking a small business class at the college over in Cotown.”

Well, I wasn’t expecting that.

I blink at him a few times. “Why?”

“Because I want to run my own glass blowing studio someday, and I haven’t told you because we’ve got this whole Peter Pan thing. I thought it might be too adult. Too responsible. Stupid, I know.”

“Are you kidding? It’s awesome. I’m so proud of you for doing this.”

His face breaks into a smile. “Thanks. I should have known you’d be cool with it.”

“Cool with it? G, I’m with you one hundred percent. You’re super talented and I bet you’ll end up becoming this world-famous glass blower.”

He lets out a laugh. “I just want to run my own studio someday to support myself and my family.”

“I’ll drink to that.” I lean over and we clink our cans of soda together.

He takes a sip and asks, “What else did you do at the set?”

I couldn’t stop the grin from claiming my face if my life depended on it. “Oh, you know,” I reply elusively as I think about Joe flirting with me, Joe’s arm around me, Joe agreeing to go on a date with me to the next screening of *Serious Bite*.

“You’re not gonna give me anything more than ‘you know’?”

“Gabe, it was amazing. I got a tour of the whole place, even though I didn’t get to see the actual filming because it was a closed set today, and I’m sure you know what that means.”

He looks at me blankly.

“They were filming a love scene, but if I’d been able to watch it, I might have seen some things.”

He laughs. “You do know you sound like a twelve-year-old, peeking through a hole in the wall to perve at the boys’ locker room, right?”

“I never did that! Besides, there was no hole in the wall of the boys’ locker room.”

“Checked, did ya?”

I shake my head at him, a smile springing up onto my face. I’ve been doing a lot of that today: smiling. I can’t help it. Things have definitely taken a turn for the awesome in my life since Hollywood came to town.

I let out a long, contented sigh. “Joe is so nice. He took me all over today,

after he got me past the big scary security guy named Carl, even though I thought he should be called The Thing.”

“Did he yell ‘it’s clobberin’ time’?”

He’s quoting Thing’s movie battle cry.

I let out a giddy laugh because that’s exactly how I feel: giddy.

Gabe shoots me a look. “Geez, Ryn-Ryn. I knew I was funny, but not *that* funny.”

“I’m just in a good mood, that’s all. I asked Joe to come to the next screening of *Serious Bite* with me and he said yes.”

“So, you’re dating the bad boy. Why am I not surprised?”

“Don’t,” I warn.

He shrugs. “I don’t want you to get hurt, that’s all.”

“I haven’t even been on a date with him yet, *big brother*.”

He pulls his lips into a line. “I’m only looking out for you.”

I soften. “I know you are. That’s why you’re my bestie. But you don’t need to worry. Joe’s a great guy.”

My thoughts bounce from Joe to Gabe’s dad. Although I’m still wrestling with what to do, I feel like I need to at least sound Gabe out.

“Hey, G? I have a question,” I begin.

“As long as it doesn’t involve what to wear on your date with this guy, but if it is, I suggest a dress up to here,” he gestures at his throat. “And down to here.” He points at his feet. “Preferably made of thick, bad boy repelling material.”

“Hilarious,” I deadpan.

“Recommended,” he replies.

I toy with the can in my hand, suddenly nervous. “Have you ever wondered what it would be like to see your dad again?”

He’s taken a sip of his drink at exactly the wrong time, and splutters and coughs as it goes down the wrong way. “My *dad*?” he guffaws when he’s recovered. “Where the heck did that come from?”

I try to shrug in an unperturbed kind of way, knowing how sensitive this topic is for him. “Do you ever think about him?”

“Sometimes? I don’t know. It’s complicated.”

“You haven’t spent time with him since you were fourteen, right?”

His jaw twitches. “I wouldn’t really call me turning up at the home of the family he chose over Mom and me and demanding he be my dad as ‘spending time’ with the guy.”

Inwardly, I cringe. Gabe was determined to track his dad down and ask him some questions, questions like why he led a double life, why he chose his other family over him and his mom. I don't blame him. I would have done the same.

I remember what it was like for Gabe when he got back to Hunter's Creek that day. I was the only person who knew he'd gone. He didn't even tell his mom. He said he didn't want people to ask him about it, in case it went badly.

Which of course it did.

How else could it go, with a kid demanding answers and a dad who never behaved like a dad to him in the first place?

That night, I found Gabe sitting on the floor of his bedroom, clutching his knees to his chest, a haunted look in his eyes.

My heart contracted at the sight of him, seeing with shocking clarity for the first time someone else's pain. I'd been so wrapped up in myself and my own dramas. Like all teenagers, I guess. But that day changed things for me. It was the day I decided to put someone before myself for the first time in my fourteen years.

It was the day I decided Gabe had to be that person.

And I've never stopped putting him first.

"You're an adult now," I continue. "Who knows? Things could be different between you two."

Gabe pushes out a breath, his eyes narrowed. "The guy's a prize jerk. He did what he did and I've moved on. I've had to. You of all people know that. I have no interest in seeing him ever again."

I reach out and place my hand over his. "What if he's changed? What if he's realized he messed up with you and wants to make it right?"

"You know what? I think I preferred talking about your latest bad boy," he says with a bitter laugh. He leans forward in his seat. "Ryn, my dad is a liar, and you know how I feel about people who lie. End of story." There's anger in his voice, his features taut.

I shift position, suddenly furious with Patrick Hartmann for turning up the way he has—and that I allowed him air time with my best friend, air time that he most definitely does not deserve. "I'm sorry, G. It was dumb of me to bring it up."

His features relax a notch. "It's fine. He's not my favorite topic of conversation, that's all. Why did you want to talk about him?"

As far as Patrick Hartmann is concerned, my mind is made up. I've



always known whose side I'm on and tonight has reaffirmed that for me. It's Gabe all the way.

“No good reason,” I reply. “I promise I won't mention him again.”

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## Chapter 11

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## Gabe



I lean back in my chair in Natalie’s kitchen, my belly full. Nat was right. Her pork tacos are absolutely delicious.

“Good, right?” Nat says.

“So good. I’m not sure I’ve ever had such good homemade pork tacos.” I collect both our plates and take them to the kitchen sink.

“Don’t bother with the dishes. I can do them later. How about I make us some coffee while you get yourself organized, since you didn’t want margaritas. How do you take it? Dark, rich, and intoxicating, like your women?” There’s a definite flirtatious tone to her voice, but then it wouldn’t be Nat if there wasn’t.

I laugh. “With cream and sugar, thanks.”

She shakes her head, smiling. “You are a hard nut to crack, Gabe Hartmann.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment. I think.”

She flashes me her smile before she busies herself making the coffee.

I power up my laptop and pull up the spreadsheet template we’ve been given to complete. “Shall we start with your business plan? I bet it’s got a bunch of measurables already.”

“That’d be great.”

She makes the coffee and we sit down and begin to work.

“Here’s what I’ve got.” I show her my plan with the empty boxes labeled “Measurables”.

She throws her gaze over it. “Not a lot of progress, huh?”

“You could say that.”

“Your first measurable could be how many new clients you’re bringing in while retaining your existing client base. That is totally quantifiable and easy to track. Maybe since you’re just starting out you could say you want to double your client base in the first couple of months.”

“Let me think, that would be zero times two. I wasn’t great at math in school but I’m pretty sure that makes zero,” I reply.

“We’ve got a math genius on my hands here, folks,” she replies with a laugh. “You’re still training now, but one of these days you’ll have to start selling what you make if you want to run your own studio as a profit-making business.”

I heave out a breath. The idea of running my own studio as a profit-making business scares the living crap out of me. Sure, I know that if I want to achieve my dream I can either do it for love or I can do it for money, but doing it for love isn’t an option, not unless I want to be a barman for the rest of my life.

“I want this to be more than just a hobby. I want to make this my life’s work. I want to create beautiful works of art that people will treasure. Works of art that mean something to not only me, but the people I make them for. That’s why I’m doing this course. To force myself to the next level.”

“Well, then, let’s get on with making that happen.”

Natalie makes a few more suggestions and I fill in the boxes, trying my best not to be daunted by the entire thing.

After we’ve achieved what we can, I drain my coffee and pack up my things. “Thanks so much for this, Nat. The presentation doesn’t feel quite so terrifying anymore.”

She runs her eyes over me. “I can’t imagine you terrified of much.”

“I am human, you know,” I reply with a laugh.

“Want another coffee before you head off?”

“Thanks, but no thanks. I should get home and practice this presentation.”

“Home? Do you live alone? With your family?” Natalie asks.

My muscles tighten, my jaw tense. “There’s not a lot of family to mention. There’s my aunt and uncle and some cousins, but that’s about it.”

“What about your parents?”

It’s a simple enough question, a commonplace one. For me, however, it’s as loaded as a criminal’s gun.

“My mom died a couple years back and my dad... well, he moved away when I was a baby.”

Her features drop. It’s a familiar sight, one I see when I share my story with someone new. Not that I share my story that often. I live in Hunter’s Creek where everyone already knows my story, not because I told them, but because my mom was always truthful about what had happened. The town had rallied around her and supported us throughout my whole life, especially Ryn’s family, the Coles, who I’ve grown to love and rely on as if they were my own.

Although Natalie lives in Cotown, she’s only a couple degrees of separation from hearing the story from someone else. It may as well be me telling the truth, something I always try to do.

After I tell her about my dad leading a double life and how my mom died in a car accident when I was nineteen, she slides into the chair beside me and places her hand on mine. “Gabe, I had no idea. I’m so sorry. I bet you miss your mom.”

I push the rising sadness down. “She was a good person. A great mom.”

“What about your dad? Do you think you’d ever—”

I know where she’s going with this. I cut her off. “He’s not in my life. That was his choice. It’s like Ryn says: I don’t owe him anything.”

“Ryn, your astronomer friend?”

“My best friend,” I correct.

“I’d like to meet her sometime.”

“I’m sure you’ll get the chance. Maybe at the Summer Festival, if you’re planning on coming to that?”

“In Hunter’s Creek? Sure, I’d love to come.”

I glance at the time on my phone. “You know, I really do have to go. Thanks a lot for the meal and the help, Nat. I owe you.”

I make my way over to the door, but before I can open it, Nat slides up beside me and leans her back against it. “Thank you for sharing your story with me.”

I shrug. “It’s no big deal.”

“It is, Gabe, and it means a lot that you shared it.”

“As I said, I live in a small town where everyone knows everyone else’s

business. It's not a big deal to tell you."

"I appreciate it all the same. You didn't need to tell me about it. You could have made up some story. I wouldn't have known."

"I would have known. Honesty is important."

She looks at me. "You're a straight up guy. A real testament to your mom."

"That's kind of you to say." I place my hand on the doorknob, ready to go.

"You know, Gabe, you don't have to leave."

She's hitting on me? Now?

Nat is a beautiful woman. There's no denying it. As far as her intentions toward me are concerned, I'd have to be a plank of wood not to know what she wants.

"Nat—"

"I know you've told me you're only interested in friendship from me. All I'm saying is, I think we could be good together, and we won't know unless we try."

I open my mouth to protest.

She places the palm of her hand against my chest, just as she did in the parking lot a few nights ago. "Just think about it. Okay?"

I pull my lips into a line. "The thing is, Nat," I begin, wondering if I'll be able to say the words.

"What's the thing, Gabe?" she says on a confident smile.

I take a breath and decide to just come out with it. Rip off the Band-Aid, as it were.

"I've got...feelings for someone else."

"Feelings?"

"Feelings."

"Serious feelings?"

"Nat, I'm in love with someone else."

She pulls back from me, whipping her hand from my chest as though it's been burned.

"I'm sorry."

It's something I don't admit to anyone. Heck, I barely admit it to myself.

"Who?" she asks.

"I can't tell you that."

"Why not?"

“Because—”

What do I say?

Because it’s a huge deal to me?

Because it eats me up every day of my life?

Because it’s the one person I shouldn’t be in love with?

Because...I’m in love with my best friend?

I am. One hundred percent, head over heels, can’t think straight, in love with Ryn Cole, my best friend since I was seven. The person who knows me best in the world. The person who always looks out for me, and me for her. The person I would trust with my life.

Only she doesn’t know.

I might value honesty as a virtue, but I can’t tell her. There’s too much at stake for me.

“Because she doesn’t know,” Natalie says for me.

I look down and nod. I reach for the doorknob and this time Natalie doesn’t stop me. “Thanks again for everything.”

She pulls her lips into a line. “Sure.”

“See you in class?”

“Of course.”

I hesitate for a moment before I give her arm a quick squeeze, pull the door open, and leave.

I’ve never uttered those words to anyone. I’ve never confessed my true feelings. *I’m in love with someone else*. Sure, I didn’t tell Natalie who it is I’m in love with, but she wouldn’t need to be a private investigator to put two and two together and come up with Ryn.

*Ryn.*

My head is full of her.

When it comes to my best friend, I’m a total fake.

I don’t mean I’m a fake person or someone who pretends I’m something I’m not. I don’t go for that kind of thing. I’m a fake because I’ve pretended to be just friends with her for years, when in fact I’ve been in love with her ever since I can remember.

I’m faking it with my best friend.

I know it makes me a total hypocrite. I’m the guy who expects honesty and integrity from those around him. I’m the guy who holds myself to those standards, too.

Being secretly in love with Ryn isn’t exactly honest.

Do I want something more with her? Have you *seen* her? Petite, curvy, with strawberry blonde hair and gorgeous hazel eyes, she's got the kind of smile that makes your heart rate leap when she shines her light on you. A light you want to bask in every single day of your life.

And that's just how she looks.

Ryn is the funniest, sweetest, smartest, kindest, easiest woman to be with I've ever met. Hands down.

But I've been in the Ryn Cole Friend Zone for so long, I've got a VIP pass, free lunches, and a t-shirt that says *Besties 4 Eva* with a couple of teddy bears high-fiving it. Seriously, she actually gave me that t-shirt after a weekend away with her in Seattle a few years back.

And then she made me wear it, which of course she thought was freaking hilarious.

Me? Not so much.

Even if I did act on my feelings—which has to be the single scariest thing to do—chances are that not only will she knock me right back, changing our friendship forever, but I stand to lose my surrogate family. Alyssa and Ed Cole are two of the people who made my life more bearable in the years following the loss of my mom. Without them, I don't know how I would have coped.

I can't risk losing that sense of family, that sense of belonging that I have with them, when in all likelihood their daughter doesn't feel the same way about me.

*Get romantic with my buddy Ryn? Kiss my buddy, Ryn?*

I'd be an idiot to subject myself to that level of rejection.

And it would be rejection, that I know for certain.

It's been so much easier to remain friends all these years. Comfortable. No rocking the boat. No sticking my neck out to be chopped off like it's a tree trunk at the town's lumber mill. That way Ryn stays in my life. There's no awkward *thing* between us. It's straightforward, uncomplicated, with no weirdness, no rejection hanging in the air between us.

Because I'd rather have Ryn in my life as just a friend than not have her in my life at all.

I reach my car and sit and stare out at the late afternoon sky, pale blue, scattered with cotton ball clouds, and as I turn the ignition, I try not to dwell on the sad irony that the woman I have no interest in made her intentions blatantly clear, and the one I've loved for so long sees me as nothing but a



friend.

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## Chapter 12

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## Gabe



I'm trying to be cool. Zen. Whatever. I'm failing. Horribly.

I'm trying to look like I'm every day, easy-going Gabe, the guy I usually am. The guy who serves behind the bar with an easy smile. The guy who's friends with everyone. The guy who's lived here all his life.

Inside? Not so much.

In my defense, it's not easy when the woman I've been in love with forever is currently taking every opportunity to touch another guy; a guy I know isn't going to appreciate her.

She's touched his arm several times, his shoulder once, and now she's touching his chest.

Yeah, that last one hurt the most.

There aren't that many things in Hunter's Creek that make my insides loop into a tight knot, but seeing Ryn placing her hand on some guy's chest as she laughs at his joke is definitely one of them.

All that said, seeing them together tonight at the town hall to watch the latest episode of *Serious Bite* is a whole bunch of rungs up the ladder of painful.

I let out a heavy breath as I try to concentrate on listening to something Christopher is telling me about...who knows what? I'm not listening. I mean,

I find it hard enough to follow what he says anyway, what with him being a former big city lawyer, concerned with something called M&A. Whatever that is. But tonight? Tonight, he could be speaking Klingon for all I'm listening.

I need to pull it together. It's not like this is the first time I've seen Ryn with another guy. We've been friends since we were kids and she's had as many boyfriends in that time as the next person, starting with that jerk Mason Henderson in the 8th grade. Man, how I hated Mason Henderson.

Since then, I've seen Ryn's men come and go. None of them stick around that long. She's never gotten serious with any of them, in fact. At least I have that as consolation.

Seriously, I can pick Ryn's type at a hundred paces. As long as he looks like he's trouble, she'll be right there.

I watch him sweep her hair to one side and whisper something in her ear, her face lighting up.

I don't get it. I know there's something in my best friend that makes her want to be around men like this. Does she want to get treated badly? Does she know it'll all end in tears before it even begins? Because I sure as heck do.

If I could change one thing about her, it would be to show her that she's worth so much more than those guys. The ones who saunter into her life and then right back out again without a single care for her.

She's worthy of being loved by someone who will cherish her.

Someone who will take great care of her heart.

Someone who will love her back the way she deserves to be loved.

I'm the only one who knows that person should be me.

And it's killing me right now.

"Hey, Gabe!"

I hear my name on Ryn's lips and I know she's about to introduce me to Joe, her latest James Dean wannabe.

I do not want that to happen.

"Tell me more about that," I say to Christopher, interrupting whatever it was he was saying. Of course, I have no clue what it was because I was too busy seething about Ryn's date, but I'm not about to let a minor detail like that get in the way.

Christopher raises his brows at me. "You want to hear more about the casserole I cooked for Harper?"

He was telling me about how he'd cooked a casserole for his girlfriend?  
No wonder I wasn't listening. Klingon would have been a lot more interesting.

I indicate the door to the hall and we walk together, moving slowly with the crowd.

"Yeah. Did you...err, use carrots?" I ask, feeling like a prize idiot.

"I did use carrots," he responds evenly.

"Cool. Cool. Carrots are...cool."

What else do I say to that? How big were the carrots? Were they orange? Did they taste carrot-y?

I glance briefly back at Ryn. She and her guy are heading our way, weaving through the crowd.

I return my attention to Christopher. "What else did you use? You know, vegetable-wise," I ask because I'm a desperate, desperate man right now.

He narrows his gaze. "You want to know what other vegetables I used in my casserole?"

"Mm-hm."

"The one I cooked for Harper?"

"Yup."

"Is that because you like to cook, Gabe?"

He's trying to figure me out. See if I'm really as stupid as I'm coming across.

I shrug. "Sure. I like to cook as much as the next guy, I guess."

Does heating up Alyssa Cole's mac and cheese count as cooking? Because if it does, I'm totally winning.

I glance back to see Ryn and her guy gaining on us. It's not a surprise. We're moving like a pack of snails doing the death march. Or the death slither. Whatever.

Christopher comes to a stop. "What's going on, Gabe?"

"What do you mean?" I try out a smile.

"Granted, you and I aren't close, but I can tell you're acting a little... oddly tonight. I mean, carrots?"

"I might want to make a casserole someday," I say weakly.

He ignores my frankly embarrassing response.

"Is everything okay with you?"

"With me? Sure. Fine. Totally fine." I shrug to show him just how fine I am.

I try not to look back at Ryn, but it's like she's a magnet and my eyes are a couple of steel balls, powerless to resist the pull.

Christopher must follow my line of sight because he replies, "I see Ryn's on a date tonight."

"Yeah, some new guy in town." I try to sound like it's no big deal. That I'm bored by the topic, even. That I'm so comfortable in the friend zone that right now I'm leaning back in my La-Z-Boy in front of the game with a beer in one hand and a big bowl of chips in the other.

I've been doing this kind of thing for years, whenever anyone mentions Ryn and some new love interest. I'm good at it.

I've got this.

"You know, Gabe, I wouldn't worry about some new guy," Christopher says to me in a low voice.

I've got this? Maybe not so much.

I play it dumb. "Who?"

"Harper told me he's only here for a few months, and anyway, I chatted to him when I met him before. He seemed more interested in his hair than in Ryn."

I suppress a smile at the comment, but I've got something that needs squashing, and it needs squashing immediately. Seriously, sometimes I feel like I'm in a continual game of whack a mole.

"Christopher, you do know Ryn and I are just friends, right?"

"But—"

"Friends. Only friends. She can date whomever she wants. Just like I can."

It's a speech I've used countless times before in this town that seems to want to matchmake Ryn and me into marriage and kids with immediate effect.

Now Harper's city slicker boyfriend is getting in on the action, too?

Just what I need.

Christopher gives me a look. "If you say so," he replies after a beat that stretches way too long for me to even entertain the notion that he believes me.

"I do say so, because that's the way it is. We're friends, nothing more."

It's the truth. We are just friends, even if I want so much more with her.

I feel a hand on my arm and look up to see Ryn, beaming at me, her face flushed.

Terrific.

“I’ve been calling your name, G. Didn’t you hear me?” she asks.

“You have? I was talking with Christopher here. We were really getting into a subject that was super interesting. Right, Christopher?”

“Absolutely,” he replies.

“Really?” Her eyes dart between us. She knows I don’t have a whole lot in common with him. “What were you talking about?”

“He, err, made a casserole for your sister,” I tell her, as though providing the proof of what we talked about will make me look less like the total loser I feel. “He used carrots and some other vegetables. It was good, right Christopher.”

“Harper liked it,” he confirms.

I hear it. It sounds weak. Pitiful. I am a weak and pitiful man.

Ryn’s gaze roves from me to Christopher and back again, a look I know so well written on her face. “Riveting,” she says with a chortle. “If you can manage to pull yourself away from talking about casseroles for a minute, I’ve got someone I want to introduce you to.”

Great.

Without waiting for my response, she says, “Gabe, this is Joe. Joe, this is my good buddy, Gabe.”

“Hey, good to meet you, man,” Joe says, his hand outstretched.

As we shake, I try not to notice how good looking he is. Sure, I’d seen him earlier, but I hadn’t taken a decent look at the guy. He totally fits the mold for her type.

“Hey, Jay,” I reply gruffly.

Yeah, I know. I got his name wrong on purpose. I’m not proud. But really, it’s the little things when you’re watching the woman you love on a date with another guy.

“It’s Joe,” Ryn corrects as she wraps her arms around his leather-clad arm, grinning up at him.

“Sure,” I reply noncommittally.

I keep my gaze from landing on Christopher’s.

Joe or Jay, all I care about is that he’ll be out of Ryn’s life when the movie people leave town, hopefully with minimal negative impact.

“It’s no problem,” Joe says, running his fingers through his hair. “Joe’s a tricky name to remember.”

Is he messing with me?

“Joe works for Leonardo Finch. He’s his assistant,” Ryn says.

“Which is why I’m not in a plaid flannel shirt,” Joe adds.

Christopher—the traitor—laughs as I adjust the collar of my own plaid flannel.

“We talked about that when we met. It was something I noticed when I first moved to town, too,” Christopher explains.

He’s still a traitor.

“But I’ve seen you wearing one,” Ryn tells him.

Christopher shrugs. “Just trying to fit in. Alfred gave it to me.”

Joe lets out a laugh. “This place is full of men in flannel and bars named after bears. Am I right?”

Christopher chuckles and immediately clamps his mouth shut when I shoot him another look.

Whose side is he on, anyway?

“Gabe works at one of those bars. Don’t you, Gabe?” Ryn says, virtually hanging on Joe by now.

“Which one, man? I’ll stop by for a drink with some of the crew,” Joe replies.

Does he have to?

When I don’t reply, Ryn jumps in. “He works at the Black Bear. They serve the best jojos.” She squeezes Joe’s arm, adding, “That’s wedges to you outsiders.”

“They’re filthy,” Christopher adds with a knowing grin.

“Filthy jojos? You are not painting a positive picture here, people,” Joe replies, touching his hair for the third time in less than thirty seconds.

I share a knowing smile with Christopher.

“Filthy means good,” Ryn explains. “Trust me. They’re so good even Christopher eats them, and he’s super into protein smoothies and boring vegetables.”

“Like carrots,” Christopher says, catching my eye.

Thankfully, Ryn ignores him. “I’ll take you there, Joe.”

Joe grins at her. “I’d like that. Filthy jojos sound great.”

They share a smile and I ignore both the look and the fact that they’ve just planned a second date—at the bar I work at, no less.

This evening is turning out awesome.

“I’m gonna head inside and get a seat,” I tell them and peel away from this deeply unenjoyable experience before any of them says another word.



“I’ll come with you,” Christopher says. “I’m meeting Harper here to take her out on a date.”

“That’s right. You don’t watch *Serious Bite*. Why is that?”

“Harper doesn’t need to see her ex up on the big screen. She might be an all-too eager helper, but she’s not a masochist. In fact, she was only here because she was helping set up for tonight, but she got pulled away by Meryl who had some *The Sound of Music*-related emergency. The kids are performing more songs from the musical at the Summer Festival.”

“They were cute last time. Sang pretty well, too.”

Together we join the crowds moving into the hall.

“Trust me. He’s a momentary thing, Gabe,” Christopher repeats as he waves at Harper, who is talking with Meryl, her boss from the elementary school where she teaches.

“Look, as I said, Ryn and me, we’re good friends. That’s just the way it is,” I say.

“Sure. Of course. If I said something out of line, forgive me. I got the wrong end of the stick.”

I spot a familiar face in the seated hall. “I’m gonna go sit with Theo. Have a great night.”

“You, too,” he replies.

I think we’re both relieved when I manage to peel away.

I move through the crowd to Theo, who’s with his wife, Louisa, chatting with some of their friends I’ve met a couple times before. We greet each other and I take a seat next to him.

“I still can’t believe the town closes the bars and restaurants for an hour so everyone can come to this,” Theo says.

“Dex Ryder is a big deal.”

“And we all thought vampire shows were over.”

“All except this one, apparently.”

Some of the people I went to high school with take the final few seats in the row. I say hello and we chat about the show before Ryn and her date take the seats directly in front of me.

Excellent. I’ve got a front row seat to their date. Just what I wanted.

Ryn smiles and says hello to everyone, introducing Joe, and grinning so hard her face might crack.

Theo elbows me in the ribs as the lights dim and the show begins. “Ryn’s on a date?”

“As you can see.”

He opens his mouth to say something, but I glare at him and he clamps his mouth shut. We both know what he’s going to say, and after the night I’m having, I don’t need to hear it from a second person. Christopher’s perspective on Ryn and me was more than enough and anyway, how much clearer do I need it yelled at me that she only sees me as a friend?

It might be time for me to finally get that message.

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## Chapter 13

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Ryn



One of the perks of working at the Second Chance Café is that after the lunch rush, I get a break and can pick whatever I want from the menu for lunch. Considering the food here is great, it's a total win.

Today, I got a BLT with a side order of fries, which I'm enjoying as I scroll through my phone, examining the few photos of the filming going on down the road that have been leaked to the media.

That night at the showing of the latest *Serious Bite* episode was magical. It felt so good to be with Joe, and we got quite a few glances our way. I bet the Hunter's Creek Ladies Committee in their scheming were more than a little disappointed.

Not me. I felt giddy the entire time, sitting next to Joe, his hand in mine. He threw me glances and made comments about the show, whispering in my ear, his breath hot on my neck. It sent tingles down my spine, and by the time he walked me to my car, I was ready for our first kiss.

It was just as I'd imagined it. He leaned in toward me, telling me how glad he was that he'd met me and how wonderful I am, and as his eyes dropped to my lips, we instinctively leaned toward one another and kissed.

I've been on a high ever since.

I'm deep in thought when someone approaches the table and clears their

throat.

I look up to see Patrick Hartmann and his sudden, unexpected reappearance in the coffeehouse startles me, a wave of apprehension washing over me.

“Hello, Ryn,” he says.

I tighten my jaw. “Hey, Mr. Hartmann.”

“Do you mind if I sit?”

We may as well get this over with. I indicate the seat opposite me and he pulls out the chair to sit down.

“Have you had the chance to think about helping me reconnect with my son?” he asks without preamble.

I steeple my fingers. “I have.”

“And?”

“Here’s the thing. I sounded him out and I—”

A look of hope leaps into his eyes. “You spoke to him about me? You told him that we’ve talked?”

“Look, I tried talking to him about you, but the thing is he made it clear he doesn’t want to see you.” I almost add “I’m sorry” but I don’t. Although a small part of me feels for this man, I’m in Gabe’s corner.

His jaw twitches, his lips pulled into a narrow line. “I see.”

He looks small in his seat, as though the news has caused him to shrink into a lesser version of himself, and even though I don’t know why he wants to see Gabe again after all this time, my heart gives a little squeeze.

“Thank you for trying to help. I guess he’s made up his mind.” His lips lift into a faint smile. “He’s like his old man in that regard.”

“You’re stubborn, too?” I ask, giving away Gabe’s often immovable nature—particularly around people who lie. But it’s not helpful to mention that to this man.

“Like a dog with a bone. Gabriel inherited that trait from me.”

“Right.”

“I’m sure you’re not used to thinking about your friend as having a father.”

I shake my head, my belly twisting up in knots.

He looks so sad. Would it really be so terrible to let this man reconnect with his long-lost son?

*Yes, it would.* Gabe has made it clear he doesn’t want to see his dad again, and I need to respect that.

“Are you going to go see him yourself?” I ask. “I mean, it’s not like you need me to act as an intermediary. Not really.”

He casts his eyes downward. “You know him better than most. How would he react if I simply turned up on his doorstep?”

I give a half smile. We both know the answer.

“That’s what I thought.” He rises to his feet. “It’s best I go. It was nice to meet you. I’m glad my son has a friend like you in his life.”

He turns to leave and a part of me wants to call out “Wait! I’ll help you! I’ll get him to come around!”

I don’t. It’s best he leaves. Best for Gabe.

The door swings shut behind him, and I stare at it blankly.

It’s done.

Over.

I know I’ve done the right thing. I’ve protected Gabe the way I always do, ever since that idiot kid poked fun at him for not having a dad back in elementary school.

“Hey, girl, hey.” Ivy’s voice pierces my deliberations as she drops herself down in the opposite seat, the floral scent of her perfume wafting over me. “You look like you’re on another planet, and I bet I know which planet it is.”

I blink at her in incomprehension.

“It starts with a J, right?” she teases.

“Actually, I was thinking about the state of the economy and what we need to do about it.”

“Sure you were,” she replies as she steals a fry from my plate. “How exactly is Joe going to fix the economy?”

I let out a giggle. “By being all good looking and sexy?”

She pushes another fry in her mouth. “Girl, you’ve got it bad. Ugh. These are cold.”

“I forgot to eat them.”

She shoots me a questioning glance.

“Are you on your lunch break?” I look at the time on my phone. “It’s late.”

“I had to get out of there, come see my roomie.”

“Here I am. Do you want coffee?”

One of the perks of having a friend work at a coffeehouse has got to be the free coffee, and Ivy is one of my non-paying regulars. I don’t tell Aunt Sheila, of course, but it’s not like I’m doing anything really wrong. It’s just

hot water with a few coffee beans and a dash of creamer. It's not like I'm stealing entire meals or anything.

"Yes. No. Oh, I don't know." She looks down at her hands, an unusual action for my super confident friend.

"You don't know whether you want coffee? What's going on?"

"Is your aunt Sheila here?"

"Nope."

She glances around the quiet coffeehouse, searching for listening ears. Satisfied we won't be overheard, she pulls her lips to one side and looks over at me. "If I tell you something, will you promise not to make a big deal about it? And you have to—I repeat *have to*—keep it to yourself. As in, don't tell a soul."

"Not even Gabe?"

"Especially not Gabe."

No coffee and not sharing with my bestie. This is serious.

"You have my word," I say in a solemn tone befitting the current atmosphere.

"Okay, here goes," she begins and then immediately clams up.

I reach out and put my hand on hers. "Tell me. You're worrying me now."

"It's..." She clams up again.

My heart begins to drum at the possibilities. Has something happened at the mill? But then why would she tell me not to mention it to anyone, especially Gabe? It makes no sense. "Ivy, you've got to tell me."

She chews on her lip, takes a breath, and then lifts her head. "Lately I've kind of developed...feelings for someone."

"Feelings? As in romantic feelings?"

She gives a slow nod of her head. She doesn't have the excited, exuberant expression you'd expect of someone who has confessed having romantic, love-type feelings for someone.

My mind whirrs. "Who is it? It can't be anyone we know in Hunter's Creek. They're mostly married off, anyway. Oh, I know, it's one of the cute guys who works on the film set. Wait, that doesn't narrow it down. There seem to be a lot of cute guys who work on that film set. Is it the cameraman who came in here? You know, the stocky one with all the muscles. I think his name was Charlie or Chad. Or was it Chip?"

"It's not him."

“Then who?”

“Don’t kill me, but...well, I have feelings for Gabe.”

I blink at her a few times, my brain scrambling to make sense of what she’s telling me. Ivy has feelings for Gabe? As in *Gabe* Gabe? Gabe my best friend?

“Gabe?” I question.

“Gabe,” she confirms, her face grim.

Talk about a bolt from the blue. This is like being slapped in the face by an angry bear in the woods you didn’t even know was right beside you.

“Really?” I ask, my voice all squeaky and weird sounding. I clear my throat.

“Is it so hard to believe?” she asks. “We’ve dated before.”

“But I thought you guys were done, like, years ago. Back in high school. You moved on pretty quick, if I remember right.”

Sure, it bothered me at the time, but that was only because I wanted to be with him myself. But he chose Ivy and not me, and other than that brief but magical rebound kiss on his porch swing that night, we’ve only ever been friends.

“I guess it’s because I’ve been seeing him more often lately, now that you and I are roommates, and I got to thinking about what it was like to be with him back then and about how cute and protective he is over you—”

“He’s not—” I protest, but she talks right over the top of me.

“He is, girl, and I find it super attractive and it made me realize I miss having him as my boyfriend when he was all cute and super protective over *me*. I guess I’ve realized I let a good thing go. He’s so dang cute, I just want to grab him and kiss his face off. You know?”

A strange feeling comes over me, a feeling I can’t quite name, but I know it’s not a good feeling.

“Girl, are you gonna say anything? You look like you’re one of those victims in *Serious Bite*, about to scream your lungs out when you see the vampire’s pointy teeth.”

I pick my jaw up from the table and swallow. I don’t want to look like I’ve just seen a vampire’s pointy teeth. I want to seem normal, like my roomie telling me she has feelings for my best friend is no big deal.

Which it’s not.

I take a breath. “Let me get this straight. You want to be with Gabe again?”



She studies my face for a beat before she purses her lips. “I knew I shouldn’t have told you. I knew you’d go all *Ryn* on me about him.”

“What does that mean? Of course I’m going to be myself. Who else could I be?”

Yes, I know, I’m purposefully missing her point here, but this is one of my closest friends confessing feelings for my best friend. You’ll excuse me if it takes me a hot minute to get up to speed.

Ivy raises her brows and crosses her arms, like she’s a school teacher who’s caught me doing something wrong. “You two have this whole closeness thing that he and I don’t share. It keeps me at arm’s length, you know. It always has.”

“Gabe and I are best friends and we’ve been best friends forever. We tell each other everything. We always have.”

“That’s what I’m talking about. That’s why I haven’t said anything to you about Gabe and me up until now.”

Gabe and me? Gabe and Ivy?

It feels like the air has been sucked from my lungs. “Are you saying,” I begin but my voice sounds strange, strained. I clear my throat and try again. “Are you saying you two are already together?”

She doesn’t reply immediately, and it forces me to think about how I might feel if Ivy and Gabe were in a romantic relationship.

I can’t say it feels great, but for the life of me, I couldn’t tell you why.

Maybe it’s because he’s my best friend and if he’s involved with Ivy, then she will take that position in his life.

Where will that leave me? Where do I want that to leave me?

“You are, aren’t you?” I say, my voice dull.

She pulls her lips together into a line and shakes her head. “Not yet.”

A wave of relief washes over me. Perhaps I don’t want to go back to the way it was in high school when they were dating? Perhaps I didn’t like feeling left out when Gabe and Ivy were together?

Whatever it is, I feel so much better knowing they’re not together.

“Right. Got it. You’re feeling me out about it before you do anything.”

“You guessed it.” She leans her elbows on the table. “It’s so odd because if you’d asked me even a couple weeks ago if I ever saw myself with him again, my answer would have been a definite no.”

“What changed for you?”

“I think it’s the way he’s been behaving lately, like he’s a hero of some

movie, about to embark on a mission to save Earth.”

I bark out a laugh. “That’s crazy. Gabe is about the only single guy in this town not involved in making a movie right now.”

She shrugs, her face glowing. “I didn’t say it was logical. The heart wants what the heart wants, girl.” She leans her elbows on the table. “Look. I wondered whether you might be able to help me find out if he feels anything for me.”

It’s like I’ve walked into a new reality in which my two closest friends could potentially fall in love with one another, and leave me behind.

It’s—

I push out a breath. I don’t know what it is.

Is it because I had to pick up the pieces last time Ivy moved on to the next guy? Is it because I don’t want to see Gabe hurt again by her, the way he was back then?

Or is it something else altogether? Something I can’t even name, let alone fully comprehend?

“Ryn?”

“You want me to find out if Gabe has feelings for you?”

Did we just hop in a time warp back to junior high?

“All I know is that it would really help me. Not in an obvious kind of way. I mean, I don’t want you to walk up to him and ask, ‘hey, do you want to get with Ivy?’” She lets out a laugh. “That would be insane.”

*That would be insane? This whole thing is insane.*

“Maybe you could plant the seed, you know? Like, tell him that there’s the possibility of being with me again and see what he says.”

Gabe is single and so is Ivy. If she’s interested in him again, then I have no good reason not to help her.

Do I?

“Sure, I’ll talk to Gabe for you,” I reply, despite the fact that I’m wrestling with this new, unexpected and inexplicable feeling.

Which is crazy. They are free to be together if they want to be.

So why does the very thought twist me up in knots?

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## Chapter 14

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Ryn



Everyone is used to seeing me in jeans, t-shirts, and tennis shoes, sporting one of several colored flannels in winter, or a jean jacket in the spring or fall. It's my look. Heck, around here, it's pretty much everyone's look. When you live in a small town and have never been anywhere, no one really thinks twice about what they wear. You wear practical clothes that keep you cool in the summer and warm in the winter.

But tonight is different. Tonight, I'm eschewing my Hunter's Creek uniform for something else. Something feminine and sexy. Tonight, I'm hoping to dazzle my date, the eminently kissable Joe Turner.

Despite knowing I'd get a lecture on why I should buy my own clothes with money I've saved from my job, I borrowed a dress from Harper. We all know she's got that whole Boho, hippie vibe going on, which isn't particularly my style, but if you take away the hats, the chunky jewelry, and the boots, she's got some super cute dresses. Since we're both about the same size, give or take—okay, I'm easily a size bigger than her, but desperate times and desperate measures, as they say—borrowing one for tonight was the perfect idea. As I look at my reflection in the mirror, even I can admit I look pretty dang good.

The dress is pale pink with Harper's favored daisy print, the color

emphasizing my peaches and cream complexion. With a sweetheart neckline and spaghetti straps, it falls just above the knee, and I've teamed it with my only pair of high heels, cream colored sandals I wore to my high school prom, senior year. This is their first outing in some time.

Ivy helped me do my hair, which falls in soft curls around my shoulders, and I applied some new makeup Hayley inspired me to get. I've been practicing when no one is around.

The overall package isn't half bad and I'm hoping Joe likes what he sees.

I slip down the hallway to the living room where Ivy is watching HGTV. I saunter into the room, and I'm suddenly desperate for her to think that I look good.

"Well, would you look at you," Ivy declares. "Where did you get the dress? Because it looks like you were poured right into it like gooey marshmallow."

"Gooey marshmallow?" I question, hoping that's a good thing. Suddenly self-conscious, I smooth out the material of the dress over my belly. It's slim fitting on Harper, which means it's almost tight on me, thanks to my chest and hips, hugging my curves in what I hope is a sexy but classy way. "Harper loaned it to me but I'm not sure."

"Girl, you are smokin'. Curves in all the right places. How about me?" Ivy hops to her feet and does a turn, the full skirt of her knee-length dress twirling around her. I've seen the dress before, and she always looks amazing in it.

"Beautiful," I tell her.

Ivy's always looked effortlessly beautiful. With her olive complexion and thick dark hair, which she loves to toss around and flirt with, she doesn't need to borrow her big sister's dress to look like a million bucks.

"Do you think Gabe will like it?" she asks.

"How could he not?" I reply, pushing unsettling thoughts about Gabe and Ivy from my mind. I'm not going to dwell on that tonight. Tonight is all about my second date with Joe.

We take the short walk to Gabe's house, where we find him sitting on his porch swing, staring at his phone.

"The party has arrived," Ivy announces as we enter through his front gate.

He gawks at the two of us like we fell in the pig trough and got covered in mud.

"Whatcha looking at? Haven't you ever seen me in a dress?" Ivy asks

him, her face glowing.

Gabe clears his throat. "I was reading something. You both look great."

Ivy grins. "Thanks, Gabe."

"Shall we go? Ryn doesn't want to be late for Joe," Ivy says.

"You're meeting Joe?" Gabe asks. He shoots me a look I can only read as his *big brother watching out for me* look.

"Duh. That's why she got all dressed up tonight. It's all for Joe," Ivy explains as she hooks her arm through his.

"Why didn't he pick you up at your place?" Gabe asks.

I chortle. "Because this isn't 1952?"

"Let's get going," Gabe comments, his voice gruff.

Maybe he does feel something for Ivy? She looks particularly gorgeous tonight. Most men would find her attractive, I'm sure.

My nerves get the better of me at the thought of seeing Joe again. "Hey, can I use your bathroom?"

"Sure. Go ahead. You don't need to ask," Gabe replies.

"Just being polite," I say as I breeze past him.

I use the bathroom and I'm about to re-join Gabe and Ivy when Gabe appears in the hallway. Unlike Ivy and me, he's in his usual combination of jeans and a casual tee, no flannel tonight on account of the fact that it's pretty warm out.

"What did you forget?" I ask.

"My keys. I figured I should lock up the house. There are lots of outsiders in town today, plus it looks like rain, so I figured I'd drive."

I gesture down my legs to my high heeled sandals. "Good thinking."

His gaze slides down to my feet.

"Where did you put them?"

"Put what?" he asks.

"Your keys, brainiac," I reply on a chortle.

"Yeah, right. I usually put them here." He indicates a small side table by the front door. Other than some stacked mail, it's empty.

"Want me to help look?"

"Sure. I'll check my bedroom. You check the living room."

We separate and I search the living room, checking the coffee table and the side table and even going so far as to pull the cushions off the sofa and chairs.

"What are you doing?" Ivy asks, standing in the doorway with her hands

on her hips.

“Gabe thinks it looks like rain and he wants to take his truck.”

“And you’re looking for it in the sofa cushions?”

“Duh. He lost his keys.”

“Hey, can I use your lipstick? I forgot mine and yours looks super good.”

“Sure.” I pull my lipstick from my purse and hand it to her.

Gabe walks into the room as she’s applying lipstick, and she throws him a smile.

“What do you think? Do you like this lipstick on me?” she asks him.

“Your lips look very...red.”

Ivy seems happy with his response, but I roll my eyes at him. “G, you’re such a guy.”

“Here you go.” Ivy passes the lipstick back to me. “You need a touch up. Your lips need to look totally kissable for your date tonight.”

“I’m gonna go check the bathroom,” Gabe mumbles as he strides from the room.

“You think your keys might be in the bathroom? That’s weird,” Ivy questions as she traipses after him.

I put the cushions back where they belong and scan Gabe’s bookshelf. It’s not long before I get distracted by the books. Gabe’s mom had pretty eclectic taste, everything from books about impressionist artists, to self-help books, to historical romance novels, and I plan on coming back to borrow a couple of them soon.

I spot the keys in front of the book I gave Gabe when he got the glass blowing apprenticeship. It’s a gorgeous book with beautiful images of blown glass, which I knew he would love.

I can’t resist pulling it out and having a quick flick through the pages, when something drops out of it, landing on the shelf. It’s an envelope. I bet he uses it as a bookmark. I pick it up to slip it back into the book when a few items fall out of it and onto the floor.

I bend down to pick them up when I notice one of the items is a photo strip. It’s three shots of Gabe and me. We’re pulling faces in one, he has my ponytail spread across his top lip like a moustache in another, and the bottom one is of us grinning at one another like we haven’t got a care in the world.

I smile to myself. I remember these photos! We were seventeen and I remember posing for them and waiting for the machine to cough them out. I remember laughing with Gabe about them, happy I’d pulled him from his

funk over Ivy breaking up with him, getting him to smile. I remember—

*Wait.*

He told me he'd dumped these photos in a trash can, and that he only vaguely remembered even getting them taken that night.

Why would he say that to me when he had them all along?

Perhaps he forgot that he had them?

But then why would he have them in this book I only gave him a couple years ago?

I chew on my lip. It makes no sense.

I flip one of the small pieces of card over and read the lettering. It's a movie ticket stub for *A New York Kind of Love*. It was the movie we went to right after Gabe and Ivy broke up. It was a rom com, one that didn't do that well at the box office, but I loved it all the same. Gabe insisted it was a waste of time and totally unrealistic, which was probably true, but it was also whimsical and wonderful in that happily ever after, schmaltzy, totally satisfying way I adore.

Why would he keep the ticket stubs from that movie? He went on and on about how bad the movie was that night, all the way back here to his mom's house, where we sat on the swing on the front porch together and—

*Oh, my gosh.*

I blink at the items in my hand.

That was the night we kissed.

He was sad from Ivy dumping him and I'd only gone to the movie with him because he'd already bought the tickets. Back then none of us had much money to waste. If you bought a movie ticket, you went to the movie, no matter what. Being his best friend, I'd agreed to go, telling myself it was more out of pity than anything else. The guy was hurting and, as a friend, I needed to be there for him.

The fact that I'd been secretly harboring feelings for him for a long time was totally beside the point.

But that night, sitting on the porch swing that is a matter of only about ten feet from where I am right now, he'd given me his jacket and wrapped his arm around my shoulders to keep me warm when I mentioned I was cold—a typical Gabe thing to do—and then, as I looked into his eyes I saw a softness there I hadn't seen before. A softness and something else, something that had my heart fluttering, my body on fire with possibilities.

Could he feel it, too?



I press the movie ticket stubs to my lips as I remember the feeling that had come over me, the way my stomach had clenched as my heart banged against my ribs, knowing what was about to happen between us.

Then, when his lips finally touched mine, I remember thinking *this must be what it feels like to be truly kissed.*

And then the lightning bolt.

What was I thinking? I was getting swept up in the moment, thinking crazy thoughts about someone who was my friend, and only my friend. The cold, hard fact of the matter was that he was only kissing me because he was on the rebound from Ivy. Anyone could have told me that. He was lonely and vulnerable and I had taken advantage of that and Ivy was my friend and I'd betrayed her and it felt like a huge mess that I could never untangle.

I felt low. Lower than low.

Afterward, being seventeen-years-old, I decided the best course of action was to pretend like it had never happened, that we hadn't kissed, and that I most definitely hadn't hoped he felt something more for me.

I took that desire and I scrunched it up into a little ball and shoved it to the back of my mind.

Gabe and I were friends. Ivy was my friend. Nothing could ever happen, and I was a fool to think it could.

"Have you found them? I've looked everywhere but no sign." Gabe's voice comes from behind me, pulling me back into the room.

As quick as a pickpocket in reverse, I slide the ticket stubs and photo strip back into the book and turn to him, plastering a smile on my face as I jangle the keys in the air. "Got 'em."

"Good, because we're late," he tells me.

Recovering with lightning speed, I reply, "Oh no! We might miss the kids singing songs from *The Sound of Music.*"

He lets out his low, rumbling laugh. "We wouldn't want to do that. I've missed hearing how those kids feel about kittens and string."

"It's their favorite thing, I hear," I reply, trying to act normal and suspecting I sound weird, my voice forced, unnatural.

Gabe, knowing me better than I know myself, shoots me a sideways glance. "You okay, Ryn-Ryn?"

I clear my throat.

"I'm nervous about seeing Joe again, I guess," I fib. "It's been a few days since we went to the screening at the hall."

There's no way I'm going to say anything about what I just found. What would be the point? As far as Gabe is concerned, I took the kiss for what it was: an ill-advised rebound that should mean nothing to anyone.

And so what if he kept mementos from that night and told me he'd thrown them away? It was so long ago. It means nothing.

Doesn't it?

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## Chapter 15

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## Gabe



The Summer Festival in Hunter's Creek is your typical small-town affair, with food carts serving delicious treats, a bunch of carnival rides, and of course your obligatory variety of farm animals for kids to pet and feed.

But this festival has one added bonus: Ryn's date, Joe.

Can you tell I'm being sarcastic?

Joe pulled up on his motorcycle about half an hour ago, Ryn doing her best to act like she didn't care that he was well over an hour later than he'd said he would be. The look on her face when he arrived was one of total relief, which morphed quickly into joy.

That look cut deep.

Now they're walking hand in hand, as she clutches a plush animal he won for her at one of the stands like it's some kind of treasure, when in reality it's just an ugly stuffed toy. She's got that sappy look in her eye she gets when she's really into someone. It's a look I've seen before, and this Joe guy is a cookie cutter version of the one who messed her up and then left her last time. And the time before that.

It's enough to make me want to get the heck out of Dodge.

But I can't. I promised my boss from the Black Bear that I'll help out in the bar later, serving up drinks for thirsty festival goers, along with jojos and

other bar snacks.

If only Joe Turner were a jojo and I could dip him in sauce and bite his head right off.

I take a deep breath. That was harsh. I don't actually want to bite his head off. I just want him to simply not exist.

There's a difference.

Of course I get it. She's attracted to him and he's attracted to her. It happens.

The problem for me is what I have to offer Ryn goes so much deeper than just surface-level attraction, based on physical looks and constant hair flicking—by Joe—alone.

I can offer Ryn my unwavering, enduring love, a love that allows her to be her. A love that won't disappear when the going gets tough. A love rooted in really knowing who she is as a person.

A love so long in the making, it should have its own street sign.

*Gabe Loves Ryn Road.*

*Be Mine, Ryn Street.*

*You Are My Everything Drive.*

Inside, I'm cringing.

I feel a hand on my back and expect it to be Ivy. She's been behaving oddly tonight, flicking her hair and offering me coy smiles. The number of times she's asked me if I like her dress or lipstick has gotten out of hand. She's acting like she did back in high school and I've had to ask her on more than one occasion if she's okay.

"Hey there, stranger," a woman's voice says and I turn to see Natalie. She's wearing a short denim skirt and a big smile, and I'm genuinely happy she's here.

"Nat. Hey. I'm glad you came."

"I came with my kid sisters who are visiting from Arizona." She gestures at a couple of teenage girls, almost identical copies of Natalie, laughing between themselves as they share cotton candy. "They love the rides, and especially the treats."

"I can see that."

"What about you? Who are you here with tonight?"

I glance at Ryn and her date. He's got his arm wrapped around her shoulder as they meander through the stands. Ivy waves at me before her eyes dart to Natalie and she pulls her face into a pout.

Weird.

“I’m here with friends,” I tell her.

“Invisible friends?”

“Something like that.”

“Nat, we’re going into the haunted house. Are you coming?” one of her sisters asks.

“You go ahead. I’m going to talk to my friend, Gabe.” She passes her sisters some cash and they flash her smiles before they leave.

A song blasts out of the loudspeakers and Nat begins to dance on the spot.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“I’m dancing. This is the song from *Footloose*. You know, Kenny Wormald? Julianne Hough?”

“I know the movie.”

She takes my hands in hers and swings them. “Doesn’t this song make you feel like dancing?”

“No,” I reply with a chortle. “I’m not much of a dancer.”

“Come on.” She tugs at my hands and pulls me into her, twisting around me like I’m a pole. She holds my arm aloft and does a spin, landing in my arms with a laugh.

It’s infectious, and I laugh along with her despite myself.

“You’re really something. You know that?” I tell her with a grin.

Who knew Natalie would be just what I needed to take my mind off Ryn?

“You know it, Gabe Hartmann.” She loops her arm through mine and we begin to move slowly through the crowds of people. “I expected to get to meet the famous Ryn tonight. Is she here?”

My eyes find Ryn and Joe in the crowd. They’re close by, only a handful of feet away, his stupid arm still around her shoulders. She’s gazing at him as though he’s her favorite flavor of ice cream. I know what that flavor is because we’re friends and I know her a million times better than the guy she’s with does.

Do I sound bitter?

Yeah, I know I do.

I’m finding this one hard to shake.

Natalie follows my gaze. “Who are they?”

“That’s Ryn and her...date,” I grind out.

Realization dawns on her face. “The guy in the leather jacket? In this heat?”

“That’s the one.”

She gives my arm a squeeze. “I’d say things have worked out well for both of us tonight. Wouldn’t you?”

I open my mouth to reply when Ryn’s parents, Ed and Alyssa, greet me with an upbeat hello. They’re accompanied by Marlowe, and a tall man in a pair of chinos and a white buttoned-up shirt and tie, who looks about as out of place here at a small-town festival as Christopher did when he first arrived in Hunter’s Creek.

Ed Cole is holding a waffle covered in strawberries and cream, while his wife is finishing a mouthful of Second Chance Café apple pie from a paper plate.

“Isn’t this fun?” Ed says, his eyes flicking to Nat briefly before returning to me.

“It’s our favorite festival of all the Hunter’s Creek festivals,” Alyssa says. “Hello, there. I’m Alyssa Cole, and this is my husband, Ed,” she says to Natalie.

I jump in with, “I’m sorry. Where are my manners? Mr. and Mrs. Cole, this is Natalie Mills. Nat, these are Ryn’s parents, and this is her sister, Marlowe.”

Natalie smiles. “I get to meet the famous Ryn’s family before I meet her? Hi, everyone.”

“This is my boyfriend, Mike,” Marlowe says by way of introduction.

Mike and I shake hands.

“I’m so looking forward to meeting Ryn. I’ve heard a lot about her,” Nat declares.

“She’s quite something,” Marlowe says in her typical older sibling way.

“Oh, she’s our baby girl,” Alyssa replies. “The only one not to have flown the coop. Not like our Marlowe here. She’s got a fancy job in Seattle. Don’t you, honey?”

“It’s not fancy, Mom,” Marlowe protests, embarrassed, but I can tell it falls on deaf ears where her mom is concerned.

“You’ve always impressed me,” Mike says with a smile teasing the edges of his mouth, and Marlowe blushes.

“Ryn did move into the house down the road with Ivy recently, so that’s flying the coop in my books,” Ed corrects.

“Oh, you know what I mean, honey. Ryn’s not one to run off to the big smoke like our Marlowe did, or like Harper, either. She isn’t like her sisters,”

she explains to Natalie. “She’s happy with her lot in life, and we’re happy she’s stayed here with us. Isn’t that right, Gabe?”

“Of course,” I reply, weirded out that the parents of the woman I’ve been secretly in love with forever are currently telling the woman who’s made it clear she wants to be with me all about how Ryn hasn’t left Hunter’s Creek.

Awkward doesn’t begin to describe it.

“Have you been on any of the rides?” Natalie asks.

“Vertigo,” Alyssa explains. “I chalk it up to me being an old lady these days.”

“You’re not old, honey. You’re perfectly aged, like a fine wine,” Ed says, and the two of them share a smile.

“We went on the roller coaster and the Ferris wheel,” Marlowe says. “Although someone here is afraid of heights.” She nudges her boyfriend.

“I got over it though,” Mike replies.

“He works on the 43rd floor and he’s afraid of heights. Go figure,” Marlowe teases.

Ed examines the gathering clouds. “It looks like rain. We’d best finish eating and go watch Harper’s kids perform before the heavens open up on us.”

“That is one thing I don’t like about the Pacific Northwest. The rain,” Natalie states. “It doesn’t rain much where I’m from.”

“Where are you from, sweetie?” asks Alyssa.

“Originally Arizona, although I went to college in Houston and took my first job there before I got transferred by the company up here to Cotown about six months back.”

“That’s nice,” she replies. “Welcome to the PNW.”

“Thank you.”

“Arizona’s as dry as a bone. And hot,” Ed observes.

“You mean like it’s in a desert, Dad,” Marlowe says with a smile.

“Okay, pumpkin. You’re right,” Ed replies with a laugh. “Where do you work?” he asks Natalie.

As she replies, Alyssa pulls me to one side and asks in a hushed tone, “Is Natalie your new girlfriend? Oh, wait. Have I jumped the gun? Is this a first date?”

I shake my head. “Nat’s a friend.”

Her face lifts in a smile. “She seems very nice, Gabe. I met Joe. Somehow I missed him at the screening the other night.”



I ignore the twist in my belly that his name elicits. “Joe. Yeah.”

She says in a hushed tone, only for my ears, “I can tell he’s not for Ryn.”

I resist the urge to smile. “Why do you say that?”

“I get the feeling he’s more interested in Joe than anything else, if you know what I mean. All that hair flicking and posing. I think he’s rather taken with himself.”

I lose the fight against my smile. “You’ve got that right.”

“You know you’re very important to us, Gabe. Don’t you?” she asks, even though it’s more of a statement than a question.

“I sure do.”

“And you’re very important to Ryn, too.”

“We’re good friends.”

She pats my hand. “Keep her close, Gabe. Ryn needs friends like you.”

The sound of singing voices grabs our attention. It’s the kids from Hunter’s Creek Elementary who seem to have a new tradition, singing songs from *The Sound of Music* at all our festivals. And considering we have a festival every season, that’s a lot of *do re mis* for them to sing about.

They’re on the bandstand, accompanied by Harper in her role as teacher and performance manager, which she’s done at each town festival since she moved back to Hunter’s Creek. All of them are dressed in the green and white outfits they wore at the Spring Festival, only this time they’re not freezing their butts off as they sing, willing their set to be over in order to bundle up in their warm coats and drink hot chocolate.

Natalie and I say goodbye to the Coles and Mike and go over to watch them perform.

“They are so dang cute,” Nat says as she watches. “Look at that little one. Is she supposed to be Gretl?”

“As in Hansel and Gretel? No, they’re the singing family from *The Sound of Music*,” I explain.

“Exactly. Gretl von Trapp of the Trapp Family Singers. The youngest kid.”

“You know the movie?”

“Of course I know the movie! Who doesn’t know the movie? It’s a classic.”

We listen to the song, the kids doing a great job and Harper being supportive and proud.

Natalie’s sisters appear, asking for more money. Natalie leaves to go get

some more cash out of the ATM, telling me she'll be back soon.

I feel a hand on my arm and I turn to see Ryn grinning at me. She's got that stupid stuffed toy and a pack of cotton candy in her hand, looking like the kid in her has come out to play. Petra Pan.

I lift my eyes from Ryn to see if she's still with Joe. By the way they looked together before, I'm pretty certain he'll be surgically attached to her, and I'm pleasantly surprised when I see he's not.

"Hey, stranger. Where've you been?" she asks me as though I'm the one who's been MIA on a date.

"I've been here," I reply.

"In this exact spot the whole time?" She smirks at me.

"Yes, because I'm that weird," I deadpan. "Actually, I've wandered around and seen some stuff. Your parents are here."

"I know. I got to introduce them to Joe." Her grin is so wide it could split her face in two.

I'm not grinning. The thought of Ryn's parents meeting Joe makes my chest tighten.

"Cool," I reply, not giving away that her mom for one didn't think all that much of him. Ryn doesn't need to hear that, especially not from me. But you know what? It's not easy to watch your best friend, the woman you've been in love with your entire adult life, make mistake after mistake with the wrong kinds of guys.

But what can I do? Tell her she's chosen a jerk again? A guy who will treat her badly?

Even if I do, she won't listen.

"Have you eaten?" I ask.

She holds up the cotton candy. "The most important food group, right here. Want some?" She offers me the bag and I take a clump, the sweetness melting on my tongue.

"You know, I'm not sure cotton candy qualifies as a food group, but I won't tell on you."

We share a smile and things feel for a moment like they're back to normal between us.

And then her expression turns serious. "G, I need to ask you something, and I need you to be honest, even if it might seem like a totally random question. Okay?"

"How can I say 'okay' to something when I don't even know what you're

going to ask me?”

“Because you’re the best friend I could ever have?”

And there it is: friend.

Excellent.

I pull my lips into a smile. “What do you want to ask me?”

“Well, you know how you used to date Ivy back in the day.”

“Yeah, in about 150 BC.”

She barks out a sharp laugh that takes me by surprise.

“It wasn’t that funny,” I say.

“It was funny. You’re a funny guy.” She punches me lightly on the upper arm.

I shoot her a questioning look. She’s acting weird.

“Do you think you’d ever, you know, rekindle things with her?”

I pull my brows together. “With who?”

“With Ivy.”

My eyes widen. “Ivy?”

“You know, your ex, my roommate.”

“That’s totally left-field, Ryn-Ryn. Why are you asking me that?”

“I know she broke your heart back in 150 BC.” She smiles at my weak joke. “But you two were good together, right? And she’s super fun, as you know, and so pretty. Who knows? Maybe you could get a second chance at love.” She looks up at the coffeehouse sign above our heads.

Second Chance Café.

A Second Chance at love with Ivy?

*What the actual heck?*

“I know I’m not much of a matchmaker, but promise me you’ll think about it. It could be really, really great for both of you.”

My heart deflates. Ryn wants me to date my ex? The idea of me getting back together with Ivy is...well, it’s not something I’ve given even a passing thought to since we broke up back in high school. It’s not like I’ve hankered for her since we broke up. I see her as a friend, nothing more.

The way Ryn obviously sees me.

“Wait. Is that why she’s been acting weird around me tonight?” I ask, thinking of the looks Ivy’s been throwing me.

Ryn scrunches up her nose. “Maybe?”

“You need to know my interest...well, it lies elsewhere,” I say.

I watch carefully for her response. I haven’t said something blatant like

“I’m in love with you” or anything crazy like that. But I need to shut the Ivy question down right away. I don’t want to give her false hope where there’s absolutely none.

“Gabe, I got you a lemonade.” Natalie shoves a plastic cup in front of me and I automatically take it from her.

“Thanks,” I mutter.

Ryn’s eyes slide between Natalie and me, and I just know the conclusion she’s leaping to. What can I do? Tell her right here and now that it’s not Natalie I love but her, when she’s only just suggested I go back to my high school ex? When there’s so much at stake for me?

That would be a hard no.

“Hey, there. I’m Natalie.”

“Hi. I’m Ryn. Nice to meet you,” she replies.

Natalie’s eyes widen. “You’re Ryn? Wow, it’s really great to meet you. Gabe talks about you all the time.”

“Not *all* the time,” I mumble feebly.

Ryn’s eyes flash to mine. “He does? How boring for you. How do you two know each other.”

“We take a class together.” She hooks her arm through mine as she replies, like she’s claiming me in front of my best friend.

My arm stiffens.

Ryn’s gaze flicks between Natalie and me once more.

I want to explain that it’s not what she thinks, that Natalie’s not my date, that she may have made her intentions toward me as clear as the Washington summer sky, but that I have zero interest in her.

I want to, but I don’t.

What’s the point?

No point, that’s what. Absolutely none.

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## Chapter 16

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Ryn



Could this night get any better? Joe, the festival, hanging out with his interesting friends.

Sure, that was an awkward conversation to have with Gabe about Ivy, made all the worse by the fact Natalie, his date, turned up at the end of it, but at least I've done my duty for Ivy. Even if Gabe regards her as a no-fly zone.

Pity for Ivy.

As for me, tonight is all about Joe, and I've been having a great time with him. And what's more, I've successfully pushed the fact that Gabe kept those mementos from the night we kissed from my mind.

Mostly, anyway.

There'll be time to work that one out another day.

Joe and I have been wandering around the stalls and the animal pens together, snacking on treats, and riding the rides. He won me a plush toy that is the funniest looking cross between an ogre and a hippo that strangely works, he's bought me drinks and snacks and told me anything I've asked him about what it's like working for Leonardo Finch, being in Hollywood, and all about his acting aspirations. Seriously, if he has even a dash of talent to add to his good looks, I bet we'll see his name in lights before too long.

He's introduced me to a bunch of people working on the movie, too.

There's Hayley, the makeup artist I met when I visited the set, who's continued to encourage me to give makeup artistry a shot—which is something I have a growing interest in doing. Someday. Maybe.

Then there's a guy named Duncan, who works as a sound engineer on the movie, a couple of other guys, Clay and Geoff, who work with Duncan, and a really gorgeous woman about five or so years older than me named Jenny, whose style I would kill to have, and who has been so super nice I feel like I've made a new BFF tonight.

Remember when I mentioned that nothing ever happens in Hunter's Creek? Tonight, it feels like Hunter's Creek is the epicenter of the entire universe, with new people and a world of possibilities at my door.

"Tell me, Ryn, we all know you have terrible taste in men, but what do you do for a living?" Jenny asks me as she, Ivy, Joe, and I feed a handful of maize to a pen of goats as Joe's friends look on.

"Thanks a lot," Joe rebuffs and Ivy laughs.

"It's true," Jenny says.

"Jenny's only telling it like it is, dude," Geoff says as he slaps Joe on the back. "You need to set your sights higher than this guy. Maybe go for a more normal looking man with unattractively thinning hair and a nose that's too big for his face."

I regard Geoff with his thinning hair and, some might say, large nose, and smile. "Thanks for the offer, but I think I'll stick with this guy."

"Yeah, you will," Joe replies with a laugh. "Ugh. My hand is all slimy from animal slobber." He makes a face and I laugh, the baby goat he was feeding looking up at him hopefully.

"Would you two let the poor woman answer my question please?" Jenny says.

"What question was that?" I ask her on a laugh.

"What you do for a living."

"I work at one of the coffee shops in town. The Second Chance Café. Right over there, behind the rainbow-colored stall," I reply, pointing at the coffeehouse.

Jenny raises her eyebrows. "You're a waitress?"

"Yeah, I guess. I work for my aunt. She owns the place. Pretty good boss, even if she can be bossy at times."

"I hear that's what bosses do: boss," Hayley comments. "I know. I get bossed around all the time and it drives me crazy."

Joe says, “Ryn makes the best iced coffee in town. Just ask Leo.”

“Does she now?” Jenny runs her gaze over me and I choose not to think of it as the least bit judgmental. That’s not to say it isn’t judgmental, just that I choose not to think about it that way. I’m having too much fun to let my new friend’s assessment of what I do for a living affect me. “Is that a summer job before heading back to college, or...?”

“It’s an ‘or,’” I tell her, embarrassed by the fact that my full-time job is working in a coffeehouse. Not that there is anything to be embarrassed about, of course, but it’s not nearly as glamorous as everyone else’s job here—Ivy working in Accounts Receivable aside.

In this company of interesting people who do interesting things, I feel I should be doing something more than working at my aunt’s coffeehouse. I should be doing something more exciting, something that stretches my mind or leads to new and interesting places.

Something like makeup artistry.

I make a mental note to do some more research.

“So that’s it? No dreams, or aspirations, no big plans to go off and conquer the world?” Jenny asks.

Joe jumps to my defense. “Some people are happy with where they’re at in life,” he says. He gives my shoulders a squeeze, smiling down at me, the goat saliva he complained about only moments ago transferred to my bare flesh. “I think it’s totally cool that Ryn is happy with what she’s doing. Not a lot of us can say that. Take Duncan.”

Duncan rolls his eyes. “Here we go.”

Undeterred, Joe continues. “He’s a sound technician who actually wants to be a director.”

Duncan shrugs. “It’s true. I do.”

“And Hayley...Hayley might be doing what she wants to do, but she wants to be the boss,” Joe continues.

“I can’t argue with that,” Hayley replies.

“Clay wants to be an actor,” Joe continues, emphasizing the last syllable of the word.

“Same as you,” Clay rebuffs.

“Nope. Joe wants to be famous. Isn’t that right?” Jenny teases.

“That is so not true. I want to act,” Joe replies, offended.

“Which, if you’re good and get lucky, can result in fame. Tell me that’s not the truth,” Jenny rebuffs.



Joe shrugs. "If fame comes, fame comes."

The rest of the group laughs.

"Joe, you are so full of it," Duncan says.

Joe grins at his friends. "It is what it is, people."

"Have you thought anymore about makeup artistry?" Hayley asks me.

"I have. I've been watching some YouTube clips. It looks cool."

I've learned there's a choice of courses I could take, courses that wouldn't take me too long to complete, based in Cotown, which would mean I'd have to move out of Hunter's Creek. Once qualified, I could do wedding makeup and prom makeup, helping people look and feel their best for their big day.

Right now, it's a pipe dream, something for me to fantasize about in private, and most definitely something I can't afford to do. But it's the only thing I've felt excited about in a long time, since the time Gabe and I applied for the glass blowing apprenticeship.

"I didn't know about that," Ivy says.

"It's just an idea," I reply.

"You wanna be a YouTube star?" Jenny asks me, again with that touch of judgement in her voice. Or it could be that I'm being overly sensitive.

I shrug. "Hayley did my makeup when I visited Joe on set and she talked about what it's like to be a makeup artist. I hadn't really thought about YouTube."

"I think Ryn could be a YouTube star if she wanted to. Look at her. She's as pretty as a peach, which never hurts, and with some training, she could really rock it," Hayley says. "Plenty of people make a living on YouTube from doing makeup tutorials."

Hayley is now officially my new best friend.

A band starts up and the group decides to head to one of the bars to get a drink and enjoy the music.

As we arrive at the Black Bear, I spot Marlowe and her oversized date, Mike, sitting at one of the tables. They're huddled together, looking like they're sharing secrets, lost in their own little world for two.

I breeze past and poke my sister in the ribs.

"Ow!" she complains as though I actually hurt her, which we both know I didn't. She loves to ham it up.

"You do realize there's a festival going on here, right? There are rides and animals and a bunch of things to eat, as well as fun activities," I tease as I

lean my hands on the top of a spare chair at their table.

There's one thing I know how to do better than either of my sisters and that is tease them. They're easy bait, and I've honed my skills on them over the years. I see it as my job as their younger, less perfect sibling.

Although tonight, I feel less like their annoying little sister and more like their equal for once in my life. Harper has her boyfriend, Christopher; Marlowe has Mike; and I have Joe. As far as I can tell we're on an even playing field, at least as far as dates for the evening go.

"Thank you, Ryn. We are aware," Marlowe replies in that suffering-her-kid-sister way.

"Is this your first time at a Hunter's Creek festival, Mike?" I ask.

"It sure is. I like it here, although it's a lot busier than I thought it would be."

"That's only because of the festival, but you might not have noticed on account of this whole loved up thing you've got going on right now." I gesture between the two.

They share a smile and Marlowe's cheeks flush an attractive shade of pink. That's Marlowe, through and through. Everything she does is just right, from the way she dresses—sophisticated casuals with fancy purses and expensive looking shoes—all the way to how she blushes.

Me? When I blush, I give tomatoes a run for their money, my eyeballs virtually sizzling with the heat.

"Would you care for a drink, Ryn?" Mike asks.

"I'm here with some friends and I think they might be at the bar getting me a drink already." I look over and see Joe with Ivy and his friends, laughing and chatting, each of them already with a drink in their hands.

Maybe they forgot mine?

I turn back to Mike. "I'd love a drink. Thanks." I note the glasses on the table. "I'll have what you're having."

I've always wanted to say that.

"Are you sure? We're having Long Island iced tea," Marlowe warns as though anything made of tea is something to be wary of.

"Sounds perfect to me."

"It's not tea, in case you thought it was."

"No," I reply defensively.

"It's stronger than you're used to," she continues, acting like she's my mom and not just my sister. "It's got a bunch of things in it."

I give a dismissive wave of my hand. “How alcoholic can something named after a state be?”

“Plenty,” Marlowe replies.

“How about I get you a weak one? Extra cola,” Mike offers.

“Mike, we’ve only just met, but I am north of twenty-one and can totally handle my liquor,” I tell him.

Marlowe presses her lips together to stifle a smile. She knows just as well as I do that I have completely overstated my ability to drink alcohol. The thing is, ever since I got horribly sick on Mom’s sweet cooking sherry when I was about sixteen, I don’t drink much, and when I do, I usually stop at a single beer, perhaps two if I’m really pushing it.

But I’m feeling adventurous tonight. I’m here with Joe and his cool and interesting friends with their glamorous lives and educated opinions. Why not push that envelope right off the writing desk?

“I’ll go get our drinks,” Mike says.

“Sit down for a second?” Marlowe gestures at a chair.

“I can give you three minutes tops,” I say as I sit myself down. “I need to get back to my date.”

“Who are you on a date with?”

“Joe Turner. He’s Leonardo Finch’s assistant.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yes. He’s the impossibly handsome one over there in the black leather jacket, the one who looks like Anthony from *Bridgerton*.”

“I love that show,” Marlowe gushes, completely missing the point. She’s supposed to be impressed by Joe.

“He’s the one running his fingers through his hair.”

She looks over at Joe, and I beam with pride. “Isn’t he hot in that leather jacket?”

Disappointed she’s not gushing, I snap, “I’m sure he’s fine. What did you want to talk to me about?”

“You need to know something.”

“You’re dating Mr. Tall over there?” I gesture at Mike. He’s so tall his head could brush the red, white, and blue bunting that’s strung across the bar’s ceiling. “Seriously, how tall is he?”

“It’s not about Mike. It’s about you.”

“You’ve got my attention.”

“I thought I might,” she replies with a wry smile. “There’s a new festival

event this year. One they've never done before."

"And this concerns me how?"

"It's a matchmaking event."

I let out a sharp laugh. "A matchmaking event? Like speed dating or something equally lame?"

"I'm actually not one hundred percent sure. All I know is some of the townsfolk have gotten the idea that you need to be matchmade."

"Because I'm sad and lonely and have the audacity to be over eighteen and not married with seven kids already, which makes me some kind of a leper in this town?"

She screws up her nose. "Something like that."

"Well, I'm on a date with a totally cute guy who is completely into me. I don't need to be matchmade, especially to whatever lame guy they've chosen for me."

"That's the thing."

"What's the thing?"

"They're matchmaking you with Gabe."

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## Chapter 17

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Ryn



Of course, I shouldn't be surprised. It's nothing new. The Hunter's Creek Ladies' Committee, aka The Meddling Women of This Town with Nothing Better to Do, has been trying to matchmake Gabe and me for years.

It's just...oh, I don't know. There's something about them trying to do it today that makes it so very awkward now that I know he kept our movie ticket stubs and photo strip from the night we kissed. Add to that the fact that Ivy wants to get back together with him, and that both he and I are here on dates with other people, it could not come at a more awkward—or confusing—time.

Despite the fact that I've been thoroughly wrapped up in Joe tonight, those mementos keep playing in my mind. He knows he has them because they're inside the book I gave him only a couple of years ago. Why? Why keep them? Why tell me he didn't?

Unless that night meant more to him than he's let on, and he *did* want to kiss me for reasons other than being on the rebound from Ivy, which must mean he had real feelings for me, which might mean he still does, and if so, what does that mean and how do I feel about it and—

*Stop!*

I'm letting my imagination run away like a kid after an ice cream truck on

a hot day. I can't even think that.

And anyway, this is Gabe we're talking about. *Gabe*. He's my best friend, my confidant, the straightforward guy who treats me like his kid sister.

The fact that I'm only three days younger than him is immaterial.

I blow out a breath.

Gabe doesn't feel anything for me other than the love of a good friend. And that's what I am to him: a good friend. A best friend. And that's a lot.

I turn to see Ivy, her face lit up like a Christmas tree.

"Come quick. Gabe's about to get dunked," she tells me. "Hey, Marlowe."

"Hi, Ivy."

"Gabe's about to what?" I ask as she pulls me away from Marlowe and back into the crowd.

"It's a charity thing. You sit above a pool of water and people throw things at a target and if it hits... *splash*, Gabe gets wet."

"Why is he doing that? It's a fundraiser for the elementary school, isn't it? The last time I checked, he wasn't a teacher."

We make our way from the bar and back into the throngs of festival goers.

"You know what he's like. Always happy to help. Look. We're just in time."

We've reached one of those dunking contraptions. One of the teachers has been dunked, much to the delighted amusement of the kids in the crowd, and Gabe is waiting in the wings. He's in a pair of swim shorts so he must have gone back home to change for this.

I look at him and catch his eye, and he throws me a sheepish grin.

I wave awkwardly, my mind stuck on those mementos.

He looks like Gabe. He talks like Gabe, but right now, he feels like a completely different person.

"He is such a good sport. Don't you think? And I'm not going to lie: there are worse things than getting to see him after he's been dunked in the water."

"Huh?"

She gestures at her torso. "All those muscles of his, glistening."

It's not at all helpful for me to focus on Gabe's glistening muscles right now. "Uh-huh," I reply.

"Look!" She points at Gabe. He's perched on top of the seat above the pool, a grin on his face as he awaits his dunking fate. I try not to let my eyes

drift down his body, but who am I kidding? He's good to look at. Great, in fact. I sweep my gaze over him, from his broad shoulders, to his defined pecs, to his abs with their hint of a six pack, down to his strong, muscular legs.

Of course I've seen Gabe in his swimsuit before. We've been friends forever. We've been swimming in the pond and at the local pool. I know what he looks like.

But that was before I know what I know, that he kept things from the night we kissed. That maybe he saw me as more than a friend.

The thought does odd things to my belly.

"Would you just look at him." Ivy fans herself, her face glowing.

"Everyone knows he's hot," I snap and immediately regret it. Not because he's not hot, because of course he is—broad shoulders, great pecs, and the rest, remember?—but for a multitude of reasons that are swarming in my head like a bunch of excited bees.

Finding the mementos he told me he'd thrown away.

That awkward conversation with him about Ivy's feelings for him.

The fact that he might be here on a date.

And to top it all off, I'm about to be matchmade with him in some scheme the Ladies' Committee has dreamt up.

It's fair to say there's a lot of Gabe-related activity going on in my head.

No wonder I'm confused.

"Have you said anything to him about me?" Ivy asks.

"Just a little bit ago. I told him you two would make a good couple and he should think about it."

She clutches my arms and pulls me in for a hug. "Thank you, thank you!"

"It was nothing."

"No, it was a lot, and I love you for it."

"He didn't say he had feelings for you," I warn. "I'm sorry."

"Maybe he's saving that for when we're alone?"

I have to admire her confidence.

"Ivy—" I begin, only to be cut off.

"With your seal of approval, he might remember how he felt about me back in high school and realize he let a good thing go, and when I say good, I mean *goooooood*." She does a little shimmy and her sequin top sparkles as it catches the light.

Wait, what?



“He let a good thing go? As in *he* let a good thing go? Not the other way around?”

Ivy giggles. “Girl, are you having a stroke?”

“I thought it was *you* who broke up with *him*.”

“Look, I’ll be straight with you. I kinda saw the writing on the wall and broke up with him. But between you and me, I knew he was going to do it. I just got in there first to save face. You know how it is when you’re a teenager.”

“He wanted to break up with you?”

She nods. “It doesn’t matter now, though.”

I’d always thought Gabe was broken-hearted when Ivy dumped him. That was why when he kissed me that night, I assumed he was on the rebound, reeling from losing the girl he loved.

Now, knowing that he didn’t want to be with Ivy anymore, I’m questioning whether it meant more to him than I’d thought, and it throws a whole new light on the fact that he kept the photo strip and the movie ticket stubs from that night.

I chew on my lip, lost in thought.

“Ryn? Do you know who that girl is?” Ivy asks.

“Sorry, what?”

“That girl. Do you know who she is?” She gestures at the woman Gabe introduced me to. She’s watching him as he climbs up the ladder.

“Natalie is her name.”

“Are they on a date?”

“I think so.”

“Terrific,” she huffs. “I don’t need that kind of competition in my life. She’s gorgeous.”

I throw my gaze over Natalie. She’s wearing a short skirt, cute tennis shoes, and a crop top that shows off how slim and toned her waist is. Her long dark hair is falling down her back, and she’s got the kind of smooth, unblemished skin I can only dream of with my peaches and cream complexion.

“Look. He’s about to get wet!” Ivy declares.

Gabe is sitting on the seat, his feet dangling inches above the water. He’s got a happy look on his face, and he grins out at us all.

It’s Christopher’s turn and he picks up a ball, lines up his shot, and hits the bullseye on his first attempt. The look on Gabe’s face shows he knows

exactly what happens next. His seat gives way and he plummets into the watery depths to a loud cheer from the crowd.

Ivy shrieks with laughter, her eyes bright. “Awesome!” she calls out before she nudges me with her elbow. “Wet Gabe.”

I let out a weak laugh, my mind abuzz. “Wet Gabe,” I echo.

If what Ivy is saying is true, then Gabe could have been already over her when we kissed.

I think on that for a minute because it changes everything.

He wasn’t heartbroken over losing Ivy.

The kiss we shared wasn’t a rebound kiss.

All this time I thought it meant nothing to him, that kissing me was a symptom of his breakup. That it couldn’t mean anything, not when his heart was otherwise engaged.

I suppressed all my feelings for him back then because it seemed futile. He was never going to feel that way about me. I pushed them down, deep inside and locked them away.

A voice pulls me from my thoughts. “What a good sport. Gabe Hartmann, ladies and gentlemen. Let’s give him a round of applause,” Meryl, the elementary school principal announces over the PA system.

We watch as Gabe climbs out of the pool and gives everyone a cheery wave. Of course he’s dripping wet, and Ivy nudges me, gawking at him.

I’m not going to lie, I do my fair share of gawking at Gabe too, although mine isn’t only in appreciation of how good he looks wet. That’s not to say he doesn’t look good, because he so does. I might have seen him after a swim on more than one occasion, but I’ve never appreciated how broad, muscular, chiseled, and *male* he is, like he’s been cut from stone, a perfectly formed specimen of manhood.

My heart hammers against the wall of my chest as an unsettled churning claims my belly.

Am I...still in love with my best friend?

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## Chapter 18

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## Gabe



I take a towel from the pile beside the dunking pool and wipe my face before I use it to dry off my hair. The last ten minutes have been a total blur. Harper pleaded with me to volunteer because they needed more dunking victims. Then she told Nat that it was all for a good cause and she'd return me a little worse for wear before she knew it. At which point I rushed home to throw on my swimming trunks before arriving back here, when I was summarily dunked with Christopher's perfect first throw.

I couldn't say no, not when Harper had told me it would help raise money for the kids to go on a trip to Seattle to see a touring dinosaur exhibition.

I loved dinosaurs as a kid.

I go into the bathroom, peel off my trunks, and throw on my jeans and t-shirt. A moment later, I step out into the crowds once more. Immediately, Natalie appears at my side, laughing and chatting about my dunk experience.

"I think you should wear your trunks to class next week," she says, her eyes dancing.

"That would be a no," I reply with a laugh.

"You'd get everyone's attention."

"No, I'd get hypothermia."

"It's summer, Gabe. You'd be fine."

“Hello there, Gabe. Didn’t you do well? Who have we got here?” It’s Ryn’s Aunt Sheila, looking Natalie up and down.

“Sheila Cole, this is my friend, Natalie.”

“Hello Ms. Cole,” Natalie says politely, offering her hand.

“It’s nice to meet you. Is this a date?” Sheila asks.

No beating about the bush for her.

Natalie wraps her hands around my arm and gazes up at me. “I suppose you could call it a date. Right, honey?”

Did I mention Natalie doesn’t know the meaning of the word “subtle”?

Aunt Sheila’s smile drops.

“She’s messing with you, Aunt Sheila. We’re just friends,” I say by way of clarification.

Aunt Sheila’s face brightens right up. “In that case, I’ve got an activity for you, Gabe. I know you’re a good sport. I saw you getting dunked. Christopher looked a little too happy about it, don’t you think?”

“I didn’t see. I was too busy being dropped in the water,” I tell her.

“Natalie, you don’t mind if I steal him for a moment, do you?”

“He just got stolen by one of the teachers and ended up being dropped into a pool of water, so I’m not sure I want to let him out of my sight again,” Natalie warns.

“I promise to return him in one piece. You run along now and get yourself a delicious slice of apple pie from the Second Chance Café stand. Tell them Sheila Cole sent you and they’ll give it to you for free.”

I’ve got to hand it to them: the women in the Cole family are nothing if not determined.

Aunt Sheila slips her hand around my other arm and begins to literally pull me away from Natalie.

But Natalie won’t be deterred. She holds on for dear life.

Seriously, I feel like the rope in a tug of war.

“Nat,” I warn.

“Can’t I come with you?”

“No,” Aunt Sheila says firmly and Natalie lets go, and not a moment too soon.

Can two women pull a man’s shoulders from their sockets?

“Go get the pie. It’s good,” I tell her over my shoulder as Sheila marches me away.

“Are you going to tell me what this is all about?” I ask.

“Karaoke,” is her surprising response.

What the...?

“Karaoke?” I question. “Don’t tell me you want me to sing.”

“Of course I want you to sing. You think I don’t know that you’re a terrific singer, Gabe Hartmann? I remember when you played one of the dads in the high school production of *Mama Mia*. You were wonderful.”

I wince at the memory. “I only got that part because they were short on guys and Harper made me do it. From memory, I think I sang pretty bad.”

In fact, I *know* I sang pretty bad. Mom recorded my performance. Suffice it to say I watched it once when she made me, and never watched it again.

A guy doesn’t need to be reminded of such things.

“Nonsense. You were wonderful. Now, here we are.”

I look up to see the sign for the Grizzly Bear Bar. “You’re making me sing karaoke at a bar that’s competition to the one I work at? Isn’t that adding insult to injury?”

She lets out a laugh. “Oh, you are funny. It doesn’t matter where you sing, Gabe, as long as you sing.” Her glasses slide down her nose. She pushes them back up with her index finger.

I know when I’m beat. There is no point trying to resist. Tonight, it would seem embarrassing myself singing karaoke is on the agenda.

Lucky me.

We make our way into the bar where we are immediately greeted by the other members of the unofficial Hunter’s Creek Ladies’ Committee: Sheila Cole of course, Mrs. Ashbridge, Mrs. Jacobson, and Mrs. Sommerfeld.

“Look, everyone! It’s Gabe,” Mrs. Ashbridge says with a beaming smile.

“Gabe Hartmann. How good of you to come,” Mrs. Jacobson says.

As if I had any choice in the matter.

“I can’t wait to hear you sing the song we’ve chosen for you,” Mrs. Sommerfeld says.

“I don’t even get to choose?”

I hope it’s not the song I butchered in *Mama Mia*. “Musically gifted” is not exactly the way I would describe myself. I just barely managed to hold the tune for that song and that was only because it was comprised of about three notes.

Aunt Sheila and the rest of the Ladies’ Committee laugh as though I’ve said something hilarious.

“Oh, Gabe. You’re so funny,” Mrs. Jacobson says. “Isn’t he funny?” she

asks the other town busybodies, and they all agree that I'm one funny guy.

"So, you want me to sing just one song, right? Because I've got a friend here and I'm not sure she knows anybody else and I kind of got roped into this thing."

"In that case, it's best we get on with it. Do you want to know what you're going to sing? Because you're up first," Aunt Sheila says.

I glance over at the makeshift stage in the corner. There's a large screen that will presumably share the words with the unwitting participants like myself, as well as a microphone.

I swallow. It was bad enough singing on the stage, watched by students and parents of all the teenagers in town, but standing on a stage in a packed bar and singing solo is a whole other level of humiliation.

"Is there any way you would consider letting me out of this?" It's my last-ditch attempt to save face in front of the crowd.

"Absolutely not," Mrs. Jacobson replies. "You are going to be singing a super fun song that isn't hard."

"It will have everyone in the room clapping and singing along with you, too," Mrs. Sommerfeld adds.

"Okaaaay. What's the song?"

"*Islands in the Stream*," Aunt Sheila announces with satisfaction, as though I should be ecstatic at their choice of song for me when it wasn't even my choice to sing at all.

I should have known. *Islands in the Stream* is a classic country tune by Dolly Parton & Kenny Rogers, beloved of seemingly all women of a certain age—in Hunter's Creek, WA, anyway.

"I can see it now. You'll do such a good job, honey," Mrs. Ashbridge says.

"Dang it. We should have gotten him a cowboy hat," Aunt Sheila declares.

"And a beard. Kenny always had a good beard," Mrs. Jacobson adds.

Before they rush out to get me a hat and a stick-on beard, I intervene. "I'll sing it, but only as long as I get to wear what I'm in right now, no props."

"Not even a hat? I'm sure I've got one at home," Aunt Sheila says.

"No hat," I say firmly.

She smiles at me. "Never mind. You'll do great all the same."

"That song is a duet, right?" I ask.

"What did I tell you? He's clever *and* handsome," Mrs. Jacobson simpers.

“It sure is a duet, Gabe, and we’ve got the perfect singing partner for you. Your good friend, Ryn Cole,” Mrs. Jacobson declares.

“Ryn?” I question.

Oh, she’s going to love this.

With a sweep of her hand, Mrs. Jacobson stands back and presents me with Ryn, as though she’s been waiting in the wings all this time for this very moment—when, knowing her as I do, I’m sure she was roped into this just like I was.

She smiles, lifting her shoulders in a shrug. I smile back until I notice she’s flanked by her date, Joe.

Great.

“They got you too, huh?” Ryn questions, her expression telling me everything I need to know.

“Yeah, it’s like there’s a dearth of talent in this town or something because I know from personal experience that neither of us are exactly good singers.”

“Speak for yourself. I’m Adele,” Ryn replies, her eyes dancing with mirth.

I let out a sharp laugh. We both know she’s not Adele.

“Is karaoke something you’re all into in this town?” Joe asks, and there’s more than just a note of judgement in his voice. In fact, I’d say it’s an entire symphony.

“Yeah, we love it here,” I reply with a glassy stare.

I do not like this man, and it’s more than the fact that he’s dating Ryn. He’s got an air of arrogance to him that rubs me the wrong way, a kind of dismissiveness of us and our town, like we’re somehow not good enough for the likes of him.

“We do?” Ryn asks with a laugh.

“Remember that time we all went over to Cotown and sang those cheesy 90s songs?” I prompt.

“That’s right. You and some of the guys were the Backstreet Boys, if I remember right.”

“You know it.”

We were just out of high school and a bunch of us went to Cotown to celebrate, ending up at a karaoke bar. For some reason the girls thought it would be fun to see us guys sing and dance like we were in a 90s boy band. Being young and excited to have graduated high school, embarking on new



adventures, we got right into it, dancing and singing and throwing those looks boy band members are famous for. Ryn and her friends had screamed with delight.

“Backstreet Boys?” Joe scoffs.

To my surprise, Ryn jumps to my defense. “Actually, it was so much fun and Gabe was amazing. Had the cheesy moves down pat.”

I pull my lips together to stifle the grin that threatens to bust out across my face.

“Well, I’ll look forward to seeing some of those moves up on the stage,” Joe replies, and I’m sure he’s puffing his chest out as he drapes an arm possessively around Ryn’s shoulders. He plants a kiss on her cheek and tells her, “I’m gonna go get another drink. Sing well.”

I’m not sorry to see him leave.

Ryn looks like she’s about to say something to me but thinks better of it, closing her mouth and looking away.

I bet she wants to apologize for Joe’s behavior, but it’s not like it’s her fault. He’s a jerk, and the sooner she works that out for herself the better.

“Let’s get this show on the road, shall we?” Mrs. Jacobson says brightly to us.

“We figured that since the two of you are such close *friends*,” Aunt Sheila begins, emphasizing the word in her usual unsubtle way, “you would do this song proud. So, you two, time to get up there and dazzle us all.”

“Do we have to?” Ryn groans, like she’s a kid being forced to wash all the dishes.

“You’ll have fun,” Mrs. Jacobson insists.

“Is that a promise or a threat?” Ryn asks on a laugh as the members of the Ladies’ Committee bustle us onto the small but brightly lit stage.

I shoot Ryn a look and she rolls her eyes at me in response.

“You’re singing Dolly’s part, Ryn, and Gabe, you’ll sing Kenny’s. Got it?” Aunt Sheila tells us, just in case there’s any confusion.

“Yeah, I think we got it,” Ryn replies.

“Knock ’em dead, kids,” Aunt Sheila says before she and the others melt into the crowd.

I glance at Ryn. She’s got this odd look on her face, an unreadable expression that tells me something is going on with her but I don’t know what it is.

“We really don’t have to do this if you don’t want to,” I say to her

quietly.

“And evoke the wrath of the Hunter’s Creek Ladies’ Committee?”

“Good point.”

“You know they’re matchmaking us, right?” she says under her breath.

My belly tightens. “Who? What?”

“The Ladies’ Committee. They think that getting us to sing a duet will make us realize our undying love for one another.”

*If only she knew how I would feel if they were successful.*

I’m not the least bit surprised. This is totally their speed.

“Shall we put on a performance for them?”

I expect her to laugh, to tell me we should totally ham it up to get the women excited. Instead, she looks uncomfortable, like I’ve suggested something she doesn’t want to do, rather than having some fun getting tongues wagging about us.

I crease my forehead. “You okay?”

The familiar opening chords of the song begin.

“I feel like I need big hair for this,” she says, avoiding my question entirely.

What is going on with her?

“Big hair and big...?”

She holds up her index finger. “Do not finish that sentence,” she warns.

“I won’t,” I reply, as the first line of the song flashes up on the screen. I take hold of the microphone and scramble to catch up, singing the words as best I can, channeling the great Kenny Rogers, and deeply, deeply thankful the song isn’t too tricky.

Kenny’s section comes to a close and it’s time for us to sing the next lines together as a duet. Ryn moves up to the microphone and gives me a nervous grin before opening her mouth to sing. It’s squeaky at best, Dolly’s part more challenging than Kenny’s.

It’s odd because Ryn is usually so confident with everything she does, always with her ready wit and ability to laugh. Why would goofing around, singing a country song about being in love make her nervous?

And then it clicks into place. She’s worried about looking like an idiot in front of her date. The too cool for school Joe.

As much as it irks me to know that’s what’s going on in her head, I reach out and take her hand in mine and give it a reassuring squeeze.

She looks at me in surprise, and I mouth, “You’ve got this.” I’m rewarded

with her smile and as we reach the famous chorus together, we sing the words with confidence and more than a touch of joy.

This is surprisingly fun, and to get to do it with Ryn only makes it all the more special.

People begin to clap and sing along, a few at the front near the stage dancing. I spot Ryn's parents. Her dad is spinning her mom, looking like they're having the best time together.

We sing the next verse, grinning at one another, both of us inches from the microphone, our lips so close they could touch.

My heart aches for this woman whose face lights up as she sings words of love, words I would give anything for her to sing to me. As we get to the line about how this could be the real thing, our gazes lock and I allow myself a brief moment of imagining this *is* the real thing between us. There's no Joe, no distractions, no pretending I don't have feelings for her, that she's just my friend. We, too, could be islands in the stream, with no one ever coming between us. Both of us happy to be together, committed wholeheartedly and eternally to one another. Just like in the song.

It's a wonderful moment to get swept up in, and one I could so easily lose myself in.

As the song comes to a close, reality crashes through the door and I know it was only a moment, a moment that will never be reality, not when my best friend chooses men like Joe.

Not when my best friend doesn't know how much I love her.

The closing bars to the song sound and the audience erupts into cheers and applause. I'm still holding onto Ryn's hand and she turns from the screen to look at me. As her gaze lands on mine, I think for a second she feels something more for me, something I've never dared let myself hope for.

But here she is, standing only feet from me, her hand in mine with a look in her eye I've never seen before.

A look that gives me hope.

"Ryn?" I ask as my heart thuds, my breath shallow.

Could there be something between us? Something neither one of us has ever acknowledged?

Could she be...in love with me?

"Can we talk?" she asks, her voice tentative, unsure, not the best friend I know so well.

"Of course we can. Now?"

She nods and I notice her swallowing, like she's nervous.

The seed of hope in my belly begins to sprout and grow. Perhaps tonight is the night when she opens the door for me and I can tell her what I've felt for her all these years?

My hand clasped in hers, I lead her from the stage. As we pass the Ladies' Committee, they flash us knowing, satisfied smiles.

"Well done, you two. Wonderful singing," Mrs. Jacobson says.

"And don't you look like you belong together?" Aunt Sheila adds.

Who knew the meddling women of this town could pull off what has always felt like the impossible?

We reach a quiet corner of the bar and I pull out a chair for Ryn.

"Is everything okay?" I ask.

"I need to tell you. I found something and I—" She stops abruptly, looking at something over my shoulder. "What the...?"

"What is it?"

I turn to see two people engaged in a passionate kiss, the kind most people save for when they're in private. Not these two. They're kissing one another like they're a couple in love, reunited after being separated by World War II.

After a beat the man comes up for air. It's then, with a jolt, that I recognize him.

Joe, Ryn's date.

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## Chapter 19

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## Ryn



I stop and stare, trying to make sense of the scene unfolding before me. I know it's Joe. I recognize his mop of hair and the leather jacket. He and his *companion* are leaning against the back wall, shrouded in the shadows, superglued together like their lives depend on one another. He's holding her close, his hands roving across her back, heading south.

Needless to say, they are blissfully ignorant of our presence.

I only wish I was unaware of their presence, too.

Joe is with another woman.

Joe is *kissing* another woman.

My brain tries to make sense of what my eyes are telling it. It tells me it can't be Joe. We're on a date. You don't go kissing other women when you're on a date.

I feel like I might be sick.

On top of everything else that's churning inside me tonight—Gabe, the mementos, Ivy—this has got to be the cruel icing on top of the sour cake.

I feel Gabe's hand on my shoulder. "Ryn, let's go," he says, his voice low and urgent.

I don't move. I don't say a word. I simply gawk at them, Joe and the woman, like they're putting on a performance for an audience instead of what

they're really doing, trying to disappear into the shadows.

Then, with a sickening thud, I recognize the woman.

Jenny, Joe's friend, the woman I met earlier tonight. The friendly but condescending one who thought my job wasn't up to scratch.

Well, she's doing a lot more than criticizing me right now.

"Ryn." Gabe's voice is insistent.

"Gabe, just...don't."

"What can I do? How can I fix this for you? Do you want to leave? I can take you home and you can forget you ever met this guy."

I turn to glare at him. "Don't, Gabe. I don't want to hear it."

"You don't want to hear what? That this guy doesn't for one second realize what he's got in you? That he's the jerk I fully expected him to be?"

"I'm so glad you get your 'I told you so' moment. Stupid Ryn always chooses the wrong guy, the guy who messes around on her or treats her like a piece of trash. Well, congratulations, Gabe, you got your moment."

He lowers his head. "I'm not saying that. I want to be here for you."

"To witness that?" My voice peaks and the sound of it disturbs the kissers. Reluctantly, they stop their game of who can lick one another's tonsils the best, and peer out at us.

Joe, great guy that he is, has the decency to pull away from Jenny, abashed.

"Hey, Ryn, Ryn's karaoke friend," he says in a bright tone, as though he hasn't just been completely busted in a passionate embrace with someone who is most definitely not his date—and forgotten Gabe's name.

I blink at him in disbelief. "That's what you have to say? Are you serious right now?" I spit.

He takes a step closer to me. "Come on. It's only a kiss. It's no big deal," he replies as he runs his fingers through his hair.

I can't believe I found that gesture sexy, because right now it makes me want to grab a hold of his hair in a big clump and snip it all off.

I wanted to bring Gabe back here, to the quiet part of the bar, to ask him why he kept the photo strip and the movie ticket stubs from that night. I wanted to ask him what that kiss we'd shared that night had meant to him, if anything. If he hadn't been as heartbroken as I thought he was, did it mean that he wanted more from me back then? But all of that is wiped from my brain as I stand and watch Joe and Jenny straighten their clothes and wipe the lipstick from their faces.

“Call me old fashioned, Joe, but I thought when you took someone on a date you were meant to kiss *them*, not someone else,” I say, my tone measured, belying the trembling in my body. “Hi, Jenny, by the way.”

“Look, we didn’t plan this,” Jenny says, as though the planning is the problem here and not the tonsil hockey.

“She’s right. You and me? We made no promises.” Joe has what I once thought was a confident air, but am now seeing as just plain arrogance. Self-interested, sleazy arrogance.

Gabe crosses his arms and glares at him. “You were on a date, Joe. You’re total scum, you know that?”

It feels good to have Gabe in my corner.

“I see your dog is getting in on the action now,” Joe scoffs.

I widen my eyes. “You’re calling Gabe my dog?”

Gabe takes a step closer to Joe and I notice how much bigger and brawnier Gabe is.

Joe’s hands immediately fly up in the air. I’m guessing he’s noticed, too. “What are you going to do? Hit me? That is such a small-town bar cliché.”

Gabe narrows his eyes at him. “Don’t tempt me.”

Although Gabe’s expression suggests he could take on a band of men, he’s not the violent type. I’ve never seen him hit anyone.

But Joe doesn’t know that.

“Look, I didn’t mean the dog comment, okay? You caught us off guard and I was lashing out. We’re cool, dude.”

Gabe glares at him. “You’re her date, *dude*.”

If I weren’t so upset right now, I would throw my arms around Gabe.

“It was an accident,” Jenny says.

I widen my eyes at her. “It was an accident that you came to the back of the bar to kiss a guy you knew was on a date with another woman?”

She shifts her weight, uncomfortable. “Okay, it was a mistake is what I meant.”

My voice is steely when I reply, “You got that right.” I turn to Joe and say, “We’re done.”

“We weren’t exclusive or anything. You’re so small town,” he replies.

“I am. And you know what? I’m glad I’m small town because if being big city is anything like you?” I gesture at him. “Then it’s a hard pass for me.”

“Let’s go,” Gabe says.

Together, we turn our backs to the smirking Joe and Jenny and walk



away.

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## Chapter 20

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Ryn



I don't quite know how much later it is, but I know one thing for sure: the room will not stay still. It's getting super annoying. Why can't it be more like...well, like a room? Still. Solid. Definitely *not* moving.

I close my eyes and open them again, hoping the room will stop its incessant whirling.

It doesn't.

In fact, it makes it worse.

I need to sit down before the floor joins in, because that could end in total disaster.

I spy a free spot on one of the leather sofas in front of the unlit fireplace. There's a woman sitting at one end, and although she looks like someone I've possibly met tonight, I couldn't name her if you held a gun against my head. Or made me drink a ton of alcohol.

Wait. I already did that. Well, if you can count about two and a half Long Island iced teas as a ton of alcohol.

For a lightweight like me, I guess it is.

Of course, Gabe being Gabe, he had gone all older brother on me, telling me he should take me home and that I shouldn't have more than one Long Island iced tea. I wasn't listening. I knew I needed to talk to him about

finding the photo strip and the movie ticket stubs, but finding Joe with Jenny had brought my choices into the stark light of day for me in an unforgiving way.

I was in no fit state to have *that* conversation with Gabe.

So, of course I'd told him I was twenty-three and perfectly capable of making decisions about what I put into my body, including whether to drink tonight, and eventually, after shooting me endlessly concerned looks, he told me he would be here for me if I needed him.

Which I haven't because I am a grown woman in charge of myself.

So there.

I plunk down on the sofa opposite Gabe and beside the vaguely familiar looking woman, sloshing the contents of my drink onto my hand and dress.

Oh well. It's only...what is it that I'm drinking again?

"Hey," the woman says to me and I focus on her face as the pesky room keeps moving.

"Hey," I echo.

"You okay, Ryn-Ryn?" Gabe asks.

Like I could be okay after everything that's happened tonight, and oh my, there's been a lot.

Some things confusing, some things down right horrible.

Why didn't I stay home? None of this would have happened if I had, and I could blissfully carry on without questioning my relationship with my best friend or losing the cute guy I'd begun to date.

"You call her Ryn-Ryn?" the woman asks.

He shrugs. "Sure." Gabe looks back at me. "You've had a shock. I should take you home," he repeats for the hundredth time tonight.

"I am *fiiiine*. F. I. N. E.," I tell him. Or I would be if the room would *stay still*.

"How much have you had to drink?" he asks.

"I'd say a lot," the woman next to me says.

I pull my brows together as I look at her. I know I've met her, and she's super pretty in that totally put together, not from around here kind of way.

"Some," I reply before I let out a loud hiccup. "Oops."

Hiccapping is a total drunk person cliché, and I've just done it so, people of the jury, if there was any doubt that I am in fact drunk, that doubt has now been dispelled.

Thank you, hiccups.

“You need coffee,” Gabe says as he rises to his feet. “Look after her, okay, Nat? Don’t let her go anywhere, and make sure she doesn’t drink anymore alcohol. Ryn is not a very experienced drinker.”

The woman next to me replies, “You can count on me, Captain.”

Gabe disappears.

“Why did you call him Captain? What’s he a captain of? Glass blowing?” I let out a snort giggle at my own joke.

“I was just having some fun.”

I let out a heavy sigh. “Do you know what? I’m horrible at choosing men. The worst.” Despite the dampness from my spilled drink, I drop my head into my hands and let out another hiccup.

“I hear you, girl. I’ve dated my fair share of jerks in my time, too.”

She gets it. She knows.

Whoever she is.

I lift my head and focus on her. Gabe called her Nat. I know! It’s Natalie, Gabe’s date. She’s not looking in the least bit drunk, aka the total opposite of me.

“They always seem like they’re these totally great guys,” she continues. “But in the end, they break your heart before they move on to the next girl.”

“Right? They trick you with their charm and sexiness and then *wham!*” I slap my hand down hard on my thigh. It hurts more than I anticipated, and I clutch it in my other hand, pulling it tight against my chest. “That hurt.”

“Are you okay?” Natalie asks.

“My hand hurts. And my thigh.”

“Want me to get you some ice?” she offers.

I shake my head. It hurts too. “How about you get me a better guy picker-er.”

Her lips lift in a smile. “A better guy picker-er?”

“It’s a,” *hick*, “thing.”

Again with the hiccups.

I beat my chest and that seems to cure them.

Ryn: 1. Hiccups: 0.

“Girl, if I could get one of those, I’d be using it myself.” She watches Gabe as he works on making me a coffee. She’s got that sappy, smitten look on her face that I’ve seen before. Gabe’s women fall head over heels for him as quick as you can say *heartbreaker*. They must think he’s a great catch or something.

To me he's just Gabe.

Only he's more than that right now. He's...what is he to me?

A memory pierces my thoughts. A memory that's been playing in my mind all evening, ever since I found out.

*He kept the movie ticket stubs. He kept our pictures.*

He looks over at us and smiles.

"Tell me, Ryn, have you two ever dated? You and Gabe?"

"Nope."

"Do you see yourself having a romantic relationship with him in the future?"

I narrow my gaze at her. "This feels like a job interview."

She laughs prettily. "I'm just getting to know you, that's all. A lot of people say that a man and a woman can't be just friends if they're close, and it seems to me that you two are super close."

"Oh, we are. We're like that." I hold my crossed fingers up in front of her face.

A hiccup takes me by surprise, pushing my entire diaphragm up so that I'm almost bolted from my seat.

Enough is enough.

"Hey, how do you stop hiccups? 'Cos I really need to."

"Go back in time and not drink all the alcohol in the bar?" she suggests, but she's smiling at me, so it must be a joke.

"No, seriously. How?"

"I don't know. Drink something upside down. Isn't that what they say?"

I pull my brows together. "Like while balancing on my head?" *Hick.*

She laughs. "No, backwards. You hold the glass like this." She demonstrates, holding her own glass to her lips and taking a sip from the opposite side, the rim resting under her chin.

I pick up my half-empty glass of booze and get myself into position.

Natalie places her hand over mine. "Maybe do it with some water. Here." She pours a glass from a jug I hadn't noticed on the table.

I position the glass, my chin dipping into the water, before I take a sip. It leaks out of the corners of my mouth.

"Ryn, hey," a voice says beside me and I hold my hand up to indicate that I'm occupied.

"She's getting rid of her hiccups," Natalie explains.

"Hiccups, huh?" he replies with a laugh.

“They’re no laughing matter,” I protest as I straighten up. “Hey, I think that worked.”

Natalie smiles at me. “Told you.”

“Hey, I’m Theo,” he says to Natalie.

“Natalie,” she replies. “Don’t tell me, you’re related to Ryn?”

Theo laughs. “No, I know Ryn through glass blowing.”

“I didn’t know you were into glass blowing, too,” she says to me.

“I did the class with Gabe,” I reply.

“You *nailed* the class,” Theo corrects. “You were the best natural talent I’d seen in a long time.”

“Oh, stop it.” I reply, not really wanting him to stop at all.

“But you didn’t want to be a glass blowing apprentice?” Natalie asks me.

“Ryn would be my apprentice, if she hadn’t turned me down.”

My eyes flash to Theo’s and I notice as he realizes his blunder. When I turned the apprenticeship down in favor of Gabe, I’d asked Theo not to mention it to anyone for fear it would get back to him.

Natalie doesn’t miss a beat. “Wait. You were offered Gabe’s apprenticeship?”

*Thanks a lot, Theo.*

He makes a face. “Gabe is a terrific talent, too,” he says.

I downplay it as best I can. “That’s all in the past. Hey, Theo, are you coming to the *Serious Bite* screening next week?”

“Sure am. I wouldn’t miss it.”

“Oh, I heard about that. It’s in the town hall, right?” Natalie asks and I’m relieved that we’ve moved the conversation along.

I don’t need her or anyone else knowing about the apprenticeship because even in my alcohol-bathed state, I know that absolutely no good can come from it.

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## Chapter 21

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## Gabe



Tonight at the Summer Festival was a lot. Ryn telling me to date Ivy, getting dunked in a pool of water, Karaoke, catching my best friend's date with another woman, getting drunk Ryn home and safely tucked in bed.

A lot.

It was hard not to feel for her. Sure, I can't stand the guy, and I wasn't exactly sad that she got to see him for who he is. But I didn't like seeing her hurt. I wanted to wrap her up and protect her, hold her close and tell her how she's worth so much more than someone like him.

Instead, I played nursemaid after she'd had one too many drinks.

The results weren't pretty. I made a pot of coffee at the bar and tried to get her to drink at least a cup. Being Ryn, she refused to even take a sip, saying she had far too much on her mind to be able to do something as mundane as drinking coffee—I didn't mention the fact she had drunk two and half glasses of Long Island iced tea because it didn't seem helpful at the time. So, Nat and I got her home, where I've managed to get her shoes, with all the unnecessary and complicated straps, off of her feet before she's conked out completely on her bed, snoring like a pug.

I close the door to her bedroom quietly and slip down the hall. Natalie is looking at the group of photos on the bookcase. There's one of Ryn, Ivy, me,

and some other friends the day we graduated high school, one of Ivy with her younger brother out fishing, and my favorite, a picture of Ryn and me lying side by side like a couple of sardines on the hood of my car, grinning at the camera.

“All tucked in and sleeping like a baby,” I tell her.

She turns to face me, holding the photo of Ryn and me in her hand. “You’re in love with her,” she states without preamble. “Ryn’s the one you were talking about. You’re in love with her, aren’t you?”

It may be a simple enough question, only a handful of words long, but it sucks the air from my lungs like a vacuum.

I let out a surprised laugh. “You got that from looking at her photo collection?”

I know I need to deflect. I haven’t told a single soul how I feel about Ryn. I always skirt around it, never lying, but never admitting to anything, either. It’s the way I’ve survived under the prying eyes of the townsfolk. It’s the way I’ve held myself together and remained in Ryn’s life.

She crosses her arms. “There’s no point pretending. It’s as clear as day.”

“We’ve known each other forever and we’re really close. Of course I love her, but we’re only friends.”

It’s the truth. We are only friends, even if I do want more from her.

“You’re playing brain basketball with me, Gabe. I saw you two singing that Dolly Parton song. I saw how you looked at her. I saw how she looked at *you*.”

My heart squeezes at the memory of the moment we shared. Because it *had* felt like a moment, a moment in which I allowed myself to think that maybe Ryn saw me as more than her friend. The fact of the matter is, I am in love with Ryn. I always have been.

Maybe now is the time to stop denying those feelings to other people, as well as to myself?

I might not be especially close to Natalie but she’s asked me a direct question. More than that, tonight something feels like it’s changed between Ryn and me. I can’t explain it. It’s just a sense.

But it’s given me hope.

I let out a heavy breath. “Is it really that obvious?”

“Maybe not to everyone, but it is to me.”

I nod, my lips pulled together, my belly clenched.

“Have you said anything to her?”

“About being in love with her?” I shake my head, the very idea making my belly tense.

“What have you got to lose?”

“Everything.”

She barks out a laugh that pierces the quiet night air. “That’s a bit dramatic, isn’t it? You would lose ‘everything’ if you told her how you feel about her?”

I pull out a chair and sit down and Natalie does the same. I rest my crossed arms on the wooden table as I search for the words to explain what’s at stake for me. I start at the beginning.

“I told you how my mom is gone and how I have nothing to do with my dad.”

“You did.”

“Although I was fully grown when it happened, Ryn’s mom and dad stepped up when she passed away, and I kinda became part of their family. I feel more a part of the Coles than I do my own aunt and uncle. Over the years, they’ve treated me like I’m their son. I know they’re not my parents, and no one can ever replace my mom, but I love them as though they are. They’re important to me, more important than I can tell you. If I tell Ryn how I feel about her it could put all of that at risk.”

“Because if she rejects you, you lose not only her but your ‘found’ family, too.”

I smile at the expression. Found family. “Yeah.”

“You don’t think they’ll still treat you like their son if she rejects you?”

“It’ll feel weird to everyone, knowing that I’ve put myself out there for her and she only sees me as a friend. Even if it’s not, even if they’re totally chill about it all and it changes nothing with them, I’ll feel awkward. Worse than awkward.”

She leans back in her chair, her arms crossed over her chest, and studies me for a beat. “You’ve made the right call.”

I pull my brows together. This is not the conclusion I expected her to draw from my confession. I’m not quite sure what I expected her to say, but it was probably more along the lines of “you should go for it with her”.

She leans in toward me and places her hands on top of mine. They’re warm and comforting, and her voice is soft and gentle when she speaks. “I could tell you to forget about this found family that means so much to you and throw caution to the wind, coming clean with her about how you feel.”

“You’re not going to do that, are you?”

My heart feels like it’s being dropped in an elevator from the top of a tall building.

“Not just a pretty face,” she says with a smile. “Gabe, you’ve been through a lot in your life. More than most, and certainly at a younger age than most. The mom you loved is gone, and in Ryn’s family you have this precious thing that means the world to you. You can’t put that at risk, just because you think you’re in love with your friend. Not a lot of us can boast having a second, replacement family that means almost as much as the original. I know I for one would be too nervous to put something like that in jeopardy.”

It’s like she’s putting my deepest fears into words. No one has ever said it to me because I’ve never told anybody how I really feel about Ryn. But Natalie has hit the nail squarely on the head.

The elevator carrying my heart has plummeted all the way to the ground with a painful thud.

I lift my gaze to hers and see tenderness in her eyes. “You’re right,” I croak. “It’s why I’ve never said anything to her. That, and the fact I haven’t had a sign from her that she wants anything more from me.”

My mind immediately turns to the moment we shared tonight. Was that even a moment? I don’t know anymore.

“I wish I could tell you otherwise, but that’s my opinion, for what it’s worth. And in case you’re wondering, I’m not saying this because I have an ulterior motive.”

I manage a small smile. “You sure about that?”

She places her palm against my cheek. “It’s no secret that I find you very attractive, and I would love nothing more than to get the chance to explore this connection between us. I think it can go someplace. Someplace really, really great.”

Natalie has made it plain how she feels about me. No second guessing. No *does she or doesn’t she*. Being with her would be uncomplicated, easy. It wouldn’t put anything at risk, no crucial family under threat.

She pushes herself up from her seat and leans so close to me I can smell her scent. Placing a finger under my chin, she lifts my face and brushes her lips softly against mine. “You let me know when you’re ready,” she murmurs.

She collects her purse and shoots me a smile before she lets herself out.

As I hear her car pull away, her kiss still lingering, I slump back in my seat, heaving out a breath.

As easy as it would be to be with her, I know my heart lies elsewhere. It wouldn't be fair. Although I've told her before, I need to tell her again. And now she knows the reason *why*. The *person* why.

I return to the conundrum that has plagued me for years. Ryn has never given me a reason to think she feels anything for me beyond friendship. I can't put that friendship at risk. I can't put what I have with the Cole family at risk.

For me, there's simply too much at stake.

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## Chapter 22

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## Ryn



I open one eye and look surreptitiously around my bedroom. The curtains are open, letting in way too much light, and I definitely do not feel like being awake. So, I make the decision to close my eye again and nestle back into my pillow.

I wonder what time is it?

I roll over and instantly feel like not only is my head hosting a party of overenthusiastic drummers, my mouth feels like I've licked every last grain of sand off a beach, and I'm pretty certain whatever I ingested last night is staging an anti-Ryn demonstration in my belly.

It takes me a moment to realize why, and then it all comes flooding back in one huge, nauseating wave.

The Summer Festival.

The kiss.

The alcohol.

I groan. *The alcohol*. What started out as me trying to be sophisticated and fitting in with Joe and his friends morphed into me drowning my sorrows after seeing him with Jenny, clinched in that kiss.

What was I thinking? I'm no good at drinking. Anything more than a couple of drinks and not only am I as drunk as a moose on fermented apples,

but I feel beyond horrible the next day.

Unfortunately for me, I have to go to work today and serve the good people of Hunter's Creek their coffee and snacks.

My mind turns like a kaleidoscope until it focuses, the patterns and colors coming into total clarity with the lyrics to a song repeating in my brain.

*Gabe.*

Karaoke.

The way he looked at me.

He got me coffee, he took me home, he did what he always does for me: he looked after me like he's my big, protective brother.

Only, he's not my big brother. In fact, although he feels very much a part of my family, he's no relation at all.

He's...what? What is he to me? Other than best friend and protector and guy who tells Joe what a jerk he is?

He's more than all those things. So much more.

*He kept mementos from the night we kissed.*

He told me he'd thrown them away. Why would he do that? Why lie to me about something so small?

But today, as I lie in my bed, my head pounding, it doesn't feel small at all.

It feels big.

*Huge.*

I blow out a breath, my head made all the worse by the confusion over my best friend. The person I tell everything to. The person I trust with my life.

It's too much. I can't deal with it right now, not when I want to curl up into a ball like a porcupine and die.

I fumble around on my nightstand to locate my phone. I pull the covers up over my head and press the screen to check the time. It's late, like ten minutes after my shift at the Second Chance was due to start. Aunt Sheila will not be happy with me.

Thinking about Aunt Sheila makes me think about the karaoke song which leads me right back to Gabe.

I just cannot right now.

I'll tuck everything to do with Gabe away in a little box and pull it out another time when I'm not feeling like crap and not running late for work.

Despite every cell of my being screaming to hibernate until the fog lifts, I



force myself to push the covers off, compel my eyes to open, and convince myself to swing my feet onto the hardwood floor. My head protests. My belly groans. My feet threaten to return me to my warm cocoon. But, as the saying goes, a girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do, and this girl's gotta get to work before she loses her job.

I stumble to the bathroom to shower off the disaster that was last night. Of course it doesn't work, but at least I'm clean by the time I leave the silent house, my hair still damp.

I pull my car to a screeching halt in the alley behind the Second Chance and push my way through the door into the kitchen. My nostrils immediately fill with the aroma of sizzling bacon, hot cakes, and fried eggs, and a wave of nausea washes over me.

As usual, Aunt Lisa is humming a tune as she works, her lemon-colored apron that tells people to *Get a Second Chance at the Second Chance Café* tied neatly in place. She looks up at me in surprise. "You're alive. We had a bet going that you'd been dragged off to the woods by an angry bear."

"Where was your money?"

"The bear."

Great.

I tie the apron around my waist and smooth the front down over my jeans and t-shirt. My wet hair has begun to dry and I just know it's gone all funky, but it's way down my list of priorities right now.

"Late night?" Aunt Lisa asks me with a wry smile that makes me wonder whether she saw me in my drunk state last night or, much worse, I'd talked to her during it.

"It was—" Horrendous? Shocking? Heart wrenching? "—eventful."

Her smile broadens. "Anything you need to tell me about?"

I scrunch up my nose. She definitely knows something. "Did I talk to you?"

She shakes her head. "No, but you can today, if you want."

"I'd prefer not to, if it's all the same to you."

She taps the side of her nose as she continues to grin at me, as though I've just told her a secret she's going to keep to herself. "That is just fine, missy."

"Okaaaay. I'm going in to the café now."

The grin doesn't falter. "Your secrets are safe with me."

My secrets? I groan.

My mouth still feels as dry as a bowl of dust, so I splash some water from

the faucet into a glass and take a deep drink before heading out into the coffeehouse.

Aunt Sheila is serving customers and only glances at me. I busy myself with checking the coffee orders and setting about making them. I pick up one of the orders and read “two iced coffees to go.” My eyes dart around the room. Is Joe here? But then tons of people order iced coffee in summer. Don’t they?

“Hi there, honey,” Aunt Sheila says when she finishes up with the customers.

I wait for the scolding. When none comes, I reply, “I’m so sorry I’m late. I’ll make up for it after my shift today.”

“It’s fine, Ryn. Really,” she replies in a completely uncharacteristic way, her face bright.

Aunt Sheila isn’t upset with me for being late to work?

“That was quite a singing performance you put on last night,” she says.

Instantly, my mind turns to the small karaoke stage at the bar down the street.

“You and Gabe sounded wonderful. Just like Kenny and Dolly.” Her smile drops a fraction. We both know she’s being generous. “Well, almost. You looked great together, anyway.”

I resist the urge to tell her I knew exactly what she was trying to do in getting us to sing that song. There’s no point. So instead, I reply, “Thanks. It was fun.”

“You and Gabe are perfect together, you know that?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Did I ever tell you I love having you working at the coffeehouse? Because I really do.”

“That’s...great,” I respond uncertainly.

Have I accidentally walked into a parallel universe? Because if I have, I’m staying put.

“You keep up the good work.” She leans closer to me and adds, “And you be sure to let me know how everything unfolds.”

“Sure thing, Aunt Sheila. I’ll just go ahead and finish this order.” I hold up the iced coffee order.

“That’s for Leonardo Finch, but I bet you already guessed that, right?”

My belly ties in a Boy Scout knot. Joe has to be in here somewhere. I look around and spot him leaning against the back wall in his habitual leather

jacket, one leg crossed over the other as he studies his phone, occasionally pausing only to run his fingers through his hair. He looks cooler than cool, like there's no way he belongs here in this small town at the end of nowhere.

As if he can sense my gaze on him, he looks up at me and, to my utter shock, his face creases into a smile.

What the...? He's *smiling* at me?

He pushes himself off the wall and saunters toward me, still with that laconic smile on his annoyingly handsome face.

And now he's *heading over to me*?

I watch in disbelief as he comes to a stop on the other side of the counter. "Hey, Kathryn with a 'y'." He gestures at my messy mane. "That's a new look for you."

Self-conscious, I attempt to smooth my unruly curls. It's no use. If I don't blow out my hair, I look like I sucked it up in a vacuum cleaner after a day at the beach, which is, incidentally, the key reason why I blow it out.

To my surprise, he reaches across the counter and wraps his fingers around my wrist and I freeze. "Don't. You look like Shakira. Tousled and sexy."

He's acting as though last night didn't happen.

I glare at his hand and he shoots me a quizzical look, as though he has no idea why I'm acting this way toward him.

Is he really that stupid? Or perhaps he thinks my opinion of myself is so low that I'll accept that kind of behavior from him.

And you know what? Not that long ago, I probably would have.

I've had guys cheat on me before, and not treat me as well as they should have, and sometimes I've accepted that treatment. There were always extenuating circumstances, always great reasons why this happened or that didn't happen or whatever. Guys can be so convincing when they want to be. I can't blame them. I believed them because I wanted to believe them and I forgave them because I didn't want the alternative of not being with them.

Seeing Joe kiss another woman on our date was the final straw for me in what's become an oversized haystack, weighing me down.

And I've realized something else, something I've been too blind to see. I've had the perfect example of how a man should be right in front of me all this time. Gabe treats me the way I should be treated. He's a good man. The best. And he means the world to me. He's been here all along, all this time, only I've been too dumb to see him, to really, *really* see him. Too wrapped

up in looking for a cute new guy to make my life feel more exciting. A cute new guy who gets to treat me however he wants because I didn't think enough of myself to make him treat me any other way.

Gabe has always offered me the utmost love, kindness, care, and respect. He's my best friend, the person I enjoy being with the most in the world, the person I can laugh with, cry with, and everything in between.

We're not involved in a romantic relationship. There's been no declaration of love on either side. Sure, we shared one amazing kiss that night back in high school, and I had to work hard to push the feelings I had away. And what did I get for that? I got the best friend I could ever imagine.

I only wish that I'd learned this lesson a long time ago. I would have saved myself a lot of heartache and avoided many poor decisions.

I've only got myself to blame.

Gabe has been here all this time.

Now, as I look into Joe's eyes, his confidence that I will forgive him glowing around him like a halo, I'm not prepared to take it anymore.

I won't accept less than great.

And Joe is definitely offering me a lot less than great.

"What's going on? Are we not talking anymore or something?" he asks, his grin still in place. Because why wouldn't it be? He probably treats women like this all the time and gets away with it.

"I'll make your coffee." I turn my back to him. I'm here to do a job, serving customers their coffee and food orders, so that's what I'm going to do.

He waits. As I hand him back his change, he asks, "Is that it?"

I know what he's getting at, but I'm not interested in going there. "Oh, I'm sorry. Did you order a snack, too?" I widen my eyes as though I were an innocent little bunny.

"You know what I mean."

"Look, we went out a couple of times and it was fun, but we're done."

"Why?"

"You're a big boy. I'll let you work that one out yourself."

"Oh, it's because I kissed Jenny."

It's official: he's a rocket scientist.

"That's what's bothering you." He tsks as though I'm a naughty child. "Look, I've known Jenny for years and we fell into an old pattern. We're that couple who's on again and off again and really, it's getting in my head and

making me crazy.”

“She’s your ex?”

He nods. “I want to break the pattern between her and me. I think, with your help, I can do that, if you’ll forgive me for my silly little mistake.”

“I forgive you.”

“Atta girl,” he replies like I’m a well-trained dog. He lifts up the iced coffees, ready to leave. “Want to come hang out at my motel tonight?”

“Me?” I question.

He shoots me one of his arrogant smiles. “Of course, you.”

“You know what, Joe?” I reply, indicating for him to lean into me.

“What?”

I scrunch up my nose. “I think you’ve gotten me mixed up with someone else.”

“I don’t follow. You forgave me.”

“That doesn’t mean I want to hang out with you in your motel room, or anywhere else, for that matter.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “You’re not making any sense. Is it your time of month or something?”

I laugh out loud. Could this guy be any more of a conceited jerk? As I look into his face, I get my answer, and that answer is *yes*. He’s the biggest, fattest jerk around and I cannot believe I entertained the thought of dating him—especially not when I have the perfect example of how a man should be, in my best friend.

Aunt Sheila approaches. “Is this man bothering you, Ryn?”

“He’s just leaving. Right, Joe?” I offer him my sweetest smile.

His gaze slides from me to my aunt and back to me again before he replies, “Yeah, I’m leaving.”

“Smell ya later,” I tell him with the sweetest smile I can muster.

I know, it’s not exactly mature of me, but in this moment, I do not care.

He throws me a scornful sneer and I watch as he leaves the coffeehouse, the door swinging closed behind him. I turn to Aunt Sheila. If I had to label the look on her face, I would describe it as triumphant.

“We’ve all got to kiss some toads before we find our prince,” she says.

“Oh, I can assure you, Joe Turner is definitely not my prince.”

“You know who is. Don’t you?”

“Aunt Sheila, I don’t buy into that fairy tale stuff.”

She flashes me her grin. “Sure you don’t, honey.”

Yes, I'm deflecting. The thing is, it's a Neil Armstrong-sized leap to go from knowing Gabe is the kind of man I should hold out for and knowing that he's the *actual* man I'm holding out for.

We had our chance back in high school, a chance to be together, to be happy, perhaps even to be in love. We didn't take it. I was too stupid, too wrapped up in Girl Code, not wanting to step on Ivy's toes. He was, well, he was wrapped up in my friend and brokenhearted when she dumped him—or so I thought. I might have wanted the moon and stars with him, but I didn't think he wanted any of it with me.

Finding those mementos yesterday changed everything. It's awakened feelings I had long ago buried, feelings I never thought were reciprocated, no matter how much I wanted them to be. I can see now, knowing he kept those things has flicked a switch in my head, taking me from the very comfortable friend zone and catapulting me into another zone altogether, taking that Neil Armstrong-sized leap into a zone in which I'm head over heels in love with Gabe.

And that thought scares the living crap out of me.

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## Chapter 23

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## Ryn



I'm wiping down tables after the lunch rush when Harper and Marlowe arrive at the coffeehouse and invite me to join them.

"Go ahead and spend some time with your sisters, Ryn. You've worked hard today and you deserve it," Aunt Sheila tells me.

I've been in this parallel universe all day and I can't say I hate it.

I deliver my sisters' order. As I take a seat at their table, I let out a grateful sigh.

"Rough day?" Harper asks.

"Rough night," I reply.

Marlowe shoots me a knowing look. "I told you not to drink the Long Island iced tea."

"I didn't listen, and oh my, do I wish I had."

"Drink your coffee. The caffeine will help. And add some sugar, too," Harper says.

I stir in a spoonful of sugar and take a sip, like the rule-following little sister I'm not. But today I'll take anybody's advice.

"I'm never drinking again," I announce.

"Probably a good idea, honey," Marlowe replies. "Is that all that's going on with you? You seem, I don't know, flat."



“That’s the word I was going to use,” Harper adds.

They watch me for my response.

“I’m fine,” I tell them.

“Are you sure?” Harper asks.

“Absolutely sure,” I reply with a firm nod of my head.

I’m unlikely to tell my two perfect siblings that their hot mess of a sister not only chose the wrong guy again, but found a strip of photos and some movie ticket stubs that made her question what her best friend felt for her and has now hurtled toward the conclusion that she’s in love with him.

I mean it’s hardly the thought processes of a rational adult, is it?

Marlowe searches my face, making me uncomfortable. “What’s that saying? The lady doth protest too much?”

I raise my eyebrows. “You’re quoting Shakespeare now?”

She shrugs. “It seems appropriate. So, what’s really going on?”

“Yeah, Ryn. Way to dodge the question, lady protesting doth.”

“How do you not know the expression? You’re a teacher, aren’t you?” Marlowe asks Harper with a teasing grin.

“There isn’t a lot of Shakespeare being taught in second grade these days. I don’t know what it was like back in the Dark Ages when you were seven.”

“Hey! I’m not that much older than you,” Marlowe replies on a laugh. “And anyway, we’re focusing on our sister here.” She sweeps her gaze over me once more. “What’s going on, Ryn?”

I push out a breath, my shoulders slumping. “Nothing. Everything. I don’t know.”

My sisters share a look and I know they’re judging me, but when you’re reminded you’re the youngest all your life, that you’re the baby of the family, that no one ever expects you to do anything of any importance, it gets in your head. You believe it. You become the person that they expect you to be, and I’ll admit, it’s easy to fit right into the role.

Harper rubs my arm. “You know you can talk to us, right? We’re your sisters and we love you. We want the best for you.”

“She’s right, Ryn. We do.”

I concentrate on the hem of my t-shirt, tugging at an errant string and snapping it with my fingers.

“You won’t understand. You’ve always been so perfect. Both of you. Mom and dad treat me like a little kid because in comparison to the two of you, that’s what I am. I’m a total mess.”

“You think we’re perfect?” Harper guffaws.

“Look at you.” I gesture at them both. “You’re both all put together with your own personal style and you both met these amazing men who fell in love with you the first minute they looked at you.”

“About that,” Marlowe begins.

“What?” I ask.

“Let me tell you how *not* perfect I am for starters. Mike, the guy you met? He’s more than the guy I’m seeing. He’s my boss, too.”

Mic dropped. No pun intended.

My gaze slides from Marlowe to Harper. “Did you know?”

“I did, and Marlowe knows I’m not wild about it,” she replies.

“Is it smart to date your boss?” I ask.

“Of course it’s not smart, but I’m doing it anyway because of the way I feel about him. I’m telling you this because you need to know that I’m not perfect. You can’t tell Mom and Dad about him, either.”

“Huh.” I roll this new information around in my mind. “You’re dating your boss even though you know it’s a dumb idea.”

“Yup,” Marlowe confirms.

Harper clears her throat. “My turn.”

“Don’t tell me you’re dating your boss, too.”

She laughs. “Meryl?”

“Good, because you’re dating Christopher. Right?” I ask because suddenly I’m seeing at least one of my sisters in a new light. Anything seems possible right now.

“Of course I’m dating Christopher, but it was all fake to start with,” Harper says with a shrug.

“What was? You and Christopher?”

Harper’s eyes flash to Marlowe’s and I know my two sisters have already discussed whatever it is she’s about to say. “Yup.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “Wait, what? You and Christopher were fake? Are fake?”

She shifts in her seat, clearly uncomfortable with this conversation, even though she started it. “I was completely humiliated by Dex and coming home was...well it wasn’t easy for me. Christopher was the new guy in town, the one no one knew, so I kind of asked him if we could pretend to date. In fact, I told everyone we were dating before I’d even spoken a complete sentence to the guy.”

My eyes widen as I process. “But you’re Harper. You’re...you.”

She smiles. “Your point?”

“Why would you need to do something like that?” When she doesn’t reply, I turn the question to Marlowe. “Why would she need to do something that?”

“She had her reasons,” Marlowe replies elusively.

That’s not good enough for me. Not anymore. I want to know. I want to understand.

“Harps? Tell me.”

Harper looks down at her hands. “I thought Dex was going to propose to me that night, and instead he broke up with me. I was humiliated.”

“But you were so cool about it. The video. You dumped your soda over his head.”

“That video went viral,” Marlowe adds unnecessarily, because we all know the video was huge.

“Not something I’m proud of.”

“You should be. It was totally awesome!” I reply, making her smile.

“I barely even remember doing it, I was so thrown by what he’d told me. Then, afterwards, coming home was super hard.”

“But you always wanted to come back here,” I prompt. “Your dream was to teach at Hunter’s Creek Elementary School and look at what you’re doing. You’re teaching at Hunter’s Creek Elementary School. Goal achieved.”

“I love my job. You’re right. It’s what I’ve always wanted to do, but I had to come back with my tail between my legs after a very public breakup with the guy the whole town loves.”

“Not easy for you,” Marlowe says to her.

“You can’t tell anyone about how me and Topher were fake to start with, Ryn,” Harper warns.

“Promise me you’re not fake now,” I reply.

“Of course not,” Harper replies, her face morphing into the most loved up smile I’ve seen since, well, since she last gazed at Christopher.

“They’re the real deal,” Marlowe confirms. “It’s just the way it started, that’s all.”

Of course Marlowe knew all about it. The two perfect sisters stick together. Only now I’m learning that maybe they’re not as perfect as I’ve always thought they were.

It feels oddly comforting.

“So, you see? We are all flawed humans,” Harper says.

I smile at my sisters. “You’re both as messed up as I am.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Marlowe says, deadpanning it.

“Now, what’s going on with you?” Harper asks.

“I think I know. It’s Gabe, isn’t it?” Marlowe asks, her voice soft.  
“You’ve realized you love him, haven’t you?”

My jaw drops to the ground. “How did you...?”

“It doesn’t take a genius to work out that two people who have so much in common, spend so much time together, and share passions, would one day fall in love.”

I blink at her a few times, trying to fathom how she came to this conclusion.

She translates my look correctly. “I’ve always hoped you two would work things out and realize what you mean to each other.”

“Me too,” Harper adds.

“Who are you all of a sudden? My sisters-slash-fairy-godmothers? Don’t tell me you’ve got a gang of mice and a pumpkin in the driveway and you’re going to whip me up a sparkly dress.”

Harper laughs. “No, but that sure sounds fun.”

“But I’ve just barely figured it out. How did you know before I did?” I persist.

“It’s obvious. You’re always together, you prioritize one another, you did that thing with the you know what,” Harper says.

“What thing with the you know what?” Marlowe asks.

“Ryn?” Harper says. “It’s up to you if you want to tell her.”

Harper is the sole person on the face of the planet who knows what happened with the glass blowing apprenticeship, outside of me and Theo, and I only told her because she was there when I got the call from Theo. She asked me repeatedly why I turned it down. In the end I gave in and told her, swearing her to secrecy on the pain of death.

“I was offered the glass blowing apprenticeship and turned it down so Gabe would get it.”

Marlowe’s eyes get wide. “You did?”

“Gabe’s mom had recently died and it felt like the right thing to do. He needed it more than I did.”

“But you love glass blowing,” she replies.

Marlowe shakes her head. “Not as much as she loves Gabe.”

Her words echo in my brain.

*Not as much as I love Gabe.*

Marlowe gives me a look that seems a lot like the kind a proud Mama would give her child. “Ryn, that is so selfless of you. Gabe must have really appreciated that.”

I toy with my apron. “I didn’t tell him. He still doesn’t know.”

“Selfless without the glory,” she says.

“That’s our sister,” Harper says with obvious pride.

“You do know what this means, don’t you?” Marlowe asks.

“That I’m a super nice person?” I say with a hopeful grin.

“It means that you’ve been a grown up all this time, and you never even realized,” Marlowe says.

“You’re an adult,” Harper adds. “An adult with everything that goes along with that. You get to make your own decisions and you get to deal with the consequences of those decisions.”

“You make it sound like so much fun,” I reply with a wry smile.

“So? What are you going to do now that you’re a fully-fledged adult?” Marlowe asks.

I can’t stop the smile from spreading across my face. “I’m going to tell him how I feel.”

Their eyebrows ping up to meet their hairlines.

“You are?”

“You’re so brave!”

I waver. “Is that too much too soon?”

Marlowe takes my hands in hers. “No way. I saw the way you two looked at each other during that song last night, and I’ve seen the way he looks at you all the time. He loves you, Ryn. I have no doubt.”

“Aunt Sheila is going to have kittens,” Harper says.

I let out a giddy laugh. “I know she will.”

Someone barrels into my thoughts with a sickening thud.

Ivy.

“There’s one problem and it’s kind of big,” I say.

“What is it?” Marlowe asks.

“Ivy. She told me that she’s developed feelings for him again and got me to ask him to think about getting back together with her.”

Harper lets out a whistle as Marlowe chews on her lip.

“That’s a toughie,” Harper says. “She’s your friend and roommate and

they went out in high school, right?”

I nod, pressing my lips together.

“How does he feel about her?” Marlowe asks.

“Hello, sister, he’s not interested in Ivy. Gabe Hartmann only has eyes for one person, and she’s sitting right here with us.”

My heart rate quickens at the thought that Gabe loves me.

“But she told me she likes him,” I protest. “I can’t do that to her.”

“She can’t do this to *you*. If Gabe loves you and you love him back, then she’s the one getting in the way,” Marlowe pronounces. “Don’t pull a Harper and put everyone else before yourself.”

“Hey!” Harper protests.

“Honey, I love you, but you know you used to do that,” Marlowe replies.

“Exhibit A: Dex Ryder. You totally put his dreams before yours,” I add.

Harper smiles at us. “I know. I’ve changed. Promise.”

“I’ll rephrase it then. Don’t do what Harper did in the past and no longer does. Better?” Marlowe looks at our sister.

“Better,” Harper confirms.

“So, you think I should go after what I want?” I ask.

“Why don’t you talk to Ivy? Tell her how you feel about him. Who knows? She might understand,” Marlowe says.

“She might not, too,” I huff, the frightening thought of telling Ivy how I feel about Gabe before I even tell him worming its way across my chest.

But then the thought of telling Gabe I love him sends a whole farm of worms across my chest.

Maybe talking with Ivy first won’t be so bad?

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained,” Marlowe says, sounding exactly like the perfect oldest sister she is. Or rather the perfect oldest sister I thought she was before I found out that she’s just as imperfect as the rest of us.

It’s strangely comforting.

“So? What are you going to do?” she asks.

I can’t stop my grin from spreading from ear to ear, the thought of telling Gabe what he means to me filling me with a potent cocktail of excitement, fear, and love. “Oh, I know exactly what I’m going to do.”

Because I do know exactly what I’m going to do.

And now I’ve just got to do it.

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## Chapter 24

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Ryn



You know when you've made up your mind that you're going to do something and absolutely nothing can stand in your way? You're determined, you're singularly focused, and it's super, *super* important that you do it at this exact moment. Right now. No questions. No backing down. You're doing it. Period.

That's the way I feel right now. Nothing can stop me from going to Gabe and telling him how I feel.

Well, nothing other than having to talk to Ivy first.

I know it's the right thing to do. I need to tell her how I feel about Gabe—and hope she doesn't take it too badly.

So, here I am at the mill, waiting nervously in reception for her to appear, hoping and praying with all my might that she's okay with it all. Because if she's not? Well, I don't know what I'll do.

The door to the office swings open and out she walks in her blouse and A-line skirt. "Hey, girl, hey," she says as she comes to sit by me.

"Hey," I murmur in response, my nerves forming a hot rash across my chest.

"What's up? I thought you were at the coffeehouse."

"I'm on a break and thought I'd stop by to see you." I offer her the peace



offering she doesn't know is a peace offering yet.

"Is that a slice of apple pie with extra whipped cream?"

"I know it's your favorite." I hand her the box and she peeks inside.

"You're the best. Want to go for a walk? I could do with some fresh air."

"Sure."

We make our way outside and she chats to me about how annoying her boss is and how the office coffee machine is on the fritz and she wished I'd brought her a decent cup from the Second Chance.

"I would have if I'd known," I tell her. "Ivy, can we talk?"

"That sounds serious. Did you lose those earrings you borrowed from me last week? Tell me you didn't, because that would break my heart."

If losing some earrings breaks her heart, then she is in for a world of pain when I tell her the real reason I'm here.

"I didn't lose your earrings. It's something else." I clasp my hands in front of me and take a breath.

"What is it?" she asks on a laugh. "Ryn, you're freaking me out."

"I'm just going to come out with it."

"Okay?"

"It's Gabe."

She sucks in a breath. "He talked to you about me? He likes me back?" Her face is bright with hope and I feel like the bad guy, about to drown a puppy.

"It's more about me."

"I thought you said it was about Gabe?"

I pause for a beat to gather my courage. "It's about me and Gabe, or more specifically, how I feel about him and how I think he might feel about me, too."

She leans back on her heels, her face a study in alarm. "You and Gabe?"

I chew on my lip and give a slow nod of my head.

She crinkles her forehead. "You have feelings for him? Like romantic feelings?"

I nod again. "I...I'm in love with him."

She reels back from me. "You're in *love* with him?"

"I know this seems really horrible that you came to talk to me about how you felt about him and now I'm telling you I have feelings for him, too, but the thing is I didn't know I had those feelings, and I'm sorry. You've got to believe me. I'm so, so sorry, Ivy. I didn't plan on this happening, and who

knows? This thing could be totally one-sided, and when I tell him, he could reject me and—”

“Wait. You’re going to tell him?”

“I have to.”

She studies my face for a long time. “Yeah, I think you do.”

“Really?”

“I’m not going to tell you this feels good, because it definitely does not, but if you love the guy, really love him, then you have to tell him.”

“But what about you? You told me you have feelings for him and you wanted me to talk to him about starting things up with you again, which I did last night, and now we’re in this pickle.”

She waves my protests away. “I don’t love him. I just thought he was cute again. And in case you’re wondering, love trumps cute.”

I open my mouth to reply, instead I pull my friend into a tight hug as tears threaten my eyes.

“Hey, this is my best blouse,” she protests.

I pull back and give her a watery smile. “You’re awesome. Did you know that?” My voice is choked with emotion.

“You know it. Now, go get your man before I change my mind and decide that cute does in fact trump love.”

“I love you,” I tell her.

“Yeah, yeah. Go tell Gabe that.”

Anxiety grips my belly. “What do you think he’s going to say?”

“You won’t know until you try.”

“You’re right. I won’t.”

When I remain rooted to the spot, she nudges me and says, “What are you waiting for? A red carpet?”

I have no good answer for her. Well, other than that I’m terrified, that is, which right now feels like a dang good reason.

But I’m not going to wimp out. If my inkling is correct, there’s a good chance he feels something for me, too. I only hope that thing is love.

With a nervous spring in my step, I say goodbye to Ivy and jump in my car with a determination I have never known before in my life, and I drive to the glass blowing studio where I know he’s working.

A short drive later, I’m standing at the side of my car, my keys clutched in my hand so hard it’s beginning to hurt as I stare at the entrance to the glass blowing studio.

Do I simply walk in there and come clean, telling him how I feel about him? Do I admit to my feelings and stand and wait, hoping he feels the same way? Or do I simply turn around, get in my car, and head back to the coffeehouse, not having scaled that mountain? Not having taken that chance?

He might shoot me down and tell me he doesn't feel the same way. Our friendship will be ruined, over, kaput. We will never again be what we are right now. Things will get weird. They'll be awkward. That I have feelings for him and that we both know will hang in the air between us.

Taking this chance is the biggest thing I've ever done.

My head hurts and I start to miss what life was like before I found the photo strip and movie ticket stubs. Before I began to hope he felt something more than friendship for me. Before I realized I'm in love with him.

And I think he might be in love with me, too.

The thought makes my heart rate leap.

I glance at the door.

*Come on, Ryn. You've got this.*

The door to the studio swings open and I jump in fright, my heart in my mouth. If it's Gabe, he'll ask why I'm here and I'll have to tell him how I feel before I'm even ready and it could be so, so terrible and...

False alarm.

It's not Gabe.

It's Theo.

I heave out a relieved breath, my heart turning from fight or flight to it's-just-Theo mode.

He looks at me in surprise. "Ryn. What are you doing here?"

I have to think fast. I can't tell him the real reason I'm here. "I... I was in the neighborhood, so I decided to come see Gabe to give him some lunch."

"You brought him lunch?" He looks at my empty hands.

"It's in the car. I guess I'd better go get it before I go in there," I fib.

He shoots me a questioning look.

I make a play of getting something from my car, hoping he leaves quickly so I don't look like a complete idiot when I turn around with nothing.

"Hey, Ryn?"

I bang my head painfully on the ceiling of my car. "Yup?" I suck in air and rub the painful spot on my head.

"You okay?"

"All good."

“Look, I’m sorry I put my foot in my mouth last night about the apprenticeship.”

“The apprenticeship?” I ask.

“I accidentally mentioned how you’d turned it down for Gabe in front of his friend. Natalie, I think she said her name was? Anyway, I know you wanted to keep that to yourself and I’m sorry I messed up.”

A murky memory of the conversation enters my mind. “I think it’s fine.”

“That’s good. I’ll keep my lips zipped from now on. Promise.”

As much as I like Theo and as much as I appreciate what he’s saying, right now I’ve got much bigger fish to fry, as the saying goes.

“That’s great. I’ll see you later?” I throw him a smile.

His eyes dropped down to my empty hands once more, but he clearly decides not to comment. “See ya later.”

He climbs into his car and I wave at him as he drives away.

I return my attention to the door. Before I have the chance to start overthinking this once more, I stride toward it, pull it open, and step inside.

The heat and the smell of gas mixed with burnt wood hits me as I close the door behind me. I see Gabe hunched over his latest creation, his brows pulled together in concentration as he wields the tools of his trade, sculpting and working and reworking.

That’s when it strikes me, like a lightning bolt to the solar plexus, dispelling any doubts I could possibly have had. I know I’m in love with my best friend. Undoubtedly, unequivocally, completely in love with him.

I know it deep within me. It’s a strong, enduring love—a love that I’ve denied for so many years, that I pushed aside when I thought he didn’t feel anything for me.

Now that I look at him, working on his creation, I know it as clearly as I know my own name.

I love him.

And I hope he loves me too.

He comes to a sudden stop when his eyes land on me. His lips lift in a smile. “Ryn-Ryn. What are you doing here?”

Standing in front of me, his t-shirt taut across his broad chest, his biceps glistening, and his face flushed from the heat of working with the glass, he looks like a Norse God, ready to take on the world.

I swallow as I look into his eyes and my insecurities smack me in the face.

*What am I doing?*

He won't feel the same way and I'm an idiot to ever think he would.

When no words fall from my mouth, he creases his forehead in concern.

"Is everything all right?"

Doubt about how he feels about me wraps my planned declaration of love into a tightly bound package and squashes it down, deep inside.

So, instead, I land on the other topic burning a hole in my skull.

"I did something because your mom had died and I thought it would mean more to you than it did to me so I let you have it and I made Theo promise never to tell you and then it came out to Natalie last night and Gabe, I'm so sorry."

My words pour out of me like water from a fireman's hose, rammed together into one long sentence.

"What are you talking about?"

"Theo offered me the apprenticeship and I turned it down." I hold my breath.

He stands and watches me, immobile. "You were offered the apprenticeship?" he asks, his brows pulled into an eleven.

I press my lips together and nod.

"Because my mom died?"

"I should have told you at the time. I-I wanted to do the right thing."

He's giving nothing away. Is he angry? Upset? About to throw our entire friendship in my face?

Summoning my courage, I take a tentative step closer to him. "I know how important honesty is to you. I shouldn't have kept this from you, but you were in a lot of pain over your mom, and when you were working with glass you seemed to forget that pain. You got lost in it. I couldn't take that from you." To my surprise, tears spring to my eyes, a lump forming in my throat. "You needed it so much more than I did."

"I can't believe you did that," he says in a low voice.

I try out a smile. "I can't believe you did that in a good way or in a bad way?" I ask, my heart thudding.

"In a good way. Of course, in a good way. Ryn, I think it's amazing. You did that for *me*." He gestures around the studio. "You gave this up for me."

I shrug as though it's no big deal, when in reality I did want all of this.

But I wanted Gabe to have it more.

He covers the distance between us in a few short strides. He takes me by

the shoulders and looks down at me, his eyes intense, like they're on fire.

My heart beat drums out a patter, each beat repeating over and over, *I love him I love him I love him.*

"I love that you did that for me," he says, his voice choked with emotion.

"I—" the words freeze in my throat. I know I'm in love with him, but saying those words after we've been friends all this time suddenly seems like an impossible labyrinth to navigate.

I swallow down the lump in my throat. "I've got another confession and I need to get it out."

His hands are still warm on my shoulders and it would be so easy to reach up and cup his face in my palms and press my lips against his.

"What is it?"

I swallow. "When I was looking for your keys, I found something. You kept the photo strip and the ticket stubs from that night we went to the movie after you broke up with Ivy. You kept them and you said you'd thrown them away."

His features tighten but he doesn't deny it. How could he? I've got indisputable evidence.

"You found them?"

"I was looking for your keys."

"They were inside a book."

Well, when he puts it like that...

"I wasn't snooping. You've got to believe me. They fell out of the envelope when I opened the book and, well, I guess I *did* look at them."

The corners of his mouth lift. "You're a total snoop, you know that?"

I bite my lip. "Why did you keep them? Please, Gabe. I need to know."

"I kept them because they reminded me of—" he begins, only to stop at the crucial point.

Do they remind him of our kiss?

Oh, please let them remind him of our kiss.

"Do you remember what happened that night?" he asks, his voice low.

Right on cue, my heart leaps like a frog onto a lily pad.

We're standing so close I can feel the warmth emanating from his body and smell his scent, that combination of physical work and *him*.

I drop my gaze from his eyes to his lips. It would be so easy to slide against him, wrap my arms around him, and pull him close, our lips touching like they did that night.

I lift my gaze back to his. “I do remember, Gabe. I’ve never forgotten it. Ever.”

His lips spread in a small smile. “I wanted to remember it, too. That’s why I kept them.”

My breath catches in my throat and I’m suddenly aware that his hands are sliding down my arms to take my own hands in his. “But you said you’d thrown them away.”

“I didn’t want you to know I had them.”

“Why?” I ask, my heart thudding so loud in my ears my voice sounds like it’s coming from another room.

“Because you didn’t seem to want to be with me after that night. You told me we should just be friends.”

A smile claims my face. I grip his hands in mine. “But that night meant so much to me and I didn’t think it meant anything to you.”

“Are you kidding? That was when I knew for sure how I felt about you.”

The fluttering in my stomach amplifies. “Really? I thought you only kissed me on the rebound and now I know you were the one to break up with Ivy, and finding those things gave me...hope.”

“Hope,” he echoes, and I nod, my mouth dry. “Ryn, I was a fool to choose Ivy over you back then, and I would be a fool to choose anybody but you now. It was you, Ryn. It always was and it always will be.”

My body is overtaken by an all-consuming burst of pure, giddy joy and I could not stop the grin from claiming my face for all the Leonardo Finch posters in the world.

“Really? I can’t believe it,” I squeak.

His face breaks into an equally broad grin. “No one compares to you, Ryn-Ryn. No one.”

“No one compares to *you*. I’m the one who’s been a fool, chasing after the wrong guys.”

“You’ve definitely done that.”

I laugh. “Does that mean...? Gabe?” I can’t bring myself to ask him, to utter the words, but surely it does. Surely, it means he loves me.

“It means I love you, Ryn Cole, more than anything, and I have loved you forever, since I can remember.” His voice is deep, raw, full of love. Love he holds for me.

All my fears and doubts disappear. He loves me. Gabe loves me!

With my breath coming in short bursts as my heart beats up into my

throat, I grip his hands and gaze into his eyes. “I love you, too, G, and not just as a friend, even though you’re the best friend I could ever have. I’m totally and completely in love with you.”

And then in one fluid movement, he pulls me close to him, running his big, warm hands up my back, sending tingles of want through me, amplified a thousand percent when he tangles his fingers in my hair.

“We’ve wasted so much time,” he murmurs.

“Well then, I’d say we’ve got some catching up to do.”

A smile spreads across his face before he leans down and presses his lips against mine. It’s sweet, and at the same time, burns with intense desire.

You’d think it’d be weird to be kissed by someone so familiar, so much a part of my life. Someone I’ve seen as a friend for so long.

It’s not.

Heck, no.

It’s like the love I’ve felt for this man all this time is imbued with a new, deeper type of love, heated with passion and a need to make him mine.

I slide my hands along the contours of his muscular arms, clutching onto his shoulders, and pulling him closer to me so that every part of our bodies touch. Our kiss deepens, and he holds on to me as though his life depends on it—as though my life does, too.

And in a way, it does because Gabe is who I’ve been waiting for, he’s who I’ve been searching for. The men I’ve chosen to be with are nothing in comparison to him. I almost laugh at how foolish I’ve been, chasing after the edgy, interesting guys, the ones I already knew wouldn’t treat me right before they even opened their mouths.

Men like Joe and the others could never compare to what we have. What Gabe and I have is a deep, durable love rooted in the closest of friendships. We love one another, we respect one another, we love being together. I can honestly say I’ve never had that with anyone before, and now that I’ve found it with Gabe, I sure as heck am never going to let it go.



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## Chapter 25

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## Gabe



If someone had told me even a week ago that I would confess my love to my best friend and that she would return it, I would have told them they were crazy. But that's exactly what's happened, and it's as if my world has turned on its head in the most wonderful way.

We didn't have long together after we'd sealed our love with a kiss at the studio. But man, what a kiss. The kind that changed my world, no lie.

Rowena interrupted us with a loud cough, needing my help, so we had reluctantly pulled apart and agreed to talk after my shift at the Black Bear. And talk we did, as well as some other stuff that may have involved some really quite spectacular kissing, but I'm not one to kiss and tell. Literally.

What I will say, is that kissing my best friend is my new favorite thing.

Today, I'm about to walk through the doors of the Second Chance Café to grab a few minutes with the woman I love before my first shift of the day. For now, we've agreed to keep this thing between us on the down low. The Hunter's Creek Ladies' Committee would probably have a collective aneurysm from sheer delight if they knew we were together, and besides, although we've been friends for so long and I've loved her forever, what's between us is new.

We want to enjoy it, just us for now.

So, the strategy is that whenever we see one another we'll act as though we're just good friends, nothing more. It should be easy enough. After all, we've been best friends almost our entire lives.

I push through the door to the coffeehouse and am immediately struck by the aroma of freshly-brewed coffee and baked goods, a hint of sugar, cinnamon, and spice in the air. My mouth instantly begins to water.

As usual around this time of day, the coffeehouse is busy, and I spot Ryn serving a customer behind the counter.

Is it just me or does she look more breathtakingly beautiful today than she ever has? Her long strawberry blonde hair falls in waves past her shoulders, her hazel eyes sparkling as she smiles her beautiful smile with those full lips I've now claimed as mine for this first time since we were kids.

The thought makes my belly clench with desire for her.

She hasn't noticed me yet, so I watch as she works, my heart full of love. She's serving Mr. Whitlow and Christopher, who are here as they often are, talking about the law over coffee and a snack as they sit at one of the tables by the bookcases stacked with books.

I could watch Ryn all day.

Not in a stalker-y kind of way, of course. But with love in my eyes and in my heart for this beautiful, funny, smart woman who knows her own mind and apologizes to no one for it. The woman who gave up an apprenticeship for me because she knew I needed it.

My Ryn.

"She really is quite something, isn't she?" a voice says besides me, making me jump.

I turn to see Alyssa smiling at me.

"She's your daughter. You know she's amazing," I tell her before I catch myself. So much for the down low. "What I mean is, she's great and I'm lucky to call her my friend."

Alyssa doesn't fall for my weak attempt at secrecy. In fact, she sees right through me.

"You finally worked out how you feel about each other, huh?" she says.

I'm not sure how to respond. Do I admit to loving her daughter when only a handful of hours ago we agreed to keep this thing quiet? I get my answer as I look into her eyes. I've always been one to tell the truth, upholding honesty above all else. I know first-hand how deep lies can cut, and I could never do that to Alyssa Cole.

Then there's the other thing, the thing that held me back from telling Ryn how I truly felt about her all these years. Risking no longer being a part of the Cole family. But knowing now that Ryn loves me back has made that worry disappear. Even though relationships fail all the time, I know in my heart I want to be with my best friend forever. I want the whole nine yards with her. Marriage. Babies. Growing old together, swinging on the front porch together.

I want all of it with her.

"Is it that obvious?" I ask in a low tone, my cheeks heating up.

"It is when you stand there gazing at her with a goofy grin on your face for a full five minutes."

I've been standing here watching Ryn for a full five minutes?

Alyssa reaches for my hand and takes it in hers. "I've been hoping for so long that the two of you would realize how great you could be together. I couldn't pick a better man for my daughter, Gabe."

"It's all very new," I mumble, and as I flick my gaze from Alyssa to Ryn, I see her looking back at me, her cheeks flushed. I shoot Ryn a smile that I hope tells her everything is okay, before I return my attention to her mom.

"It's not new, Gabe. It's never new when two people who are meant to be together finally realize it." She gives my hand a squeeze. "I am so happy for you." She looks over at her daughter. "Both of you."

I grin at her. Getting Alyssa's seal of approval makes me want to punch the air.

I lean down and press a kiss against her cheek and say, "Thank you. For everything you've done for me."

To my surprise and humiliation, tears prick my eyes, and I blink them away quickly.

"Oh, honey," Alyssa murmurs.

"It's fine. I'm fine. It's just a lot. In a good way." I look back over at Ryn. She's serving a customer but keeping a watchful eye on her mom and me. "In the very best way."

"Gabe, I'm late for my appointment at the hair salon," she tells me. "You run along and get your coffee and whatever else it is you've come in here to get." She grins at me, a knowing, approving smile. "I'll see you for dinner soon."

We say goodbye and I wait in line at the counter for Mrs. Jacobson to make her selection. Finally, Ryn is free, and we stand there gazing at one

another, divided only by the counter between us, like we're a couple of doe-eyed teenagers, in love for the first time in our lives.

Which is exactly what we are—other than being a little older, of course.

“Hey, you,” she says, her face lit up in a smile, her voice soft and breathy.

“Hey, you,” I reply as we communicate a million things that don't need to be spoken.

“How have you been?” she asks, as though we haven't seen one another for a while.

“I've been fine. Great, in fact.”

“Great? Why's that? Any particular reason?” she teases, and the look on her face makes my belly flip.

“It's a beautiful day out. No rain.”

“You're great because there's no rain? You are one easily pleased man.”

I lean a fraction closer to her and reply, “Only when it comes to you.”

I watch as a satisfying pink glow claims her cheeks, and I wish we were alone together where I could take her in my arms and show her how much she means to me.

“Oh, hello there, Gabe,” Aunt Sheila says, a tray in her hands filled with fresh muffins for the display case. “Here for your takeout coffee?”

“Right. Coffee. I hadn't ordered it yet,” I reply in about the least smooth way a guy trying to keep a new relationship under wraps can manage.

Not missing a beat, Aunt Sheila's eyes swivel between Ryn and me. I know she's guessed, even before she opens her mouth. “So, you two. Any news?”

I know the game is already up, but Ryn doesn't.

“Just making coffee and serving the customers like usual,” she replies brightly.

I heard an expression from a British tourist once that went “butter wouldn't melt in her mouth.” It's used to describe someone who appears innocent, when in fact they're totally guilty. Right now, Ryn has melted butter dripping from her lips.

Aunt Sheila isn't buying the buttered innocence. “You know what I think? I think we have Hunter's Creek's newest couple right here.”

Ryn opens her mouth to protest but I shake my head at her.

“The game's up, Ryn-Ryn. Your mom already guessed.”

“You never did like to lie,” she replies with a laugh.

Aunt Sheila claps her hands together. “Oh, this is terrific news. Terrific!”

“Aunt Sheila, we’re trying to keep it a little quiet,” Ryn complains, but her aunt is not listening.

“So? When did this happen? And how did you know?” She sucks in air. “It was the song, wasn’t it? The song did it for you. You gazed into one another’s eyes and you realized how much you love each other and here we are.” She looks like a squirrel that scored the last acorn, like it was she who had orchestrated the entire thing and now we’re in love because of a Dolly Parton and Kenny Rogers song.

Ryn and I share a smile. She’s partially right. We did share a moment when we sang that song together, but the feelings were there way before then. For both of us, only one of us had pushed them away, and the other one had spent years denying them.

“Chrissy? Joanne? Get yourselves over here. We have news,” she calls out to Mrs. Jacobson and Mrs. Sommerfeld, sitting at their table over by the window.

Literally every person in the coffeehouse turns to hear what this news is.

I pull my lips into a contrite smile. “Sorry,” I mouth to Ryn.

She shrugs in response as the other members of the Hunter’s Creek Ladies’ Committee rush over to hear the news.

Neither Ryn nor I are the ones who share it, however. It’s all Aunt Sheila, who’s brimming with pride as she grins at her friends.

“It worked. It worked!” she tells them.

“What worked, Sheila?” Mrs. Jacobson asks.

“Our plan worked! *Islands in the Stream!* They sang it and they realized how they feel about each other and look at them now.”

All three sets of eyes swivel in wonder to look at Ryn and me.

“You’re together? As a couple?” Mrs. Jacobson asks, her eyes as wide as the plate of muffins on the counter.

“Oh my word. Would you look at that,” Mrs. Sommerfeld says with her hands over her heart. “They’re in love.”

“In love?” Aunt Sheila asks. “Is that true?”

Ryn and I don’t dare look at one another.

Is it getting hot in here?

“It’s true,” Ryn replies, and I swear my heart doubles in size, filled with love for this woman.

“I thought we were keeping this quiet,” I say to her.

“I’d say we failed,” she replies with a grin and I reach out and take her

hand in mine.

“Oh!” Mrs. Sommerfeld looks so happy she could burst.

Aunt Sheila looks on proudly. “Aren’t we a bunch of geniuses?”

“We certainly are, Sheila. We certainly are,” Mrs. Jacobson replies.

All three women regard us with proud smiles, as though us being in love is solely down to them.

“Aren’t you glad you got to sing that song together? Because it was the song, wasn’t it?” Mrs. Jacobson prompts.

“The song definitely played its part,” I reply, and all three of them laugh and congratulate each other as if they’d pulled off an impossible mission, Tom Cruise style.

“Wonderful. Just wonderful!”

The three of them chat about their success and Ryn gestures toward the back door. She tells Aunt Sheila that she’s going to take a quick break, who informs her in return that she can take as long as she wants. We pass through the kitchen and out the back door together, hand in hand.

“Well, that was a lot. So much for not telling anyone,” Ryn says.

“We live in Hunter’s Creek, remember?”

She grins up at me. “Oh, there is no way we could forget that, with the Ladies’ Committee and their scheming. Who knew they would be proven right all along?”

We come to a stop and I brush my fingers down her cheek. “I knew.”

She lifts her gaze to mine. “I pushed my feelings for you deep inside a long time ago, back when we kissed that night, thinking you didn’t feel the same way about me. I always assumed we only kissed because you were upset about Ivy.”

“I kissed you because I had all these feelings for you, feelings I never expected to have. I was dating Ivy. I should have been thinking of her and only her, but instead I found myself thinking about her friend. *My* friend. That’s why I broke up with her. That’s why I took you to that movie and brought you back to sit on the porch swing. I had planned on telling you how I felt, but after we kissed, you changed.”

“I was protecting myself. I thought it was just a rebound kiss.”

“And you didn’t want it to be just a rebound kiss?”

“No, I didn’t.” She smiles at me and I can’t resist leaning down and brushing a soft kiss against her lips, because I get to do that now, and it feels amazing.

“So, let’s get this straight. All this time, you wanted to be with me and I wanted to be with you. We’re just a couple of idiots, aren’t we?” she asks with a smile.

“Peter and Petra Pan.” I reach out and push a strand of hair from her face, brushing my fingers against her soft skin. “I guess we’re getting a second chance, and this time I want us to get it right.” I lean in and kiss her once more, showing her how much she means to me.

She pushes herself up onto her toes, wrapping her arms around my neck as she kisses me back. I breathe in her uniquely Ryn scent as electricity flows through my veins.

“I wish we hadn’t wasted all that time,” she murmurs against my lips, and I kiss her again and again, knowing I will never grow tired of kissing this woman in my arms.

“The way I see it, it just makes it all the sweeter now.”

She grins at me. “Is that right?”

“You know it is because I want everything with you. Everything.”

“You do?”

“I love you, heart and soul.”

“You’d better,” she warns on a laugh.

I pull her close, as close as I can, and press my lips against hers once more. “You can count on it.”



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## Chapter 26

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Ryn



Gabe and I arrive at the town hall along with the rest of the townsfolk, ready to watch this season’s final episode of *Serious Bite*. The place is abuzz and not only because in this episode we’re all going to find out what happens to the band of vampires and the upcoming battle with the creatures from the underworld, but because, by now, everyone knows that Gabe and I are together.

And I do mean *everyone*. The whole freaking town. But then, this wouldn’t be Hunter’s Creek unless everyone knew everyone else’s business.

We’ve been congratulated, literally patted on the back, told we make a cute couple, and generally been celebrated like we were the stars of the TV show we’ve come to watch—not just a couple of people who’ve finally admitted they love one another.

I can’t say it doesn’t feel good. It feels great. Finally, I’m with the guy I’ve loved forever, although I never admitted it, not even to myself. More than that, I know now that he feels the same way about me.

Life doesn’t get much better than this, folks. Not in my experience, anyway.

“You two finally figured out that you’re meant to be together, huh?” Christopher says with a broad grin as he shakes Gabe’s hand and pulls me in

for a quick hug.

“I guess we did,” Gabe replies, looping his arm possessively around my shoulders, keeping me close.

“I’m happy for you,” Christopher replies, although he’s looking more at me than at Gabe. He once told me I remind him of his sister, Kelly, which I took as his seal of approval. Maybe he’s imagining his sister happily in love, too.

All I do is beam at him. I’ve been doing that a lot lately. Beaming. Grinning. Giggling. Laughing. Smiling. It’s hard not to when you feel like you’re on top of the world. The fact that everyone in this town is overjoyed for us only adds to my happiness.

Even Ivy, who has taken this all with a grace I didn’t know she possessed. I am so grateful to her. I’m sure she feels super awkward around us, but she doesn’t let on. She just leaves the room when we share looks.

It’s better that way, anyway.

“Hey, you two,” Harper says, smirking at us.

“What are you doing here? I thought you avoided seeing these episodes like the plague,” I say. Christopher and Harper never watch the episodes along with the rest of the town. I get it. Why would they want to watch her ex-boyfriend up on the big screen? They’ve got much better things to do with their time.

“You know your sister. She was helping set up,” Christopher replies.

I roll my eyes. “Sounds like Harper.”

“Come on, Topher. Let’s go,” Harper says to him. “You two have fun tonight,” she tells us.

“Oh, we will,” Gabe replies as we share another one of our totally goofy smiles.

Really, even I find us nauseating at times.

I spot Joe in the crowd. He’s got his arm slung around Jenny’s shoulders, and she’s gazing at him like he’s a slice of Aunt Sheila’s award-winning apple pie.

Figures.

Good luck to them, that’s what I say.

It’s weird because I expected the next time I saw him I’d feel at least something. I don’t. Not a thing. Well, other than wondering why I ever went for the guy in the first place, that is.

An elderly man in a suit, who bears a striking resemblance to the actor

Jack Nicholson, smiles at us and I nudge Gabe in the ribs.

“Mr. Cantor is smiling at us,” I say through my teeth.

“Who?” Gabe asks, mainly because I probably sound like a bad ventriloquist.

I don’t have time to answer. Mr. Cantor approaches us, smiling away, and says, “I heard you two kids are a couple now. Congratulations.”

I blink at the town’s wealthiest person, open-mouthed.

“Thank you, sir,” Gabe replies as he shakes his hand.

“Have a pleasant evening.” He moves along to join his party.

“I didn’t think he even knew who we were, let alone that we were friends and now we’re more.”

Gabe gives me a squeeze. “I’m liking the ‘more’ part. A lot.”

I gaze up at him. “Me, too.” I push myself up onto my toes and kiss him, forgetting that we’re surrounded by our friends and family. As I pull back, I look around to see two members of the Hunter’s Creek Ladies’ Committee watching us with pride, my parents grinning at us, and Gabe’s friend and classmate, Natalie, smiling her pretty smile.

“Nat. Hey,” Gabe says. “You made it.”

“Of course I did. I’d heard about these screenings but I’ve never been. It looks like the entire town is here.” She looks around in wonder at the throngs of townsfolk filling the hall.

“We’re glad you could come,” Gabe replies.

That’s the other thing. I love it when Gabe refers to us as “we”.

We find a seat next to my parents, and I introduce Natalie to them. She’d already met them at the festival, apparently.

“Do you know Dex Ryder?” Natalie asks us.

“Sure. He was a couple years ahead of us in high school,” Gabe replies.

“He dated my sister for years,” I add.

Natalie laughs. “And you say that not everyone is related in this town.”

“Not everyone,” I reply, and am rewarded with a smile from Gabe that makes my belly flip.

She leans forward in her seat. “Surely no one can keep any secrets from anyone else in this place. You must know everyone’s business.”

“I’m sure people have as many secrets here as they do in bigger places,” Gabe replies lightly.

“Oh, I’m sure you’re right,” Natalie replies, her eyes gliding briefly to mine.

The hairs on my neck stand to attention, warning me of danger. A memory from the night I drank too much flashes before my eyes.

*Theo told her about the apprenticeship.*

False alarm. It's a non-starter. I've come clean with Gabe about the apprenticeship. If she wants to mention it, it won't have the effect she might be looking for.

Natalie turns her attention to me. "What do you think, Ryn? Do the townsfolk of Hunter's Creek hold secrets?"

"I don't know," I reply with a shrug.

I don't know Natalie well. I've only met her that one time. Gabe has told me that she's being super helpful with their class and, in his usual honest way, he told me that she has a bit of a crush on him, as well.

"No secrets at all?" she asks me.

Gabe comes to my rescue. "Are you talking about the apprenticeship? Because Ryn told me about that." He gives my hand a squeeze, and I let out a sigh of relief.

Seriously, someone get this man a horse because he's most definitely my knight in shining armor.

And yes, the idea of that would ordinarily make me cringe, but being in love with Gabe has made me a little less cynical.

Natalie's eyes slide between Gabe and me. "Oh, did she? Well, that's good because now that you're seeing one another romantically, it would be terrible to have any secrets between you."

"No secrets," Gabe says.

I narrow my gaze at her. She's trying to come between us. She was trying to use the fact that I hadn't told Gabe about what happened with the apprenticeship to break us apart.

*Well, lady, that is not happening.*

I lean back in my seat and Gabe hooks his arm around my shoulders. As the lights dim and the *Serious Bite* theme song fills the room, I snuggle up against him, secure in his love and the knowledge that nothing can come between us. Not Natalie or anyone else.

We watch the episode unfold, climaxing in the anticipated battle scene that proves to be both epic and exciting, right down to the end of the season cliff hanger that leaves us wanting the third season as soon as possible.

Afterwards, I tell Natalie what a pleasure it was to spend the evening with her—the subtext of which is that it would be the only evening I will spend

with her after the little stunt she tried to pull—and we chat to the other townsfolk as we make our way toward the exit.

We walk out onto the street where rain is falling in light droplets. Neither of us thought to bring an umbrella, but Gabe offers to take his flannel shirt off to hold above our heads to make our way to his car.

“Only if you’re not wearing a t-shirt underneath it,” I say with a laugh.

He unbuttons his flannel shirt and pulls it off, revealing his characteristic white t-shirt underneath. “Sorry to disappoint.”

“I can’t imagine you ever disappointing me.” I wrap my arm around his waist and he slings his over my shoulders.

It’s then that I see him, a dark figure against the low evening sky, a figure so similar to the one at my side.

He steps in front of us and we come to a stop, and it’s in that moment that I recognize who he is with a heart-stopping flash.

Patrick Hartmann.

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## Chapter 27

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## Gabe



I glare at the man standing in front of me on the sidewalk, my disbelief morphing into shock and then anger.

My father is here? In Hunter's Creek? What in the actual *heck*?

Why is he here? It makes no sense. He doesn't live here. He lives in Portland, or at least that's where he's lived in the past. I haven't seen him for the best part of ten years. Scratch that. I haven't *wanted* to see him for the best part of ten years.

And yet here he is, in the flesh, standing in front of me, a hopeful look on his face.

I tighten my grip around Ryn's shoulder as I try to make sense of his unexpected reappearance.

He opens his mouth and to my surprise he says, "Hi, Gabriel. Ryn."

I pull my brows together. He knows Ryn's name?

"Hey, Mr. Hartmann," she mumbles, looking about as comfortable as I feel.

Wait, *what?!*

They know each other? What kind of horrible parallel universe have we inadvertently stumbled into?

"You-you know him?" I ask. My voice comes out strangled.



“We’ve talked,” Ryn replies.

Her words form something big, blunt, and heavy which thuds painfully into my chest.

“You have?”

“Your dad came to the coffeehouse a while back and asked me to help him smooth a pathway back to you. At first I wasn’t sure if I should help him, and then, after I spoke to you, I told him—”

“At *first*?” I interrupt, because seriously? Ryn has met with my dad on more than one occasion? I feel as though my head could explode. “What do you mean ‘at first’? You’ve seen him more than once?”

“Twice. The second time I told him that I couldn’t help him.”

My father takes a step closer to me. “Look, Gabriel. Don’t blame Ryn. If you’re going to be angry with anyone, be angry with me.”

Oh, I’m already plenty angry with him. But right now, I want to understand. I *need* to understand. They’ve spent time together. Without me. Without my knowledge. Talking about me.

And Ryn didn’t tell me.

Icy cold grips my heart. I let my arm drop from around her shoulders and pull away.

“Gabe,” she says, her eyes wide, her face pleading. “I asked you if you would want to see him again, and you said no. Flat out no. That’s why I told Patrick that I wasn’t going to help him.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you’d seen him?”

“It just felt so big and you were so sure you didn’t want to see him again. You told me so. I was going to tell you. Really, I was.”

A sense of stone-cold betrayal slithers over my body like a snake. “But you didn’t,” I grind out.

“No.” She hangs her head.

“Look, Gabriel,” my father begins, and I shoot him a look that wills him not to continue. He continues all the same. “I knew you wouldn’t see me, even if I turned up on your doorstep. I figured that the best approach would be to appeal to your friend. I found out who she is because people in this town like to talk.” He lets out a scornful laugh. “I went to where she works and we talked. Ryn’s a great gal. You’re lucky to have such a good friend.”

I cut straight to the chase with him. “What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to see you. I wanted to make things right between us.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re my son.”

I scoff. “I’ve been your son for twenty-three years and you’ve never wanted to see me ‘because I’m your son’. Why now? What’s changed?”

“Gabe,” Ryn pleads.

“You can’t defend him.”

“I’m only trying to explain what happened,” she says.

People move past us, some saying hello, some congratulating us on our new relationship, some shooting us questioning looks. I’m blind to it all. All that exists is Ryn, my father, and me, in some weird, unbelievable triangle.

“Can we go somewhere and talk?” he asks.

I cross my arms and glare at him. “Tell me why you’re here,” I repeat, my resolve hard and strong.

“This isn’t the place,” he replies.

“Are you gonna tell me that you came here to watch the show?”

He drags his fingers over his jawline and I cross my arms, my anger bubbling like a pot of hot soup on a stove.

I feel Ryn’s hand on my arm. “I know you said you didn’t want to see him. I get that, and I’m totally on your side. He’s told me that all he wants is to make amends and to form a relationship with you.”

Ryn is defending this spineless man who calls himself my dad?

I slide my gaze to hers, feeling the sting of her betrayal. “You know that’s not true.” I turn to him. “It can’t be true.”

He pauses for a beat, his features contorted with emotion. “It’s my son,” he begins. “Elliot. He’s sick. He has to have surgery next month and he has a rare blood type. It’s-it’s the same as yours.”

And that, folks, is what you call *motive*.

“What?” Ryn snaps, her face aghast.

Apparently, this is news to her, too.

“Got it, *Dad*. You’re not here for me. You’re here because you need something from me for your other family, the family you stuck around for.”

“It’s complicated,” he protests.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” I spit. “It’s completely *uncomplicated*. You’re here because you want something from me. Nothing more.”

“G, please,” Ryn begins as tears roll down her cheeks.

“I can’t right now,” I say, my voice low, as I back away from her. “I’m sorry, Ryn, but I can’t. You met with him and...no.”

“Where are you going?” she asks.

“I’ll call you later, Ryn.”

I glance at my dad. His jaw is locked and he’s looking at me with a grim, defeated expression.

I shoot Ryn one final look before I turn and walk away. A small voice in the back of my head tells me Ryn is caught in the crossfire between my dad and me. That this isn’t really about her.

But right now, I’m blindsided by his reappearance, and for the life of me, I can’t get past the fact that she spent time with my him—without my knowledge.

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## Chapter 28

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Ryn



I round on Gabe’s dad, shock and dismay sparking off me. “You came here for his *blood*?” My voice is shaking with a host of emotions raging through my body, not one of them positive.

“It’s my son, Elliot. He’s really sick. Without the blood for that operation, we’ll have to use a donor and, well, I want to keep it in the family.”

“Keep it in the family?” I scoff. “Which family? Because the last time I checked, Gabe’s mom was his only family.”

I know it’s cruel. I know I’m lashing out, but this man duped me. He told me all he wanted was a relationship with Gabe, and being the fool that I am, I believed him. I believed every word he told me—about how he had known that he hadn’t done right by his son, how he regretted his actions of the past, how he was here to turn over a new leaf.

Well, that leaf has blown away in a gust of wind, exposing him for what he is: a terrible dad to Gabe, someone willing to use his relationship with his abandoned son to get what he wants for a child he stuck around long enough to be a father to.

“Why did you turn up here tonight?” I ask him.

“I knew he would be here and I needed to get things moving.”

“Manipulating his best friend wasn’t enough for you?”

“I wasn’t manipulating you. I just hadn’t told you the full truth, that’s all. That was between me and Gabriel.”

I glare at him, my anger peaking. “You’re splitting hairs, Mr. Hartmann.”

“Look, if I’d told you, would you have helped me?”

I open my mouth to reply but no words come. Would I?

I can’t think about this right now. I’m standing here wasting my time talking to him when I could be chasing after the man I love, the man who has my heart. The man who thinks I’ve betrayed him.

“Honesty is incredibly important to Gabe after...after what you did, and you put me in this impossible position where it looks to him as though I lied when in reality, I didn’t.”

I’m sure I’m right. I asked Gabe whether he’d want to see his father again, and he gave an unequivocal *no*. Sure, I could have told him that he’d been into the coffeehouse and that we’d talked, but it felt like opening a can of fat, juicy, emotional worms—and with our declaration of love for one another, I didn’t want those worms poking holes in our bliss.

Oh, who am I kidding? I should have come straight out and told him the moment his dad turned up.

I think I’ve messed up. And I’ve hurt my best friend.

“Ryn, he’ll get over it. With you, at least. Me? I’m not so sure.”

I drop my shoulders, the air sucked from my lungs. From Gabe’s perspective, the fact that I kept this from him is me being dishonest. My omission means I’ve broken Gabe’s cardinal rule: honesty, above all else.

“Maybe you could try talking to him for me?” Mr. Hartmann suggests.

I glare at him in disbelief. “Are you serious?”

“Would you at least think about it?”

I shoot him an incredulous look.

I just cannot right now.

I push past him and march down the street. I make my way to where Gabe and I had parked.

His truck is gone.

I quicken my pace to a run, dashing down Main Street as I head for Gabe’s place. I reach the house, but it’s shrouded in darkness. His truck is nowhere to be found.

If he didn’t come home, where is he?

I stop and stare up at the cloudy night sky, the light rain floating around me, and wait for inspiration to hit.

Could he have gone to our star gazing spot at the edge of the forest?

No. He wouldn't go there. It would remind him too much of me, and right now, that's the last thing he'd want.

He might have gone to the glass studio. I run the four blocks to the studio only to find it locked up and dark.

Slumping against the wall, panting, a wave of helplessness washes over me.

Gabe is out there somewhere, thinking bad thoughts about me, thinking I betrayed him when I was trying to do the right thing by him. To protect him from a man he made clear he didn't want to see.

Tears stream down my cheeks and I brush them angrily away with my fists.

Is he angry with me?

Have I messed things up?

Surely not. We're good. He said he'll call me. He just needs some time, some space to figure this out.

I make my way back down the street to Gabe's house, hoping with every step that he's there. His truck still isn't in the driveway. I try the door. Locked.

I slump down on the porch swing, watching and waiting, my heart as heavy as a tree in the mill. It's early enough, maybe only about 9 o'clock. I'm sure he'll come back soon and we can talk about this. Make it right between us.

I pick up my phone and tap out a message to him.

*Are you all right?*

I stare at my screen, willing him to reply. After some time, he does.

*I need some time to think.*

Anxiety grips my chest and gives it a painful twist. Does that mean he needs time to think about us? No. I'm sure that's not the case. It's about his dad and the fact that his brother is sick and his dad asked for his blood.

Right?

I type another message, just to check.

*Are we okay? You and me?*

The dots that show he's typing a reply flash across my screen, then stop. I sit and I wait. No more dots. No response.

*G?*

*I love you,* he replies, and relief floods my blood stream.

*I love you too, so, so much, and I'm so sorry about talking to him. You don't deserve this.*

He messages me back.

*Give me some time, okay?*

*Of course. Just know I'm here for you. xoxo*

I stare at my screen, waiting for another message. I get nothing more.

Okay, so he needs some time. I get that. He's got a lot to wrap his head around right now. I can give him time. No problem.

Although I understand that he needs space from me as well, I wish with all my heart he didn't.



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## Chapter 29

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Ryn



I wait in silence as Aunt Lisa fries the bacon on the grill. She lifts the wire tub of hashbrowns from the scalding hot oil, and sets it on a hook to cool.

“Do you want to go grab a basket for the hashbrowns, honey?” she asks in the tone that she and Aunt Sheila have been using with me since Patrick Hartmann’s reappearance last night.

The answer to how they know about the exchange between a stranger and Gabe and me is simple: this is Hunter’s Creek. Someone would have heard our conversation, and they would have told someone else who told a member of the Ladies’ Committee, and then it would have been spread to every corner of the county.

Small towns.

“Sure thing, Aunt Lisa.” I collect one of the baskets from the shelf and line it with grease proof paper. I tip the hashbrowns into it and salt them generously.

“Here you go. Table 3, honey.” Aunt Lisa passes me the plates, and together with the basket, I balance the meals and push my way out into the coffeehouse.

As usual, the place is abuzz with chatter and laughter and Aunt Sheila gossiping with whomever will listen. To her credit, she’s told anyone who’s

asked that what happened last night is Gabe's and my business and they would do well not to poke their noses where they are not wanted.

The irony of the town's biggest gossip making statements like that without even getting all the facts from me herself has not been lost on me, but I love her all the more for it.

I deliver the meals to Marlowe and her boyfriend, Mike. They've come to stay for a few days again. Of course, I know now that Mike is more than just her boyfriend and is in fact her boss, too, so I can only hope for her sake that things work out on both fronts.

"Thanks, sis," Marlowe says. "How are things?"

I reply with a shrug, "Oh, you know. Same old, same old."

She and Mike share a look that tells me they've heard what the rest of the town seems to know.

Mike clears his throat. "Your sister told me you're talented artistically."

"She did?"

Things are looking pretty bad when my sister's boyfriend, a person I barely know, talks me up to try to make me feel better.

"Oh, she really is, Mike. Aren't you, Ryn? You're super good at drawing and art. I heard you might pursue makeup artistry, which you would be so good at," Marlowe says.

I flick my gaze between the two of them. They're clearly trying to be nice to me and take my mind off Gabe.

"Sure. Thanks," I mutter. I pull my features into what I hope is a smile. "Enjoy your meals."

"I'm sure we will. They look great," Mike says as I turn to leave.

"I didn't make them," I reply.

"Well, you...delivered them super well," he says.

We are definitely scraping the bottom of the barrel now.

I plod across the hardwood floors as I return to the counter, my feet heavy and my heart heavier. I miss Gabe. Really, really miss him. I know it's only been one night, and we've messaged, but it feels like a week or more.

Before we admitted to being in love with one another, we were friends. The best of friends. We were always there for each other, happy to talk, laugh, or just hang. Now, I've got a massive Gabe-shaped hole in my life.

I reach the counter and serve some more customers, delivering their coffee and meals. After a while—and a lot of hovering and checking in by Aunt Sheila, Aunt Lisa, and Marlowe, with even my mom and dad and

Harper and Christopher popping in to say hello—the coffeehouse begins to empty out.

I check my messages for the tenth time today. The last message is still from me. *Just know I'm here for you. xoxo*

I chew on my lip, rolling around the thought that keeps gnawing at my brain. Is me not telling Gabe about talking to his dad protecting him, or rather lying to him instead? I know which way he took it last night, and I can only hope he sees it differently today.

Aunt Sheila pushes through the door from the kitchen. “Are you okay, honey?”

I stash my phone into the pocket of my apron and reply, “Fine.”

She sees right through me. “You two have been friends for a long, long time. No matter what happened with that stranger from last night who’s got the whole town talking—” She pauses, looking at me expectantly, hoping I’ll fill in the details. I don’t. “Well, whatever it’s all about, I know one thing for sure: everyone deserves a second chance. I know first-hand.”

“You do?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Is that why you named this place the Second Chance Café?” I ask, relieved to be talking about something other than me and Gabe and “the stranger”.

“It sure is.”

“I’ve always wondered about that. You and Uncle Johnny have been married forever. Since you were teenagers, right?”

“Let me tell you a story. When your uncle and I started dating, I had just broken up with a boy I thought I was going to marry.”

“You were what? Twelve?”

“I was seventeen, actually. Bernie Romano.”

“The butcher?”

“The very same. We’d dated for about two years and I really thought he was the one. Then one day he told me he didn’t love me anymore, and I was heartbroken. I had planned our lives out, you see. He was going to take over his dad’s butcher shop, and I was going to stay home and be a full-time mom.”

“It sounds very Hunter’s Creek to me. What happened next?”

“Your uncle asked me on a date and even though I was heartbroken over Bernie, I went because we’d been friends for a while and I liked him. We

dated, but my heart wasn't in it."

"It was still with the butcher?"

"Exactly. So, after about a month or so of dating your uncle, I dumped him."

"Aunt Sheila! Poor Uncle Johnny."

She waves her hand. "Oh, he got over it. I decided I wasn't in the headspace to date anyone, so I said no to anyone who asked me."

"You were popular, huh?"

"I was in my day," she replies with a laugh, making herself sound about eighty. "Then, when I'd gotten my head together and was over Bernie, I realized I'd never forgotten Johnny. So, I asked him out. He said yes, and the rest is history."

"You gave Uncle Johnny a second chance."

A smile creeps across her face. "Giving that man a second chance was the best thing I ever did."

"That's why you named this place the Second Chance Café."

"It was either that or Johnny's and your uncle didn't want that. Now, I need you to run some errands for me, if you don't mind. You're coming back tonight to do the special dinner shift, right?"

Aunt Sheila decided only a couple of hours ago to open for dinners once a week. It's a new venture and tonight is the first night. I agreed to help out. Waitressing is hardly going to help me buy a mansion, so the more shifts, the better—especially while Gabe is taking his space.

"I'm dropping by Mom and Dad's for a while and then I'll be back by five. Promise."

"Send them my love," she says, as though she hasn't already seen my parents today, same as most days.

She gives me a list of items, several of which look suspiciously personal and not coffeehouse-related, such as collecting her dry cleaning and picking up her shampoo and conditioner from her hair stylist, but I complete them all.

Reaching my parents' house a couple of hours later, I ask Mom and Dad to join me in the living room.

"What's going on, sweet pea?" Dad asks as he and Mom take a seat on the sofa. "Sorry. Pumpkin. I'll get the hang of it."

"Actually, Dad, it's fine. You can call me sweet pea if you like," I reply.

His face lights up. "Are you sure? Because I don't want you to feel like a pea when your sisters are both pumpkins."

An image of Harper and Marlowe as large pumpkins with heads, arms, and legs enters my mind. I smile. "I was kinda stupid about that. Sorry, Dad." Dad's eyes flick to Mom's. "It felt important to you at the time."

I shrug. "Being the only pea is fine. Special, even."

Dad beams at me. "That's the way I see it. Are you going to sit down?"

"I've got something I want to tell you and I'd prefer to stand." I chew on my lip as I stand awkwardly in front of the dormant fireplace.

"Is this about the stranger you and Gabe saw last night?" Mom asks.

"No. It's about something else. Something to do with just me." I shift my weight from foot to foot. I don't need to think about all of that right now.

Mom leans back in her seat and shoots me an encouraging smile. "We're all ears, honey."

"We sure are," Dad confirms, smiling expectantly at me.

I clear my throat, nervous.

*It's only my parents. They love me and they support me.*

"Okay. Here goes. I wanted to share with you what my plans are and hope that you'll support me in them."

"Of course we will," Dad says.

"Absolutely!" Mom echoes.

"Good, because I've made a decision. I'm saving up my money to go to school. Beauty school, actually. You see, I met this makeup artist named Hayley on the film set that time I went to visit, and she encouraged me to learn how to become a makeup artist. I've always had this artistic streak in me, and I haven't used it at all. I figured being a makeup artist might be a way that I could use it and have a career, too. So, I began researching it a while back and found that there's a course starting up real soon at a beauty school in Cotown. They teach you how to do makeup as well as things like facials, nails, massages, the works. I, err, I enrolled myself last night."

I hold my breath. It could have been a rash decision, making it the way I did when I got home from looking for Gabe last night, but it felt right. It still feels right, and I'm excited about the new possibilities it could bring.

"You did? Is this because you missed out on the glass blowing apprenticeship that Gabe got?" Mom's hand flies to her mouth. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have mentioned Gabe's name. Oops. There I go again. I'm sorry, honey." She looks mortified.

"It's fine," I lie. "It's not about the apprenticeship. Gabe loves it and he's doing super well at it and I'm happy for him. This is about me. Just me. I

really feel like I've found what I want to do with my life and I hope you can be happy for me. I know you think I'm the kid of the family and I'm never going to do anything with my life, but I think I was just trying to work it out and I never really knew what it was that I wanted to do."

"Good for you," Dad says. "It's just wonderful. Isn't it, honey?" he says to Mom.

"Oh, it is! But I'm a bit confused about why you said we think of you as a kid."

"You do," I reply simply. "Everyone does. It's 'Ryn's the baby of the family so we can't expect her to make sensible decisions,' or 'that's just Ryn, the big kid.' And before you say anything else, I know I made a pact with Gabe that we were never going to grow up, but that doesn't mean I haven't grown up."

Mom's eyebrows rise to meet her hairline. "You made a pact?"

"It was a long time ago and we were being stupid and, anyway, he's gone on to do the glass blowing thing and I've gotten to the point where I think I want more than just working at my aunt's coffeehouse. Which I'm really trying to do better at, by the way. It's part of the new me."

"Honey, we don't see you as a kid. Sure, you're the youngest in the family and you didn't want to leave and go to college like your older sisters, but we've always thought you'd figure out what you wanted to do with your life in your own good time," Mom says.

"Your mom is right. We figured that if you never found something you really wanted to do then that was okay, too, although I had hoped you would fall in love with the coffeehouse and wanna stay there."

Mom shushes him. "Not now, honey."

"Why? What's going on at the coffeehouse?" I ask.

"It doesn't matter. What matters is that you've found something you love," Mom says.

"I'm not a very good waitress and being nice to people and remembering their orders just isn't my thing."

"But you think beauty school could be?" Mom asks.

"I do. Since Lauren Barrowe left town a year or so ago there's no beautician here in Hunter's Creek, and one day, when I'm fully trained and ready, I'd like to set up a business. See if I could be Hunter's Creek's new beautician and makeup artist."

"Because the people of this town need some serious beautifying, is that

what you're saying, sweet pea?" Dad asks with a chuckle.

I smile back at him. "Something like that, Dad."

"Well, I think it's just wonderful and we will support you one hundred percent," Dad says as he and Mom rise to their feet and collect me in a group hug.

"Thanks, guys," I say, choked with emotion.

"I'm so sorry you felt that we treated you like the baby of the family, because I think you might be right about that. At least a little. But you're a grown woman with a mind of your own, and I love you for it," Mom says with tears in her eyes.

I mumble, "Thanks," as I sniff loudly.

Things may be on shaky ground with the man I love, but I've gained a new focus in my life. A grown-up focus, and it's hard not to feel good about that, even if my heart is aching.



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## Chapter 30

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## Gabe



I open my eyes, disoriented. I blink at the familiar surrounds of my living room. I'm lying on my sofa, a crick in my neck, the blanket my mom always had on the sofa arm pulled across me.

As I blink in the daylight, my mind bounces from my dad's sudden and unexpected appearance to the fact that he wants something from me. That the brother I've met once in my life is sick and needs me. That Ryn met with my dad and chose not to tell me about it.

It was a lot.

Last night, I needed space. I needed time to process everything. Seeing my dad sucked the wind from my sails, and it brought up so many emotions—emotions I thought I had long since put to bed.

It turns out, when your long-lost dad reappears in your life, it seriously messes with your head.

After I walked away, I found my truck and drove straight to the cemetery. I needed to be with my mom.

I sat there by her grave, shrouded in darkness, and I talked. I told her about my dad turning up and befriending my best friend. I told her how he had an ulterior motive, to save the son he stuck around to bring up. I told her how Ryn talked to him without my knowledge. I told her how that hurt me.

I let it all out, and with it, my tears.

I cried for the loss of my mom.

I cried for the man my father is.

I cried for the fact that he has never been there for me.

Eventually, to the tune of the morning chorus birdsong, I placed a kiss on my mom's gravestone, told her I love her, got into my truck, and headed home.

When I got there, exhausted, I curled up on the sofa and finally fell asleep.

Now, as I lie here, staring up at the ceiling as the rain pelts against the window, I try to work out what the right thing to do is.

Do I ignore my father's plea to spite him, and in doing so hurt Elliot, an innocent man?

Or do I suck it up and agree to his request, despite hating him?

I heave out of breath. I'm finding it impossible to know what to do.

I need my best friend. Ryn would know what to do—and if she didn't, she'd be here to help me work it out.

I pick up my phone. I had dropped it on the coffee table when I got home. I send a message and then read the last one Ryn sent me.

*Just know I'm here for you. xoxo*

I smile despite my turmoil.

That's the thing: Ryn has always been there for me. Always. And last night I made her feel like she's the enemy, like she'd betrayed me for my father.

That says a lot more about me than it does about her.

You see, my biggest fear has always been ending up like my mom. I don't mean as a single parent, abandoned by her partner and raising a kid as best she knew how. She did an amazing job. I love her, and I will be forever grateful for the person she was, and the person she made me into. But with that comes some baggage. Some fears. I put so much emphasis on honesty, that I lost sight of everything else. My mom did that, and she had good reason to. My dad lied to her. He had another family that she knew nothing about, and their marriage wasn't legal. Learning that must have been the worst shock of her life, and it caused her not to trust people.

She taught me that of the virtues, honesty always has to be number one.

And I took it to heart, following her lead in my life.

I've always tried to act with integrity, with honesty, and I've asked the

same in return from the people in my life. So, last night when Ryn showed that she hadn't been completely honest with me, my first instinct was to feel betrayed. Ryn, the woman I love, met with my dad without telling me? It was like a sucker punch, right in the gut.

By my mom's reasoning, that made her a liar.

Black and white thinking: you're either honest or you're not.

But here's the thing. In life, things are very rarely black or white. They're very rarely one thing or the other. Ryn is not perfect—but neither am I.

She has such a presence in my life, and not just because I've been in love with her forever. She's someone who lights up the room when she walks into it, her smile making my heart sing. She's nothing but her authentic self at all times, and she is the best friend I've had in my life—and could ever hope for.

Last night, Ryn got caught in the crossfire, an unwilling participant in the Gabe and Patrick show. She didn't tell me she'd met with him because she was trying to protect me. I can see that now. She had my best interests at heart. She was in my corner.

Now, I need to show her I'm in her corner, too.

I glance at the time. I'm due at the Black Bear in less than twenty minutes. I take a quick shower, throw on some fresh clothes, and head out.

After my shift is done, with the rain showing no sign of letting up, I message Aunt Sheila and then go to Hunter's Creek Stationery. I've got something I need to buy for tonight, and I'm eager to get started.

I dash to my truck and drive the short distance to Main Street. I find a parking spot right out front, and as I open my door there's a loud crash of thunder overhead and the falling rain intensifies.

Talk about adding some drama to my grand gesture.

Not that what I'm planning for Ryn is all that grand. It's not like when Christopher told Harper he wanted to take her out on a date in front of everyone right after he saved the town.

No. For Ryn and me it's more intimate, personal. It's more us.

With my trusty flannel acting as my umbrella, I knock on the door and a moment later, Aunt Sheila pulls it open, a broad grin on her face.

"Aren't you a sight for sore eyes. I got your message. Quick, come in out of the rain."

Inside, I shake out my wet clothes.

"You're all set up. The ladder's out back, but I figured you're the burly type. You can go get it and do your thing. Just make sure you put everything

back where it belongs once you're done."

"Thanks, Aunt Sheila."

"She thinks we're opening up for dinner tonight."

"She has no idea?"

"None." She grins conspiratorially. "Go get that ladder."

I do as she says and put the ladder in place. I climb up and open the box I just bought. Carefully, I lay out my map on the top rung and begin to place each star in its correct position, including the Big Dipper. Of course. It takes some time, and working in the lit coffeehouse, I don't get the full effect until I climb down the ladder, pull the blinds shut, and flick off the lights.

I stand in the middle of the room and gaze up at my handiwork. It looks like the ceiling of Ryn's childhood bedroom.

"It's terrific," Aunt Sheila declares, as she too gazes up alongside me. "It's just like Ryn's old bedroom."

"That's the plan."

"If we ever open up for dinner, the customers will like it, I'm sure. It's whimsical. Now, are you sure you don't want anything other than sodas?"

"Sodas are enough."

"In that case, I'll leave you to it. Lock up when you leave," she says as she makes her way toward the door. "And Gabe? I know it's none of my business, but Ryn has been down in the dumps today and I do hope you're doing this for her as more than just her friend."

My response is to simply smile. As the fully-fledged leader and founding member of the Hunter's Creek Ladies' Committee, I don't want her to know what my full intentions are tonight—not before Ryn does.

With Aunt Sheila now gone, I pull out my phone and send a message to Ryn.

*I'm done with my brooding, I begin. I miss you. Can we talk? I'm at the Second Chance. xoxo*

I stare at my phone, awaiting her reply. It's one thing to arrange a grand gesture to tell the woman you love how you feel about her and that you're sorry for the way you acted the night before. It's quite another to have to wait around, bursting with those feelings that want to get out.

My phone vibrates with a message.

*I'm at my parents' place right now.*

She's probably holding back, hurt by my disappearance last night when I told her I needed time to think. Although it was what I needed to do, I get it

and I don't blame her.

I type my response.

*You've been waiting for me since last night, so I'll wait for you.*

The three dots appear on the phone, showing me she's replying.

*Maybe I should make you wait until tomorrow?*

I smile at the screen. Such a Ryn response.

*I wouldn't blame you if you did.*

I hit send and then type a second message.

*By the way, have I told you lately I'm in love with you?*

Her response is swift.

*Geez. Manipulating much?*

I let out a laugh.

*No manipulating. I promise.*

*Be there in a few. And G?*

*Yes, Ryn?*

*I'm in love with you, too.*

I grin as I set up a picnic blanket and place some cushions on top of it. Scattering cushions is not exactly in my skill set, but I do my best.

After what feels like a long, long time, I hear a knock at the front door.

Ryn.

I rush over and pull it open, my heart bursting with love for her. She's wearing tennis shoes, jeans, and a t-shirt, like she always does, and she's holding a red umbrella over her head that gives her hair a warm glow.

My plan was to bring her inside and get her comfortable on the picnic blanket and, with a soda in hand, I was going to turn the lights out so she could look up at the stars before I delivered my speech.

But you know what they say about the best laid plans, particularly when the woman you've loved forever is standing in front of you, looking breathtakingly gorgeous.

"I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry," I blurt as I catch her hand in mine, my heart thrashing in my chest. I'm overwhelmed with the love I feel for her.

"I'm the one who's sorry. I should have told you I'd seen him. I know how important honesty is to you, but I didn't because you were so sure you never wanted to see him again, so I told him I wouldn't help him, and I was going to tell you about it, and I'm so sorry I didn't," she replies in a rush.

"No, Ryn. I pushed you away when you've always been there for me. It was a knee-jerk reaction, and one I'm ashamed of. I know it's no excuse but I

somehow got you and my dad and my mom all tangled up in my head and my fears got the better of me. I feel terrible that I walked away from you.”

She twists her mouth. “I didn’t like that a whole lot.”

“My mom never recovered from what my dad did to her and she never allowed herself to trust anyone again. She taught me you were either honest or you were a liar, and I got stuck in thinking that way about everyone, including you. My mom made me promise that I would only ever fall in love with someone who would protect my heart.”

By now tears stream down her face and my heart contracts in my chest for this woman, this beautiful, clever, gorgeous woman I love more than I could ever have imagined loving anyone.

“I promise to protect your heart, G. Always,” she murmurs.

“I know, and you always have. Finding out that you’d seen my dad without my knowledge hit me hard, but I should have trusted you.”

“You can trust me.”

“I lost sight of it for a while last night, but I do trust you and I love you for it.”

“I love you, too. But Gabe?”

“Yes?”

“Do you think I could come in out of the rain?”

I let out a self-conscious chortle, dismayed at how thoughtless I’m being. “Of course. Come in.” I stand back as she closes her umbrella and steps inside.

I close the door and turn back to her, offering her my hand once more. “I’ve got something to show you.”

“Sure.”

She takes my hand in hers and I lead her to the picnic blanket.

“You put a blanket on the floor of the coffeehouse, G?” she asks on a laugh. “You’ll need to clear that away soon. We’ve got dinner bookings tonight.”

“No, you don’t.”

“We don’t?”

“I got your aunt to tell you that to make sure you’d be here.”

“You schemer,” she teases with a happy smile.

I gesture at the picnic blanket. “Take a seat. Soda?”

“Of course.” She sits down and I hand her a drink.

We crack them open and each take a sip.

I hop up to turn the lights off and then join her on the blanket.

“Is this mood lighting or something, G?”

“You’ll see.”

Together we lean back on the cushions, looking up at the ceiling.

“Stars?” she asks.

“For you.”

“It’s awesome. You even got the Big Dipper!”

“No ceiling constellation in Hunter’s Creek is complete without it.”

She leans over and kisses me, her lips cold and sweet from the soda. “I love it. I love *you*.”

I brush my fingers down her cheek. “That’s just as well because otherwise the next thing I’m going to say could be a little awkward.”

Her beautiful face lights up in the smile I adore. “What is it?”

“We’ve known each other forever, and although this thing between us is new, it doesn’t feel that way to me.”

“It doesn’t feel that way to me, either. It feels natural. Right.”

“Exactly. Which is why, one day, under the stars, I’m going to ask you to marry me.”

“You are?” she says, her voice trembling, her face aglow.

“If that’s okay with you?”

She cups my face in her hands and gives me a long, sensual, emotional kiss that tells me everything I need to know. “That’s more than okay with me, G.”

I kiss her back, a sense of peace and warmth and contentedness falling over me like a blanket.

Ryn is the first woman I ever loved, and after years of friendship, she loves me back. I know she will be my only love, the woman I spend my life with, right here in Hunter’s Creek.



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## Chapter 31

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## Ryn



The film credits roll but neither of us are moving. We're snuggled up together in Hunter's Creek's one and only movie theatre, my head against Gabe's shoulder, his arm around me.

"That was super romantic and I loved it," I tell him.

He makes the face that tells me his opinion may not match mine.

"You didn't like it, did you?"

"What can I say? It's a rom com."

"Exactly. It's got both romance and comedy, two of my favorite things in all the world. What's not to like?"

He plants a kiss on top of my head. "As long as you liked it, that's all that matters."

"Consider it a success."

We make our way out of the theatre and onto the street. It's been a few weeks since that terrible night with Patrick Hartmann and the weather has begun to cool. I pull my jean jacket on against the breeze, and Gabe wraps his arm around my shoulder. Of course, with the cooler weather comes Gabe's take on the Hunter's Creek uniform: an array of plaid flannel shirts which he teams with a pair of jeans and work boots. But I've said before and I'll say again, no one in this town wears the Hunter's Creek uniform quite as well as

he does.

Not that I'm biased.

"Ice cream?" he asks.

"Of course."

We walk past the Second Chance Café, closed for the day, past one of the town's three bars named after a bear, to Lombardi's Gelato and Ice Cream, an ice cream parlor that opened up at the start of summer.

With wooden tables and cushioned booths, the walls are adorned with vintage ice cream advertisements and old photographs of Hunter's Creek, the counter is a solid wood throwback to the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The place is packed with ice cream eaters, the sound of spoons against glass and chatter in the air, and we say hello to Harper and Christopher, sharing a banana split and looking all gooey eyed with love. We spot Ivy and her date, a guy we went to high school with who lives over in Cotown these days, and Aunt Sheila and Uncle Johnny, who are sipping their milkshakes and chatting.

We get our treats—two-scoop cones with chocolate and mint for me and coconut and raspberry for Gabe—and then Gabe says, "Let's not stay. I've got a surprise for you."

"A good surprise?"

"Why would I give you a bad surprise when we're out on a date?"

"You're someone who doesn't like rom coms. I do not profess to understand you."

He laughs and it rumbles through me, making me smile. "Well, the *good* surprise is just around this corner." He takes a bite of his ice cream. "Try this. It's amazing." He offers me his cone and I take a bite.

"That's yummy, but not as yummy as this. Try it."

He takes a much bigger bite of my chocolate ice cream than I did of his coconut. "That's good."

"Did you leave me any?" I ask, looking at my much-depleted ice cream.

"Plenty," he replies on a laugh.

We meander down Main Street and turn off onto Donnelly Street.

"This is where I'm taking you," Gabe tells me.

"The mall? It's 8:30 at night. The stores will be long-closed by now."

The people of Hunter's Creek call the tiny covered strip of three shops on Donnelly Street "the mall". We won't be rivaling Bloomington's Mall of America anytime soon.

"We're not going into the stores. We're going here." He gestures at a

large, human-sized black box with a red curtain, like he's a presenter on a game show

"A photo booth? Are you kidding me right now? I love these things."

"Your mom mentioned it was here at dinner the other night and I thought it'd be fun to take some photos. Want to?"

"Does the Hunter's Creek Ladies Committee love to gossip and meddle in people's lives? Of course! Let's take some photos."

"You might want to wipe there, first." He gestures at my top lip.

"Chocolate?" I ask and he nods. "Kiss it off," I challenge.

"With pleasure," he replies, doing just that, kissing first my top lip, then both my lips until there's no trace of ice cream.

"You're ready for your close up, Ms. Cole."

I giggle. Gabe Hartmann is easily the most amazing boyfriend I've ever had, hands down.

He puts some money in the machine, pulls the curtain back for me, and we slide onto the seat. "What backdrop do you want?"

"You can choose backdrops?"

"When was the last time you took photos in one of these booths?"

I offer him a coy smile. "You know when."

He smiles back. "Yeah, I do. Ready?"

"G, I was born ready."

He shoots me a look. "I can't believe you said that. Too cheesy."

*Snap!* The first photo is taken, almost blinding us.

"I wasn't ready," I complain.

"I thought you were born ready?"

I ignore the gibe. "Quick. Do something cute."

"Like this?" He takes my hair in his hand and pulls it across his face to form a mustache, like he did for that photo strip back when we were seventeen. I open my mouth to tell him to use a smaller amount when *Snap!* the second photo is taken.

"Dang it! Not ready again, and don't you dare say anything."

He raises his hands in the surrender sign. "Would I?"

"Yes, G, you would."

"I know what to do this time," he says, but he doesn't wait for my reply. He sweeps me up in a kiss and *Snap!* the third and fourth photos are taken, but I barely register them. What can I say? Gabe's an excellent kisser.

"Shall we see how they turned out?" he asks.

“Most definitely.”

He pulls them up on the screen and we both laugh. The photos are not what you would describe as great. In fact, we look surprised in the first photo, and I’ve got my mouth open and half of Gabe’s face is covered with my hair in the second. But the third and fourth? Those pictures are perfect.

“Choose Hawaii,” I instruct him.

“Excuse me?”

“The backdrop. Choose a beach in Hawaii because I want to go there and I’ve never even left the country.”

“Ryn-Ryn, you do know Hawaii is the 50<sup>th</sup> state, don’t you?”

“Of course I do, but I also know it’s a group of gorgeous islands surrounded by the Pacific Ocean and I want to go there, so quit with the geography lesson.”

He finds a beach scene and we print the photos before we meander through the streets to Gabe’s place, where he suggests we sit on the porch swing together.

“Oh, my gosh. I just got it. You’re recreating that night from high school.” I nudge him. “You’re a romantic, Gabriel Hartmann.”

“Your mom told me about the photo booth and the only movie playing tonight is a rom com—”

“And you switched shifts so we could go to it,” I interrupt.

He fixes me with his gaze. “Are you complaining?”

“No,” I reply as memories of that night wash gently over me. “You know what we did after the movie and the photos?”

“Remind me.”

“We sat right here on this swing and kissed.”

“We don’t have to do that part if you don’t want to.”

I giggle. “Yeah, you know how much I hate kissing you.”

“Really? You hide it so well.”

And with that, he leans in and kisses me, just like he did that night back when we were in high school. But tonight is different. Tonight, neither of us is trying to hide anything from the other.

Gabe surprises me by springing to his feet.

“Where are you going?”

“I’ll be right back. Sit here and think about me.”

I let out another giggle. I know he means it as a joke, but I also know I’m likely to do just that. That’s the thing when you’re in love. You think about

the person all the time. In fact, it's hard to think about much else.

That's not to say I don't have plenty of other things to think about right now. I'm still working for Aunt Sheila at the Second Chance Café, although only when I can fit it in between classes—because I'm now a student at the Cotown School of Beauty. I'm learning how to do makeup and facials and all those things beauty therapists do. And you know what? I love it, just as I thought I would. It's like it was made for me.

So, one good thing came out of Hollywood coming to town, and it has nothing to do with Joe and everything to do with me.

My sisters are happy for me, my parents are proud, it feels amazing to have found what I want to do with my life, and Aunt Sheila has had to find someone else to focus the Hunter's Creek Ladies' Committee's meddling on.

As for my boyfriend—I do so love saying that—he still works at the Black Bear, he's still training as an apprentice at Theo's glass studio, but he graduated from his small business class this week and has begun looking for the things he needs to set up his own studio in the garage of his house. It's going to take some time, because these things don't come cheap, but he's determined. I'm with him every step of the way.

Natalie misses him, but considering she tried to sabotage our relationship to claim Gabe for herself, I'm not too sorry about that.

Gabe sits back down next to me on the swing, holding a yellow box the size of two shoe boxes, tied with a red bow. "I've got something for you."

"What is it?"

"Why would I go to the effort to put something in a box and tie it up with a bow if I was just going to tell you what it is?"

"Good point." I pull the ribbon off and pop the box open, peering inside. I look back up at Gabe. "The vase."

"It was collecting dust at the studio and Theo told me I needed to get rid of it," he says with a sly grin on his face.

I let out a giddy laugh. "It's the one I saw and loved." I pull the vase from the box and admire it. It's a wide-rimmed, mid-century style vase in various shades of blue and purple.

What can I say? I've got the best boyfriend who also happens to be my best friend and easily the hottest guy in town. I have totally hit the jackpot.

"I didn't exactly hide it very well."

"No, but you hid something else pretty well. Something kinda big." I nudge him with my elbow and he rolls his eyes at me.

He knows I'm referring to the fact that he's been in love with me since high school and had never said anything to me. He told me I had friend zoned him and he'd learned to accept it, and I told him I'd only friend zoned him because I didn't think he felt anything for me.

Funny how two best friends who know each other well can get things so very wrong.

But none of that matters now because we've found one another and could not be happier.

It turns out being in love with Gabe, and him loving me right back, is the very best feeling in the world.

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## Epilogue

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## Gabe



After a long drive, we arrive at an address in Portland. Nerves are clanging in my chest and my hands are damp.

But I need to do this. There's no turning back.

"Are you ready?" Ryn asks me softly from the passenger seat.

I peer up at the red brick apartment block. "I'm not sure."

"It's okay if you decide not to do it today."

"No. I need to. We talked about this."

The truth is, I'm so on the fence about being here, I'm like a squirrel at a nut convention, torn between almonds and cashews.

Ryn gives my hand a squeeze. "I've got you."

I flick my gaze to hers and the love I see in her eyes compels me to see this through. "Let's do this."

We climb out of my truck and I press the button for Apartment 5.

A moment later, the door pops open with a buzz, and together we climb the stairs to the fifth floor. At the top of the stairs, I take Ryn's hand in mine, grateful for her presence.

A man is standing in an open doorway with a tentative smile on his face as we approach. He's a familiar looking man, a man I haven't seen since that night after the screening of *Serious Bite*.

“Gabriel. Ryn. I’m glad you came,” he says and I nod, because I’m not sure I’m glad, but it does feel like I’m doing the right thing.

“Hey, Mr. Hartmann,” Ryn mumbles.

“That’s quite a walk up you’ve got there,” I comment, my nerves are as tangled as an old box of Christmas lights.

“I hear you. I couldn’t live here. I definitely need an elevator,” he replies with a smile. “Come in. I’ve got someone for you both to meet.”

I know who it is so I reply simply, “Okay.”

We follow him into the apartment where a man is waiting. It’s like looking into a contorted mirror. He’s tall like me, although skinnier, his hair a couple shades darker than mine, his eyes a pale blue.

“Gabriel, Ryn, this is Elliot,” Patrick says.

Ryn raises her hand in a wave and says hello while I pull my lips into a smile. “Hey, Elliot.”

“It’s great to meet you properly, Gabriel,” he replies.

“My friends call me Gabe,” I reply and feel a small squeeze of my hand. I glance at Ryn and see she’s smiling back at me.

“Gabe, then,” Elliot replies. “I know we met all those years ago, but I feel like we’ve got a lot of ground to cover.”

“I guess we do,” I say.

I had met Elliot and his older sister, Michelle, when I was fourteen years old. He was a year older than me, confused as to who I was and what I was doing, turning up on his family’s doorstep, claiming I was also his father’s son.

Today is different. Today he knows me as his brother, and we’re here together with our dad.

Man, that feels weird to say. *Our dad.*

It’s going to take time.

“How about I go fix us some coffee? How do you take it?” Elliot asks.

“Just water for me, thanks,” I reply. I’m hyped. The last thing I need is to add caffeine to my system.

“I’ll have coffee. I’ll come help you make it,” Ryn replies. “If that’s okay?” she asks me.

“It’s fine,” I tell her.

“Come with me, Ryn. The kitchen’s down the hall.” Elliot closes the living room sliding doors behind him and Ryn, who shoots me one final encouraging smile, and then it’s just Patrick and me.

“I’m also really glad you came,” he says. “About the night outside the hall last week? I should never have told you about Elliot. Not there. I messed up. You seemed pretty angry with both me and Ryn, but as I said, it’s all down to me.”

I tighten my jaw. I know I was unfairly angry with Ryn that night when it was all him—him and my rigid views on honesty. “I know it is.”

“That night, I felt like I needed to give you a strong reason not to run away from me. Elliot needing blood for his surgery was the first thing I landed on. I hope you understand that him needing this from you is only part of the picture.”

“Look, even if it is the only reason you tracked me down, I want to do the right thing. I’m ready to donate blood.”

His face lights up. “You are?”

I pull my lips together, my jaw tight, and nod. Although I know this is right, I have to fight the feeling that I’m being used by my father—and that he wants nothing more from me. But, as Ryn and I have agreed, after I do this the ball will be firmly in my dad’s court. It’s up to him what he does with it.

“Thank you, Gabriel. This means so much to me. To my family.” He pauses for a beat before he adds, “To *our* family, because I hope you can feel a part of that one day.”

I lean back on my heels. “Let’s take it one step at a time, shall we?”

He lets out a giddy laugh. “Would it be okay if I gave you a hug?”

“I guess,” I reply, before he wraps his arms around me in the most emotionally uncomfortable hug of my life. I’m being hugged by the man who fathered me and then left me.

Talk about a trainwreck.

Ryn and Elliot return to the living room, and I give Ryn a look to tell her I’m doing okay. The four of us spend the next hour catching up on a lifetime—or three. Of course it’s as awkward as all get out, and I can’t say it’s my favorite thing to do with my time, but it certainly feels like the *right* thing to do. I’m going to hold on to that for just as long as I need to.

Who knows? Maybe someday I will feel a part of this family. Maybe I won’t. But I’m here and I’m doing what I need to do.

And most of all, I know Ryn, the woman I love, is proud of me. Sure, we wasted so much time, both of us hiding feelings we had for each other, but that doesn’t matter now. What matters is that we found our way to one another, and as I told Ryn that night under the stars at the Second Chance

Café where we got our second chance, one day I'm going to ask her to marry me, and until that time I'm going to treasure every single moment I get with my best friend.

THE END

THANK you so much for reading Ryn and Gabe's story. I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. The third book in the series is about Ryn's oldest sister, Marlowe. Called *Faking It With the Guy Next Door*, it's on pre-order from Amazon, releasing later in 2023. You can pre-order it [here](#).

## Acknowledgments



I want to say a huge thank you to you, my readers, for not only reading this book, but for reading so many of my other books, too. I've written well over twenty titles now, and every one of them has been an amazing journey. Some of you have read all of my books—including the sexy ones written under my pen name, Lacey Sinclair—and I want you to know that it means so much to me that you have stuck by me over the years. For some of you, this might be the first book of mine that you've ever read, and I sincerely hope it's not the last. I try to put humour and warmth into every book I write to make you smile, perhaps to give you an escape, and I want you to finish each book with that warm, satisfied feeling I myself get when I read a happily ever after that feels just right. I love writing. I love bringing characters to life, giving them stories—putting them through hell along the way, of course—and ultimately giving them their happily ever afters. I get to write as my full time job these days, and I wouldn't be able to do that without you, my wonderful readers. So, from the bottom of my heart, thank you.

Writing Ryn Cole's story was so much fun. She's younger than a lot of my heroines and had purposefully avoided following in her sisters' footsteps,

choosing instead to stay in the small town where she grew up, determined in fact to never really grow up. Of course you've read the book now and you know that it was a flawed way of thinking on her part, but the fact that she loves Hunter's Creek, fell in love with her best friend, and ends up working out that adulterating isn't quite as scary as it seems, was immensely satisfying to write. I really enjoyed writing her snarky wit, and in my first draft I had her rolling her eyes at pretty much anything anyone said. That had to change—although not rooted in science, I'm sure a character's eyes can fall right out of their head if they do too much eye rolling—but I tried not to lose her character in the process. Not only that, but she got to tell Joe Turner that she would “smell ya later” that really made me smile, because I do love giving a jerk his comeuppance, but also it's such a childlike expression, I knew Ryn had to say it at some point during the book. After all, she said it in book 1, *Faking It With the Grump*.

In *Faking It with the Grump* I wrote Gabe as very much a blank canvas, seen through the eyes of Harper, who knew and liked him, and Christopher, who didn't feel any affinity to him whatsoever and even wondered whether he had much of a brain in his head! Of course I wanted to tell Christopher that Gabe certainly does have a brain in his head—he's not just flannel-clad eye candy—as well as a good heart, but he and Christopher are very different people so I needed to wait until this book to give Gabe the depth he deserved. Pairing him with his longstanding best friend, Ryn, meant I got to create a back story for him that showed how he had been made into the man he is now. I'm really happy with the way he turned out, and was so glad to be able to give both him and Ryn the friends to lovers happily ever after they both deserve.

My critique partner, Jackie Rutherford, hauled this book over the coals (no pun intended – coals-slash-Coles) and helped me pull it into shape. As ever, thank you, Jackie, for all your incredibly useful feedback and advice. I'm much the better writer for it.

Kim McCann proof read this book, as she has done for a bunch of my books now, and she did a great job, as usual. With this book though, she went a step further and pointed out a rather big plot issue that needed fixing, like, *yesterday*, which has made this book so much stronger as a result. So, thank you Kim, for not only your proof reading and Americanizing of my Kiwi English, but for being a total rockstar, too.

As I have mentioned a couple of times before, I've got an awesome group

of readers in my Facebook group, Kate's Cupids. They help me out with names and ideas and we have a whole lot of fun together. I totally love this group. Thanks especially to Christine Todd Champeaux and Joanna Keisel for Gabe's last name, Hartmann with two 'n's (to show his German heritage), and again to Christine for Ryn's name. Thanks, Cupids!

## About the Author



Kate O'Keeffe is a *USA TODAY* bestselling and award-winning author who writes exactly what she loves to read: laugh-out-loud romantic comedies with swoon-worthy heroes and gorgeous feel-good happily ever afters. She lives and loves in beautiful Hawke's Bay, New Zealand with her family and two scruffy but loveable dogs.

When she's not penning her latest story, Kate can be found hiking up hills (slowly), traveling to different countries around the globe, and eating chocolate. A lot of it.

Kate's titles:

Second Chance Café Series:

[\*Faking It With the Grump\*](#)

[\*Faking It With My Best Friend\*](#)

[\*Faking It With the Guy Next Door\*](#)

It's Complicated Series:

[\*Never Fall for Your Back-Up Guy\*](#)

[\*Never Fall for Your Enemy\*](#)

[\*Never Fall for Your Fake Fiancé\*](#)

[\*Never Fall for Your One that Got Away\*](#)

Love Manor Romantic Comedy Series:



*Dating Mr. Darcy*  
*Marrying Mr. Darcy*  
*Falling for Another Darcy*  
*Falling for Mr. Bingley (spin-off novella)*

High Tea Series:  
*No More Bad Dates*  
*No More Terrible Dates*  
*No More Horrible Dates*

Cozy Cottage Café Series:  
*One Last First Date*  
*Two Last First Dates*  
*Three Last First Dates*  
*Four Last First Dates*

Wollywood Romantic Comedy Series:  
*Styling Wollywood*  
*Miss Perfect Meets Her Match*  
*Falling for Grace*

Standalone title:  
*One Way Ticket*

Writing as Lacey Sinclair:  
*Manhattan Cinderella*  
*The Right Guy*

