

It smelled like parchment and tea, mixed with a little bit of dust and home. I'd never been able to find anything close to its soothing scent in any chain store while I'd lived in New York, and grief pricked at my eyes with my first breath. Gran had been gone six months, and I missed her so much, my chest felt like it might collapse from the hole she'd left behind.

"Georgia?" Mrs. Rivera's jaw dropped for a second before she smiled wide from behind the counter, balancing her phone between her ear and shoulder. "Hold on one second, Peggy."

"Hey, Mrs. Rivera." I grinned and waved at her welcomingly familiar face. "Don't hang up on my account. I'm just stopping in."

"Well, it's wonderful to see you!" She glanced toward the phone. "No, not you, Peggy. Georgia just walked in!" Her warm brown eyes found mine again. "Yes, *that* Georgia."

I waved once more as they continued their conversation, then walked back to the romance section, where Gran had an entire stack of shelves dedicated to the books she'd written. I picked up the last novel she'd published and opened the dust jacket so I could see her face. We had the same blue eyes, but she'd given up dyeing her once-black hair around her seventy-fifth birthday—the year after Mom had dumped me on her doorstep the first time.

Gran's headshot was all pearls and a silk blouse, while the woman herself had been a pair of overalls, dusty from the garden, and a sun hat wide enough to shade the county, but her smile was the same. I grabbed another, earlier book just to see a second version of that smile.

The door jingled, and a moment later, a man on a cell phone began to browse in the general fiction aisle just behind me.

"A modern-day Jane Austen," I whispered, reading the quote from the cover. It had never ceased to amaze me that Gran had been the most romantic soul I'd ever known, and yet she'd spent the overwhelming majority of her life alone, writing books about love when she'd only been allowed to experience it for a handful of years. Even when she'd married Grandpa Brian, they'd only had a decade before cancer took him. Maybe the women in my family were cursed when it came to our love lives.

"What the hell is this?" The man's voice rose.

My eyebrows flew upward, and I glanced over my shoulder. He held a Noah Harrison book, where—go figure—there were two people in the classic, nearly kissing position.

"Because I wasn't exactly checking my email in the middle of the Andes, so yes, it's the first time I'm seeing the new one." The guy practically seethed as he picked up another Harrison book and held them up, side by side. Two different couples, same exact pose.

I'd definitely stick with my selection, or anything else in this section.

“They look exactly the same, that’s the problem. What was wrong with the old— Yes, I’m pissed off! I’ve been traveling for eighteen hours and in case you forgot, I cut my research trip short to be here. I’m telling you they look *exactly* the same. Hold on, I’ll prove it. Miss?”

“Yes?” I twisted slightly and glanced up to find two book covers in my face. *Space much?*

“Do these look the same to you?”

“Yep. They’re pretty interchangeable.” I slid one of Gran’s books back onto the shelf and mentally whispered a little goodbye, just like I did every time I visited one of her books in a store. Was missing her ever going to get easier?

“See? Because they’re not supposed to look the same!” the guy snapped, hopefully at the poor soul on the other end of the phone, because it wasn’t going to go well if he was using that tone with me.

“Well, in his defense, all his books read the same, too,” I muttered. *Shit.* It slipped out before I could censor myself. Guess my filter was just as numbed out as my emotions. “Sorry—” I turned to face him, lifting my gaze until I found two dark brows raised in astonishment over equally dark eyes. *Whoa.*

My ruined heart jolted—just like every heroine in one of Gran’s books. He was the most gorgeous man I’d ever seen, and as the now-ex-wife of a movie director, I’d seen my fair share.

Oh no, no, no. You’re immune to good-looking men, the logical side of my brain warned, but I was too busy staring to listen.

“They do not read the—” He blinked. “I am going to have to call you back.” He moved both books to one hand and hung up, pocketing his phone.

He looked about my age—late twenties, maybe early thirties— stood at least six feet tall, and his black, just-out-of-bed hair fell carelessly over tanned, olive skin before reaching those lifted, black brows and impossibly deep brown eyes. His nose was straight, his lips carved in lush lines that only served to remind me exactly how long I’d gone without being kissed, and his chin was shaded in a light shadow beard. He was all angular, sculpted lines, and, given the flex of muscle in his forearms, I’d have bet the store that he was pretty well acquainted with the inside of a gym...and probably a bedroom.

“Did you just say they all read the same?” he questioned slowly.

I blinked. *Right. The books.* I mentally slapped myself for losing my train of thought over a pretty face. I’d had my name back for all of twenty minutes, and men were off the menu for the foreseeable future. Besides, he wasn’t even from around here. Eighteen hours of travel or not,

his tailored slacks blatantly screamed designer, and the sleeves of his white linen shirt were rolled in that casually messy style that was anything but casual. Men in Poplar Grove didn't bother with thousand-dollar pants or have New York accents.

"Pretty much. Boy meets girl, they fall in love, tragedy strikes, someone dies." I shrugged, proud that I didn't feel any heat creeping up my cheeks to give me away. "Throw in some legal courtroom drama, a little unsatisfying but poetic sex, and maybe a beach scene, and you've pretty much got it. If that's your thing, you can't go wrong with either book."

"Unsatisfying?" Those eyebrows drew tight as he glanced between the books, then back to me. "Someone doesn't *always* die."

Guess he'd read a Harrison book or two. "Okay, eighty percent of the time. Go ahead and see for yourself," I suggested. "That's the reason he's shelved on this side"—I pointed to the general fiction sign—"and not on this side." I swung my finger toward the romance marker.

His jaw dropped for a millisecond. "Or maybe there's more to his stories than sex and unrealistic expectations." His attractiveness slipped a peg or two as he tapped one of my pet peeves right on the nose.

My hackles rose. "Romance isn't about unrealistic expectations and sex. It's about love and overcoming adversity through what can be considered a universal experience." That was what Gran and reading thousands of romance novels had taught me in my twenty-eight years.

"And, apparently, *satisfying* sex." He arched a brow.

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