


ONE

Darren

 In the morning of Decklee Cassel's funeral, I'm in the employee lounge of Bob's Gas Station, losing a fight with the coffee machine for the second time that day.

To be fair, I never stood a chance. Everything at Bob's is at least a decade older than me, but the fact that this specific machine has started spontaneously leaking boiling water whenever I clock in feels a little personal. Kendall is already behind the register, too busy holding back the bleary-eyed morning crowd to lend me a hand, so this, overall, is not the best way to start my morning.

Oh, and Decklee Cassel is dead.

There's also that.

I slap the OUT OF ORDER sign onto the machine and lug it back into the open. "Sorry, folks. Energy drinks are third cooler on the left."

Kendall finally looks up from the register as the crowd dis-

sipates. “Coffee out again?” he asks. “Weren’t you supposed to fix that?”

I roll my eyes. Kendall is *technically* shift lead and *technically* my boss when Bob’s not around, but he’s barely a year older than me and only marginally better at operating our ancient cash register, so I don’t like to think of him as “being in charge.” I’ve known Kendall since the day my second-grade teacher went into labor and left us with the class next door. We’ve worked together for the last three years and the idea of him telling me what to do is still genuinely laughable.

“No, *Bob* was supposed to fix it,” I say, giving the coffee maker one more shove for emphasis. “This thing hates me, remember?”

“It doesn’t hate you, it’s just Friday.” Kendall braces his elbows on the counter. “Right on schedule.”

He has this theory that Bob’s coffee machines know what day it is. He swears they know what *time* it is, too, because one of them always seems to go out right in the middle of the morning rush. Today, at least, it’s summer, so we don’t have to break the news to the school crowd. Any other day I might have laughed along with him because this whole thing really *is* getting ridiculous, but today is Decklee Cassel’s funeral.

And there’s absolutely nothing funny about that.

In a town this small, every change feels like a kick to the gut—swift and sudden and aching with a strange sense of inevitability. You feel it in the air first, and when I came home from work Tuesday to find Mom already waiting by the door, I knew something big had happened. For a second, my mind ran wild

with every terrible possibility. She was sick again. She lost her job. They were firing *me* for some reason.

But then Mom took a deep breath, squeezed my hand, and said, “They found Decklee Cassel at home this morning, Darren. It was peaceful, but . . . she’s gone.”

Her voice had cracked on the last word, and I was so relieved at the momentary confirmation that she herself was fine that I didn’t register the news. She had to repeat herself two more times before the reality hit me, and even then, I hadn’t really believed it until I checked my phone and found memorial videos and posts already pouring in.

The world lost a good one today, RIP Decklee
Cassel.

I’ll never forget meeting her backstage in Tupelo.
Her music changed my life. I’m forever grateful.

I have *Whiskey Red* on repeat today. Decklee’s
music was my sanctuary as a kid. Still don’t know
how to process this.

Most of the comments and tributes I saw were written by people more than twice my age, fans who grew up with Decklee’s music and followed her meteoric rise in real time. Maybe that’s why I haven’t posted anything myself. I don’t know many seventeen-year-old girls whose favorite singer is a country artist old enough to be their grandmother. In a town

this small, there are some things you keep to yourself.

The familiarity smothers you after a while.

I pull my phone out of my pocket, stealing a glance in Kendall's direction in case he suddenly decides to start enforcing our *no cell phones* policy, before opening Instagram.

I have my private account with a handful of followers from school, but *Mayberry Unpublished* is the one I really care about. The account started as last year's journalism final, a semester-long feature story broken down into individual interviews, clips, and sound bites that my best friend, Emily, said was *very Caroline Calloway* of me. Instead of a single human subject, I wrote about this town—its singular, stifling pull and all the people caught in its orbit. Somewhere along the way, the account developed a decent following of people outside the county line, and even though the school year is long over, I still update as often as I can.

It's not much, but it's something to keep the boredom away, to keep this town from feeling like one long cry for help and to keep me from counting the days until I can pack my bags and leave for good. My post from this morning already has a few hundred likes—a quick interview I'd snagged with Melanie Grauer, a girl a few grades below me. I asked if she'd heard about Decklee Cassel and she just shrugged and said, "Yeah, I saw. I don't really listen to her music, but my dad was really upset about it."

And that was it. No choking back tears, no shake of her head. Decklee could have walked right by us with her baby-blue guitar slung across her back and Melanie wouldn't have noticed.

But her interview contrasts so well with the one next to it that I really can't be mad. I'd found Clayton Sperry's dad loading dog food into the bed of his truck the day the news broke and asked if he wanted to talk about it. That's a little secret I learned about interviewing last year. People in Mayberry don't like questions. They're suspicious of most things—outsiders, CNN, people with too many piercings—but ask them to tell you about someone? Ask if they want to talk? They open right up.

When I asked Clayton's dad about Decklee, the wrinkles on his face deepened and he ran a hand through his graying beard. "Everyone my age has a story about the first time they heard a Decklee Cassel song," he said. "'Losing You' came out the summer of '73 and the first person I thought of was Ellie. I remember getting in my truck, driving all the way to Little Rock to see her, and we've been married fifty years this Friday. That's what those songs did. I think this town is going to miss her a lot."

Even now, I can't help grinning as I scroll past his photo on my grid. It has all the beats of a good story—the lede, the hook, the happy ending. His interview next to Melanie's is a juxtaposition even I couldn't have planned. A generational gap with me somewhere in the middle.

"Heads up!" Kendall tosses a bag of gummy bears in my direction, and I barely reach over in time to catch it. "There's a bunch of inventory in the back. If you ever decide to work today, you can totally restock."

I slide my phone back in my pocket. "I'm sorry, what was that?"

“I said you can totally restock.”

“No, the other thing.”

Kendall grins and rips the top off another bag, dropping a handful of candy into his mouth. “Nothing.”

“That’s right.” I walk back down the aisle as the door shuts behind our last customer, Instagram momentarily forgotten. “Because it would be pretty bold of you to talk about my work schedule when you’re the one who was late this morning.”

Kendall laughs, head tipped back enough for the sun falling through the windows to cut warm shadows across his brown skin. “I honestly didn’t think you noticed. You’ve been so quiet.”

Something in my chest twists. Of course I’m quiet. I almost tell him why. But our relationship is nothing more than the result of living in the same small town. I know what Kendall eats for lunch every day. I know where his brothers live and what his parents do for work. I know him in the same shallow, superficial way I know everyone in Mayberry, and that’s exactly how I want to keep it.

So instead, I snatch the bag of gummy worms from his grasp, dump the rest into my mouth, and say, “I notice everything,” before pushing myself off the counter and striding into the back.

We only get a few more customers the rest of the morning, but it doesn’t get quiet enough to risk checking my phone again. As far as part-time jobs go, Bob’s isn’t bad. Working at a gas station wasn’t exactly at the top of my vision board, but the pay is decent, there’s plenty of air-conditioning, and it’ll be easy enough to leave when I go to college next year. There used to be another station up the road, but it closed a few years ago

and the raccoons took over before the people could. Now it sits abandoned and unused on the side of State Road 34, a great place to go after football games to drink stolen wine and summon ghosts.

I know because Madison, Emily, and I tried to summon ghosts multiple times last year to varying degrees of success. Madison is still convinced the place is haunted.

But that leaves Bob's as the only viable gas station for thirty miles. And since we're the sole place for people to grab cold drinks and subpar snacks, it also means Kendall and I aren't alone when Decklee Cassel's funeral starts.

I don't know if he means to have this specific channel on. I don't think he knows it's unmuted, but when the first chords of a church processional start, a bag of Moon Pies slips through my fingers. It hits the floor right as Kendall reaches for the remote.

"Wait!" I'm surprised I can speak at all. The sight of people gathered in the pews on-screen feels like a shard in my chest. *Real. This is real.* I swallow as several heads turn in my direction. "Can you leave it?"

Kendall glances from me to the customers, most of whom have stopped shopping to watch. I know them all. There's Ms. Rapisarda, my fourth-grade teacher, Alan Carmichael from across the street, Paul the librarian. They're all watching the screen and I'm watching them so I don't have to look at the casket slowly being marched down the aisle.

I've never been to a funeral, so I'm not sure how much of the ceremony is normal and how much is happening because this is *Decklee Cassel*. I try to place each speaker and musical guest

as they come on-screen, but I don't have Mom's encyclopedic knowledge of celebrity names and faces. I recognize Hunter Wallstreet in the first row, but only because that kind of star power is hard to miss. He has to be nearing ninety and his hair is shockingly white on camera, head bowed as an artist I don't know performs a stripped-back cover of the first song Hunter and Decklee recorded together.

Behind him, hand in hand with his husband, is Markell Fansworth. His intricate purple suit stands out in the sea of black and navy, the rhinestones on his sleeves catching the light whenever he moves, and I wonder, briefly, if that's an inside joke. If Decklee would have hated the formal, stifling atmosphere of her own funeral enough to make her oldest friend promise to make it interesting. For a minute, I wonder how she would look among the crowd of mourners, dressed in layers of sequins and glitter, arm in arm with her longtime writing partner, Mickenlee Hooper, and scratching out lyrics for their next number-one song on the back of the offering envelopes.

The thought makes my throat close. Decklee and Mickenlee haven't worked together in decades, but I think part of me expected her to be here despite whatever creative differences drove them apart years ago.

I'm distantly aware of the customers still hovering around me, the cool interior of the gas station, and the fact that I should definitely be working right now. But I can't move. I'm stuck in the aisle, watching the funeral continue as I grip the edge of the freezer, fingers slowly going numb with each passing second.

It's Kennedy Grasso, Decklee's goddaughter, who concludes the ceremony eventually. She's been sitting up front the entire time, wiping her eyes and nodding in time to each musical guest, and as she stands, I wonder if she thinks the eulogies sound genuine. It's hard to capture someone like Decklee Cassel with words. I haven't seen one article get it right. It's always lists of accomplishments and accolades, a character in shoulder pads and sparkly boots; none of the things that make her feel vibrant and rich and real.

I think I could write a story like that one day, if someone let me.

The church quiets as Kennedy looks up from the podium, a smooth copper box clutched in her hands. My fingers curl around the phone in my pocket and I wonder if Mom is watching at home, perched in the middle of our couch, right where the cushions dip down. I should be there with her. We should be experiencing this together. But when I tear my eyes away from the TV, I realize I'm not alone at all.

Ms. Rapisarda blinks back tears as she presses a hand to her chest. Paul the librarian has a bottle of Gatorade clutched in one hand, like he can't quite remember what he came here for in the first place. I swallow over the lump in my throat. *Community*. That's another thing Decklee was always good at creating, and I'm grateful for it now, for how it makes this singular pocket of Mayberry feel a little more like home.

Then Kendall looks up and, because he has this complete inability to read a room, asks, "What's in the box?" so loudly half the gas station jumps.

“Shhh.” Ms. Rapisarda swats him with her purse before I have the chance. “It’s the time capsule!”

I wipe my palms on my jeans, suddenly sweaty despite the frigid air-conditioning. I picture Mom doing the same, leaning forward on the couch, caught in the spell of Decklee Cassel’s legacy.

“Thank you all for being here,” Kennedy says, voice crackly on the old gas station TV. “I really think Decklee would have loved this. She loved when she could bring people together. That’s what she wanted her music to do and that’s what she wanted *this* to do.” She taps the box. “For the last fifty years, she’s been tucking things away in here. She wrote journals during every tour, kept photographs and ticket stubs, and even recorded an entire brand-new album with the explicit instruction to release it only after she was no longer with us,” Kennedy continues. “And even though that day came sooner than any of us would have liked, I’m comforted by the fact she found peace in this project. That she found joy in the music.”

I can’t stop my toe from tapping a nervous rhythm on the linoleum floor. This time capsule isn’t a secret; Decklee talked about it all the time. She called it a mosaic, a scrapbook of her life, and even though I, too, wish the situation was different, the idea of new Decklee music soothes a bit of the ache in my chest.

New songs for me. New songs for Mom.

It’s been eight years since the last Decklee Cassel album. She still made music after Mickenlee left and every record was objectively a hit, but it never quite replicated the magic of her

old stuff, the songs I knew were born on Tennessee porches, in smoky bars and old church pews.

Kennedy slides a key from the chain around her neck and slips it into the time capsule's lock. When it turns, I swear I hear it click from where I stand, five hundred miles from Nashville. No one in that church breathes as her hands hover over the box. Then she lifts the lid and we all lean forward. Even Kendall cranes his neck to see from behind the counter. The lid falls back, the cameras zoom in, and I suck in a sharp, bewildered breath.

Because there isn't an album at all. There aren't crisp tour journals, piles of black-and-white photographs, or letters penned in Decklee's familiar, looping handwriting.

The time capsule is empty.