

So Into You

A NOVEL



Kathleen Fuller

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Kathleen Fuller



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

So Into You

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Chapter 1

Lights? Check.
Sound? Check.
Script? Check.

Brittany Branch placed her hand on her fluttery stomach. Four hundred fifty-six videos, seven years on YouTube, almost five hundred thousand subscribers, comment sections filled with compliments and encouragement . . . and her nerves were still tap dancing in her gut. She gave up hoping she wouldn't have stage fright or video phobia or whatever it was that made her anxiety reach unacceptable levels every time she filmed content for her channel. She was twenty-eight years old and an experienced vlogger. She shouldn't be fretting over her job.

She sighed and made the mistake she always made before filming her content—she glanced at her black computer screen and grimaced. No matter how she changed the lighting in her room, positioned her desk, or moved the monitor, she still caught her shadowed reflection. And even though her flaws weren't clearly visible, she knew they were there—the wiry curls she couldn't tame, one eyebrow that was clearly higher than the other, her elongated profile that had inspired her third-grade classmate Chase Anderson to call her “Horse Face,” a nickname that stuck until eleventh grade when her fellow students finally decided to grow up a little. He'd even apologized—in a DM, of course, not in person—saying that she had never looked like a horse, and he'd

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been an idiot kid who liked to clown around in class.

She accepted his half attempt at an apology, but the damage was done. And it didn't matter how many commenters said she was "cute" and her hair was "beautiful" and claimed her squeaky voice was "adorable." She never forgot the sound of boys neighing behind her as she walked in the hallways.

Britt blinked, shoving the past aside. She took a deep breath, turned on her smile and her camera, and began filming.

"Hey, everyone! Britt here. If you're new to my channel, welcome. If you enjoy the content, hit Like and Subscribe!"

Today's video was a tutorial about perspective in anime art. Britt had recorded herself drawing a typical anime scene, so today she only had to be on camera for the intro and outro, and the rest was voice-over. Two hours later she finished and began the editing process, something that had initially been daunting when she started her channel, but she now did with ease.

She heard her mother's car door shut outside the window of her studio and glanced at the clock. Almost five? The video had taken longer than she thought. She would have to upload it tonight and then promote it on her social media channels, answer some comments, and take a stab at cleaning out her DMs and other private and public messages. Feeding the marketing beast was a never-ending job.

Britt went upstairs to start on supper as Mom walked through the door, her leather satchel slung over one shoulder and the other carrying her ever-present water bottle that said *Teachers Rock*. "Hey, hon," Mom said, setting the bag on the table and taking the water bottle to the sink. "How was your day?"

"Productive." Britt slipped the plastic spiral ponytail holder off her wrist and put up her out-of-control hair.

"That's nice. Did you go outside for a few minutes? The

weather was gorgeous today.”

“Um, no.” She pulled out a skillet from the cabinet and set it on the stove. “I worked all day.”

Mom stood beside her. “Now, Britt, we discussed how important vitamin D is, especially directly from the source. You need to at least sit on the patio for thirty minutes each morning.”

“Sure.” Britt walked to the fridge and took out the ground beef for Taco Tuesday.

“And make sure you wear sunscreen!” Mom grinned and went back to the sink. She washed out the bottle while Britt cooked, their typical post-work/post-school routine. As much as her mother’s hovering and unwanted advice grated, Britt knew she was right. Staying cooped up in her studio wasn’t healthy, as her pale skin made obvious. But she liked her studio. It was her space, and even though she was nervous before each video, that was the only negative feeling she had about her job. She loved drawing, loved coming up with content, and even enjoyed most of the marketing, except for the creepy DMs she occasionally received. A quick internet search had revealed that almost all content creators had to deal with problematic messages.

Mom made iced tea and they both sat down for supper. Britt shared her video topic of the day and Mom discussed the end-of-the-school-year scramble.

“My advanced calc class is almost all seniors except for two,” she said, spooning salsa on top of her crunchy taco. “Things are crazy right now while we get them and all the other seniors ready for graduation, but next week I can take a breath.”

Britt smiled. Mom might complain about some of the hassles that came with teaching, especially during stressful times of the year, like testing and dealing with senioritis. But she loved her job, even after twenty-five years.

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She felt a tap on her wrist and glanced at her watch as a text popped up.

Phone call later?

She quickly gave the text a thumbs-up, then crunched into another taco. She could eat Mexican food every day of the week, but Burrito Monday and Quesadilla Friday didn't sound as clever as Taco Tuesday. Although she wouldn't mind if Sopapilla Saturday went viral.

"Who was that?" Mom asked, sprinkling a little queso fresco on top.

"A—" She was about to say friend, but she only had one real-life friend, Savannah, and if she told Mom it was her, a barrage of questions would follow. None of them too nosy, but usually conversations about Savannah led to the inevitable "*you should really get out and meet more people*" directive.

She couldn't tell her who was really texting, not unless she wanted to send her mother into orbit. "Just a spam call."

"Ew, I hate those."

They finished their tacos, with Mom still conversing about school and Britt interjecting a few things about her video channel. It had occurred to her more than once that both she and her mom were obsessed with their jobs. The only other activity they shared, other than watching movies together on Friday nights and going to church, was reading in their separate bedrooms.

"What are your plans for the evening?" Mom asked, getting up from the table.

Britt joined her as they collected the dishes. "The usual. Answering comments, organizing my email." After her phone call.

"You're being careful about who you talk to online, right?"

She fought the urge to roll her eyes. Her mother constantly asked her that question and had been asking since she first started her channel. The only thing that stopped Britt from making a snarky reply was . . . Mom was right. There were absolute creeps out there in the cyber world, and she always kept in mind that whoever she was talking to, unless she knew them personally, couldn't be completely trusted. Since there were few people she knew on a personal level, she always had her guard up. "Yes, Mom. I'm being careful."

"Good." She opened the dishwasher, which was only partway full of dirty dishes. "I know you get tired of me nagging you about that—"

Truth.

"—but you wouldn't believe the things I hear from kids at school, their parents, even law enforcement, about what can happen online. Two weeks ago we had in-service about yet another way criminals are trying to steal personal information." She shook her head. "Technology is so helpful, but it has its downsides."

Britt rinsed the dishes and put them in the washer, and a few minutes later the kitchen was cleaned. Between the two of them it didn't take long, and it had been the two of them for almost twenty years. They both liked things neat, and the house never got too out of control.

"I've got a stack of finals to grade." Mom yawned. "I'll be in the living room."

"Okay. After I'm done with a little work, I'm going to finish the novel I started last night."

"About dragons?"

She smiled. "Nope. Not this time."

"Anime?"

"That was last week. I decided to switch things up and read C.

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S. Lewis again.”

“Ah, Narnia.” Mom smiled. “Enjoy.”

“I will.”

They went their separate ways as they did every night. Britt entered her room and shut the door, then took her phone out of her pocket and found the number in her Contacts list. He answered on the first ring. “Hello?”

She lay down on her stomach on her twin bed. “Hey, Dad.”



Buzz . . . buzz . . .

Amy Branch startled from a dead sleep. She sat up and looked at her cell phone on the side table, then at the crooked stack of papers on her lap. When had she fallen asleep? She took off her glasses and grabbed the phone without looking at the screen. “Hello?”

“Oh, hey. Did I wake you up?”

“No.” She resisted the urge to yawn, settling back in her recliner to chat with her friend Laura. She was feeling every bit of her forty-seven years tonight. “You called at the perfect time.”

“Fell asleep grading papers again?”

“Maybe.”

Laura chuckled. “You know I’m an expert at snoozing over paperwork.”

“Yeah, because legal paperwork is boring,” she said, taking a dig at Laura’s paralegal profession.

“That’s where you’re wrong, my friend. I would rather pore over pages and pages of writs than grade one single quadratic equation.”

“These are calculus papers, not algebra.”

“There’s a difference?”

They both laughed as Amy glanced at the clock above the fireplace mantle. Ten-thirty. She needed to get to bed before eleven or she would be groggy in the morning. “You’re calling kind of late.”

“I know and I’m sorry, but I had the best time tonight, and I have to tell you all about it.”

Intrigued, Amy shifted in her recliner to get comfortable. “Do tell.”

“I joined Single Mingles.”

“What?” The papers on her lap almost fell on the floor with her jolt of surprise. “You didn’t.”

“I did. And guess what? It isn’t as dopey as we thought. In fact, it was a blast, and you should join.”

Amy rolled her eyes. “Not this conversation again.”

“This is different. I’m not asking you to join another dating site,” Laura said.

“Good, because that’s not happening.” Despite her warnings to Britt, and even though she knew the pitfalls of the internet, four years ago she’d agreed to sign up for a dating website and was promptly contacted by a slew of middle-aged guys who only wanted two things—sex and money. “I’m still getting over the trauma.”

“These are real people. And they like having a good, clean time.”

“That’s nice. But no. I’m not interested.”

“Amy, you can’t live the rest of your life hiding from fun.”

“I have fun. Brittany and I do lots of fun things.” Well, not lots. But enough. Her daughter was twenty-eight and Amy didn’t want to hover. Although she considered Britt closer than a best friend, they didn’t have much in common, and never really

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had. Brittany had always been an introverted child, while Amy was more extroverted. Being around teenagers all day gave her plenty of interaction—in the case of the end-of-the-year scramble, *exhausting* interaction.

“Amy . . .”

She could feel her friend building up for another truth session, and she had to cut that off at the pass. “Laura, I’m really glad you had a great time with your singles and that you want to include me. But I have papers to finish grading and a bedtime to meet.”

“But—”

“I’ll call you tomorrow. At a decent hour.” Amy smiled and hung up, knowing Laura wouldn’t take it personally. That was one of many things she liked about her friend—she was level-headed, intelligent, and logical. Above all, she was honest, and normally Amy appreciated that. But not tonight.

She finished the rest of the finals by eleven-thirty and crawled into bed. As she turned off the light, their conversation came back to her mind. It had been seven years since Laura’s husband’s untimely death from a heart attack, and she had entered the dating market a year and a half ago. It was difficult to find romance in middle age, but she was persevering. “*I know my other Mr. Right is out there somewhere,*” she insisted.

Amy thought she’d had her Mr. Right, but he couldn’t have been more wrong. The only good thing to come out of their relationship was Brittany. Daniel had killed her desire for a romantic relationship years ago. Twenty, to be exact.

She rolled over in bed. For years, she counted every day a blessing since she and Daniel divorced. He’d made her life a swamp of misery. To top it off, he abandoned Britt. Logically she knew all men weren’t like him. She also knew people who had successful marriages. Her parents, for one. Lots of couples at church too.

And Laura wasn't the only one wanting Amy to find a partner. It seemed everyone in her life, other than Britt, was eager for her to get married again.

She sighed. Although Britt didn't talk about it, Amy had to wonder if she was feeling pressure from anyone to start dating. While she wished Britt was more outgoing, she had to respect her nature, and she tried to gently encourage her to get out more. Her daughter didn't seem unhappy, or that her life was lacking anything. And her video channel was something to be proud of. She'd taken her degree in graphic design and turned it into a profitable and educational enterprise.

But will she live with me forever?

Amy had to admit, she wouldn't mind if she did. And Britt had never said anything about dating. In school she was more interested in art than boys, and Amy wasn't in any hurry for her to find a liar, cheat, and downright horrible man like her father.

Flopping over again, she closed her eyes and counted down from one hundred. If she continued to muse about Laura, Single Mingles, Britt, and—*shudder*—Daniel, she'd never get to sleep. Only two more weeks of school left, and she could relax . . .



“You still haven't told your mom that you're talking to your dad?”

Britt and Savannah were taking a walk around her neighborhood. It was a perfect day for a stroll. Savannah loved to walk, and every time she and Britt went on one, Britt promised herself that she would try to walk on a regular basis. But then she'd get caught up in her work or her art, and exercise fell to the wayside.

She glanced at her friend. They had met at church youth group fifteen years ago, when they were both thirteen. She'd never had

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a friend like Savannah before, someone who understood and accepted Britt's quirks, particularly her annoying bouts of anxiety. Those had peaked during her school years, but she occasionally had issues when meeting new people and being around large groups in unfamiliar places. Social anxiety, her counselors had called it. She'd also read several blogs online to see if she was the only one who had that problem. Turned out she wasn't. It also turned out that most of the people online who admitted to having social anxiety had jobs where they didn't have to deal with people in person. Just like she did.

Savannah didn't have an anxiety problem, and she made friends easily. She was also beautiful. Her Hispanic, olive-toned skin took on a golden glow in the spring and summer months under the Texas sun, and she not only walked regularly, she also enjoyed going to the gym—something else Britt didn't want to do. But she appreciated her friend going at a slower pace so they could talk without Britt losing her breath.

"I haven't mentioned it yet," she said, finally answering Savannah's question.

"How long have you been in contact with him?"

"Three months."

Savannah shook her head. "That's a long time to keep such a big secret."

"It's not like I don't want to tell her. But you know how she would react if she knew." They turned right at the end of her street.

"She definitely won't be happy." Savannah tucked a lock of her long black hair behind her ear to reveal one of the gold hoops she always wore. Britt still couldn't get up the courage to get her ears pierced. "But maybe she wouldn't be quite as mad if she knew he was different now."

“I doubt she’d believe me.” Britt was still coming to terms with reconnecting with her dad again. It was only last week that she stopped calling him Daniel and changed over to Dad.

“Aren’t you worried she’ll find out?”

Britt sidestepped a huge crack in the sidewalk. Her suburban neighborhood, while nice, wasn’t without its problems, and aging roads and sidewalks were one of them. “Definitely. I’m being real careful. I still don’t trust him completely. But so far, he’s called me almost every night like he promised. We’re still getting to know each other.”

“I can’t imagine talking to my dad every night.”

“He’s kind of busy being a veterinarian.”

“Even if he weren’t busy, I don’t know what we’d say.”

Britt sometimes had that problem with Daniel—Dad. Especially in the beginning, after he’d contacted her through her channel and asked if he could see her. It took a while for her to think it over, then she agreed and he’d stopped by the house during the day while Mom was at school.

She’d felt confused when she first saw him. In some ways he hadn’t changed—he still had the same curly hair, although it was shorter than she remembered, and he was on the thin side. But he also seemed different. He looked healthy instead of gaunt, and there was a calm stillness about him, which was a huge contrast to his alcohol-induced volatility. He didn’t ask her for anything, just told her he was sorry for the past and asked if it was all right if he could call her every once in a while. How could she tell her father no? The sporadic phone calls became more frequent, and both of them became more relaxed. Now they never ran out of things to say.

She and Savannah changed the subject and chatted as they made the loop around her neighborhood. When they reached her

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house, her friend hadn't broken a sweat. Britt couldn't say the same. Wow, she was really out of shape. Being naturally thin, she didn't have the impetus to exercise to lose weight. But now that she was almost twenty-nine, she needed to do something. She couldn't rely on her genes forever.

They went into the kitchen and Britt filled glasses with ice water, and then they sat outside on the patio. Britt had just taken a gulp when Savannah spoke.

"Justin and I are engaged."

Water spewed out of her mouth. "What?" Britt wiped the back of her hand over her lips.

"I don't have a ring yet, but he proposed last night." Savannah beamed. "The ring is on layaway since we don't want to have any credit cards."

Engaged? Britt knew they had gotten serious pretty quickly—they'd only been dating for a few months.

Savannah's smile widened, showing perfectly straight, white teeth. "We're planning to get married in August. I know it seems fast, but I've known all along that Justin and I would end up together. It was love at first sight for both of us."

Britt's head was spinning. "You never told me that."

She gave her a sympathetic look. "I didn't want you to . . . I don't know. Be jealous? And I definitely didn't want to be one of those friends who changes when they have a boyfriend."

She'd achieved that goal, because Britt was realizing she didn't know much about her best friend's relationship with her boyfriend. Scratch that—her fiancé.

Savannah turned in the lawn chair and faced her. "Will you be my maid of honor?"

Britt couldn't find the words to answer. More than anything she wanted to be there for Savannah's big day. But immediately,

the obligation of the role plucked at her anxiety. She'd have to get a fancy dress and stand up in front of everyone. Then there were the bridal showers. And a bachelorette party. She'd have to coordinate things, talk to people, be around people . . . She rubbed her hand on the arm of the chair as she gripped the slippery glass in her hand. "Can . . . can I think about it?"

A flash of disappointment crossed Savannah's face. "Sure."

Suddenly a wave of regret washed over Britt. "I'm sorry. I . . . I want to say yes. I really do. But . . ."

Savannah reached for her hand. "I understand. And if you can't be in the bridal party, that's okay."

Britt squeezed her hand, fighting back the urge to flee. "I promise I'll let you know soon, okay?"

"Yeah. Sure." Savannah let go. "There's something else I have to tell you. Justin got a job in Missouri. It's with a prestigious architecture firm. He's getting a promotion, raise, the whole package. He starts work next week."

At first, Britt nodded, happy to hear that Justin had gotten a great job. Then the full meaning of Savannah's words sank in. "You're moving?"

Savannah nodded, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "That's part of the reason why we're in a hurry to get married." She glanced at her watch and stood. "Sorry, Britt, but I've gotta run. We have less than four months to plan the wedding and I've already got a list a mile long."

"Right." Britt stood and faced her best friend. Not only was Savannah tanned, gorgeous, and six inches taller than her, but she was also the sister Britt didn't have. Tears burned her eyes. "What am I going to do without you?"

Savannah's excitement dimmed for a moment as she seemed to register Britt's reaction. "We'll find time to hang out together

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before I move. I promise.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

Savannah hugged her. “You’ll be okay,” she said, her voice thick. “You’ll find your way.”

Britt nodded, not wanting to let her go. But she had to. Soon Savannah would be embarking on a new chapter. *Without me.*

“Missouri isn’t that far,” she said, stepping away. “You can come visit. We’ll be in Springfield, near the Ozark Mountains. Justin says it’s really pretty there. Lots of trees and hills. And mountains, obviously.” She smiled. “You’ll always be my bestie, Britt. You know that.”

Britt nodded and walked Savannah to her car, a used but still in good condition red convertible she’d gotten for high school graduation ten years ago. As her friend drove away, she swallowed the boulder in her throat.

Savannah’s words were true—at least for now. But being an introverted wallflower had given Britt the opportunity to observe people, which was always easier than interacting with them. She’d seen her peers at church pair off, get married, have families, move away. They were living their lives, and she knew some of them didn’t even talk to each other, despite being close while growing up. Missouri wasn’t just around the corner, and even though Savannah had kept her relationship with Justin fairly private, Britt knew she wanted a family. She wouldn’t marry him if he didn’t want one too. She would move on from Allen, Texas, and create a new life in Springfield. That’s how it always worked.

She stared at the convertible as it disappeared down the road. If she were Savannah’s maid of honor, she would get to spend a lot of time with her before she left. Surely, she could get over her anxiety enough to be by her side. All she had to do was be . . . social.

Her stomach clenched at the thought. Now the nausea was coming in for a landing. Her palms grew slick, and spots danced before her eyes. It was all so ridiculous, but she couldn't help it.

If she couldn't overcome her social anxiety for Savannah, would she ever be able to? Or would she always be stuck in her small universe, engaging with the world from behind the safety of a computer screen or vicariously through adventure novels?

Will I ever grow up?



Chapter 2

Hey! Watch where you're going with that forklift!" Hunter Pickett blinked and quickly maneuvered the vehicle away from his coworker and roommate, Sawyer Campbell, barely missing him. He put the lift in Park and turned around. "Sorry!"

Sawyer shot him a hard look. "Did you fall asleep at the wheel or what?"

Hunter shook his head, but Sawyer was already back at work unpacking boxes of merchandise off the pile of pallets Hunter had just unloaded. He didn't blame him for being mad. He hadn't fallen asleep, or even dozed off. But he was tired, and he'd been distracted—a common state of mind for him lately.

Sawyer was good-natured enough that he wouldn't hold the near miss against him. But Hunter expected some well-deserved ribbing was forthcoming.

He and Sawyer spent the rest of the afternoon unloading pallets at the warehouse where they worked, unironically called The Warehouse. They worked second shift, and as soon as ten o'clock rolled around, they met in the locker room, took off their safety vests, and clocked out.

"Wanna grab a bite on the way home?" Hunter asked as they walked outside and into the muggy Texas air. It was only May, but summer was already in full force.

"Rain check. You know Marissa?"

They reached Hunter's motorcycle. Sawyer's Subaru was parked next to him. "She works in the office, right?"

"I asked her out."

"Don't tell me she was dumb enough to say yes." Hunter lifted his helmet off the handlebars.

"Of course she did." Sawyer pushed his floppy bangs off his wide forehead, grinning as he got into the car. "Don't wait up, Dad."

Hunter shoved on his helmet as Sawyer sped away. Normally he laughed off his roommate's digs. But tonight it grated. He started his Yamaha, revved it up, and took off. He wasn't in the mood to go back to an empty apartment, so he headed for the local twenty-four-hour waffle place.

As soon as he entered, he was seated at a small booth near the window. He was the only patron in the restaurant. A waitress with short green and blue hair approached, carrying a pot of coffee and smacking her gum loudly enough to be heard in Dallas.

"Evening," she said. A white plastic badge with the name *Enid* handwritten on it was pinned to the lapel of her uniform. "Coffee?" *Snap.*

"Sure." He turned over the coffee cup in front of him and watched her fill it with the steaming brew. He hadn't slept well lately, and a little caffeine wasn't going to make a difference.

Snap. She gestured to the plastic-coated menu wedged between the window and the napkin dispenser. "I'll give you some time to decide on food." Giving him one last gum snap, she walked back to the counter.

Hunter glanced at the menu, even though he wasn't hungry. He took a sip of coffee, pulled out his phone, and scrolled through thirty-second videos on YouTube. There were the requisite silly dance videos, dumb viral challenges that would probably end up

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with someone getting hurt, and food. Lots and lots of food.

Snap. “Have you decided?”

He set down his phone and nodded. “A waffle and two strips of bacon.” What else would he order in a waffle house?

“Crispy or regular?”

He frowned. “The waffle or the bacon?”

Enid gave him a patient half smile, revealing one incisor that was significantly smaller than the rest of her teeth. “The bacon.”

“Crispy.” The wrinkles at the corners of her lips and eyes made her look too old for multicolored hair, but who was he to judge.

Snap. Snap. She jotted a few scribbles on the pad. “Anything else, handsome?”

He flinched. “No.”

“Coming right up.” She flashed a more genuine grin at him before leaving again.

He let out a long breath. All he needed tonight was to get hit on by a waffle waitress who had a good ten, if not more, years on him. Again, not judging, but she wasn’t his type.

Hunter slouched in the booth, pushing his coffee cup a few inches away with his index finger. The type of women he was interested in weren’t eager to go out with a thirty-year-old entry-level warehouse worker with a GED.

Well, he *used* to be interested in those kinds of women. That was before his older brothers—top-notch attorney Payne and venture capitalist Kirk—had married two of them. His sisters-in-law were hot, with toned bodies, perfectly highlighted hair, unnaturally tanned skin, and pearly white, even teeth.

They were also self-absorbed shopaholics who were bleeding his brothers dry.

He sat back up and ran his hand through his hair. He’d always been judgmental. About looks, about money, about everything.

And now here he was, twelve years past high school graduation, sitting alone at a waffle house on a Saturday night with few prospects—both personal and professional.

Whose fault is that?

He yanked out his phone again, desperate for a distraction. After scrolling through several kitten and puppy videos—they did warm his heart, he had to admit—a girl with a mass of curly, messy black hair popped up on his screen.

He paused. A week ago today she'd somehow appeared in his feed for the first time. *Britt Draws Everything*.

Out of boredom, he'd clicked on her video titled "Color Theory: Who Needs It?" and surprised himself by watching it all the way through, even though he couldn't draw a straight line. That sent him on a rabbit trail, and by the time he dozed off, he'd watched more than a dozen of her videos. Some were only a few minutes long, others were comprehensive art lessons. She was talented. She was also cute.

But not cute enough to keep his attention beyond wasting time on a dull Saturday night, and he'd avoided clicking on any of her other videos since then. But now here she was, smiling sweetly into the camera, her black squiggly curls framing a fair, thin face. He started to scroll past her, then went back up. His thumb hovered over the video for a few seconds before he tapped the Play button.

"I just had to try these." She held up a pack of fancy colored pencils, pushing them closer to the camera, influencer style. The case was crooked in the frame. "Oops." She quickly straightened it.

He smiled a little. Her high-pitched voice was soft, not grating, and she had a muted Southern drawl. Soothing too. He'd fallen asleep listening to her that first night.

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She set the pencils down. “Want to see what I drew with them? Click here.” She awkwardly pointed down, supposedly to the name of her channel or blog, but she missed it entirely.

“One waffle with crispy bacon.” *Snap.* Enid set the plate down in front of him. “Anything else?”

“I’m good.” As an afterthought he said, “Thanks.”

“Sure thing, handsome.” She winked at him as a group of customers entered the store. She took off to tend to them.

His waffle and bacon forgotten for the moment, Hunter glanced at the video’s view counter. Almost half a million views in less than a week. Wow. Unable to help himself, he clicked on the next one.

“Hi, I’m Britt.” Her mouth turned up in an awkward smile as her gaze moved downward. “Today I’m going to show you how to draw farm animals.”

This wasn’t the first animal lesson she had on her channel. When he watched the first one—“How to Create the Perfect Nar-whal”—at first he thought he’d stumbled upon a kids’ channel. Then he found out she was a graphic artist with a passion for animation. She was really good at it too. In this video, her hair was even mussier, as if she’d filmed it on a day with 150 percent humidity. Then she looked directly into the camera and smiled.

He paused the video and saw the reflection of the lights in her jade-green eyes. Her smile was endearingly awkward.

His thumb slipped and the video started again, the focus shifting from her to a sheet of white paper surrounded by cups of markers, pencils, and pens. He picked up his coffee and watched as she announced that today’s animal was her favorite: a cow. Then she started to draw.

For the next twenty minutes, Hunter drank coffee, inhaled his waffle and bacon, and watched as Britt transformed a plain sheet

of paper into an incredibly lifelike, detailed, and, oddly enough, colorful drawing of a cow's face. She worked fast and with skill, explaining everything as she went along. She did speed up the video in some places, but mostly it was all done in real time. Before he knew it, she was finished, and the focus was on her again.

"I hope y'all learned a few things today," she said, awkward smile back in place. "I'd love to hear about your favorite farm animal and the art projects you're working on. Until next time." She gave a little wave and turned off the camera.

He shut off the phone as Enid came over and handed him the check. He pulled out his wallet and gave her the cash. "Keep the change," he said, sliding out of the booth.

"Thanks." She looked him up and down. "Come back any time."

He gave her a quick, noncommittal nod, headed out the door, hopped on his bike, and sped off. When he reached his apartment building, he went upstairs and then inside. With nothing else to do, he headed to his bedroom, stripped down for bed, and turned off the light.

He lay on his back. Flipped onto his side. Tried lying on his stomach. Counted sheep. Counted sheep backward. Then gave up and grabbed his phone off the nightstand. Almost one in the morning.

After nearly running into Sawyer with the forklift, he couldn't afford another fidgety night. He started to put the phone back. Changed his mind. Turned it on and went straight to YouTube . . . and *Britt Draws Everything*. He turned up the volume, hit Play, and set it back on the nightstand. Then he closed his eyes.

"Before I start with today's beachscape, I wanted to say a few words to those of you who are interested in drawing but haven't picked up your paintbrush or pen yet. It's okay to be afraid to try something new, or to come out of your comfort zone."

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His eyes opened, then closed again. Her voice was so relaxing, he felt himself melt into his mattress.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about that myself. I’ve had a big change in my life recently, and I’m starting to rethink some things. Don’t worry, I’m not giving up my channel. It’s not going anywhere, and neither am I.”

His breathing slowed.

“But have you ever come to a point in your life where you know you need to do something different or you need a change, and you’re . . . scared?”

His eyes fluttered. She sounded different from her other videos. He wasn’t sure why . . .

“Just know I understand. I also understand how hard it can be to make that change. It’s easy to keep doing the same things, falling into the same patterns. It’s safe. And we all like to play it safe, right?”

Safe. He rolled on his side, away from the phone.

“So maybe you can start with something small. Like drawing, and showing people your art. Or doing whatever it is you’re interested in. Maybe it’s a new job you’re thinking about applying for, or possibly going out on your first date . . .”

Hunter half snored, half snorted.

“If you’re thinking about doing something daring or new, don’t overthink it. Just do it.” She cleared her throat. “Now, on to today’s lesson.”

“Hunter!”

Pounding sounded in the distance. Hunter hugged his pillow. “Mmph.” Then the door flew open. Light poured in as Sawyer

burst through.

“Hey!” He shielded his eyes with his arm. “What the—”

“I’ve been banging on your door for five minutes.” Sawyer flipped on the lightswitch, then walked to the bed and peered at him. “You okay?”

“I’m fine.” He sat up, scrubbing a hand over his face.

“You sure?” Sawyer’s gaze darted around the room.

“Yeah, I’m sure.” He grabbed his phone. “What time is— Oh no.” He scrambled out of bed, then noticed Sawyer was not-so-secretly opening the top drawer of his dresser. Hunter bumped him away with his shoulder. “You won’t find anything there.”

Sawyer stopped his snooping but didn’t look convinced.

Hunter yanked a short-sleeved yellow uniform shirt out of his drawer. “I overslept.” And had the best night’s sleep he’d had in a long time. He didn’t even remember drifting off. “That’s all. I’ll meet you at work.”

“I can wait for you,” Sawyer said.

He faced him. “Don’t worry, I’m still clean.”

“Just want to make sure.”

“I appreciate it. If you insist on waiting, get out of here so I can get dressed.”

Sawyer nodded. “Meet you outside.”

Hunter headed to the bathroom for a quick shower, brushed his teeth, threw on his clothes and slicked back his damp, shaggy blond hair. He appreciated what Sawyer was doing. A year ago when they signed the lease together, he’d made a pact with Sawyer that he would stay clean and sober, and he’d kept it. That was in the past, and it was a road he never wanted to travel again.

He locked the apartment and went outside, and it hit him how long he’d slept. Now that he was fully awake, he felt better than he had in two weeks. He also remembered how he’d fallen asleep.

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By listening to Britt.

Jumping on his bike, he followed his friend to the warehouse. Some of the words she'd said flashed in his mind. Something about playing it safe. Up until recently, that had never been his MO.

But as he approached the warehouse, more of what she'd said came back to mind. "*But have you ever come to a point in your life where you know you need to do something different . . .*" That definitely applied to him. His life was at a standstill, and he didn't know how to change it.

He'd blown so many chances, he wasn't sure he could.

Chapter 3

Daniel Branch loosened the knot on his black tie and looked at Brittany, then took a drink of the half-lemonade, half-tea she'd given him shortly after he walked inside the house. Not only was the drink delicious, it was also his favorite beverage, and he appreciated her thoughtfulness. Thoughtfulness he didn't deserve. But he was hoping to make up for the years he'd lost with her. And hopefully, someday, with Amy. *If she'll ever let me.*

"Thanks for agreeing to stay here today." Brittany tugged at the bottom of her white T-shirt. The graphic on the front was some kind of Japanese cartoon design he didn't recognize. Manga, he thought she called it. Whatever it was, he'd seen her draw similar-looking things on her channel that rivaled the commercially sold stuff. His girl had talent, and lots of it. "I didn't feel like going out today," she said.

"No problem." He shifted on one of two matching sage-green recliners.

Brittany was seated in the other one. He reminded himself that this was no longer his home and hadn't been for over twenty years. The walls were still the same shade of beige they'd been when he and Amy bought the three-bedroom home back in the nineties, soon after they were married. At that time, the city of Allen was starting to boom, and they'd gotten a deal for it. She was a first-year teacher and he'd just started his mechanic job at a

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garage around the corner that was no longer in business and was now a nail salon. They didn't have much money or experience. But they'd had a lot of love . . . and he'd squandered all of it.

"I'm sorry I haven't asked you this yet, but is it weird to be here after all these years?" Brittany put her palms on her knees.

"A little." More than that actually. There was nothing of him in this house anymore, other than her. He didn't recognize any of the furniture, pictures, or knickknacks. His ex-wife had even changed out the country blue carpeting for wood flooring. This house was all hers now, and she'd made it her home.

He glanced at Brittany. She was rubbing her palms over her knees, something she did when she was a little girl and was upset or anxious about something.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Her head jerked up. "Talk about what?" She grabbed her glass and drained half of it in one gulp.

"Whatever's bothering you. Is that why you didn't want to go out and grab a bite to eat?"

"I didn't feel like being around . . ." She sighed and set the drink back on a coaster on top of a square, glass-topped end table. "People."

"Ah." He settled back in the recliner. At least she was being honest. She might not have inherited her art talent from him, but she did have his introversion. Especially compared to Amy, who never met a stranger. "I get it."

"I don't." She stared at her lap, then gave the hem of her shirt one more tug. "Savannah's getting married."

Shortly after they started talking to each other a few months ago, Brittany had told him about her best friend. "That's good, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yeah . . . for her." She looked at him. "She wants me to be in

the wedding.”

“And you don’t want to?”

“I do. But whenever I think about everything that goes with it, I get nervous. And then I feel guilty. The wedding isn’t about me. It’s about Savannah and Justin.”

While he was glad she was sharing her troubles with him, he was already out of his depth. Their family had imploded when she was eight years old and Amy had filed for divorce. He hadn’t exactly been present during the prior years either. He’d missed a lot of time and a lot of milestones. “What does your mom say?”

“I haven’t told her.” A thick lock of curly hair had escaped her ponytail, and she shoved it behind her ear. “I know what she’d tell me anyway.”

“Do it?”

“Yeah.”

“I agree with her.” He shifted and faced her. “I know it will be hard for you, but Savannah is a good friend.”

“She said it was okay if I didn’t want to.” She lifted her head and met his gaze. “I sound like a child, don’t I?” Before he could answer, she said, “I’m going to do it.”

He grinned. “That’s the spirit!” At her eye roll he said, “Guess that didn’t sound too hip.”

For the first time since he arrived, she smiled. “You’re forty-eight. You’re not supposed to be hip.” But she seemed more light-hearted as she took a sip of her lemonade tea. “Are you hungry? I made some tuna salad earlier today.”

He hated tuna salad. But he would eat ten bowls of it if she wanted him to. “Sounds great.”

They took their drinks into the kitchen, and he tried to keep his expression impassive. Just like the living room and foyer, everything was different except for the paint. He wasn’t anything

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close to an interior designer, as his sparsely furnished, bare-walled, one-bedroom efficiency would attest, and he had no idea what Amy's style was, other than cozy. There was a serene, comfortable vibe throughout the space. They hadn't had much of that during their short marriage.

Brittany quickly made the sandwiches, adding a pickle spear on the side of each and a small serving of ridged potato chips. While he choked down the tuna, they talked about her channel, and a little more about the wedding.

"I'm proud of you, Brittany," he said.

"Thanks, Dad. But why don't you call me Britt like everyone else?"

"I don't know." He wiped his mouth with a paper napkin. "You've always been Brittany to me." He glanced at his watch. "Sorry, I've got to get back to work."

"Oh." Disappointment flashed in her eyes. "Well, I'm glad you could come over. Next time we'll definitely go out."

He was about to tell her that it was okay to stay here at the house, as long as Amy wasn't around. Not that he didn't want to see her. He was dying to. But she didn't even know he was back in town, and Brittany wasn't ready to tell her they were talking. He was allowing her to guide their relationship. She'd let him know when the time was right to reach out to Amy.

Then again, he didn't want to encourage her reluctance to leave the house. That was one thing he was concerned about—she had a fear of social situations. He wasn't a fan of them either, so there was a level of understanding there, along with more guilt. When Brittany revealed she'd been in counseling on and off for her anxiety, he knew he was partly to blame, even though she never said so. Considering how he'd abandoned her, he had to be.

"Right. We should go out," he said. "There's a new barbecue

place in Plano I want to try.” When she nodded, he was relieved. Maybe in the near future he would ask her about returning to counseling. Lord knows it did a lot for him. But not now. He didn’t want to do anything to shake up their tenuous relationship.

He stood and took his dishes to the sink. After washing his hands, he tightened his tie. It was already approaching ninety degrees outside, and he’d left his coat jacket in the car. But he didn’t want to forget about the tie. He had a strict uniform, and there was no deviating from it.

He turned to Brittany, who was wiping crumbs off the counter with a dish towel. “When are you telling Savannah?”

She paused, then folded the dish towel neatly into fourths. “Tonight,” she said with a sharp nod. “I don’t want to keep her waiting any longer.”

“Good idea.” He smiled, his heart full of pride and love for her. “By the way, you don’t sound like a child. You’re not acting like one either. When you do something that’s hard on you to make someone else happy . . . that’s maturity.”

She tilted her head. “That’s really wise. Thank you.”

He wanted to pull her into his arms and tell her how much these moments meant to him. She was doing another hard thing by allowing him to prove she could trust him again. But he held back. They hadn’t hugged yet, just shook hands the first time they met in person after he contacted her through direct message on her channel. There would be time for hugs. Right now, he would take anything he could get.

She walked him to the door and opened it. A barely year-old white Jaguar was parked in the driveway. “My dad, the chauffeur.”

He frowned a little. “Does that embarrass you?”

“Of course not. It’s pretty cool. I don’t know anyone else who drives a Jag.”

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“It is my boss’s, remember.” He wasn’t going to mention that this was only one of his cars, and it was the cheapest and most common looking. He didn’t dare drive the Bentley or the Bugatti by himself. He’d ridden in the Bugatti once, when his boss had driven it to the country club. Daniel had ended up parking it for him. Beautiful, amazing car. But driving the Jag was great too. “I better get back. He’s got a meeting in two hours downtown.”

“All right.” She stood in the doorway as he went to the car. When he opened the door, she said, “Call me later.”

He grinned. “Of course.” He got inside and drove off, the rich interior cooling down quickly as he mulled over how good his life was now. A great job, fantastic boss, an apartment that suited him, and a relationship with Brittany. He would never have dreamed he’d be at this point in three short years. There was only one thing missing.

Amy.

All he could hope for where she was concerned was eventual civility. She had every right to be angry with him. Hate him, even.

But he wasn’t the same man he’d been twenty years ago, or even three years ago. He’d changed for good. He also had bridges to rebuild, and it was past time he did that.

~

“Oh, Britt, thank you! If I were there, I’d give you a big hug!”

Britt grinned as she FaceTimed Savannah, who was in Springfield with Justin looking for houses. Despite her anxiety over being maid of honor, it was worth it to make her best friend happy. She was glad she’d talked to her dad about it today. Confiding in him was a brand-new thing. As soon as he left, she decided to tell Savannah before she chickened out.

"I'll be home this weekend," Savannah said. "We can discuss all the details then. Oh, Justin says hi."

Justin's face appeared on the screen. "Hey, Britt. Thanks for making my girl's day." He grinned and disappeared from view.

"Isn't he the best?" Savannah put her large-framed sunglasses on. "We've got another appointment for a showing. This is the sixth—"

"Seventh," Justin corrected.

"Okay, seventh house we've looked at today. It's all running together."

"Any promising ones?"

"Not yet. But we'll find the perfect house, I'm sure. Thanks again, Britt. Talk to you soon!"

After Britt hung up, she went upstairs to her studio and looked at the large calendar on her wall. She had one more video to make this week, but she hadn't figured out the content yet. She was still fielding comments and messages about the last one she'd uploaded two weeks ago where she had admitted the need for a change.

She'd surprised herself by saying those words, and she had considered editing them out of the video. But she didn't, mostly to keep herself accountable. Now that they were out in the public domain, she needed to stand by them. Regardless of her father's excellent advice, she still might not have called Savannah and told her she would be her maid of honor if she hadn't been honest with her audience.

She sat down at her desk and started to doodle, something she did when she was looking for inspiration. But she wasn't thinking about videos. She was thinking about her father.

He always seemed uncomfortable when he walked into the house, no matter how much he tried to play it off. Although she

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was only eight when he left, she could remember the fights with Mom, the times he didn't show up to school or church events, the empty beer cans that littered the floor around his chair when he fell asleep drinking after work. There was one time when she got up before her mother, saw the cans, and picked them up so he wouldn't get into trouble. She was, what, five? Six?

Her heart pinched, and she stared at the doodle that wasn't a doodle at all. It was a pencil sketch of her father's eyes. Clear, bright, engaged. Like he was today. She hadn't expected him to figure out she was struggling with something. He'd told her he'd changed, and she could see it. But she also knew not to trust him—not yet. Even he'd said it would take time to build up their relationship. So far, it had been time well spent.

She did a quick fill-in of the rest of his features and set the drawing aside. She still didn't have a topic—she'd done many tutorials on faces and portraiture—but she didn't panic. There were endless ways to find inspiration. Eventually she would land on an idea, or several, she would want to explore.

Britt opened her laptop and went to her channel dashboard. One hundred new comments from yesterday, and twenty DMs, all from her “confession video” as she now referred to it. The unread DMs weren't all recent. Several of them arrived shortly after the video, and after the first three crept her out, she'd avoided reading the rest. She was almost to the point where she wanted turn off DMs. But not all of them were inappropriate or bad. There were good and kind people who complimented her art and gave her encouragement. It had also been the way her father had gotten back in contact with her.

Maybe some music would make the process of going through her messages less painful. She slipped in her earbuds, found one of her beloved yacht rock playlists, and jammed while she opened

her inbox.

Hello dear. I like you videos and you are beutyful. I am Afri-can prince with one billion dollers to give you . . .

Delete.

Dear Britt—while I do enjoy your videos, I wish you would do something about your hair and makeup. You would be so pretty if you would just add a little lipstick and mascara, and for the love of God buy a straightener—

Delete.

Wow look at u. So famous. Remember me? We went to elementary school togthr. U know, I have this business where I make 25k a day. U can too, just click here—

Delete.

“And I’m not famous,” she muttered, even though she knew the message was a spam bot. She didn’t consider having a large audience being famous. She was just teaching what she knew, and she was glad other people were enjoying it.

The rest of the messages were similar, and she deleted all of them until she got to the last one.

Hi Britt. I hope this doesn't seem weird, but I wanted to let you know how much I appreciated your last video—the one where you talked about making a change. I can so relate. It's easy to stay stuck in a rut, even when it's uncomfortably comfortable. I've got some changes to make, but I'm not sure

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how to make them. I don't even know why I'm telling you this. I just stumbled across your videos a little while ago. I'm not an artist. I can't even color in the lines.

Anyway, I'm rambling. Just wanted to say thanks and good luck with your art and the channel.

H.

P.S. That beachscape you drew was very cool. Made me want to go surfing.

Britt looked at the small circle to the left of the message. H's avatar was a digital drawing of a planet surrounded by purple, pink, and silver space dust on a black background. Then she read the message again. This wasn't the first time someone had written the words "I hope this isn't weird." It almost always was. And there were other people who messaged her and wondered why they were writing to her or confessing something. But there were two words in H's message that made her pay attention.

Uncomfortably comfortable.

That was her in a nutshell. She had nothing to complain about. She lived in a nice house, her mother treated her like an adult—most of the time—and she had a good job that was building a great nest egg. It helped that she didn't have too many expenses, although she did pay rent to her mother and footed her own bills for her phone, insurance, gas, etc. Not that she drove her secondhand car too often. Like everything else in life, driving gave her anxiety. She'd barely made it through the process of getting her license. She wouldn't have done it without Savannah and her mother's encouragement.

Britt closed her laptop and went to the window. The bonus room she'd turned into an office six years ago faced the street and gave her an overview of the neighborhood. Beyond the house

across from hers was a nice neighborhood park that had a pond complete with ducks, a walking trail, and a sand volleyball court, along with the requisite playground equipment for kids. When was the last time she had gone to the park? Or gone swimming?

Her best friend was getting married, and Britt was . . . uncomfortably comfortable.

The playlist on her phone ended, and she started up another one. She'd never been into hip-hop, rap, or any pop music past 2000. Savannah always teased her about her "boomer music," but Britt didn't care. She smiled as a Seals & Crofts tune played in her ear while she opened her laptop again and reread H's message. She decided to respond.

Dear H,

She stopped, having no idea if H was female or male, and then realized it didn't make a difference.

Thanks for reaching out to me. I'm glad you liked the video—beachscapes are relaxing to draw, even though I've never been to an actual beach. One day I'd like to go, just to dip my toes in the ocean and collect seashells. I know that sounds boring compared to surfing.

I've discovered over the years that people who say they can't draw or paint or do any kind of art just haven't found what suits them. Coloring in the lines isn't easy, no matter what medium you use. I still miss the lines myself sometimes. And that's okay. You have to give yourself the freedom not to be perfect.

I hope you're able to figure out how to make your changes. I'm still working on mine.

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Her fingers hovered over the keyboard. Now who was confessing things? She quickly signed off the message, and after a second's hesitation, hit Send. She'd probably never hear from H again. That happened too, where she liked a message enough to respond to it. Those were almost always requests for art help, and if she was able to offer advice, she gave it. It always surprised her how many people didn't bother to say "thanks" or "I got your message." She didn't want them kissing her feet, but a response in return would be nice.

She did some more doodling and internet searching, finally landing on an idea for her next video—a ten-minute art challenge. She'd done a thirty-minute one before and it was fun. She took out her planning notebook and decided on the subject—a seashell.

She made some production notes—a list of supplies, and a timeline, then practiced drawing a pale-pink scallop shell with pastels, all while timing herself. When she got down to ten minutes, she stopped, made a few notes about how she was able to accomplish the speed drawing, then began to shut down for the day and start on supper—a nice cobb salad with homemade dressing. On hot days like today, she and Mom preferred to eat light meals.

Just as she was logging off her channel, she saw a new message pop up. She paused, thinking it was probably another spam DM, then clicked on it.

Britt—I didn't really expect you to write back, so it was nice to get a response. I've got a few things to do before I head to work, but if you don't mind, I'd like to message you later. I've got some questions about art. Maybe you're right—I just haven't found the right thing yet.

She smiled and looked at the sign-off name. *Hunter*.

About the Author

With over two million copies sold, Kathleen Fuller is the *USA TODAY* bestselling author of several bestselling novels, including the Hearts of Middlefield novels, the Middlefield Family novels, the Amish of Birch Creek series, and the Amish Letters series as well as a middle-grade Amish series, the Mysteries of Middlefield.



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