

Behind Enemy Bylines

a novel



USA Today Bestselling Author

KATHLEEN FULLER

PRAISE FOR KATHLEEN FULLER

Behind Enemy Bylines

Praise TK

TK

So Into You

“*So Into You* by Kathleen Fuller is an uplifting story about rising above your fears and letting go of your past. Secrets abound in this satisfying romance, and it’s hard to look away when the house of cards comes crashing down. This satisfying tale will charm its way into your heart!”

—Denise Hunter, bestselling author of *Before We Were Us*

Sold on Love

“The sweet third entry in Fuller’s Maple Falls series (after *Much Ado About a Latte*) follows an unlikely romance between an ambitious realtor and an affable mechanic . . . their friends-to-lovers arc charms. Fans of wholesome romance will be eager to return to Maple Falls.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Kathleen Fuller writes an ‘opposites attract’ romance that will leave you with a wonderful sigh and a silly smile. Harper Wilson overworks to cover up her insecurities, but when tenderhearted and gentle greasemonkey Rusty Jenkins enters her life to save her

Mercedes, an unexpected friendship grows into something both of them need. Love-authentic and sweet, this small-town romance with wonderful heart and a delicious male makeover will have you cheering for two people whose lives look very different on the outside, but whose hearts are very much the same.”

—Pepper Basham, author of *The Mistletoe Countess* and *Authentically, Izzy*

Much Ado About a Latte

“Fuller returns to small-town Maple Falls, Ark., (after *Hooked on You*) for a chaste but spirited romance between old friends with clashing entrepreneurial goals . . . the cozy atmosphere and spunky locals will leave readers eager to return to Maple Falls.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“You’ve heard of friends to lovers; now get ready for childhood friends, to coworkers, to fake-dating coworkers, to business rivals, to lovers. *Much Ado About a Latte* has it all—charming and sweet, with delectable dialogue and just enough biting tension to keep you on the edge of your seat. I fell in love with Anita’s determined spirit, Tanner’s kindness, and their slow-burning romance. A wide cast of side characters, including Anita’s complicated but loving family, build the delightful feel of the town. Readers will love the beautiful setting of Maple Falls, the gratuitous food descriptions at Sunshine Diner, and Anita’s adorable cat, Peanut.”

—Carolyn Brown, *New York Times* Bestselling author

Hooked on You

“Sign me up for a one-way ticket to Maple Falls. If you love small towns, charming characters, and sweet, swoony romance, *Hooked on You* is your next favorite read. Kathleen Fuller has knit one wonderful story yet again.”

—Jenny B. Jones, award-winning author of *A Katie Parker Production* and *The Holiday Husband*

“A charming story of new beginnings, family ties, love, friendship, laughter, and the beauty of small towns. Fuller invites you into Maple Falls and greets you with a cast of characters who will steal your heart, make you want to stay, and entice you to visit again.”

—Katherine Reay, bestselling author of *The Printed Letter Bookshop* and *Of Literature and Lattes*

“A sweet, refreshing tale of idyllic small-town life, family, and unexpected romance, *Hooked on You* is the perfect read to cozy up with on a rainy day.”

—Melissa Ferguson, multi-award-winning author of *How to Plot a Payback*

“The quaint Arkansas town of Maple Falls could use a little sprucing up, and as it turns out, Riley and Hayden are the perfect pair for the job. What neither of them is counting on, of course, is that their hearts may receive some long overdue TLC in the process. Kathleen Fuller has knit together a lovable cast of characters and placed them in a setting so rich and dear you may find yourself hankering for a walk down Main Street on a warm summer’s evening. I loved every minute of my time in Maple Falls, and I can’t wait to return to visit the friends I made there.”

—Bethany Turner, award-winning author of *Brynn and Sebastian Hate Each Other*

OTHER CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE NOVELS

by KATHLEEN FULLER

Stand-Alone Novels

So Into You

The Maple Falls Romance Novels

Hooked on You

Much Ado About a Latte

Sold on Love

Two to Tango



Behind Enemy Bylines

A NOVEL

Kathleen Fuller



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Behind Enemy Bylines

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To James. I love you.



Prologue

Little Rock, Arkansas
1994

"It's not my fault."
Jade sighed, closing her eyes as her foster brother complained on the other line. Although they hadn't lived in the same home for more than nine years after she aged out of the foster system and went to University of Central Arkansas, she still felt responsible for him. She always had, from the moment he walked into Madeline and John Westin's house and was introduced to her as her new foster sibling. His wide, scared brown eyes, overgrown black, curly, out-of-control hair, and gaunt frame touched her fifteen-year-old heart. Logan Mitchell had held it ever since.

But that neglected, frightened child was now twelve years old and, once again he was in lots of trouble. And as always, it wasn't his fault. While he continued his tirade of blaming everyone else but himself for his predicament, Jade opened her eyes and glanced at the clock on the wall in her tiny office at *The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. In a little while she had to meet Sebastian for their lunch date. Despite her frustration with her brother, she smiled a little.

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If anyone had told her when she joined the accounting department at the paper six months ago that she would be having weekly lunches with the most incredible man she'd ever met, much less date him for four months, she would have said they were crazy. Jade didn't date. She didn't do much socializing either. That had changed since she met handsome Sebastian Hudson. He might be a newspaper columnist, but he had the body of an athlete—not surprising since he played football in high school. “*Tight end,*” he'd told her. “*Bench rider too, although I did play in a couple of games my senior year. My coach felt sorry for me.*”

She had no idea what a tight end was, but she had no complaints about his backside or the rest of him. And she wasn't surprised he downplayed his role on the team. Sebastian wasn't just good-looking and charming. He was humble, which made him even sexier.

“When can you get me out of here?” Logan whined. “These people suck.”

Her temple started to throb, and she was a little irritated that Logan had interrupted her Sebastian reverie. “Those people are trying to help you. And you wouldn't be in youth detention if you hadn't been caught smoking marijuana behind the school building. Henderson, right?”

“Pulaski Heights,” he muttered. “You can't even remember where I go to school.”

She tried to ignore the guilt his words triggered, and logically she couldn't be expected to remember all the schools he'd gone to over the past several years. Logan had been in one foster care and child home after another since she left the Westins. That made her feel guilty too. She could have stayed at their house as an adult, like they offered, and could have commuted to University of Arkansas at Little Rock instead of going to UCA and living on cam-

pus. She could have continued to be the surrogate mother she'd been to him since day one. If she'd given up her dream of finally living a normal life, maybe Logan wouldn't be off the rails.

"It was only one joint anyway." He sniffed. "I promise I'll follow the rules."

"You said that the last time—"

"I mean it now." His voice wavered. "Please, Jade. I just want to go home."

Her heart broke. Logan didn't have a home—not a real, permanent one. Until she graduated college and got her own apartment, she didn't either. Not since she was nine. *It's not fair.* Logan didn't deserve to live a transient life like she did. Like so many other kids had to. "I'll see what I can do," she said, looking at her suddenly shaking hands. "I'll call Mr. Brink."

"Who's he?"

"My lawyer." She paused. Should she tell him? Get his hopes up when she wasn't sure she could deliver on the promise?

"Thanks, Jade," he said, sounding relieved. "You're the best. I miss you."

"Miss you too." Her fingers grew steadier now that he sounded appeased.

"I wish I could live with you."

"I know." He said that every time they talked on the phone or met in person, usually once a month and on holidays. Even though she wasn't around all the time, she made sure to be a presence in his life. Unfortunately she had limited influence on him. This time he sounded so dejected, she had to give him some hope.

"Mr. Brink is trying to figure out something."

"Like what?"

"Like me adopting you."

"Really? You're going to adopt me?"

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She grinned, his excitement fueling hers. "I'm trying to." She heard someone yell his name in the background.

"I gotta go. Social worker time." His tone turned crabby again.

"Do what they say, Logan, and stay out of trouble."

"I will."

"I mean it. I love you, and I'll always be here for you—"

"Bye!" Logan hung up.

Jade put the phone in the cradle and sat back in her chair, worried she'd said too much. Now that she'd told him, she'd have to make sure Mr. Brink did everything possible to make the adoption happen. That would cost money—more than she had. But Logan was worth it.

She looked at the clock again and her stomach churned. Talking to Logan was easy compared to what she had to do next, and she had ten minutes to figure out what she was going to say to Sebastian.

A printed contract from Preston Ustace was on her desk, ready for her signature. She looked through the media company's offer one more time, then picked up her pen. The ballpoint hovered over the signature line. Once she signed this, her world would change, and she suddenly felt weary. She was tired of change. Her entire life had been one upheaval and disappointment after another, with a few victories along the way—making it through foster care almost unscathed, graduating from college in three years, finding an accounting job right away, then moving on to *The Democrat-Gazette* . . . and meeting Sebastian.

Her chest squeezed. But she knew what she had to do. With a surprisingly steady hand, she quickly signed the contract, sealed it in a brown envelope, and put it to the side of her tidy and organized desktop to mail on the way home. There. A done deal. She

was doing the right thing—for her career, and most importantly, for Logan.

This wouldn't be the first time she'd had to put her happiness on the back burner. She doubted it would be the last.

SEB'S VIEW

BY SEBASTIAN HUDSON

In the immortal words of Snoopy, it was a dark and stormy night. But storms didn't deter fans of the Quisenberry Golden Rockers and the Sterling Spring Chickens as they watched the two senior teams vie for the coveted *We Ain't Too Old for This* bowling trophy at the Little Rock Professor Bowl. The sassy and steadfast septuagenarians battled through three close games, with the Spring Chickens emerging victorious.

"We'll get 'em next year," Horace Quisenberry, the Rockers' team captain said, shaking off the loss as he spooned a stack of sauerkraut on his foot-long hot dog. "This is all in good fun, and we raised over two hunnerd dollars for the senior center."

Mr. Q.'s wife of fifty years, Pearl June, wasn't as magnanimous. "Those Chickens cheat," she muttered, her frosty pink lips pursed in a scowl while her good-natured husband strode off. "We should have won the second game

Briiiiiing!

Sebastian jumped at the jingling sound coming from the sleek

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black telephone perched on the edge of his desk. His fingers froze over his manual Smith Corona typewriter as he switched his thoughts from the Professor Bowl to his office. He shoved aside the ever-present stack of papers in front of him, found the phone, and picked up the receiver. "Hudson here."

"How are things in the big city?"

Seb smiled at Buford Wilson's gravelly voice. "Still hustling and bustling."

"That's why I like it here in Clementine. No hustle or bustle."

Leaning back in his creaky antique chair, Seb grinned. "It's good to hear from you, Buford. It's been a while."

"Far too long." A pause.

His grin faltered. "Everything okay? Glenda doing all right?"

"Yeah, she's fine. Everything's fine. I just needed to ask you something."

Seb glanced at the paper in the typewriter. His column was due by end of day, but he could spare time for his old mentor. Besides, it was his own fault he'd procrastinated so long on it. Not something he normally did, but the muse had struck during the weekend, and he'd spent both Saturday and Sunday working on his novel instead of the writing that paid his bills. "Sure," he said to Buford. "What's up?"

"My retirement."

Seb sat up. "Really?"

"Don't sound so surprised."

"I'm not surprised. I'm shocked. You said you'd retire when you were dead. Wait. You're not—"

"No, no. I'll be alive and kicking as long as the good Lord wants me to. It's just . . . I'm tired, Sebastian." His voice turned gruff. "And with my nephew, Bo, happy with his farm and having no interest in the newspaper business, I realized I needed a succession plan. I

want you to be a part of it.”

That was the last thing he'd expected to hear.

“I want to sell *The Clementine Times* to you. Before you say anything, just listen to my offer. I talked it over with Glenda and Bo, and they agree with me—you should be the one to carry the paper into the future. But I know how important your work for *The Democrat-Gazette* is, and I don't want to pull you away from that.”

Seb wouldn't call it important work—not really. After *The Arkansas Gazette* merged with *The Arkansas Democrat* and formed one paper with a rather uninspired yet self-explanatory moniker, Seb had moved from hard reporting to writing slice-of-life features for Seb's View. He didn't think his column would be missed all that much if it were to disappear tomorrow. His new editor sure wouldn't mind if it was gone. Frank had little respect for what he called “boring” little columns. “*Readers want excitement,*” he'd said more than once. “*They like stories with conflict, not fluff.*”

He didn't share Frank's opinion, and he had enough reader mail to prove his column was popular. But how long would that last? He'd been in the newspaper business since he was twelve, working for Buford in Clementine, his hometown. The business had changed a lot since then, and the changes seemed to come at a faster clip the closer they approached the twenty-first century. “Why me?” he asked.

“You were the best carrier I had, and then you turned into the best reporter I'd seen in years, even at sixteen.”

Seb grinned. He hadn't thought about those days in a long time. “I was just the local sports reporter. Not a big deal.”

“There you go, selling yourself short again. Let me guess—all those awards you've won are in a box, right?”

He didn't have that many awards, but Buford was correct. “Just like yours are in the cleaning supply closet on the bottom shelf.

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They should have twenty feet of dust on them by now.”

Buford chuckled. “Touché. I’ll cut to the chase. You have the writing talent and reporter instincts. You’ve been around a newsroom for most of your life. You’re the future of *The Times*, Sebastian. No doubt about it.”

Seb was glad Buford couldn’t see him blushing over the compliments. It meant the world that his mentor thought so highly of him. Yet there was one hang up they both had to face. “I’m not a businessman.”

“Exactly why I want you to continue my legacy. I don’t need a bean counter who will put the bottom line before journalistic excellence and integrity. The people of Clementine deserve better.”

Clementine, a tiny town nestled in the Arkansas Ozark Mountains, had exactly one general store, one gas station, one motel, a southern-fried diner that was always packed with hungry patrons, and zero traffic lights. Not exactly the big time. But the paper’s total circulation was larger than Clementine’s population and included several smaller towns in the area. It was also Seb’s hometown, and he hadn’t been there since . . . huh. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d made the two-and-a-half-hour drive to visit. Here his mentor was offering him the family business, and Seb had been too busy to see him, although they did keep in touch over the phone every once in a while.

“Sebastian, I’m prepared to offer you *The Clementine Times* for the princely sum of . . . one dollar.”

For the second time since answering Buford’s call, Seb’s jaw hit the floor. “Now I know that’s a joke.”

“I’m serious, son.”

And Seb didn’t really doubt him. The man wasn’t only his mentor, he’d been a second father to him after his own dad ran off with the Clementine High School secretary and never looked back,

leaving Seb, his mother, and his younger sister, Evelyn Margot, to fend for themselves. They made it through some tough times, and Em was still finding her way. Seb probably would be too, if it weren't for Buford.

Still blindsided by the offer, Seb said, "It's very generous, but I don't know. It's a big decision. Can I have some time to think about it?"

"Take all the time you need. I'm not in any hurry to retire, and there will be a training period before I turn the reins over to you."

"You sound pretty sure I'm going to accept."

"I'm cautiously optimistic. Just let me know when you're ready to talk."

"I will. Regardless of my decision, I appreciate the offer." A lump formed in his throat. "I'll be in touch."

They said their goodbyes and Seb hung up the phone. He leaned back in his chair, still dumbstruck. He'd never aspired to be anything more than a reporter, and now a columnist. There was the pipe dream of being a novelist too. But at the rate he was writing his first book, he'd be near retirement age, if he could even get it published.

But owning and running a newspaper? That wasn't on his radar, and he wasn't sure it should be. He also had more than a lack of business sense that made him hesitant. There was something else—or rather someone else. *Jade*.

Simply thinking about her made him happy. For the first time in six years, since his last disastrous relationship in college, he was considering his personal future again. He and Jade had been casually dating for the past four months, emphasis on casual. But he wanted more. And if things worked out between them, he'd have to take her into consideration when thinking about Buford's offer.

He glanced at his watch. In a few minutes, he would meet her

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downstairs at her office in the accounting department, and they would go to the Sports Page for hamburgers and fries, their usual Wednesday lunch.

Seb got up from his chair and shoved Buford's offer out of his mind. Good thing he'd given Seb plenty of time to think about it. He didn't like being rushed. Never had.

He was about to head out when he saw a female figure behind the frosty glass window of his door, which used to be an empty closet that his former editor had agreed to let him change into a tiny but usable office. Seb grinned, his pulse quickening as she knocked. "Hey," he said as he opened it with a smile, resisting the urge to take her hand even though they agreed no PDA at work. It wasn't a secret that they were dating, but they didn't draw attention to it either. "I was just heading downstairs to get you."

She nodded, her gaze focused on her black pumps. "Can we talk first?"

His smile tempered. "Sure. Come on in." He stepped back as she closed the door behind her, then clutched her hands together. That wasn't a good sign. "Is something wrong?"

"No." She pressed her lips together. "Not exactly."

He didn't believe her. He was also more than a little distracted by how pretty she was in her brown pants and crisp white shirt. He'd always had a thing for redheads, and her auburn, pixie cut hair framed a flawless face with round, malachite eyes and long russet eyelashes. Irresistible. When his eyes dipped to her rose-colored lips, he fought not to linger. They'd kissed a few times, and if he had his way, he'd kiss her a lot more. She'd made it clear in the beginning that she wanted to take their relationship slow, and he respected that. Hopefully he could speed things up soon, though. Very soon.

As she lifted her gaze to meet his, she said, "I, uh, have some

news.”

“Well, you’re in the right place then. News is our bread and butter.” He chuckled, but her expression remained unreadable. “What’s going on?”

She moved toward his desk, her heels tapping on the wood floor. He half expected her to comment on how disorganized it was, and she’d have a right to. Twice she’d helped him get his office in order, and both times he vowed to keep it that way, only to immediately revert back to his habit of setting things down and dealing with them later. But when she faced him again, she remained silent.

“Whatever it is, you can tell me.”

A quick nod. Then, “You know that new website? LinkedIn?”

“Never heard of it.” He didn’t have a computer at the office, although Frank had given him one. Forced it on him actually. He’d never been on the internet and didn’t plan to. He figured it was just a flash in the pan anyway. No one in their right mind would give up a tangible newspaper or printed book to read a screen all the time.

“It’s a place to put your resumé and find jobs,” she said. “I made a profile last week.”

“You did? Why?”

“I’ve been looking for another job.”

Whoa. She hadn’t given any indication that she was wanting to work somewhere else.

Her hands were wringing now, and she shoved them behind her back. “I got an offer for an analyst position. I start next week.”

“Oh.” Well, that stunk. He wouldn’t be able to see her every day. But if she was happy, he was happy for her. He put his arms around her, fully intending to give her a hug. “Congratulations,” he murmured into her hair. She smelled so nice. Jade wasn’t one to wear perfume or more than minimal makeup. He found her simplicity

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enticing, and before he could stop himself, he was kissing her. To his shock and pleasure, she melted against him, returning his kiss with more fervor than she ever had before, and he was happy to match her. Bliss, pure bliss.

Suddenly she jerked away, slipping out of his arms. "I'm sorry," she mumbled, so low he almost didn't hear her.

He scrubbed his hand over his face. Even though his office was well out of the way of everyone else on the floor, he'd blown it. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that. But I love you—"

"What?" She whirled around, stunned.

He froze, shocked he'd said the words when he hadn't even thought them before. No, that wasn't true. He had, but only once or twice . . . maybe a little more lately. But now that they were out there, he couldn't take them back. He didn't want to. After having his heart trampled in the past by someone he thought he loved, he realized what he felt for this beautiful woman was the real thing. She was smart, determined, caring. Sure, she could be a little uptight, a little overly focused on her work. But he liked the passion and fire he saw inside her. No, he *loved* it.

"I love you, Jade." He smiled, the phrase sounding more natural. More *right*.

She didn't move or respond. She stared at him, her mouth slightly parted and more than slightly red from their fierce kissing. As the seconds ticked by and she remained mute, his stomach turned into a sour mess.

Seb tried to brush it off. "You don't have to say it back." So awkward. "How about we just forget it and go to lunch? I'm starving." The last thing he wanted was food, but he had to leave his stifling office and get some air, because it was becoming clear that he had messed up. Big-time. He started to open the door.

"The job is in Atlanta."

The door latched shut and he turned around. "Georgia?"

"Yes."

Now it was his turn to remain silent as reality set in. She wasn't just leaving *The Democrat-Gazette*. She was leaving Arkansas. *Leaving me.*

"I'm sorry, Sebastian."

To her credit, she sounded genuine. That didn't make him feel any better. "I didn't realize you were so unhappy here."

"It's not that. I . . . need a fresh start. This is a good opportunity—one I couldn't pass up."

With every word, she deflated him. "What about us?"

Jade's hands stilled and she looked him straight in the eye. "We weren't that serious."

After his declaration of love, she didn't think they were serious? After kissing him like she couldn't get enough of him? Like she'd been telling him . . . goodbye.

"It's for the best," she continued, her earlier hesitation gone. "We're different people, we have different goals. It wouldn't have lasted."

"I just told you I love you." He shook his head, trying to make sense of what was happening. "Doesn't that mean something?"

A pause. Her bottom lip quivered. Then stilled. "No, Sebastian. It doesn't." She brushed past him and walked out the door.

He could hear her clicking heels down the hall, percussing in his spinning head. *It can't be over. Go after her. Tell her again that you love her. Don't let her go.*

But his feet wouldn't move. He'd done that before, chased after Karen, who in the end didn't want him either. They dated for three years in college, and he'd been so sure she was the one for him. Just like he'd been sure about Jade.

Seb plopped down on his chair and leaned his elbows on the

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desk, his head drooping. He was the guy who didn't like to be hurried or rushed, and then he prematurely and inexplicably voiced his love to Jade. While he blamed Karen for breaking his heart, in hindsight she wasn't the only one at fault. When he finally came around to wanting to marry her, she had moved on to someone else.

Now Jade was moving on too. He was a loser either way.

He could try talking to her again. Convince her to stay. But what would be the point? If she wanted to be with him, she wouldn't take a job hundreds of miles away. She didn't even ask him to go with her. He was truly confused by that, since he thought, felt, they'd been growing closer during their short relationship, even before that amazing kiss.

"*Your girl picker's broken.*" Evelyn Margot's words entered his brain. She'd said that after Karen had dumped him, and considering his high school girlfriend had kicked him to the curb before graduation, his little sister might be right. He'd also been completely wrong about Jade. His own emotions too. Minutes ago, he'd been so sure he was in love with her. Now he never wanted to see her again.

His logical brain kicked into gear, instantly hardening his feelings. Fine. In fact, better than fine. She had done him a favor by ending things before they got too deep. He was the idiot who had read more into their *casual* relationship. He wasn't going to spend years moping over her like he had Karen. Jade Smith wasn't worth it.

Chapter 1

Clementine, Arkansas
2004

Seb glanced at his watch. Three o'clock and Haskell Panchak wasn't here yet. It figured. Clementine's earnest, friendly, and mostly capable mayor was terrible with time and deadlines. More than once he'd had to nudge the man to get his monthly column done and turned in before *The Clementine Times* went to press. But beggars couldn't be choosers, and Seb was having a hard enough time getting local content for the once daily newspaper that was now a biweekly publication that went out on Monday and Thursdays. If circulation and advertising didn't change for the better, he would soon have to go to just Mondays.

But he didn't want to think about that now. Instead, he observed the cast of characters sitting at the long conference table in *The Times's* conference room. They were all waiting on Panchak's arrival. Or Pancake, as Seb had christened him in one of his columns a couple of years ago. It was a joke at the time that ended up a part of Clementonian vernacular, much to the politician's consternation.

There were Cletus and Paul, cousins who were as good ol' boy

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as any two guys could get and had worked *The Times's* press for thirty years. They typically didn't attend staff meetings, but Seb had invited them to this one. Across the table from them was his sister, Evelyn Margot—his advertising manager who also doubled doing layout and graphic design. Next to her was Flora Fisher, *The Times's* bookkeeper, who had no idea what was in store for her as soon as Pancake arrived, and she was talking to Isaiah Boston, the sports beat reporter who also picked up breaking news.

Sitting next to Seb was Tyler Hernandez, an eighteen-year-old kid who was graduating from Clementine High next week but had been working for Seb for two years. Tyler reminded Seb of himself when he was younger—eager, willing to do the most menial of the jobs while also showing an aptitude for taking on more responsibility. Right now he was the unofficial circulation manager, and the only reason he was unofficial was because Seb couldn't afford to pay him an official salary. At best he'd been able to give him a bonus Christmas ham from the Piggly Wiggly, the nearest grocery store, last year. But Tyler didn't mind the pay or the measly ham, and he was quickly turning into Seb's right-hand man, much like Seb had been for Buford.

Seb shifted his gaze to the modest conference room that hadn't changed since the early seventies, complete with a picture of Buford and his wife, Glenda, on the opposite wall. It wasn't a large photo, or a staged one. Just the two of them sitting on their patio at their cabin thirty minutes outside Clementine. It was the last picture of them together, taken a couple of years after Seb had bought *The Times* two months after Buford first offered it to him, and for the one dollar the man had promised.

It wasn't often that Seb turned wistful, and maybe it was due to the real reason they'd all gathered in the conference room, but seeing Buford and Glenda during happier times tugged on his heart-

strings. Little did anyone know that shortly after the picture was taken, and only two-and-a-half years into their retirement, the unthinkable would happen—a deadly car crash that took both their lives. The grieving process had been hard, but he'd been stoic and helped his staff get through it. But there were times, like now, that he wanted Buford to be here. He and Glenda *should* be here.

“Sorry I’m late.” Pancake swooshed into the room, the three strands on top of his balding head hanging on for dear life as he took his seat on the other side of Evelyn. Grateful for the respite from his melancholy thoughts, even though he was irritated by the mayor’s tardiness, Seb stood up. “Now that everyone’s here,” he said, giving Pancake a stern look, “we can start the meeting.”

Pancake shifted in his seat.

“Ignore him, Haskell,” Evelyn said in an exaggerated whisper. “He’s just being his usual crabby self.”

“No, he’s right. I was late. I had a meeting with the Clementine Historical Society, and we ran behind. My apologies.”

Considering the Historical Society was comprised of five women in their sixties and seventies who were all compulsive talkers and stealth gossipers, Panchak could be forgiven his tardiness. “No problem,” Seb said, softening his stance. “Okay, a quick state of the union and we’ll be on our way. The Memorial Day Hoedown is three weeks away.” As far as Seb knew, Clementine was the only town that held a hoedown in the spring instead of fall, which elicited questions from non-Clementonians every year. He’d always liked the originality. “I want everything covered before the event. Evelyn, what’s the advertising status?”

She flipped through her spiral notebook. “We’ve got a general ad going out this week, and next week three of the vendors who will be there have taken out small—emphasis on *small*—ads. I’m working on filling our empty spots in the next two issues.”

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While he wished those spots were already full, he knew she would do her best to complete the job. If not, she'd come up with some drawings and cartoon blocks to fill the empty space, but it would be nice to earn some needed funds from ads.

He asked Pancake for more info on the hoedown and the progress being made to get everything in place, and the mayor obliged. He then queried Isaiah and Tyler for their reports and assigned both of them to cover the hoedown. Isaiah, always cool and collected, just nodded. But Tyler's eyes lit up.

"Take plenty of pictures."

Tyler grinned and pushed up his large round metal glasses. "Yes, sir."

Ah, enthusiasm. Seb could use some of that.

Evelyn got up from her chair. "I'll be right back," she said, giving Seb a small nod.

Showtime. He faked a scowl. "We're in the middle of a meeting, Evelyn."

"Cool your jets. I'll be right back." She hurried out of the room.

As Seb pretended to be irritated, he noticed Pancake's gaze had followed her out the door. Well, well, well. Although Haskell's fading hairline made him look much older than thirty-four, he and Evelyn had gone to high school together, and she was actually three years older than him. But this was the first time he'd seen the man take a visual interest in his sister. Seb wasn't sure how he felt about that.

"Sebastian," Flora's resonant voice was butter smooth as she spoke his name. "I've got an appointment at four—"

"Congratulations!" Evelyn burst into the room carrying a cake she'd picked up earlier that day from the Clementine Bakery. She set it in front of Flora as Flora's husband, Carl, and her mother, Florine, came into the room. Carl held two six-packs of Coke and

Florine had a paper bag with the cups, napkins, and plates Evelyn had requested her to bring.

Flora looked at the top of the cake. It read: Retirement Suits You. Her gaze darted around the room. "I wasn't expecting this."

"There's no way we were going to let you go without a little celebration," Em said, putting her arm around Flora's shoulders.

Seb stood to the side and watched as his staff celebrated Flora's retirement. The woman had been his bookkeeper for the past ten years, and she'd been Buford's for twenty before that. Thirty years of service to *The Clementine Times*. That deserved more than a cake, but he was waiting for the plaque commemorating her service to come back from the engraver. For now, a cake would have to do.

"Get over here, sugar." Florine waved her hand at him, her long, perfectly manicured coral nails a nice contrast to her dark skin. Ms. Florine was never without her nail polish or her pearls. "You'd better get your piece of cake before Carl eats it all."

"Hey," Carl said, scoffing at his mother-in-law. "I've only had two."

Chuckling, Seb uncrossed his arms and walked to the table where Florine had a slice at the ready. For the next thirty minutes, he was able to take off his publisher and editor-in-chief hats and just be Seb—a man hanging out with his friends.

At ten to four, the cake was put away and the mess cleaned up. Flora told Carl and Florine she'd see them at home. When everyone had left the conference room, Flora went to Seb, tears in her eyes. "You didn't have to make a fuss," she said.

"Sure we did." He smiled, keeping his emotions in check. "It was Evelyn's idea."

"I'm sure she didn't have to twist your arm." Flora dabbed at her eyes with a retirement-themed napkin and looked around the room. "I'm going to miss this place." She faced Seb. "I'll miss you

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the most.”

He drew her in for a quick hug. “Same here. I don’t know what I would have done without you all these years.”

“You would have survived.” She stepped back. “Just like you’re going to survive now.”

Doubt crept in. “I’m glad you’re confident.”

She touched his cheek. “Don’t forget to come around on Thanksgiving. That’s a standing invitation, no matter what.”

“Of course. I wouldn’t miss your collard greens and Florine’s potato pie.” While Evelyn usually spent Thanksgiving with their mother and their stepfather, Bill, in Tennessee, Seb didn’t like to stray too far from Clementine and *The Times*. Flora and her family had taken him in on the holidays.

She nodded. “I best get to that appointment. You holler if you need anything . . . even though I know you won’t.”

She was right—he probably wouldn’t. *The Times* was his responsibility, not hers. “I’ll keep it in mind, though.”

After she hurried out of the room, Seb stayed behind. He’d see Flora in town and at the Clementine Community Church, but not having her in the office was going to be hard. And then there was the fact that now he had added another job responsibility on top of being publisher, editor in chief, part-time columnist and reporter, and full-time owner. But that was the newspaper business in the twenty-first century, and despite the hard work and uncertain times, he still loved it.

He loved Clementine even more.

Seb turned off the lights and went to his office to check the messages on his answering machine. There was only one, which was unusual. Often his machine was full. He hit Play.

[[Begin Voicemail]]

Hello, Mr. Hudson. Miles Harrington here, from Harrington

Media. I'm following up on the three letters and five messages we've left with you recently. Our company is serious about discussing a possible deal with you—

[[End Voicemail]]

Seb hit the erase button. Geez, this guy was persistent. Seb had read his first letter and immediately balled it up and threw it into the trash, and did the same with the subsequent letters that he hadn't bothered to open. He also didn't listen much further to the other phone messages Harrington had left over the past two months. He'd figured if he ignored the man, he'd leave him alone. So far he hadn't, but Seb wasn't changing his strategy. Eventually he'd realize the answer was an emphatic and forever *no*.

The Times might be in dire financial straits, and he was taking on another job to keep it afloat, but he continued to hope that this was only temporary—that the newspaper business would make a comeback. He'd been very, very wrong about the appeal of the internet, and Evelyn had asked him more than once to start moving things to digital. Seb refused. If he changed the newspaper format, then that would irrevocably change *The Times*. He couldn't allow that.

Yes, he was a relic at age forty, but if someone didn't preserve the past, who would? When he bought the paper from Buford, he made a vow not to let it go under or stray from its original mission—to keep Clementine and the surrounding communities connected. And even though it was hard, even though at times it seemed impossible, he wasn't giving in.

[[Location Stamp]]

Los Angeles, California

[[Location Stamp]]

“And now here's the latest from No Doubt—'It's My Life!'”

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“Ooh, I love this song.” Kalista Clark pushed down her Chanel sunglasses and looked at the man cleaning the pool. “Turn it up.”

The guy stopped pushing the long pole he was holding and looked at her. He was pretty old—at least in his forties. “The radio is right beside you, ma’am.”

“I *know* that.” She glanced at the small portable radio on the glass table near her lounge chair. “My nails are still wet.”

The guy put down his pole—did he seriously just roll his eyes?—and walked over to the table. He turned the knob, and Gwen Stefani’s voice carried through the speaker. “How’s that?”

“Good. You can go back to”—she waved her hand at him—“Whatever you were doing.”

“Yes, *ma’am*.”

Ugh, Kalista didn’t like his tone at all. She’d have to tell Daddy to get another pool man. She blew on her hot-pink nails, then lay back on the lounge chair and closed her eyes. The warm California sunshine warmed her skin, and the white string bikini she wore was very comfortable. She might wear it to the beach this afternoon when she met up with Abbie, Ryan, and their other friends. Having a huge pool was nice, but she loved being at the beach—or rather, being *seen* at the beach. *Let’s be real.*

She was just about to turn over when the worst voice that ever existed hit her ears. “Kalista!”

Kalista cringed. Maybe if she didn’t move, Bettany would think she was asleep. She kept super still, resisting a scowl when she heard her stepmother’s kitten heels approach on the textured tile surrounding the pool.

“I know you’re awake and you can hear me.” Bettany kicked Kalista’s lounge.

Rude. Kalista took off her sunglasses. The pool man was gone, but Bettany was looming over her. “What do you want?”

“Ray-baby wants to talk to you.”

So dumb. “Why can’t you call him Raymond like my four other stepmothers did?”

“Because he’s my Ray-baby.” Bettany’s long blond extensions framed her face. Her very young face. Kalista had been shocked to find out her stepmother of three months was twenty-five—only seven years older than Kalista. So tragic. “He’s in his office.”

At least her father was home. Usually he was gone during the week, either at his office downtown or flying out somewhere to close some business deal. Kalista wasn’t sure exactly what kind of business her father was in, but he was incredibly rich, and that’s all Kalista cared about. She replaced her sunglasses. “Tell him I’m busy.”

“He’s not going to like that.”

“Don’t care.”

“You’re such a brat.” Bettany stormed off.

Kalista frowned. Maybe she was being bratty, but not any more than her stupid stepmother. She wondered how long this marriage would last. The longest one was Megyn, and that had been eight years, when Kalista was in her early teens. She didn’t like her either.

Another song started, this one by Maroon 5, and Kalista focused on the music and her tan and pushed Bettany and “Ray-baby” out of her mind. When Adam Levine crooned the last words, the radio shut off. “Hey,” Kalista said, scrambling to sit up. “I was listening to that.”

“Now you’re going to listen to me.”

Uh-oh. She whipped off her sunglasses at her father’s stern tone. She hadn’t expected him to come out here, and he didn’t look happy. “Hi, Daddy,” she said, giving him her sweetest smile.

His expression softened. “Hi, sweetheart. Are you enjoying the

pool?”

“Yes, very much.”

“Good.” He looked at the crystal-clear water, tinted blue by the Moroccan tiles decorating the edge. “I need to spend more time out here,” he mumbled. “Shame to have such a nice backyard and never enjoy it.”

Kalista was surprised to hear him say that. Usually he was just in and out of the house, and every once in a while he’d call and check in with her. It could be annoying sometimes, like when she was at the mall or the movies or at a friend’s house after school. But after next week, she wouldn’t have to worry about school anymore.

He turned to her. “What are your plans after graduation, Kalista?”

Plans? “Hang out here. Oh, and hang out with my friends. Go shopping for sure, and of course go out with Ryan.” They weren’t official, but they were going out more frequently lately. She liked him, but she also liked to keep her options open.

“What about college?”

“Ew, no. I’m tired of school, Daddy.” She laid back down. “I just wanna have fun, you know?”

He pushed his hand through his short, gray hair. “That’s what I’m worried about. It’s time to grow up.”

“I am grown, duh. I turned eighteen in March.”

“I mean mature.”

Where was this coming from? “I am mature. Just ask my friends.”

“You overcharged four credit cards this month. Where did the money go?”

Oh. She didn’t realize she’d done that. “Things.”

“What things?”

“You know, stuff.” She sulked. “You’ve never complained before.”

“That’s my fault. I should have taught fiscal responsibility to you earlier, but there’s no time like the present.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“After your ceremony next week, you’re going to Arkansas.”

She sat up again. “What’s an Arkansas?”

Daddy’s mouth dropped open. “You’re kidding. Wait, you’re serious. What did they teach you in school anyway?”

“Lots of boring stuff.”

He shook his head, then said, “Arkansas is in the south . . . by Texas . . . Forget it. Vivian’s there, and she’s agreed to let you stay with her for the summer.”

“Really?” Despite her confusion, she was excited to hear him mention her first stepmother, Vivian, or Viv as Kalista called her. She had married Daddy when Kalista was six, a year after her mother had died, and even though they divorced five years later, Viv was a formal model and had been in her life a few years after that. Although, since then they’d talked infrequently. Why was she in Arkansas? “Hold on, what do you mean for the summer?”

“She’s getting married in August, and she agreed to let you stay with her until after the wedding.”

“But what about my summer here? I have plans with my friends.” Very loose plans. Actually, nonexistent, but that was usually how her summers went—she just did what she felt like when she felt like doing it. “Does Arkansas have a beach?”

Daddy chuckled. “No.”

“What about a mall?”

“Probably, but I’m not concerned about that. I’m worried about your lack of direction. I don’t want you to get your trust fund and blow it on clothes and hair salons.”

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"I wouldn't do that." She'd known for a while she had a trust fund that she would get when she turned twenty-one. "I'm going to buy a Bentley. Oh, and a big house. I bet I could get Britney Spears to sing at my parties—"

"Good Lord," Daddy said, his scowl back again. "Are you listening to yourself? Having money involves lots of responsibilities. There's nothing wrong with a fancy car or a big house, but you need other goals. Like an actual job."

"Oh, I can get a job," she said, although the idea sounded dull. None of her other friends worked—why should she?

"You need to understand the value of hard work too. Vivian's fiancé is a farmer—"

"Yuck."

Daddy gave her an exasperated look. "You also need an attitude adjustment." He stood. "I bought the tickets and Vivian is expecting you. A week from today you'll be in Clementine, Arkansas."

She jumped to her feet. "But—"

"No buts, Kalista Louise. You have to prove that you're mature and responsible enough to handle your trust fund. The first step is getting a job and helping Vivian with whatever she needs. Understand?"

"And what if I don't?" She crossed her arms over her shoulders. He couldn't make her do this, could he? She was an adult, not a little kid.

"Then you won't get your trust fund until your thirty. No, make that thirty-five. I must have been out of my mind to plan to give it you at twenty-one."

No trust fund? "All I have to do is get a job?"

"And be responsible—don't forget that."

"Okay." She held out her hand. "Deal."

"Wow." He looked surprised. "That was easier than I thought."

He shook her hand, then gave her a hug. “I’ll miss you,” he said.

She froze, unable to remember the last time he hugged her. Weird. She hugged him back. “Uh, me too.”

“I’ll let you get back to your”—he sighed—“Tanning.”

“Thanks, Daddy.”

“I love you, Kalista.”

“Love you too,” she said and quickly turned on the radio. Instead of a cool song, a commercial played and she heard her father walk inside. Arkansas . . . hmm. She could do anything for three months, and it would be nice to see Viv again. This would be a breeze, as long as Clementine had a decent mall. Oh, and a Starbucks. And a spa. She couldn’t survive without a spa . . .



Chapter 2

Atlanta, GA

“You don’t know what he wants?”

Jade looked up from her computer at Charlotte Rae, her coworker in the next cubicle. The fiftyish woman was standing next to Jade’s desk, her thin eyebrows raised above surprised eyes. She’d heard Jade talk to Miles’s secretary when she called a few minutes ago, and as soon as Jade hung up, she came right over.

“I have no idea.” Jade’s nerves started an unpleasant tap dance under her skin. In the ten years she’d worked for Harrington Media—eight of those had been when it was Preston and Ustace Communications—this was the first time she’d been summoned by Miles Harrington, the owner’s nephew and an up-and-coming junior executive. Thankfully, her hands weren’t shaking. With a lot of practice and self-talk, she’d overcome that outward show of her inner anxiety.

“Maybe he’s got the hot for you.” Charlotte gave her a sly look. “He’s about your age and quite handsome. In fact, if I were fifteen years younger—”

“You’re not and you wouldn’t.”

She sighed. “I suppose it would put a tiny crimp in my mar-

riage.”

“Only a crimp?”

Charlotte laughed. “I’m joking. But you’re single and ready to mingle, and from all accounts, so is he.”

Jade put a stack of data sheets in the folder she’d been instructed to bring to her impromptu meeting. “I’m not mingling with anyone.”

“Obviously.”

What did she mean by that? Jade frowned and pushed back from her desk. She had to meet Miles upstairs in fifteen minutes, and she needed to get there early to collect her thoughts. The last thing she wanted was to think about her nonexistent social life, which was nonexistent by choice. “He’s not interested in me.”

“You don’t know that.” She quickly undid the top button of Jade’s blouse.

Jade gasped and pulled back. “What are you doing?”

“You’re too uptight. Showing a little skin—emphasis on *little*—wouldn’t hurt.”

She redid the button. “If you’re finished being ridiculous, I’ve got a meeting to go to.”

Charlotte sighed. “One day you’re going to realize that all work and no play makes for a dull life.”

“My life is fine.” She softened her tone. “Really, I’m happy.” At least as happy as she could be.

“It’s a shame you can’t see that you’re such a catch.” Charlotte’s smile was sweet but bordered on pity too. “I don’t want you to end up an old maid like my cousin Gert.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being single, and I have to go.”

“Good luck!” she called out as Jade hurried down the hall. “And if he gives you bedroom eyes, flirt right back!”

Bedroom eyes? *She’s lost her mind.* She meant well, though.

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Jade had worked with Charlotte since she joined Preston and Us-tace—or PU, as it was informally called, much to the chagrin of the owners who hadn't quite thought through the ramifications of combining both their names. Her cubicle mate was a little eccentric, nosier than she should be, but it was nice that she cared.

As she made her way to the elevator, she shifted her thoughts to Miles. The only encounter she'd had with him was at last year's Christmas party, and that had been in passing. She stayed fifteen minutes, a suitable length of time for a drop-in. She couldn't stand small talk, and what little free time she had, she preferred to spend volunteering at one of the women's shelters in Atlanta or helping with charity events for the children's home and foster children's association.

But Charlotte didn't know that. No one at Harrington did, and neither did they know about her past. She intended to keep it that way.

When she stepped onto the elevator to go upstairs to the executive offices, she felt the phone in her jacket pocket buzz. She pulled it out and saw an unfamiliar number on the small screen. She let it go to voicemail and straightened the collar on her white shirt to make sure the button was securely fastened. "Bedroom eyes," she mumbled. She had no idea what bedroom eyes were. "And I'm not going to flirt with Miles—"

The elevator doors slid open, and an office worker she didn't recognize tilted his head at her, confused.

Jade's cheeks flamed. "I, uh . . . Never mind." She brushed past the man and hurried down the hall toward Miles's office. When she was halfway down the hall, she turned to the right. A plaque right outside the door read Miles Harrington, Vice President. She took in a big breath and opened the door.

A beautiful young woman with long blond hair, French-tipped

nails, and burgundy lipstick smiled at her from behind a modest-sized desk. “Ms. Smith?”

“Yes. Hi.” She gripped the folder.

“I’ll let Mr. Harrington know you’re here.” She gestured to a chair on the other side of the room. Jade nodded as the woman buzzed her boss, but before she could sit down, Miles came out of his office.

“Ms. Smith. Or can I call you Jade?”

“Jade,” she said.

“Perfect.” He smiled and waved her in. “I promise this won’t take long.”

Jade followed him into a simple office adorned with photos of Miles and various people, mostly on golf courses. She noticed a few golf trophies on a shelf behind his desk, and on the opposite side were several diplomas. Near the desk was a medium-sized round table with three neat stacks of folders on it.

“You can sit here.” He held out one of the chairs at the table for her.

She sat down, and he sat opposite her. “Sorry about the mess,” he said, moving one of the stacks to the side. “I’m in the middle of research.”

As someone who liked tidiness, she didn’t think it was even a little bit messy. She’d seen worse. Much worse.

“Thanks for meeting me on short notice, Jade.” He folded his hands and rested them on the table. “I’ll get to the point. I need your assistance.”

That explained the data sheets he asked her to bring regarding several newspapers in Oklahoma and Missouri. She handed it to him. “I’m happy to help.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.” His smile widened, and she had to admit Charlotte was right—he was a nice-looking man. A little

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too nice-looking for her taste. His short black hair was slicked to the side, his dark eyebrows perfectly groomed, his chin appearing freshly shaven despite it being three in the afternoon. His navy blue suit and crimson tie looked perfectly pressed and expensive. All things she would expect from the nephew of a very rich CEO with an impressive financial portfolio.

“I want you to go to Arkansas,” he said.

She froze. “W-what?”

He took one of the folders near him and opened it. “I’m putting together a huge acquisitions deal, but I’ve run into a snag.” He pushed the folder toward her.

Jade looked at it. “*The Clementine Times*?”

“It’s been a thorn in my side for months.” He tapped the folder. “This small newspaper is the last piece I need to make this deal work, but I can’t get to the owner.”

She lifted her gaze. Clementine sounded familiar, but she couldn’t place it. And she didn’t want to. She’d left that state behind a decade ago, and after her failure with Logan, she never looked back.

“I need you to go to Clementine and open negotiations with him.”

“But I’m just an accountant.”

“Now, you’re more than that, Jade.” His smile widened, to the point she thought he might hurt himself. “You’re a valuable member of the Harrington team.”

So valuable he never bothered to talk to her before this, but she shoved that thought aside and looked at the folder’s contents again. The top page was mostly specs about the newspaper’s circulation, expenditures, history, other business things. Then she got to the list of employees.

Sebastian Hudson—Owner, Publisher, Editor in Chief.

Her gaze flew to Miles. "I can't do this," she blurted.

"Sure you can. In fact, I think you're the only one capable of getting through to him. I did some digging and found out he used to work for *The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. Imagine my surprise when I discovered you worked there too." He sat back, extremely satisfied. "What are the chances?"

"Yeah," she mumbled, glancing at Sebastian's name. She hadn't thought about him in years. Not too much anyway. When she packed up and left Arkansas shortly after their last conversation, she'd been filled with guilt over how she'd handled ending their relationship. Him telling her he loved her had thrown her for a thousand loops . . . and it had also felt nice. Like when he surprised her with that intense, amazing kiss that nearly made her lose her mind. Those heavenly moments in his arms had almost made her lose her resolve too, and she almost told him she wouldn't take the job. Somehow, she had regained her senses. Logan was her priority, not her feelings for Sebastian. Better to end it then instead of breaking it off later. That would have inevitably happened—no man would want to be saddled with an instant family and a troubled teenager.

In the end, she didn't even have a family anymore.

"Jade?"

She shifted her focus to Miles. "I'm sorry," she said, pushing the folder toward him. "I'm the last person Sebastian wants to see."

"Because you used to date?"

Her brow lifted, and she almost asked him how he knew that. Then again, she shouldn't be surprised. His uncle Mayfield Harrington and the executive team were very thorough, conscientious, and successful. Of course Miles wouldn't have left a stone unturned. "It didn't end well."

"That was ten years ago. Surely bygones are bygones?" He

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leaned forward. “Even if they’re not, you can both be professional. I want *The Times*, Jade. It will complete our acquisition of all the community newspapers in that region. The other owners were eager to sell. They understood our mission—to keep newspapers alive in an uncertain industry.”

Miles was making sense. And while her time at *The Democrat-Gazette* had been brief, she knew how newspaper employees loved and believed in their work—Sebastian in particular. Besides, he was probably married with a family right now. She had been a quick blip in his life, an unimportant one at that, despite his declaration of love. There was no way he still harbored any feelings for her. Still, doubts persisted. “I’ve never negotiated anything.”

“You don’t have to negotiate. Just convince him to talk to me. Once that door is opened, I’ll take over from there.” He stood. “Tiffanni has your itinerary, your flight information, where you’ll be staying in Clementine.”

“But—”

“You’ll also have plenty of information about *The Clementine Times*. I’m sure once you’ve read my proposal, you’ll understand we’re doing the right thing by purchasing the newspaper. Then you can convince Hudson he’s making a mistake by not talking to us.”

Jade opened her mouth, then closed it. Miles wasn’t looming over her, not exactly. But he was leaning forward and staring intently at her with piercing black eyes that weren’t as friendly or eager as his smile. She didn’t like that he was making her feel obligated, or that he assumed she would say yes. Then again, she couldn’t exactly afford to lose her job or be demoted because Sebastian was being obstinate. “I just have to get him to talk to you?”

“An open line of communication, that’s it.” He straightened a little. “Once you’ve accomplished that, you’ll return to Harrington

and receive a raise and a bonus.”

Both? That was unexpected. She stared at Sebastian’s name again. She could use the bonus money, and the raise would be nice too. It wasn’t like she could say no. Technically she could and he wouldn’t fire her, although she didn’t think he had that kind of clout . . . yet. But she could kiss any career advancement goodbye if she refused to do what he asked.

“We have a deal then?”

When she glanced up, his smile was almost gone and his expression turned impatient. Clearly he was ready to mark this off his checklist and move on. “Okay,” she said, her fingers slightly trembling. She gripped them tight, just as her phone rang in her pocket again.

“Excellent.” He gestured for her to leave. “I’m sure you want to get that call.”

What she wanted was not to have to go to Arkansas. Instead, she nodded.

“Don’t forget to get your packet from Tifanni. I’ll be in touch.” He went to his desk and back to work.

As Jade left his office, her phone thankfully stopped ringing. She paused at Tifanni’s desk.

“Here you go,” the secretary said with a smile, handing her two glossy folders with the Harrington Media logo on them. “Have a good trip.”

“Uh, thanks.” She took the folders and left the office, still in a daze. When she got to the elevator, she almost turned around and changed her mind, then realized she was being silly. Or to be more accurate, cowardly.

She straightened her shoulders and pressed the elevator button. Her assignment was a simple one. She didn’t need any special negotiating skills, and she expected her trip to Clementine would be

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short and sweet. She would be professional, and so would Sebastian. No emotions involved.

If only her nerves would get the message.

A week after Flora's retirement, Seb stared at the mess of papers spread across his desk. He needed to work on his column, Seb's View Part Deux, but he'd put off dealing with *The Clementine Times's* financials long enough. Before she left, Flora had explained her bookkeeping method, and Seb had taken notes. But it wasn't easy looking at a balance sheet that had been in the red more often than the black over the years, and now that he was solely responsible for keeping track of the books, he dreaded opening the ledger. The only thing he was thankful for was that Flora had resisted using a computer bookkeeping program. He definitely didn't want to have to use one of those things.

He shoved his bangs back from his forehead and reached for the ledger. What he really needed, besides a sudden influx of cash, was a haircut.

"Mr. H.?" Tyler poked his head inside the door.

Seb motioned for him to come in. He kept telling the kid to call him Seb, but Tyler refused. Even though Seb was editor in chief, he didn't cotton to formality much, but they finally settled on Mr. H. "Thanks," he said as the young man shut the door behind him.

Tyler's fuzzy, dark brown eyebrows furrowed. "For what?"

"Saving me from this." He swooped his hand over the dreaded book and set it on one of the several crooked piles on his cluttered desk.

"You're uh, welcome?"

"What brings you by?"

The kid frowned. "Wish I had some good news for you, Mr. H." Just what he needed—more problems. "Lay it on me."

"We lost Daniel."

Oh no. Seb sat back in his chair, stunned. For eighteen years Daniel had been the carrier for *The Times's* most difficult route, a zigzag through a rural, mountainous region that was mostly one-way back roads. Seb would know—Buford's cabin was at the highest elevation on the route, and after he passed, he'd bequeathed the cabin to Seb, who tried to spend as much time as he could there. Arkansas didn't experience snowfall, but ice was a problem, and the route was brutal in winter. Daniel rarely missed a day, even during the worst storms. "Was it his heart?" he asked, bracing himself.

"No. Florida." Tyler parked on the chair, and his leg immediately started to bob up and down. The skinny eighteen-year-old go-getter could never keep still. "He and Becky finally decided to retire."

"Oh. Oh." Seb smiled, relieved the septuagenarian hadn't kicked the bucket like he presumed. "Good for him."

"But bad for us."

Seb sobered. "Yeah. Any of our current carriers interested in taking the route?"

Tyler's leg stilled. "No, sir. One even said she'd rather, and I quote, 'Drink a castor oil cocktail.'"

"How specific. And descriptive." He frowned and leaned back in the chair, the creaky noise resounding in the office. This room was larger than the cracker box closet he had at *The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, not that he'd needed a big office to do his job. But other than his typewriter, chair, a few reference books, plus the mess of folders and papers on his desk, everything else was still Buford's. Seb didn't want to get rid of any of it, and Buford's

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nephew Bo was happy to keep his uncle's things here, where they were appreciated.

Bouncing up from the chair, Tyler said, "Don't worry, Mr. H. I'll figure something out. Until then, I'll take the route."

"I can split it with you, if that helps."

"It might, if I can't find anyone. I'll keep you posted."

"Sounds good. Hey, great job on your Witfordville City Hall exposé. I hear rumblings that the mayor might resign because of your reporting."

"He needs to." He turned somber. "Hard to believe there's so much corruption in such a small town."

Seb merely nodded. There was corruption everywhere, especially when politics were concerned. Witfordville, a town only slightly larger than Clementine and about an hour north, wasn't immune from problems, and right now they were mostly instigated by its crooked mayor. But there were plenty of good, solid local politicians who hadn't traded in their integrity who were interested in the job. Seb had a few friends in Witfordville, and after Tyler's article hit the stands, it looked like things were going to change for the better.

"Thank goodness Mayor Pancake seems to be an all right guy." Tyler broke out a toothy grin. "Catch you later, Mr. H." And Tyler dashed out the door.

Seb smiled, but it quickly dimmed. The day was coming when Tyler would put Clementine in his rearview mirror and move on to bigger and better things, just like Seb had when he was the same age. But until then, Seb counted himself lucky to have him. Maybe at some point Tyler would be interested in running *The Times* and following in Seb's footsteps. *If The Times would still be in business.*

He glanced at the bank statement folder and set it aside. Facing

reality could wait another day and he turned to the small desk that was perpendicular to his larger one, where his black Smith Corona manual typewriter made its home. Due to his shoestring staff, he was having to depend on AP and UPI feeds to pad *The Times*—something he didn't care for because, up until the past several years, the newspaper had always been locally focused. At least he could keep his own column going.

He picked up a piece of crisp, white paper and wound it into the typewriter. A Macintosh computer with the dust cover still on it was on one of the shelves behind him, untouched since his arrival at *The Clementine Times*. He flexed his fingers with unnecessary flair and started typing his column for tomorrow's paper.

SEB'S VIEW PART DEUX HOEDOWN LOWDOWN

With the Clementine Annual Memorial Day Hoedown at Wilson Farms coming up this weekend, I've been asked to disseminate the following information:

1. There will be horses, cows, goats, and chickens at the farm, so plan your footwear accordingly. I suggest old cowboy or rain boots for field and barn touring. Trust the voice of experience: You don't want to bring home anything fragrant on the bottom of your sandals or Air Jordans. If you're planning to congregate around the event tents, dance floor, and food areas within the white oak fence, you're in the clear.
2. Junior Rankins is roasting plenty of oxtail, pork butt, and spareribs, with sides provided by local Clem-

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entire cooks. There will also be food stalls, including the perennial favorite funnel cakes. Bring a big appetite!

3. Bo Wilson is cordoning off a kiddie area with a bouncy castle, crafts, and face painting. A big thank-you to the student volunteers from Clementine High School for helping out with the lil' darlin's.
4. Straight outta Flippin, Arkansas, the Flippin Biscuit Boys will again be providing the music this year, complete with fiddle, banjo, washboard, and jaw harp. For the tenth year in a row, Ms. Eugenia Pickles will be giving square dance lessons, so take advantage of that if you desire. Be ready for a boot-scootin' good time!
5. Per tradition, the last musical number of the night is a Sadie Hawkins one, so, ladies, you still have time to figure out who you're going to ask. Don't be shy now!
6. Finally, have fun, be safe, put on your best smile, and leave your bad attitude at home, 'cause you know Sheriff Thistle and Mayor Pancake won't abide any trouble.

Remember, summer doesn't officially begin until sundown after the hoedown. See ya Saturday!

"Seb?"

He jumped at the sound of Bo's voice.

"Sorry." Buford's nephew was standing in front of the desk. "I knocked a couple of times. Didn't mean to scare you."

"It's okay." Sometimes he got so caught up in his writing that he tuned out the world. He stood and shook Bo's hand, then gestured

to the chair Tyler previously occupied. "Good to see you," he said, sitting back down. "It's been a while."

"Sure has." Bo sat and placed his folded hands over his portly stomach. "Between the hoedown and wedding plans, I'm plum busy, and you know how summertime is on the farm. Lots of work to do up until after the harvest."

"How are the crops this year?"

"Looking good so far, as long as the weather holds. We could use a drenching rain, though."

Bo's words were normal enough, but Seb could tell he looked a little off center. He definitely wasn't here to shoot the breeze. "What can I do for you?" Seb asked.

Bo ran his palm over his bald pate. "I have a big favor to ask."

"If I can do it, I will."

"It involves Vivian's stepdaughter, Kalista Clark."

"I didn't know she had a stepdaughter."

"I knew about her, but we've never met. Viv and Kalista's father, Raymond, divorced a long time ago, but she and Kalista kept in touch for several years after and then lost touch again. It's a long story, but Kalista's coming to visit for the summer. Viv's missed her. I don't think she realized how much until Raymond called."

Seb nodded. While he'd known Bo almost all his life, the man was thirteen years older than him. Everyone in town was shocked when he announced he was getting married, not just because he was Clementine's oldest bachelor but also because Viv was a former model who lived in California. Not exactly the type of woman one would peg as farmwife material. But she'd proven her mettle when she moved to Clementine earlier this year after they'd gotten engaged. She lived in Bo's small, fifties-era house, and Bo stayed in the bunkhouse with his farmhand on the back forty of the prop-

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erty. The relationship worked for them, and they were getting married later this summer.

Bo adjusted his left suspender over a red short-sleeved shirt. “Kalista arrives tomorrow, and Viv’s going to help her find a job so she’ll have something to do while she’s here. I thought I’d try you first, though.”

“You want me to hire her?”

“I was hoping you could. See, Kalista’s lived a pampered life. Spoiled rotten is what Viv says, even though she loves her. She says that deep down Kalista is really sweet. It’s just hard to find that sweetness when it’s swimming in vinegar.”

“Does she have any journalism experience?”

“I reckon she doesn’t. I know this is a big ask, but since we’re family . . .”

They weren’t, not technically. But in Seb’s book, they were in every way that counted. He didn’t believe you had to be blood related to be family. “I’d be glad to help out, but I don’t have anything—” He thought about the abandoned route. “Does she know how to drive?”

“She’s eighteen, so I assume so. I don’t know for sure.”

“We have a delivery route open. If she wants to apply for it, send her over. That’s the only job I can give her right now. We’re low staff as it is.”

“Things aren’t getting any better?”

Seb shook his head. He could admit that to Bo. “It’s hard on newspapers all over, especially since everything’s moving to digital. You know how your uncle felt about digital.”

“Sure do.” He glanced at the MacIntosh. “Bought him that computer over there, thinking he’d appreciate it. He wasn’t interested. I can see you’re not either.”

“My manual typewriter and some good old-fashioned paper

are all I need.”

“And that’s one of the reasons Buford liked you. You’re an old soul, Seb. A throwback even. Kinda like myself.” He stood and grinned. “I’d better get back to the house. Viv and me are cake testing this afternoon.” He patted his large stomach. “I ain’t been into all the wedding planning, but today’s gonna be a good day.”

“Sounds like a delicious one too.”

“Sure hope so. Thanks again. I knew I could count on you.”

Bo left, and Seb turned back to his column. He was glad he could help Bo and Viv, although he wasn’t thrilled with the idea of hiring a spoiled kid. If she worked out, though, it would help him and Tyler, at least in the short term until they could find a permanent carrier.

He started typing, only for the door to open again. “Now what?”

“Good morning to you too, bro.” Evelyn Margot paused in the doorway, holding five eight-by-ten pictures of him. She thumbed through them, then showed him the one with a scowl and slid it into the clear frame right outside the door, altering his staff photo to match his current mood. He frowned as she came back in and sat in front of him, placing the rest of the pictures on his desk.

“Sorry I’m late.”

“For what?”

“My yearly reminder that you’re not allowed to duck the Sadie Hawkins dance at the hoedown.”

“Not this again. Don’t you have some vendors to call? Some ads to create? A lawn to mow?”

She gave him an annoying smirk, bothering him even more. Her smirk looked like his smirk, and if his smirk annoyed other people as much as her smirk annoyed him—

“Lawn’s mowed, ads will be done by the end of the day, and I’ll make some calls in a bit, so stop dodging the conversation.”

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"I don't duck the dance." He just made sure he wasn't available when the time came.

"Quack, quack." She crossed her legs, clad in flared jeans with a wide belt, her olive T-shirt tucked inside the waistband. "Or should I say, 'Cluck, cluck'?"

"You're one to talk. When are you going to tell Haskell how you feel about him?"

Evelyn rolled her eyes. "Not this again."

He faced the typewriter. "Payback's a pain, isn't it. And as much fun as this banal conversation is, I have a column to finish."

"I need to talk to you about something else."

He turned to her. "What's that?"

She pushed a lock of her long brown hair over her shoulder. "Piggly Wiggly doesn't want to renew their contract."

Seb groaned. "Why?"

"George wouldn't say, at least not right away," Em said, referring to the grocery store's advertising representative. "But they don't think *The Times* has a big enough circulation anymore. They're going to look at more regional advertising instead of local."

"That's just great." The store was one of their biggest accounts.

"Sorry," she said, her teasing mood completely gone. "I tried to convince him otherwise."

"I'm sure you did." Evelyn was a good salesperson, and he had confidence she'd done everything she could to get them to stay. "Would it help if I called them?" He and George were on friendly terms.

Evelyn shook her head. "I mentioned that. George said the decision's been made."

Seb sighed and rubbed his forehead. So much for the paper being in the black anytime soon. He did some quick calculations in his head. If he didn't hire Kalista—Bo would understand—and

he and Tyler split the mountain route until Evelyn found another large advertiser, the paper would bleed less money. But that would also give Tyler a third job and Seb would have . . . he lost track of how many jobs he had. No, they had to hire someone for that route.

There was another thing he could do, but it would take time. Lots of time—something he didn't have. And even if he had the time, he wasn't sure he could pull it off again. The sophomore slump was real.

Evelyn took the rest of the pictures off Seb's desk and stood. "Cheer up, bro. I'm sure we'll get another advertiser soon." She left his office.

He wanted to believe her. And he could carve out some time to make some vendor phone calls and help Em in her advertising search. He hated sales almost as much as bookkeeping, but it had to be done. He glanced at his half-finished column. He'd work on it tonight. With another sigh, he picked up the phone, moved his Rolodex closer to him, and started dialing.

Chapter 3

Water cascaded over Jade's car as she leaned back in the driver's seat and closed her eyes. She barely had time for the deluxe car wash, and after the seven-minute-and-thirty-second cycle was complete, she'd have to rush to the airport to catch her flight to Little Rock. That's what she got for procrastinating—something she normally didn't do. Usually she was ahead of schedule.

After reading Miles's information about *The Clementine Times* and his plans to keep the paper afloat after the acquisition, she was convinced he was correct. She just wished he hadn't tapped her for this assignment. The thought of going back to Arkansas filled her with dread. She had trouble sleeping the past two nights, and her continued self-reassurances that she and Sebastian would both be professional and let the past stay where it belonged didn't help.

Colorful soap bubbled across her white sedan and the industrial scent filled the car interior. She closed her eyes, pushing her impending trip and Sebastian Hudson out of her mind and focused on the sound of swishing brushes. For a few moments she felt a little peace . . . until her phone rang.

Her eyes flew open, and she grabbed her purse from the passenger's seat and took out her Razr. When she saw the number appear on the small gray screen, her chest tightened. *Logan*. He'd

called her at the end of her meeting with Miles but didn't leave a voicemail. She didn't call back, and neither did he. She hadn't heard from him in nearly two years, and it figured he'd pick the worst time to call.

She slipped the phone back inside her purse and closed her eyes again. The water from the rinse cycle crashed against her car, causing it to rock slightly. There. She was getting her bearings back.

The phone rang again, but she refused to answer it. As the huge blow-dryers dried off her car, her cell rang a third time. She grabbed the Razr just in case it was someone else, but it was Logan again. Worry set in. He never called her three times in a row. What if something was seriously wrong? She'd never forgive herself if that were the case. Against her better judgment, she answered. "Logan?"

"Finally," he said, relief in his tone. "I was starting to think you wouldn't pick up."

His voice was raspy and old sounding, especially for a twenty-three-year-old. A side effect of years of drug and alcohol abuse. He also didn't sound upset or panicked. Which was good, but she couldn't stop feeling that he would try to manipulate her again. "What do you want?" She winced at her harsh tone, but she couldn't help it. She couldn't let down her guard.

"I know you're still mad at me," he said. "Just give me a few minutes. Please."

The dryers shut off and she put her car in Drive and inched forward. Something in his tone made her pull over by the manual car wash stalls, although she kept her foot on the brake. "I'm not mad." Well, not as mad as she had been the last time she bailed him out of jail and he promised not to get into trouble again, only to call her a week later for more bail money.

"You sure sound like it."

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“Logan—”

“I’ve changed, Jade.”

She tapped her fingers against the steering wheel, resisting another snide remark. How many times had he said those very words? Had promised to get his act together? She believed those promises, just like she believed her mother when she said the same things. And just like her mother, he continued to use, continued to break the law, continued to drain her financially and emotionally. Lydia had finally left her alone after five years of bleeding her bank account, and Jade had to cut off Logan just to keep from going bankrupt.

“I’m telling the truth this time. I’m sober and living in a halfway house.”

She could almost picture him, his ebony eyes darting around as if trouble constantly followed him, because it usually did. “If you’re okay, then why are you calling me?”

“We need to talk.”

“We’re talking now.”

“Not over the phone.” His tone turned urgent. “In person.”

She tilted her wrist and glanced at her watch. “No. I told you the last time we talked I was done helping you out.”

“But—”

“Bye, Logan.” Before he could say anything else, she cut him off and tossed the phone onto the passenger seat. She hung her head and tried to settle down. This was the first time he’d mentioned a halfway house. Was he finally getting his life on track? *Or is he trying to play me again?*

Jade lifted her head, her teeth clenching as she left the car wash and drove to the airport. She wasn’t responsible for Logan anymore, and she wasn’t going to support or fund her little brother’s self-destruction. She’d told him that right before she’d cut off con-

tact, and he'd been upset, spewing vile things at her—words that cut her to the core, even though she knew they were coming from a drug-induced haze.

Her watch glinted in the sun, and when she saw the time, she panicked. If she didn't hurry, she'd miss her flight. She zoomed off to the Hartsfield-Jackson airport. Whatever Logan wanted, he'd have to figure it out himself.

Two hours later, she was settled in her seat on the airplane, waiting for it to take off. In about ninety minutes she would land at Little Rock airport, then pick up the rental car reserved for her and drive nearly three hours to Clementine. Even though she'd grown up in Little Rock, she'd never been to the Ozarks. As an adult, she'd been too busy, and it wasn't like her mother would have ever taken her anywhere—the infrequent times she was able to keep custody of Jade.

She pushed off those thoughts and switched to Sebastian. Miles hadn't set up a meeting time with him, and she had sent him an email asking why. "*How busy can he be? I'm sure he'll fit you in,*" was his response. At first she was confused and almost asked him for clarification, only to realize that surprising Sebastian at his office would make it harder for him to say no. Theoretically anyway. She'd find out if that was the case soon enough.

The plane lifted off, and she pulled out her handheld personal digital assistant and worked on her plan, although there was nothing left for her to do but a few tweaks. It was straightforward—she'd explain Miles's position and how it would benefit Sebastian and *The Times*. Miles had revealed how much Harrington Media was willing to pay, and the offer was more than generous. From a business standpoint, Sebastian would be a fool not to accept, considering *The Times's* desperate financial position.

But would he be willing to hear that information from her? She

wasn't sure. All she could do was hope he would be reasonable.

“Rise and shine!”

Kalista shielded her eyes from the bright light that suddenly came on in Bo's spare bedroom. She grimaced and sat up as Viv approached her with a wide smile, showcasing straight white teeth that had graced many a fashion magazine cover in the seventies and early eighties, her chin-length bob smooth and sleek. Her former stepmother had almost reached supermodel status, only to walk away from the business when she was at the top of her game—something Kalista never understood.

“What time is it?” Her bleary eyes glanced at the old-fashioned alarm clock on the equally old-fashioned bedside table. “Six thirty? I slept all day?”

Viv sat next to her on the soft mattress. “It's six thirty in the morning.”

Kalista fell back against the pillow and groaned. “You know I don't rise and shine until after ten.”

“That's about to change, young lady.” Viv's cultured voice held a slight southern twang. “I let you sleep in today.”

Six thirty was sleeping in?

Viv's salt-and-pepper bangs were pulled back with a red scarf. “There's lots to do on the farm. Bo always takes care of the heavy farmwork, but we have chickens, pigs, and goats to feed.”

Kalista felt faint. “I have to feed pigs?”

Viv's smile widened. “You'll love them. Their snorts and grunts are adorable.”

It was official. Vivian had lost her marbles.

“We also have to get ready for the hoedown on Saturday.”

“The what?” It was like she was in a foreign country.

“The Clementine Memorial Day Hoedown.” Viv went to the window on the opposite side of the room and pulled open the red-and-white gingham curtains. Light poured inside. “You’ll have a great time. Everyone does.”

Doubt it. The excitement of seeing her former stepmother after so many years was starting to wear off. Viv had changed, and she barely recognized her. The old Viv loved to shop, get mani-pedis, peruse fashion magazines, and attend lavish parties. She’d lived to be seen, and Kalista had loved being seen with her, even as a pre-teen, although the parties had always been off-limits.

The Viv sitting next to her was a different woman. Completely barefaced and wearing a blue gingham sleeveless shirt and knee-length blue jean shorts, she looked like she’d come in straight from the barn. She didn’t even appear to be wearing lip balm. Un-thinkable.

Kalista covered her face with one of the fluffy, white bed pillows. “I’m going back to sleep.”

“Nope.” Viv grabbed the pillow, dropped it on the bed, and stood. “You’re getting dressed and going to your first job interview.”

“I have one already?”

“Bo arranged it for you. He had to call in a favor, so you don’t want to be late.”

Kalista scowled and shoved off the covers. She shouldn’t have let Daddy make her come to Podunk Arkansas. She should be back in Los Angeles with her friends having fun, hanging out at the beach. She was a California girl through and through. She was also starting to think Bettany put her dad up to this. She wouldn’t put it past her current stepmother to use the time Kalista was away to dip her paws further into Daddy’s bank account.

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“But Daddy has to teach me a lesson,” she muttered as she got up from the bed.

“What?” Viv was inside the closet, pushing hangers across the clothes bar. She poked her head outside the door. “Oh boy,” she said, looking at Kalista from head to toe before ducking back into the closet again.

“What?” Kalista walked toward her.

Viv tossed a robe at her. “Put this on. You can’t walk around the house wearing next to nothing.”

Kalista looked down at her plum colored negligee. “What’s wrong with this?”

“It’s inappropriate.”

“It’s a nightgown, Viv. You’ve worn less than this at the beach.”

“And I regret being so immodest.”

“A bikini isn’t immodest. Neither is a little nightgown.” Kalista rolled her eyes. “It’s not like it’s see-through.”

“It’s too short and leaves too little to the imagination.” Viv crossed her arms. “I don’t want you to embarrass Bo if he drops by. There are also men working outside and getting the property ready for Saturday.”

Although Viv’s tone was kind, Kalista scowled anyway and slipped on the frumpy housecoat. Her skin recoiled at the polyester fabric, the pattern straight out of the seventies—large yellow flowers on an avocado green background. “Where did you get this thing?”

“It belonged to Bo’s mother.” Viv shut the door. “It’s vintage, by the way. Don’t be so condescending.”

Kalista put her hands on her hips. “You wouldn’t have worn this a few years ago.”

Viv faced her. “I’ve grown up since then. Do you want sausage gravy with your biscuits?”

“Ew, carbs.”

Viv sighed. “Suit yourself,” she said, and walked out of the room.

Kalista plopped down on the edge of the bed and folded her arms over her chest. Viv had picked her up from the airport in Little Rock yesterday, and they had caught up during the drive to Clementine. But it wasn’t long into their conversation that Kalista realized Viv was different. When they got to Bo’s house where Viv was living until they got married, he’d already gone to bed in something called a bunkhouse. Kalista was still trying to comprehend that Viv was engaged to an almost fifty-year-old farmer who’d never been married before.

Then there was the house—a fifties-era cottage with only two bedrooms, one bathroom, a tiny kitchen with linoleum flooring, and a small living room that featured a TV on a stand. How could anyone live in a place so small, even if they were single? When Viv and Daddy were married, she decorated their massive LA house in the latest style, and everything was expensive and chic, not country bumpkin. The woman had gone all *Little House on the Prairie*.

She reached for her phone and checked for any texts or voice-mails. She’d let her friends know she was leaving “on vacation” but didn’t tell them where—just gave hints that it was somewhere tropical and expensive and that she’d be gone awhile. Huh. Not a single call or message, not even from Ryan. She thought about calling him, then remembered it was way too early. Her friends rarely stirred until noon.

Scratching her arm, she felt the polyester fabric again and jumped up from the bed. Her skin didn’t need this kind of abuse. She opened one of her Louis Vuitton suitcases and searched for something to wear to her interview. Finally deciding on a crimson off-the-shoulder dress and sandals, she got dressed, then squeezed into the minuscule bathroom and peered at her reflection. Ugh,

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the humidity was already frizzing her blond hair, so she swept it up in a long ponytail to hide the state of it.

“Kalista, breakfast is ready!” Viv called from the kitchen.

“Be there in a minute.” She needed to do her makeup and apply a generous amount of hairspray to the flyaways that were already escaping her ponytail.

“Kitchen’s closing in ten minutes,” Viv said. “You eat now, or you don’t eat at all.”

“What a crabby patty,” Kalista muttered. She didn’t remember Viv being so militant either. Oh well, she’d scarf down a piece of bacon, finish getting dressed, then find a decent coffee shop for a much-needed cappuccino. Surely there was one in downtown Clementine.

Viv was at the kitchen sink washing dishes in a white apron with a frilly red hem. She turned and tilted her head toward the round table. “Help yourself . . . Wait.” Viv dried her hands and faced her. “You’re not wearing that to your interview.”

“What’s wrong with this?” First, she’d criticized her nightwear, and now she was fussing about her cute outfit. It was certainly modest enough. There was nothing indecent about a bare shoulder.

“You look like you’re going to a cocktail party.” Her expression grew soft. “You’ve never been to a job interview before, have you?”

Kalista lifted her chin. Until now, she’d never needed to. What was the point of having an über-rich father if she had to work for her money?

Viv pulled out a chair. “Let’s have breakfast first. Then we’ll look at the clothes you brought. Surely you have something suitable.”

“This is suitable,” she muttered and sat down.

Viv placed a small plate with one boiled egg and two pieces of bacon in front of Kalista. Then she poured two cups of coffee and

joined her at the table. Kalista had just picked up one of the bacon strips when Viv took her hand.

“We pray before our meals,” she said softly.

Kalista set the bacon down. Viv closed her eyes and prayed silently while Kalista stared at her plate. She’d never prayed or gone to church in her life. Her daddy always played golf on Sundays, and her other stepmothers always slept in. *Like I should be doing.*

When Viv finished, she picked up her coffee cup and took a sip. “Bo’s coming over for supper tonight. He’s eager to meet you. We’re having pork chops, baked potatoes, and salad. Would you mind going to the Piggly Wiggly after your interview and picking up a few things?”

“The wiggle what?”

“Piggly Wiggly. That’s our closest grocery store, and there’s been so much to do lately I haven’t had time to stock up for your visit. I’ll give you a list and some money. Feel free to get what you want to eat too.”

“Do they have a sushi bar?” She bit into the bacon. Wow. It was delicious.

“Ah, no.”

“Do they have an organic section at least?”

She shook her head. “Not at this grocery store. The pork and chicken we raise here on the farm is organic, but Bo doesn’t have a garden, and I didn’t have time to put one in this year. I will next spring. If you need other organics, we can go to Harrison or take a trip to Russellville. Maybe even go to Little Rock, although that’s quite a drive.”

“How do you live so isolated, Viv?”

“I love it.” She sat back in her chair. “I got so tired of the fast-paced life. It was burning me out.”

“Is that why you left modeling too?” She’d always wondered,

but until now she never asked. As a kid, she hadn't wanted Viv to get mad at her and not see her anymore after the divorce, and when she got older, well, she wasn't really interested. Seeing Viv's shocking change piqued her curiosity again.

She shook her head. "The industry was soul crushing, Kalista. I used to lament that I'd never made it to the top, but now I'm glad I didn't."

"You could have, though. You could still model now." Despite the lack of glamour, Viv had kept her figure, and for an older woman, she still looked stunning.

"I'm happy here in Clementine, and I love the farm and small-town life. Bo is the best thing that ever happened to me." She took Kalista's hand again, her eyes misty. "Did I tell you how much it means to me that you're going to be at my wedding?"

Surprised, Kalista felt a lump form in her throat. "I'm glad I will be too." From what she could tell, Viv's wedding was the only thing she had to look forward to, other than going back to California. It was nice to hear someone wanted her to be around. Until the past week or so, her daddy didn't seem to care, and of course Bettany and her other stepmothers had seen her as a nuisance. But not Viv. She smiled—her first real one since leaving LA.

Viv glanced at the rooster clock on the wall. "You need to hurry or you'll be late for your interview with Sebastian." She jumped up from the chair and dragged Kalista to the bedroom. "You'll barely have time to change clothes."

"But I still have to put on my makeup." That was a thirty-minute process, minimum.

"There's no time for that." At Kalista's shocked look, Viv added, "Don't worry. You're lovely without it."

Kalista grimaced, doubting her words. Her hair looked awful, she had no idea what kind of dowdy clothes Viv would insist she

BEHIND ENEMY BYLINES

wear, and now she couldn't put on makeup. What a disaster. *It's going to be a long three months.*



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

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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