

# The Roads We Follow



A FOG HARBOR  
... ROMANCE ...

CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

NICOLE DEESE

FOG HARBOR  
..... ROMANCE .....

The  
Roads  
We  
Follow

N I C O L E D E E S E



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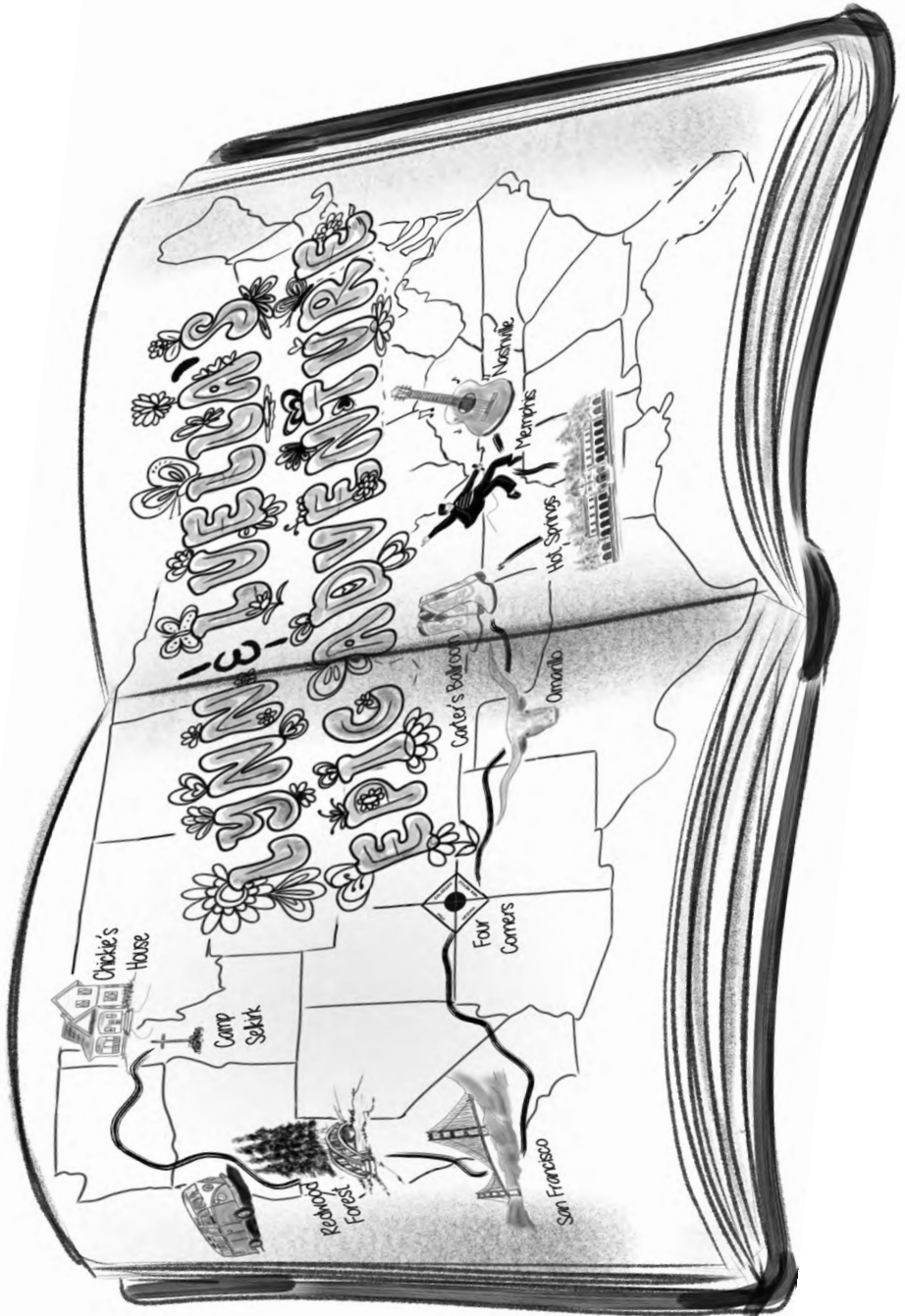
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*In honor of my father-in-love, Bill Deese,  
who enjoyed many cross-country road trips  
and all the family bonding time they entailed.*

If there are road-trip adventures to be had in heaven,  
then I hope you'll save a seat for me, Dad. I love you.



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# 1



## Raegan

I breathe in the fresh dopamine hit of a dark roast brewing somewhere behind the coffee shop's counter and remind myself that turning off my GPS location from the family tracking app is not one of the seven deadly sins. Nor is my decision to keep today's meeting with the acquisitions editor from Fog Harbor Books off the shared family calendar. Don't get me wrong, I'm not ashamed of my love for the written word. It's just that I've learned the hard way why some dreams are worth keeping to yourself, especially when those dreams involve seeking a professional's opinion on the unpublished manuscript you've been revising all year. And especially when the world you live in is far more likely to accept an up-and-coming country music artist over a wannabe author who writes in secret under the cover of night.

The thought triggers the same herd of nerves I've worked to corral since I first spotted the email in my inbox last Friday. There's no

need to close my eyes to retrieve the message. It's still right where I left it, burning a hole in my prefrontal cortex.

Raegan,

I'll be in Nashville for a publishing conference next week. Any chance you might be available to discuss your manuscript while I'm in town? My afternoons are open.

Chip Stanton

Acquisitions Editor

Fog Harbor Books—San Francisco, CA

After a quick adjustment of the claw clip restraining my curls at the back of my head, I rise up on tiptoes to search the few patrons seated inside the memorabilia-heavy Cup O'Country Coffee House. I've only met Chip in person once, but his flaxen hair is easy to spot at a corner table near the back. As if sensing my perusal, he shifts his attention from his laptop and offers me a friendly wave. I immediately respond in kind.

Before our first meeting last December, my only reference for acquisitions editors came in the form of a Hollywood stereotype: a grumpy, overbearing stress case who wields their red pen like a dagger and has never cracked a joke in their life. Thankfully, Chip's demeanor couldn't be more opposite. He has the kind of smile that instantly sets a person at ease, and even though he looks to be about my age, somewhere in his mid-to-late twenties, his knowledge of books and the publishing industry leaves no guessing as to his life's passion; he's living it. It's an observation I can't help but be the tiniest bit envious of. And yet, for what feels like the first time in my adult life, the outcome of today's meeting holds the potential to change that.

I push down my rising hope as I zigzag through the entryway and around country-music display cases scattered through the coffee shop. An editor doesn't ask for an in-person meeting if he hates the

manuscript he read, right? Seems like a brief email would suffice. I'm pondering this line of thought for what is likely the hundredth time when my hip makes contact with a tall object, causing it to teeter. Just as I throw out my arm to steady it, I realize the item in question is a life-size cardboard cutout of a beloved country music legend. Luella Farrow.

My mama.

From her place in the center of the room, she smiles back at me in all her crushed-velvet-jumpsuit-wearing glory. In her right hand she holds up the shiny CMA Award she won for Song of the Year only a few months back, an iconic night for more reasons than one. From her mouth is a speech bubble with text I've read a hundred times in a hundred different locations on the internet. But this time I read her words through an entirely different lens. "*Don't confuse your talent with your worth; only one of those is subjective.*" Much to my surprise, the timely quote from her award speech serves to boost my confidence in the way only a pep talk from my mama can. Ignoring the niggle of guilt I feel over the secrets I've been keeping from my family, I thank her under my breath and set her right.

By the time I've reached Chip's table, he's standing with his hand outstretched. "Raegan, hello! It's so good to see you again."

"You too." We shake hands. "Thanks for taking time out of your busy conference week to meet with me. I was surprised to learn it was here."

"We rotate locations," he says easily. "And it was my good luck that this year's location was near your hometown."

Fresh hope buoys to the surface as his words anchor in a tender, uncharted place in the center of my chest. Could that mean he . . . he liked what he read?

He glances around the quiet coffee house. "I think this is the first place I've been to in Nashville that doesn't have a line waiting outside the door or music turned up so loud I can hear the bass line in my sleep. Good recommendation."

“The summer heat keeps this coffee house pretty low-key during the afternoons.”

He nods and gestures to an empty beverage on the table. “Said heat is why I ordered the iced coffee special. May I order you one, as well?” He leans in and lowers his voice. “In full disclosure, I will be ordering myself a second round. I have absolutely no shame when it comes to caffeine intake.”

I laugh. “An iced coffee sounds perfect, thank you.”

It’s remarkable how in only a matter of seconds Chip confirms he’s exactly how I remember him being last winter—easygoing, personable, real. When my niece Cheyenne had been hired to sing for an office Christmas party in San Francisco last December, she’d begged me to fly down and spend a long weekend with her and her lively roommate, Allie. I’d agreed without hesitation. Partly because any escape from home is a welcome one, but also because over the course of the year, those girls have played a significant role in my life as a closet writer. Apart from the man ordering me an iced coffee, they remain the only two souls on earth to have read *The Sisters of Birch Grove*, my only completed full-length novel to date.

At just seven years my junior, my musically gifted niece grew up reading my short stories as a girl, so when I agreed to start a weekly accountability call with her and Allie to aid in our collective creative motivation, I hadn’t expected it to help me as much as it did. Each Wednesday night on video chat I’d read them one chapter of *The Sisters of Birch Grove*, and in exchange, Cheyenne would sing the lyrics to a song she’d been working on, and Allie would share whatever scene she was revising from her already contracted fantasy trilogy.

Little had I known, however, that this so-called *office Christmas party* I’d been invited to was at none other than Fog Harbor Books, Allie’s publisher. She introduced me to Chip, and within the hour, she must have told him no less than fifteen times, in fifteen different ways, just how much he’d regret letting me leave the party without asking to review my manuscript. I was both mortified at her for-

wardness and flattered at her adoration of the fictional world I'd grown to love more than any place I'd visited in real life.

By the end of that night, Chip had asked to review my manuscript. The moment had coaxed all kinds of fairy-tale-like feelings, though it didn't take long for the fear to set in. I'd spent the next four months tweaking and polishing before I had the courage to send him the novel that took me the better part of two years to write and revise.

Chip now strides back to our table, having made our coffee orders, and his smile takes on a new quality. And unlike I predict, he doesn't sit down across from me. "So I have somewhat of an unconventional request to make of you before we get started."

"Oh? What is it?"

He ticks his head left, and for the second time in five minutes, I lock eyes with my cardboard mother.

"My girlfriend is a huge fan of your mother's. Would you mind taking my picture so I can send it off to her before my brain switches fully over to book mode?"

"Sure, of course," I say cheerily, even though I feel a twinge of disappointment for Allie's sake at the revelation that Chip has a girlfriend. When I saw them together last December, their chemistry had been off the charts. I figured it was only a matter of time before they started dating. Guess I was wrong.

"Thanks. Charity's borderline obsessed with that new remix song—the one about the bridge."

"Crossing Bridges," I supply.

"That's the one." He points with a grin. "I swear I hear it everywhere—the grocery store, the gym, my dentist's office, and somehow it's playing in every rideshare I climb into. Pretty crazy how a song written decades ago has the power to take today's music fans by storm."

Due to years of living under the scrutiny of the public eye, I nod politely at his unassuming observation. But it wasn't only music fans that had been *taken by storm* with the resurgence of "Crossing Bridges" these past eighteen months. My family had been stunned

to watch a song Mama cowrote decades ago with her ex-bandmate soar to the top of the charts—skyrocketing there from the remix version used on a popular mini-series, a show that’s now been streamed millions of times over. Seemingly overnight and without warning, the spotlight on Mama—and our family-run music label—had brightened considerably. Unfortunately, the bright lights of fame aren’t always flattering.

I banish the thought trail before it can gain traction and instead tap into the camera app on my phone to grant Chip his favor. Nothing says *icebreaker* quite like cautioning a business professional on how to avoid papercuts from posing with a cardboard replica of your mother. Then again, after living nearly three decades as the youngest child of a famous entertainer, this moment ranks low on the weirdest-things-I’ve-been-asked-to-do-for-a-fan list.

Back at our table, I’m halfway through my first sip of iced coffee when Chip abandons all things country and pulls an about-face in conversation. “I loved your book, Raegan. More than loved it, actually. And I sincerely hope I can convince you to let me pitch it to my publishing board next month.”

My straw slowly sinks back into my plastic cup as I blink up at him for a full three seconds. “You . . . you want to publish it?”

He laughs as if this isn’t the most serious question I’ve ever asked another living soul.

“Let me put it this way, I think *The Sisters of Birch Grove* has the potential to be the modern-day *Little Women* of our time. It hit all the right notes for me—nostalgic, moving, witty, romantic. It’s an expertly paced family drama and exactly where I suspect the market will be trending by this time next year. Don’t tell Allie I said this, but she was spot-on in her recommendation when she said I’d regret not asking you for your manuscript that night. The entire time I was reading, I kept forgetting it wasn’t yet a published work.” He plants his elbows on the table and drums his fingers. “Please tell me you have ideas for a sequel—and perhaps a book three, as well? I guarantee readers are going to want more from Birch Grove.”

A *modern-day* Little Women? I bring a trembling hand to my mouth and release a sound that's something between half sob, half laugh. "I'm sorry, I'm . . . you think readers would want a series of Birch Grove novels?"

He nods demonstratively.

"This is surreal," I whisper and fall back against my seat.

"In a good way, I hope?"

My eyes turn watery. "In the best possible way."

His smile softens as he reaches for his laptop. "I have a whole list of questions and comments I jotted down while I was reading, but first, I've been dying to know if Birch Grove was inspired by a real town."

I shake my head and work to regain my composure. "Not unless you count my internet travels. I've never actually been that far north."

"Then that's even more remarkable." He opens his laptop and scans whatever document he's opened. "Before I get too far ahead of myself with story questions, I should ask if you have a literary agent you'd like me to reach out to on your behalf. It's best I touch base with them as soon as possible so we're all in the know at the same time."

"I don't have an agent," I say quickly. "I'd like to represent myself."

He stares at me for a beat before he nods. "Okay, that's not a problem. We have several authors at Fog Harbor who are self-represented. Typically they opt to use an entertainment lawyer for contract review and negotiations, but if you'd rather use one of your family's attorneys, that's understandable. I'll just need their contact information within the next couple weeks. If my pitch to the publication board goes as well as I hope, things could move pretty quickly after that."

The euphoria I experienced from moments ago is placed on pause, making way for my climbing anxiety. "Actually, my preference would be to handle as much of this process on my own." And as far away as possible from certain sisterly opinions.

“With all due respect, Raegan, the legalities involved in a publishing contract can be difficult to navigate, seeing as each contract is drafted for the individual author. Given your unique background and high-profile family, I’m certain your legal team will require specific provisions for your—and their—protection.”

He relaxes into his seat as if I’m a totally reasonable individual who will simply accept his sound logic at face value. Only, it’s not his logic that has my insides churning. It’s the lack of one small, but absolutely critical, detail.

A detail I fear has somehow been lost in translation.

The pulse in my throat moves to my ears, muffling the sound of my own voice. “I’m sorry, but I think there’s been a misunderstanding. I realize now I never should have expected Allie to relay my wishes for anonymity to you but . . . I have no intention of publishing under my own name.”

His brow crimps slightly. “Meaning . . . you were hoping to use a pseudonym?”

“That’s correct.”

At my confirmation, the confusion in his eyes deflates to an understanding I can feel in the depths of my soul. So he didn’t know, then. Chip came here expecting to sign a book deal with a celebrity’s daughter. Not an anonymous nobody.

He opens his mouth twice before he manages to speak. “May I ask why?”

And it’s right then the phone I left face up on the table after picture-taking vibrates. My oldest sister has the most impeccable knack for poorly timed communication. As soon as Adele’s name appears on the screen, I flip it over, knowing the action will in no way silence her for long.

“I don’t want my writing to be tied to my family name,” I say. “I want my stories to stand on their own, unattached to my family’s achievements.”

For so many years, my dream of publishing a novel lived in a protected cocoon, safe from expectation, pressure, and rejection.

Safe from the reality of being known as only one thing: Luella Farrow's youngest daughter. While the literary agents I've queried in the past promised huge book deals and placement on prestigious bestseller lists due to my family's connections and resources, I've never wanted the Farrow name to be a stepping stone for my success as an author. I've only ever wanted to know—*needed* to know, even—that I'm a storyteller by talent and not by fame.

Yet once again, the answer to that ever-elusive question remains up in the air.

I can almost hear Adele's reply to my musings: *"When will you finally accept what I've been telling you, Raegan? You'll always be a Farrow first. Your name is not a filter you can take on and off. It's permanent. What you do affects all of us."*

My phone vibrates again. I ignore it. Adele has had me at her beck and call nearly twenty-four hours a day for years now. She can give me one hour.

The short buzzes indicate she's left multiple texts. I don't look at the screen.

"You've obviously given a lot of thought to this," Chip continues. "I have, yes."

His nod is slow, yet his expression remains open, empathetic even. I've just set fire to his hope of signing an author with access to a built-in fan base of hundreds of thousands, and yet he's still here. Still sitting with me. That's more than the last literary agent I queried ever did.

"It's no secret that a known brand is an easier sell than an unproven one," he begins. "The marketing strategy that's been used for decades by clothing designers, product labels, automotive branding, and music bands is essentially the same for authors and their books." He releases a long exhale. "I wish I could tell you that the current marketplace is kinder to debut novelists than it is . . . but I believe in your story too much to mislead you. Starting from scratch by using a pen name with no backlist to work off of and no real visibility is a tough sell to any publisher. In our industry, like so many others, names and connections are important."

“Of course,” I whisper around the growing lump in my throat. “I understand.” I swallow and lift my head. “I appreciate you taking the time to review my manuscript, Chip, and I apologize again for the misunderstanding about—”

The abrupt shake of his head cuts off my polite attempt to wrap up our meeting. “When it comes to your talent, there’s no misunderstanding. I’d want to publish this book if you were writing as Luella Farrow’s daughter or as Big Bird.”

Despite my increasing heartache, a mournful laugh escapes me. “I promise you my pen name is better than Big Bird.” I’d planned to use Sunny Rae—a combination of my two childhood nicknames—but when I think it over now, it sounds almost as ridiculous as Big Bird.

“I’m sure it is,” he concedes, “but regardless, creating a marketable pen name will require a lot of time, energy, and diligence. If that’s the route you decide on, I can send you information on how to grow your socials, along with advice on how to utilize any of your past writing efforts for contest submissions in order to grow in name recognition and visibility. Earning some accolades under that name would be a good start.”

“I understand.” I drop my gaze to the condensation slipping down the sides of my cup and process what he’s actually saying: the path he’s describing now won’t involve a publishing contract from Fog Harbor Books, at least not until I establish a reputable foundation for my pen name.

Chip studies me for a long moment before he adds, “As counterintuitive as it might be for me to say this to you, you could also look into self-publishing as an option.”

I meet his gaze, stunned again by his forthrightness and honesty. I’d done my research on self-publishing. Truth is, I’ve enjoyed all sorts of books by many authors who’ve chosen that option. Yet when I think about finding the time to learn an entirely new business *and* execute it well while also doing my best to remain anonymous, it seems about as plausible as joining the witness protection program to escape my family responsibilities.

“I appreciate the option, but I don’t think it’s the right one for me,” I say, as disappointment continues to weave its way through my ribs.

For the briefest of moments, I allow myself to imagine how incredible it would be to sign a publishing contract with Fog Harbor Books as someone else. Someone born into a typical family with typical jobs and who grew up in a typical home with typical siblings. Someone who’s never had to question if their achievements are based on their own merit or a family member’s. Someone whose every life decision isn’t discussed and dissected like an agenda item at a monthly business meeting.

He nods as if he’s not surprised by my response. “I’m sorry I can’t offer you something that will work for us both at this time, Raegan.”

Suddenly unable to speak, I can only swallow and nod.

Chip looks down at his laptop screen and then begins to read out loud without preamble, “*The Sisters of Birch Grove* is both universally relevant and deeply personal. Readers will wonder what window Farrow snuck through in order to write such a detailed observation of a family.” His smile turns pensive when he glances my way again. “I wrote that after I read the last chapter—after the sisters finally reconcile. It’s obvious you know a thing or two about family dynamics.”

Yet another reason for a pen name, I suppose. As Raegan Farrow, the readers familiar with my family would be wondering what parts of my stories are true and what parts are fiction. But when I write, I’m *not* analyzing the divide between my life and my characters. I’m simply writing the narrative that speaks to me.

Writing has been the only thing that’s truly been mine since the day our father died and left Adele in charge of everything . . . and everyone.

“. . . touch base in the future.”

I blink Chip back into focus as he’s politely wrapping up our meeting. I clear my throat and thank him again for his time, knowing that realistically this will likely be the last time we meet under

these circumstances. Neither of us has made false promises as to what the future holds for my publishing journey or lack thereof.

Perhaps I should be content with my current reader audience of two—Cheyenne and Allie. Maybe that’s enough. Maybe I need to make it be enough.

As I gather my things, Chip’s attention returns to his laptop. So this time, when my phone buzzes, I give in to the pull and tap the waiting string of text messages from my oldest sister.

Adele:

Where are you? Why does the tracking app show you’re offline?

Adele:

What do you know about the meeting Mama put on the family calendar for tonight? There’s no way I can break away from the office before seven.

Adele:

Did you pick up the outgoing packages from my secretary yet? They need to go out by four. I don’t trust our new mail courier. Please confirm.

Adele:

Please get Mama to reschedule tonight’s meeting for some time after next Wednesday. Please confirm.

Adele:

Why is Hattie’s location showing she’s near the courthouse??? There’s nothing on the calendar regarding her custody appeal until next week. Are you with her? I’m walking into an important meeting. PLEASE CONFIRM ASAP.

Reality presses down on me with such force it’s an effort to switch mental gears in order to say a final good-bye to Chip as I take a step back from the table. Only, his reply comes in the form of a furrowed brow as he seems to contemplate me.

“Before you go, there’s something I overheard at the conference

that's been bothering me, especially in light of our conversation here today. At the risk of beating a dead horse, can I ask if . . ." He stops himself and then starts again. "Does part of your reasoning for anonymity have to do with a publication rumor involving your mother?"

"What rumor?" I shake my head. "I haven't heard anything."

"Really?" His brow rumples further. "Interesting. I swear I heard something about a biography collaboration."

Relief comes swiftly. "My mother would never agree to anything like that. I know that might seem odd, given her gregarious personality onstage, but my parents made a commitment early on to each other and to us that they'd keep their private lives private." And given the fact that Adele is the reigning Nondisclosure Queen of our family, there are few people who could write anything of substance without having to go through her first. My oldest sister is a star player in both offense and defense when it comes to matters of family. "Chances are good it's nothing more than a rumor."

He bobs his chin twice. "Perhaps I'm mistaken, then."

"Perhaps." Then again, *if* there was something unsanctioned in the works and I failed to give Adele a proper heads-up, she'd skewer me. "But if you hear anything more, would you mind letting me know?"

"Certainly. I'll keep my eyes and ears open for you."

"I appreciate it." I try to hold my smile even as I feel the vibration of more texts rumble against my palm again. Any chance I had of appealing to Adele's good graces at this point are long dead and buried. "Bye, Chip. I hope you have a good trip back to California."

I'm only a few steps away from the cardboard cut-out of my mother when I hear him call after me, "Do whatever it takes to get your book on the shelves, Raegan. Your future readers will thank you for it."

I hesitate for the briefest of heartbeats as my mind is whisked away to a fantasy life where I can be both an accomplished author and a dependable sister. But then I look down at the leash tethered to my palm, and the spell is broken.

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