

# Acclaim for Kathleen Fuller

“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.”

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“Kathleen Fuller is a gifted storyteller.”

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“Fuller brings us compelling characters who stay in our hearts long after we’ve read the book. It’s always a treat to dive into one of her novels.”

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—MOLLY JEBBER, SPEAKER AND AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

“Fuller has an amazing capacity for creating damaged characters and giving insights into their brokenness.”

—CBA RETAILERS + RESOURCES

“I always enjoy a Kathleen Fuller book.”

—LENORA WORTH, AUTHOR OF *THEIR AMISH REUNION*

Hooked  
on You



# Hooked on You



KATHLEEN FULLER



THOMAS NELSON  
Since 1798

*Hooked on You*

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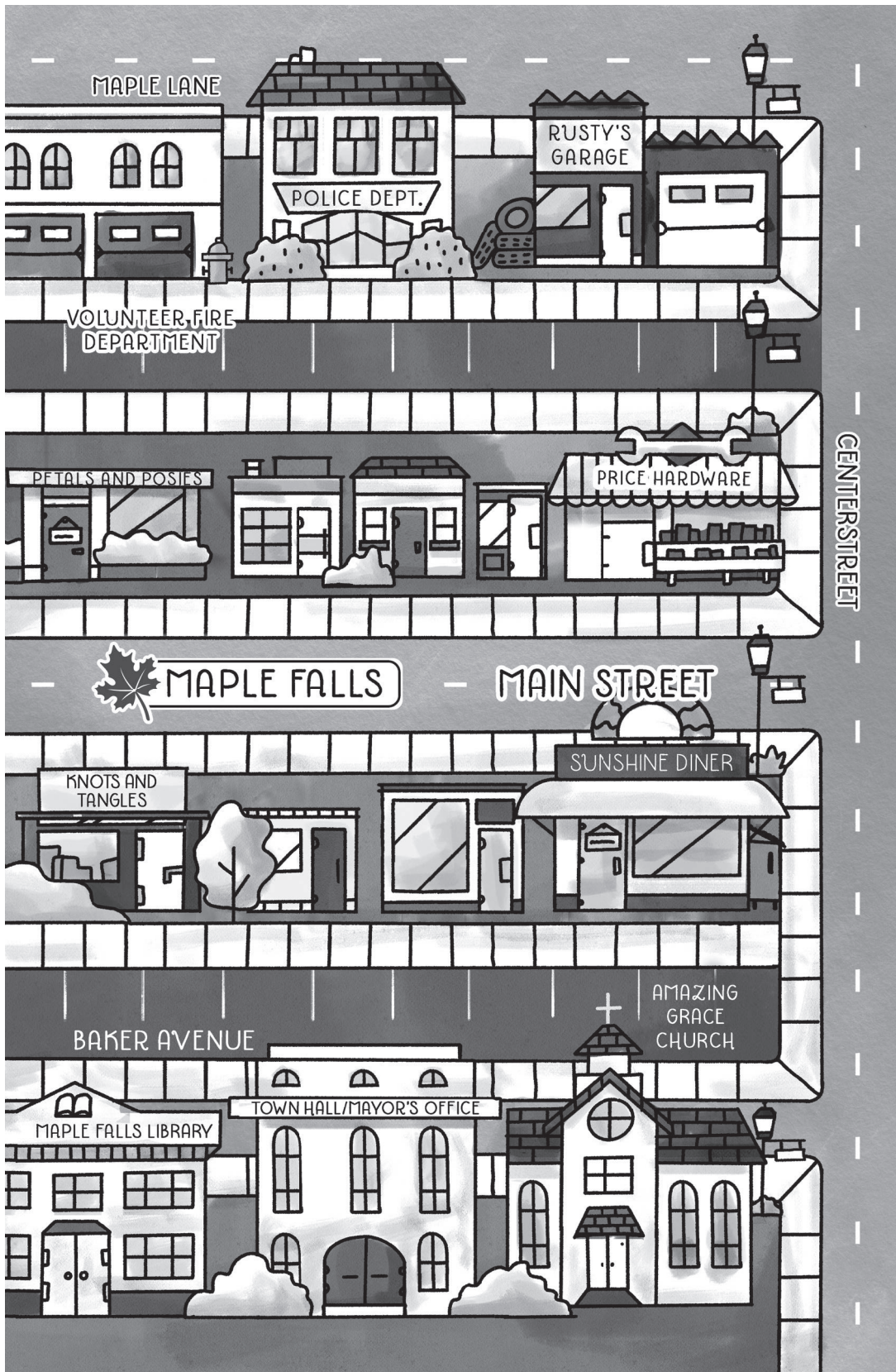
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*To my bosom buddy Eddie. We started out as fellow authors and ended up closer than sisters. I miss your smile, your hugs, your wisdom, your contagious laughter, your cooking adventures, your generous heart . . . I miss everything. There's never been a stronger woman than you.*



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# Chapter 1

A riot of colors, textures, and fibers filled the canvas in front of Riley McAllister. She tilted her head to the right. To the left. Then, with careful precision and pointed tweezers, she started to apply a hair-thin golden thread to the narrow bead of glue on the peacock feather in the center, the final touch to a project that had taken over three months to complete.

“Riley! Your Mimi called!”

Riley flinched and the tweezers pierced through the canvas, marring the multilayered feather. She started to mutter a curse but bit her tongue. She couldn’t afford foul language, not when she had almost zero dollars in her bank account. Besides, she was determined to win the cash in the cuss jar at the end of the month. There had to be over three hundred dollars in it already.

“Oops, my bad.”

She turned around and glared at her roommate. Melody had entered her bedroom–art studio–living room in the

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apartment they shared, a silver headband pushing back her short, curly black hair. Then Melody's words hit her. The torn canvas and gold thread forgotten, she jumped up from her chair. *Mimi*.

"Is she okay?" Riley asked, panicked.

"She's fine, but she sounds a bit cranky. She said she must have called five times before I answered." Melody took a sip of coffee out of her brand-new *Probably Wine* mug. The purchase was courtesy of her winning the cuss jar bounty last month. "You really should put your phone on vibrate at least. It's a good thing I saw it light up on the kitchen counter."

Dread filled Riley. "What did she say?" Her grandmother was no spring chicken, and as the years passed, she worried the next call would be *the one*. She grabbed her cell out of Melody's hand.

"For you to call her. You're welcome, by the way." Melody scowled. "Geez, calm down. She's not at death's door, if that's what you're worried about."

Riley turned her back to Melody and tapped Mimi's number on the phone screen. "How would you know?"

"Because she said, 'Tell Riley I'm not at death's door.'"

Riley turned back around as she put the phone to her ear, relief flooding her. "I'm sorry. You know how I get when she calls."

"You get crazy," Melody said with a grin. At Riley's pointed look, she added, "Crazy with worry, I mean."

True. She tended to expect the worst when Mimi called, despite telling herself she was being ridiculous. But she couldn't help it. *If anything ever happened to Mimi . . .* She drew in a deep breath as her grandmother answered.

“Hi.” Riley forced a cheerful tone. “I’m sorry I missed your—” She looked at her roommate.

*Five*, Melody mouthed, holding up her hand.

“Five calls.” Riley winced. “Is everything okay?”

“Oh yes, sugar. Just the usual goin’ on here.” Mimi’s lilting Southern drawl filled Riley’s ear, triggering the tiniest spark of homesickness, which always surprised her. After nine years of living in New York City, she should be over it, but every time she heard Mimi’s voice, it came back again. Riley’s life in Maple Falls had been a big disappointment, but that wasn’t Mimi’s fault.

“The *usual* required five calls in a row?”

“If you had picked up the phone, there only would have been one.”

“You could have left a message, you know.” Riley plopped onto the pull-out sofa that was also her bed.

“I could have, but then I wouldn’t have heard Melody’s sweet voice. She’s a peach.”

Riley smiled and glanced at Melody, spying her friend’s frown as she inspected the ruined canvas. Her stomach lurched. With some time and precision, the artwork could be fixed. Still, Riley would always know it was imperfect. She had planned to put it in her show next week, but that was impossible now. The work was too flawed to display in public.

“Riley? You still with me, hon?”

“Yes, sorry.” She turned away from the canvas and focused on her grandmother, her prior concern rising to the surface. “How are you? Is everything all right?”

“I called because I haven’t heard from you in three weeks.

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According to your social media, you've been a busy young lady." She sniffed. "Apparently too busy to call your decrepit old grandmother."

"You're *not* decrepit." Erma McAllister was far from feeble, but she was seventy-two, and Riley didn't like thinking about her getting older. She also didn't want to point out that her social media wasn't exactly a reflection of her life. She kept it going with carefully curated pictures of her works in progress, hoping to catch the eye of someone in the art business. A far-flung idea, but it didn't take much effort to post a picture and write a caption. "You're also too classy for guilt trips."

"It was worth a shot." Mimi sighed. "I guess I better get to the point. I need you to come home. ASAP."

Riley pressed her hand against her chest, feeling her heart rate speeding up. "Why? Are you sick? Are you in the hospital?"

"No, I'm not sick . . . or in the hospital. At least not anymore."

Riley sat up. "You were in the hospital and you didn't tell me?"

"There wasn't time. I broke my leg—"

"You broke your leg?" Her voice choked in her throat, and Melody rushed to sit down next to her. "When? How?"

"If I can get a word in edgewise, I'll tell you."

Mimi's quiet, composed tone immediately calmed Riley, as it had for so many years. After an unstable childhood, she'd moved in with her grandmother when she was thirteen. Mimi had been her rock ever since. "I'm listening."

"Put her on speaker," Melody said.

Riley tapped the screen. "You're on speaker now. Melody wants to know what's going on too."

"Oh, hello again, sugar. As I was saying, I broke my leg when I slid into third base last Sunday."

Riley and Melody stared at each other.

"What?" Riley finally said.

"You see, the young man playing third was blocking the base, so I had to slide. Myrtle hit a lousy outside pitch straight to the first baseman, who clearly should have been riding the bench instead of playing the infield. He flubbed the ball, and I thought I'd made it to third, until everyone started yelling at me to go back to second. I was already committed, so down I went. I was safe, by the way."

"Is she serious?" Melody whispered.

Rolling her eyes, Riley nodded. Softball was one of her grandmother's favorite sports, and she had dragged Riley to many a community game until Riley was seventeen. Then the community games had stopped.

"Mimi, you shouldn't have been playing softball in the first place."

"I don't need a lecture from you, young lady," Mimi grumbled. "I need you to come home and take over Knots and Tangles while I convalesce."

"Oh no," Riley said, getting up from the couch. She shook her head. "I'm not falling for this again."

"Falling for what?"

Her grandmother sounded so innocent Riley almost believed her. "Like I've said a million times before, I'm not moving back to Maple Falls, and I'm definitely not taking over the yarn shop for you." She walked over to the painting

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and scowled at the hole in the canvas. “I am impressed, though. You spun a good yarn, pun intended.”

“I’m not spinnin’ anything.” Mimi’s tone was sharp. “It’s the truth. Myrtle and I joined the new church softball team a few weeks ago, and we just had our second game. Now I’m out for the season, so stop what you’re doing and get back here. Pronto.”

Riley spun around and met Melody’s stunned gaze. Her grandmother rarely used a commanding tone with her, and not once since Riley moved away had she been insistent about her returning to Maple Falls. Until now. While she had asked Riley to visit around the holidays, she never pressured her and even visited New York a few times. She understood how important Riley’s career was to her and had always supported it 100 percent. Riley was banking that she still did.

“Mimi, I’m sorry you broke your leg—”

“Thank you. Now, about your return—”

“And I would love to come help you.” Which she would, if it didn’t mean going back to Arkansas. “But I can’t exactly drop everything here at the last minute. I have a jo—” She hadn’t told Mimi she was working part-time for a food delivery service. She had to pay her bills somehow, since her art wasn’t making any money. “I, um, have a show coming up.” At least that part was true. *Mostly.*

“Oh?” Excitement entered her voice. “I didn’t know that. Where is it so I can tell everyone about my famous granddaughter?”

She wouldn’t exactly be bragging about her one and only granddaughter, the supposed artistic rage of New York City, if she knew her art show was at the local flea market. It wasn’t

even a show, really. Just a place to sell some of her work so she could make her part of the rent. Telling herself it was an art show made it easier to swallow.

“The details aren’t worked out yet.”

“So it’s something you can postpone? Sugar, you know I wouldn’t ask you to come if I wasn’t desperate. Myrtle’s going on a three-week cruise again, so I can’t count on her.”

Guilt hammered Riley, but she stood fast. “What about one of the other Bosom Buddies?” she asked, referring to the small group of ladies that met weekly at the yarn shop for coffee, knitting or crocheting, and copious amounts of gossip.

“I suppose one or two of them could help,” Mimi muttered. “But they’re *awfully* busy.”

Riley pressed her fingertip against her temple, feeling her pulse throb. She had vowed not to return to Maple Falls until she made it big in New York—or at least could say she wasn’t living from hand to mouth, and she was barely doing that. She knew the Bosom Buddies wouldn’t hesitate to help her grandmother if Mimi asked. Most of the seven women had been friends since grade school, except for two who had been folded into the group over the years.

“I . . .”

She turned and looked at Melody, whose thin brown arms were crossed over her chest, her dark eyes peering over bright-green square glasses. Riley knew that reproving look, and she didn’t like being on the receiving end of it.

In truth she didn’t need Melody to prod her. Riley couldn’t refuse the woman who had practically raised her after her mother abandoned Riley for God knew where. If Mimi needed

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her, Riley would be there—just like Mimi had always been there for her.

“I’ll get the next flight out,” Riley said, holding back a sigh. The expense would almost max out her one credit card, but she’d worry about that later.

“Oh, Riley, thank you! Thank you!” Mimi gushed. “I can’t tell you how much this means to me. I know the shop will be in good hands with you while I recuperate. I won’t keep you. Once you’ve made your reservation, text me your flight info, and I’ll have someone pick you up from the airport.”

“I’ll just get an Uber,” Riley said.

“Nonsense. The airport is over an hour away. That would cost way too much money. Don’t you worry, sugar. I’ll make all the arrangements to get you back home.”

Home? Maple Falls had never felt like home.

“Love you, sweetie,” Mimi added before Riley could say anything else. “Talk to you soon!”

She stared at the phone after Mimi hung up. A few seconds later, she glanced at Melody, who had sat back down on their lumpy, secondhand couch and was now grinning at her.

“I knew you wouldn’t let her down.”

Riley trudged over to the couch and sank onto it again, her phone still in her hand. She continued staring at the black screen. “I don’t know about this.”

“What’s the big deal? You’re taking care of Mimi, who means a lot to you.”

“But that also means going back to Maple Falls.”

“So? You’re overdue for a visit home, Riley. I’ve been back to Minnesota three times this year alone. When was the last time you were in Arkansas?”

Nearly ten years ago, when she first moved to New York. She wasn't about to tell Melody that. The two of them had become good friends over the last two years since they became roommates. But there were things Riley didn't want to share with her—or anyone else, for that matter. Like her reasons for staying away from Maple Falls.

Shifting the subject, she said, "You're right. I need to focus on taking care of Mimi. That's what matters. I'll make sure she's following doctor's orders." She smirked as she set her phone on the coffee table. "She has a tendency to think she's invincible."

"No way." Melody chuckled. "Imagine that."

"I can't believe she slid into third base," Riley said. "Or that she is even playing softball at her age. Then again, Mimi has been in sports all her life. She and Myrtle were on the first girls' softball team in Maple Falls, and they were both excellent. She still plays tennis with Gwen too." Riley looked at her slightly pudgy tummy, the result of cheap food, a few too many glasses of wine alone in her apartment, and more than a little stress. She didn't doubt her grandmother was in better shape at seventy-two than Riley was right now.

"I had no idea Erma was so athletic," Melody said.

"I shouldn't be surprised she's on the team. Well, maybe a little because of her age. Whoever is coaching ought to be smacked upside the head for letting her do something so ridiculous."

"You think they could have stopped her?"

"They could have stalled her at second." Riley shook her head and turned to her friend. "Anyway, what's done is done. I'm heading back to Arkansas." A sour lump formed

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in her stomach at the thought. She would have to quit her job and cancel her upcoming “show.” “Don’t worry about rent, Melody. I’ll still pay my share.” *Somehow.*

Melody nodded. “Any idea how long you’ll be gone?”

Riley shrugged. “Depends on how fast Mimi’s leg heals, I guess. I’ll be back as soon as I can, but it could be a while.”

Nodding, Melody adjusted her headband, seemingly deep in thought. After a pause, she said, “Would you mind subletting to Charlie?”

“The guy in your acting class?”

“Yeah. He’s been couch surfing for the past two months after a bad experience with his last roommate. He’s looking for a place to land until he can find something more permanent.”

“Are you sure he’s . . . safe?”

“That boy’s practically got wholesome tattooed on his forehead. I kinda feel sorry for him. He’s character actor material and not bad, but he’s rough around the edges. I’ve gotten to know him pretty well over the past year. Trust me, he’s safe.” Melody gripped Riley’s hand. “Thanks for caring, sis.”

“Always.” Riley held her hand tight, then let it go. She was so grateful for Melody’s friendship. She had answered Riley’s ad for a new roommate at the local university where she took theater classes. Friendship had never come easy to Riley, but Melody’s easygoing and caring personality had eventually pulled her out of her shell.

She was also grateful to the unknown Charlie for taking over the rent for a little while. “Guess I better search online for a flight.”

“And I’ve got to get ready for the exciting world of waitressing. Double shift today. Yay me.” Melody got up from the couch and headed for the one bedroom in the apartment. When they first rented the place together, they agreed to change rooms every three months. The arrangement had worked out well, especially since neither of them was big on entertaining visitors. When she wasn’t delivering food, Riley was focused on her art, while Melody, a social butterfly who liked being out and about, often spent time with her actor friends at various places around the city. The few times she dragged Riley out of the cave had been torture. Riley was used to being alone, and she liked it that way.

A few moments later, Melody emerged from the bedroom, dressed in the white T-shirt and black pants her job required. Her blue-and-orange-striped drawstring backpack was slung over her shoulders, and her lips glistened with plum lipstick that perfectly complemented her dark skin.

“See you tomorrow,” she said, opening the apartment door. “Don’t wait up.”

Riley waved goodbye as Melody closed the door. She rose from the couch and turned the double locks into place, then glanced at her ruined art. She wasn’t in the mood to try to fix it now. Instead, she walked over to the window and gazed at the view of the brick apartment building next door. Not much of a vista, but like every struggling artist trying to make it in the big city, she couldn’t afford to be picky. Still, New York was her home.

The window was cracked open, letting in the buzz of city life. When she’d first arrived, she had been awed by the place. Too awed, to the point of culture shock. She wasn’t

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used to the mix of cultures, but she had quickly grown to appreciate the diversity of the people living here. She'd never gotten used to the nightlife, but that was fine. Her focus wasn't on having fun. She was determined to break into the hip art scene that had eluded her for the past ten years.

She might be broke and in serious need of some vitamin D, not to mention shedding a few pounds, but at least she wasn't in Maple Falls. The only way she'd planned to return was after she had proven to herself and everyone else that she was different. Successful. Responsible. And nothing like Tracey. Thanks to her grandmother not acting her age, Riley's plan was now in shambles.

Riley turned and stared at the ruined peacock feather and the golden threads she had painstakingly glued over thick, lifted curls of purple, blue, ochre, and green acrylic paint. Poking through the colorful swirls in what seemed like a random pattern but had taken hours to design were the glossy black-and-white magazine pictures of city life. The comfort of nature's colors clashing with the harshness of human constructs. She loved to explore opposite concepts in her art using unexpected materials—fabric, feathers, a variety of paints, anything with texture, and especially substances that on the surface were easily discarded things yet could be transformed into something beautiful.

A sigh escaped. There'd been a time when she thought her art was unique, and in the unsophisticated town of Maple Falls, it was. But not here. Mixed-media artists were everywhere, and getting herself noticed in a sea of aspiring creatives had been beyond difficult. But she wasn't going to give up. There wasn't time to fix the piece the way she

wanted to, but she would tackle it when she returned. Right now she had to go take care of her grandmother, which meant working at Knots and Tangles again.

A car horn sounded below, jolting Riley's thoughts. She'd never imagined she'd be working there again. During her teen years she spent hours in her grandmother's yarn shop. Not only working but practicing her art in the all-purpose room in the back. The old yarn store had been her job and her haven. But even she could see that it was a fifty-year millstone around her grandmother's neck. Mimi needed to sell the store and retire. Riley had mentioned it to her over the years only to be instantly shut down. Maple Falls was in decline when Riley moved away, and from little hints she gathered during conversations with Mimi, things hadn't improved.

Riley thought her grandmother not only needed to sell the store but also needed to put her large house on the market and move in with Myrtle. Or maybe Myrtle could move in with Mimi. Riley wasn't naive enough to think her grandmother would come to New York with her, but Mimi moving in with one of her good friends was a possibility. They were both widows, and paring down expenses would benefit them both. If there was something Riley was an expert at, it was pinching her pennies.

While her brain knew retirement and consolidation were in Mimi's best interest, the thought of the store being in someone else's hands pinched at her heart. She shoved the feeling away, as she normally did when she grew sentimental. It was time her grandmother embraced change. This visit was a prime opportunity for Riley to convince her of that.

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She felt an unexpected spark of hope. She had a plan now—help Mimi heal and convince her to sell her shop and the house. All three tasks wouldn't be easy, but she was determined. Once her grandmother unchained herself from the past, Riley could too—and when she left Maple Falls this time, it would be for good.

She crossed the small living room, opened her ancient laptop, and started to search for a flight. As she surfed, another thought popped into her mind. But no—she didn't have to worry about running into *him*. Like her, he'd moved on from Maple Falls. Still, remembering the crush she'd had on him in high school—one he had no idea about—caused a tiny flutter in her stomach. Talk about silly. She hadn't given him a single thought since she left Maple Falls. Okay, maybe one . . . or fifty thoughts since she'd left, but not any recently. And there was no reason for her to think about Hayden Price again now. She put him out of her mind and booked her flight to Arkansas.



“Erma Jean McAllister, you need Jesus.”

Erma set her cell phone on the counter and looked at her friend of close to sixty-five years. She tapped her chest with two fingers. “I have Jesus. Right in here.”

“Then you need a double portion.” Myrtle Benson straightened the business cards on the counter next to the small antique cash register that was just for show. A working adding machine from the eighties was right next to it. “Good thing we have evening service tonight.”

Erma wheeled herself from behind the counter, trying not to knock down a display of knitting needles with her outstretched, plaster-covered leg. She was proud that her little store, Knots and Tangles, was one of the original businesses in Maple Falls and at one time had the most yarn and fiber art supplies within a one-hundred-fifty-mile radius. Her mother owned the shop before Erma, and her grandmother had started the business. A woman entrepreneur was almost unheard of back then. Erma had worked here since she was twelve, and very little of the shop had changed since then. The place was full to the brim, and that was the way she liked it.

Her wheelchair, however, did not. “What are you prattling on about?” she said.

Myrtle sighed. “That phone call you just made to Riley. Land sakes, woman, you know I can cancel my trip anytime.”

“And let you disappoint Jorge?”

“His name is Javier. And I’m sure he’s long gone from the ship anyway. You know those jobs can be temporary.”

Erma caught the dreamy look in Myrtle’s eyes, the same one she’d had when she came home from her cruise eight months ago after meeting Jorge, er, Javier, the silver-haired—and silver-tongued, apparently—mâitre d’ at one of the fancy restaurants on the cruise ship. Erma couldn’t remember the name of the place, but she did remember how Myrtle wouldn’t stop talking about the food—and the *service*.

“You’ve been looking forward to this trip for so long.”

“I haven’t heard from him since my last letter.” Myrtle stuck out her lower lip, covered in a soft pink lipstick that coordinated with her oversize handbag. “I might as well cancel.”

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“If you cancel, I’m going in your place.”

“With a broken leg?”

Erma gave her a pointed look. “In a heartbeat.”

“You might just do it too.” Myrtle grimaced. “Fine. You win, as usual. But that still doesn’t make it right that you acted like it was an emergency and Riley had to come right away.”

“It *is* an emergency.” She gestured to the overstuffed shelves and baskets in the store. “How am I supposed to maneuver around this place in this thing?” She slammed her hands on the wheelchair armrests, which jolted the chair and made her leg twinge. Uh-oh, that was more than a twinge. “I need a pain pill.”

“Right away.” Myrtle rushed to get a glass of water from the bathroom sink in the back, then handed it and a pill to Erma. “Bea has already told you she can help out.”

Erma swallowed the pill, then leaned back in the wheelchair. Bea was Erma’s closest friend, but Myrtle came in second. She was grateful for their offers of help, but she needed to refuse them this time. “It’s high time Riley came home for a visit. Nine years is too long.”

“So you took advantage of your injury to get her back here.” Myrtle gave her a reproofing look. “You know why she left.”

Erma lifted her chin. “She can have an art career here.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about.”

She knew exactly what Myrtle was referring to—her no-good daughter who hadn’t returned since she disappeared fifteen years ago. Riley still carried the burden of that rejection, even if she stuffed it down behind a facade of

small-town girl turned big-city artist. “I just want her home, Myrtle. Is that too much to ask?”

Her friend’s blue eyes softened, the creases in the corners deepening. “It might be.”

Erma didn’t want to hear that.

The bell over the door chimed, and both women turned to see Hayden Price walk into the store. If Erma were fifty years younger and hadn’t known not only Hayden’s parents but also his grandparents and great-grandparents, she wouldn’t mind taking a crack at the handsome young man. As it was, she could still appreciate his fine form, which looked even better in a baseball uniform. He wasn’t as winsome as her Gus had been in his day, but he was definitely easy on the eyes. *I might be old, but I ain’t dead.*

“Hi, Hayden,” Myrtle said, casually patting the back of her short gray hair. “What brings you by?”

Erma smirked. Seemed like she wasn’t the only senior woman who thought Hayden was the bee’s knees.

“I came to check on our center fielder.” Hayden walked over to Erma and crouched in front of her. “How’s the leg?”

“Tolerable.”

“She just took a pain pill,” Myrtle blurted.

Erma shot her an annoyed look. “Don’t you have a cruise to pack for?”

“I guess I do.” She grabbed her pink purse, which looked big enough to house half the contents of the yarn store, and headed for the door. “*Hasta la*, um, whatever.”

“You might want to brush up on your Spanish for Jorge,” Erma called out.

“It’s Javier!” The door shut behind her.

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Hayden chuckled. "You two are a mess."

"Sugar, you have no idea."

He stood, still smiling, a shock of his thick blond hair falling over his forehead. Then all traces of humor disappeared. "I'm sorry about what happened."

She waved him off. "Not your fault."

"I was the third base coach. And I'm the head coach. I should have told you to stay on second."

"I wouldn't have listened to you anyway." She looked up at him, smiling as she remembered the split second before her leg ended up going in a direction God never intended. "Did you hear the crowd cheering?"

"They were yelling at you to go back."

"But I was already committed—"

He held up his hand. "Let's not go down that road again. I came by to take you to lunch if you're so inclined. Today's special at the Sunshine Diner is liver and onions."

"Ugh, who likes that?"

"I do." He looked slightly offended.

"You're too young for old people food." Erma tried to move toward him and knocked over a display of T-shirt yarn. "Oh, for goodness' sake."

"I'll fix it."

She watched as he made a valiant attempt to put all the skeins of yarn in the cube she'd knocked over. They had been neatly stacked—one of the few displays that was—but now they were being haphazardly squished into the space.

"There," he said, cramming the last skein of yarn into the box. "No harm done. So, are we on for lunch? I only have forty-five minutes, and then I have to get back to the store."

Erma was about to tell him she wasn't hungry when an idea jumped into her mind. *Erma Jean, you're a genius.* "I'm not all that hungry, but there is something you can do for me."

"Name it."

She wished there were a way to convince him not to feel guilty over what happened. Truth be told, she should have known better than to attempt that slide. The accident brought home the fact that she wasn't as fit as she used to be, which was another reason she wanted Riley back. Although she'd never admit it out loud, Myrtle was right—she was taking advantage of her accident to coax Riley back to the fold. She was worried about her granddaughter. The child had always been a loner, and that tendency hadn't changed since her big move to New York. Riley needed fresh air and companionship. And potential companionship was standing right in front of Erma, wrapped up in a charming and attractive package.

"I need you to pick up someone from the airport for me," she told Hayden. "Either tonight or tomorrow, if you're free."

"Just so happens I am." He grinned. "All you need to do is let me know when."

"I'll send you a text." As the creator and coach of the newly minted church softball team, he had given all the players his cell phone number. For years Erma had been resistant to texting, preferring to pick up the phone and call whoever she wanted to talk to. But she acknowledged that sometimes it was convenient, especially if you wanted to avoid any unwelcome questions.

"That works." He put his hands into the cargo pockets of his shorts. "Are you sure you don't want anything to eat?"

Kathleen Fuller

I can bring you something if you don't feel like going to the diner."

"No, I'm fine."

"All right. Rain check then." He headed for the front of the store, then turned around and looked at her, smiling again—Hayden Price's typical expression. Not only was he handsome but he was unfailingly optimistic and had been since he was a young kid. The perfect contrast to her serious but sweeter than peaches-and-cream granddaughter. He waved at Erma, then left for the diner.

She smiled, steepling her fingers. Erma couldn't believe it—a broken leg might be just the thing she needed to help her granddaughter.