

Praise for Kathleen Fuller

“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

“Something’s brewing in Maple Falls and you’re going to be rooting for the romance every step of the way. Kathleen Fuller has created a wonderful small-town setting for this sweet reunion romance. How these two first-kiss kids ever kept their distance until now is beyond me! Just goes to show if true love is meant to be, there’s no escaping it.”

—NANCY NAIGLE, *ECPA* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE SHELL COLLECTOR*, ON *MUCH ADO ABOUT A LATTE*

“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*

“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 *HADLEY BECKETT’S NEXT DISH* AND *PLOT TWIST*, ON *HOOKED ON YOU*

“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 *THE CUL-DE-SAC WAR*

“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*, ON *HOOKED ON YOU*

“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.”

—BETH WISEMAN, BESTSELLING AUTHOR

“Kathleen Fuller is a gifted storyteller.”

—JENNIFER BECKSTRAND, AUTHOR OF
HOME ON HUCKLEBERRY HILL

Much Ado
About a Latte

Other Contemporary Romance
Novels by Kathleen Fuller

Hooked on You

Much Ado About a Latte



KATHLEEN FULLER



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Much Ado About a Latte

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“I Will Survive,” lyrics written by Dino Fekaris and Freddie Perren, 1978.

“Always and Forever,” lyrics by Rod Temperton, 1977.

“I Will Always Love You,” lyrics by Dolly Parton, 1974.

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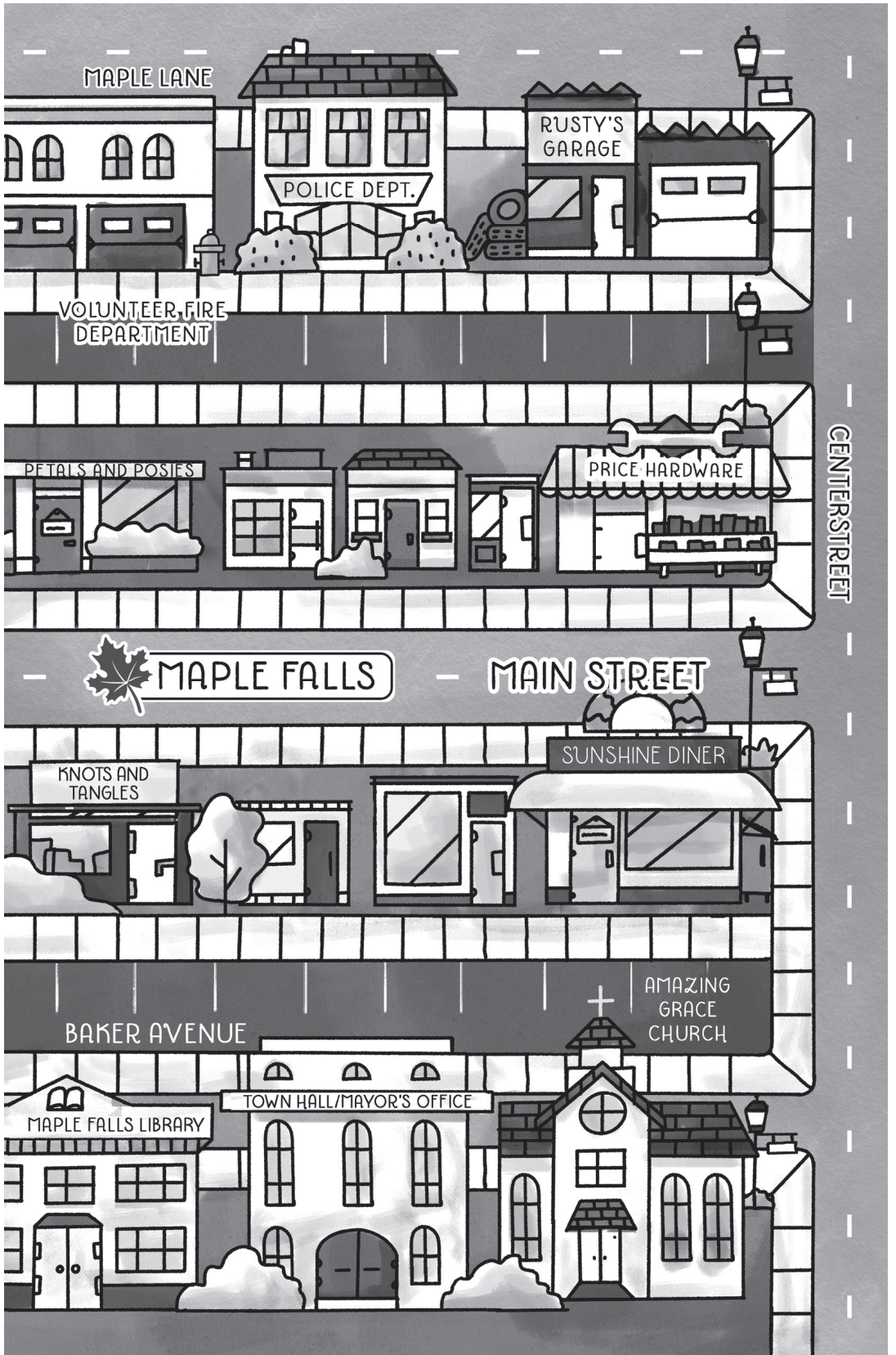
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To James. I love you.



CENTER STREET



MAPLE FALLS

MAIN STREET

Chapter 1

You never forget your first kiss . . .

At sixteen years old, Anita Bedford had never broken her parents' rules. Now she had violated at least two of them, maybe three. She always did what she was told . . . except for tonight. But how could she stay away from Tanner Castillo's party when he was the one who'd invited her?

She bit her bottom lip, unsure what to do. She'd been so excited to attend her first high school party that she hadn't thought about what would happen if she got caught. Now, in the dark of Tanner's coat closet, waiting for whatever was supposed to come next, she couldn't think about anything else.

She put her hand on the doorknob, then drew back. If she chickened out, the teasing would be relentless. She'd been the butt of enough jokes at school, and she refused to give her classmates more ammunition. Instead, she took a deep breath and stepped away from the door, only to lose her footing, grabbing at the coat behind her. When she felt the

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leather, she knew exactly what she was holding. Tanner's jacket.

She'd seen this jacket on him enough times to know exactly what it looked like—a deep mahogany color with zippered side pockets, the leather worn to the point that it fit him perfectly in all the right places. Even now she could imagine him walking into the library where they met twice a week, his thick, light-brown bangs brushed to the side, small white gauges gleaming in his ears. He'd been the first kid in town to get them, and now there were several students who had followed suit. His look was a combination of traditional and edgy, making him irresistible.

Sigh.

Without thinking, she pressed his jacket against her chest. Had he noticed her brand-new scoop-neck yellow top and light-blue denim jeans when he opened the door to his house and let her in? Or that she had gotten her braces off last week? He hadn't said anything about her braces yesterday during their tutoring session, but she thought he might have noticed tonight, because he did sit next to her as they and their friends played the Truth or Dare game that had landed her in his closet. Tanner was nice like that. But he sat next to her every Tuesday and Thursday after school as he tutored her in math, so sitting next to her at his party obviously wasn't a big deal to him.

Only to me.

This was stupid. How long were they going to make her wait? Maybe that was the point—no one was coming after all, and they were laughing at her in the Castillos' living room. Tears burned in her eyes. She should have known

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better than to try to be a part of the cool crowd. Was Tanner laughing with them? *I think I'm going to throw up.*

Suddenly the door opened. Anita squinted at the light shining in her eyes. The glare wasn't that bright, but compared to the dark it might as well have been a spotlight. Before she could speak, someone shot inside the closet and shut the door.

"Anita, it's me," a male voice said.

She almost fainted with relief. "Tanner!"

"Shh." He pressed his finger lightly against her mouth.

When he removed it, she responded, "Why are we whispering?"

"Everyone's standing outside the door."

"Why?"

"Why do you think? They want to make sure we're together in the closet long enough."

That didn't make any sense. She'd had no idea high school parties were so confusing. "Long enough for what?"

A pause. "Anita, please tell me you're joking."

She wasn't, but this wouldn't be the first time she'd misunderstood a situation.

"We're supposed to kiss," he explained softly, his tone even. "If we leave the closet too soon, they're going to push us right back in."

"Oh." Then she realized what he was telling her. "Oh!" Butterflies performed a shaky ballet in her stomach.

He chuckled quietly. "What did you think was going to happen?"

"I wasn't exactly paying attention." She'd been too focused on watching Tanner's every move.

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“Then why did you take the dare?”

Her face burned. “I don’t know.” Now she felt dumb, a sensation she was more than familiar with. “I’ve never played Truth or Dare.”

“Never?” She could almost imagine one of his ash-blond eyebrows rising above his sage-green eyes in surprise.

“No.”

He blew out a long breath. “I shouldn’t have let Corey talk me into having this party, and I definitely shouldn’t have let them play Truth or Dare. Nothing good happens with that game. My mother is going to flip her lid if she finds out about tonight.”

As he talked, she smelled the scent of mint-flavored gum. Fresh, as if he’d recently started a new stick. She was surprised he’d had to be persuaded to have the party. He was one of the popular kids and had a lot of friends. She had assumed he partied all the time like they did.

“I’ve learned my lesson,” he continued. “Hopefully not the hard way.” Another pause. “I was surprised to see you here.”

“You invited me, remember?”

“Uh, yeah. I didn’t think you’d actually come, though.”

So he had invited her out of politeness. She should have known that at the time. Then again, she was always slow on picking up cues. “I’m sorry,” she said, hugging his jacket.

“No, I didn’t mean it like that. I’m just saying this isn’t exactly your type of scene.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know.” He shifted away from her, giving them a little more space from each other. “Parties.”

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“I’ve been to a party before,” she said, forgetting to whisper.

“Like this one? Do your parents know you’re here?”

She was about to tell him they did but stopped herself. Everyone in town knew her father, who was a cardiologist, and her mother, who was a therapist. Both of them worked in Hot Springs, and they, along with her and her brother, Kingston, and sister, Paisley, never missed a church service. They were paragons of the community, and Tanner would never believe they’d let Anita go out past curfew. “No. They don’t.”

“You snuck out, then.”

Anita nodded, then remembered he couldn’t see her in the dark closet. “Yes.”

“Enough talking!” A sharp banging sound rattled the door.

Anita jumped and lost her balance again, Tanner’s jacket slipping from her grasp. Instantly his arms went around her waist.

“You okay?” he whispered in her ear.

“Yes.” The butterflies were now a whirlwind in her stomach. He was at least five inches taller than she, and if she wanted to—and she definitely wanted to—she could lean her head against his chest.

“Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!” The kids outside banged on the door again.

“Just ignore them.”

How was she supposed to ignore them? They were chanting so loudly it was like they were in the closet too.

“Don’t worry, we don’t have to kiss,” he said, letting her go. “If we both stay quiet, they’ll eventually shut up.”

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Her shoulders slumped a bit. “Oh. Okay.”

“Huh,” he said.

“What?”

“You sound disappointed.”

So much for hiding her feelings. And since she was honest to a fault, she had to make things worse by saying, “I’ve, uh, never been kissed before.”

He didn’t say anything for a moment. A long moment. Then he finally spoke. “Would you like . . .” He cleared his throat. “Would you like to be kissed?”

Her heart nearly exploded in her chest. Ever since he had started tutoring her three months ago when she signed up for the after-school tutoring program—on top of the tutor her parents had already hired—she had thought about kissing him. She’d always thought he was cute, and over the time he had tutored her, she had developed a secret crush on him. She wasn’t the only girl at Maple Falls High School who was enamored with him. He was easy to crush on. He was smart, nice, and patient, something every tutor who worked with Anita had to be. On top of everything else, he always looked and smelled good. He was the complete package.

“Uh,” he said. “Forget I brought it up—”

“Yes!” Then she put her hand over her mouth. “I’d like to be kissed,” she whispered through her fingers.



Tanner was in big trouble.

Not just because of the party, although right after he

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and Anita were finished here, he was going to kick everyone out of the house—something he should have done before the party started. His younger brother, Lonzo, had spilled the beans to Corey's younger brother about Lonzo and their mother being out of town this weekend to visit family in Texas. Corey must have heard about it, because the next thing Tanner knew, fifteen people had been invited to come over. Tanner should have nipped it in the bud right then, but somehow everything had gotten out of control, enough that when Anita had asked him what he was doing over the weekend—something she asked every Thursday for some reason—he absently mentioned the party. He'd never thought in a million years she would come. Not Goody Two-shoes Anita Bedford. He wasn't exactly a rebel—although getting gauges in his ears had made his mother think he was until he explained he only did it because he liked the look. But he was a year older than Anita, and he had definitely kissed, and been kissed by, a few girls in his time.

Well, now that he thought about it, only two. School and work had put a crimp in his dating life.

But those girls weren't Anita. Why had he opened his big mouth about the kiss in the first place? He knew she was naïve; that's why he had volunteered to be in the closet with her before any of the other guys had the chance. But he hadn't expected her to be this innocent. He had to admit it was kind of nice to be around a girl who wasn't trying to date him. They were friends. Not close friends, but during their tutoring sessions he'd gotten to know her a little better. Math was extremely difficult for her, but she always tried her hardest, and he tried his hardest to teach her. He

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admired her persistence, and soon it hadn't just been about the extra twenty bucks he made each week tutoring her. He wanted to see her succeed too.

"Tanner?"

He heard the hope in her voice, and he was surprised to find that he was nervous, something he'd never been around Anita. That had to be the reason his thoughts were all over the place. Surely there was nothing wrong with a little kiss between friends, right? And he was her tutor after all. He'd had a lot of practice teaching her math, so why not do her a solid and help her out?

"Okay," he said, moving close to her again. He rested his hands lightly at her waist. "Put your hands on my shoulders."

"Like this?"

He could barely feel her hands resting on him. "You can touch me, Anita. I won't bite."

"Oh." Her giggle sounded strained. Awkward. And kind of cute. When she settled her hands on his shoulders, she said, "What do I do now?"

What should she do now? He'd had his first kiss when he was twelve, and that hadn't been much of one—more of a peck from one of the girls who had been at the one and only summer camp session he'd ever attended. Looking back, he could see now that the counselors should have been fired for the stuff they let the campers get away with.

His other kisses had been with Kayla Smith, a girl he'd dated for four months when they were sophomores. She had moved last year, but they had broken up before that.

He took a step closer to Anita, breaking out of his rambling thoughts before she decided he'd changed his mind.

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Now he was close to her ear. “I’m going to kiss you now, Anita,” he murmured, then moved his head until he found her lips.

It took a second for her to respond, but once she did . . . Wow. Kissing her was nothing like he’d experienced before. Her lips were sweet, and that soft moan she made . . . His hands tightened at her waist, drawing her closer to him—

“Hey!” Corey yelled, banging on the door.

They jumped away from each other.

“Stop hogging the closet!”

“Shut up, Simpson!” Tanner gave his head a hard shake, trying to regain his senses.

“Did I do okay?” Anita asked, her voice small.

“Uh, yeah.” More than okay. He’d never had to catch his breath after a kiss before. But he wasn’t going to tell her that. She saw him as a friend. Her tutor, to be more accurate. “I think you’ve got it.”

“Open the door, or I’m going to break it down,” Corey shouted.

“That’s it.” Tanner was done with this guy and everyone else. He threw open the door, his eyes squinting as they adjusted to the bright light. “Party’s over.”

Corey stood back and held up his hands. “Hey, dude, why ya mad? You should have said something if you wanted to be alone with Anita all night.”

“I *don’t* want to be alone with her.” His temper was getting the best of him, not to mention he was still reeling from the kiss. “Get out of my house.” He turned and went to the front room. “All of you, leave now!”

“This party’s lame anyway.” Corey came up behind him,

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then walked over to Madison Baker and put his arm around her shoulders. “No booze, no fun.”

Tanner rolled his eyes and pointed to the back door. “Out.”

Everyone grumbled and groaned but complied. He barely knew most of the kids here, and he was relieved when they left.

Then he remembered Anita.

“Anita?” He searched the front part of the house where the closet was, then went outside. He put his hands on his hips and frowned. She had left along with everyone else, and he hadn’t had a chance to see if she was okay or even tell her goodbye. She probably thought he was the biggest jerk on the planet. He sure felt like he was.

But a small part of him realized he owed Corey a favor. Because if Tanner hadn’t left the closet when he did, he might have kissed Anita Bedford again.

No, I definitely would have.



On Tuesday, Anita sat at her and Tanner’s usual table in the school library. She squeezed her hands together and made sure they stayed in her lap. She’d thought about canceling today’s session, but she would’ve had to come up with an excuse to tell her parents, who always wanted to know how her tutoring went. If she canceled today, they would want to know why. She was still so out of sorts, she knew she couldn’t come up with anything believable.

Her stomach twisted into a tight knot. All weekend and

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Monday she had remembered what Tanner said right after their amazing kiss: *“I don’t want to be alone with her.”* Those words had hit hard, and as soon as she’d heard them, she’d left his house and snuck back home. Her mother and father had no idea she’d been gone, and neither did her siblings. Not that she would have cared if she’d been caught. Nothing could compare to the pain her heart was going through right now. Her first kiss had knocked her off her feet, and she had felt Tanner pulling her closer right before Corey had interrupted them. But instead of savoring every second of their kiss, she wanted to crawl into a hole and disappear forever.

She glanced at the clock in the library. Almost three o’clock. Tanner would be here any minute. She looked around the room. Usually there were several other people here, including the librarian, but today the library stood empty. Great. He would probably bolt once he saw they were the only ones here.

“I don’t want to be alone with her.” No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t force his words out of her mind.

Unable to sit still any longer, she yanked her math book out of her bag and opened the pages to the day’s homework assignment. Yuck, geometry. While she was in intervention classes for both math and reading, math was her worst subject. Today the teacher had talked about a coordinate plane, and she’d had no clue what it was. If Tanner did show up, he would think she was dumb as a bag of rocks, if he didn’t already.

“Hey.”

Anita looked up, and her breath caught. How was she supposed to keep her composure when he looked so hot

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today? A navy blue V-neck T-shirt, bootcut jeans, and his ever-present leather jacket.

He smells good again.

“Looks like everyone else bailed.” Tanner sat next to her, putting his books across the table from her backpack. He took all AP courses, and his statistics and advanced chemistry books sat on top of a red spiral notebook.

Anita shrugged, unable to look at him. Instead she stared at the graph in her math book. She couldn’t make heads or tails of it, but she wasn’t thinking about math anyway. Somehow she had to get through this session, and then she would tell her parents she needed a different tutor. The only reason she hadn’t done so over the weekend was that her father was working a hospital shift and her mother was busy with Paisley at a cheerleading tournament. She was sure Tanner would be relieved.

“Um, before we get started, can we talk for a minute?” he asked.

She looked at him, surprised. “What about?”

“Friday night.” He glanced away and fidgeted with the metal spiral holding his notebook together. “I’m sorry about what happened at the party.”

She already knew he regretted the kiss, but it hurt even more to hear him say it. Fighting tears, she started to stand. “It’s all right,” she said quickly. “This will be our last session.”

His head jerked around. “What? Why?”

“I don’t want you to feel like you have to tutor me. Or be around me.”

“Oh boy.” He ran his hand over his face. “You heard what I said, didn’t you?”

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Nodding, she reached for her backpack. “Don’t worry, you don’t have to be alone with me anymore.”

He reached for her wrist, stopping her. “Can I at least explain before you leave?”

She looked at his hand on hers. He even had nice hands—long fingers, short, square fingernails, and lightly tanned skin due to his Spanish heritage. Her own hand was small underneath his, and her perpetually pale skin looked almost bleached next to his.

“I was really mad about the party,” he said, releasing his grip. “I didn’t want that bonehead Corey to get the wrong idea about us. That’s why I said what I did.”

Anita sat back down, already missing the warmth of his touch. *I’m hopeless.*

But he seemed genuinely distressed, so she had to hear him out.

“We’re friends, right?” His gaze met hers.

Anita hesitated. She wished they were more than friends, but obviously he didn’t feel the same way. Finally she nodded. “Right.”

“I don’t want to ruin that. Or our tutoring sessions. You got an A on your last test, and I think you can get one on the next test too.”

“I don’t know.” She pushed her book toward him. “Coordinate planes.”

“A piece of cake.” Tanner smiled.

She almost melted in her seat right there. But she managed not to. She and Tanner were friends, and she would rather have that than nothing.

“Let’s forget about Friday, okay? Then we can focus

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on this.” He tapped the page. “Not some idiotic party that never should have happened.”

She was sure he meant the kiss too. The embrace they’d shared would be their one and only, and wishing differently wouldn’t change anything. If Tanner could forget the kiss, then so could she.

But deep down, she knew she never would.