

Chapter 1

Nobody thought Viola Thatcher would ever expire, if for no other reason than sheer stubbornness. She'd made it to eighty-seven, after all, without a single daily medication or chronic health condition. She was as spry as her cat Chaucer, bustled around her beloved bookshop like a woman half her age, and was known to ascend shelf ladders when no one was around to stop her.

But alas, no one was immortal. Not even Gram.

Shelby Thatcher dabbed her eyes with a tissue that now bore the remnants of her foundation, eyeliner, and mascara—none of which had kept their waterproof promise. She tried to block the canned music flowing into the restroom of Fancy's Funeral Home and the cloying lavender scent emanating from a potpourri dish on the vanity.

She'd nearly made it through the two-hour visitation with her dignity intact. She'd smiled and nodded her way through platitudes and comforting hugs. She'd even held up through quiet exchanges with Dad, whose bloodshot eyes belied his unwavering assurances and stoic posture. But then Miss Dahlia struck the strident chords of "Amazing Grace" on the organ, and Gram's favorite song twisted a key, unlocking Shelby's pent-up grief.

That and the arrival of Grayson Briggs, who'd strutted through the door just in time for the service. It all went downhill from there.



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Could there be a worse time or place to encounter one's long-lost love? The daunting emotions of loss and grief seemed to compound the bittersweet—heavy on bitter—memory of heartbreak.

She blew her pinkened nose, losing more foundation and the last of her ruby-red lipstick. Vanity was a cruel teacher.

She was supposed to be in a breezy sundress when he saw her again, wearing just-fine-without-you makeup, her salon-styled light brown hair bouncing around her shoulders in slow motion. Not wilting in a matronly black dress she'd borrowed from Liddy, her best friend and sister-in-law, because she didn't own anything as dark and gloomy as this wretched day deserved.

The hollow restroom door opened and Liddy entered, a wan smile warming her features. She'd pulled back her beautiful red hair in a loose updo, leaving a few tendrils to frame her peaches-and-cream face. Her blue eyes softened on Shelby. "How you holding up, honey?"

"About as well as my makeup, I'm afraid."

"You're beautiful without it. What I'd give for that olive complexion of yours."

"Your freckles are adorable. If my brother hasn't convinced you of that yet, he's not doing his job." Shelby tossed her tattered tissue, then eyed the door. "Is he still out there?" They both knew she wasn't referring to Caleb.

"He is. And can I just say, *holy cannoli!*"

"Stop it. You've seen pictures of him."

"From a decade ago. Don't get me wrong—he was hot back then, but he's since reached holy cannoli status."

"Don't let Caleb catch you saying that."

"He's been glowering at Gray since he walked in. I left the baby with Caleb—hopefully that'll keep him in line."

"What's he hanging around for anyway? There's no graveside service."

"Maybe he wants to catch up with folks?"

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Shelby huffed. Gray's one and only fan had just passed. And since when had he wanted to stick around Grandville a moment longer than necessary? He'd shot off like a rocket two seconds after graduation. And four years ago when he'd returned to North Carolina for his own grandma's service, he was gone before the funeral lilies could bloom.

"Maybe he wants to talk to you."

"He skipped the receiving line. And last time he was in town he didn't so much as glance my way."

Liddy arched an auburn brow. "Maybe he finally realizes what a putz he was."

Shelby could always count on Liddy to come to her defense. "Doubtful. I should get back to Dad. Folks will be coming by the house soon." Plus Logan was probably wondering where she'd disappeared to. She tugged at the dress, which was shorter on her five-seven frame than on Liddy's five-three, and resisted the urge to check her reflection one last time.

Liddy held the door, then took Shelby's arm in solidarity as they walked down the hall and into the flower-perfumed funeral parlor. A quick visual sweep of the room revealed most of the lingering guests had departed—including the man she'd been avoiding for the past hour. It wasn't too hard to convince herself that the funny fluttering in her stomach was relief.

Cars lined the street of Shelby's childhood home, and friends and neighbors swarmed the ranch-style house. Sounds of chatter and laughter dominated the living spaces, and the aroma of Miss Martha's peach cobbler filled the air.

As Shelby milled about the room, snatches of conversation reached her.

"She was quite the looker in her day, you know. Paul wooed her for weeks before she'd even go out with him . . ."

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“They only had the one son, though Viola always said she’d have at least half a dozen . . .”

“She sure would’ve loved this beautiful October day . . .”

“What’ll happen to the bookshop? I do hope Shelby keeps it open. What would Grandville be without it?”

Shelby’s eyes caught on Caleb near the entry and she made a beeline for him. Her big brother was handsome in a trendy navy suit. He wore his wavy dark blond hair longer these days, and paired with artsy glasses and a casual scarf, he looked every inch the creative.

Currently, though, he was doing daddy duty with his fussy infant. Oliver was the most beautiful two-month-old on the planet. He had fine dark hair, a button nose, and wide brown eyes just like Caleb’s.

She reached for the baby. “Give me that precious thing.”

“He’s fighting his nap.”

“Aunt Shelby will get him right to sleep.” She snuggled the baby in her arms, bouncing him gently, savoring the sweetness of new life. Just what she needed right now. Plus, she sensed her brother was struggling.

A couple from church arrived, and Caleb and Shelby accepted their condolences before they moved toward the kitchen.

“Where’s your wife?” Shelby asked her brother.

“In the kitchen with the food. Where’s Logan?”

“Something came up at work.” He’d wanted to stay but she encouraged him to go. She needed to support her family today and run interference between Caleb and Dad. Logan’s good intentions sometimes rendered him clingy.

“Have you talked to Dad yet?” she asked.

“Of course.”

Shelby gave him a pointed look. “I mean really talked.”

“Real talks between the two of us don’t go very well, as you might remember.”

“He misses you.”

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“Yeah, I could tell by his warm greeting yesterday.”

“Well, you haven’t been home in almost a year, Caleb. And you’re not exactly the best about staying in touch.”

“I’ve been busy with my work.” No more had the words left his mouth than sadness crept into his eyes. His Adam’s apple dipped. He took a long drink from a water bottle, then his gaze locked on Shelby. “Gram wrote me last month. I never wrote back. I meant to—I just hadn’t gotten around to it.”

Shelby’s heart softened at the rough texture of his voice. “Aw, Caleb. She knew you were busy. And she knew you loved her. She was so proud of all your success. She hung that painting you sent for her birthday in the bookshop. It’s right behind the register where everyone can see it.”

He blinked away tears. “I know she was proud of me. I just wish I’d appreciated her more when she was here. I’m a little envious of all the time you had with her.”

Shelby was grateful for all that time with Gram, but it hadn’t been without its frustrations. Her grandmother hadn’t exactly been open to new ideas. She had her own way of doing things, and they didn’t always jibe with Shelby’s. But it was Gram’s bookshop.

Had been.

The thought caught in her throat. “Dad’s on the porch. You should go talk to him. He needs his family right now.”

“I doubt that includes me.”

Shelby rolled her eyes. “Of course it does.”

“I never realized how much of a buffer Gram was for Dad and me. She had a way of bringing us together and keeping things calm. I sure do feel her absence.”

Seven years ago Caleb had dropped out of college and run off to New York to become an artist. The news didn’t sit well with Dad, who thought Caleb would be following in his footsteps into academia—Dad was an English professor at Grandville University. The sudden shift in

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plans had caught them all off guard. And the switch to the competitive world of art . . . ? Let's just say Shelby had her own doubts. Her brother was very talented, but how many artists actually managed to eke out a living with their paintings?

To his credit, Caleb managed to make something of himself. He wasn't selling million-dollar projects, but he was regularly featured in galleries and selling well enough to support himself and Liddy, who now stayed home with Oliver.

His success had done nothing to soften their dad's heart, however.

Shelby glanced down at Oliver, whose eyes had closed. His dark lashes feathered the tops of his petal-soft cheeks, curling ever so gently. Her heart rolled over. She hadn't seen him since she and Dad went to New York for his birth. He'd already grown so much. By the time she saw him again, he might well be crawling. "How long can you guys stay?"

"A week or so—if Dad and I don't kill each other first. My next showing isn't until December, but I have a lot of work to do before then."

"You don't mind if I just keep Oliver here with me for a few months, do you?"

"You might change your mind when you've gotten up with him twice a night for a week straight."

She gazed at the baby's precious face. "Oh, I don't know. I think I could forgo lots of sleep for some sweet cuddles with this little guy."

"I think you'll have your hands full enough with the bookshop."

Shelby's mood plummeted. Gram had made it clear over the years that Shelby would always have a place at the bookstore. But the thought of working there, much less running the place, without Gram opened a hollow spot inside. It would never be the same again. "You're right about that. There's a lot I don't know." Gram had done the accounting and handled the inventory. She was a whiz with the computer program. Shelby had been happy handling the customers and managing the other

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booksellers. “She never really got around to teaching me her end of things.” Mainly because Shelby had put it off.

“You’re smart. You’ll figure it out.”

Maybe so, but Shelby would probably just hire someone to fill her grandma’s role. They’d need an extra person now anyway, and Shelby would rather work the floor than be stuck in the office all day.

She didn’t want to fret about the store right now though. She gazed down at her sleeping nephew and could practically feel the oxytocin flooding her system.

“I saw Gray skulk into the visitation at the last minute.” His lips twisted on the name.

The feel-good hormone dried up like steaming pavement after an August rain. “I saw him.”

“Did he say anything to you?” His tone implied that he’d better not have.

“Nope.”

“Good. He doesn’t deserve your time or attention. You’re better off without him.”

“I’m sure he’s already halfway back to Riverbend Gap by now.” Because, yes, that was where he lived these days. Only three hours away. She knew this because Gram had kept in contact with him. As Gray’s grandma’s lifelong friend, Gram had felt she owed it to Dorothy to look out for him after Dorothy passed. Shelby could respect her grandmother’s loyalty, though she had long ago asked Gram to keep news of him to herself. She’d mostly complied, though sometimes things “slipped out.”

Caleb glanced through the window to the porch where their dad was saying good-bye to someone. “Guess I’ll go talk to Dad. Want me to take Ollie?”

Shelby edged the baby away from him. “I’m not finished collecting cuddles.”

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He ran a hand through his hair, which fell artfully into place. “All right.”

“Want me to go with you? Be your buffer?”

“I probably need to stop depending on other people to fill that gap.”

“Just ask him how he’s doing. If there’s anything you can do.”

“He’ll say I could move back home where I belong, and then we’ll be well on our way to World War III.”

“Good point. Well, just go be with him. Talk about something benign—the great start to Duke’s season.” The football team was about the only thing they had in common these days.

“Good thought. Thanks.” He headed toward the front door like a man headed toward death row.

And Shelby headed to her old room. She wanted just a few minutes to enjoy little Ollie before she had to resume her role as grieving granddaughter. Her feet felt heavy as she made her way down the hall. *Oh, Gram, you’re supposed to be here. You weren’t supposed to die. What will we all do without you?*

Chapter 2

A rush of cool air washed over Shelby as she entered the offices of Barclay and Greenwood set on the edge of town just past Dottie's Donuts (which she might or might not have visited on the way). She'd passed the office a million times but had never had reason to enter. The lobby smelled like lemon Pledge and fresh reams of paper.

From behind her desk Becky Field's brown eyes softened on Shelby, her laugh lines visible even though she wasn't smiling. She was at least sixty, but her hair had been a coiffed platinum blonde for as long as Shelby could remember. They attended the same church, but Becky wasn't a reader and only ever came into the bookstore to shoot the breeze.

"Hi, honey. How are you doing? It was such a lovely service yesterday. Your gram would've loved it."

"Thank you, Becky. It's been a rough week."

"Of course it has. If there's anything I can do, you just let me know."

"Thank you. We're just trying to take one day at a time." Everyone had been so helpful. Dad already had over a dozen meals tucked away in the freezer, and Shelby had at least that many. The whole town had shown up to honor Gram yesterday. Shelby stopped at the desk, hitching her purse on her shoulder.

"I understand completely. Listen, this is terrible timing, but a few of my friends from church are heading up a fundraiser for the humane



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society, and we're collecting donations from area stores to give away in a silent auction. I meant to ask weeks ago . . . Would the bookstore be able to donate a book or two for that?"

"We'd be glad to." Though there was really no more *we*. Shelby's heart squeezed tight but she smiled through the sensation. "When do you need the donation?"

"Would tomorrow be too soon? I can swing by and pick it up."

"Sounds good." Shelby glanced past the desk. "Is anyone else here yet?" She hadn't seen her dad's or brother's cars, but she'd parked on the street.

Becky glanced over her shoulder. Then she stood, leaned over the desk, and lowered her voice. "Listen, honey, I thought you might like to know—"

"Becky, can you bring back some coffee, please?" Javon Greenwood appeared in the doorway, tall and handsome in white shirtsleeves and khakis. "Oh, hi, Shelby. I didn't hear you come in. Come on back. We'll be in the second room on the left. Make yourself comfortable."

"Thank you, Mr. Greenwood." Javon (legal suspense and true crime) was a fiftysomething newcomer to Grandville, which only meant he hadn't been born here. In truth he'd been in town for at least ten years.

Shelby shot Becky a parting smile before heading down the short hallway. The reading of Gram's will was just one more thing they needed to get through. But after yesterday this should be a piece of cake. Shelby had, however, forgone makeup altogether today. If there was one thing she wasn't, it was a slow learner.

They'd been surprised by the invitation to Mr. Greenwood's office. But apparently Gram had appointed him as executor and given him explicit instructions about how she wanted everything to play out.

Shelby was happy to comply with Gram's wishes. She just wanted to get past this difficult week so she could get back to the bookstore, which

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she'd mostly left to the other booksellers this week. Janet and the others had been so good about stepping up to the plate.

Shelby arrived in the doorway and blinked at the dark-haired man sitting at the conference table.

Grayson Briggs.

Her feet slammed to a halt. She gaped at him. Snapped her lips shut.

Gray eased to his feet, gaze locked on her like a laser. He had the nerve to look well rested and handsome, even under the harsh fluorescent lights.

He was supposed to be gone by now, not hanging around Grandville making her nerves twitch. And certainly not here at what would be the reading of her grandmother's will. "What are you doing here?"

"Mr. Greenwood asked me to come," he said in that slow drawl she used to find utterly sexy.

"What for?"

He lifted his shoulders, drawing her attention to them. They were broader than they'd been back then. His whole build seemed . . . thicker. Sturdier. She hadn't seen him this close-up for years. Time and maturity had sculpted his face. The boy had become a man. And the man was far too appealing for his own good. She frowned at the thought.

A shuffling sounded down the hall. Caleb approached, seeming somber even as he offered a wan smile. He lugged the baby carrier, Liddy on his heels.

Thoughts still roiling, Shelby greeted them and stepped inside to make room for the couple.

Once through the doorway, Caleb stopped so suddenly Liddy nearly crashed into him. "What are *you* doing here?"

Gray's blue eyes toggled between Caleb and Shelby.

Caleb moved forward and set the carrier down. "You have no business being here."

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“Mr. Greenwood invited him.”

“Why would he do that?”

Shelby could practically see the wheels turning in her brother’s head.

“I don’t know.”

Caleb scowled at Gray. “Why would you need to be here? What have you done?”

Gray put his hands up, palms out. “I didn’t do anything. I don’t know why he invited me.”

“Alrighty then!” Mr. Greenwood swept into the office, seemingly oblivious to the thick fog of tension. “Your dad’s on his way in so we’ll get on with the reading in just a moment. Have a seat. Make yourselves comfortable.”

They all settled as Becky brought in coffee service and set it on a buffet table behind Gray. “Can I pour y’all a cup?”

Since Liddy was taking Ollie from the carrier and her brother was busy glaring at Gray, Shelby answered. “We’ll just help ourselves. Thank you, Becky.”

Becky offered a parting smile that toppled when she glanced Gray’s way, then she vanished through the doorway.

Mr. Greenwood pulled documents from a file while Shelby’s mind spun. Gram must’ve left Gray something. She couldn’t think what. Gram didn’t have anything that— *Oh*. The necklace and china. Gray’s grandma had left Gram a pearl necklace and her wedding china. Gram would now pass those items to Dorothy’s grandson. Of course. It all made sense now. Shelby’s shoulders slumped on an exhale.

Dad entered the room, seeming a little harried. “Sorry I’m a little late. There was—” His gaze stopped on Gray, his prominent brows pinching together over soft blue eyes. He’d combed his salt-and-pepper hair back, showing off a hairline that hadn’t receded so much as a centimeter. He’d dressed casually in jeans and a button-down.

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“You’re right on time,” Mr. Greenwood said. “Come on in and take a seat. Can I get you a cup of coffee?”

“No, thank you.” Dad pulled his gaze from Gray and took a seat on Shelby’s other side.

As he settled, Shelby dared a glance at her ex-boyfriend. He burned a hole through the conference table as he spun a to-go cup from Latte Da with his left hand.

“Alrighty then. Thank you for coming down today. You’re all here as beneficiaries of Miss Viola’s will. And as I conveyed on the phone, we usually don’t hold formal will readings, but this is what Miss Viola requested.”

He continued talking, but Shelby made a connection while he did so. Gram had always rooted for Gray and Shelby. She’d been so convinced they were meant for each other. Shoot, at one time Shelby had been just as convinced.

Gram had pushed her on it for a while. For years, really, until Shelby finally put her foot down.

“It’s over between us, Gram. I know you don’t like change, but sometimes it’s for the best. Sometimes change is necessary for growth. Let it go.”

But Gram had been stubborn and convinced she was right. She’d probably set up this reading to force them together in the same room. Ridiculous, since she couldn’t have known when she was going to pass. For heaven’s sake, Shelby could’ve been married by now. Not to mention Gray.

Her gaze flitted toward the hand still fiddling with the coffee cup. To the fourth finger. Bare.

“Did you just check out his ring finger, Sweet Girl?” Gram’s voice held that familiar note of humor.

I’m just curious. It’s completely natural.

“Whatever you say.”

“Is that okay with everyone?” Mr. Greenwood said.

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“Of course,” Dad said.

Caleb folded his arms. “Fine by me.”

Gray offered a nod.

All eyes were on her. What was the question again? Shelby squirmed in her seat. “Uh, yes. Sure.”

“Overview it is then,” Mr. Greenwood said. “I’ll go ahead and pass these out so you each have a copy for your records.” He proceeded to do just that.

Shelby took the stapled document and set it on the table, her eyes pinned on the heading: *Last Will and Testament of Viola Elaine Thatcher*.

Gram was dead.

No matter how many times Shelby told herself that, it still didn’t seem real. Just last week she had entered the bookshop to find her grandma on a ladder, shelving a new first edition of *The Exiles*. After Shelby had shooed her off the ladder, they’d debated whether or not they needed a website—they did. Then they chatted about a few new releases, then *Normal People*, which led them as always to that dream trip to Ireland they’d always wanted to take.

And never would now.

Shelby tried to take comfort in the fact that Gram had had a good, long life and had passed peacefully in her sleep. Who could ask for more? But that wouldn’t stop them all from missing her terribly. It wouldn’t fix the gutted feeling that left her chest hollow and aching.

Mr. Greenwood interrupted her thoughts. “So I’ll run through the list of assets in the order Miss Viola requested. Feel free to stop me if you have any questions.”

Ollie let out a little squeak as Liddy shifted him in her arms.

Dad’s face was stoic, his eyes tight at the corners.

Shelby took his hand under the table and gave it a squeeze.

He squeezed back.

“The first asset is Miss Viola’s house.” Mr. Greenwood made eye

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contact with her brother. “Caleb, she wanted you to have her home to do with as you and Liddy wish. Though she loved the home and cherished the memories made there, she wanted to make sure you felt no obligation to keep it. The contents are yours also, except for the items she designated for others. Though she asked that you allow your father and sister to take whatever they might wish to keep.”

Caleb nodded. “Of course.”

“She also wanted you to have your grandfather’s wedding band and watch. She had fond memories of you playing with that watch when you were a child.”

Caleb blinked back tears, gave a nod.

Liddy rubbed his arm.

Mr. Greenwood’s glance shifted to Dad. “Stanley, your mother wanted you to have any monetary assets once outstanding debts are paid.” He glanced down at the papers. “She also wanted you to have the letters she and your father wrote to each other when he was away at war, the grandfather clock he bought her for their twenty-fifth anniversary, and any gifts you gave her over the years that you might like to have, including the hummingbird feeder you made her, which provided hours of enjoyment, the diamond birthstone necklace you gave her for her sixtieth birthday, and the antique desk residing in her home office.”

Dad swallowed hard. His jaw flexed.

“Grayson . . .”

All eyes swung his way.

“Your grandmother was a wonderful, lifelong friend to Miss Viola. She felt Miss Dorothy would’ve wanted you to receive the things she left to Miss Viola in her will—her pearl necklace and your grandparents’ wedding china will go to you.”

Gray offered a nod. Let go of his cup and slid both hands under the table.

Shelby’s shoulder muscles loosened a notch. She’d been right about

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the bequeathments. But Gram had been wrong about getting them into a room together. There was no crucible powerful enough to make her open her heart to Gray again.

“Shelby, you know how much your grandmother valued her wedding rings.”

“She never took them off.” Even though Pop had died almost twenty years ago. “Pop was her first and only love.”

“Exactly so. She wanted you to have those to remember them both by. Also, all of her first-edition copies in her home library and all the books from her personal library. She wanted you to have the antique settee in her living room. She had many fond memories of late-night chats dating back to your childhood. She wanted you to have her tea service, the diamond earrings your grandfather gave her for their twentieth anniversary, and the antique lamp that belonged to her mother. She also asked that you would care for Chaucer. Lastly, in regard to The Second Story Bookshop, which includes the business and the building’s contents, she bequeathed you 51 percent.”

Shelby blinked at Mr. Greenwood. “Did you say 51 percent?”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Dad said. “Shelby and Mom have run that place together for years. She always intended for Shelby to have it after she was gone.”

“Who’d even get the other half?” Caleb said. “Not me. I have no interest.”

“I understand your confusion. But I’d like you to recognize that Miss Viola was very clear in her wishes. Shelby, running the bookshop with you was one of your grandmother’s biggest joys. She wanted me to express how thankful she was for the time she had with you over the years. Those memories were very dear to her. She realized you might not understand her wishes, but nonetheless”—his gaze shifted across the table and locked on Gray—“she bequeathed the other 49 percent of the bookstore to Grayson Briggs.”

Chapter 3

What?” Gray had heard the words. They just didn’t quite compute. Miss Viola had left him half of the bookstore? His gaze shot to Shelby, who stared at him as if he’d just killed her cat.

Caleb shot to his feet, eyes hot and aimed straight at him. “You manipulated her. I know you stayed in touch with her, and there’s no way she would’ve done this on her own.”

Gray frowned. “I didn’t know anything about this.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Liddy took Caleb’s arm. “*Honey.*”

“I refuse to accept this,” Shelby’s father said to Mr. Greenwood. “Mom always planned to leave Shelby the shop. She mentioned it many times.”

“She did express that she wants the shop to continue under Shelby’s direction.”

Caleb glared at Gray. “She wouldn’t have done this without some kind of coercion.”

Mr. Greenwood cleared his throat. “I know this must be upsetting and you may not understand her reasons. But I assure you, Miss Viola was adamant about this decision.”

“We must have some legal recourse,” Stanley said.

“There’s always that option. But your mother was of sound mind—

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there's not a soul alive who would dispute that. Frankly, I don't think you'd have a legal leg to stand on."

As Mr. Greenwood rambled on about legalities, Gray's gaze slid to Shelby. Her long dark lashes swept downward, hiding her brown eyes. She clamped her lush lips together the way she'd always done when she was angry or about to cry. Which was the case right now?

Either way he couldn't blame her. He had no right to that bookshop. Maybe he'd helped Viola a bit from afar, but he hadn't even stepped foot inside the store since he'd left town eleven years ago. And the last thing he wanted was to hurt Shelby.

Time and distance had shown him what an idiot he'd been. Long before his tour in the Army was up, he'd realized he'd made a terrible mistake. But it was far too late. He'd already lost her.

Maybe he could somehow use this opportunity to finally make things right. He so regretted the way he'd hurt her. And the weight he'd carried for years seemed to get heavier by the day.

And seeing Shelby yesterday had stirred more than a desire for closure. At the first sight of her doe eyes, all those old feelings resurfaced. And seeing her with her boyfriend at the funeral home, his arm draped around her chair, sent jealousy roiling through him. He had no claim on Shelby. No right to these feelings. But they were there anyway.

Shelby lifted her eyes and narrowed them, pinning him with a flinty look.

Anger it is.

More anger. He would forfeit his share of the store. It was the least he could do. Maybe then she'd finally forgive him for being such an idiot when he was a kid.

He opened his mouth to say so . . . just as Mr. Greenwood's last words rang out. "Whatever her intentions, your grandmother had your best interests at heart, Shelby. I can promise you that."

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She lowered her gaze to the table. Her fist closed around a tattered tissue.

Gray shut his mouth. No doubt he had a fair share of business acumen, but that wasn't what this was about. Miss Viola had made no secret of her wish for Shelby to forgive him. The woman had arranged this stunt to accomplish just that.

Maybe he could carry out Miss Viola's wishes while still making an honorable decision regarding the bookstore.

He cleared his throat as he stood, and all eyes darted his way. "I'd like to talk to Shelby alone."

"I'll bet you would," Caleb said.

Mr. Greenwood gathered his papers. "I'm finished conveying Miss Viola's wishes, so I'll excuse myself. Feel free to read through the will and contact me with any questions you might have. You're welcome to use the conference room as long as you like."

Stanley stood and shook the attorney's hand, thanking him for his time.

After Mr. Greenwood left, Shelby came to her feet, staring at Gray. Her eyes flashed and she lifted her elfin chin.

He'd seen that look a time or two. Gram had passed that stubborn gene right down to her granddaughter. Despite the gravity of the situation, he felt a smile forming—and squashed it quickly.

Shelby addressed her family. "Why don't you guys head on out while I have a word with Gray."

Her dad frowned. "You sure, honey? I can stick around awhile. I don't have to work today."

"That's okay, Dad. I'll be fine. Really."

"I'm staying," Caleb said.

Liddy handed him the baby carrier. "No, you're not. You're coming with us." Her eyes warned him not to argue.

Caleb aimed a scowl at Gray as Liddy made her way toward the door.

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Then he set a hand on Shelby's arm. "My phone is on. Call me if you need anything. Anything at all."

* * *

The office emptied, leaving Shelby and Gray utterly alone. Only the quiet hum of the air conditioner broke the silence. She brushed back a tendril that had escaped her bun. Her hands were shaking. She folded her arms across her chest. "Is this where you admit to manipulating Gram into giving you half her bookshop?"

"I don't want her store, Shelby. Who do you take me for?"

"You don't want me to answer that."

"Fair enough. But I had no idea she was planning this and no desire to come back here at all, much less permanently."

"Fine, then sign your half over to me and you can be on your way."

He dragged his gaze from hers. Paced the length of the table.

She felt the ridiculous need to scuttle around the other direction just to keep the table between them. But he pivoted and returned to where he was standing before. "You'll need some help around the store until you find a replacement for your grandma."

"I'm perfectly capable of hiring my own staff, thank you."

"I want to help."

"I don't need your help."

His stare was unwavering. "So you're up to speed on the software for the POS system, the bookkeeping, the financials?"

Heat flooded her face. She fought the urge to squirm under his steady gaze. Drat him for being good at such things. And for knowing she darn well wasn't. "That's none of your concern."

His head tilted back a degree. He pocketed his hands. "I want to make you a proposal."

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“You’re very good at those—not so much on the follow-through though.”

Hurt flared in his eyes, there and gone.

She shouldn’t have said that. It wasn’t as if he’d technically proposed. They’d been too young for that. But they’d promised their hearts to each other. That counted for something.

He offered a nod. “We’ll call it an offer then. I’ll stick around long enough to do a financial audit. That’ll need to be done before you find a new bookkeeper anyway.”

“Can’t I just hire a CPA for that?”

“Sure, if you want to pay for it. I’m willing and able to do it for free. And I can step into your grandma’s position immediately as I’m already proficient in Shopify. I helped her set it up.”

Gram hadn’t mentioned that. That would solve one problem—one big problem. But the last thing Shelby wanted was to be stuck for days on end with Grayson Briggs. “Don’t you have a job back in Riverbend Gap? A life?”

“I can make arrangements. I’m due time off.”

“Why would you do this? You hate Grandville.”

He smirked. “It’s more that Grandville hates me, isn’t it?”

“Semantics. Answer my question.”

He took his time. “Why do you think your grandma did this?”

“That’s a question, not an answer.”

“All right, I’ll answer it then. She wanted us to put the past to rest. I think it must’ve meant an awful lot for her to have done this. She loved you and she knew what the bookstore means to you. It wasn’t her intention to take it away from you—even a piece of it.”

“And yet she did.”

“That brings us back to my offer.” His gaze sharpened on her. “If you allow me to stick around and help out for a couple weeks—that should

be long enough to get things squared away and hire a replacement—I'll sign over the 49 percent."

Shelby's lips parted. She snapped them back together. "Why would you do that? Isn't this your dream—owning a business?"

"If I own a business someday, it'll be because I've earned it."

There had to be some trick here. She just couldn't think clearly enough to figure out what it was.

"I have no desire to own a business in Grandville, Shelby." He regarded her for a beat. "And maybe Gram isn't the only one who wants us to bury the hatchet."

Shelby stiffened. "I'm not interested in some kind of reconciliation."

"I'm only asking for a chance to make things right—as best I can. Maybe if I help you out, maybe if we spend a little time together, we can work through this."

That was exactly what she was afraid of. Gray used to have such a hold on her. She'd fallen fast and hard in a way she hadn't before or since. It had taken over a year to get past the heartbreak. That resentment she carried now was a block wall between them—and it sounded as if he wanted to tear it down.

And yet . . . if he continued to hold 49 percent of the shop, that would tie them together indefinitely. She didn't really have much choice.

She regarded him through a veil of bravery. "You'll sign papers to that effect? Two weeks at the bookshop and you'll sign over your share?"

"Whatever you draw up."

There was nothing but sincerity in those pale blue eyes, in the resolute set of his jaw. But her trust in his word had evaporated ages ago.

She lifted her chin. "Fine. Be at the store at eight o'clock tomorrow. I'll have the paperwork, and once you sign it you can get started."

Chapter 4

Eleven years ago

How had Shelby been lucky enough to score a bookstore job at the age of seventeen? She arranged the seasonal table with beach reads and complemented the theme with various sideline products: a beach towel, a few totes, and some colorful cozies.

Her gaze drifted over Gram's store from the tall wooden shelves, complete with gliding ladders, to the freestanding shelves laden with books.

The brick building, built in 1923, sat near the center of town, set back from the other storefronts. It boasted a small yard and a front porch that welcomed guests to sit and read awhile.

Beyond the front door, a wonderful old staircase led to their second-story shop. At the top it opened up into a lofted space with honey-brown wood floors. Shelby loved every time-scarred plank and familiar squeak. The main room held fiction titles, complete with tables for bestsellers, seasonal books, and a few sideline items. The antique checkout stand sat off to the side next to the front staircase. Behind the stand was the first-editions wall, which contained the store's only used books.

The Nonfiction section took up the smaller middle room, and the back room held the Children's and Young Adult sections, complete with



Denise Hunter

a cozy story-time corner. Gram's office was tucked away downstairs between the back staircase and the rear exit.

Shelby had only been twelve when Gram rented the building and opened the bookstore. Having lost her husband a couple years before, she wanted to use their savings to pursue her lifelong dream. She'd lost the love of her life and needed another purpose. She called it her second story. So when this upstairs space became available, she snatched it up. She wanted the bookshop to be a community hub, and that was exactly what it became.

But the store didn't just cater to residents. Grandville was a college town, so the bookstore enjoyed its share of student business. And the weekenders who came up from Charlotte to enjoy the fifty-square-mile lake often came in search of a beach book or a cozy mystery. Shelby and Gram loved to welcome one and all into their little bookshop.

"Oh, that looks so nice." On her way to the register, Gram stopped, appearing all summery in a sleeveless teal top and a pair of white capris that matched her cropped hair. "You sure have a knack for arranging merch."

"It's so fun. Oh, do we still have those seashell earrings Meg Finlay made? Those would be perfect."

"Over by the register. I'll grab them for you."

"Thanks."

A customer who'd been perusing the Fiction section moved to the next room, browsing covers as she went.

Shelby moved Debbie Macomber's new beach title to the side and slid the ocean-breeze candles to the front. She stood back. There.

"Here you go." Gram handed over the earrings as a lawn mower roared to life outside.

Shelby glanced out the picture window and down to the lawn but didn't see anyone. "Did you pay someone to mow?" Shelby normally tried to beat Gram to the chore. There was only a tiny lawn out front and a square of grass in the back.

The Second Story Bookshop

“Dorothy asked if I had some work to keep Gray busy this summer. He’ll be mowing and landscaping the front yard for us.”

At the thought of Grayson Briggs, a strange hum vibrated beneath Shelby’s skin. “Oh. Well, you’ve been wanting to put some flower beds out front.”

“It’ll be nice to spruce up the yard.” Gram snapped a picture of Shelby’s display with her phone. “Beautiful. Can you check on the customer when you’re finished here? I’m gonna say hello to Gray.”

“Sure thing.”

Gram went down the stairs and slipped out the door, the bell tinkling after her. A minute later the mower shut off.

Gray, a fellow classmate, used to live in a trailer on the other side of Grandville with his father. But six months ago, halfway through their junior year, his dad was arrested on charges of second-degree murder, and Gray moved in with his grandmother.

Something like that didn’t go unnoticed in a town with fewer than fifteen thousand residents. The case was the talk of the town for months, and Ferris’s recent conviction only spurred it on. He was now serving time in the state penitentiary.

Rumors had swirled throughout the school about Gray. He was tall and darkly handsome and strutted through Grandville High’s halls in weathered jeans and T-shirts, silent and brooding. Shelby had only ever shared one class with him—English—and he’d hardly said a single word all year.

Though one time they’d reached the trash can at the same time, and his blue stare at such close range had made her blood buzz in her veins. Time stood still for a few ticks of the clock before he finally dropped a wad of paper in the trash can and swaggered back to his seat.

The seemingly insignificant moment had left her shaken. Later she told herself her reaction had been based on fear. She couldn’t get that direct gaze out of her head. Or the harsh planes of his face. Everyone knew

Denise Hunter

Gray was rough around the edges, and a violent streak certainly seemed to run in the family—Dorothy Briggs notwithstanding.

Now Shelby wondered how many of those rumors about Gray were actually true. Gram wouldn't have hired a troublemaker, would she? Not even for her best friend.

Shelby finished the display, then checked on the customer who was inspecting the Travel section. After a brief discussion about the best North Carolina guides, Shelby left the woman to shop alone.

She wandered back to the front room where she peeked out the window, hoping for a glimpse of Gray. The mower sat in the middle of the yard, but Gray and Gram were nowhere to be seen. She leaned closer and finally caught sight of him raking out the beds at the base of the porch.

Shirtless.

His summer-bronzed skin gleamed under the morning sun, hugging every delicious muscle. And boy, did Gray Briggs have muscles. He had a body like Michelangelo's *David*, only living and breathing.

His biceps bulged as he worked the rake through an entire winter's worth of decayed leaves and debris. His rippling abdomen mesmerized her for a few long seconds. How did one acquire abs like that? Especially a guy who'd never deigned to join the football or basketball team?

Only when he stopped raking did she tear her gaze away, letting it drift toward his face. Toward his eyes.

Which were aimed directly at her.

She gasped and jumped out of view, heart racing. But she'd been about one second too late.