

Much Ado About a Latte



THOMAS NELSON

Since 1798

KATHLEEN FULLER



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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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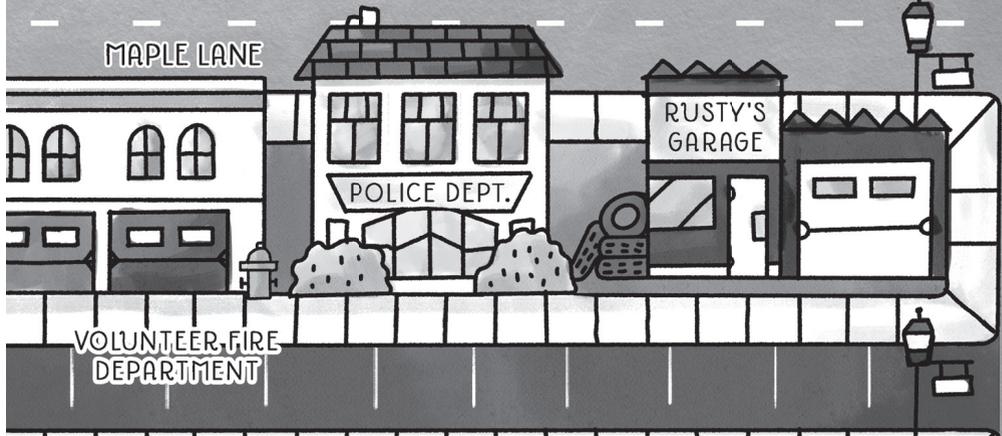
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To James. I love you.



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

MAPLE LANE



VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT

POLICE DEPT.

RUSTY'S GARAGE

CENTER STREET

PETALS AND POSIES

PRICE HARDWARE



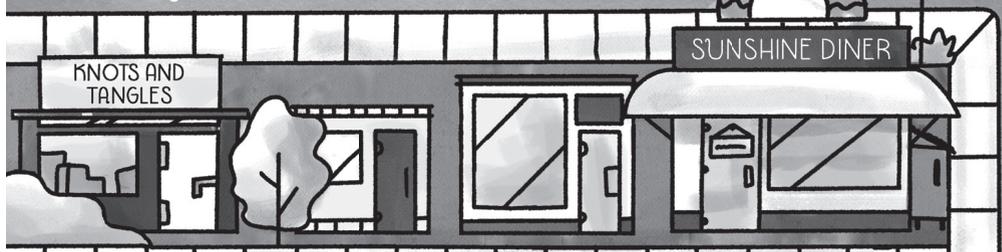
MAPLE FALLS

MAIN STREET



KNOTS AND TANGLES

SUNSHINE DINER



BAKER AVENUE

AMAZING GRACE CHURCH

MAPLE FALLS LIBRARY

TOWN HALL/MAYOR'S OFFICE



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

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

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.

“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.”

“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.”

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

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

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.

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

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

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?”

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.



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Chapter 2

April
Ten years later



I hate the name the Four Musketeers.”

“We *know*,” Harper Wilson and Riley McAllister said in unison.

“You bring it up every Tuesday, Olivia.” Riley’s cushion-cut diamond engagement ring glinted under the fluorescent lighting as she waved her hand. Shortly after her fiancé, Hayden Price, had proposed during the grand reopening of Knots and Tangles—the yarn shop Riley co-owned with her grandmother, Erma—he had replaced the pink-yarn ring Erma had fashioned for him with the beautiful understated one she wore now. Anita held back a sigh. The proposal had been so romantic, with him dropping to one knee in front of the Bosom Buddies, Erma’s long-time group of friends. Anita, Harper, and Olivia Farnsworth had been

there, too, and afterward the four of them had formed their own group—one that after eight months still didn't have a name.

"Shouldn't we be talking about something more important?" Harper said. "Like your wedding, Riley. How are the plans going?"

"Good. Everything's moving right along."

Olivia nodded. "You're not worried about Tracey showing up?"

Only Olivia would be straightforward enough to bring up Riley's mother. But when Anita exchanged a glance with Harper, she saw she and Olivia weren't the only curious ones.

Riley shook her head. "No. Mimi said she was back in jail again."

"This might sound heartless, but I'm glad." Harper scowled. "You don't need her showing up and ruining everything."

"I agree. At least she's safe in jail, too." Riley sighed. "Tracey's made her choices. I've made mine. Mimi and I are our own little family, and Hayden will soon be a part of that." She smiled. "There is one little hitch, though."

"What?" Anita asked, concerned. She wanted everything perfect for Riley.

Riley took a sip of the chai tea she had fixed earlier. "Mimi is still insisting she can wear her prom dress as a grandmother-of-the-bride dress."

"You're kidding," Harper said, a horrified look crossing her face.

Riley rolled her eyes. "I wish. Fortunately, she can't find

it. Her attic is full of stuff, and she's barely made a dent in the boxes. But she's *absolutely, positively* sure it's up there somewhere."

"What does it look like?" Anita asked.

"You know the vinyl tablecloth she has on the kitchen table? The one with the avocado-green and egg yolk-yellow flowers on it? Like that, but worse."

"Oh no." All three girls groaned.

"I'll take her shopping," Harper said. "I'll convince her to pick out something a little more contemporary." Harper, the fashion queen of the group, had also contributed some advice on the bridesmaids' dresses, at the bride's request.

"That would be great." Riley grinned. "I still can't believe I'm getting married."

Harper frowned. "You're not having any doubts, are you?"

Riley shook her head. "I can't imagine life without Hayden. It's surreal how much has changed since I came back to Maple Falls last year. I went from being an introverted struggling artist to being a partner in Knots and Tangles with Mimi, selling some of my work online, getting engaged, and finding the best friends a girl could ever have."

"You're still pretty introverted." Olivia crossed her short legs and looked directly at Riley. "Then again, so am I."

"Me too," Anita interjected.

"Except when you're at work," Harper pointed out. "That's when you unleash your inner extrovert."

Anita frowned. "Is that wrong?"

Harper chuckled. "Of course not. The customers love it. Everyone knows you're the best waitress at Sunshine. And

as for me, I don't have an introverted molecule in my body, and I like it that way."

They spent the rest of the evening talking about the wedding, interspersed with reluctant discussion about choosing their group name. At nine o'clock—always at nine, the time Olivia had established when they first started their weekly meetings—they cleaned up the snacks and left the shop.

"Do you need a ride, Anita?" Olivia asked as they walked into the parking lot.

"Not tonight." She had a car, but she rarely used it. One of the perks of living in a small town was that everything she needed was within walking distance of her house—her waitressing job at Sunshine Diner, the church, and the grocery store, among other places.

As her friends got into their cars to go home, she waved goodbye to them. When they'd gone, she turned and headed around the corner to the storefronts on Main Street, the opposite direction of her house. The rubber soles of her gray slip-on tennis shoes were nearly soundless as she walked along the sidewalk past Knots and Tangles and two more empty buildings, then stopped in front of the third one, next door to the diner. When she was growing up, it had been called the Trimble Building, but now everyone referred to it as empty building #3, or just #3. A crooked *For Sale* sign sat in one of the large picture windows.

Streetlamps lit up the dark street, but she didn't need light to know every outer detail of #3, from the picture windows on each side of the dark wooden door to the splintered wooden façade that was in desperate need of repair and fresh paint. During her childhood, an antique store had

lived here, run by the Trimble family, who no longer lived in Maple Falls. They'd sold the building to a bank, but during her freshman year of high school the bank had moved to another location outside of Maple Falls. Since then #3 had been empty.

She pulled her lightweight blue jacket close to ward off the spring chill. This wasn't the first time she'd stopped in this spot and contemplated her future. Once Riley and Hayden had begun their campaign last year to revitalize the town, Anita had started paying more attention to her surroundings. This old building wasn't the only thing going downhill in Maple Falls.

But what if . . .

Six months ago she had come up with a crazy idea: opening a café in #3. Not only would it be a great addition to the downtown, but it was also right next door to her current workplace. People wanting a quick cup of coffee and a snack could go to the café, and for meals they could go to the diner. The two could promote each other and maybe work together as one in the future—although it would be a challenge to get George, Sunshine's owner and her boss, on board.

But she always talked herself out of the idea, and tonight was no exception. She didn't have the brains or skills to run a business. She wouldn't even know where to start.

Then again, Riley had been a reluctant business owner too. Yet once she renovated Knots and Tangles, she had grown to love running it. The yarn shop was popular, and people from all over the state came to buy her products. She also sold yarn online to customers all over the world.

Could a café possibly be the next hot spot in Maple Falls?
Yes, if someone else opened one.

She touched the cold concrete, then turned to go home, dashing her own hopes once again.

A few feet from #3, however, she stopped. Looked in the direction of the diner. Saw the glow of the lights from the large window facing the street.

Is he still there?

Unable to stop herself, she walked the short distance to the diner, pausing at the edge of the window to peek inside. The place closed at eight, and usually the staff had clocked out and left by eight thirty. But through the wide serving window she could see Tanner, the assistant manager and Sunshine's main cook, still working in the kitchen. His head was down, and he wore his usual green baseball cap, a beat-up thing just sturdy enough for him to tuck his shoulder-length ponytail underneath.

Sigh.

Suddenly Tanner lifted his head, paused as he saw her, and waved.

Darn it. He'd caught her. When he gestured for her to come inside the diner, she couldn't refuse, not without him getting suspicious.

Act natural. She waved back and went to the front door, ignoring the *Closed* sign prominently displayed above a smaller sign showing the days and times the diner was open. She pushed against the heavy glass door and walked inside, immediately hit with the enticing smells of cumin, peppers, and cilantro mingled with the usual fried-diner-food smell. Sunshine Diner had a fifties décor, right down

to the barstools and jukebox—a jukebox that hadn't worked in over a decade.

“Hey, Tanner,” she said, walking toward the front counter.

“Am I glad to see you.” He walked out of the kitchen. “I need a taste tester.”

Not only was Tanner the best cook Sunshine had ever had, but two months ago he'd somehow convinced George to open a catering business with Tanner in charge and Bailey, one of the new waitresses, assisting him. Anita knew he spent several nights a week after work tinkering with his catering menu. Sunshine Catering had booked only two small parties so far, but he worked so hard and was so good at his job she knew he would soon be adding to his client list. Just like she knew whatever he was cooking right now would undoubtedly be delicious.

Still, she hesitated. She couldn't deny that she felt nervous around Tanner. Shortly after that kiss they'd shared way back in high school, he'd stopped tutoring her to take a busboy job at a restaurant in Malvern, and she'd rarely seen him outside the scattershot times he attended Amazing Grace Church. Absence hadn't made the heart grow fonder, and she'd gotten over her crush on him. In the years that had passed since then, she'd moved on.

Or so she thought.

Three years ago, when George hired Tanner as a cook at the diner and he and Anita started working together, it hadn't taken long for those puppy-love feelings to return. Only this time it wasn't puppy love, and she had no idea what to do with the intense attraction she felt toward him—other than hide it from him. That was difficult enough for

her to do when they were surrounded by coworkers and customers. This would be the first time they'd been alone.

"Unless you're busy," he said, uncertainty entering his sage-green eyes. "I don't want to impose."

Never one to turn down a request for help, she shook her head. "You're not imposing." She placed her purse on one of the round red-and-silver stools and sat down on the empty one next to it.

"Awesome." He smiled, his gorgeous eyes meeting hers.

Double sigh.

"I'll be right back." He spun around and dashed to the kitchen, then returned holding a large white plate filled with a variety of small appetizers. "These are for Harper's party," he said, putting the plate in front of her. "I thought I would add a Spanish twist to the menu and serve some of my grandmother's recipes."

She had forgotten he was catering Harper's cocktail party next Saturday night. Or rather, she'd been too surprised to find out Harper had invited her but not Olivia or Riley to think about anything else. Then again, both Olivia and Riley were busy, Olivia with her job as head of the Maple Falls library and studying for her second master's degree, and Riley with work and wedding plans. So Anita had been the one to get the invite. She still didn't know what she was going to wear. Being invited to cocktail parties didn't happen very often.

More like never.

Tanner pointed at each sample. "There's ham, cheese, and olive empanadas; Spanish tomato bread; roasted pepper-stuffed mushrooms; *patatas bravas*; and *bandarillas*."

“I didn’t know you spoke Spanish,” she said. He’d even rolled his *r*’s.

“I don’t. Not much, anyway. My mom’s family is third-generation Puerto Rican transplants, and Dad’s was from Spain. I picked up some words growing up, mostly from Dad, but not many. He insisted we all speak English.”

She’d known Rosa and Alonzo Castillo growing up; the Castillo family had attended the same church Anita went to. She hadn’t been aware of their backgrounds, though, and Tanner had never mentioned his father to her until now. Their tutoring sessions in high school had always focused on the subject matter—or at least Tanner had. Anita couldn’t say the same. Why would she pay attention to reading comprehension when she could stare at him for forty minutes?

She was aware that there was another reason he didn’t talk about Alonzo. His father had died from leukemia when Tanner was eight. She was surprised, and a little honored, that he’d said something about him tonight.

“Anyway, *bon appétit*.” He gestured at the tapas again.

“Isn’t that French?”

“Yes, and one of only three French words I know.”

She smiled. “What are the other two?”

“*Oui* and crepes. Does that make me multilingual?” He winked at her.

Her heart did a little backflip. “I think it does.”

She needed to focus on the task at hand instead of how attractive Tanner was, so she examined each appetizer more closely. The patatas bravas looked like small crispy potatoes, and the bandarillas were long thin skewers of tiny pickles, pearl onions, mini sliced carrots, pieces of roasted

red pepper, and various sizes of green olives. “These all look so yummy. I don’t know what to try first.”

“I suggest the bandarillas.” He picked up a skewer and held it out to her. “I hope you don’t mind anchovies.”

She hadn’t noticed the tiny slivers of anchovy meat in between the veggies. “I’ve never had them before.”

He pulled the skewer back. “Maybe you should start with the potatoes, then.”

“No, I don’t mind trying the anchovies. And I do love olives.”

He grinned again. “A woman after my own heart.”

Her cheeks heated, and she focused on the bandarillas and not on her racing pulse. Two bites in, and she discovered she did like anchovies. After several more nibbles she declared it a winner and reached for the potatoes. She paused before she picked up one of the small pieces with a toothpick. “I feel weird eating in front of you.”

“Don’t worry about it.” He leaned against the counter, a white apron covered with food stains tied around his slim, athletic body. “I’m stuffed from snacking on all this food. I’ll have to double my run this week to burn off all the calories.”

“That sounds like torture.”

“It’s not. You should join me sometime.”

She froze, the potato poised above the plate. In the three years they had worked together, he had never asked her to join him for anything. Then again, why would he? Even though they went to the same church, had played on the new church softball team Hayden had started last summer, and worked Wednesday shifts together, they interacted only superficially. Was he ready for that to change? She sure was.

“Not that I’m insinuating you need to lose calories. Or, um, weight. Because you don’t. Not at all.” He threw up his hands. “Forget I mentioned jogging. I’m going to shut my trap while I’m ahead.”

She shoved the potato into her mouth, hiding her disappointment as she mentally noted the morsel was even more scrumptious than the skewer. She hated running, but she’d suffer through a marathon if it meant being with him. Not that she would be able to keep up if they did go on a jog together. Tanner was the type of guy who was good at everything. Tutoring, cooking, athletics . . .

Sigh.

“Those patatas bravas must be really good.”

Had she actually sighed out loud? She crammed three more bites into her mouth. “Mmmf, good,” she managed before she swallowed the large mouthful. “Your grandmother must have been an excellent cook.”

“The best. I never met her because she lived in Spain, and we weren’t able to go over there for a visit before she passed away. I think I got the cooking gene from her, though.” He tilted his head. “So what were you doing lurking around the diner?”

Oops. He was suspicious after all. “I wasn’t lurking.” She eyed the empanadas and picked up a small square. “We had our usual meeting at Knots and Tangles tonight.”

“And you decided to walk by the diner. The exact opposite direction of your house.”

Uh-oh. She was stuck. If she admitted she’d been watching him, she’d have to explain why, something she wasn’t completely sure of herself. Talk about awkward and embarrassing.

Maybe she should tell him about her business idea and see what he thought about it. No, that wouldn't work either. She didn't want him to think she was ready to start a café when she was 99.9 percent sure she wouldn't, shouldn't, and couldn't.

Before she could stumble through a reply, the oven timer went off, and he disappeared into the kitchen.

Whew. Saved by the bell, literally.

When he returned with a dinner plate filled with small, seasoned pieces of cauliflower, she kept him distracted. "What's this called?"

"Pan-fried cauliflower." He chuckled and pushed the plate closer to her. "I think it should have a fancier name, but that was what was on Abuela's recipe card."

Then he brought another small plate from behind his back. "Of course, we can't forget dessert."³

She grinned at the piece of pecan pie topped with a dollop of whipped cream. "I didn't know this was Spanish," she said.

"It's not. Just good old southern comfort food. You deserve a reward for being my guinea pig."

The food, not to mention the time she was spending alone with him, was reward enough.

Although he'd said he was full, Tanner finished off the rest of the bandarillas while she sampled the cauliflower, which unlike its name wasn't plain at all. Tasty, like everything else he made.

"This is nice," he said, leaning against the counter again. "Why don't we hang out more?"

Anita almost fell off the stool, and despite trying to temper her hopes, they flew sky high. *Please let him be serious this time.*

His phone buzzed, and he held up one finger and pulled it out of the pocket of a pair of khaki shorts that had seen better days, part of his Sunshine Diner uniform. He looked at the screen, frowned, then put the cell back.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah. Maybe.”

Concerned, she said, “You can return the call. I don’t want you to miss something important.”

“Nah, she can wait.”

She?

“My girlfriend,” he added.

Anita froze, her sky-high hopes crashing to the ground. He had a girlfriend. She should have known that. Someone as talented, gorgeous, and nice as him would be taken. Obviously when he had mentioned hanging out, he’d meant as friends. Or even just coworkers. The same thing he’d wanted when they were in high school.

“She’s actually my ex,” he said, piercing one of the pieces of cauliflower with a toothpick but not picking it up. “We started dating about a year before I got hired on here. She lives in Arkadelphia, and I met her when I was working at one of her father’s restaurants in Hot Springs.” He shrugged. “I’m surprised she contacted me after all this time.”

At least the ex wasn’t someone in Maple Falls. But Anita wasn’t exactly relieved, either. “Does she want to get back together?”

He nodded.

“Do you want to get back with her?” She held her breath, waiting for his answer.

“Not really—”

Yes!

“But maybe I should give her a chance. Just to see if there’s still something there.” He paused. “What do you think?”

I think you should be with me. But she couldn’t tell him that, not when he was considering getting back with this girl. Woman. Whatever. She couldn’t believe he was actually asking her for advice. Anita Bedford, the last person on the planet who should be giving romance tips.

Knowing the oven timer wouldn’t save her again, she decided to take his question seriously. “You should only go out with her if you really want to. There’s nothing worse than stringing someone along.”

I should know.

Although that wasn’t fair. Tanner had no idea she was attracted to him. Even the kiss they’d shared in the closet back in high school had been under duress, for him at least. It had been magical for her.

“You’re right. I’ll let her know I’m not interested. I don’t have time to date anyway. Between working at the diner and the catering business and . . .” He paused again. “Thanks, Anita. I guess I’d better start cleaning up now. I’ve been working since noon, and I’m pretty beat.”

Although she wondered what the “and” was on his list, she had been nosy enough for one night. “Yeah, I’m *really* tired too,” she said, faking a yawn. He’d given her an out to leave and nurse her disappointment. But it wasn’t in her

DNA to leave a mess behind without offering to clean up. “Do you need some help?”

“Nope. But I can wrap that pie to go if you want.”

Even though her appetite had disappeared the moment she heard him utter the word *girlfriend*, she nodded, not wanting to reject the offer. It only took him a few minutes to put the pie in a plastic container, and he came out of the kitchen and handed it to her across the counter. “See you tomorrow,” he said.

“See ya.”

She picked up her purse and hurried out of the diner, not stopping until she reached the end of the corner. She glanced at the pie container. The words *Thank You* were scrawled on the top in black Sharpie. Despite herself, she smiled. On top of everything, he was thoughtful too.

As she walked home, she felt restless. Why was she still holding on to these feelings for Tanner? If he could talk to her so casually about dating someone else, then it was obvious he wasn't romantically interested in her. Even if he was, he'd straight out said he didn't have time to date. Although if he was considering getting back with his ex, he would find time if the right person came along.

Clearly Anita wasn't that person.

Her restlessness wasn't only about Tanner, though. She enjoyed being a waitress, loved her little house that she rented from Mabel, who also worked at the diner, and cherished the preschool Sunday school class she taught. But she was twenty-six and lately had been feeling like her life was standing still. Maybe that's why she couldn't get the café idea out of her mind, even though she didn't have the courage to pursue it.

When she reached her house, she unlocked the door and started to go inside.

Meow . . . meow . . .

Not again.

For the third time this week she looked up on the roof and saw Peanut, her little white, orange, and black calico cat, perched on the edge. Actually, Peanut wasn't really her cat but a stray who had started hanging around Mabel's house two months ago. Anita had put out a bowl of food one evening a few weeks ago when it was cold. Unfortunately, she was allergic to cats and couldn't bring him inside. Which was too bad, because when he was on the roof, he wouldn't stop wailing until Anita got him down.

She went to the backyard, and as expected, he scurried over the pitched roof and met her there, the light from the streetlamp shining behind him. "This isn't funny anymore," she said, planting her hands on her hips. "I'm tired of climbing up to get you."

He lifted a paw and licked, completely unbothered.

She trudged to the shed she and Mabel shared, a wooden structure that held the lawn mower, tools, and a ladder. The shed was never locked, and a few minutes later she was scrambling up the ladder.

"Come here, you little furball." She held out her hand and Peanut walked over to her, positioning himself to be carried down the ladder. "I swear you do this on purpose."

Meow. He tucked himself into the crook of her arm and purred.

After she'd climbed down and set Peanut on the ground, made sure his food and water dishes were full, and put the

ladder away, she went inside her house and set her purse on the round table in her small kitchen, her mood tanking even more than before. Even her little home, decorated with the things she loved, wasn't welcoming tonight.

She thought about #3 and the café again. About Tanner. About her friends accomplishing things with their lives while she sat in a rut. She'd had exactly four dates since high school, all of them forgettable, and zero since Tanner started working at Sunshine. That number wasn't going to change anytime soon.

The most exciting thing in her life right now was rescuing her cat.

Anita went to the sink, filled up a glass with water, and drained all of it. Something needed to change. *I have to change.*

The question was . . . could she? ®

THOMAS NELSON
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