

A pregnant woman with long dark hair is shown in profile, looking upwards and to the left. She is wearing a strapless, colorful floral dress and is gently holding her pregnant belly. The background is a soft-focus green, suggesting an outdoor setting with trees. The bottom half of the image has a pink overlay with floral patterns.

HIS PREGNANT
TEXAS SWEETHEART

Amy Woods

 *Cherish*™

Amy Woods

His Pregnant Texas Sweetheart

Аннотация

A Father for Her Baby?Katie Bloom's ex may have left her pregnant, jobless and alone, but she has a plan: find a new career; plan the best Pumpkin Festival the people of Peach Leaf, Texas have ever seen; and create a happy environment for her child-to-be.The only thing Katie desperately wants, but isn't sure she can get, is Ryan Ford, her childhood best friend and first love, who's back in town. Their chemistry is off the charts and Katie knows letting Ryan go again isn't an option... but can she really build a new family in time for her baby?

“Hey, hey,” Ryan said softly. “It’s okay.”

Katie could hear his voice falter and knew his words were as much for himself as they were for her. Suddenly she knew she would do anything, would move heaven and earth, to make him feel better ... if only she knew what that anything was.

“Is there something I can do to ... help?” she asked, her own voice shaking.

“You’re doing it now,” he answered.

“What do you mean?”

“Shh, Katie,” he said. “Just let me hold you.”

He wrapped his arms tighter around her; it felt simultaneously natural and earth-shattering to be held by him, the man she should have given her heart to long before then. For the longest time she’d thought she was just lost without him, that she’d never be able to find someone like him again. She’d settled for Bradley, had done her best with their relationship, knowing all the time, somewhere in the very back of her mind, that he wasn’t The One.

It was Ryan. It had always been Ryan.

Peach Leaf, Texas: Where true love blooms

His Pregnant Texas Sweetheart

Amy Woods



www.millsandboon.co.uk

AMY WOODS took the scenic route to becoming an author. She's been a bookkeeper, a high school English teacher and a claims specialist, but now that she makes up stories for a living, she's never giving it up. She grew up in Austin, Texas, and lives there with her wonderfully goofy, supportive husband and a spoiled rescue dog. Amy can be reached on Facebook, Twitter and her website, www.amywoodsbooks.com.

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[Chapter One](#)

Ryan Ford signaled and pulled off Main Street into the parking lot of Jenkins'. The pub's name was a testament to its no-nonsense atmosphere as a favorite local hangout. He might not be a drinking man, but he wasn't abstaining from the best hot wings in Peach Leaf, Texas. After turning off his vehicle, he headed toward the door.

Walking into that pub was like taking a step into the past. The thick, delicious scent of frying chicken hit his nostrils, and the twang of country music from an ancient jukebox spilled out over heel-marred hardwood floors.

He swore not a single thing had changed, not even the barstools, which were made from salvaged tree stumps after a field nearby had caught fire a good twenty years ago. Each of the stools was carved into something unique—from horse behinds to totem poles. He couldn't help himself. The stupid old things still made him chuckle. The only thing notably absent from the setting was a thick cloud of cigarette smoke.

Ryan smiled to himself, thinking of the ruckus it must have caused with the locals when whomever had been in charge decided to do away with smoking in bars.

The wall was still decorated with photographs of famous folks who had managed to stumble into Peach Leaf on their way to somewhere else. In snapshot after snapshot, famous arms were draped over and over again around the pub's heavysset owner, Maude Jenkins, and her rail-thin husband, Jimmy. The couple smiled in each and every one, including the shot of Ryan and the rest of the senior varsity football team. A few of the photos were newer—ones Ryan hadn't seen before—and the evidence that two of his favorite people were still happy after all this time made his heart dance a little two-step.

“Well, I'll be damned.” The deep, smoky voice jolted Ryan out of his thoughts and he turned from the wall, smack into the arms of Maude. “Where in the hell have you been, boy? What's it been? Fifty, seventy-five years since you've graced us with your presence?”

Ryan wrapped his arms around Maude's broad shoulders

and squeezed her into a hug. Her warm scent—a strangely comforting combination of leather and flowers—brought back memories of Friday nights after football games, when a good portion of the town had come to this same dive to celebrate wins.

“Hi, Mrs. Jenkins. How’ve you been?”

Maude flashed a huge, pink-lipsticked grin and held him out with her arms to give him a long once-over. “I’ve been fine, kid, just fine. But never mind. How the hell have you been?” She embraced him again and patted him on the back.

The woman was strong as an ox. The team had always teased her that she would make an excellent linebacker, and Maude, bless her, had never once taken offense, but rather accepted the comment as it was meant coming from clueless male teenagers—a compliment. Those pats would have knocked the wind out of a smaller man, but Ryan held his own at six-foot-two.

“Just fine, Mrs. Jenkins. Just fine,” he said, careful not to say too much.

Ryan and his father had discussed the sale of the Peach Leaf Pioneer Museum for months before they’d coordinated that morning’s face-to-face meeting with the owner and director. The museum—a centerpiece of Peach Leaf and a gold mine of West Texas history—would itself become a thing of the past in the near future, as Ryan’s architecture firm partnered with his dad’s construction company to build a cancer treatment hospital in its place. He knew and respected Mrs. Wallace’s reasons for selling her land, but the town was understandably upset about the

coming change.

Arrangements were already being made for every artifact, along with the buildings, to be preserved. The university in Austin would take all of the smaller pieces, while the old settlement homes, dating back to the 1800s, were to be transferred to a similar museum just outside of Dallas.

It bothered him a little to know that the old houses wouldn't be in their original location, but Mrs. Wallace had revealed that they were in desperate need of repair and preservation work. Her family had lovingly allowed visitors to trample through them for years, and the wear and tear had begun to take its toll. Ryan's father, for all his faults, had worked hard to find a highly recommended specialist to handle the work, and the buildings would be well cared for at their new locale.

It was for the best.

But the town wasn't likely to see it that way. He knew that it was only a matter of time before word got out that the museum as they'd known it would be gone, replaced by a new, very modern cancer-treatment hospital, and it wasn't going to be pretty once word hit. The locals would see the benefit of a medical facility: plenty of much-needed new jobs, advanced health care nearby and so on...but they wouldn't be pleased that the hospital would cost a piece of their heritage.

Ryan stopped that train of thought; it shouldn't bother him. After all, Peach Leaf wasn't his home anymore, and after he designed the buildings, the rest was his father's problem. Ryan

planned to be long gone by the time the news hit the fan.

Mrs. Jenkins chatted with him for a good half hour before finally releasing him from her grip to grab his arm and drag him over to the bar. She planted him on a stool and set to work, and before long the most decadent meal he'd had in ages was spread out in front of him like a king's feast. He took a bite of a home-style fry and savored it before tucking into his chicken and munching with contentment while Maude chattered away about the locals.

It was early in the evening, and his only companions were Mrs. Jenkins and a few people he didn't recognize, so if the President of the United States himself had walked in from the kitchen a moment later, it wouldn't have surprised Ryan more than who actually did.

* * *

If there was one thing worse than getting laid off from a job you loved, it was having to ask for an old job back that you, well...didn't.

It wasn't that working for the Jenkinse fresh out of high school was bad; it just wasn't what Katie had wanted to do for the rest of her life. Maude and Jimmy were wonderful employers who'd treated her the absolute best for the two years she'd worked for them, but even they had been glad when Katie had accepted the offer at the museum—they had known it would make her happy, and told her they were glad for her each time she dropped by for a Coke in the years since.

Katie lost herself for a moment, letting reality slip away briefly as she thought about how she would care for the little one growing inside of her, alone, without her work at the Peach Leaf Pioneer Museum...work she loved so much. Each morning, as most people sat down at their desks following long commutes, read their emails and planned for days full of business meetings in over-air-conditioned conference rooms, Katie was busy donning petticoats and pinning her thick, shoulder-length hair up in late-nineteenth-century Gibson Girl fashion. She couldn't imagine ever enjoying another job as much. She loved teaching kids about her hometown's history, demonstrating how her ancestors wove clothing, constructed rope and baked bread, and showing adult visitors how to slow down, to take a step back in time and relearn the quiet pleasure of hard work and fruitful hands...

Three months ago, a couple of weeks after her excited pregnancy announcement, her now-ex-fiancé, Bradley, had informed her that he wasn't cut out to be a father, that he had no interest in building a family with her. Katie had been devastated...and livid. Sure, they hadn't discussed children beyond a few casual comments here and there, and yes, the pregnancy was unplanned, but she hadn't expected Bradley's reaction to be so extreme. He had never expressed a serious interest in fatherhood that she could recall, but neither had he ever specifically stated that he didn't want kids. They'd only been together for a year, and Katie always figured they would have time to discuss their hopes and dreams before planning a family.

But birth control wasn't guaranteed to work and the baby was a surprise...to Katie, an incredible, lovely surprise.

Bradley hadn't shared her sentiment and had even made suggestions about how she should handle things that made her skin crawl. She'd made a big mistake in believing that Bradley was a better man than he'd turned out to be...but keeping their baby was not a mistake. Her sudden singleness and the pain of giving up the two-bedroom apartment she and Bradley had shared because it just didn't feel like home without him was a lot to carry on just her own shoulders. Plus that morning's news that in a few weeks, when the museum shut down, she would no longer have a salaried job with benefits for herself and her child. Despite all of that, and all of the other emotions churning around in her heart, Katie hadn't felt afraid.

Until now.

She had a supportive family who would stand by her every step of the way. Her parents were as open-armed as they'd always been, and she knew they would be an amazing source of support when the baby came, but Katie didn't want to lean too heavily on them. She wanted to be able to care for her child on her own. And her close friend June had welcomed Katie into the small but lovely cottage they'd shared ever since.

After Bradley had left, she'd pulled herself together and vowed to be the best mom she possibly could—plus some—to make up for the baby's absent father. For a short time, everything had been okay.

But that was before the job she loved, the career she'd built over the past five years, was threatened.

Just that morning, Katie's boss had informed her of the museum's sale to an unknown buyer, and its subsequent pending demise. The artifacts and a few of the antique buildings would be preserved elsewhere, but the museum itself, and all of the jobs it took to run it, would be eliminated. Evidently, the Peach Leaf Historical Society simply didn't have the budget to outbid the vast property's potential buyer, and a state-of-the-art hospital was to replace the museum.

Peach Leaf was a small town with more people than work, so of course Katie could see the benefit of so many potential jobs...but what about the town's history? Its culture? What about the joy the museum brought to the community through its annual fall and Christmas festivals and its children's learning programs and senior activities?

She shoved the thought aside, unwilling to let her mind linger and build anxiety and dread over something she couldn't control. She focused instead on the present.

Katie's favorite time of year was close at hand—the Peach Leaf Pumpkin Festival—and she and her coworkers had a packed schedule of events planned for that weekend. She couldn't wait for the upcoming hayride and campout, couldn't wait to pile a bunch of kids into the museum's old farm trailer and drive them the three-mile loop around the pioneer settlement, where five original homes still stood, for an afternoon of horseback riding

and swimming, and a night under the stars.

Katie smiled to herself. She always made sure to pack supplies for s'mores. She knew the kids and the other staff would tease her because the treats weren't exactly "authentic pioneer food," but Katie didn't care. She treasured sharing the desserts with the children and seeing their eyes light up as they made sticky messes and huddled together for ghost stories around a glowing campfire. Plus, this year, it would give her an excuse to indulge in the chocolate cravings she'd been having lately.

A giddy rush rippled through her, just like it had when she was a kid. She was practically counting down the seconds.

But the rush was closely followed by a scratchy tightness that wrapped around her heart when she realized that this would probably be the town's last festival.

There were so many things to worry about. Aside from the most pressing issue—how to support the baby she couldn't wait to meet—there were a million other problems... How would she continue to afford her rent or gas for her geriatric truck? How could she ever replace the job that had given her so much joy, so much to look forward to?

The museum was Katie's past and present. She'd believed until this news that it would also be her future, as she'd planned to work her way up to director and take over from her boss one day, in time to send her kid to college.

Her mom and dad had taken Katie to the Pumpkin Festival every year since they'd moved to Peach Leaf just after Katie's

sixth birthday...right next door to Ryan Ford. The two had been best friends from the instant they met, despite Ryan's hesitation to hang out with a girl "covered in cooties." Like the rest of the town, the neighboring families had gathered at the festival every year, and those times were some of the best of Katie's life. It was why she'd been so thrilled when she'd gotten this job, and it was why she put every ounce of her heart into the museum.

Katie braced herself against the sudden memories of weekends with the best friend she'd eventually grown to see in a different light, and eventually lost to someone else...someone who saw that light first and claimed it.

She shook her head, pushing Ryan Ford from her memory.

Katie sighed. It was with a leaden heart that she had stepped back into the pub that late afternoon on her way home to see if her former employers needed any help. She wasn't alone anymore; she would soon have another person to provide for. When she'd stepped into the kitchen and Jimmy—pretending not to eye the curve of her growing belly—said she could come back anytime, even if there wasn't any work to be done, she wasn't sure if she should smile or cry.

She grabbed a fresh Jenkins' T-shirt to wear on her first shift. They'd agreed she would start the first of November, and Katie had just swung through the saloon doors to make her way back to her truck when her eyes landed on Ryan Ford, eating chicken wings at the bar as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

An icy tickle ran up Katie's spine and she stopped midstep.

“Ryan?” she called across to the bar, her voice shaky and thin. Maybe it wasn’t really him. She’d had a long, terrible day, so maybe she was just imagining him sitting there like a mirage from her past, or a ghost; she couldn’t be sure. Her feelings for Ryan Ford were so complicated, had wavered so much over the years that she couldn’t be certain what would happen if it really did turn out to be him.

She didn’t have to wonder much longer, because it only took one glance at his face—that incredible face she’d hated so hard, and loved even harder—to know that it was Ryan.

My Ryan, she thought, before instantly correcting herself.

He’s never been yours.

He stared back at her, blinking as though trying to see her clearly through a veil of fog. He didn’t say anything for a moment that stretched out like eternity. Then he set down his fork and spoke her name, the sound of those two simple syllables rolling over his tongue making her knees go weak until they were about as useless to stand on as pillars of sand.

Katie grasped at the doorframe and steadied herself, and when she looked up again, he was crossing the room toward her.

He stopped about a foot away and seemed to second-guess his decision. She immediately cast her eyes down, unwilling to glance up again, but that didn’t stop what she’d already seen. Ryan Ford had always been a pleasure to look at; there wasn’t a woman in the world who would disagree. But the man who stood before Katie was...gorgeous.

He had Ryan's deep hazel eyes—tiger eyes, her mother had always called them—and Ryan's russet hair, wavy and unkempt and too long, as usual. And that was Ryan's mouth she'd seen, the bottom lip fuller than the top—lips Katie had kissed only once and wished for since. And there was Ryan's height, towering over her...making it darn near impossible to deny the truth.

A million different things rushed through her all at once. She wanted to punch him right in the face, and she wanted to wrap her arms around him. She wanted to scream at him and tell him to go back where he came from and she wanted him to hold her. She wanted to kick him in the shins, and she wanted to feel his mouth on hers. Katie couldn't make sense of any of it, and she was afraid of what she might do if he stood there much longer.

She didn't ask him why he'd done what he had done, why he'd never once contacted her after he'd driven out of town in that rusty old piece-of-junk truck—that stupid old thing Ryan had worked his ass off for just so he wouldn't have to use his dad's money—and never looked back. Why he'd refused to answer her that night when she'd asked him if he felt the same way she did. And...why he'd let her fall right out of his life, as though she'd never been important enough to hold on to.

The thoughts wouldn't stop swirling around in her head, and Katie felt as if she was going to be sick. Ryan was still standing there staring at her, his face an unreadable mask, when she sucked in the breath she hadn't known she'd been holding and pulled herself together. Before she had a chance to do anything

stupid—before she had a chance to make her day even worse than the epic disaster it already was—Katie did what Ryan had done all those years ago.

She slipped past him and walked away.

Chapter Two

Footsteps crunched over the gravel behind her as Katie raced through the parking lot toward her truck, and she couldn't help but wonder if they belonged to Ryan.

Jeez. Is that what I wanted? For him to follow me?

Once, a long time ago, it would have been a resounding *yes*, but now...now her world was so completely backward that she wasn't sure.

Could this day get any worse?

“Katie,” Ryan's voice rang out behind her.

So that *was* him following her. Her head and heart were in such a jumble that she didn't know how to react, so she just kept walking, digging through her purse for her keys so she would have them ready when she got to her truck. Maybe there was still a chance that the whole day had been just one big nightmare. There was still a chance—a slim one, she knew, but she would take it—that she could wake up from this and find herself back in her normal life, where each day was wonderfully similar to the one before it and where things made sense. She wanted to go back to that life, because having Ryan Ford show up in town after eight years...*that* did not make sense.

“Katie, stop!” Ryan called out, his voice somehow gentle and

firm at the same time, the sound pouring over her like rain, tempting the dried-up place inside her heart—the place she'd given to Ryan when she'd been just a teenager.

And dammit if she didn't obey.

Katie halted and turned around, her pulse thumping, still reeling from the surprise of seeing him in the pub, of having him so close to her body, and from the strange mix of anger and sorrow that always welled up at his memory...and now his presence.

She'd imagined this moment before...had always envisioned herself coming face-to-face with her past love in such a way, only to meet him with poise and apathy. A single person shouldn't be allowed to turn another into mush just by his presence, yet that was exactly what he did to her. Years of time passing, of Katie maturing into a hardworking adult and now a parent-to-be, and still the sound of his voice made her want to fall into his arms.

She took a deep breath. Just because he made her feel that way didn't mean he had to know it.

“What in the world are you doing here, Ryan?”

There, she'd said his name. It tasted bittersweet on her tongue and felt raw coming out of her throat, but there it was. And it hadn't killed her.

He stopped walking a few feet away from her, the distance more comfortable to Katie than his nearness inside the bar. As long as he stayed over there, she would be fine. As long as she maintained their current proximity—as long as she couldn't smell

the lemon-and-mint soap he still apparently used, and if she couldn't hear him breathing—she would be okay. She couldn't allow him to come any closer, even as she cursed herself for wanting nothing more.

“Katie, it's so good to—” He moved a foot in her direction, and she matched it with one step backward. “It's good to see you,” Ryan said, shoving his hands into the pockets of his trousers. “I know you don't want to see me, but it's good to see you.”

Katie met his eyes and immediately wished she hadn't.

She watched as his attention moved down to the roundness of her midsection. His eyes grew wide and he swallowed before his lips formed a thin, straight line.

He lingered there for a moment before he looked back up at her. There was softness in his gaze, along with a...hopefulness...that she couldn't have prepared herself for.

Eight years had done nothing to temper what she'd felt the night of Ryan's graduation. If she closed her eyes, she could still see the way his features had shifted when, after several long moments of standing silently in front of her, he'd finally understood what she'd been trying to say.

It had taken over a year for Katie to work up the courage to confront him...to force herself to face what she'd been feeling for far longer than she'd been able to admit, and muster enough bravery to share it with Ryan.

She loved him. Not as the best friend he'd been since childhood, but far more. Even at sixteen, she'd known something

then that hadn't changed since: he was her true love...her person. No matter how hard she tried in the coming years, he would not be replaced.

At the time, she'd been naive enough to believe that loving him was enough to make him hers.

She found out soon enough that other things could come first...that other things could matter more. Things like the baby his girlfriend, Sarah, had been carrying—the baby Ryan had found out about only moments before Katie pulled him aside.

She would never forget the way he looked at her when he told her why he had to go and “do the right thing” by Sarah. Even as he'd told her that it was what he wanted, Katie could see the truth in his eyes.

For a second, a single second, she'd seen what she'd known all along. He loved her the same way—the way she wanted him to. He left that night without another word, the expression in his sad, determined eyes seared into her brain...but she knew. She wished she didn't—perhaps his leaving would have hurt less—but she knew.

When Ryan drove away that night, Sarah by his side in the cab of his old truck, along with the couple's few possessions and a jar full of cash Ryan had been saving for college, a piece of Katie went along with him.

She had cried and holed up in her room for two days, wrapped in Ryan's favorite old sweatshirt with *Peach Leaf Panthers* emblazoned across the front, but when the last tear had fallen,

Katie let it drop, and she'd made a vow to let him go. Ryan was a wonderful childhood best friend and an amazing person, but she wasn't going to let his memory take away the life ahead of her. He'd taken a piece of her heart with him, but he couldn't have the rest of her, and she would make her own happiness in the world.

Even if the men she loved kept leaving her.

Katie pushed out the breath she'd been holding.

Yeah, she wanted more. She wanted a family. She wanted a husband to share her life with, and she wanted the baby inside of her. She wanted to re-create the joy that had filled her childhood home. But she was a patient woman, and she was willing to wait for those things as long as she needed to. In the meantime, she'd found a way to create a kind of makeshift happiness, and she'd found a way to embrace the parts of the past that she wanted to keep by working at the museum.

So how was it that, in one day, the world she'd built so carefully was falling down around her? And the last piece to hit the ground was Ryan Ford, who stood staring at her, waiting for her to say something.

"Ryan, I don't... I mean, I never expected to see you again," she choked out before clearing her throat. "I didn't think you'd ever come back here."

He nodded and his shoulders slumped, and Katie felt herself melt into the molten pools of gold and brown inside his eyes.

"I didn't know you still lived here, Katie. I didn't think I'd run into you like this. I'm sorry I freaked you out back there. That

wasn't my intention."

Hearing him apologize tugged at Katie's heart. Why had she bolted from him? It wasn't like her to be so impolite, so unkind. And it wasn't as though he didn't have the right to visit his own hometown.

She didn't have to like him, and she didn't have to spend more than a few more seconds with him, but that didn't mean she had a right to be rude.

"No, it's okay. I'm the one who should apologize for brushing you off. Seeing you just...caught me by surprise, I suppose." She reached up and tugged at a strand of hair that had come loose from her hairdo.

Oh, God.

She still had her hair up in the Gibson Girl. She must look like a complete idiot.

And why did she care, anyway?

It was Ryan. Ryan Ford, who used to spend every weekend and afternoon at her house because he preferred it to the tumultuous atmosphere his parents' incessant fighting caused inside his own. Sweet Ryan, who used to call her Katydid like the bug, a nickname no one had used since, one which she secretly missed tremendously.

Ryan, whom she'd loved in a way she'd always known she could never find twice in a lifetime. Anger swelled inside her and Katie was grateful for its presence. It was much easier to handle than the myriad of other emotions she shoved aside.

Stupid Ryan Ford.

“Look, Katie, I—”

She held up a hand to stop him. “You don’t have to say anything else.” She dropped her arm to her side and before she had a chance to do anything to prevent it, his steps had eaten up all the distance between them and there he was...right there in front of her.

Her breath caught in her throat when he opened up his arms and wrapped them around her tightly. She couldn’t have moved if she wanted to, and the worst part was...she wasn’t sure she did.

When she could finally breathe again, his familiar smell washed over her and brought hundreds of memories with it...most of them happy, which startled her. His chest was firm and wide, and Katie resisted the urge to dissolve into him. She didn’t want to think about what would happen if she gave in, about how hard it would be to let go.

He must have sensed her tension because he pulled back abruptly, balling his hands into fists at his sides as though he didn’t quite know what to do with them. They stood staring at each other, the air between them a silent pool of chaos, filled with all the things they weren’t able or willing to say.

And what *was* there to say, really? Yes, she’d had a crush on him growing up...more than a crush. But what he’d done that night—or rather *hadn’t* done—had erased any chance of whatever unspoken feelings had been between them. The bottom line was, she couldn’t trust Ryan. Couldn’t trust him to be there

for her and couldn't trust him with her heart.

"Look, Katie. You don't have to talk to me, and you don't have to stay. I understand if you want to get away from me. I just want you to know that I don't feel the same way."

She leaned back on her heels, just to get some feeling into her legs, which had gone numb along with the rest of her body when Ryan touched her. She looked at the ground and back up again, and he was still there.

"I really need to get home," she said. As soon as the words were out, regret tumbled through her and she had to face the fact that she really didn't want to go anywhere, least of all home, where she'd have nothing more to do than think about the job she'd lost and face her housemate's endless supply of cheer.

And to tell the truth, she wanted to talk to Ryan. She wanted to know what he'd been up to for the past near-decade and find out what kind of life he lived, what had happened with him and Sarah and the family they'd started.

Just simple curiosity. That was all.

Ryan's face fell, but he nodded. "That's fine. I understand. I've got to...get back to my hotel and work on a few things. Make some calls."

"You're not staying with your parents?" she asked. She'd just assumed they were the reason for his visit. Why else would he be back in town?

Darkness fell over his eyes, but he blinked it away in an instant. Katie had caught it, though, and she wanted to know what it

meant.

“No,” he said, his tone strange. “No, I’m not. I don’t...see much of them anymore...at least not my dad. Not since I left.”

They weren’t the only ones you left.

“Okay, well—”

“It was nice to see you, Katie. It really was. I hope it’s not the last time.”

She tried to keep her face neutral, but was pretty sure a funny look escaped. It was an odd thing for him to say, but then the past half hour had been odd; her whole day had been odd. This was just another slice of crazy to add to the pie.

She gave him a small grin and held up her palm in a wave before heading to her truck. Somehow she managed to unlock the door and get inside, but it wasn’t until she reached to put her seat belt on that she realized her hands were shaking. She leaned forward until her head rested against the steering wheel, where she stayed until her whole body ceased its trembling and she could breathe again.

She put her key in the ignition and turned it, but the result she got was definitely not the one she expected.

Katie tried again, but all that came out of the engine was a sputtering cough.

“All right, old man. Don’t do this to me. Not today.”

She gave it another go and heard the same thing; the engine turned over, but it wouldn’t start.

“Okay, *please?*” she begged, trying a different tactic. Maybe

if she talked a little sweeter to it, the old hunk of metal would do as she asked, which really wasn't a whole lot, considering its job description.

She gave a loud groan and slammed her fists against the dashboard, throwing a fit like the smaller children sometimes did at the museum. She was about to try one more time when a sound interrupted her—a soft knock on her windshield.

Ryan.

Great.

Now she could add being a *damsel in distress* to her list of experiences. October 15 was turning out to be a very bad day indeed. If this kept up, it wouldn't hold the position of her favorite month much longer.

He motioned for her to roll down her window. That little maneuver hadn't been possible for a year or so, so she opened the door instead.

“Need some help?” he asked.

“Maybe...possibly. I don't know.” She threw her hands up in the air.

Why did he look...pleased?

He gave her an utterly charming smile and she wanted to hit him.

“Jump out. Let me have a look,” he instructed, and once again, she obeyed. She would really have to stop doing that... He didn't deserve it.

Once she'd hopped down, Ryan reached inside the truck and

found the lever that opened the hood. He walked over and propped it open, bending to peer inside. She really wished he hadn't done that, because her eyes immediately latched on to his backside, which was even better than she remembered—a fact she would never, ever tell him.

After only a few minutes of poking around, Ryan pulled his head out from under the hood and faced her. A few streaks of grease tattooed his hands, which did nothing to make him look worse. “Your piston rings are worn,” he said, looking a little too smug for his own good. “We’ve got to get you some new ones.”

Katie ran a hand through her still-pinned-up hair, which had probably started to resemble a toilet brush by then. “How long will that take?” she asked, glancing down at her watch. Even though she wasn't going to be working at the museum much longer, Katie still had a job to do. She was determined to make this Pumpkin Festival the best the town had ever seen—even if it was the last. Especially if it was the last. And she had some shopping to do the next day and...*oh, jeez...* what if something happened, what if there was more wrong with her truck than Ryan had already discovered? She needed it to pull the trailer for the hayride Friday night.

“Well, that depends, Katydid.”

She pretended to ignore the old nickname that made her pulse kick up its pace.

“On what?”

“On whether or not they have the right kind of rings at that

piddly old shop on Main.”

She glared at him.

Peach Leaf had always been too small for Ryan Ford.

He'd always wanted more—a fact Katie resented for the obvious implication that Peach Leaf was a small town full of small people. Including her.

He had always wanted to find something bigger...ever since they were kids. And she had always known he would. Even if Sarah's unplanned pregnancy hadn't separated him and Katie, something else eventually would have.

She would do well to remind herself of that the next time he bent over to check her truck's engine.

“All right, well. Let me make a call and see if they have what I need.” She reached inside the truck for her purse. “Maybe if they do, they can send someone over here with it.”

“Nonsense,” Ryan said.

“Huh?”

He rolled his eyes. “That's not necessary. You're obviously—” he raised a hand to gesture in the general area of her stomach “—in no condition to wait out here for someone from the shop. October or not, it's too hot for you to sit around outside. I'll take you over there. If they have the parts, we can pick them up and bring them back here. You have tools, don't you?”

She glanced up at him and nodded. He was serious. He really planned to take her to the store. “I don't know what you're here for or what your schedule is, but I really doubt it includes taking

me over to Main Street to buy truck parts.”

Ryan’s jaw tightened. “You always did have trouble accepting favors.”

“And you had trouble sticking around.” The ugly statement was out before she could censor it, and Katie slapped a hand over her mouth. It might be true, but that didn’t mean it was okay to speak out loud. Her words were harsh and hateful, and she instantly regretted their escape.

The hurt she’d caused passed quickly behind Ryan’s eyes and then it was gone, but his tone became detached, cold. “Just let me take you to the store, Katie. I’ll help you fix your truck and then I’ll leave you alone. How’s that?”

It should have been fine. It should have been exactly what she wanted to hear. She’d been curious about what had become of Ryan Ford many times over the years. Of course she had. She’d wanted to know about his life. What kind of job he had. Where he lived. Did he stay married to Sarah...and how was the child the two had made together? But now that she’d seen him—without a wedding ring, she noticed, and looking quite well—it should have been enough to let him go permanently. He’d obviously been fine without her all this time, hadn’t he? Of course he had been, or he would have made an attempt to get in touch. So why wasn’t his promise enough?

Why did she find herself searching for a reason—any reason—to get him to stay a little longer?

She shoved aside all rational thought and did something

supremely stupid.

“What if they don’t have it?” she asked, locking up her truck before following Ryan to his vehicle—the same Jeep he’d bought with money he’d earned himself when he’d turned sixteen. Only now it was in much better shape. He’d obviously spent a lot of time and put a lot of hard work into it. She had always loved that about Ryan. He always knew exactly what he wanted and worked at it until he got it.

Too bad he didn’t want me.

He opened the passenger door for Katie and held out a hand to help her inside. The gesture made her heart do a little flip. She knew to appreciate gentlemanly gestures when she saw them, which was maddeningly rare.

“Well,” he said, shutting her door. He got in the driver’s seat and started up the engine. “I guess they’ll have to order some, which means—” he turned to grin at her “—that you’ll have to wait.”

“That’s just the thing, though. I need my truck for the Pumpkin Festival in two days.”

Ryan’s eyes lit up slightly at the mention of the event. It was so subtle that if she’d blinked, Katie would have missed it.

“I volunteered to drive in the hayride at the festival this year, and I’m picking up a kiddo who doesn’t have a ride to the campground.”

Something changed in his eyes when she’d said those words, and Katie wondered what she could say to get that little burst of

light back. Ryan had always loved the Pumpkin Fest. What had she said that bothered him?

“It’s not a problem,” he said, his voice low and unnervingly tender. “If your truck’s not fixed in time, I’ll take you, and we can use my truck for the hayride.”

Ryan dropped the words and started up his Jeep as if he hadn’t just offered a favor that would save her last festival. Katie was glad he didn’t look over at her then because he would have caught the traces of a smile she didn’t want to let him have.

Chapter Three

“It’s going to take how long to fix?” Katie asked, leaning over the front counter of the auto shop on Main. The teenager behind the long Formica worktop leaned back as Katie’s face drew dangerously near his own, his eyes wide with worry. Ryan bit back laughter as the grown woman and young man went back and forth futilely over how long it would take for the order of the new parts for Katie’s truck to come in.

Same old spunky Katie.

There were a few changes, of course, all of them good.

She still wore her glossy dark hair long, he noted, pleased. Her eyes were the same sparkling shade of brown, almost mahogany in the daytime, but black as night when the sun went down, and then there was her body...more womanly now, more deliciously curvy in her fitted dark jeans and pink plaid camp shirt. The whole picture delighted him.

“Look, Miss Bloom,” the harried-looking kid said, holding

his hands out in surrender, “I know it’s not what you want to hear, but the fact is we can’t fix the problem without those rings, and it ain’t so easy to find spare parts for a vehicle of that—” he swallowed slowly, choosing his words with meticulous care, evidently having dealt with Katie’s befuddling love of her piece-of-junk vehicle on prior occasions “—production year.”

Ryan and the teenager—Billy, his name tag read—exchanged a look, neither of them certain whether or not the clerk had succeeded in appeasing the aggravated woman between them. Katie shoved a fist onto each of her hips, still slim but newly curved from pregnancy—the pregnancy that sent a confusing rush of emotions through Ryan’s heart each time he noticed it anew.

“Billy Greene, are you calling my truck *old*?” Katie challenged, her cheeks flushing pink.

Billy gulped again, but this time he raised his chin and met Katie’s eyes.

Good, Ryan thought. Maybe she would finally let it go and accept the terms so they could leave the shop. Ryan’s stomach grumbled again, as if he needed a reminder of how hungry he was. Mrs. Jenkins had given him a meal at the pub, but with all their catching up and then running into the woman who now stood in a stare-down with the auto-parts clerk, he’d only been able to scarf down a few bites.

“Miss Bloom,” Billy said again, his voice squeaking a little over the words, “I’ve ridden in that old—” Katie’s mouth dropped

open but Billy ignored her “—yes, *old*, truck many a time to the Pumpkin Festival campout, and I love that thing just like all the other kids in this town.”

Katie’s shoulders seemed to relax ever so slightly.

“But I’m not a darn magician, and that part is pretty hard to come by.” Billy took a deep breath, bracing himself once more. “So I’m real sorry, Miss Bloom, but you’re just going to have to wait.”

Ryan had to hold back yet another laugh at the silly exchange and, if he hadn’t imagined it, Billy even stomped his foot to add finality to his statement. Katie’s wound-up features loosened a little more and she leaned forward to grab her purse from the counter, pulling out a credit card. Ryan fought the urge to stop her and pay for the part himself; Katie wasn’t his to take care of. He noticed he’d had to remind himself of that fact much too often in the few hours they’d spent together that afternoon.

“Oh, all right,” she said, releasing a heavy breath. Billy’s shoulders slipped down a bit, but his eyes betrayed remaining caution.

Ryan didn’t miss a slight tremor at the corner of Katie’s mouth as Billy rang up the bill, and he noticed how tightly she gripped the card as she passed it across the counter, letting go reluctantly when Billy reached out to accept it.

Why was Katie so clearly worried about money?

She’d yet to text or call anybody to let them know she was stuck with car problems. The last he’d known, after high school

she'd worked at Jimmy and Maude's pub, but surely she'd moved on since... She was possibly even engaged or, worse, married—he knew from experience that pregnancy caused otherwise wedding-band-adorned fingers to swell—so where was the guy who'd gotten her into her current situation?

Katie was a grown woman now, perfectly capable of caring for a child on her own, but the thought of her being forced to do so caused a burning sensation in Ryan's chest, which he promptly blamed on Mrs. Jenkins's chicken.

As soon as she finished paying and Billy promised to call the instant her truck was ready, Ryan placed a tentative hand on Katie's shoulder, leading her out of the shop and back to his Jeep. He'd had his share of inconveniences as a result of owning an older vehicle, but his income meant they were easily handled.

As Ryan opened the passenger door and helped a deflated Katie inside, he chastised himself for caring so damn much. He owed Katie exactly nothing, and that was precisely how much he guessed she wanted to do with him. And as he glanced over at her gently rounded middle as he slid his seat-belt buckle into place, he had to fight to swallow past a lump in his throat. As much as he tried, he couldn't help but wonder about the baby inside her.

Finding out more about the developing child would open an old wound he'd rather not revisit. So he couldn't have been more surprised at himself when he opened his big mouth a second later.

He cleared his throat and the words flooded out. "When are

you due?" His voice was too loud in the previously silent cab.

For a moment Katie seemed startled, as if she'd been lost in thought when he'd spoken, but then a sweet smile stretched over her lovely plump lips, causing Ryan's throat to tighten. "Well," she said, resting a palm on her belly, "that's up to this little guy." She tossed her smile over at Ryan. "But if all goes as hoped, he'll arrive in about twenty-four weeks."

Ryan nodded, kicking himself for opening up a conversation about the very last thing in the world he wanted to discuss. Despite the years that had passed since he'd seen his ex-wife, each time he remembered the baby he and Sarah had loved and lost together, a newly sharpened knife sliced through his heart. Losing their child before its birth had been hard enough, but Sarah's gradual withdrawal from Ryan, and her eventual decision to file for divorce, had made his life nearly unbearable for a time.

He'd rebuilt the best he could manage, but it was time to fully let go and move on. He'd long since stopped missing his marriage to Sarah, but was it even possible for him to risk loving someone again, much less consider starting a family, or was he forever doomed to fresh grief on each occasion he happened to run across a random pregnant woman? Worse, Katie was anything but a random woman, and seeing her—his first, and perhaps only, true love...the one that got away...carrying a new life—was excruciating.

How could he have offered to chauffeur her and a bunch of kids around for an entire weekend of camping? It would be like

forcing a recovering alcoholic to spend a couple of days locked inside a bar.

Ryan scrubbed a hand over his face. What had he been thinking?

He recalled the emotions he'd sifted through at eighteen on his graduation night, when he'd been all set to head off to college on a coveted football scholarship and Sarah had announced her pregnancy, to the whole town's shock once the news quickly spread. The townspeople were even more dismayed when Ryan and Sarah marched down to the courthouse and married on their way out of town the very next day. He'd had his reasons. Sarah made a happy bride for a while, and he still believed he'd done the right thing—at least as he'd understood it at the time.

Couples on the verge of becoming first-time parents were supposed to feel a lot of things—joy, excitement, anticipation—but disappointment and fear shouldn't have been among them. He'd been terrified, certain he didn't have what it took to be a good father at that age, still just a hardheaded kid himself. Sarah, on the other hand, had been far less surprised about the pregnancy than he, something he'd only had a chance to explore after that night had passed and he'd made enough mistakes to last a lifetime.

Ryan pulled himself out of the past and back into the present, which wasn't any less disconcerting, as he glanced over at Katie, a move that yet again threatened to knock the breath from his lungs.

She'd only become more beautiful with time.

He'd fallen in love with the self-conscious pretty girl he met as a kid when Katie and the girls' very-much-in-love young parents moved next door to his seldom-happy home. But now she was a gorgeous, confident woman—comfortable in her own skin and feistier than ever.

He made himself engage in conversation, not wanting to seem rude. After all, he was the one who'd brought it up in the first place. "You must be excited," he forced out over the lump in his throat.

As his question settled in the air, Katie's smile changed into something different and a look of apprehension crossed her features before she could hide it from him. When she spoke, though, her voice was clear and firm. "I am. Very," she said, then stopped suddenly, as if reconsidering her next comment.

"But—" Ryan offered, knowing better. He should have just let the conversation drop if he didn't want to hear more about Katie's baby. A little tingle of admonition lit through him.

That was just it. He did want to hear about it—about *them*.

No matter what he'd done or how far he'd moved from home, sitting there with his childhood best friend was like going back in time. The years of separation were no cure for what he'd felt. He supposed a piece of him would always belong to Katie Bloom.

She tossed a sideways glance at Ryan. "No *but*," she said, pausing before she went on, as if determining how much it was wise to reveal. "It's just that...well, circumstances are not ideal."

She waved a gentle hand over her abdomen. “I thought I’d have things all set and ready by the time I became a mom, and...I don’t. I mean, I did—” She stared out the passenger-side window as Ryan pulled his Jeep onto Main Street, unsure of what direction to head in “—but I don’t anymore.”

Katie looked ahead at the road, knitting her eyebrows. “Um, Ryan, where are we going?”

“To dinner,” he answered, surprised at her question. Old habits died hard; he’d just assumed it was okay to bring her along to a meal with him.

“No,” she said, and he glanced over at her quickly before returning his full attention to the road. It was late evening and most of the shops were closing, their owners heading home for the night, so Main Street was fairly deserted, except for a few people bustling down the sidewalk, carrying shopping bags and food containers.

Katie laughed at him. The sound filled Ryan with memories from their shared childhood—giggling together at the cinema, over-apologizing each time their hands inadvertently brushed inside the popcorn cup, him tickling her feet when he’d gotten tired of a long homework session, just to hear the infectious melody of her laughter.

“What’s so funny?” he asked, and Katie rolled her eyes.

“Where do you think you’re going to get dinner at this hour?” Her eyes sparkled as she teased him.

Ryan glanced at the clock on his dash. “It’s only eight.”

Kate's expression told him he was being an idiot. "It's Peach Leaf, Ryan. Surely you haven't been gone so long you've forgotten the limited nightlife of a small town."

Dammit, she was right. His stomach let out a groan of protest. "It's okay," Katie said, chuckling, "you can eat at my place." She lifted her chin to indicate the road. "Just keep going and turn left up here. June and I started sharing a little house after—" she hesitated—"after I left my old apartment. You remember June Leavy from high school."

Ryan nodded.

Katie pointed up ahead. "It's this street here. Left at the stop sign."

Ryan switched on his signal and steered his truck as instructed down a narrow street lined with peach trees on the verge of shedding their leaves. The houses were familiar and soothing, and he could name just about every family who'd occupied each one before his departure—teachers, librarians, old friends from school. Some of the yards held evidence of new ownership; tricycles and shiny swing sets spoke of young families with children.

He'd found he'd really rather go back to the hotel and grab an unsatisfying snack from the vending machine than endure the generous kindness he knew to expect from Katie and her old friend, but it would be rude to turn down the invitation. He might've moved across the country all those years ago and rarely looked back, but, as Katie pointed out, Peach Leaf was a small

town, immune to the rapid changes of the rest of the world, and Ryan hadn't forgotten his Southern manners.

As he followed Katie's directions and pulled into the gravel driveway of an aging but cozy-looking small blue cottage, he reminded himself that he'd agreed to spend an entire weekend with this woman—a woman he'd once loved so hard that leaving her had nearly ripped him apart—so what difference would an hour over dinner make?

The pain of loss was nothing new to Ryan, and he would just have to steady himself until the time with her passed. Then he'd do the same as he worked on the hospital plans with his father, and sat through the dreaded town meeting to inform the residents of his hometown of the timeline for razing and replacing their beloved museum.

He would endure, as he always had, and then it was back to his normal life in Seattle, the life he'd never adore but had come to tolerate for its predictable lack of complication.

A life that didn't include the inevitable hazards of love, babies...or, especially, Katie Bloom.

* * *

"I still can't believe Ryan Ford is sitting out on our deck," June whispered like a little girl at a slumber party.

Katie just rolled her eyes. No matter the subject, June was always easily excited—it was one of the countless things she loved about her friend and housemate. The woman was a card-carrying, unapologetic romantic, and over the years she'd mused

more than once about how sweet it would be if Katie's childhood best friend, possibly divorced and pining over his long-lost sweetheart, swept back into town and earned Katie's love again.

In your dreams, Katie thought.

Once, long ago, she might have indulged June's silly fantasy, but she wasn't a little girl anymore, and Ryan himself had taught her plenty about broken hearts. June could have her daydreams, but Katie preferred to stick with reality. She owed it to her soon-to-arrive little one to keep her head out of the clouds and to make decisions based on fact, rather than those tiny shivers of memory and desire that raced up her back every time she saw his face.

June reached out to grab the empty pitcher from Katie's hands as they stepped into their shared little kitchen with its buttercup-colored walls and French-blue accents. Though Katie loved it in there, it was really June's domain. Her friend had been employed at Peach Leaf Pizza since high school and was now the manager. While June enjoyed her work, deep down she hoped to open her own bakery someday. Katie often wished her friend could have her dream job sooner, rather than having to work so long to save up enough to buy a venue. Then they would both have careers they really loved...

Katie stopped what she was doing for a second as the awful recollection of her conversation with her boss pummeled into her with fresh intensity. She would have to tell June; in fact, there were a lot of unpleasant arrangements that would soon require attention. She wasn't even certain she'd be able to continue living

there in the shared home that had become her sanctuary after Bradley left.

So much for the stability she wanted desperately to give her unborn baby.

Katie pulled in a steadying breath and managed to pick her heart up from the floor before June's cheery voice cut through. "I just cannot believe it. I always told you this day would come."

"Well," Katie said, her voice sounding thinner than she'd intended, "you'd better believe it because there he is. And it's not what you think—" she aimed what she hoped was a cautionary look at June "—so don't get any ideas in that wild imagination of yours."

June ignored her and pulled a large container of lemonade out of the refrigerator. She refilled the pitcher while Katie pulled her friend's fresh cobbler from the oven, the scent of warm vanilla and peaches, purchased from local farm stands and stored up for the winter months, filling the room—the perfect end to a lovely meal of rosemary-lemon chicken and potato salad. "And you expect me to believe you don't feel anything for him anymore, after the history you two share? Time can't erase everything, Katie."

How right she was.

June studied her friend's face and Katie shrugged, setting the warm dish of cobbler on a blue ceramic trivet, focusing her attention on the deepening twilight outside the kitchen window.

Katie's heart gave a little kick at the mention of her and

Ryan's past. She'd come to anticipate the feeling by now. A few long-term relationships, the most recent failed but resulting in a welcome new life, and now the threat of unemployment, had done little to ease the ache that his leaving her caused back in high school. But she'd learned to ignore its presence, like a phantom pain after the loss of a limb. Nothing she couldn't handle.

Katie pulled her gaze away from the window and pointed to a cabinet up high. June opened it effortlessly, her six-foot frame towering over Katie, who held out her hands to accept the china dessert plates she intended to use for the first time. "That's just the thing, June bug—it's history. In the past." She glanced at the stack of plates as she set them on the counter next to the cobbler dish. "Just like Bradley."

June squeezed Katie's shoulder affectionately. "At least you're finally going to use these babies."

Katie grinned. The four-place china setting was supposed to be June's housewarming present to Katie when she and Bradley bought the house they'd been admiring together, a gift June had worked extra hours to save for. When Katie told June she was returning the lot so June could have her money back after Bradley called off their plans and had the Realtor shred the house contract, June had insisted they keep and use it. The irony that its first guest would be Ryan Ford didn't escape Katie.

"Can I just say one more thing, though, and then I'll stop talking about him? I promise."

Katie tossed a skeptical look at her housemate. "What do they

say about making promises you can't keep?"

June stuck out her tongue. "All right, fine. So maybe it won't be the very last thing."

"Uh-huh," Katie said.

"It's just that...well...he's hot." Mischief shone in June's eyes as she glanced at Katie. "I noticed you left that part out when you texted to let me know you two were headed up the drive."

Despite herself, Katie burst out laughing as she slid a third spoonful of cobbler onto one of the delicate black-and-white-patterned plates she'd picked out for her life with Bradley not so long ago. "I guess I just don't think of him that way. He was my friend when we were kids. I mean, the guy used to throw water balloons at me and run up behind me to shove me into the pool when I least expected it." She set the spoon aside and wiped her hands on a dishcloth. "Not exactly the stuff of fairy tales."

June just blinked, clearly not convinced.

Katie shrugged her shoulders. "Okay, fine," she said, arranging the plates on a tray with the refreshed pitcher of lemonade. "He does look good. I'll admit that much."

"What looks good?"

Katie started abruptly at the warm, low sound of Ryan's voice coming from the kitchen archway, but caught herself in time to recover before she turned to face him. "Oh, we were just admiring June's baking." She pulled in a deep breath as she busied herself again with the tray. "It's unparalleled in Texas." She winked at June, who looked a little too pleased with herself.

Catching the beginning of a grin on her friend's lips, Katie shot June a warning look.

What? June mouthed silently, and Katie deployed the stern expression she saved for rare occasions when kids got too rambunctious at the museum.

"Yep, it's true," June said, holding Katie's gaze, "this is one of my favorite recipes. I love how the peaches are so ripe and delicious. They're just gorgeous." She winked at Katie.

The nerve.

Evidently Katie's laser-of-doom glare didn't work on women over twenty-five.

Some of Ryan's earlier discomfort at joining the two women for dinner seemed to have dissipated and, apparently oblivious to the ulterior meaning of the conversation going on about him, he rubbed his hands together and beamed. "Looks amazing, June," he said, turning then to Katie. "Can I take that tray from you?"

Katie regained her composure and nodded. "Of course. Thanks." She handed it over and let Ryan start out of the kitchen before she jabbed her elbow into June's side as they followed him through the open sliding-glass door and out onto the lantern-lit patio. He placed the tray onto a turquoise-painted picnic table and sat down just as June's cat, Harold, pounced onto the bench next to him, and Katie and June settled on the seat across.

"He likes you," June offered with a smile. "He doesn't feel that way about most people, especially those of the male variety."

"What she means," Katie said as she passed out each plate, "is

that he's kind of a jerk.”

June pretended to look offended, though she knew as well as anyone that her own cat—the cat she and Katie adored in equal measure—was the most irritable feline who ever lived. “He’s just...particular is all,” June said, taking a sip of lemonade.

Katie tucked a fork into her dessert and held it up to cool. “Well, he’s a terrible judge of character,” she argued. “The first night I moved in, he used my suitcase as a litter box, leaving me with nothing to wear to work the next day.”

June had a naughty look in her eyes. “He was just giving you a warm welcome,” she soothed, and Katie nearly choked on her own laughter.

Ryan chuckled, too, and the three of them ate in silence as a welcome October breeze swept over the deck, causing the flames to dance on the citronella candles scattered about. Katie was thankful June had remembered to light them to stave off the last of the summer mosquitoes, though she had to admit the candles, combined with a couple of solar-powered iron lanterns and a string of twinkling fairy lights, gave the deck a much more romantic appearance than Katie was comfortable with at the moment.

She caught Ryan watching as she savored her last bite. He gave her an open smile that spoke of campfires and sneaking out at night to the swimming pool when they were kids, of the delicious tingle that had arisen under Katie’s skin every time their limbs had brushed together.

How quickly life could change without notice, how easily the past could merge into the present...the future. Heat spread through her chest as the notion slipped into her mind, causing her to pull away from his gaze and stare down into her lap.

Ryan is the past, and only the past, she reminded herself in warning.

Letting him become anything else would only lead to sorrow again.

Katie set her shoulders back and lifted her chin. The look in his eyes as she caught them this time was both familiar and strange; it held a disconcerting mix of what they'd been and what she'd once wanted them to become. Part of her had enjoyed spending time with two of her favorite people as if not a day had passed since they were younger, but a wiser part was certain it wouldn't last.

She didn't regret inviting him to stay for dinner, and she'd been pleasantly surprised how easily his presence fit in with hers and June's. And it was kind of Ryan to offer to drive her out to the camping ground in a few days, but she knew suddenly that she couldn't ask him to stay the weekend, even though it would mean a canceled hayride and making plans for someone to drive her home. When he dropped her and the supplies off and headed back out of her life, she would feel relief.

Katie closed her eyes.

Another jolt of pain, too, but mostly relief.

[Chapter Four](#)

The next morning, Ryan stepped into the diner, half expecting all eyes to turn his way, and he was more than a little relieved when they didn't. A few friendly faces greeted him with welcome-home smiles, and Barb, the owner, remembered the booth by the window that he and Katie used to share and led him in its direction. Thankfully, his father had agreed to meet later in the day, so the restaurant wasn't teeming with regulars. Still, apprehension had settled in early that morning and didn't seem to have any plan to leave.

Though Ryan would always love his father, it would be a lie to say he liked the man already seated on the other side of his and Katie's bench.

He'd known about the cheating long before his mother found out. Ryan, only sixteen, had been the one to urge his father to tell his mother. The man's refusal, and the resulting chasm it formed between father and son, was one of the more pressing reasons Ryan had left town so young. It had taken over a year for Ryan to be able to pick up the phone to call his mom, knowing there was a fifty-fifty chance the old man would be the one to answer.

Ryan felt many things toward him now—anger, betrayal, even disgust—but not the forgiveness his father's eyes seemed to ask for as Ryan reluctantly reached out to shake his offered hand. He wouldn't concentrate on how wrinkled it had become, or how the old man's skin seemed a little looser on his frame since the last time they'd seen each other.

"Dad," he said simply, firmly, determined not to let the

sudden, unwelcome emotion creep into his words. His father didn't deserve Ryan's pity any more than he deserved to be forgiven. This was a business meeting, like the hundreds Ryan had led at his own architecture firm in Seattle, and he would treat it as such. Work was what got him through the last months of his failed marriage to Sarah, and their child's bewildering death, and it was what he dived into to forget Katie. Surely he could make it through a short meeting with George Ford.

"Son," George said, meeting Ryan's eyes with unmistakable moisture in his own.

Ryan ignored their tug on his chest, looking away to study the menu. It didn't take long to notice that it was unchanged, just like the cheery yellow walls and red-checkered tablecloths. Being there felt like stepping out of a time machine into his youth. He wished the same was true for his father; if the man looked as young and sturdy as he had years ago, it would have been a lot easier to maintain animosity. Instead, the pallor of his skin and the slight tremor of his hands made him seem almost ill, but there had been no mention of any such thing when they'd spoken on the phone. Perhaps George had a few more secrets up his sleeve.

"I'm so glad you decided to come home," he said in a wavering voice.

Ryan stopped fiddling with the menu. He would order only drinks so as not to stretch out the meeting any longer than necessary, and then he'd be on his way to tie up some loose ends before the Pumpkin Festival. The thought gave him

more pleasure than it should have and Ryan's mood lifted unexpectedly. A weekend away before the serious building preparation began would be good for him; it would give him time to figure out how he planned to deal with the upcoming months of work with his father.

He gathered himself, annoyed by his father's words after being there for less than five minutes. "I've said this already, Dad—" he corrected himself—"George. I didn't *come home*. I'm here for one reason only, and after that, I'm heading back where I belong."

At least part of his statement was true. Heading up a project of that size—a colossal, state-of-the-art cancer treatment center—was an undeniably excellent move for the company he'd built. The deal would ensure the continued prosperity of his young firm, and it would mean bigger and better future projects, all of which guaranteed he could give his employees the very best. He thought of them like family; as the owner, it was his duty to make decisions in their best interests—to care and provide for them so that they could give their own children their dreams.

Somehow it helped fill the void he felt each time he realized again that he might never have his own kids. It wasn't a solution, but it took some of the sting away.

The other reason, though, the one he'd left out, was Katie.

But his father didn't need to know that. The old man didn't need to know anything about Ryan's life that he didn't already.

George cleared his throat and took a sip of the coffee he'd

been nursing long before Ryan's arrival. "Peach Leaf is where you belong, son. This is your home."

I'm not your son anymore.

Ryan bit back the words and the surge of defensiveness they incited. "My home is in Seattle now, with my firm." He let his eyes burn into his father's as a waitress headed toward their table. "I'm here on business, as I said, and it would be a good idea to keep that in mind—" he looked up as the waitress approached—"for both of us."

He ordered black coffee and orange juice and held his tongue when George's full plate of bacon, eggs and biscuits with gravy arrived a short time later. They discussed building plans for half an hour while George ate. Ryan barely touched either of his beverages. By the time the waitress cleared their table, they'd managed to set personal matters aside and had made quite a bit of headway. Ryan grabbed the check when it arrived and held up a hand to preclude any argument.

He slipped a few bills onto the table and was halfway out of his seat when George wrapped fingers around his wrist. "Sit down, son," George said, his tone firm and authoritative. "We're not done here just yet."

Ryan silently balked but remained calm as he wrenched his hand out of his father's grip. "I beg to differ. I'm not staying to chat. I was clear when I agreed to come here that it wasn't to make amends with you—it's business only."

George closed his eyes and nodded. "Yes, you've made

yourself quite clear.” He held out his hands. “But this isn’t about me.”

Ryan’s eyes narrowed. “What are you talking about?”

George motioned to the booth’s bench. “Just...have a seat, will you?”

Ryan stood motionless for a moment before he acquiesced.

“There’s something we need to talk about.”

He glanced at his watch, then eyed his father across the table.

“I’ve got to go soon, but if it’s important...”

George looked down into his coffee cup. “It’s about Annabelle.”

Ryan’s ears perked up at the sound of his mother’s name. They’d spoken on the phone every Thursday night since Ryan moved away, and had met annually, away from both of their homes, to vacation together, always at Ryan’s expense, per his insistence. Those getaways with Mom were his favorite part of the year. He hadn’t noticed any change in her at the most recent one, and he didn’t recall her mentioning anything out of the ordinary. They’d had a lovely time in Athens, Greece, only a few months prior, both commenting that it would be a wonderful place to return on a future trip.

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