

CHAPTER ONE

I never meant to kiss Glade Adams—ever. I mean, I hated the guy. For reasons unknown, the universe fated my first kiss to be forever connected with the jokester who tormented me all the way through ~~junior high~~~~middle school~~ by dropping pencil shavings on my head and stuffing a plushie into my tuba right before my concert band audition. When I recall what should be a nostalgic teen memory, I'm haunted by the acrid, metallic smell of the school's darkroom and what unpleasantness developed there.

My heart thumps hard against my ribs, drowning out the sound of the Uber's tires crunching over the gravel as it pulls up in front of my old alma mater, James Hogg High School, home of the Fighting Blue Bulls—our tragically named mascot. The parking lot is still unpaved nearly twenty years after the school was built. So much for all the involuntary student fundraising efforts. It's a stark contrast to the new state-of-the-art LED sign that flashes: ~~"Welcome, Class of 2006!"~~ I guess something had to be done about the mischief-makers like Glade who habitually changed the letters on the old marquee and tormented the mascot. Good to know the school board's priorities are straight.

Seeing it all again causes memories of all my poor choices to come flooding back like an overwhelming tsunami of emotion and regret. I also shouldn't have kissed Stewart Lendl—the most adorkable band geek who ever was—but Kelsey dared me. It was stupid. If I had to offer an excuse for my uncharacteristically flirty behavior, it was seven hours into the bus ride home after performing in the Rose Parade. Everyone was hopped up on Red Bull and Twizzlers. I coyly offered to show him how to avoid too much pucker in his embouchure. While engaging in close proximity mouth and lip exercises, I laid one on him. It wasn't as epic as I had hoped. Oh,

Commented [BP1]: I just did a little research through some Texas friends and learned that virtually no one in Texas says "junior high" instead of "middle school."

well. Dare I say, I helped his French ~~H~~orn technique just a bit? -According to social media, he has a hot wife and little dorklings now. *You're welcome, Stewart.*

I've arrived fashionably late. My heels click on the tile as I walk down the locker-lined hallway toward the inner sanctum of the gymnasium. Matching trophy cases flank its double doors, and music pulses within. A couple of bored teens sit at the reunion check-in table. The air smells of chalk dust, must, rust, and cleaning chemicals. My stomach flip-flops as I pass doors to the library, my old classrooms, and Luke's locker that I spent numerous make-out sessions propped against.

I absolutely should've quit kissing Luke Hamilton after our first breakup, but I was slow to learn. He was a smooth-talking, two-timing jerk with the ripped six-pack of an Adonis sculpture and the brains God gave an angsty woodchuck. I gave him the best two semesters of my life, and in return, he gave me a brief appreciation for emo bands, Gothic fashion, and a lingering case of mono. I still cringe whenever someone tags me in group prom pictures on Facebook. A Lolita Bride of Frankenstein—what was I thinking, and why didn't my mother stop me?

No need to discuss the hot mess that were my college years. None of those guys are presently in the picture. But just this minute, I'd give anything to have any one of them standing next to me as I don my name tag and enter my fifteen-year high school reunion. I can hardly bear to face what lurks on the other side of the double doors. Is it too much to hope Luke is bald and has a beer gut and no one else remembers me?

I'm perspiring as I enter the dimly lit gym. A familiar Keane song activates my mental time machine, and I'm no longer a poised, professional photographer, but the weird girl who recently stalked all her classmates on the internet to ensure she measures up. Make that all but

one, I never stalk Glade because there's no need when his face is plastered all over cyberspace. I avoid any photo of him like clickbait, so I won't have to admit I want a do-over on our ill-fated kiss.

I freeze up mere steps into the room. Is it nostalgia or nausea? The gym is crowded and noisy and I'm already losing my cool. Social anxiety rears its ugly head like the two-faced friend it is. I don't care if my therapist is making me do this ridiculous assignment. It's way too peopley in here. Cue the gut-clenching tummy ache. Seriously, that's just perfect. I know, let's go somewhere we always hated and spend time with people we didn't/still don't like—but wait, let's also add gastrointestinal discomfort, because IBS mixes so well with public events.

I no longer have my long-hoarded air miles, but I do have my dignity, such as it is. I can't do it. I can't face Glade here even if he's the only reason I bothered to show up. I came all this way to find closure on that jinxed kiss, but forget it! There's got to be a red-eye back to Los Angeles tonight where I can live a long and happy life as a spinster with a dozen rescue cats. With any luck, my Uber driver hasn't cleared the parking lot yet. I fumble in my bag for my phone, but it's too late. I've been spotted.

A plumper version of my high school bestie, Kelsey Cady, squeals as she barrels across the room, drawing all eyes toward us in her wake. So much for dignity. And escape—she practically tackles me, her beaded fringe dress undulating like a chandelier in a cyclone.

“Kerrington!” Kelsey exclaims. She hugs me tightly until fainting from lack of air becomes a real possibility. “I can't believe it. I thought you said you weren't coming.”

“You know me, always changing my mind ten thousand times. Surprise!”

I scan the dim room pulsing with lasers and disco lights. A vast ocean of gussied-up people clumps around cocktail tables like the survivors of an ill-fated dinner cruise that

shipwrecked ~~washing them up on~~to overcrowded islands. Next to black party dresses, my cuffed boutique jeans, blouse, and jacket appear too casual. The only thing I got right were the ankle-twisting high heels.

No, I should've opted for my signature Doc Martens. At least then I might not fall when I turn tail and run. I'm decidedly underdressed despite having an editorial stylist, who owed me a favor, choose my wardrobe. It's ironic that most of the residents of this ~~p~~Podunk town in the armpit of Texas are dressed for a red-carpet event ~~while~~and I'm dressed for tapas at the local neighborhood bar and grill.

"I missed the memo about the line-dancing-at-the-casino-nightclub," I say.

"You look great—so California chic," Kelsey says before launching into a trademark monologue as she drags me towards a group standing awkwardly around a tiny table.

Her rapid Texas twang feels foreign. That, and the bold shade of red lipstick she wears, makes it hard to concentrate on what she's saying. The sparkly black fringe of her skirt is still swaying wildly. She reminds me of the campy, ~~CGI~~ long-snouted CGI lead singer of the Max Rebo Band in the Star Wars movies. I'm mortified to admit I know that bit of trivia, but my brothers would be proud. Also, that was not a flattering image of my dear friend. Kelsey's more like a ~~bleach~~-blonde Taylor Swift with dark roots and high-heeled cowgirl boots than the potbellied Sy Snootles. Though all three can pull off that red lipstick in a way I never could.

"Look who the cat dragged in, y'all. It's Kerri Mullins!" Kelsey says to the group at her table.

A few heads nod in ~~acknowledgement~~. I spot some of the cheerleaders who were on the squad with Kelsey. I struggle to recognize anyone without making a covert glance at their name tag first. Guess I'm not the only one using younger profile photos on social media.

Commented [BP2]: Did you mean "bleach" or "beach"?

Commented [BP3]: Merriam Webster's dictionary appears to prefer this spelling as "acknowledgment" (no E after the G), but it does list the current spelling as a common variant, meaning it's just as valid a spelling. (This also applies to similar words like judgement/judgment.) You are welcome to choose whichever variant you like; just do a thorough find/replace of your manuscript if you decide to take out the extra E in these words.

Kelsey's husband, Tim, my old lab partner, touches the brim of his Stetson in greeting. "Nice to see you again, Kerrington. How long are you in town for?"

"Thanks, Tim." I smile and give a noncommittal shrug. "Can't stay long. I'm off to Italy on assignment Tuesday and ~~have to~~ **must** organize and pack my equipment. Going through customs is a nightmare."

Commented [BP4]: "Must" just sounds overly formal in the context of this conversation.

"But we've got to do brunch, right ladies?" Kelsey pleads as her sad puppy dog eyes guilt the others. She's won enough titles at beauty pageants to make an art of this.

Murmurs of polite assent reach me, and I almost laugh out loud. Southern women are nothing if not well-mannered sugar sloppers. Have these ladies forgotten none of them had room for me at their lunch tables in the cafeteria down the hall? Now they want me to spill the tea on the celebrity couples whose weddings I've done. Not fixin' to happen.

"Who's your big client?" demands Gina, former head cheerleader and the queen bee of what used to be the mean girl squad, though it looks like she still has faithful attendants. Some things never change.

I smile pleasantly. "No one you'd be familiar with."

No need to tell them that I don't actually know who's employing me. When it comes to celebrity clientele, ~~arrangements are usually~~ ~~it's~~ handled through our personal assistants or the magazine, ~~and w~~ **W**hen they do tell me details, I must sign nondisclosure agreements. -This one is so private I can't ~~even~~ bring my assistants. That usually means I'm shooting Academy Award-winning famous talent or lower-ranking royalty.

As if on cue, Kelsey offers her own humble brag. "Kerri still uses our engagement pictures in her portfolio. Me and Tim, showcased along with recording artists and Hollywood

movers and shakers. I'm so honored. I always flip through the magazines in the checkout lines to see how many of Kerri's photographs I can find."

"So, you're a member of the paparazzi?" Alicia asks with a less-than-subtle roll of her eyes. She pauses in a lazy, calculating manner before adding, "Don't you find that a bit tacky?"

Who is she kidding? I can tell she's trying to get a rise out of me, so I answer her as though I'm a shoo-in for Miss Congeniality. "A paparazzo is a freelance photographer who makes a living by pursuing celebrities and selling photos of them to tabloids. I agree, being a professional stalker is in poor taste. However, I have a state-of-the-art workspace and am hired by PR agencies, studios, or companies who pay me for my portraiture services. *They pursue me.*"

Under the table, Kelsey stomps on my foot. That's the cue for me to shut up that dates back to our middle school days. I wince and give a polite smile. I've been standing here less than five minutes and am already waxing professorial. It's a defensive reflex when I'm uncomfortable. Another annoying, spontaneous effect of such nervousness is slipping into a local dialect regardless of whether I ever lived in a region. I haven't spoken Southern in over a decade but ~~can~~ feel the cadence creeping back into my brain and the cutesy colloquialisms popping into the forefront of my phrases. (In ten more minutes, I'll be blessing everyone's hearts.)

Commented [BP5]: Haha! XD

"Kelsey told us those were your photos of Courtney Bloom and her baby on the cover of *People* magazine," says Gina. "A few of those made it into tabloids."

"Like many celebrities with a cause they want attention for, the Blooms released selected photos and asked the publishers to donate a portion of the proceeds to their chosen charity. I don't get a say in how anyone uses the photos they've hired me to take."

Alicia says, “Attention-needy celebs are so boring. They have Instagram and Twitter accounts. With all their selfies, tweets, and stuff, I can’t see how tabloids can last much longer. No one our age reads a newspaper, right?”

I bite my lip to keep from revealing that I take a lot of those supposed selfies. The “I woke up like this” movement bankrolled the down payment on my gorgeous new studio. I have no fears regarding my future earnings nor of scientists curing Hollywood of narcissism anytime soon.

“I only browse tabloids at my hairdresser’s. It’s just a matter of time before the public loses interest in them,” says Gina. “Everyone knows someone famous these days, so it’s not worth bragging about. Especially if they’re just reality TV or internet famous. They don’t even get their fifteen seconds of fame these days.”

I try to keep my tone conversational. “According to Warhol, it’s fifteen *minutes* of fame, but I get what you’re saying. True talent will rise to the top, and the rest will be about as memorable as those *Twilight* books everyone was obsessed with back in high school.” This gets a snort from Tim, which is better than a foot stomp any day.

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“Team Kill Bella forever,” he whispers before fist-bumping me.

Commented [BP6]: Have to say, I agree. XD

Kelsey shoots him a warning look, but then steers back to the conversation. “Gina’s right; you can throw a rock and hit a famous fella even in these parts. Take Glade for example. I was so proud when he co-hosted the Oscars. He’s got real staying power. I wonder when he’s gonna get here.”

“It can’t be soon enough. You know they’re stalling until he arrives so they can do some big tribute,” says Gina, ever jealous of anyone who steals the spotlight. “It’s not like he’s the leader of the free world.”

“I couldn’t agree more!” I blurt out.

The surprise on the faces around me tells me I responded with a bit too much enthusiasm. Yikes! Methinks the lady doth protest too much, anyone? *Be cool, Kerrington. No one else needs to know you have a bone to pick with Glade. It will just come back to bite you.*

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Gina takes a long sip from her drink, signaling the end of the conversation. She and Alicia turn to speak with another couple passing by our table. A wave of relief washes over me. My inquisition by the mean girls is over, and Glade isn’t here yet. I have a temporary reprieve.

I make small talk with others nearby. Just as I begin to relax, the music ends abruptly, and a scattering of applause starts up as the reunion committee takes its place on the platform at the front of the room. What fresh heck awaits now? Square dancing? Karaoke? Open-mic poetry readings?

“How y’all doing tonight? Everyone gettin’ their fill of the appetizers and open bar?” asks a thin black woman. I have no idea who she is—probably the class treasurer or another officer. The crowd applauds, and she continues. “We have lots of great things planned for you this evening, starting with this slideshow gathered from the yearbook archives and other sources. Happy reminiscing!”

“Good Riddance (Time of Your Life)” by Green Day begins playing. The opening image is of the hallway leading to we entered the gym, through except it’s filled with students passing on their way to classes. Words scroll across the screen. *2006: The edge of the cyber frontier— No Smart-phones—... no Twitter—... no Pinterest—... no Instagram—... no Netflix—... no Siri—... and no Facebook or YouTube (in these parts—). We had flip phones, Zune, Blockbuster Video, Napster, Classmates, and Myspace—...—*

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Pictures of students shown with these dated forms of technology flip past, and the crowd lets out a collective laugh. Naturally, the first dozen photos are of the popular crowd. No chess club members or band geeks anywhere in sight, although when I was on the yearbook staff, I was careful to be inclusive of everyone. The text on the slideshow continues. *Somehow, we not only survived, but we also thrived.*

After a smattering of candid group photos, the theme changes to a “then and now” montage. I wonder if anyone else is groaning internally. A cheesy photo of “The most likely to succeed” candidates morphs, and she’s a surgeon and he’s playing bassoon with the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra.

More tedious categories follow. The pimply king of the chess club morphs into the acne-scarred tech billionaire. Then the uncontested “class clown” slide displays Glade circa 2006 and a recent photo on the set of his show. Whoever did his latest promotional shoot did a fantastic job, and I almost regret turning it down.

“The cutest couple” candidates, Tim and Kelsey, in matching outfits at the Sadie HawkinsHopkins dance flash across the screen and are met with collectives ahhs as it morphs into their engagement photo, then wedding photo, and then family photo with their four kids—all taken by yours truly.

Kelsey beams appreciatively at the compliments offered. She holds up her appletini in a Gatsby-esque toast. Tim puts his fingers in his mouth and whistles. “Daddy’s got himself one hot mama!”

Kelsey blushes and we all laugh. I adore them. Some people deserve to find happiness, butwhile these two are bent on making their own. Watching them together, makes me wonder if I could have found what they have if if I hadn’t gone back time and again to Luke when his

flings with other girls ended. Thinking of that idiot summons the demons of my past, because suddenly there we are on the screen in all our eGothic emo glory.

A few chuckles make me cringe. From somewhere near the stage, Luke shouts his pet name for me: Mulli-Mulli, which is short for Mull-again Mulligan. I always gave him a do-over even when he didn't deserve it. In truth, if I'd taken time to *mull* it over *again*, we'd never have gotten back together ever. To this day I don't think he knows my last name is Mullins, *not* Mulligan, because the golf-based moniker had stuck fast long before Luke. *Mulligan*—that was Glade's doing, of course.

Glade was the one who pointed out I was quick to forgive and give second chances to almost everyone. It kills me to admit I'd give him one now, but the problem is Glade's beyond famous and would think that was the only reason—when it's about as far from the truth as a person can get. It's a cosmic mulligan I'm looking for, not a non-committal make-out with a celeb. I need to remove the curse he's put on my love life.

I'm pulled out of my pondering by Tim's belly laugh. He points at yet another slide featuring me but without the punk influence. Even Kelsey is suppressing laughter. I can't blame them. It was during my Gwen Stefani *Harajuku Lovers* phase. The ensemble was *Alice in Wonderland* inspired. I was going for the sweet Lolita baby doll look, but with giant bows and dozens of ringlets in my blonde ponytails, I look more like a possessed version of Cindy Brady.

"Ugh!" I say. "Not my best look, but those *were* my favorite Doc Martens."

"Oh Kerri, I forgot how fashion challenged you were," says Alicia with a pitying giggle.

"Not much has changed," I hear Gina mutter under her breath. "And she does editorial spreads in *Vogue*?"

“At least your style was unique for this neck of the woods,” Kelsey says and gives Tim a warning look that makes him clamp his trap shut faster than greased lightning. (And terrific, I’m southern-izing.)

Commented [BP7]: Haha! XD

“What did y’all see in that loser Luke?” asks Alicia.

I glance up at the screen just in time to see the slide transition from Luke with his arm around a different girlfriend in a Team Edward ~~€T~~-shirt to a nearly identical slide featuring yet another girl in a Team Jacob ~~€T~~-shirt. My face flames hot with embarrassment. I guess I should be grateful that the photos are focused on Luke and not me.

I shrug. “He talked a good game.” And boy-howdy that guy knew how to kiss.

Tim sets his empty beer bottle on the table. “I’m parched. Come on, Kerrington, let’s get us a drink before Luke decides to come over here.”

Before I can protest, he leads me by the elbow away from the table. I half-trip, half-run to keep up with him. These death-trap heels were the wrong choice. We make our way to the bar where the mixologist looks at us expectantly.

“A Virgin Mary with an extra skewer of green olives, please.”

My request causes a microexpression of surprise to flash across her face. “You got it, Honey.” She starts on my drink before turning to Tim. “And what can I get for you?”

“Another longneck ought to top me off.”

A huge roar of laughter breaks out across the room, and a few people shout my name. I turn to see another picture of myself on the screen. One I had seen exactly once before and had forgotten existed until now. It’s Me in a Harajuku school-girl uniform standing in a blossoming

alfalfa field serenading a bunch of bewildered cows. A shiny brass sousaphone snakes around me like the poisonous serpent that sunk his fangs into my heart that day. Glade Adams kissed me shortly after taking this portrait of me.

I gasp in shock. “No!”

“Is that *you?*” asks the bartender as she hands me my thirst-quencher. “No way! You’re Tuba Girl?”

She snaps a selfie with me as I pop the contents of the first skewer in my mouth to avoid commenting. I have no idea what she’s talking about. I glance at Tim to see if he understands any of this. He gestures back to the screen at the front of the room. I take a sip and try to ignore the pointing in my direction. I nearly choke on an olive. I want to sink through the floor as the laughter intensifies. Now there’s a side-by-side comparison of my portrait and another of Glade dressed as—well, me—with a tuba. Underneath the two pictures, words flash: *Nailed it!*

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“What the crap is this, Tim?”

In reply he pulls out his phone, does a quick search, and gives it to me. Over a thousand results in less than ~~forty-five~~⁴⁵ seconds. Have I been living under a rock? I scroll through the Tuba Girl memes and GIFs. I don’t dare watch a video, though there are dozens to choose from. My hand trembles, and I feel like I’m fixin’ to be sick. Glade Adams made fun of me on national television. *Repeatedly.*

Commented [BP8]: This seems a little bit long for a search to take in 2021. Or maybe the Wi-Fi is just that poor at the school? Maybe we could change this to something like ten or fifteen seconds.

“I’m going to kill him!”