

TURN THE PAGE

I used to enjoy the holidays, but not anymore. This time of year brings back too many painful memories. However, there is no escape. The streets are decorated with lights and ornaments, the local coffee shop is using their annual holiday cups, and the speakers on Main Street are playing holiday music non-stop.

It's never cold outside here, so I usually leave the door to my little bookshop open. But not today. I can hear the music and I simply can't handle it while I'm putting up decorations in my shop. I do it for my customers; they appreciate the cheeriness. Or maybe they need it?

I should mention that I no longer use my real decorations. They hold too much pain and sadness for me. Instead, I've bought cheap ones that have no sentimental value. They look nice enough, though. People comment on them every year. Decorating and making everyone feel welcome has always been a talent of mine.

My dog Bernie groans in his corner bed. Lately, he does that every time he moves. He's very old, but still seems happy to be alive. I'm grateful he's still with me - I'd be all alone if he wasn't. I try not to think about the day when I'll have to say goodbye to him.

I can't bear the thought of another loss, even though I know it's inevitable. So now, I look at him with a sad smile and sigh. He's a scruffy little mutt with gray fur around his nose. She fell in love with him the moment she saw him, but I was the one who needed convincing. And today, he's the one who keeps me company when I need it most.

The door opens and a wave of holiday music floods the store, much to my chagrin. I'm standing on a three-step ladder, so I turn around carefully and slowly. It wouldn't be the first time that I fell off this ladder, and I know I won't always get lucky and not get hurt.

"I'll be with you in just a sec!" I say.

"Sure," a cheery, female voice replies. "Take your time, River."

I freeze as an invisible hand grabs my heart and twists it around in my chest.

"Excuse me?" I croak as I turn around.

The woman standing in my doorway looks at me with eyes that sparkle as much as the stars do.

"River's bookshop?" she says and points at the shop's window.

It takes me a moment to get it. "Oh, right," I say, nodding as I look at the floor. "Yeah, I'm not River."

"Oh, I thought it was the store owner's name," the woman says, a little embarrassed.

I'm still looking at the floor and scratch behind my ear. I do that whenever I'm uncomfortable. River used to make fun of it, but in a loving way. I remember how her eyes sparkled whenever she teased me. She had the most beautiful eyes.

My customer clears her throat. I'd already forgotten about her. I meet her gaze reluctantly, intending to force a smile onto my lips. But she's looking at me with a curious, joyous gaze and it's a bit infectious. I give her a genuine smile back.

I suddenly notice that the music is still playing. "Could you please close the door?" I say a little more gruffly than intended.

"Oh, sure, I'm sorry," the woman quickly closes the door. "Can't have the cold come in."

I arch an eyebrow as her tone is as light and playful as the sparkles in her eyes. After a moment, I realize she's teasing me. It's not cold outside at all, like I said, it never is here. That's what makes the holidays a little weird, if you ask me.

"I don't like the music," I volunteer, much to my own surprise.

She grins at me and nods. "I've only been here for a day and I think I've heard this playlist three times."

"You missed at least one play-through then," I comment dryly. "It plays from start to end five times every day."

"Torture," she says, shaking her head. "Have you considered starting a petition? I'm sure you can get enough signatures."

I laugh before I can stop myself. It surprises me because I haven't heard my own laughter in a long time. It leaves me shaken and a little sad. I used to laugh often and freely, and I liked that version of myself. A lot.

Bernie seems to like that version of me too because he has gotten up and joined us, panting happily.

"Oh my God, who is this?" our visitor asks as she kneels down.

Bernie starts wiggling his butt eagerly, wanting to say hi but also feeling shy.

"This is Bernie," I say, worried he's going to hurt himself with all this wiggling.

"He's adorable," she coos and lets him sniff her hand.

"He's old," I sigh sadly.

She looks up at me and smiles. "He still looks very happy."

I smile back politely. She's right. He does look happy. I sometimes resent him for it though - how can he be this happy after all we've lost? But I don't want to let that feeling take over right now, not today, not again. So I bend down and pet Bernie's head.

"Yes, he's in a great mood most days," I reply.

"He's the perfect companion," she says, slowly getting up.

She takes a deep breath after straightening and I realize she's a little older than I first thought. Her eyes and smile are young and bright, but her skin shows subtle lines like mine does whenever she smiles.

"Bad knee," she says, pointing at her leg.

I look up and study her knee.

"You won't see anything unless I'm wearing shorts," she chuckles.

My cheeks turn hot within seconds. My face is probably as red as the holiday decorations I was putting up earlier. I scratch behind my ear in embarrassment. Bernie walks back to his corner and plops down with a groan, leaving me just when I need him most. Traitor.

"Anyway, I'm looking for something to read?" she says.

"I can help with that," I say quickly, straightening.

I point to the table with the best-selling books. "These are the town's favorite books right now."

I turn and gesture towards the other smaller table. "And these are my personal favorites. There are little notes on the covers if you want to find out more."

I've said this exact thing to many customers before, but it feels different now. I feel exposed and vulnerable sharing my recommendations with this particular stranger.

"Feel free to look around," I tell her and nod towards the box of remaining decorations. "I have to put those up."

"Want some help?" she asks, flashing me a goofy grin that looks as carefree as that of a young girl. I'm instantly charmed by it. It's rare to come across an adult who can still smile like that - I certainly can't do it anymore.

I shake my head. "No, no, you go find that perfect book, okay?"

She shrugs and seems a little disappointed. "Alright. I usually have a hard time picking so I'll be around for a while."

I give her a quick smile and pick up a little Santa stuffed toy from the box before hurrying toward my counter. I need some form of barrier between myself and this chatty visitor, and I feel better as soon as I step behind the old wooden desk.

But it doesn't take long before she says, "It's a lovely store."

I reluctantly look up and meet her kind eyes. "Thank you," I say, feeling my voice falter for a moment.

"Have you had it for long?" she asks, picking up a book from the table with my recommendations.

I take a better look at her and realize I haven't gotten past her twinkling eyes and generous smile until now. She's dressed as if she's coming back from a long hike. Her dark hair is shoulder-length and a little messy, but the look works for her.

She's looking at me expectantly, and I remember her question. I give her the answer I always give: "The store opened twenty years ago."

"Twenty years?!" she exclaims, visibly stunned. "That's amazing!"

I start blushing again. "Yes, I'm lucky."

"Oh no, this can't just be luck," she says enthusiastically. "You can't survive in this day and age by being lucky. You must have a secret."

I adjust the screen of my laptop resting on the table - an old model I got second-hand last year. "The webshop does pretty well, and we do get a lot of visitors around here," I say.

For a second, I hesitate, but then I say what I feel like saying: "Still, I think I'm going to have to shut down this place at the end of the year. Amazon is killing me."

Her face drops and she even lowers the book in her hand. "I'm sorry," she stammers, her face flushed. "I guess I assumed you..."

I laugh. "I'm kidding!" I say, enjoying the embarrassed bewilderment on her face.

Her lips part in shock, then her eyes light up and she lets out a delightful chuckle. "Got me," she says with that way-too-charming grin.

Quickly looking down at my laptop, feeling guilty for enjoying myself so much, I explain more seriously: "It is hard, but I always make it work somehow. I have a lot of repeat customers and they keep this place alive."

She walks up to the counter and I feel myself starting to blush more. "It's easy to see why people come back here. I know I want to," she says.

There's a new sincerity in her voice that makes me look up at her. Our gazes meet and hold for a second. I know I should look away, but I don't want to. To my surprise, she's first to avert her eyes.

She taps the book in her hand. "I think I'll take this one."

"You haven't even read the back," I say simply.

"I read your recommendation," she replies. "That's enough for me."

My mouth goes dry. Is she flirting with me? Am I flirting with her? What is happening?

"Okay," I say, trying to remain calm.

She smiles and begins searching through her pockets, pulling out a small wallet. Is she leaving? Because I don't want her to go. This realization hits me suddenly, causing panic to rise within me.

"Are you the CEO of the giant bookstore that's about to put me out of business?" I ask on a whim.

This catches her attention and she forgets about her wallet. "What?!"

I grin. "It's from a movie. You've Got Mail. It's ancient, really. But I thought maybe you might have seen it."

She tilts her head. "I think I've heard of it. But it is very old." Her eyes twinkle once again.

"It's about a small bookshop owner who has an online romance with a man who is about to put her out of business. She doesn't know that, of course."

I realize I am rambling, but I can't stop myself. "The movie inspired my...well..."

Now I do stop myself, feeling a chill run down my spine as I realize what I am doing. It's horrible. I am using my dead wife's story to flirt with a stranger. Oh my God. I am an awful person.

"Are you okay? You look pale," she asks.

I nod, but inside I feel far from okay.

"I don't think you should get back up on that ladder," she says. "Is there somewhere you can sit for a moment?"

My hands are shaking and the ache in my chest spreads to my throat. I know this feeling all too well - soon, it will force me to sit on the floor and weep uncontrollably. But not right now - I can't let that happen right now.

"Hey," she says softly and steps around the counter. "Come on, let's find you a place to sit. You don't look well."

"Okay," I stammer, feeling both relieved and increasingly alarmed.

I was fine until this stranger walked in and opened the door to the hidden cellars of my grief. I should send her away so I can push the monster back down and shut that door again.

She reaches for my arm, as if she is about to grab it, but then thinks better of it. "What's your name?"

I rub my chest. "Mia," I croak.

"Okay, Mia," she says. "Have you eaten?"

The question takes me by surprise and seems so trivial that it makes me laugh.

"Not much," I admit, happy to think about something as simple as food.

"Do you live here? Can you sit down and eat something?" she continues, still standing near me behind the counter. She's much too close, but I guess she wants to be there in case I top-ple over.

"I'll eat something after you've left," I say, and then realize how harsh it sounds. "Don't worry, I'm fine," I quickly add but it doesn't make anything sound any better.

"Alright," she says, taking a step back. "Let me pay for this and get out of your way."

I want to say that she is not in my way. I want to make things right between us again, even though this is a stranger and there is no such thing as an 'us.'

But I don't say anything at all, and I am reminded of how much that used to piss off River.

"My name is Dani," she says as she places the book on the counter for me to scan.

As I reach for the book, I see that she has chosen one of my favorites. I stare at the cover, lost in thought. It's been a while since I've talked about this book and I realize how much I miss it.

Without hesitation, Dani says, "I'd also like to buy a gift card."

On autopilot, I ask, "Sure. How much?"

I scan the book's barcode with my phone and it appears on the laptop screen immediately.

Dani's response surprises me. "A hundred bucks."

I glance up at her.

She smiles timidly, but her eyes are sparkling again. And suddenly, I understand what she's doing - she wants to support the store. I doubt she'll actually give the gift card to someone else.

"How long will you be staying?" I ask as I enter the gift card into the system.

There is a pause before she answers, so I look up at her again. Dani meets my gaze with an intensity that doesn't match our conversation as strangers in a bookstore. "Not long."

Once again, it feels like something is whispering the true meaning of her words in my ear. She plans to leave this town soon and never come back unless I stop her.

At this point, I start questioning my sanity. Maybe Dani is right to be worried about me. I touch my lips, making sure my face hasn't twisted into an insane expression. I've heard that experiencing out-of-body moments can be a sign of a stroke before collapsing.

"That'll be \$125 then, please. Cash or card?" My voice falters with hesitation.

"Card, please," Dani replies and pulls out her credit card from her wallet.

I nod and click a button on the screen. "Go ahead."

As a chime signals her successful payment, I force a smile.

"Thank you," I say, though it's rude to not make eye contact. "Would you like your receipt?"

"No, thank you," she responds. "I already have too many old receipts cluttering my pockets."

Her answer genuinely makes me smile because I doubt it's true. She seems organized and put together, not the type to leave receipts lying around. But perhaps I am mistaken.

"I use receipts as bookmarks," I confess.

"Really?" Dani sounds intrigued.

I nod and add, "I even have 10 beautiful bookmarks that I ordered from Etsy, but in the end, I always find myself using random receipts or used envelopes."

She laughs. "I like that."

In the corner of the store, Bernie has dozed off and his snoring interrupts our conversation. Dani turns to look at him and chuckles again. I can't help but giggle too.

"You know what," I say on a whim, "maybe you could stick around for just one more minute? I need to get back on that ladder and put up some lights. Last year, I relied on Bernie to call for help if I fell off, but today that doesn't seem like a safe bet."

Dani's unrestrained grin returns. "Of course, happy to assist."

I place my hands on the counter. "Awesome, thank you. It shouldn't take long."

"No rush," Dani smiles and puts away her wallet. "I've got plenty of time."

My heart starts pounding a bit faster at her words. In the last few minutes, something has shifted inside of me and now I am desperate for human company. Just for today, I don't want to be alone.

"Alright then," I say, trying to conceal my relief.

I step out from behind the counter and dust my hands off on my pants, even though they're not dirty in any way. It's better than scratching my ear again, at least.

"Let me find the lights," I say, walking over to the box of decorations where they're neatly rolled up with a piece of old cardboard. Dani hasn't moved, but her eyes are fixed on me.

I hold up the lights. "I usually hang these over the counter." I point to the old table with my laptop on it.

"You mean this table?" Dani asks, placing her book next to my laptop and piles of paperwork.

"Yes, the table," I say shyly, feeling self-conscious now. I don't want Dani to think I'm weird; I know I can be odd compared to others, but she doesn't need to know that.

"Alright, I'll start there," I say, walking over to grab the ladder from the corner of the room.

Dani joins me and I become acutely aware of how close she is standing. Every now and then, I catch a hint of her perfume or shampoo or day cream - whatever it is, it smells nice.

As I climb the three steps of the ladder, it dawns on me that my ass might be right in Dani's face and I am mortified at the thought.

"What if I fart?" I worry internally, feeling my cheeks turn crimson.

But instead of dwelling on it, I push those thoughts away and focus on hanging the lights instead.

I skilfully unwrap the lights from the piece of cardboard and reach for the hook I placed on the wall many years ago. Within seconds, I attach the lights to the hook without even having to lean over too far.

"You've done this before," Dani teases.

"Just a few times," I reply.

"Be careful stepping down," she warns as I start to climb down the ladder. "It's quite a drop."

I bite my lip as I place my foot on the ground. Dani is standing so close that I can feel the warmth of her body. Any normal person would have taken a step back, but she hasn't. Why?

As I pick up the ladder, I hesitate. The thought of turning around and being face-to-face with Dani makes me nervous. What if I start thinking or feeling something inappropriate? But then it hits me: I don't know what color her eyes are.

"Okay, we survived this part," I say, trying to sound calm and collected.

"What adventure awaits us next?" she asks from behind me.

I can hear a hint of hoarseness in her voice now. With such little space between us, my skin starts to tingle.

But then guilt washes over me and my shoulders tense up. It's been six years since River passed away, and I haven't felt attracted to another woman since then. This shouldn't be happening.

"Let's move onto the other corner," I say hastily, placing the tangled lights onto a nearby table cluttered with books.

I hurry to the other side of the room, bumping into another table along the way. A pile of books falls to the floor, but I don't even bother to check for damage.

"Wow, casualties," Dani jokes as she bends down to pick up the fallen books.

"Sorry about that," I say with a sheepish smile. "Thanks."

"No problem," Dani replies, already straightening back up. "I'm glad I could finally be of use."

I can't help but smile at her remark. She always knows how to calm me down in moments of panic. It's like she has some sort of sixth sense for it.

"What do you do when you're not helping bookstore owners put up holiday lights?" I ask while placing the ladder close to the wall.

"I actually own a chain of department stores with large book departments that often put smaller bookstores out of business," Dani says with a serious tone.

I spin around, taken aback by her response. But before I can say anything, she breaks into a huge grin. "Just kidding."

My narrowed eyes relax and I unconsciously run my tongue over my upper lip. I love her sense of humor too much to not indulge in it a little longer.

"So are you here to open a store next door and put me out of business?" I tease.

Dani's eyes twinkle mischievously as she tilts her head. "I'm afraid so. You know how times change."

My lips part for a moment before breaking into a genuine smile again as I meet her gaze. Her eyes are a light brown, possibly with a hint of green around the irises. It's an interesting mix indeed.

"I wasn't always a small-town bookstore owner," I say, turning back to the ladder.

"You didn't grow up around here?" Dani asks as she steps closer.

"New York City," I reply, climbing the three steps again. "Born and raised."

"Really?" Dani responds, sounding genuinely surprised. "I live in New York City."

I pause at the top of the small ladder. A twinge of longing for my city tightens my chest.

"Not born and raised though," Dani adds. "I guess you could tell."

"Can you hand me the lights?" I ask, already fixing my eyes on the other hook in the wall.

"Of course," Dani says quickly and rushes to get them.

She hands them to me a moment later and I nod in gratitude. "So, where did you grow up?" I ask.

"A small town much like this one," she replies. "I couldn't wait to get away from it."

My eyebrows shoot up. "Don't like small towns?"

"Don't like small-minded people," she answers with sadness in her eyes for the first time.

"And my hometown had plenty of those."

"Ah," I say, clumsily holding onto the decorative lights. I don't want to reach for the hook too quickly and appear indifferent to what she just shared with me.

"Go ahead," she says, apparently reading my mind now.

"Right," I say, thinking that I have become awfully inept at expressing myself properly. "I'll just..."

As I reach for the hook, I lose my balance and for a terrifying moment, hang in the air feeling gravity pull at me. But then Dani's hands grab me and pull me back just before I fall.

"Careful!" she says loudly.

I start laughing. I am not even sure why, but I cannot stop until I notice Dani's hands still gripping my arm tightly. Suddenly, my body starts buzzing with a feeling that has been absent for a long time.

I reach for the hook on the wall again, trying to distract myself. With Dani's hands still holding onto me, I manage to attach the lights, feeling the heat radiating from where she's touching me.

"There," I say, slightly out of breath. "All set."

"Hooray," Dani exclaims, her voice betraying a hint of strain. "Time for a break!"

As I descend the ladder, it feels more unstable than before and I hold on for dear life. Dani doesn't let go until both my feet are back on the ground.

We grin at each other; a grin of accomplishment and discovery.

"Do you drink coffee?" Dani asks, tucking her hand into her pocket.

"Of course," I reply, still maintaining eye contact.

She looks away as she asks, "Do you want to go out and maybe grab some?"

"I can't," I respond immediately.

The smile on her face fades and her shoulders slump.

"I have the store," I explain.

"Of course!" she says, rubbing the back of her neck. "I completely forgot about the store."

"Well," I stutter. "I do have some pretty good coffee in the back."

The coffee is more than just pretty good, it's exceptional. As a self-proclaimed coffee snob, I always keep a stash of specialty beans in my kitchen cabinet.

Dani's face lights up. "I'd love that!" Her cheeks flush bright red. "I mean, if you're offering."

It's been years since I've had coffee with someone. I haven't even gone out for a cup with a friend. Ever since I used to make coffee every morning for River, I haven't shared this experience with anyone else.

There's something intimate about grinding beans by hand every morning. The resistance against the beans and the gradual release of their aroma is a ritual I've come to cherish.

"Do you prefer a stronger blend or something more fruity?" I ask, taking my time.

"Oh, how fancy," she chuckles. "That's quite unexpected."

Unexpected indeed, even for me. But I've taken a big step today and try not to think too much about it. For once, I want to go with the flow and not overanalyze my interactions with other humans.

"If you think that's fancy, then I might have to give you my cheap beans. Only someone who truly appreciates good coffee deserves the good stuff," I tease.

Her eyes widen briefly before her voice lowers. "I do like it on the stronger side."

I clear my throat as butterflies erupt in my stomach. "Got it, I know just what to get you then."

"Perfect," Dani nods shyly.

She seems slightly bewildered by this sudden turn of events, but so am I. Yet, it feels nice to feel alive again after living in the shadow of death for so long. Perhaps it's really okay to enjoy this moment without overthinking it?

"I'll go make that coffee now," I say slowly.

Should I invite Dani to the back of the store? There's a small kitchen there, much smaller than the one upstairs, but I usually use this one since I spend most of my days in the store.

"Do you want me to hang up those other lights while you're making coffee?" Dani suggests, pointing at the box of decorations.

This takes me by surprise. Now I realize I want her to sit at the kitchen table and chat with me while I make coffee. But it's probably better if I don't allow that to happen.

"That would be great," I reply, pointing towards the other side of the store. "There are two hooks on the wall over there."

"Perfect," she says, grabbing the ladder with ease and carrying it across the room.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," I say reluctantly.

"I'll scream if I fall," she jokes, already climbing up the ladder confidently.

"Okay," I reply before heading towards the small kitchen.

But before I disappear through the door, I turn around and watch Dani for a moment. She's attaching the lights effortlessly, her upper body reaching towards the wall as her fleece sweater rides up slightly.

My mouth goes dry at the sight of her skin; noticing the curve of her hip just below her belt and her exposed side revealing a beautiful stomach.

In a hurry, I start opening cabinets in search of the right beans. With all this energy building up inside me, grinding them will be no problem at all.

I make a few mistakes while brewing the coffee because I'm trying to listen to what Dani is doing in the other room. It's okay, I can just surprise her with an even better cup next time.

As I pour the dark brew into a mug, I note that I am already assuming there will be another coffee. That's scary and normal, I tell myself. It's normal to want to be around people.

Still, I shouldn't make assumptions. Assumptions lead to expectations. And expectations lead to disappointment. The last thing I need in my life is more disappointment.

"What are you doing?" I ask myself, staring at the kitchen counter.

I'm too old and have lived through too much to tell myself anything but the truth. I don't want to be around people. I want to be around Dani, who I've only just met.

It's not that I don't believe in instant, intense connections. I had that type of connection with River and it brought me so much happiness. But I was convinced I would never experience this again.

And even if I could, should I allow it to happen? What would River think if she saw me grinding coffee beans for someone else? I know she told me to find love again, but did she really mean that?

It's not too late to stop this. I can ask Dani to leave. I can go back to living my life with Bernie. I can keep River here with me forever by never loving anyone else.

Finally, with a sigh, I carry the two mugs of steaming black coffee back into the store feeling shaken and unsteady. Dani is placing a stuffed reindeer in between two sections of books for kids. It's cute of her to do that

"Are you enjoying yourself?" I ask.

She spins around and laughs. "I do like kids' books. They're often so beautiful."

"They are," I agree, handing her the coffee. "I forgot to ask if you want milk or sugar."

"Wouldn't that ruin your fancy coffee?" Dani asks, her eyes twinkling.

"It would," I nod. "But I wouldn't judge you."

"That's a lie," she replies. "You would totally judge me."

She sniffs the cup and moans in a way that I wish she wouldn't, even though I often do the same thing when raising my first cup of coffee in the morning.

"You're right," I concede, taking a sip. "I would consider it coffee heresy."

Dani tastes the coffee and closes her eyes. "That is very good."

"Where do you usually get your coffee?" I ask, already suspecting the answer.

She swallows slowly, sitting down on the small ladder. I realize I should have offered her a chair or something. I guess I wasn't sure anymore if I wanted her to stay.

"Starbucks," she admits as I turn to grab a chair from behind the counter for myself.

"I figured," I say, smiling, but she can't see that. So I add, "But I forgive you."

She laughs. "I guess I should do better, especially in NYC where I have plenty of options."

I come back with the chair and hesitate. I want to put it very close to Dani, but I know it might seem weird. Still, I place it a little closer than I normally would.

"You never told me what you do," I say, leaning back while holding the cup with both of my hands. "Do you live in NYC because of your job, or did you find a job there after moving to the city?"

Dani raises her eyebrows slightly. "I never said I work in the city," she finally says with a mysterious smile.

I nod, forced to agree. "You haven't."

I don't want to press any further, but I'm intrigued - and annoyed - by her sudden secrecy.

She places both feet on the bottom step of the small ladder. "I create websites, so I mostly work from home."

"Okay!" I say enthusiastically, not because I have a particular interest in websites, but because I'm relieved that she has a normal job. For a moment, I thought she managed a sex toy store or something.

Not that there's anything wrong with that, of course. Why am I even thinking about sex toys? I shouldn't be thinking about sex at all.

"Okay?" she asks, and I realize I've gone silent.

"It sounds very interesting," I quickly say, raising my cup.

"It's not," she wrinkles her nose. "I used to love it, but now I'm tired of it. People expect too much for too little pay these days."

"Yeah," I sigh. "Tell me about it. People expect to find books here for a few dollars... It's madness."

"And AI is only going to make it worse," Dani continues. "I've had clients say they'll just use artificial intelligence for their next website."

"Yikes," I make a face.

Dani chuckles as she looks at me. "You're a great listener," she says, shaking her head.

"I wanted to be a psychologist when I grew up," I joke and wink.

She laughs again. I feel proud of myself for making her laugh like this.

"I don't know," she says before taking another sip of her coffee. "Sometimes I just want to pack up everything, sell the rest, and leave the country. Go live in Europe or something."

My ears start ringing. The coffee suddenly tastes bitter in my mouth. But I force a smile and respond, "Yeah, I understand."

But of course, I don't really understand anymore. My younger self would have related. I once packed up everything, sold what I couldn't take with me, and moved here to be with the love of my life. And now I'm stuck.

"Really? Do you?" Dani asks eagerly, her eyes wide.

Something inside me breaks at her hopeful expression. Almost as if a dream or illusion that had formed recently is shattering into pieces.

Suddenly, I'm back where I've been for years: sitting in a bookstore that isn't mine and wanting to leave, yet also not wanting to leave at all. Soon, I'll be all alone again.

"Yeah," I reply softly. "It's normal to want to run away when you feel trapped."

Dani huffs in surprise and maybe even insult.

Realizing my comment was probably not very tactful, I try to explain further.

"I mean," I say slowly. "I get that the promise of a change of environment can bring a new perspective."

I would have made a terrible psychologist, I think to myself. I'm too opinionated. River used to tell me that all the time. She often called me out on my rants about injustice from the comfort of my chair.

"That's true," Dani agrees.

"I'm sorry," I say before even thinking about it. "I understand, because that's how I left the city. I packed on a whim and came here, and now I'm still here, trying to run away from everything, but I can't. I just can't."

Her eyes soften and she straightens her back. "Okay," she says, wrapping both of her hands around the mug again. "That sounds like a lot."

I have no idea why I just shared all that. I've hired several online therapists since River died and not one has gotten me to admit anything remotely as intense as what I just blurted out.

"It is," I say quietly. "It's been a lot." I nod a few times, more to myself than to Dani.

Dani places her hand on my knee, sending a jolt up my spine. "You came here for River, didn't you?" she asks.

It's not often that you can feel your own eyes widen, but I do, and I quickly look away. It doesn't help much because everything around me reminds me of River. The bookshelf in the corner still looks a little crooked because she never got around to fixing it.

"How long has it been since..." Dani continues, but she doesn't finish the question.

She doesn't know what to ask, I realize. My throat tightens as I prepare to answer. It takes me a few moments before I can say, "She passed away 6 years ago."

I'm ready to explain that River got ill and things went downhill quickly, but Dani doesn't ask what happened. Instead, she asks, "Have you been alone here since?"

Tears immediately prickle at the back of my eyes. I shake my head and point in Bernie's direction. Dani follows my finger and smiles at Bernie, her hand still resting on my knee.

"Okay, this might sound a little weird," Dani finally says, her voice croaking as she speaks. "But I'd like to stay with you for a little while longer."

I tilt my head. "For more coffee?" I ask, even though I know that's not what she means.

Dani chuckles softly. "Yes, and maybe dinner afterward."

I immediately think about what's in my fridge. I doubt there's anything fresh in there to make dinner with.

"I-I don't know," I stammer.

Dani squeezes my knee. "It's okay, I understand."

Frowning, I say, "No, I mean, my fridge is empty. I was never a great chef. I got a lot worse after River died."

"How about pizza?" Dani asks, smiling. "Is there any good pizza around here? Or Chinese food?"

I smile back because I know every good take-out place in this town.

"There's a fantastic pasta place around the corner," I say. "It's pretty new but it's really good."

"Is it gluten-free?" Dani asks.

"What?" I reply, alarmed.

"I'm joking," Dani says. "I love pasta."

I smile but it quickly fades. This is about a lot more than pasta. I know Dani knows how lonely I am, and I think Dani is lonely too. We were both fine with being lonely... until now. But can I be anything other than lost and lonely? Isn't this who I am now?

"It's just pasta," Dani now says, as if sensing my hesitation.

"No," I say, "it's more than that."

Our gazes hold for a long moment, and I feel something change in the air around us. It's as if we have come to an understanding. The feeling frightens me, and I am tempted to get up and hide from it. But something stops me.

If this were a Christmas movie on Netflix, there would be mystical bells ringing in the distance or maybe an elf peeking mischievously through the window. However, this is not a movie. Yet, I still feel something extraordinary taking over.

It feels like... peace. Like a blessing. Like... River is telling me to let go, I realize with a start. Tears immediately fill my eyes, but I also smile - so wide that the skin around my eyes crinkles. Tears run down my cheeks.

"You're beautiful when you smile," Dani says quietly.

I meet her eyes again, overcome with emotion.

"Where did you come from all of a sudden?" I ask, my head spinning.

"I, eh, impulsively booked an Airbnb," Dani replies after a second. "I was walking through town after a nearby hike, and something made me want to come inside your store."

"It's a little freaky," I say, shaking my head. "I mean..."

I gesture around the store, which suddenly looks cozier and lighter.

"Who are you?" I say as I focus on Dani again.

She just grins and shrugs.

"Do you know that show with the angel who comes down to help people?" I ask, the words tumbling out of my mouth before I can consider what I am saying.

Dani's eyes widen. "That is not me," she laughs. "I am most definitely not an angel."

Something in her voice stirs the butterflies in my stomach. A wonderful tingling spreads from my chest to my center. I take in a sharp breath.

A flash of guilt almost ruins the feeling, but not quite. Something in or around me chases away my guilt. Deep inside, I know that I've waited long enough.

"But who are you?!" I repeat, a little louder.

Dani laughs. "I'm not even sure I can answer that question, to be honest."

I like that answer because I wouldn't be able to describe myself anymore either. I could have told you who I was this morning, but I can't now. A sense of wonder and discovery makes my fingers and toes tingle.

"What did you add to this coffee?" Dani asks, sniffing her mug.

Grinning, I reply, "This coffee hasn't changed in years. This is all on you."

She purses her lips as she nods, and I look at her in a new way. I focus on her lips. They're more pink than I had previously realized. Her cheeks are flushed too and her skin looks so soft.

"I feel like we have so much to talk about," Dani says shyly. "I mean... We hardly know each other."

"We don't," I reply, my confidence growing inexplicably. "But we have time."

"Do we?" she asks, raising her eyebrows.

"Do you have somewhere else to be soon?" I ask. "Because I don't."

She visibly thinks about my question, no doubt listing her appointments for the coming days. Or perhaps she was planning to leave for Europe soon. For a terrifying moment, she frowns. I give her the time she needs to make a decision.

"No," she finally says. "I think I'm exactly where I need to be right now."

I consider kissing her, but it seems too much, too soon. And if I am going to kiss her, I don't want to do it here.

"How about a walk?" I say, feeling my eyes sparkle. I haven't felt this alive in years, and I am eager to see the world with fresh eyes. Going outside together seems like the right thing to do.

"Sure," Dani replies. "But what about the store?"

I get up and place the coffee on the table next to some books. "I'll close it for the rest of the day." My words sound delirious and I struggle not to take them back immediately.

"Are you sure?" Dani asks. "We can go later if you'd rather..."

"No," I interrupt her. "I really would like to go now, if that's okay with you." I need to get out of here before I change my mind. I need to escape from this prison I've built for myself.

She runs a hand through her hair. "Of course. I'd love to go for a walk."

I glance in Bernie's direction, but he's deep asleep and snoring again. I decide it's better to leave him be. He's gotten slower over the years and I doubt I'll have the patience to stick to his pace.

"I'll grab my jacket," I say. "We'll bring something back for Bernie from the bakery store."

Dani beams back at me. "Yes, perfect."

I stop and look up at the holiday decorations. "Maybe we can stop at the store for some new ornaments too. These ones are getting old. And we could use some more lights."

"We can do that too," Dani chuckles. "But I thought you hated the holidays."

"I do," I nod and turn to face her. "But maybe...maybe I don't have to anymore?"

Dani suddenly walks over to me, her eyes lit up with fire and something I don't want to name just yet. I place my hand on her chest, gently, before she can kiss me. But her mouth is already close to mine and I can smell her perfume again. The delicious scent makes my whole belly glow with anticipation.

"I'll go get my jacket," I say hoarsely. "The park is beautiful this time of year."

She takes a deep breath, and after a moment, I see that she understands. She leans back, biting her lip. I'm grateful for it. I sense that I can trust her to give me space when I need it.

"It's not far," I croak, "and we still have time."

"Yes," she says. "We do have time. All the time you need."

And then, because she is just so perfect, I impulsively and passionately kiss her. Not all change has to be slow. If I had not kissed her now, immediately, I might never have. And so I continue kissing her standing in the middle of my past but also very much stepping into my future.

As I feel her lips on mine, I realize that I don't need a new life. I don't need this to be a new story. But what I do need is a new chapter. Finally, I want to turn the page and write a new happy ending that I didn't ask for but will embrace nevertheless.