

THE
Missing 
PIECE

AMY R. ANGUISH

This one is dedicated to my Mom and grandmothers for teaching me the joy of sewing—even if that means mastering the art of using a seam ripper first. The patience and love you put in every stitch through the years hopefully comes through in this story too.

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Chapter One



“What’s that sigh about?” Beth Norton glanced over at her mom on the other side of the desk.

“I’ve been able to determine some of these scribblings Laura left behind. But not enough. And I’m pretty sure we missed a payment or two.”

Beth’s heart sank to her stomach. “Any idea how much?”

“Not sure, but bills add up fast.” Mom pulled her brown hair away from her face. “Laura was the financial and business-minded one—my expertise is more the customers.”

“Mine too.” Beth sighed. “But the Watermelon Festival is in just a few weeks.”

“I heard that somewhere.” Mom shot her a wink. “Maybe every time you found a new pattern to try out. You’ve only been sewing for our booth for months.”

“Our booth is going to be the best ever this year. I’ve already completed three full-sized quilts, two twin, and several baby-sized too. Down to pillows, table runners, potholders, and other small items.”

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“If you kill yourself doing this, is it really going to be worth it?”

“If we win the Best Watermelon Festival Spirit award, the prize money would give us a tiny cushion, more notice, and honor Mama Laura’s memory—she adored all things watermelon.” Beth had been researching other ways to draw in more customers, too. The festival would be the perfect time to take advantage, as people flocked to their small town from all over the state.

“I know, I know.” Mom glanced around at the piles of paperwork covering the desk. “But I’m working on a few other ideas too.”

“You aren’t going to need any other ideas. This is going to work.” Beth gave a sharp nod. “Speaking of which, I’d better get back to it. I only came in here to print out this pattern piece I lost somewhere. That table runner isn’t going to sew itself.”

Back through the quilt shop and into the front room, set up with sewing machines and a cutting table, Beth cranked her radio up and sat at the machine which had been her near-constant companion these last few months. But it would be worth it. Soon, she found her rhythm and had the machine humming along at a good clip.

“Since when do you listen to pop rock?”

Beth jerked as her hand pushed the fabric under the sewing machine’s needle. Air hissed through her lips as pain shot through her thumb, and the machine’s hum groaned then stopped. Lifting the presser foot, she jerked her throbbing thumb out and stuck it in her mouth then turned to see who had snuck in.

“Sorry. You okay?” He stood in the doorway, about six feet even, a ball cap shading his eyes and a short brown beard covering his face. Despite the familiar voice, nothing about him

looked recognizable, and his identity remained just out of her mind's reach.

"Fine." She faked a smile that she hoped looked hospitable, then stood and strode toward the store's small kitchen. Cold water had her cringing, even with the hot July sun coming through the window. But she needed to wash the needle wound before she could fully assess the damage.

"How can I help?"

There he was again. Hadn't he caused enough trouble? And how had she not heard the front doorbell?

She turned the faucet off and wrapped her hand in a paper towel. Blood seeped through the white material, spreading into a flowery blob. "Look in that drawer over there and see if there are any bandages left. I can't get the bleeding to stop." She bobbed her head toward the other counter's far end.

Darting to the drawer she indicated, he dug through its mess as if he belonged there. Who was this guy? And what was he doing in a quilt store in Sassafra, Arkansas, of all places?

"Ta da!" He lifted a mostly empty box stashed behind several old pairs of scissors and at least a dozen twist ties. "Let's see if we can get you patched up. I didn't see any antiseptic in there."

"I haven't died from pricking my finger yet." She lifted the soaked towel away and huffed as more red seeped out. Apparently, the needle had gone all the way through her thumb nail—a clean puncture. The nail side was bleeding more than the other, though.

"Here we go." He peeled the backing off a medium sized bandage and carefully wrapped it around her thumb. As his hand cradled hers, a new awareness of him seeped in. That, and the familiar scent of sandalwood and something else outdoorsy.

Before she could formulate a thought, he lifted her hand

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and pressed a kiss to her sore digit. Shock and something else zinged through her. What in the world? Her gaze darted up to his face.

From this vantage point, she had a better view up under the brim of his hat. Two familiar brown eyes focused on her bandaged thumb. *Tommy?* Her rebellious heart skipped a beat before remembering how he'd betrayed and abandoned her all those years ago.

"Tommy." His name breathed from her mouth.

"How's that? Too tight?" His focus moved to her face.

She blinked and jerked away. Much too tight, but she was thinking about her heart more than her finger.

"Fine. Thanks." Never in a million years would she admit the dressing needed to be loosened before she lost circulation. She could fix it after he left.

"I didn't mean to startle you. I thought you heard the door." Tommy hooked a thumb over his shoulder, motioning toward the store front. His voice was deeper now, just different enough it hadn't completely registered earlier.

"No. I guess the machine drowned it out." She slid past him and pulled out the piece she'd been working on. No blood stains marred the white background or bright pink appliqué. But she'd have to replace the needle.

"Or maybe this music." He turned down the radio. "I don't remember you listening to this genre before."

"It's not like you've been around the last seven years." She loosened the screw so she could slide the old needle out and insert a new one. "You don't know a lot about me."

He rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. "Yeah. I know. When I left for college, I had no idea I'd get a job offer somewhere else right out of school. Trust me. I wish I'd been back more."

At the break in his voice, regret stirred in her chest. His

mom, who Beth lovingly referred to as Mama Laura, had been gone three months now. He had to be thinking about how little he'd seen her, not realizing cancer would steal her away before any of them were ready.

"So, you work here now?" The sadness lingered in his voice.

"For the last several years. Mom needs me more than ever. Especially with the Watermelon Festival coming up."

"She's actually the reason I'm here. She called and said she needed help." He glanced around as if expecting to see Mom over his shoulder.

He was Mom's Plan B? Surely not!

"She's in the office. Feel free to go on back. She's been trying to decipher your mom's notes and plans and organization strategy but isn't having much luck. That's probably why she called." Though Beth wished her mom had at least warned her Tommy was in town and might be coming by.

Then, maybe she could've prepared her heart to see him again. Braced herself for how good he looked with that beard and more muscles—details she hadn't noticed at Mama Laura's funeral when she'd been busy avoiding him. Or at least given her time to find an excuse to hide. When had he returned to town anyway?

"Right. Thanks." He paused in the doorway. "We should catch up sometime."

She refused to meet his eye. "I don't know. I'm pretty swamped right now, working on things to sell at the festival."

"Is something wrong, Bethie?" He lingered.

Seriously?

"I haven't been called Bethie in over seven years." Her voice came out more bitter than she intended, but so be it.

If he had to ask that question, he didn't deserve an answer. In years past, he could read her mind better than anyone other

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than Paige. But that ended years ago, back when they were seniors in high school.

“There you are.” Mom’s voice rang through the now quiet store. “You wouldn’t believe how much trouble I’m having with these notes your mom left about the business’s financial side.”

Tommy shot Beth one more look before grinning and turning toward Mom. He wrapped her up in a hug like he’d done his whole life. After all, Beth and Tommy had been raised together, playing under the quilt frame in the back room, hiding and seeking between the fabric shelves. How could they be so estranged now?

“Hey, Mama Marsha. I make no promises, but I’m willing to take a look.” He rested his arm across her shoulders as they walked down a row of green cotton prints toward the office.

“I miss your mom every day, Tommy. How are you and your dad holding up?” Mom’s voice drifted away.

Beth laid her head down on the table for a moment before lifting it and loosening her bandage. Moisture gathered at the edges of her eyes, but she refused to let it fall. Not now. She’d told herself she’d moved on, and she planned to live up to that.

Beth glanced at the clock and then to the half-sewn watermelon table runner. Would it be ridiculous to go to lunch this early? She eyed the clock again, shot her mom a quick text, and slipped out the back door before she changed her mind. Perhaps Tommy would be gone when she returned. Hopefully for good.



“HEY, BETH. THE USUAL?” Dawn grinned over her shoulder as Beth entered the sandwich shop.

“Please and thank you.” Beth studied the menu to see what all Dawn had added, though she rarely varied in her order.

“Want to help taste test my new watermelon smoothie? I’m trying to come up with several recipes for the festival.” Dawn pointed to a blender full of bright pink slush.

“No, thanks. But I’m sure whatever you make will be great.” Beth paid for her order, but all the tables in the small deli were full. So much for staying here longer. In the July heat, even in the shade, it would be too uncomfortable to stay out long, so a picnic was out. Nothing to do, but head back to The Missing Piece.

The door jangled as she neared the corner the shop occupied. She paused, peeking around the brick. Tommy stepped out, pulled his baseball cap back on over his brown waves, and headed in the opposite direction. His shoulders were broader than she remembered, but also held what looked like the weight of five men instead of just one.

A twinge of guilt tempted her to call out and take him up on that offer to catch up, but she held back. Much as their history had her wanting to comfort him in Mama Laura’s loss, the rest of their past got in the way. No need to set herself up to fall into the same temptation once more. She knew from experience that only led to heartache.