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## PRESENT DAY



“*I* love the smell of funnel cakes.” Catherine Mullins inhaled deeply and turned to her daughter, Madeleine.

“And kettle corn. Mmm.” Maddy smiled back at her, shifting her weight.

Both women were laden down with art prints and frames, carrying Maddy’s unsold paintings back to her car after a long day at the Shady Springs Harvest Festival. Booths and tents lined the walkways of Spring Park, and the sounds of banjos and fiddles floated through the air. The crowd had thinned significantly, but dozens of families still stood in line for fried treats or icy lemonade. Many had already made their way over to the square-dancing exhibition taking place on the other side of the park.

“Did you have a good day?” Catherine asked as they hiked through the field-turned-temporary parking lot.

“It was great!” Madeleine beamed as she set down her load and unlocked the car trunk. “Much better than last night. I’m sure the next couple of days will be a little slower, but I’ve more

than made up for the cost of reserving my booth. I even had some repeat customers from last year.”

This was Maddy’s second time selling her art at the Harvest Festival. After spending a summer painting a mural for the small church in downtown Shady Springs the year before, Maddy had decided to split her time between her hometown of Kansas City with her mom and her aunt’s house in Shady Springs, Arkansas. It didn’t hurt that her boyfriend of a year, A.J. Young, also lived in Shady Springs.

As if summoned by Catherine’s thoughts, A.J. appeared behind her, his arms full.

“You got all that, A.J.?” Catherine carefully leaned her frames against the car so she could take a couple from him.

“Thanks, Ms. Mullins. I think we’ve about got everything now.”

“Catherine. You’ve got to start calling me Catherine, especially if—” Clamping her lips suddenly, she cut her eyes to her daughter. She breathed a sigh of relief. Maddy was fiddling with something in the driver’s seat and didn’t seem to hear anything.

“I’ve got the last of it.” Maddy’s father, Henry, joined the rest of them at the car. He gave Catherine a smile, and she nodded her head in return.

“Here, let me help you, Mr. Mullins.” A.J. and Henry unloaded the rest of the prints and frames into the trunk and the backseat.

“Are you two going to stick around a little while?” Henry shut the last car door and turned to Maddy.

“What do you think, A.J.? Want to walk around a bit?” She turned her face up to A.J.’s, slipping her hand into his.

“Of course. Would anyone care to join us?” A.J.’s tone of voice was inviting, but his eyes, peering over Maddy’s head said otherwise.

“Oh, no. You two go have fun.” Catherine waved them off, leaning against the car in an attempt to look casual.

As soon as they were out of sight, she turned to Henry. “Did you bring the camera?”

“Of course. It’s in my car. Did you text Clara?” He pulled car keys out of his pocket.

“Not yet.” Catherine whipped out her phone and typed a brief message to her sister. “Done. Let’s pick up your camera and meet her by the lemonade stand.”

They walked in silence for a few minutes. “How’re you feeling, Cate?”

“What do you mean?” Catherine turned to him.

“I mean, how do you feel about ...” Henry gestured broadly.

She nodded, understanding. “I’m okay. I mean, it’s a little bittersweet, but I like him. She could do a lot worse.”

“I like him too. He’s a good guy.” Henry stopped and looked at her, his eyes narrowed. “Does he seem—?”

“Familiar? Like maybe we’ve seen him before somewhere?” Catherine had wondered the same thing since she met A.J.

“Yes!” Henry’s face lit up. “I’m glad I’m not crazy.” He shook his head and kept walking.

“No, I see it, too, but it’s not possible for us to have met him before. He just moved to Shady Springs four years ago, and his family is all in Little Rock.”

“Hmm.” Henry clicked his key fob, and a nearby sedan beeped.

“New car?”

“Yeah ... well, new to me, at least.” He retrieved a camera bag from the trunk. “My old clunker finally gave up the ghost.”

“Still went with red, I see.”

“Of course.” Henry grinned at her, and her heart skipped. That dumb smile of his always got her. “When I saw they had one in red, I had to buy it.”

Catherine gave a tight-lipped smile. She hoped her pink

cheeks didn't give her away. Even after all their years apart, she couldn't shake her attraction to Henry. It didn't help that she had never been in a serious relationship with anyone else after him.

They trekked through the field together, toward the lemonade stand where Catherine's sister, Clara, waited.

"Cate! Henry!" Clara waved her arms.

"It's good to see you, Clara." Henry enveloped Clara in a warm embrace, and Catherine's breath caught. Was that ... jealousy?

"I was thinking if we cut through the field on the west side, we should be able to get close enough without being spotted."

"Sounds like a plan." Henry patted Clara on the back, and the three headed off together.

"Well, I *thought* this would be a shortcut." Clara's gaze roved over the booths standing in their way. Vendors packed away wreaths of tulle, carved wooden signs, and bars of goat milk soap.

"Come on, let's go across here." Catherine led the way to a large empty tent.

"How have you been, Henry?" Clara patted him on the shoulder as they walked.

"Good, Clara. Really good." Henry beamed at her. "I was booked solid for wedding season. We're getting ready for some fall sessions at the studio, and I've got an agreement in the works with a pumpkin patch nearby. I'm going to offer a package deal with a mini-session for families."

"You said 'we.' Have you been able to hire some help?"

Although Cate knew he'd taken a long hiatus from his photography to work through personal issues, Henry had made an impressive amount of progress in a short time with his business in Fayetteville.

"Yes, I have an assistant now, Leah. She's taken a lot off my plate. And if we keep growing, I might be able to hire a second photographer."

“That’s great, Henry.” Catherine turned to smile at him. Was that a faint blush in his cheeks, or just her imagination?

They hunkered down against the trunk of a large oak tree. “Did A.J. say what he’d do to give a cue?” Henry asked.

Catherine barely noticed the rough bark of the tree against her back as she turned to face Henry. His blue eyes peered into her own. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she registered that he’d asked her a question, but all she could think about was how his cologne still smelled the same. She willed her heart to slow down.

“Yes, he’s going to stop close to that bench.” She pointed to a green park bench a few yards away. “Then, he’ll kneel.”

Henry nodded, but he blinked. Did he look sad that their daughter was already old enough to be getting engaged? Or was she projecting her feelings? He turned away from her, pulling his camera out of his bag.

“Look, there they are. *Shh, shh.*” Clara patted their arms.

Catherine, Henry, and Clara peeked around the tree trunk at the sight before them. Maddy and A.J. strolled along the path, completely oblivious to anyone else.

Henry lifted the camera to his face, kneeling on the grass. “Cate, would you grab my bag? I’m going to move closer in a minute.” He spoke without looking away from the viewfinder.

“Of course.” Catherine shouldered the strap of his heavy equipment bag. How many times had she done that same exact movement in the past? A dozen times a hundred?

“I’m going to try to sneak around behind them to get a different angle from my phone,” Clara whispered in Catherine’s ear.

“Good idea.” Catherine settled back behind the tree and leaned to find a good vantage point.

Henry snapped a few shots. “Could you grab my other lens?”

“Uh, sure.” Catherine reached into the bag again. There were

two lenses, both black, and she wasn't sure which was the right one. "Is this it?"

Henry glanced away from the camera. "No, that's the macro lens for closeups of the ring. The other one."

"Right. Here you go." She grabbed the other lens and handed it to him.

"Thank you." His fingers brushed hers as he took the lens.

A jolt. Electricity zipped all over her skin, not just where she'd touched him. "Sorry about that."

Henry cleared his throat. "It's no problem. I'm not always great at communicating."

That was an understatement if she ever heard one. "Well, I used to be more helpful. It's just been so long ..." She trailed off.

"*Shh, shh*. Listen." Henry turned back to his camera, and Catherine took in the scene in front of her. Her stomach roiled. She'd thought she was ready for this, but now she wasn't sure.