

REMINDERS OF HIM: A NOVEL



REMINDERS
OF
HIM

A NOVEL

COLLEEN
HOOVER

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

REMINDERS OF HIM: A NOVEL

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 Montlake

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This book is for Tasara.

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CHAPTER ONE

KENNA

There's a small wooden cross staked into the ground on the side of the road with the date of his death written on it.

Scotty would hate it. I bet his mother put it there.

"Can you pull over?"

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“Can you pull over?”

The driver slows down and brings the cab to a stop. I get out and walk back to where the cross is. I shake it side to side until the dirt loosens around it, and then I pull it out of the ground.

Did he die in this very spot? Or did he die in the road?

I didn't pay attention to the details during the pretrial. When I heard he had crawled several yards away from the car, I started humming so I wouldn't hear anything else the prosecutor said. Then, to avoid having to sit through details if the case went to trial, I pleaded guilty.

Because technically, I was.

I may not have killed him with my actions, but I definitely killed him with my inaction.

I thought you were dead, Scotty. But dead people can't crawl.

I walk back to the cab with the cross in hand. I set it on the back seat next to me and wait for the driver to pull back onto the road, but he doesn't. I glance at him in the rearview mirror, and he's staring at me with a raised brow.

“Stealing roadside memorials has to be some kind of bad karma. You sure you want to take that?”

I look away from him and lie. “Yes. I'm the one who put it there.” I can still feel him staring at me as he pulls back onto the road.

My new apartment is only two miles from here, but it's in the opposite direction from where I used to live. I don't have a car, so I decided to find a place closer to downtown this time so I can walk to work. If I can even find a job. It'll be difficult with my history and lack of experience. And, according to the cabdriver, the bad karma I'm probably carrying around right now.

Stealing Scotty's memorial might be bad karma, but one could argue that leaving a memorial up for a guy who verbally expressed his hatred for roadside memorials could be bad karma as well. That's why I had the driver take the detour down this back road. I knew Grace probably left something at the location of the wreck, and I felt I owed it to Scotty to remove it.

“Cash or card?” the driver asks.

I look at the meter and pull cash and a tip out of my purse and hand it to him after he parks. Then I grab my suitcase and the wooden cross I just stole and make my way out of the cab and up to the building.

My new apartment isn't part of a huge complex. It's just a single-standing unit flanked by an abandoned car lot on one side and a convenience store on the other. Plywood covers a downstairs window. Beer cans in various stages of decay litter the property. I kick one aside so that it doesn't get stuck in the wheels of my suitcase.

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stuck in the wheels of my suitcase.

The place looks even worse than it did online, but I expected as much. The landlord didn't even ask for my name when I called to see if they had any vacancies. She said, "We always have vacancies. Bring cash; I'm in apartment one." Then she hung up.

I knock on apartment one. There's a cat in the window staring at me. It's so motionless I start to wonder if it's a statue, but then it blinks and slinks away.

The door opens, and an older, tiny woman stares up at me with a disgruntled look about her. She has curlers in her hair and lipstick smeared to her nose. "I don't need anything you're selling."

I stare at the lipstick, noting how it's bleeding into the wrinkles hugging her mouth. "I called last week about an apartment. You said you'd have one available."

Recognition flashes on the woman's prune-like face. She makes a *hmp* sound while looking me up and down. "Didn't expect you to look like this."

I don't know what to make of her comment. I look down at my jeans and T-shirt while she walks away from the door for a few seconds. She comes back with a zipper pouch. "Five fifty a month. First and last month's rent is due today."

I count out the money and hand it to her. "There's no lease?"

She laughs, stuffing the cash into her pouch. "You're in apartment six." She points a finger up. "That's right above me, so keep it down, I go to bed early."

"What utilities are included?"

"Water and trash, but you cover electric. It's on now—you have three days to get it switched into your name. Deposit is two fifty to the light company."

Fuck. Three days to come up with \$250? I'm starting to question my decision to come back so soon, but when I was released from transitional housing, I had two choices: spend all my money trying to survive in that town, or drive the three hundred miles and spend all my money in this one.

I'd rather be in the town that holds all the people once connected to Scotty.

The woman takes a step back into her apartment. "Welcome to Paradise Apartments. I'll bring you a kitten once you get settled."

I immediately put my hand on her door to prevent her from closing it. "Wait. What? A kitten?"

"Yeah, a *kitten*. Like a cat, but smaller."

I step away from her door like it'll somehow protect me from what she just said. "No, thank you. I don't want a kitten."

"I have too many."

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"I have too many."

"I don't want a kitten," I repeat.

"Who wouldn't want a kitten?"

"Me."

She huffs, like my response is completely unreasonable. "I'll make you a deal," she says. "I'll leave the electric on for two weeks if you take a kitten." *What in the hell kind of place is this?* "Fine," she says, responding to my silence as if it's a negotiation tactic. "The *month*. I'll leave the electric on for the whole month if you just take one kitten." She walks into her apartment but leaves the door open.

I don't want a kitten at all, ever, but not having to spend \$250 on an electricity deposit this month would be worth several kittens.

She reappears with a small black-and-orange kitten. She places it in my hands. "There ya go. My name is Ruth if you need anything, but try not to need anything." She goes to close her door again.

"Wait. Can you tell me where I can find a pay phone?"

She chuckles. "Yeah, back in 2005." She closes her door completely.

The kitten meows, but it's not a sweet meow. It sounds more like a cry for help. "You and me both," I mutter.

I make my way toward the stairs with my suitcase and my . . . kitten. Maybe I should have held out a few more months before coming back here. I worked to save up just over \$2,000, but most of that was spent on moving here. I should have saved up more. What if I don't find a job right away? And now I'm tasked with the responsibility of keeping a kitten alive.

My life just became ten times more difficult than it was yesterday.

I make it up to the apartment with the kitten clinging to my shirt. I insert the key in the lock and have to use both hands to pull on the door and get the key to turn. When I push open the door to my new apartment, I hold my breath, afraid of what it's going to smell like.

I flip on the light switch and look around, releasing my breath slowly. There's not much of a smell. That's both good and bad.

There's a couch in the living room, but that's literally all there is. A small living room, an even smaller kitchen, no dining room. No bedroom. It's an efficiency apartment with a closet and a bathroom so small the toilet touches the tub.

The place is a dump. A five-hundred-square-foot absolute shithole, but it's a step up for me. I've gone from sharing a one-hundred-square-foot cell with a roommate, to living in transitional

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I've gone from sharing a one-hundred-square-foot cell with a roommate, to living in transitional housing with six roommates, to a five-hundred-square-foot apartment I can call my own.

I'm twenty-six years old, and this is the first time I've ever officially lived somewhere alone. It's both terrifying and liberating.

I don't know if I can afford this place after the month is up, but I'm going to try. Even if that means applying to every business I walk past.

Having my own apartment can only serve to help as I plead my case to the Landrys. It'll show I'm independent now. Even if that independence will be a struggle.

The kitten wants down, so I put her on the floor in the living room. She walks around, crying out for whoever she left downstairs. I feel a pang in my chest as I watch her searching corners for a way out. A way back home. A way back to her mother and siblings.

She looks like a bumblebee, or something out of Halloween, with her black and orange splotches.

"What are we going to name you?"

I know she'll more than likely be nameless for a few days while I think about it. I take the responsibility of naming things very seriously. The last time I was responsible for naming someone, I took it more seriously than I've ever taken anything. That could have been because the whole time I sat in my cell during my pregnancy, all there was to do was think about baby names.

I chose the name Diem because I knew as soon as I was released, I was going to make my way back here and do everything in my power to find her.

Here I am.

Carpe Diem.

CHAPTER TWO

LEDGER

I'm pulling my truck into the alley behind the bar when I notice the nail polish still on the fingernails

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I'm pulling my truck into the alley behind the bar when I notice the nail polish still on the fingernails of my right hand. *Shit*. I forgot I played dress-up with a four-year-old last night.

At least the purple matches my work shirt.

Roman is tossing bags of trash into the dumpster when I exit the truck. He sees the gift sack in my hand and knows it's for him, so he reaches for it. "Let me guess. Coffee mug?" He peeks inside.

It's a coffee mug. It always is.

He doesn't say thank you. He never does.

We don't acknowledge the sobriety these mugs symbolize, but I buy him one every Friday. This is the ninety-sixth mug I've bought him.

I should probably stop because his apartment is full of coffee mugs, but I'm too far in to give up now. He's almost at one hundred weeks sober, and I've been holding on to that one-hundredth-milestone mug for a while now. It's a Denver Broncos mug. His least favorite team.

Roman gestures toward the back door of the bar. "There's a couple inside harassing other customers. You might want to keep an eye on them."

That's odd. We don't normally have to deal with unruly people this early in the evening. It isn't even six o'clock yet. "Where are they sitting?"

"Next to the jukebox." His eyes fall to my hand. "Nice nails, man."

"Right?" I hold up my hand and wiggle my fingers. "She did pretty good for a four-year-old."

I open the back door of the bar and am met with the grating sound of my favorite song being slaughtered by Ugly Kid Joe through the loudspeakers.

Surely not.

I walk through the kitchen and into the bar and immediately spot them. They're hunched over the jukebox. I quietly make my way over to them and see she's punching in the same four numbers again and again. I look over their shoulders at the screen while they giggle like mischievous children. "Cat's in the Cradle" is set to play thirty-six times in a row.

I clear my throat. "You think this is funny? Forcing me to listen to the same song for the next six hours?"

My father spins around when he hears my voice. "Ledger!" He pulls me in for a hug. He smells like beer and motor oil. And limes, maybe? *Are they drunk?*

My mother backs away from the jukebox. "We were trying to fix it. We didn't do this."

"Sure, you didn't." I pull her in for a hug.

They never announce when they're going to show up. They just appear and stay a day or two or three and then head out in their RV again.

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Their showing up drunk is new, though. I glance over my shoulder, and Roman is behind the bar now. I point to my parents. "Did you do this to them, or did they show up this way?"

Roman shrugs. "A little of both."

"It's our anniversary," my mother says. "We're celebrating."

"I hope you guys didn't drive here."

"We didn't," my father says. "Our car is with the RV in the shop getting routine maintenance, so we took a Lyft." He pats my cheek. "Wanted to see you, but we've been here two hours waiting for you to show up, and now we're leaving because we're hungry."

"This is why you should warn me before you drop into town. I have a life."

"Did you remember our anniversary?" my father asks.

"Slipped my mind. Sorry."

"Told you," he says to my mother. "Pay up, Robin."

My mother reaches into her pocket and hands him a ten-dollar bill.

They bet on almost everything. My love life. Which holidays I'll remember. Every football game I've ever played. But I'm almost positive they've just been passing the same ten-dollar bill back and forth for several years.

My father holds up his empty glass and shakes it. "Get us a refill, bartender."

I take his glass. "How about an ice water?" I leave them at the jukebox and make my way behind the bar.

I'm pouring two glasses of water when a girl walks into the bar looking somewhat lost. She glances around the room like she's never been here before, and then when she notices an empty corner at the opposite end of the bar, she makes a beeline for it.

I stare at her the entire time she's walking through the bar. I stare at her so hard I accidentally overfill the glasses and water goes everywhere. I grab a towel and wipe up my mess. When I look at my mother, she's looking at the girl. Then at me. Then at the girl.

Shit. The last thing I need is for her to try to set me up with a customer. She tries to play matchmaker plenty when she's sober, so I can't imagine how bad the tendency might be after a few drinks. I need to get them out of here.

I take the waters to them and then hand my mother my credit card. "You guys should go down to Jake's Steakhouse and have dinner on me. Walk there so you can sober up on the way."

"You are so nice." She clutches at her chest dramatically and looks at my father. "Benji, we did so well with him. Let's go celebrate our parenting with his credit card."

"We did do well with him," my father says in agreement. "We should have more kids."

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“We did do well with him,” my father says in agreement. “We should have more kids.”

“Menopause, honey. Remember when I hated you for an entire year?” My mother grabs her purse, and they take the glasses of water with them as they go.

“We should get rib eye since he’s paying,” my father mutters as they walk away.

I release a sigh of relief and then make my way back to the bar. The girl is tucked quietly into the corner, writing in a notebook. Roman isn’t behind the bar right now, so I’m assuming no one has taken her order yet.

I gladly volunteer as tribute.

“What can I get you?” I ask her.

“Water and a Diet Coke, please.” She doesn’t look up at me, so I back away to fulfill her order. She’s still writing in her notebook when I return with her drinks. I try to get a glimpse of what she’s writing, but she closes her notebook and lifts her eyes. “Thank . . .” She pauses in the middle of what I think is her attempt at saying *thank you*. She mutters the word *you* and sticks the straw in her mouth.

She seems flustered.

I want to ask her questions, like what her name is and where she’s from, but I’ve learned over the years of owning this place that asking questions of lonely people in a bar can quickly turn into conversations I have to maul my way out of.

But most of the people who come in here don’t capture my attention like she has. I gesture toward her two drinks and say, “Are you waiting for someone else?”

She pulls both drinks closer. “Nope. Just thirsty.” She breaks eye contact with me and leans back in her chair, pulling her notebook with her and giving it all her attention.

I can take a hint. I walk to the other end of the bar to give her privacy.

Roman returns from the kitchen and nudges his head in her direction. “Who’s she?”

“I don’t know, but she isn’t wearing a wedding ring, so she’s not your type.”

“Very funny.”

CHAPTER THREE

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CHAPTER THREE

KENNA

Dear Scotty,

They turned the old bookstore into a bar. Can you believe that shit?

I wonder what they did with the sofa we used to sit on every Sunday.

I swear, it's like this whole town is one huge Monopoly board, and after you died, someone came along and picked up the board and scrambled all the pieces around.

Nothing is the same. Everything seems unfamiliar. I've been walking around downtown taking it all in for the last couple of hours. I was on my way to the grocery store when I got sidetracked by the bench we used to eat ice cream on. I sat down and people watched for a while.

Everyone seems so carefree in this town. The people here just wander around like their worlds are right-side-up—like they aren't about to fall off the pavement and land in the sky. They just move from one moment to the next, not even aware of the mothers walking around without their daughters.

I probably shouldn't be in a bar, especially my first night back. Not that I have an issue with alcohol. That one horrible night was an exception. But the last thing I need your parents to find out is that I stopped by a bar before I stopped by their house.

But I thought this place was still the bookstore, and bookstores usually have coffee. I was so disappointed when I walked inside because it's been a long day of traveling here on a bus and then the cab. I was hoping for more caffeine than a diet soda can provide.

Maybe the bar has coffee. I haven't asked yet.

I probably shouldn't tell you this, and I promise it'll make sense before I finish this letter, but I kissed a prison guard once.

We got caught and he got transferred to a different unit and I felt guilty

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We got caught and he got transferred to a different unit and I felt guilty that our kiss got him in trouble. But he talked to me like I was a person and not a number, and even though I wasn't attracted to him, I knew he was attracted to me, so when he leaned in to kiss me, I kissed him back. It was my way of saying thank you, and I think he knew that, and he was okay with it. It had been two years since I had been touched by you, so when he pressed me against the wall and gripped my waist, I thought I'd feel more.

I was sad that I didn't.

I'm telling you this because he tasted like coffee, but a better kind of coffee than the prison coffee they served to the prisoners. He tasted like expensive eight-dollar coffee from Starbucks, with caramel and whipped cream and a cherry. It's why I kept kissing him. Not because I enjoyed the kiss, or him, or his hand on my waist, but because I missed expensive flavored coffee.

And you. I miss expensive coffee and you.

Love,

Kenna



"You want a refill?" the bartender asks. He has tattoos that slide all the way into his shirtsleeves. His shirt is deep purple, a color you don't see in prison very often.

I never thought about that until I was there, but prison is really drab and colorless, and after a while, you start to forget what the trees look like in the fall.

"Do you have coffee?" I ask.

"Sure. Cream and sugar?"

"Do you have caramel? And whipped cream?"

He tosses a rag onto his shoulder. "You bet. Soy, skim, almond, or whole milk?"

"Whole."

The bartender laughs. "I was kidding. This is a bar; I have a four-hour-old pot of coffee and your choice of cream or sugar or both or none."

The color of his shirt and the way it complements his skin tone are no longer impressive.

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The color of his shirt and the way it complements his skin tone are no longer impressive. *Asshole*. “Just give me whatever,” I mutter.

The bartender backs away to retrieve my basic prison coffee. I watch as he lifts the pot out of the holder and brings it close to his nose to sniff it. He makes a face, then dumps it out in the sink. He flicks the water on while refilling a guy’s beer while starting a new pot of coffee while closing out someone else’s tab while smiling just enough but not too much.

I’ve never seen someone move so fluidly, like he has seven arms and three brains and they’re all going at once. It’s mesmerizing watching someone who’s good at what they do.

I don’t know what I’m good at. I don’t know that there is anything in this world I could make look effortless.

There are things I *want* to be good at. I want to be a good mother. To my future kids, but mostly to the daughter I already brought into this world. I want to have a yard that I can plant stuff in. Stuff that will flourish and not die. I want to learn how to talk to people without wishing I could retract every word I said. I want to be good at feeling things when a guy touches my waist. I want to be good at life. I want to make it look effortless, but up until this point, I’ve made every aspect of life appear entirely too difficult to navigate.

The bartender glides back to me when the coffee is ready. As he’s filling the mug, I look at him and actually absorb what I’m seeing this time. He’s good looking in a way that a girl who is trying to get custody of her daughter should want to stay away from. He’s got eyes that have seen a thing or two, and hands that have probably hit a man or two.

His hair is fluid like his movements. Long, dark strands that hang in his eyes and move in whatever direction he moves. He doesn’t touch his hair; he hasn’t since I’ve been sitting here. He just lets it get in his way, but then he’ll flick his head every now and then, the slightest little movement, and his hair goes where he needs it to. It’s thick hair, agreeable hair, want-my-hands-in-his-hair hair.

My mug is full of coffee now, but he lifts a finger and says, “One sec.” He swivels and opens a minifridge and then pulls out whole milk. He pours some into the mug. He puts the milk back, opens another fridge—*surprise*, whipped cream. He reaches behind him, and when his hand reappears, he’s holding a single cherry that he places carefully on top of my drink. He slides it closer to me and spreads out his arms like he just created magic.

“No caramel,” he says. “Best I could do for not-a-coffee-shop.”

He probably thinks he just made a bougie drink for a spoiled girl who’s used to having eight-dollar coffee every day. He has no idea how long it’s been since I’ve had a decent cup of coffee. Even in the months I spent in transitional housing, they served prison coffee to the prison girls with prison *nasts*

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pasts.

I could cry.

I *do* cry.

As soon as he gives his attention to someone at the other end of the bar, I take a drink of my coffee and close my eyes and cry because life can be so fucking cruel and hard, and I've wanted to quit living it so many times, but then moments like these remind me that happiness isn't some permanent thing we're all trying to achieve in life, it's merely a thing that shows up every now and then, sometimes in tiny doses that are just substantial enough to keep us going.

CHAPTER FOUR

LEDGER

I know what to do when a child cries, but I don't know what to do when a grown woman cries. I stay as far away from her as I can while she drinks her coffee.

I haven't learned much about her since she walked in here an hour ago, but one thing I know for certain is she didn't come here to meet anyone. She came here for solitude. Three people have tried to approach her in the last hour, and she held up a hand and shot them down without making eye contact with any of them.

She drank her coffee in silence. It's barely seven in the evening, so she might just be working her way up to the hard stuff. I kind of hope not. I'm intrigued by the idea that she came to a bar to order things we rarely serve while turning down men she never even made eye contact with.

Roman and I are the only ones working until Mary Anne and Razi get here. The place is getting busier, so I can't give her the attention I want to give her, which is *all* my attention. I make it a point to spread myself out just enough so that it doesn't seem like I'm in her space too much.

As soon as she finishes the coffee, I want to ask her what she's having next, but instead I make her sit with her empty mug for a good ten minutes. I might make it fifteen before I work my way back to her.

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back to her.

In the meantime, I just steal glances at her. Her face is a work of art. I wish there was a picture of it hanging on a wall in a museum somewhere so I could stand in front of it and stare at it for as long as I wanted. Instead, I'm just getting in peeks here and there, admiring how all the same pieces of a face that make up all the other faces in the world just seem to coordinate better on her.

People rarely come to a bar at the start of a weekend evening in such a raw state, but she isn't dressed up. She's wearing a faded Mountain Dew T-shirt and jeans, but the green in the shirt matches the green in her eyes with such perfection it's as if she put all her effort into finding the perfect color of T-shirt, when I'm pretty sure she gave that shirt no thought at all. Her hair is russet. All one sturdy color. All one length, right below her chin. She slides her hands through it every now and then, and every time she does, it looks like she's about to fold in on herself. It makes me want to walk around the bar and lift her up and give her a hug.

What's her story?

I don't want to know.

I don't need to know.

I don't date girls I meet in this bar. Twice I've broken that rule, and twice it's bitten me in the ass.

Besides, there's something terrifying about this one. I can't quite put my finger on it, but when I talk to her, I feel like my voice is trapped in my chest. And not in a way that I'm left breathless by her, but in a more substantial way, as though my brain is warning me not to interact with her.

Red flag! Danger! Abort!

But why?

We make eye contact when I reach for her mug. She hasn't looked at anyone else tonight. Only me. I should feel flattered, but I feel scared.

I played professional football and own a bar, yet I'm scared of a little eye contact with a pretty girl. That should be my Tinder bio. *Played for the Broncos. Owns a bar. Scared of eye contact.*

"What next?" I ask her.

"Wine. White."

It's a hard balance owning a bar and being sober. I want everyone else to be sober, but I also need customers. I pour her the glass of wine and set it in front of her.

I remain near her, pretending to use a rag to dry glasses that have been dry since yesterday. I notice the slow roll of her throat as she stares down at the glass of wine, almost as if she's unsure. That split second of hesitation, or maybe it's regret, is enough to make me think she might struggle

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That split second of hesitation, or maybe it's regret, is enough to make me think she might struggle with alcohol. I can always tell when people are tossing away their sobriety by how they look at their glass.

Drinking is only stressful to alcoholics.

She doesn't drink the wine, though. She quietly sips on the soda until it's empty. I reach for the empty glass at the same time she does.

When our fingers touch, I feel something else trapped in my chest other than my voice. Maybe it's a few extra heartbeats. Maybe it's an erupting volcano.

Her fingers recoil from mine and she puts her hands in her lap. I pull the empty glass of soda away from her, as well as the full glass of wine, and she doesn't even look up to ask me why. She sighs, like maybe she's relieved I took the wine away. Why did she even order it?

I refill her soda, and when she isn't looking, I pour the wine in the sink and wash the glass.

She sips from the soda for a while, but the eye contact stops. Maybe I upset her.

Roman notices me staring at her. He leans an elbow onto the counter and says, "Divorce or death?"

Roman always likes to guess the reasons people come in alone and seem out of place. The girl doesn't seem like she's here because of a divorce. Women usually celebrate those by coming to bars with groups of friends, wearing sashes that say *Ex-Wife*.

This girl does seem sad, but not sad in a way that would indicate she's grieving.

"I'm gonna say divorce," Roman says.

I don't respond to him. I don't feel right guessing her tragedy, because I'm hoping it isn't divorce or death or even a bad day. I want good things for her because it seems like she hasn't had a good thing in a long, long time.

I stop staring at her while I tend to other customers. I do it to give her privacy, but she uses it as an opportunity to leave cash on the bar and sneak out.

I stare for several seconds at her empty barstool and the ten-dollar tip she left. She's gone and I don't know her name and I don't know her story and I don't know that I'll ever see her again, so here I am, rushing around the bar, through the bar, toward the front door she just slipped out of.

The sky is on fire when I walk outside. I shield my eyes, forgetting how assaulting the light always is when I step out of the bar before dark.

She turns around right when I spot her. She's about ten feet from me. She doesn't have to shield her eyes because the sun is behind her, outlining her head like it's topped with a halo.

"I left money on the bar," she says.

REMINDERS OF HIM: A NOVEL

"I left money on the bar," she says.

"I know."

We stare at each other for a quiet moment. I don't know what to say. I just stand here like a fool.

"What, then?"

"Nothing," I say. But I immediately wish I would have said, "*Everything.*"

She stares at me, and I never do this, I *shouldn't* do this, but I know if I let her walk away, I won't be able to stop thinking about the sad girl who left me a ten-dollar tip when I get the feeling she can't afford to leave me a tip at all.

"You should come back tonight at eleven." I don't give her a chance to tell me no or explain why she can't. I go back inside the bar, hoping my request makes her curious enough to show back up tonight.

CHAPTER FIVE

KENNA

I'm sitting on an inflatable mattress with my unnamed kitten, contemplating all the reasons I shouldn't go back to that bar.

I didn't come back to this town to meet guys. Even guys as good looking as that bartender. I'm here for my daughter and that's it.

Tomorrow is important. Tomorrow I need to feel Herculean, but the bartender unintentionally made me feel weak by pulling away my glass of wine. I don't know what he saw on my face that made him want to take the wine away from me. I wasn't going to drink it. I only ordered it so I could feel a sense of control in *not* drinking it. I wanted to look at it and smell it and then walk away from it feeling stronger than when I sat down.

Now I just feel unsettled because he saw how I was looking at the wine earlier, and the way he pulled it away makes me think he assumes I have an active issue with alcohol.

REMINDERS OF HIM: A NOVEL

pulled it away makes me think he assumes I have an active issue with alcohol.

I don't. I haven't had alcohol in years because one night of alcohol mixed with a tragedy ruined the last five years of my life, and the last five years of my life have led me back to this town, and this town makes me nervous, and the only thing that calms my nerves is doing things that make me feel like I'm still in control of my life and my decisions.

That's why I wanted to turn down the wine, dammit.

Now I'm not going to sleep well tonight. I have no reason to feel accomplished because he made me feel the complete opposite. If I want to sleep well tonight, I'm going to need to turn down something else I want.

Or someone.

I haven't wanted anyone in a long, long time. Not since I first met Scotty. But the bartender was kind of hot, and he had a great smile, and he makes great coffee, and he already invited me to come back, so it'll be simple to show up and turn him down.

Then I'll sleep well and be prepared to wake up and face the most important day of my life.

I wish I could take my new kitten with me. I feel like I need a sidekick, but she's asleep on the new pillow I bought at the store earlier.

I didn't buy much. The inflatable mattress, a couple of pillows and sheets, some crackers and cheese, and some cat food and litter. I decided I'm only going to live two days at a time in this town. Until I know what tomorrow will bring, there's no sense in my wasting any of the money I've been working six months to save up. I'm already running low, which is why I choose not to call a cab.

I leave the apartment to walk back to the bar, but I don't carry my purse or my notebook with me this time. I just need my driver's license and my apartment key. It's about a mile-and-a-half walk from my apartment to the bar, but it's nice out and the road is well lit.

I'm a little concerned that someone might recognize me at the bar, or even on my walk there, but I look completely different than I did five years ago. I used to care more about self-maintenance, but five years in prison has made me less concerned about hair dye and extensions and false lashes and artificial nails.

I didn't live in this town long enough to make many friends outside of Scotty, so I doubt many people even know who I am. I'm sure plenty of them know *of* me, but it's hard to be recognized when you aren't even missed.

Patrick and Grace might recognize me if they saw me, but I only met them once before going to prison.

Prison. I'll never get used to saying that word. It's such a hard word to say out loud. When you

REMINDERS OF HIM: A NOVEL

Prison. I'll never get used to saying that word. It's such a hard word to say out loud. When you lay the letters out on paper individually, they don't seem that harsh. But when you say the word out loud, "*Prison,*" it's just so damn severe.

When I think about where I've been for the last five years, I like to refer to it in my head as *the facility*. Or I'll think of my time there as *When I was away*, and leave it at that. To say "*When I was in prison*" is not something I'll ever get used to.

I'll have to say it this week when I look for a job. They'll ask, "Have you ever been convicted of a crime?" I'll have to say, "Yes, I spent five years in prison for involuntary manslaughter."

And they'll either hire me or they won't. They probably won't.

There's a double standard for women, even behind bars. When women say they've been to prison, people think *trash, whore, addict, thief*. But when men say they've been to prison, people add badges of honor to the negative thoughts, like *trash, but badass, addict, but tough, thief, but impressive*.

There's still a stigma with the men, but the women never get out with stigmas *and* badges of honor.

According to the clock on the courthouse, I make it back downtown at eleven thirty. Hopefully he's still here even though I'm half an hour late.

I didn't pay attention to the name of the bar earlier, probably because it was daylight out and I was shocked it was no longer a bookstore, but there's a small neon sign above the door that reads **WARD's**.

I hesitate before going back inside. My return presence is more or less sending this guy a message. A message I'm not sure I want him to receive. But the alternative is my going back to that apartment and being alone with my thoughts.

I've spent enough time alone with my thoughts over the past five years. I'm craving people and noise and all the things I haven't had, and my apartment reminds me a little of prison. There's a lot of loneliness and silence there.

I open the door of the bar. It's louder and smokier and somehow darker than it was earlier. There are no empty seats, so I weave through people, find the restroom, wait in the hall, wait outside, weave some more. Finally, a booth opens up. I cross the room and sit in it alone.

I watch the bartender flow behind the bar. I like how unbothered he seems. Two guys get into an argument, but he doesn't care—he just points to the door and they leave. He does that a lot. Points at things, and people just do the things he points out for them to do.

He points at two customers while making eye contact with the other bartender. That bartender walks up to them and closes out their tabs.

REMINDERS OF HIM: A NOVEL

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REMINDERS OF HIM: A NOVEL

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He points to an empty shelf, and one of the waitresses nods, and then a few minutes later she has the shelf restocked.

He points at the floor, and the other bartender disappears through the double doors and reappears with a mop to clean up a spill.

He points to a hook on the wall, and another waitress, a pregnant one, mouths, "Thank you," and she hangs up her apron and goes home.

He points, and people do, and then it's last call, and then it's time to close. People trickle out. No one trickles in.

He hasn't looked at me. Not even once.

I second-guess being here. He seems busy, and maybe I read him wrong earlier. I just assumed when he told me to come back that he said it for a reason, but maybe he tells all his customers that.

I stand up, thinking maybe I need to trickle out, too, but when he sees me stand, he points. He makes a simple motion with his finger, indicating for me to sit back down, so I do.

I'm relieved to know my intuition was right, but the emptier the bar gets, the more nervous I grow. He assumes I'm a grown-ass woman, but I barely feel like an adult. I'm a twenty-six-year-old teenager, inexperienced, starting from scratch.

I'm not sure I'm here for the right reasons. I thought I could just walk in, flirt with him, and then walk away, but he's more tempting than any bougie coffee. I came here to turn him down, but I had no idea that he would be pointing all night, or that he would point at me. *I had no idea pointing was sexy.*

I wonder if I would have found it sexy five years ago, or if I'm pathetically easy to please now.

By midnight, we're the only two people left. The other employees have gone, the door is now locked, and he's carrying a case of empty glasses to the back.

I pull my leg up and wrap my arms around it. I'm nervous. I didn't come back to this town to meet a guy. I'm in this town with a much bigger purpose. One he looks like he could derail with the point of a finger.

I'm only human, though. Humans need companions, and even though I didn't return to this town to meet people, this guy is hard to ignore.

He walks through the double doors with a different shirt on. He's no longer wearing the purple collared shirt with the rolled-up sleeves that all the other employees were wearing. He put on a white T-shirt. So simple, but so complicated.

He smiles when he reaches me, and I feel that smile slip over me with the warmth of a weight-

REMINDERS OF HIM: A NOVEL

He smiles when he reaches me, and I feel that smile slip over me with the warmth of a weighted blanket. "You came back."

I try to act unaffected. "You asked me to."

"You want something to drink?"

"I'm okay."

He touches his hair now, pushing it back, staring down at me. There's a war in his eyes, and I am by no means Switzerland, but he comes to me anyway. Sits next to me. *Right* next to me. My heart beats faster, even faster than when Scotty came to my register for a fourth time all those years ago.

"What's your name?" he asks.

I don't want him to know my name. He looks like he could be the age Scotty would be now if Scotty were alive, which means he might recognize my name, or me, or remember what happened. I don't want anyone to know me, or remember, or warn the Landrys that I'm in town.

It isn't a small town, but it isn't huge either. My presence won't go unnoticed for long. I just need it to go unnoticed for long *enough*, so I lie, sort of, and give him my middle name. "Nicole."

I don't ask him what his name is because I don't care. I'll never use it. I'll never come back here after tonight.

I pull at a strand of my hair, nervous at being so close to someone after so long. I feel like I've forgotten what to do, so I just blurt out what I came here to say. "I wasn't going to drink it."

He tilts his head, confused by my confession, so I clarify.

"The wine. Sometimes I . . ." I shake my head. "It's dumb, but I do this thing where I order alcohol specifically to walk away from it. I don't have a drinking problem. It's more like an issue with control, I think. Makes me feel less weak."

His eyes scan my face with the slightest hint of a smile. "I respect that," he says. "I rarely drink for similar reasons. I'm around drunk people every night, and the more I'm around them, the less I want to be among them."

"A bartender who doesn't drink? That's rare. Right? I'd think bartenders would have one of the highest rates of alcoholism. Easy access."

"That's actually the construction industry. Which probably isn't good for my odds. I've been building a house for several years now."

"You're really setting yourself up for failure."

He smiles. "Looks that way." He relaxes into the booth a little more. "What do you do, Nicole?"

This is the moment I should walk away. Before I say too much, before he asks more questions. But I like his voice and his presence, and I feel like staying here would be distracting, and I really

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But I like his voice and his presence, and I feel like staying here would be distracting, and I really need a distraction right now.

I just don't want to talk. Talking will only get me in trouble in this town.

"Do you really want to know what I do for a living?" I'm sure he'd rather have his hand up my shirt than hear whatever it is a girl would say in this moment. And since I don't want to admit that I do nothing for a living because I've been locked up for five years, I slide onto his lap.

It surprises him, almost as if he really did expect us to sit here and chat for the next hour.

His expression changes from mild shock to acceptance. His hands fall to my hips, and he grips them. I shiver from the contact.

He adjusts me so that I'm sitting a little farther up, and I can feel him through his jeans, and I'm suddenly not as confident that I can walk away as I was five seconds ago. I thought I could kiss him and then tell him good night and saunter home with pride. I just wanted to feel a little bit powerful before tomorrow, but now he's dragging his fingers across the skin on my waist, and it's making me weaker and weaker, and so fucking *thoughtless*. Not thoughtless as in uncaring, but thoughtless as in empty inside my head, and feeling everything in my chest, like a ball of fire is building inside of me.

His right hand slides up my back, and I gasp because I feel his touch surge through me like a current. This guy is touching my face now, running his fingers down my cheekbone, and then his fingertips across my lips. He's staring at me like he's trying to figure out where he knows me from.

Maybe that's just my paranoia at work.

"Who are you?" he whispers.

I already told him, but I repeat my middle name anyway. "Nicole."

He smiles but then loses the smile and says, "I know your name. But where'd you come from? Why have we never met before tonight?"

I don't want his questions. I have no honest answers. I move a little closer to his mouth. "Who are *you*?"

"Ledger," he says, right before he rips open my past, pulls out what's left of my heart, drops it on the floor, and then kisses me.



People say you fall in love, but *fall* is such a sad word when you think about it. Falls are never good.

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People say you fall in love, but *fall* is such a sad word when you think about it. Falls are never good. You fall on the ground, you fall behind, you fall to your death.

Whoever was the first person to say they fell in love must have already fallen out of it. Otherwise, they'd have called it something much better.

Scotty told me he loved me halfway into our relationship. It was the night I was supposed to meet his best friend for the first time. I had already met his parents, and he was excited for that, but not nearly as excited as he was to introduce me to the guy he considered a brother.

That meeting never happened. I can't remember why; it's been a long time. But his friend had to cancel, and Scotty was sad, so I baked him cookies and we smoked a joint and then I gave him head. Best girlfriend ever.

Until I killed him.

But this was three months before he would die, and on that particular night, even though he was sad, he was very much alive. He had a beating heart and a rapid pulse and a heaving chest and tears in his eyes when he said, "*I fucking love you, Kenna. I love you more than I've ever loved anyone. I miss you all the time, even when we're together.*"

That stuck with me. "*I miss you all the time, even when we're together.*"

And I thought that was the *only* thing that stuck with me that night, but I was wrong. Something else stuck with me. A name. *Ledger*.

The best friend who never showed. The best friend I never got to meet.

The best friend who just put his tongue in my mouth and his hand up my shirt and his name in my chest.

CHAPTER SIX

LEDGER

I don't understand attraction.

What is it that draws people to each other? How can dozens of women walk through the doors

REMINDERS OF HIM: A NOVEL

What is it that draws people to each other? How can dozens of women walk through the doors to this bar every week and I don't feel the urge to give any of them a second glance? But then this girl waltzes in, and I can't take my fucking eyes off her.

Now I can't take my mouth off her.

I don't know why I'm breaking my self-imposed rule: "no pursuing customers." But there's something about her that indicates I'll only have one chance. I get the feeling she's either passing through town or doesn't plan on coming back in here. Tonight seems like an exception to whatever her normal routine may be, and I feel like skipping an opportunity to be with her will be that one regret in life I'll still think back on when I'm an old man.

She seems like a quiet person, but not the shy kind of quiet. She's quiet in a fierce way—a storm that sneaks up on you, and you don't know it's there until you feel the thunder rattle your bones.

She's quiet, but she's said just enough to make me want the rest of her words. She tastes like apples, even though she had coffee earlier, and apples are my favorite fruit. They're probably my favorite food *period*, now.

We kiss for several seconds, and even though she made the first move, she still seemed surprised when I pulled her to my mouth.

Maybe she expected me to wait a little longer before tasting her, or maybe she wasn't expecting it to feel like this—I *hope it feels like this for her*—but whatever caused that tiny gasp right before my mouth met hers, it wasn't because she didn't want the kiss.

She pulls away, briefly indecisive, but then she seems to make up her mind because she leans in and kisses me again with even more conviction.

That conviction disappears, though. Too fast. She pulls away for a second time, and this time her eyes are full of regret. She shakes her head quickly and places her palms on my chest. I cover her hands with mine right when she says, "I'm sorry."

She slides off me, the inside of her thigh rubbing across my zipper, making me even harder, as she scoots out of the booth. I reach for her hand, but her fingers trickle out of mine as she backs away from the table. "I shouldn't have come back."

She turns away from me and heads toward the door.

I deflate.

I didn't commit her face to memory, and I don't like the thought of her leaving without me, being able to remember the exact shape of the mouth that was just on mine.

I push out of the booth and follow her.

REMINDERS OF HIM: A NOVEL

She can't get the door open. She jiggles the handle and tries to push it like she can't get away from me fast enough. I want to beg her to stay, but I also want to help her get away from me, so I pull down on the top lock while reaching in front of her with my foot to push up on the floor lock. The door opens and she spills outside.

She inhales a big gulp of air and then spins and faces me. I scan her mouth, wishing I had a photographic memory.

Her eyes are no longer the same color as her shirt. They're a lighter green now because she's tearing up. Once again I find myself not knowing what to do. I've never seen a girl so all over the place in such a short amount of time, and none of it feels forced or dramatic. With every move she makes and every feeling she has, it's as if she wants to reel them back in and tuck them away.

She seems embarrassed.

She's gasping for breath, trying to wipe away the few tears that are beginning to form, and since I have no idea what the fuck to say, I just hug her.

What else can I do?

I pull her to me, and for a second, she stiffens, but that's almost immediately followed up by a sigh as she relaxes.

We're the only people around. It's after midnight, everyone is home sleeping, watching a movie, making love. But I'm here on Main Street, hugging a really sad girl, wondering why she's sad, wishing I didn't think she was so beautiful.

Her face is pressed against my chest, and her arms are tight around my waist. Her forehead

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