

The Apothecary
by Sydney Scheller

To Cody, for being my Jamie.

Chapter 1

If you have ever thought, *I should seek employment that requires my complete and undivided attention at five in the morning on a Tuesday*, go back to bed and rethink your life goals because you are a crazy person and crazy people need more sleep and less caffeine. Unfortunately, I did not take my own advice which is how I ended up in possession of a foreclosed drug store, a small business loan, and a collection of baseball caps that smelled like a strange mix of espresso and dry shampoo. Or, more accurately, a superbly strange coffee shop.

The first morning walking into The Apothecary to turn the lights on and open for business felt sacred. Hearing Leo pull the first shots of espresso from our brand new machine, trying to get the flavor profile just right, the sound of cups clinking and steamed milk bubbling as I walked behind the counter to squeeze his shoulder, his smile as he offered me a glass...this place was our church.

Two years later, the butterflies in my stomach still hatched in excitement every time I turned on the lights to welcome in our mismatched cast of characters to the shop. Even on Tuesday at five in the morning.

“It's pay day, ladies and gents!” I exclaimed to everyone as they stood behind the counter, tasting the first shots of the day.

“Does that mean we can play the music extra loud today?” My brother signed back at me.

I tapped my first two fingers to my thumb, laughing and shaking my head. “Just because you're deaf doesn't mean everyone else is.”

“I'm okay to go a little louder,” Gray said while she signed.

I pondered for a minute. “Alright, fine. But only until we open.” They high fived. “And *only* if everyone else is okay with it,” I added. I walked behind the counter and before Leo could turn the volume up so he and Gray could feel the rhythm through the floor boards as we opened, I waved a hand in front of him, getting his attention. “Don't make me grab my ear plugs.”

He winked and turned up the volume on our opening playlist, a bass-heavy string of indie pop songs that put everyone in the shop in a good mood. I walked to back to the kitchen to check on Critch, our baker.

“How are the scones this morning?” I asked, giving him a hug.

“Good. I hope,” he replied, transferring some treats from a baking sheet to a display tray. “Gray said the chocolate chip came out great. I also made some gluten free cheddar and bacon ones that I just put in the oven. I tried a new recipe last night at home. They're heavenly.”

I took a bite of one that he handed to me with the tongs. “You're a culinary genius!” We both laughed and then I asked, “How are you feeling, by the way?”

“Oh, fine. I had a celiac flair up yesterday, but I'm detoxing the rest of the day, so I should be back in fighting shape by tomorrow.”

“Just take care of yourself, okay? Do you need a few days off?”

“I'll be okay, Laney.” He smiled and bumped my hip with his. “You worry too much.”

“I just care about you guys.” I dipped my finger into the bowl of icing on the counter and smeared it on his cheek, ducking out of the kitchen before he could retaliate.

“Morning, Lane!” Bea called from her favorite cozy couch in the space.

“Morning! How's the schedule coming?” I asked.

“Good. Jamie is coming in a little late today. He was working on a roast of those new Honduran beans we got last week, and he lost track of time. I told him to get some sleep and come in about an hour late.”

“Sounds good. Thanks for the heads up. Everyone else coming in on time?”

She nodded. “They should be. I have to leave a little early for an appointment.”

“Yeah, that's right. Thanks for reminding me. Anything I can do for you?”

Bea shook her head. “Thanks, though!”

I walked over to the other end of the shop, turning stools on to the floor from the bar along the

windows, feeling all too grateful for the Apothecary family and our little slice of heaven. A few regulars were already loitering out front when I walked over to unlock the doors. They groggily crossed the threshold, offering me a few sleepy smiles I knew would be erased by the time they got their first shot of caffeine. Liv, my favorite college student that frequented the shop, threw her backpack down on the couch that she would likely not move from until she had to leave for class.

“Morning, Lane!” she said, walking with me to the counter. “How's it going today?”

“It's good, Liv. Has anyone ever told you you are unnaturally perky in the mornings?”

“A few times.” She laughed. “But this is my favorite time of the day.” I caught the distracted glint in her eyes as she looked around the shop, searching.

“Critch is in the kitchen,” I told her, winking.

“Was it that obvious?” she scrunched her nose. “Well, can I just get a vanilla cappuccino then?”

“Yeah, sure.” I wrote her order down and passed it over to Gray for her to make. Liv walked off, and I turned back toward the line to find a tall, broad shouldered man I didn't recognize.

“Hi!” I said, trying to push back down the butterflies that threatened to reappear. “Welcome to The Apothecary. What can I get started for you?”

“Well,” he said, leaning over the counter and looking at the menu in his hand, “I've never been here before. What's good?”

“I really like the espresso blend we have right now.”

“I'll have an Americano then.”

I nodded and tapped Gray on the shoulder and signed, “He wants an Americano.”

Before I can say another word she signed back, “And he's cute. Nice googly eyes, Lane.”

I shot her a look, embarrassment mixed with agreement. I tapped the side of my hand against my palm.

“Okay, okay, I'll stop,” she signed, shaking her head and grinning.

When Gray was finished with his drink, she handed it to me to take to the man. I walked over to

the table where he sat reading the *Wall Street Journal*. As I walked up, he folded the paper and stood, greeting me with a smile and taking the cup from my hand.

“So, I never got your name,” he said.

“Oh,” I replied, tucking a hair behind my ear. “It's Lane.”

“And you said you're the owner?”

“Yes, sir.” I pushed my sleeves up to my elbows and fiddled with the towel on my shoulder.

He reached into the pocket inside his suit, pulling out a business card. “Well, my name is Ryan, and I'm a—”

Before he could finish, Leo walked over and tapped my shoulder. “Lane, we have to go,” he signed. “We have that meeting. With the bank.”

“Right,” I replied. “I'm really sorry. We have to go.” I took his business card and slid it into my back pocket. “Thanks so much for coming in! Enjoy your drink!”

Leo and I ran out the door. “Who was that guy?” he asked.

“I have no idea.”

Chapter 2

When we got to the bank, we were ushered into our loan officer's office. Recently, we had sent him plans to open another location, and he had called a meeting nearly immediately.

“So, how are you guys doing today?” Tyler asked while I interpreted. Even though Leo was oral and could read lips like a madman, it still helped to sign everything people were saying in business meetings so he didn't miss a word.

“We're doing really good,” Leo replied. “How are you?”

“Doing great. So, I'm sure you're wondering why I called you in today.”

I leaned forward in my seat. “I'm assuming it is about the business plan I sent you last week.”

He paused, gathering his thoughts. “It is...related to that.”

“So, what did you think?” I asked eagerly.

He looked between Leo and I, leaning forward and clasping his hands in front of him on the table.

“Look, guys, you know I like you. I like you a lot, actually. Your coffee is great, you employ a lot of people that might otherwise have a hard time finding jobs, and I respect that. But your numbers don't really reflect an ability to open a new location.”

“Well, I know we've been struggling a bit the last couple months, but we always pull through the dry seasons and now that the college kids are back in school, business will pick up again.” Leo laid a hand on my arm.

“Let him finish,” he signed. Then he said to Tyler, “Where do our numbers need to be to get another loan to open the second location?” Leo was always the more thoughtful one.

“I really don't know how to tell you this guys.” Tyler laced his fingers behind his neck, took a deep breath, and looked me straight in the eyes. “Lane, the bank cannot give you guys another loan. There's someone that wants to buy the shop, and with your numbers, it looks like you guys could probably survive for another four, maybe five, months, but not much longer. I want you to talk to this developer. His name is Ryan Moore. He's invested a lot of money into different communities, and it could be a great opportunity for Anchorage.”

“But what about everyone that works for us? What about Gray and Jamie and—”

“Lane. I'm just asking you to think about it.”

“What does he want to turn my coffee shop in to?” I asked.

“He's trying to buy the block. He wants to open a yoga studio, and a juice bar, and a Thrive Market.”

“That Whole Foods knock off?” I exclaimed.

Leo looked at me and shook his head and hands in front of him. “What's going on?”

I sighed, “The developer wants to turn our block into some weird hipster commune.”

“No way!” Leo said.

Tyler looked at both of us, a disappointed frown forming on his face. “Guys, this is your only option right now. Just meet with him. I think you'll really like him.”

Suddenly a wave of recognition hit me. “What did you say this guy's name is?”

He shuffled through the papers on his desk. “Ryan Moore.”

I pulled the business card out of my back pocket. “I think I already met him.”

That night, I met with the whole team in our apartment, filling them in on what had been going on for the last few months over family dinner.

“I thought opening a second location would be a good move,” I said, “bring us in some more revenue. But, unfortunately, we've been struggling to make some ends meet for the last couple months, and I didn't want to tell you until there were no other options. We're going to have to close The Apothecary.”

Bea piped up. “Lane, if we'd known, we could have helped. I would have gladly taken a pay cut if it had helped get us on our feet.”

Everyone nodded in agreement, but I stopped them. “Guys. I wasn't going to do that to any of you. This family comes first, no questions asked. I stop getting paid before you do.”

“Me too,” Leo agreed.

“How long do we have? What are our options?” Critch asked.

“Well, there's a developer they want me to meet. He's trying to buy the block.”

“To turn it into what exactly?” Jamie piped up again.

Leo responded before I could get out the awful piece of news. “He wants to bring younger people into Anchorage. He's opening a yoga studio and a Thrive Market. Among other things.”

“What?”

“You're kidding me!”

“That is not going to work here.”

“They can't close The Apothecary for a health food store!”

“The community is going to hate that!”

“Guys!” Gray exclaimed, slamming her hand on the table. “I can't read your lips when you're all talking so fast.”

Leo nodded in agreement. A few mumbled “sorry”s were heard from the table.

Jamie finally asked, “Do we have any other options?”

“No. We don't.” I said.

Silence fell over the room like a quiet kind of thunder, an absence of sound so loud even my brother could hear it. Finally, someone spoke up.

“This guy has a lot of money, right?” I could see the gears turning in Bea's head.

“Right,” I replied.

She looked at everyone else. “What if we can convince him to invest in the business, show him how important it is that The Apothecary stays open?”

Slowly, Jamie started to nod. “I mean, that could work. He could become another partner, a silent one even. That is what it's called, right?” he asked, looking at me. “Someone that doesn't have a say in the business, but still invests in it?”

“Jamie, that's not going to work. I think we're just going to have to face the facts for once. The Apothecary had a good run, but it's time. We're going to have to sell.”

Chapter Three.

Early is not a word that can describe a morning when one does not fall asleep the night before. When the sun rose, I stirred from my nap, barely long enough and not nearly restful enough to be called sleep. I had fallen asleep on our flat roof on a makeshift bed of pillows I made for particularly anxious

nights. I climbed back through my window, pulled out my ear plugs, and was welcomed into the land of the living by the smell and sound of Leo brewing coffee in the kitchen.

I got Leo's attention by flicking the lights when I walked in the kitchen. "Good morning," I signed, yawning.

"Morning," he replied. He held up a finger and turned, reaching for his hearing aids. "Are you ready for our meeting today?" he asked.

I grimaced at him and ducked into the fridge, avoiding his fast-flying fingers and sympathetic smile altogether, opting instead for the fresh squeezed orange juice and a carrot cake cupcake, courtesy of Critch.

"Breakfast of champions," Leo remarked, laughing.

I simply rolled my eyes at him and asked, "When do we have to be there?"

"We're meeting Ryan at nine-thirty."

I groaned and dragged my feet back to my room to get ready, trying to enjoy my one morning a week I was allowed to be lazy before heading into work.

When we got to The Apothecary, things were business as usual. The old ladies from the Baptist church down the street were holding their Bible study, Gray and Austen were signing away, silent jokes being made about the orders from customers and a regular's newest haircut. Liv was leaning over the bar, chatting with Critch before her class, both of them vainly attempting to conceal their smitten looks. And then there was the guy in the corner, drinking an Americano and wearing tailored, navy blue dress pants and a crisp white button down, reading the morning paper.

I walked straight over to him, Leo in tow. "You're early," I said as he stood up, offering me his hand to shake.

"My dad used to say, 'early is on time, on time is late, and if you're late, well, you might as well have never shown up at all.'"

"Your dad sounds like a wise man," I said.

“More like a harsh man. Shall we sit?” He gestured to the table.

I signed to Leo, “Do we really have to do this?”

Before Leo could reply, Ryan said, “I meant to ask yesterday before you rushed off, is that sign language?”

Irritated, I interpreted for Leo who, much more patiently than me, replied, “Yeah. I'm deaf. So is one of our baristas. The rest of the team has picked it up and taken a few lessons along the way so that we can communicate effectively.”

“Doesn't that slow you guys down?” Ryan asked.

“No. You just learn to adapt,” I curtly replied, not waiting for Leo to answer. Leo kicked me under the table, a silent reminder that he could speak for himself.

“We make it work,” he said, much more polite than I could muster. “You just have to announce and face me when you're speaking. I can read lips really well, and my hearing aids help a lot with louder sounds and spatial awareness.”

Ryan nodded. “Well, it sounds like you have a good system in place for yourself. So,” he said, turning to me, “let's get started.” He pulled paperwork out from his bag, already highlighted and tabbed as if he assumed we would sign on the dotted line and hand over the space with no argument. “I usually prefer to do this through my lawyers, but I was told you would do better with a more...personal conversation. So, I will do my best to try to explain these documents to you.”

Ryan worked through a few pages of legal jargon and then came to the amount he was willing to offer us.

“This is less than I bought the place for off of a foreclosure!”

He nodded. “In reviewing the most recent inspection of the space, we found several structural issues. We would have to completely renovate the space, maybe even tear it down. Which is no surprise considering how old the space is.”

“How am I supposed to tell my employees that I can't even pay their next two weeks salary?” I

asked him. "It's not like they can all get jobs with a click of their heels. They have challenges other people don't care to adapt to."

"Well, that is between you and them. And I'm sure if it is really that bad, they can file for disability."

He started to move on, but my anger got the best of me. The little voice inside me that sounded a lot like Bea crept into my head as he handed me a pen to start signing documents to sell the space to a developer who did not even care about the people here. I looked around at our loyal customers, the people that had been coming here since we opened, wondering how all of these people would feel if we closed. I turned back toward Ryan.

"I can't accept this offer," I said, surprising all three of us. "At least," I added, "not yet. I have a proposition for you."

"What did you have in mind?" Ryan asked, skeptical.

I mulled over my plan in my head, sure it would work. "I will sell the space to you for fifteen percent less than your offer," Leo looked at me like I was insane, and I probably was, but insanity would not stop me from proving a point to this asshole, "if you work here for two weeks. Get to know the people and the space, get to know the community. If you still think what Anchorage needs is some trendy organic food store, I'll sign the papers. But if you think, even just a little, it's worth saving, you take the money you would have used to buy me out and invest in the shop instead."

"Absolutely not!" Ryan exclaimed.

"Why not? Are you afraid I might be right?" I taunted.

"It's not about you being right, it's about the money that this community could have. I've never met a deal I couldn't close. I'm not *scared*."

"Well, maybe it should scare you! I can be very scary!"

He snickered. "All five feet of you?"

I took a step toward him. "I'm five foot three thankyouverymuch. And if you're such a *closer*

this should be a piece of cake for you.”

He smirked. “You're making your own bed.”

“I'll gladly lie in it to prove you wrong.”

He shook his head, thinking for a moment, a pretentious grin creeping onto his face. “Okay, fine,” he said. “I'll do it. But your little coffee shop isn't changing any lives, including mine. All it is doing is keeping a community from moving forward. And now it will save me some money, too.”

Chapter 4

I spent the whole day thinking through what I had just done. Jamie noticed my panic stricken face in between taking orders before Ryan came in for his first shift and immediately pulled me aside, putting Critch on register duty while he took me upstairs to the little makeshift studio he had set up in the back of the stockroom. We sat in the tiny soundproof booth, and I tried to wrap my head around the decision I had just made.

“I don't think I can do this, Jamie. What if I can't convince him that this place is worth saving? What if he still wants to open that stupid yoga studio? What am I going to tell everybody when they find out we're getting next to nothing?”

Jamie grabbed me by the shoulders and looked me in the eye. “Madeline Clark. I have known you since you were twelve years old. You convinced me to eat fried grasshoppers in Mexico once. I think you can convince some developer that The Apothecary is worth saving.”

“But what if I can't?” I asked again.

“Then we'll figure something out. But you're not doing this alone. We'll put him through the same hell you put us through during training week.”

I smacked him in the chest. “I did not put you through hell.”

“Maybe a little bit of hell.” He held up two fingers centimeters apart and squinted. I hit his hand

away, and leaned into his chest as he wrapped me in the tightest hug possible.

“You,” he said, “are superwoman.” I laughed and pulled away, wiping my eyes. “But,” he continued, “you're going to have to walk down there and be a role model for everyone else. We'll follow your lead. Be the Lane I know you are: loving, kind, and spunky. Don't forget spunky.”

“Spunky should have come first,” I replied, winking and grinning.

We walked downstairs after I pulled myself together, and Ryan was already behind the counter with an apron on, trying to communicate with Gray and very obviously losing the battle.

“I don't know sign language!” he groaned as she continued to give him the run down on the espresso machine in ASL. He shouted, “I need. Someone. Who speaks. Do you understand me?”

I walked up behind him, attempting calm. “First of all, she is speaking. Secondly,” I leaned around Ryan to look at Gray, and I signed, “Stop being mean. We need to make a good impression.” I turned back to Ryan. “Sorry about that. I think my employees are stuck in high school.” I shot her a look. “And hazing will not be tolerated. Gray can read lips like Jamie so you just need to face her—”

“And annunciate. Right. But why are you still signing then? If she can read lips...?”

Jamie looked at him like it was obvious. “Would you want someone talking right in front of you in your second language when they could just as easily include you? It's really insensitive to know sign and not use it if there is someone deaf in the conversation.”

Point for Jamie! I tried to conceal my smile and looked at Ryan's outfit, a nice button down and skinny dark jeans. “So, let me give you the run through. First of all, you're going to want to dress a little less...Sunday morning. Unless you want to spend hundreds of dollars on dry cleaning.”

“I only dry clean,” he responded.

I laughed, a deep, belly laugh. “Well, not everyone has the money for that.” I grabbed a t-shirt off one of the shelves on the other side of the counter. I threw it to him, and he caught it against his chest, staring at me bewildered. “On the house,” I informed him. “Go change, and then I'll run you through everything else.” His mouth hung open, but I prodded him toward the back. “Well, go on.”

While he was gone, I gathered everyone to the front of the store. With an Apothecary t-shirt on, he came and stood right next to me, puffing his chest. I stepped into the middle of the circle, addressing the staff. I noticed Leo smile briefly, proud of me for asserting my dominance.

“Good morning, everyone,” I said. “This is Ryan. Over the next two weeks, he will be observing your work, working with you, and learning more about The Apothecary. I want all of you to welcome him with open arms. Show him what we are about. Understood?”

Everyone signed “yes”s and “got it”s at me.

“What?” Ryan asked, confused.

I grabbed his right hand, balled it up into a fist, and moved it up and down. “Yes,” I said, pointing at his fist.

“Yes?” he asked, mimicking the sign again.

I smiled. I shook my fist back at him. “Yes.”

Ryan spent the rest of the afternoon acting like he knew everything about coffee.

“I think I can steam milk,” he scoffed at Jamie more than once, proceeding to ruin the foam on his milk, making Jamie laugh. His cheeks flared red when he tried to make latte art that turned into a blob of milky mess. He got several orders wrong, and I apologized to more than one customer.

As we closed down, Critch came up to me with a cake tin filled with more cupcakes.

“Gluten Free Lemon Cream,” he said.

“For dessert tonight?” I asked. He nodded.

“Are we doing dinner at your place again tonight or mine?” Critch asked.

“Mine. I’ll see you in an hour.”

“Dinner at Lane’s!” Critch shouted as he walked out of the shop.

Ryan handed me his apron and started to walk out.. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

“Yeah, see you.”

Leo locked eyes with me and signed, “Invite him.”

I shook my head, but he shot me another disappointed look. “What happened 'show him what we're about'?”

I groaned and rolled my eyes, calling over my shoulder, “Ryan?”

I heard him stop, and I turned around. “Would you like to come to dinner?” I asked begrudgingly.

“No, I'm good,” he replied. “I don't want to impose. And I don't like mixing work with pleasure.”

I took a deep breath, suddenly annoyed that he thought he was above all of us. “Then I promise it won't really be any fun.”

Chapter 5

Everyone was curled up with glasses of wine and half drunk beers in the living room when Ryan rang the doorbell.

“Hi,” I said as I opened the door to Ryan holding flowers and a bottle of wine.

“This is for you,” he said.

I looked back and forth between the wine and flowers. “You brought me a Sonoma? This is like a forty dollar wine.”

“I don't like showing up empty handed.” He shrugged. He crossed the threshold and handed me his overly generous gifts. I put the bottle on the table and poured him a glass from the one we had already opened.

He took one sip and looked at me skeptically. “What is this?”

“Barefoot Malbec. Our overhead doesn't exactly go toward fine wines and spirits.”

I sat back down on the floor, and Ryan leaned on the arm of the couch, sitting next to Jamie. Jamie looked at me, raising an eyebrow, silently asking if I was okay. I gave him a short nod. *I'm fine.*

“So,” Bea asked, “where are you from?”

Ryan stirred his wine in his glass and sipped from it then responded. "Well, I grew up in Louisville but I live in Columbus now."

"Where did you go to school?" Critch asked.

"I graduated from Duke."

"Why come back here?" Leo said.

"This is an up and coming town. There's a lot of opportunity here."

"So you decided to bring the city to our middle of nowhere?" Jamie asked.

"Guys," I interrupted. "Quit with the interrogation."

"No, it's fine," Ryan said, leaning forward. "I'm really interested in up and coming areas of cities. This is one of them. I think Anchorage deserves more commerce in the community. I'm just trying to bring money back into this side of town."

"What if we never asked for it?" Jamie countered.

Ryan cocked his head at her. "Why wouldn't you want a financial boost to your community?"

The timer on the oven went off suddenly. "Saved by the bell!" I shouted, popping up from the floor, spilling my glass of wine on the white carpet in the process. "Damnit." I muttered.

Ryan jumped up and asked, "Do you have spot remover and a towel?"

Jamie beat him to the punch, ignoring his comment. "I'll get it. I know where it is. Lane, don't worry. Go finish dinner."

I looked between the both of them, Jamie suddenly territorial. "Thanks guys. I'm just going to, um, yeah." I ducked out and into the kitchen before the night could get any weirder.

The air felt thick and foggy as we sat at the table, people shifting uneasily at our dinner table. I watched as Ryan tried to follow the mix of talking and signing that was so obviously normal for us, but seeing it through Ryan's eyes? It was so obviously weird.

"Hey," I said, interrupting a joke Gray was telling about a tree and a deaf guy yelling timber, "do y'all mind talking, too? Ryan is pretty lost."

Gray looked at me like I was insane. “It's not funny if it's not signed. The whole joke is about not being able to yell timber.”

“Well, I just thought he might like to be included,” I mumbled.

“Whatever,” Gray said, rolling her eyes and picking up her fork. “I'll just tell you guys later.”

Ryan quickly changed the subject, asking Leo about growing up deaf, trying to get away from the even heavier fog of awkward now so thick that I thought I might not be able to break through it in a short order. We rushed through dessert, and I saw Ryan grab a cupcake off the plate and actually try it. And then take another bite. And another, enjoying it. I let a little smile creep on my face. He was starting to get it.

Over the next few days, Ryan started to get used to the shop. He picked up a few signs by necessity like coffee, milk, and the letters L A T-T E. I caught him out of the corner of my eye one afternoon patiently waiting for Austen to explain something to him, helping her find a few words she stuttered through. Critch talked him through flour alternatives that would actually enhance the flavor of the scones. I could see the gears in his head turning when he asked if he planned on monetizing something like that, and I laughed as he grimaced when Critch told him the money didn't matter as much as the smiles on people's faces.

Ryan walked over to me after bussing some tables, and he suddenly asked, “So, explain this community thing to me.”

I looked up from my planner at him. “What is there to explain?” He sat in the chair across from me and leaned forward, adjusting his glasses.

“Well, like earlier. You gave away coffee to all those old ladies. That's terrible for business. You're literally giving away money.”

“They come in twice a week for bible study. On the house black coffee won't kill me. And besides, June and Mabel both knew my grandma in high school. And Irene? Her husband died last fall, and they used to come in every morning for coffee. These people are family. They are worth more than a

dollar and change.”

“Well, I know that!” He defended. “I just think that if you're going broke, you would start pinching pennies until you recovered.”

I shook my head and bit my bottom lip, thinking of what to say next. Slowly, I closed my planner, stood up, and pushed my chair in. “I would rather go broke being kind than have a million dollars and not know a single person in here. Your version of investing in a community is turning it into a money machine.” I looked around the coffee shop, saying more to the building than him, “This is how you invest in a community. You don't just pay them, you love them.”

I spent the rest of the afternoon making Ryan sweep and bus tables, trying to reconcile the image of the man who slowly signed cappuccino to Leo that morning with the money-obsessed utilitarian who tried to put a dollar sign on my people. Jamie squeezed my shoulder while I was steaming milk for a latte, completely zoned out while I stared at Ryan.

“You're super stiff, Lane,” he said. “And you have no foam left on that milk.” He pulled the pitcher out of my hand and set it on the counter. He asked Leo to finish up the macchiato I was making and rubbed my back asking, “You okay?”

“Jamie, what am I going to do?” I asked him, turning to face him. “Ryan is never going to invest in us.”

“Since when does Lane Clark give up? How did one guy steal your fight so easily?”

“By having the power to take away my dream.”

“Hey,” he said, grabbing me by the shoulders and looking me dead in the eye. “He may take away your shop. He may make us all completely broke. He may even tear this place down. But he can never, ever take away your dreams.”

“Thanks for the pep talk, Jamie,” I said, letting out a breath I realized I was holding. “But I'm just not feeling it tonight.” I turned back toward the espresso machine. “And to think,” I added, glancing back at him as I wiped it down, “I actually started to think he was kind of cute.”

“Wait, what?” he said, leaning on the counter next to me.

I shrugged. “I don't know. It's probably crazy. But that look in his eye? On that first day? When I taught him the sign for 'yes'? There was potential in him, like he wasn't so horrible after all.”

“Lane,” he said, furrowing his brow at me, “even if he does invest in the business, you can't change someone. Maybe his mind, but not who he is. He will always be like this.”

“But you used to be the worst, too.”

“I matured, but I certainly haven't changed.” He pushed himself off the counter, walking to take the drink Leo made to a customer. “Just be careful, Lane. I don't want to see you get hurt.”

Chapter 7

Ryan walked up to me after his first week as we were closing and leaned over the counter I was wiping down. “So,” he started, “what are you up to tonight?”

I looked up from the sticky stain of raspberry syrup I was trying to scrub away. “I don't know. I didn't really have plans.”

“How would you feel if you got some?” I snorted and covered my mouth with my hands. He shut his eyes, cringing.

“I mean plans. How would you feel if you got some plans.”

I started laughing again. “Plans I would like. Some? Not so much. What did you have in mind?”

“Well, there's this ice cream place down the street that Critch told me about, and I wanted to check it out, but I thought it would be more fun with company.”

“What?” I said snarkily. “You trying to buy that space, too? Maybe open a bike shop while you're at it?”

“No. They make no money in the winter.” I rolled my eyes at him, and he laughed. “Lane, I'm kidding. I genuinely just want ice cream.”

I eyed him, trying to decide if he was being genuine. He stared at me, waiting for my answer. After a few seconds, I caved and said, "Okay. Let me grab my coat."

After we got our ice cream, we walked around downtown Anchorage. "This is so different than where I grew up," he said between bites of ice cream.

I looked up at him as we walked. "I thought you said you grew up in Louisville."

"I did. Sort of. I lived here for a few years, but we lived downtown. My dad worked for Brown-Forman, so he wanted to be close to the plant. Then we moved out to St. Louis when he started working for Anheuser-Busch. We popped around the country to bigger cities. Basically whatever distiller wanted him, we went there. I moved back to Louisville for college, though. I needed to get away from my parents."

"What happened?" I asked.

"Dad became a drunk. Nature of the job, I guess. He died when I was 19, and I've been using his life insurance to plant businesses and make investments."

"So you just live alone in Columbus stashing away money? That sounds pretty lonely."

"I actually live in Columbus because of my mom. A lot of my money goes to her medical expenses. She has Alzheimers, so taking care of her gets pricey. But it's worth it."

"So he does have a heart!" I said under my breath.

He looked at me, shaking his head and chuckling. "What, did you think I was some heartless monster?"

I stepped in front of him and stopped walking, looking up at him. "Actually, yeah. I did."

"I'm not stone cold. I'm just practical. But enough about me. Tell me about you."

I finished my ice cream and threw away the bowl as we continued walking down the street. I rubbed my hands together, thinking. "Well, what do you want to know?"

"Tell me about your family. Was it hard to learn sign when you found out Leo was deaf?"

I shook my head. "I'm actually the only hearing one in my family. Leo started to go deaf when

we were in middle school, but I don't carry the gene or whatever. Perfect hearing." I pointed to my ears and shrugged.

"That must be hard."

"Sometimes. It's okay, I guess. It's just our normal."

"So is that why you started hiring people with disabilities?" he asked.

"I mean, sort of? Not really. I think we just wanted to give people a chance that might not have it somewhere else. They were all worth the chance. No one else wanted to take the time to adapt to their needs, but it was worth it to me to do that. To adapt."

He nodded, processing. He grabbed my hand as we walked, waking up my sleeping butterflies. I squeezed back, smiling ever so slightly, trying not to get my hopes up. He was starting to understand, to ask questions I hoped he would ask.

"It's really cool of you to help those people out. I'd love to do something like that with the space when I buy it, maybe hire everyone to work for me."

I dropped his hand. "When you buy it? What are you talking about?"

"Well, you can't honestly think I am going to invest in your coffee shop, right? I mean, I get why you love it, but it's still not making any money."

"But that's not the point!"

"Lane, if it cannot sustain itself, then there is no point."

"I cannot believe you have been here every day for a week and still can't see these people have value!"

He shook his head as I ran my fingers through my hair, stressed. "It's not that they don't have value, Lane," he said, calm as ever. "It's that their value is not greater than the value of the whole."

"Every single one of those people in that shop has value. They are all worthy of love. They are worth it to me."

"You say you'll never understand me, but I don't think I'll ever understand you, Lane."

“What is there to understand? I'm the hearing kid that had to be the voice for her deaf parents and deaf brother. That does something to you, you know? I didn't have parents that stood up for me or made my life better or got to move around to work in a new city at a new distillery and make even more money. I was the only one that could get a normal job and go to a normal college and be some amount of normal. It is anxiety inducing and stressful and I just want to make my family proud, but I can't do that when I have my brain telling me that I'm terrible for wanting normal when my mom works at the deaf school in town and my dad is a mechanic and normal doesn't even exist. They had no other choice, but I do. This is my choice, these people are my choice. I'm doing this for them and no one else.”

“Oh. Now I get it.” He shoved his hands in his jean pockets, and I huffed loudly having gotten so much pent up anger out of my system.

“You get it?” I asked.

“Yeah, I mean, now I get what's wrong with you. It makes sense.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, angry all over again. “What do you think is wrong with me?”

“Austen has a stutter, Bea has CP, Critch has Celiac's, your brother and Gray are deaf. And you have an anxiety disorder. Amongst other things. That's how you fit into all of this.”

“So now you're a psychologist, too?”

He shook his head, impervious to my anger. “No, I'm just saying I get it. I've been trying to figure you out all week. No one does something like this out of the kindness of their heart. It's simply personal experience. If you would let your worries about failing stop clouding your vision, you would see why selling The Apothecary would be the best option.”

He took a step toward me and tried to touch my arm, but I flinched away. “I want you out. Now. I don't care if we foreclose. I don't even care if someone bulldozes the building and builds a parking garage. I refuse to sign over my dreams to someone as pretentious and condescending as you.”

I walked away, but I heard his footsteps following me, a few paces behind.

“Lane, wait, I didn't mean to—”

“Don't follow me!” I shouted, my anger a flame lighting up the dark, downtown streets, so bright and hot it could rival the sun. “I never want to see you again. You are nothing to me. Go to hell.”

“You really said that to him?” Jamie asked as he handed me a cup of tea while I sat curled up in a blanket on his couch. I had rushed straight to his apartment knowing he would be the only one awake enough to process everything with. I nodded as he sat down next to me holding his own cup of tea.

“Wow,” he said. “That's ballsy. I might actually shed a tear I'm so proud.”

I laughed, shoving him with my elbow, and he grinned back at me. Other than my parents, Jamie had been the one constant in my life. He saw me cry when I told him that my parents almost seemed pleased that their perfect, eldest son would be just like them, and he held me as I panicked that they would never love their hearing kid. He had been there through it all, my second best friend, my other brother.

“You were right, you know. About everything.”

“Yeah, I know. But that's okay. You had to go through it yourself.”

“Thanks for being here, Jamie.” He put a hand on my knee.

“I'm always here for you. You're my people. I just wish there was something else I could do.”

“Unless you can buy The Apothecary,” I told him, “there's not much any of us can do.”

Chapter 8

Leo and I solemnly walked to the bank Friday morning to accept our fate. After a long week of tears, laughter, and hundreds of hugs from every customer, we flipped the sign to open on the door one last time. Leo hugged me before walking into Tyler's office, shouldering some of the burden I carried with us into the bank that morning. I took a deep breath, hoping that I could be strong enough to handle giving up The Apothecary and everything it meant to me.

Tyler was leaning against the front of his desk when we walked in, arms crossed, and a dumbfounded grin on his face.

I cocked my head in his direction. “What's going on?” I asked.

He shook his head, staring into space before looking up at me and Leo. Without moving a muscle he said, “Sit down, you guys.”

I did as I was told, feeling like a sheep led to slaughter.

Leo signed, “What's up, Tyler?”

“Well,” he started, uncrossing his arms and resting his hands on the desk behind him as well. “I have good news and bad news.”

“What's the bad news?” I asked.

“The bad news is we are going to have to foreclose The Apothecary.”

“We knew that,” I said. “What's the good news?”

“The good news is that someone anonymously purchased the space with the condition that it remains The Apothecary. With you in charge.”

My eyes flew open, and I nearly had to pick my jaw up off the ground. Leo looked at me with the same confused look. “Did I read his lips right?” he asked. In my shock, I had forgotten to sign the best news we had ever received.

I shook my fist at him and nodded. “But how does that happen?” I asked Tyler. “How does someone just up and do that?”

“Lane, someone paid your debt. I guess someone thought your coffee shop meant something to the community. Congratulations, guys.”

My heart suddenly felt free, and I thought I might float away, but I quickly realized that floating feeling was just Leo picking me up and spinning me around in Tyler's office.

“Who do you think did this?” Leo asked for the millionth time when we walked back into The Apothecary.

“I told you, Leo. I have no—” I locked eyes with Jamie, who was smiling like he already knew the news we were about to share.

“Did you do this?” I signed at him from across the room.

He shook his head. “I don't know what you're talking about,” he signed back, winking.

I walked over to the counter and asked, “Jamie, did you buy The Apothecary?”

“Lane, you know I don't have the money for that.”

“Then how did you know?”

“I never said it was my money. Maybe my idea, but not my money.”

“Then who...” I trailed off as I felt someone tap me on the shoulder. Ryan stood in front of me in an Apothecary t-shirt and ripped up jeans. Holding a bag of unroasted coffee beans tied with a white ribbon, a sort of makeshift peace offering.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, narrowing my eyes at him. “I thought I told you go home.”

He set the bag of beans on the counter behind me and help up his hands in surrender. “That was my intention. In fact, after our, ehem, conversation last weekend, I figured I would just stay out of Anchorage, find a new spot to invest in. I wanted to respect your wishes.”

“That's not telling me what you're doing here, then, Ryan.”

“I'm getting to that, if you'll be patient.” I raised an eyebrow at him, and he continued. “I was back in Columbus when I received an email from Jamie with a petition with signatures from, I'm pretty sure, the entire town declaring that The Apothecary needed to stay open. That's not something you can just ignore.” I rolled my eyes and started to turn away but he tapped my shoulder. I turned back around. “*And*,” he said, “I realized that people do value this place. Jamie wrote me a very convincing email about you. He said that without you and this coffee shop, this community probably wouldn't even *be* a community. So, he suggested I become a silent partner. You have a very loyal team. Miss Clark.”

“What did Jamie promise you?” I asked. “You're the one who said no one does anything out of the goodness of their heart.”

“An investment opportunity. He offered me an investment opportunity,” he said.

I turned toward Jamie. “What is he talking about?” I asked.

He turned up a corner of his mouth. “I'm going to go finish my business degree and work with him. Opening other coffee shops like this one. Trying to cultivate community. It's very noble.”

“So, you're leaving me?” I asked. “What about this? What about everything we've built? You hate running the show!”

“Lane, I would have done anything to save this place for you.” He squeezed my hand.

“Absolutely anything. Besides, you get to help with the new concept. I think I want to call it Nest. Ryan thinks he can find him a space in Nashville.”

I smiled at him, and signed, “We'll see about that,” and then turned back toward Ryan. “So, a silent partner, huh?”

“Well, I'm hoping you let me be a little less silent. No matter how much I like you—and I really, really like you—there are still a lot of financial issues we need to discuss, and if you're going to be calling the shots—”

I held up a hand in front of him. “Listen, Ryan. You broke my trust. You hurt me. Badly. This isn't a Hallmark movie where the guy gets to hurt the girl, but she forgives him anyway, and they live happily ever after. You're going to have to earn back my trust every single second of every single day.”

“But it is worth earning back,” Leo mentioned.

“Worth?” Ryan asked, copying the sign.

I smiled and giggled, unable to help myself. Jamie nodded.

Ryan pointed at me and signed, “You? Worth it.”

“Damn right.” Jamie said, nudging my shoulder with his fist.

Gray walked out with the rest of the team.

“What's going on here?” she asked.

I signed back at her, joy bursting from every ounce of my being, the one thing I was willing to

throw around like glitter to everyone in my path, “We're staying open!”

“That is music to my ears!” Gray replied.

“Look at them,” Leo signed to me while everyone hugged each other and thanked Ryan. “All of these people you've touched. You're like a doctor for the soul.”

I looked around our coffee shop, so very aptly named. “Kind of like an Apothecary.”

“Exactly like an Apothecary.”

Appendix

“And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with tax collectors and sinners, said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?' And when Jesus heard this, he said to them, 'Those who are well have no need for a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.'”

This story began with a simple premise: a girl owns a coffee shop with her deaf brother, hiring people with various disabilities on whom no one else wanted to take a chance. It also started with a simple question: what is my unique take on the world as a whole, the world I live in, and my experience in both? The answer to that question involved a very real disability, a very real God, and a very real desire to be a conduit for the type of love that heals the soul. I believe some of that love starts with coffee.

My entire college career has consisted of consistently keeping track of my caffeine levels while attempting to befriend the baristas at the coffee shops I frequent—and doing homework (there has definitely been homework). It is in coffee shops I have found solace, a place where I can breathe for a moment, stepping away from campus stress and pretending to be whomever I want to be that day. It is in coffee shops that I have had transformative conversations that have shifted my worldview. It is in coffee shops that I have made friends, made enemies, and made myself. It is in coffee shops that I have found home. I have often dreamed of opening my own coffee shop where people can have similar experiences while also finding the spiritual healing Jesus talks about in Mark 2:16-17. He came to heal the sick, the broken, the battered and worn. Because I cannot open this coffee shop on my own, I wrote about it.

Lane is the only hearing kid in a family of deaf and hard of hearing individuals. In the same vein, I am the only disabled kid in my family. Lane and I both straddle a line between the disabled world and the abled world. While she is too hearing for the deaf world, having grown up in a deaf family, she is too deaf for the hearing world. She has experiences both communities cannot understand.

She is ridiculously empathetic and has no concept of why people would ever disregard someone just because they are different. Lane's heart is for those who have been disregarded, cast aside, and left to suffer on the world's terms.

Ryan is meant to act as those Pharisees, the people that could not understand why Jesus would eat with sinners and tax collectors. He is also a character a lot like my father, someone heavily utilitarian, who wants to chase after the common good rather than the good of the individual. As a developer, if there was no money, it was worthless for Ryan. He could not see the heart behind the things Lane was doing while she could not understand his incessant need for monetary security. I believe these two ideas, love and money are so opposed in Christian communities, but one cannot exist without the other which is why Lane's business could not be saved with feelings or heart or care. Lane and Ryan needed each other, the heart and the head of the body of Christ, so intimately tied to each other and so necessary for the world we live in to survive. In short, Ryan's villainous nature is redeemed but not changed. As Jamie says, "You can change his mind, but not who he is."

Finally, we have Jamie, my favorite character to write. I wish we had more time with Jamie. He is Lane's voice of reason, the thing that gets her up in the morning, and the one person that understands her. Unfortunately, Jamie's backstory did not fit into this story as is, but it is alluded to through Jamie and Lane's relationship and conversations. The two of them grew up together, Lane's oldest friend, the only person who remembers what it was like before Leo was deaf. Jamie's character was so important to me because I wanted the reader to believe that they were being introduced to a love triangle but find that, actually, Jamie really is just Lane's best friend.

"This is not a Hallmark movie." Lane's last line to Ryan was the first line I thought of for this story because "a girl owns a coffee shop that is getting closed down, unintentionally falling in love with the man trying to buy it," is a Hallmark movie waiting to happen if it has not happened already.

However, Lane recognizes that this is faulty story telling, reminding the reader that real life works very

differently. Her people come first and her trust must be earned. If acceptance is the A-Story, trust is the B-Story. Both are so important that this story would not have existed without them.

So, what happened to everybody? Well, if you are curious, I would like to inform you, dear reader, that Jamie opened a coffee shop of his own under the careful (but still somewhat silent) watching eye of Ryan Moore. It is called Nest. He built a recording studio in the back, met a girl, fell for her and her spunky attitude (yes, she reminds him of his best friend from back home), and they now have a successful music career together signing other artists to Jamie's label while recording music of their own for their friends, family, and anyone else who will listen.

Naturally, Gray and Leo also fell in love. It was written in the stars—or maybe in the coffee grinds. Their wedding was fully in American Sign Language. Lane interpreted for their hearing guests, including her not-so-silent anymore partner in business (and life). Everyone in Anchorage is hoping hers will be the next Apothecary wedding.

Speaking of Ryan, he fell hard into the coffee game, learning all he could about monetizing house-roasted beans and creating a little empire for himself and Lane (naturally). He also has gained an impressive collection of espresso stained t-shirts and odd smelling baseball hats that Lane insists on borrowing.

Critch found love in the college girl that hung around the bar whenever she got the chance. He and Liv make pastries together every Saturday morning. It is sickeningly cute. Lane loves every second of their escapades.

And the rest of the Apothecary team? They are still striving to make the best coffee Anchorage has ever tasted. Bea has taken over the new Middletown location, and Austen is now the manager of the original shop. Both ladies have never stopped thanking Lane for taking a chance on them. Whenever they speak on the success of The Apothecary at events across the country, they encourage everyone to be friends of “tax collectors and sinners,” being Apothecaries for the sick and needy rather

than the healthy because coffee is more than an impersonal drink handed to you by a guy in a green apron. It is an art that heals the soul. In short is is a love that does.