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Written by

Catherine Doyle

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PART I

‘Of all forms of caution, caution in love is perhaps the most fatal to true happiness.’

Bertrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness*



CHAPTER ONE

THE HONEYPOT



I didn't see it at first, sitting between the cash register and a stack of order pads. It might have been there for hours – or longer – just waiting, while I spent another day of my summer dying of boredom inside Gracewell's Diner.

There were just two of us left to lock up tonight. I was hovering beside the register, drumming my fingernails on the countertop, while Millie, my best friend and partner-in-waitressing, glided around the diner and sang into the broom handle like it was a microphone. Everyone else had left, and my uncle Jack – manager not-so-extraordinaire – had stayed home with a hangover.

The tables stood resolutely in rows, flanked by straight-backed burgundy chairs and the occasional rubber plant. The door was locked, the lights were dimmed and the window

booths were clean.

I was trying not to listen to Millie destroying Adele when I noticed it: the jar of honey. I picked it up and studied it.

'I think I'm getting better,' Millie called mid-song-murder from across the diner. The only thing she got right was the faint British accent, but that's only because she *was* British. 'I can hit that high note now!'

'*Big* improvement, Mil,' I lied without looking up.

The jar was small and rounded. Inside, honey dotted with crystals of gold swayed lazily as I tilted it back and forth. A fraying square of cloth covered the lid and, instead of a label, a thin velvet ribbon encircled the middle, finishing in an elaborate bow. It was black.

Homemade? Weird. I didn't know anybody in Cedar Hill who made their own honey, and I knew almost *everyone* in Cedar Hill. It was just that kind of place – a little pocket on the outskirts of Chicago, where everybody knows everybody else's business; where nobody forgives and nobody forgets. I knew all about that. After what happened with my dad, I became infamy's child, and infamy has a way of sticking to you like a big red warning on your forehead.

Millie hit the last note of her song with ear-splitting vigour, then skipped behind the counter and stashed the broom away. 'You ready to go?'

'Where did this come from?' I balanced the jar of honey on the palm of my hand and held it out.

She shrugged. 'Dunno. It was here when my shift started.'

I peered at her through the golden prism, which made her face look distorted. 'It's weird, right?'

Millie rearranged her features into a classic I-don't-really-

care-about-this-topic-of-conversation look. 'The honey? Not really.'

'It's homemade,' I said.

'Yeah, I figured.' She pulled her eyebrows together and reached out to touch the glass. 'The ribbon is kind of odd. Maybe a customer left it as a tip?'

'What kind of customer tips with pots of honey?'

Millie gasped, her face lighting up. 'Did you . . .' She breathed in dramatically. 'By any chance . . .' She exhaled. 'Serve . . .'

I leant forward in anticipation.

'. . . a little yellow bear . . .'

I can't believe I fell for it.

'. . . called Winnie-the-Pooh today?'

Her laughter set me off, it always did. That sound – like a duck being strangled – was what drew me to her when she moved to Cedar Hill five years ago. At school we would always find ourselves laughing at the same things. It was the silly stuff – making stupid faces, giggling inappropriately when someone tripped and fell, enjoying long, nonsensical conversations and discussing ridiculous hypothetical situations – that brought us together. Back then I didn't know it would be the only friendship that would survive what happened to my family eighteen months ago, but it didn't matter any more because Millie was the best friend I'd ever have, and the only one I really needed.

We laughed all the way through closing up, until we were outside in the balmy night air. Located on the corner of Foster and Oak, the diner was a modest, low-lying building made from faded brick. It was perfectly symmetrical, its squareness reflected in the boxy windows that dominated the exterior and the small parking lot that surrounded it on all sides. Along the

overhanging roof, a scrawling 'Gracewell's' sign was half illuminated by streetlamps that lined the periphery of the lot. Right across the street, the old library loomed against the night sky, half hidden by a line of neatly clipped trees that continued west past the general post office and on down the sidewalk.

I was still holding the well-dressed pot of honey as we crossed the empty parking lot. It's not like anyone would care, I told myself – with my uncle Jack at home nursing his self-induced headache, there was no one official around to claim it. I'd only done what any jaded, underpaid employee would do in my situation – claimed a freebie that I had no immediate use for and walked away from the diner feeling triumphant because of it.

'So, I've been thinking.' Millie slowed her pace to match mine.

'Be careful,' I teased her.

'Maybe *I* should take the honey.'

'Finders keepers,' I sang.

'Sophie, Sophie, Sophie.' She put her arm around my shoulder and pulled me towards her. We were almost the same height, but while Millie was curvy in all the right places, I was boy-skinny and chipmunk-cheeked like my father, though I had inherited his dimples too, which was somewhat of a silver lining. Millie squished her cheek up against mine, as if to remind me of that. I felt her smile. 'My *best* friend in the *whole* world, *ever.* Oh, how dull would my life be without you in it? The stars wouldn't shine half as bright, the moon would be but a shadow of its former self. The flowers would wither and—'

'No way!' I slithered out of her grip. 'You can't compliment your way into my honey stash. I'm immune to your charm.'

Millie scrunched her eyes and released a soul-destroying whine. 'You already get the whole freakin' diner. Can't I just have the honey?'

Even though she was right, inheriting the diner when I turned eighteen was hardly my life's greatest ambition. Those were my father's instructions before he went away, which would no doubt be enforced by my gloriously grumpy uncle Jack, who happened to exude a particularly pungent aura of 'I-don't-take-no-for-an-answer.' It didn't matter anyway. Millie and I both knew the diner wasn't something to be excited about. It was just one big, dead-end headache waiting to crash into my life. But the black-ribboned honeypot? That was pretty – a nice surprise to lift the monotony of the day.

Millie shuffled behind me. 'Sophie, this is your conscience speaking,' she whispered over my shoulder. 'I know it's been a while since we've talked, but it's time for you to do the right thing. Millie is so nice and pretty. Don't you want to give her the honey? Think of how happy it would make her.'

'I didn't know my conscience had a British accent.'

'Yeah, well, don't read too much into it. Just give her the honey.'

I stalled at the edge of the parking lot, where we would peel off separately into the night. Before my parents' income was halved, Millie and I used to walk in the same direction, to Shrewsbury Avenue, where there were housekeepers and gardeners, giant pools, and crystal chandeliers hanging inside actual foyers. Now my walks home were a whole lot longer than they used to be.

'Millie doesn't even like honey,' I hissed. '*And* she has no respect for bees. I saw her stamp on one three times last week

to make sure it was dead.'

'It's not my fault this country is over-run with obnoxious insects.'

'What do you expect? It's the middle of July!'

'It's a disgrace.'

'*And* you were wearing Flowerbomb perfume.'

'He was being inappropriate.'

'So you murdered him.'

Millie shot out her hand. 'Just give me the freaking honey, Gracewell. I need it to bribe my way out of a grounding.'

I raised my eyebrows. We had just completed an eight-hour shift together and she hadn't mentioned this. 'Grounded?'

'Total injustice. *Complete* misunderstanding.'

'I'm listening . . .'

'Alex called me a *braceface.*' Millie paused for effect. 'Can you believe that?'

Well, she did have braces. And they were technically on her face. But I didn't say that. Instead, I did what any best friend would do. I adopted an expression of pure outrage and pretended to linger over what a rude tyrant her not-so-mature-but-definitely-hot brother was.

'He's *such* an ass,' I offered.

'He's literally the worst human being on the planet. Anyway, one thing led to another, and his iPhone fell out the window . . . well, it sort of fell out of my hands . . . which were coincidentally dangling outside of his bedroom window at the time . . . He *completely* freaked out on me.'

'Oh, siblings . . .'

'Well, you're lucky you don't have to share your house with any douchelords,' she ranted. 'What kind of nineteen-year-old

guy *squeals* on his younger sister? I mean, *where* is the honour in that? He's a total disgrace to the Parker name. And how was I even supposed to know his phone would break?'

'Weird.' Honey still in hand, I leant against a nearby street-lamp and watched my shadow curve inside its puddle of light. 'I could have sworn the latest iPhones had tiny built-in parachutes.'

Millie started to swat at the air, like the problem was floating around in front of her. 'If I give my mum that thoughtful jar of honey to use in one of her baking recipes, then she'll see me as the kind, caring daughter that *I am*, and take back the unjust grounding, which was unfairly handed out because of my ignorant pigman brother.'

I straightened up. 'That's never going to work. I'm keeping the honey.'

'Whatever,' she said, with an elaborate flick of her poker-straight brown hair. 'It's probably poisoned anyway.'

She stuck out her tongue and flounced off into the darkness, leaving me alone with my hard-won bounty. I slid the jar into my bag, watching the wisps of black ribbon fall away from me.

I crossed the road and paused, trying to decide which way to go. After six shifts in a row, the balls of my feet were throbbing, and because Millie and I had stalled for so long, it was already later than it should have been. The longer way home was usually my preferred option – it was well lit and well travelled – but the shortcut was significantly shorter, bypassing the centre of town, winding up the hill instead and looping around the haunted mansion at the end of Lockwood Avenue.