

Begin Again



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Chapter One

To be clear, I don't believe in fairy tales. After the past eighteen years of existing, I'd have to be pretty silly to put any stock in those. But I do believe in destiny. Specifically, in our power over it.

Which is why, against all odds, I'm here—standing just outside my dream school as one of the record few mid-freshman-year transfers that Blue Ridge State has ever had. I kept it under wraps over winter break since I was scrambling to figure out the financials of it, but as of today, everything's official. For once, everything is falling into place.

I squeeze the “A” charm on my mom's old necklace, slide it back under my coat, and knock three times on the door of the off-campus apartment in front of me.

“Who's there?” someone calls from inside.

“Um.” I've mentally rehearsed this moment so many times this morning that my brain can't shake the expectation of Connor swinging the door open, his amber eyes wide and so happy to see me he sweeps me off my Keds. Instead I lean in and say to the stranger, “It's Andie? I'm Connor's . . .”

Girlfriend, I'm going to say. Which I am, even if we've barely seen each other since August, when he moved two hours from home to study here, and I stuck around at the local community college.

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A boy opens the door a crack, squinting at me. “Uh, I only just moved in. But I don’t know any Connors.”

“I mean Whit,” I correct myself. Connor’s teammates have always called him by his last name, to the point where I’m pretty sure they don’t remember he has a first one to begin with. Even his Instagram bio just says “Whit” now.

“No Whits, either.”

“Oh.” I step back to check the address. It looks like the same one I’ve been sending care packages to every month, but maybe in all the pandemonium of shoving my life into two suitcases and a backpack, I got the numbers jumbled.

I pull my phone out of my pocket to call Connor. “Sorry to bother—” The door shuts in my face. “You,” I mumble, taking a step back.

I press the phone to my ear, but it just rings until it hits Connor’s voicemail. “Snickerdoodle,” I cuss, an admittedly weird habit I’ve picked up from Gammy Nell, who refuses to use actual swear words and makes a big show of flinching when anyone does within ten feet of her.

I was hoping to catch Connor before the kickoff event for the school’s annual ribbon hunt, a tradition for freshmen I’ve only been dreaming about for—well, pretty much my entire human existence. According to the livestream I caught of the school’s underground radio show *The Knights’ Watch*, it’ll start on the quad at ten o’clock. But today’s already going to be stacked with a quick move-in and new classes and trying to find a decent work-study job as it is, so maybe catching up with Connor later is for the best. It’s not like we’re short on time, now that we’re going to the same school again.

I walk back to the car where my grandmas are waiting for me, flashing what I used to call my syndicated-talk-show smile, the one so practiced and reflexive that it’s almost stopped feeling fake.

“I forgot,” I say as I open the car door. “He’s at an early soccer practice.”

One of Grandma Maeve’s perfectly penciled eyebrows pokes out from behind her hot pink sunglasses. “Is he now?” she asks, turning her key in the ignition.

We both know I’m lying for Gammy Nell’s sake, so I press my lips back at her in the rearview mirror in acknowledgment that I’ve been busted. Better that than letting Gammy Nell go on another one of her doomsday spirals—she can take “Connor’s not picking up his phone” to “Connor’s been kidnapped by a cult that’s going to harvest his organs” in two seconds flat.

“Off to Cardinal, then?” Grandma Maeve asks, referring to the dorm I’ve been assigned.

Gammy Nell pouts, turning back to look at me with the same big blue puppy dog eyes she gave my dad, and my dad gave me. “I wish you’d let us come up.”

I lean forward from the back seat. “I don’t mind if you want to—”

Grandma Maeve waves me off. “And ruin your street cred with two bickering old ladies before you can so much as bat your eye at one co-ed?”

“I have a boyfriend,” I say patiently.

This earns me a scoff. Grandma Maeve isn’t Connor’s biggest fan at the moment, since he talked about taking a break last semester when the distance got to be too rough. But in his defense, Blue Ridge State is known for putting students through the wringer. I’m sure it’s why I didn’t get in when I applied out of high school—none of my otherwise shiny academic and community feats could make up for the string of Cs I got sophomore year, which was more than enough of a reason to put me in the “reject” pile at the most competitive school in the state.

“And *I* don’t bicker,” says Gammy Nell primly.

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Grandma Maeve pats her on the shoulder with the hand that isn't trained on the wheel. "Sure you don't, Nellie."

The thing about Grandma Maeve and Gammy Nell is that they have precisely two interests in common: a years-long, borderline-concerning obsession with Ryan Reynolds, and me. Other than that they might as well be night and day. Grandma Maeve is all sass and flashy accessories and telling you how it is; Gammy Nell is all sweetness and cotton cardigans and not telling you how it is, but passive-aggressively letting you know she doesn't like it. The only reason they haven't blown our house in Little Fells sky-high is that seven years ago, when my mom died, they both decided to move in with my dad to help raise me.

Well, "help" might be a generous word for it. With Gammy Nell long since widowed and Grandma Maeve divorced multiple times over, they did their fair share of it, then pretty much took over after my dad landed a job two hours away and I stayed put to finish high school. It wasn't long before the two of them were so well-known in our neighborhood that the neighbors practically camped out on our porch, hoping to hear about another misadventure behind one of Grandma Maeve's tattoos or score some of Gammy Nell's famous chocolate cherry jam.

There's this pang then that I've been doing a pretty decent job of ignoring for the past few weeks, ever since I got my transfer acceptance letter. It's been a weird childhood, but a mostly good one. They'll only be a two-hour drive away, but it still feels like a whole lot more.

We roll up to the entrance of Cardinal and my heart skips a beat. I'm trying to think of something to say as we all get out of the car, something to reassure both them and myself, but then Gammy Nell nudges Grandma Maeve and says, "You forgot."

Grandma Maeve scowls. "Forgot what?"

"I knew you would. The rib—"

"Oh, you're right. Shit."

Cue the trademark Gammy Nell flinch.

“Hold up, chicken,” says Grandma Maeve, pulling something out from the glove compartment.

She presses a stack of three ribbons into my hand, one red, one yellow, and one blue, all of them stamped with a faded version of the Blue Ridge State logo of a knight. She waits to give me the fourth ribbon last—a white one marked with my mom’s signature “A” in permanent ink.

My throat goes tight. I haven’t seen these since my dad put them in storage; I wasn’t even sure we still had them.

“I dug them out of your mom’s old things,” she says. “She’d have wanted you to have them.”

Neither of us likes to talk about my mom in front of other people. After our tiny town of Little Fells watched her grow her local radio show into a statewide syndicated one, she was so universally loved as the “hometown spitfire” that everyone jumps at the chance to share memories of her. But there’s always been this private, almost sacred grief between me and Grandma Maeve and my dad, in the rare moments he acknowledges it with us.

So I’m not surprised when Grandma Maeve immediately changes gears by pressing a bag full of quarters into my hand for the laundromat. A beat later Gammy Nell yanks out an entire grocery store aisle’s worth of snack cakes and candy she’s stuffed into a tote bag and hands them to me, nearly spilling out individually wrapped Ring Dings and Tastykakes onto the sidewalk.

“For all your new friends,” she says excitedly.

I grin back, the seams of my coat itching at the anticipation. The minute I had that acceptance letter in hand I promised myself that this wouldn’t just be an academic fresh start, but a fresh start for making new friends, too—something I don’t have a lot of experience with, growing up in a small town full of people I’ve known my whole life. Lightly bribing the dorm with snack cakes seems like a good place to start.

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They hug me in turn, Grandma Maeve with that deep, sharp squeeze like she's jolting my bones with love, then Gammy Nell all soft and full and smelling like the apples she put in the air fryer this morning. I swallow back the extremely unhelpful balloon of fear in my stomach.

"Call us when you're settled," says Grandma Maeve as they get back into the car.

"And every day!" Gammy Nell demands.

Then Grandma Maeve blows me a kiss and steps on the gas as Gammy Nell squawks in protest, trying to take my picture through the open window in vain. I wave as they turn the corner, smile still fully intact, then open my suitcase to its hidden pocket and press the ribbons inside, safe and out of sight.

Chapter Two

Cardinal dorm is on the fringes of campus, nestled between a row of other dorms and the woods behind the school. The campus is every bit as stunning as all the brochures I've collected over the years promised, and the ache in my chest feels deep enough to bruise. It's not just the faded red brick of the buildings and the idyllic tree-lined paths and the sweeping mountain views from the campus's highest hill. It's that I've seen them all before, in the background of pictures of my parents I found in a box under my dad's bed. Blue Ridge State is where they met.

I square my shoulders. This is my story, not theirs. And seeing as I have an entire floor's worth of new friends to make, an entire schedule of classes to wrangle, and eventually a dimpled soccer star to surprise, my work here is cut out for me.

An elevator takes me up to the fourth floor, where I've been assigned. I pass a group of students in the hallway, all of them carting sleek laptops and textbooks and laughing about something that happened at a finals party last semester. A few of them cast me a curious glance, but they all seem so at ease with one another that I clam up before I can remember which hand I've got the snack cakes in.

I take a deep breath, promising myself to give it another go later, and knock on the RA's door.

“Nobody’s home.”

I laugh nervously. “It’s Andie Rose? The transfer student?”

There’s rustling on the other side of the door, which then opens to the more modern Blue Ridge State logo. I blink, then look up from the T-shirt into the eyes of an overly tall boy who must be the Milo Flynn I’ve been emailing with, blinking right back at me with the bewilderment of someone who clearly hasn’t slept in a week. He hovers in the doorway, his shoulders slumped but his eyes considering mine so intently that my face burns from the unexpectedness of it. He clears his throat and we both glance away.

“Transfer student. Yes,” he mutters, more to himself than to me. He runs a hand through his dark curls. “Shit. Is it Monday?”

His voice sounds familiar to me, enough that I’m about to ask if he went to a school near Little Fells. But I’m immediately distracted by his room, which is littered with coffee mugs, the majority centered around a tiny, single-serve Keurig placed dead center in the room like a shrine.

“Yup,” I inform him. “You okay there, Milo?”

“Peachy,” he mutters, moving his hand to rub his thumb and pointer finger over his eyes like he’s trying to rub his face back to life. “Cool, okay. I got this. You’re with Shay.”

Now this is the one part of the whole Blue Ridge State experience I’ve actually been looking forward to—having a roommate. Especially considering my only past roommates, bless their hearts, both qualify for social security and spend most of their nights arguing over the division between the tomatoes and strawberries in the backyard garden. I squashed the hope my kid self had for siblings a long time ago, but I can feel the glimmer of it now—someone my age. Someone who doesn’t think that watching *The Proposal* eighteen times a month is a personality trait. An actual, legitimate *peer*.

Milo leads me down the hall on legs so long that I half jog to keep up, then knocks on 4A. There’s no answer.

“Shay’s probably in the shower,” he says, pointing vaguely down

the hall. “So, uh—bathrooms are down there on the left. Just past them is a study room. End of the hall is the rec room.”

“Got it.”

“Rules. Uh . . . quiet hours start at nine. If you’re going to drink, please don’t do it in front of me, I don’t have the time or the will to write you up. This is your key,” he says, pulling it out of the back pocket of his jeans and pressing it into my hand. His own is warm in that way of someone who’s recently been asleep. “Don’t lose it, they’re expensive to replace.”

I close my fist around the key like a talisman. “Anything else?”

He takes an exaggeratedly long breath. “Probably. Sorry. Long night. Do you have any questions?”

“No, thanks.” I read through the student handbook so thoroughly that I probably know more about the rules than he does. I don’t do anything halfway.

“Good, because I’m not alive enough for them yet.” He gestures at the closed door. “You lucked out. Shay is my favorite person on this floor.”

“Why’s that?” I ask, eager to hear more about her. The only information I’ve been able to glean about Shay Gibbins is from the Bookstagram she runs, where you can scroll into an endless abyss of beautifully pastel-filtered books on bedspreads and shelves paired with coffee and knickknacks and cozy socks. I only know what she looks like because I managed to find pictures her sister and friends tagged of her—she has this close-lipped, conspiratorial kind of smile and full cheeks and a seemingly endless collection of knit sweaters that would make Gammy Nell proud.

Milo leans down to meet me at my level. He’s just awake enough now that I can see the celery green of his eyes, and the absolute resolution in them. “She respects quiet hours. Quiet hours are very, very sacred to me. Understood?”

I laugh. Milo does not.

“Understood,” I say, saluting him.

He straightens himself back up to his overly tall self, so I have to crane my neck to look at him. “Good,” he says. “And, uh . . . godspeed with the whole midyear transfer thing.”

“Thanks?”

“Anytime,” he says, and then stops himself. “Except during quiet hours.”

There’s a pink-robed, flip-flop-clad Black girl walking down the hallway that I instantly recognize as Shay. She and Milo high-five each other without breaking their strides, then Milo disappears back into his room, and Shay pulls her key out of her robe pocket.

“You must be Andie,” she says, her smile just as warm as it is in pictures.

I hold myself up straight, trying to project the same warmth even as my stomach does a quick backflip. “And you’re Shay.”

“For better or worse,” she says, twisting the key in the lock and opening the door. “Sorry in advance—my side of the room is kind of, uh . . .”

“Whoa.”

I have no idea how she meant to end that sentence, but I’m so swept up by the aesthetic that I probably wouldn’t have heard it anyway. Her half of the room is littered from wall to floor with candles and books and pillows, with glossy Blue Ridge State stickers from the school’s literary club and Campus Pride, with framed and hanging pictures of herself with friends and her parents and sister. Everything is so personal and cozy that I don’t even want to cast my eyes at my bare side of the room and wreck it. I make a mental note to head to the craft store down the road and see if I can curate anything half as cute as her setup.

That is, if I have any money left over after the school’s work-study program comes to collect. Tuition does *not* come cheap.

“Yeah. Well. You’re welcome to the bookshelf anytime,” says Shay.

“Holy guacamole,” I say, peering closer to look at the titles. It’s

a mix of everything—romance, young adult, historical accounts, sci-fi, fantasy, horror. I only look away because there's a zombie skull on the binding of one of them that rattles me. "You must read like, an entire book a day."

"Sometimes two," she confesses.

"In *this* place?" I ask, setting my bags down on the bare mattress of my bed.

She shrugs. "I don't have a major yet, so. Things aren't super intense for me." She pulls off her shower cap, revealing her intricate pattern of zigzagged cornrows cinched in a ponytail, and plucks a book with a very steamy cover from her bedside table. "How about you? Picked your poison?"

"Psychology," I say, hoping she doesn't take one look at me and know that the only two books I own are celebrity-authored hybrid cook- and lifestyle books.

Shay looks up at me from the pages of her novel, wincing. "Well—good, I guess. Makes sense for you to be here, since the psychology program is so intense. Nearly knocked my older sister off her ass, but she's in grad school now and glad for it."

I try not to wince back, focusing on unpacking the backpack I put all of my essentials in.

"Yeah. Not looking forward to that."

Shay shrugs. "If you managed to elbow your way in as a mid-freshman-year transfer, I'm guessing you'll be fine. That's basically unheard of."

And this time I do wince, pivoting on my heel before she can see it and turning my attention to the overflowing snack-cake bag. It's not basically unheard of. It technically *is* unheard of. According to the registrar, not only am I the only freshman transfer they took, but the first one in years.

It's not that I didn't get good grades. I worked my tail off in my first semester, wrote fifteen drafts of my application essay, and got glowing recommendations from my two most favorite teachers.

But I can't help suspecting that a huge part of why I got in is because—well. For lack of a better phrase, the “dead mom” card.

See, when you have the “dead mom” card in your playing deck, everything in your world is just a little bit tilted sideways. The kids you were close to growing up suddenly hesitate to talk about their own moms in front of you, or even the rest of their problems, like they're worried to bother you with them when they think it doesn't compare to yours. The adults in your small town are extra nice to you, sneaking you gumballs at the grocery store checkout line, showing up in full force whenever you host a car wash fundraiser. And eventually you get a little older and look around and realize that there's a mark on you that's followed you around, some shadow that's colored everything that's happened to you since. Marked you as an “other” with your friends, so you can never quite relate to them the same way you did. Given you little boosts with everyone else, like they could ever make up for the worst thing that ever happened to you.

It's why I loved writing the anonymous advice column for our high school paper so much, and why I've kept doing it long after graduation. Nobody has ever known who I am. It was a way to help friends with their problems, once half of them felt too uncomfortable about my situation to keep coming to me with them. And I know the reputation I've built with it is all my own, and not because I'm Amy Rose's daughter.

Blue Ridge State, on the other hand, I'm not so sure about. My mom was just as well-loved here as she was back at Little Fells. As happy as I am that it all worked out, there's some part of me that's wondered exactly whose merit I got in on—mine or hers.

“Got any friends here?” Shay asks.

I clear my throat, securing the smile back on my face. “Yeah. My boyfriend, Connor,” I say, a little more brightly than I meant to.

“Your boyfriend?” says Shay.

“Yeah. Of three years. But we've been friends for like, ever.” I

put down the shirts I was pulling out of my suitcase and take a step closer to the edge of her bed. “Actually, my being here is kind of a surprise. I haven’t been able to tell him yet. Still brainstorming the most romantic place to go about it.”

Somewhat unhelpfully, my thoughts keep straying to the arboretum, a huge chunk of woods on the edge of campus full of trails to explore and hidden spots with bridges and gazebos and a whole tree grove full of birdhouses. There’s a lake smack-dab in the middle of it with a trail that goes all the way around, one just as picturesque as the big lake my parents used to take me on nature strolls to as a kid. On a whim I even unearthed my old hiking boots, only to abruptly realize upon seeing the Hello Kitty pattern on them that I no longer had ten-year-old feet and they wouldn’t do me any good here.

But Connor’s always been too restless for that kind of thing. If he’s outdoors, he wants to be competing in soccer matches or training, doing something “productive.” Considering all the times he dodged my attempts to take him hiking back in high school, I doubt he’d appreciate getting dragged all the way out there when I could have just as easily met up with him somewhere less muddy.

Shay watches me curiously. “Huh,” she says. “Well—as long as you don’t ditch me to join the cast of a reality show like the last roommate did.”

I flip my ponytail over my shoulder. “I’ll try to keep MTV’s casting directors at bay.”

Shay lets out a small snort and we share a cautious smile. We’ve messaged back and forth the past few weeks, but it was mostly about moving arrangements. But as nervous as I’ve been to make friends here, I can already tell that Shay and I are going to get along just fine.

“Zebra Cake?” I ask, pulling one out of Gammy Nell’s bag.

Shay’s eyes widen. “Um, yeah, always.”

I toss one over to her and she catches it with ease, tearing open

the wrapper. I grab one of my own, then walk over to cheers it with her.

“To new roomies.”

My phone buzzes on top of my mattress. I apologize quickly before turning around to answer it.

“Hey, Andie. Sorry I missed your call.”

Just hearing Connor’s voice makes the world feel a little smaller again, a little easier to manage. We’ve known each other since kindergarten. Sometimes his voice sounds just as familiar to me as my own.

“No problem. Um, are you at your apartment? Or on your way to class?”

Connor lets out that easy laugh of his, the one I can feel in his whole body when my hand is pressed against his chest. “Funny you should ask . . .”

“Tell me where you are,” I say, grabbing my key off the mattress. “And stay put.”

“I’m outside your psych building.”

I stop at the door. I can feel Shay’s eyes on me. “Like, the psych building at Blue Ridge State?”

“No, Andie, *your* psych building.”

The key suddenly feels so heavy and bulky in my hand that I nearly drop it on the dorm room’s linoleum floor. “Why would you be . . .”

“I transferred to Little Fells Community College. To be with you.”

My eyes sweep up to Shay’s, knowing she just heard every word through my old tinny phone. My jaw drops, and so does hers, just before she lets out a low, sympathetic “Holy guacamole.”

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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