

## Maybe. Maybe Not.

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Austin Grant pulled his ancient Dodge pickup truck into a parking spot in front of the Country Time Bar and Grill and turned off the engine.

He didn't get out right away, just sat, fingers tapping restlessly on the steering wheel, staring at the squat brick building glowing with neon beer signs in the dark evening.

Austin didn't know why he'd come here tonight. He'd just gotten off work at Hardy Hardware after what had turned out to be a ten-hour shift, and he had some things he really needed to read for his first class tomorrow morning. He should have gone home, taken a long, hot shower, and listened to some tunes while he got caught up.

Instead, he was here at a bar on the other side of town.

"Don't be a jackass. You know exactly why you're here," Austin muttered, calling himself on his own bullshit.

He was here because his buddy, Drew, had told him Grace Cooper was working tonight. And he was here because Grace's younger brother, Eli, had come into the hardware store today and made all sorts of snide remarks that seemed to indicate Grace might, possibly, sort of, have a thing for Austin.

Maybe.

Or maybe not. You could never tell with Eli—the guy loved to stir up trouble.

Austin's restless drumming picked up speed.

Jesus, he was an idiot. Grace Cooper liked him? No freaking way.

*But...*

Austin knew exactly how he felt about Grace. He'd had a thing for her since high school. No—middle school. Even though they'd been in the same grade and sometimes in the same classes, it had taken him until eighth grade to really notice the girl with the beautiful golden-brown eyes and skin the color of coffee with cream. But once he'd started, he'd never stopped.

He wondered if her skin was as soft as it looked.

Grace had always been out of his league, and he'd never gotten up the guts to actually ask her out or anything. Now they were both at the university just outside of town, but they didn't run into each other much on campus. Pocono University was pretty big.

He saw her at the Country Time or around Hardy Falls, of course. He even tried to talk to her whenever he could. She'd never given him any clue that she was interested.

Which meant he was an idiot, and Eli was full of crap. Why would Grace even give a guy like him the time of day? Austin was a townie who couldn't even afford to live on campus. Grace's parents owned the local grocery store, and Eli had already started his own landscaping business. Grace

lived on campus, belonged to a sorority, and got involved in lots of activities. Austin kept to himself and had a small circle of friends.

She was beautiful and popular. He...wasn't.

They were so opposite it was ridiculous. He was wasting his time even being here.

*But...*

Grace worked damned hard at the Country Time and was one of Hannah's best servers. She wasn't stuck up like the rest of the girls in her sorority.

She probably wouldn't laugh at him if he tried to talk to her.

Probably.

He should just leave now.

*But...*

Oh, who was he kidding? He might be an idiot, but now that the idea had been planted, Austin knew he couldn't pass up the opportunity to see if Eli was right.

He had to know.

Austin took a deep breath and let it out slowly. If he was going to do this, he should just freaking do it before he made himself nuts.

"No guts, no glory," he told himself. "All she can do is say no."

*Or "get away from me, jerk."*

Drawing a hand through his hair, he checked his teeth in the mirror to make sure there wasn't food stuck in them, checked his breath, checked his pits, adjusted the collar of his button-down Hardy Hardware shirt, and got out of the truck. Walking quickly to the building, he pulled open one of the antique leaded glass entry doors, stepped into the taproom, and hesitated.

It was a bigger space than you'd expect from the outside, with old wood paneling that gleamed gold under the lights and a big bar dominating the room. There were tables scattered around, and a new stainless-steel toppings bar off to the side. A flat screen television was tuned to the Phillies, like it usually was during the season, and country music pounded over the speakers.

Usually, when Austin went into the Country Time, he took a seat at the bar, enjoying the fact that he could legally order a drink. But Grace didn't work the bar with Deacon, and Grace was the point of this visit, so Austin settled at one of the tables.

There were other customers around, including a group of kids he recognized from school. He gave the leader of the group, Jeffrey Ruffio, a chin lift, even though the guy was a total douche. But life was always easier if you stayed on Ruffio's good side.

He'd only been sitting there a minute when the door from the kitchen pushed open, and Grace came into the room, balancing a tray holding plates of food at her shoulder. Austin tightened as he watched her move.

*God, she was pretty.*

He rubbed his suddenly damp palms on his jeans and waited for her to notice him, but Grace's focus was on Jeffrey and his friends, and she didn't see him.

Grace handed out the food to Jeffrey and his friends, then stood talking to them, the empty tray held at her side. Her smile was bright and flirtatious, her laughter musical over the pounding bass of the music. She touched Jeffrey on the shoulder, leaned into him for a moment. Jeffrey reached up and grabbed her hand when she would have pulled away and smiled at her.

Austin felt his stomach sink.

*Eli had been wrong.*

God, he was such an idiot. Why had he even believed Grace's brother for a moment? Grace was so obviously into Jeffrey Ruffio. All you had to do was look at her to see it.

It had been better when he didn't have any hope. But now, thinking a door might be opening only to have it slammed in his face? Well, it was...painful.

Austin didn't want Grace to see him now. He wanted to get out of there and pretend he'd never come.

Pushing to his feet, he strode quickly to the safety of the front door. He thought he was going to make it, too, but just as he reached the entrance, he heard Grace call his name.

"Austin? Where are you going?"

*Crap.*

He turned and forced a smile for her but avoided looking at Deacon behind the bar.

"Forgot something," he called back to Grace. "Gotta go. I'll see you around sometime."

Waving once, he got the hell out of there.

One thing was for sure, Austin thought as he trudged back to his pickup. He'd never trust Eli Cooper again.