

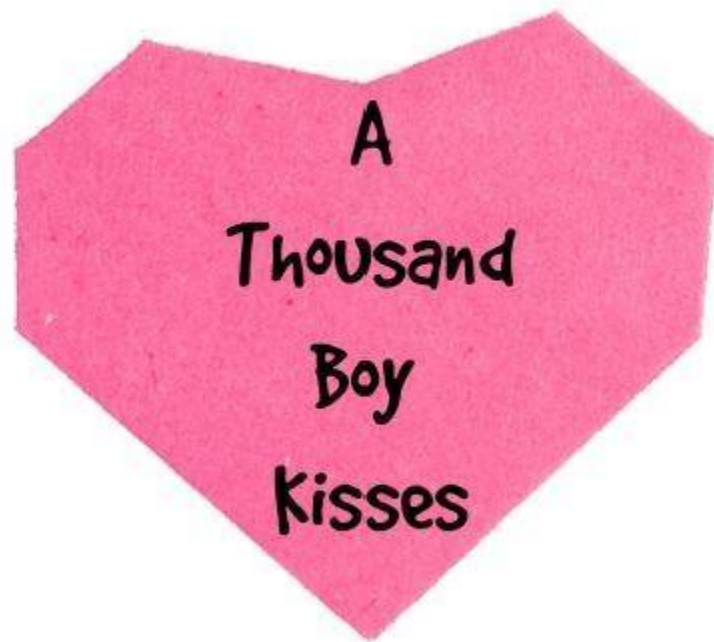
a
thousand
boy

Kisses

a novel

USA Today Bestselling Author

Tillie Cole



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Dedication

For believers in true, epic, soul-shattering love.

This one's for you.

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Rune

There were exactly four moments that defined my life.

This was the first.

* * *

Blossom Grove, Georgia

United States of America

Twelve Years Ago

Aged Five

“Jeg vil dra! Nå! Jeg vil reise hjem igjen!” I shouted as loud as I could, telling my mamma that I wanted to leave, now! I wanted to go back home! “We’re not going back home, Rune. And we are not leaving. This is our home now,” she replied in English.

She crouched down and looked me straight in the eye. "Rune," she said softly, "I know you didn't want to leave Oslo, but your pappa got a new job here in Georgia." Her hand ran up and down my arm, but it didn't make me feel any better. I didn't want to be in this place, in America.

I wanted to go back home.

"Slutt å snakke engelsk!" I snapped. I hated speaking English. Since we set off for America from Norway, Mamma and Pappa would only speak to me in English. They said I had to practice.

I didn't want to!

My mamma stood up and lifted a box off the ground. "We're in America, Rune. They speak English here. You've been speaking English for as long as you've been speaking Norwegian. It's time to use it."

I stood my ground, glaring at my mamma as she walked around me into the house. I looked around the small street where we now lived. There were eight houses. They were all big, but they all looked different. Ours was painted red, with white windows and a huge porch. My room was big and it was on the bottom floor. I did think that was kind of cool. Sort of anyway.

I'd never slept downstairs before; in Oslo my room was upstairs.

I looked at the houses. All of them were painted bright colors: light blues, yellows, pinks... Then I looked at the house next door. Right next door—we shared a patch of grass. Both houses were big, and our yards were too, but there was no fence or wall between them. If I wanted to, I could run into their yard and there'd be nothing to stop me.

The house was bright white, with a porch wrapped right around it. They had rocking chairs and a big chair swing on the front. Their window frames were painted black, and there was a window opposite my bedroom window.

Right opposite! I didn't like that. I didn't like that I could see into their bedroom and they could see into mine.

There was a stone on the ground. I kicked it with my foot, watching it roll down the street. I turned to follow my mamma, but then I heard a noise. It was coming from the house next to ours. I looked at their front door, but nobody came out. I was climbing the

steps to my porch when I saw some movement from the side of the house—from next door's bedroom window, the one opposite my own.

My hand froze on the rail and I watched as a girl, dressed in a bright blue dress, climbed through the window. She jumped down onto the grass and dusted off her hands on her thighs. I frowned, my eyebrows pulling down, as I waited for her to lift her head. She had brown hair, which was piled up on her head like a bird's nest. She wore a big white bow on the side of it.

When she looked up, she looked right at me. Then she smiled. She smiled at me so big. She waved, fast, then ran forward and stopped in front of me.

She pushed out her hand. "Hi, my name is Poppy Litchfield, I'm five years old and I live right next door."

I stared at the girl. She had a funny accent. It made the English words sound different to the way I had learned them back in Norway. The girl—Poppy—had a smudge of mud on her face and bright yellow rain boots on her feet. They had a big red balloon on the side.

She looked weird.

I looked up from her feet and fixed my eyes on her hand. She was still holding it out. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know what she wanted.

Poppy sighed. Shaking her head, she reached for my hand and forced it into hers. She shook them up and down twice and said, "A handshake. My mamaw says it's only right to shake the hand of new people that you meet." She pointed at our hands. "That was a handshake. And that was polite because I don't know you."

I didn't say anything; for some reason my voice wouldn't work. When I looked down I realized it was because our hands were still joined.

She had mud on her hands too. In fact, she had mud everywhere.

"What's your name?" Poppy asked. Her head was tipped to the side. A small twig was stuck in her hair.

"Hey," she said, tugging on our hands, "I asked for your name."

I cleared my throat. "My name is Rune, Rune Erik Kristiansen."

Poppy scrunched her face up, her big pink lips sticking out all funny. "You sound weird," she blurted.

I snatched my hand away.

“Nei det gjør jeg ikke!” I snapped. Her face screwed up even more.

“What did you just say?” Poppy asked, as I turned to walk into my house.

I didn’t want to speak to her anymore.

Feeling angry, I spun back around. “I said, ‘No, I don’t!’ I was speaking Norwegian!” I said, in English this time. Poppy’s green eyes grew huge.

She stepped closer, and closer again, and asked, “Norwegian? Like the Vikings? My mamaw read me a book about the Vikings. It said they were from Norway.” Her eyes got even bigger. “Rune, are you a Viking?” Her voice had gone all squeaky.

It made me feel good. I stuck out my chest. My pappa always said I was a Viking, like all the men in my family. We were big, strong Vikings. “Ja,” I said. “We are real Vikings, from Norway.”

A big smile spread across Poppy’s face, and a loud girly giggle burst from her mouth. She lifted her hand and pulled on my hair. “That’s why you have long blond hair and crystal-blue eyes. Because you’re a Viking. At first I

thought you looked like a girl—”

“I’m not a girl!” I butted in, but Poppy didn’t seem to care. I ran my hand through my long hair. It came down to my shoulders. All the boys in Oslo had their hair like this.

“—but now I see it’s because you’re a real-life Viking. Like Thor. He had long blond hair and blue eyes too! You’re just like Thor!”

“Ja,” I agreed. “Thor does. And he’s the strongest god of them all.”

Poppy nodded her head, then put her hands on my shoulders. Her face had gone all serious and her voice dropped to a whisper. “Rune, I don’t tell everyone this, but I go on adventures.”

I screwed up my face. I didn’t understand. Poppy stepped closer and looked up into my eyes. She squeezed my arms. She tilted her head to the side. She looked all around us, then leaned in to speak. “I don’t normally bring people with me on my journeys, but you’re a Viking, and we all know that Vikings grow big and strong, and they are really really good with adventures and exploring, and long walks and capturing baddies and... all kindsa things!”

I was still confused, but then Poppy stepped back and held out her hand again.

“Rune,” she said, her voice serious and strong, “you live right next door, you’re a Viking and I just love Vikings. I think we should be best friends.” “Best friends?” I asked.

Poppy nodded her head and pushed her hand further toward me. Slowly reaching out my own hand, I gripped hold of hers and gave it two shakes, like she’d shown me.

A handshake.

“So now we are best friends?” I asked, as Poppy pulled her hand back.

“Yes!” she said excitedly. “Poppy and Rune.” She brought her finger to her chin and looked up. Her lips stuck out again, like she was thinking very hard. “It sounds good, don’t you think? ‘Poppy and Rune, best friends for infinity!’”

I nodded because it did sound good. Poppy put her hand in mine. “Show me your bedroom! I want to tell you about what adventure we can go on next.” She began to pull me forward, and we ran into the house.

When we pushed through my bedroom door, Poppy rushed straight to my window. “This is the room exactly opposite mine!”

I nodded my head, and she squealed, running toward me to take my hand in hers again. “Rune!” she said excitedly, “we can talk at night, and make walkie-talkies with cans and string. We can whisper our secrets to each other when everyone else is asleep, and we can plan, and play, and...”

Poppy kept talking, but I didn’t mind. I liked the sound of her voice. I liked her laugh and I liked the big white bow in her hair.

Maybe Georgia won’t be so bad after all, I thought, not if I have Poppy Litchfield as my very best friend.

** * **

And that was Poppy and me from that day on.

Poppy and Rune.

Best friends for infinity.

Or so I thought.

Funny how things change.



Chapter 1

Broken Hearts
←
Boy-Kiss Jars

Poppy

Nine Years Ago

Aged Eight

“Where are we going, Daddy?” I asked as he held my hand gently, guiding me to the car. I glanced back at my school, wondering why I was being taken out of class early. It was only lunch break. I wasn’t supposed to leave yet.

My daddy didn’t say anything to me as we walked, he just squeezed my hand. I searched along the school fence, a strange feeling pulling in my stomach. I loved school, I loved to learn, and we had history next. It was my absolute favorite subject. I didn’t want to miss it.

“Poppy!” Rune, my very best friend, was standing at the fence, watching me go. His hands were holding real tight to the metal bars. “Where are you going?” he shouted. I sat next to Rune in class. We were always together.

School was no fun when the other wasn't there.

I turned my head toward my daddy's face for answers, but he didn't look back at me. He stayed silent. Looking back at Rune, I shouted, "I don't know!"

Rune watched me all the way to our car. I climbed in the back and sat on my booster seat, my daddy buckling me in.

I heard the whistle blow in the schoolyard, signaling the end of lunch. I glanced out the window and watched all of the kids running back inside, but not Rune. Rune stayed at the fence watching me. His long blond hair was blowing in the wind as he mouthed, "*Are you okay?*". But my daddy got in the car and started driving away before I could answer.

Rune ran along the fence, following our car, until Mrs. Davis came and made him go inside.

When the school was out of sight, my daddy said, "Poppy?" "Yes, Daddy?" I replied.

"You know Mamaw has been living with us for a while now?"

I nodded my head. My mamaw had moved into the room opposite mine a while back. My mama had said it was because she needed help. My pawpaw had died when I was only a baby. My mamaw had lived on her own for years, until she came to live with us.

"Do you remember what your mama and I told you about why? Why Mamaw could no longer live by herself?"

I breathed in through my nose and whispered, "Yes. Because she needed our help. Because she's sick." My stomach flipped over as I spoke. My mamaw was my very best friend. Well, her and Rune were tied at the absolute top. My mamaw said I was just like her.

Before she was sick we would go on lots of adventures. She read to me every night about the great explorers of the world. She would tell me all about

history—about Alexander the Great, the Romans, and my favorite, the samurai from Japan. They were Mamaw’s favorite too.

I knew my mamaw was sick, but she never acted sick. She always smiled, she gave tight hugs and made me laugh. She always said she had moonbeams in her heart and sunshine in her smile. Mamaw told me that meant she was happy.

She made me happy too.

But over the last few weeks Mamaw had slept a lot. She’d been too tired to do much of anything else. In fact, most nights I would now read to her, as she stroked my hair and smiled at me. And that was okay, because Mamaw’s smiles were the best kind of smiles to get.

“That’s right, pumpkin, she is sick. In fact, she’s very, very sick. Do you understand?”

I frowned, but nodded my head and said, “Yes.”

“That’s why we’re going home early,” he explained. “She’s waiting for you. She wants to see you. Wants to see her little buddy.”

I didn’t understand why my daddy had to bring me home early to visit my mamaw, when the first thing I did every night after school was go into her room and talk to her, while she lay in bed. She liked to hear all about my day.

We turned into our street and parked in our driveway. My daddy didn’t move for a few seconds, but then he turned to me and said, “I know you’re only eight, pumpkin, but you have to be a big brave girl today, okay?”

I nodded my head. My daddy smiled a sad smile at me. “That’s my girl.”

He got out of the car and walked around to my seat in the back. Taking my hand, my daddy guided me out of the car and toward the house. I could see there were more cars here than usual. I had just opened my mouth to ask whose they all were when Mrs. Kristiansen, Rune’s mamma, came walking across the yard between our houses with a big dish of food in her hands.

“James!” she called out, and my daddy turned to greet her.

“Adelis, hey,” he called back. Rune’s mamma stopped in front of us. Her long blond hair was down today. It was the same color as Rune’s. Mrs. Kristiansen was real pretty. I loved her. She was kind, and called me the daughter she never had.

“I made you this. Please tell Ivy I’m thinking of you all.” My daddy released my hand to take the dish.

Mrs. Kristiansen crouched down and pressed a kiss on my cheek. “You be a good girl, Poppy, okay?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I replied, and watched her cross the grass to go back into her house.

My daddy sighed, then tipped his head for me to follow him inside. As soon as we were through the front door, I saw my aunts and uncles sitting on the couches, and my cousins sitting on the floor of the living room, playing with their toys. My aunt Silvia was sitting with my sisters, Savannah and Ida. They were younger than me, only four and two years old. They waved at me when they saw me, but Aunt Silvia kept them sitting on her lap.

Nobody was speaking, but lots of them were wiping their eyes; most of them were crying.

I was so confused.

I leaned into my daddy’s leg, clutching on tightly. Someone stood in the doorway to the kitchen—my aunt Della, DeeDee as I always called her. She was my absolute favorite aunt. She was young and fun, and always made me laugh. Even though my mama was older than her sister, they looked like each other. Both had long brown hair and green eyes like me. But DeeDee was extra pretty. I wanted to look just like her one day.

“Hey, Pops,” she said, but I could see that her eyes were red, and her voice sounded funny. DeeDee looked at my daddy. She took the dish of food from his hand and said, “You go on back with Poppy, James. It’s almost time.”

I started to go with my daddy, but looked back when DeeDee didn’t follow. I opened my mouth to call her name, but she suddenly turned around, put the dish of food on the counter and rested her head in her hands. She was crying, crying so hard that loud noises came from her mouth.

“Daddy?” I whispered, feeling a strange feeling in my stomach. My daddy wrapped his arm around my shoulders and guided me away. “It’s okay, pumpkin. DeeDee just needs a minute alone.”

We walked to Mamaw’s room. Just before daddy opened the door, he said, “Mama’s in there, pumpkin, and Betty, Mamaw’s nurse is in there too.”

I frowned. “Why is there a nurse?”

Daddy pushed open the door to Mamaw’s room, and my mama got up from the chair beside Mamaw’s bed. Her eyes were red and her hair was all messy. Mama’s hair was never messy.

I saw the nurse at the back of the room. She was writing something on a clipboard. She smiled and waved at me when I came in. Then I looked to the bed. Mamaw was lying down. My stomach flipped when I saw a needle sticking in her arm, with a clear tube leading to a bag hanging off a metal hook at her side.

I stood still, suddenly frightened. Then my mama moved toward me, and my mamaw looked my way. She looked different to last night. Her skin was paler, and her eyes weren’t as bright.

“Where’s my little buddy?” Mamaw’s voice was quiet and sounded funny, but the smile she gave me made me feel warm.

Giggling at my mamaw, I rushed to the side of the bed. “I’m here! I came home early from school to see you!”

Mamaw lifted her finger and tapped the end of my nose. "That's my girl!" I smiled real big in response.

"I just wanted you to visit a little while. I always feel better when the light of my life sits beside me and talks to me some."

I smiled again. Because *I* was the 'light of her life', 'the apple of her eye'. She always called me those things. Mamaw secretly told me it meant I was her favorite. But she'd told me I had to keep it to myself so it didn't upset my cousins and little sisters. It was our secret.

Hands suddenly gripped my waist, and my daddy lifted me to sit beside Mamaw on her bed. Mamaw took hold of my hand. She squeezed my fingers, but all I could notice was how cold her hands were. Mamaw breathed in deep, but it sounded funny, like something was crackling in her chest.

"Mamaw, are you okay?" I asked and leaned forward to press a soft kiss on her cheek. She normally smelled of tobacco from all the cigarettes she smoked. But I couldn't smell the smoke on her today.

Mamaw smiled. "I'm tired, girlie. And I'm..." Mamaw sucked in another breath and her eyes briefly squeezed shut. When they opened again, she shifted on the bed and said, "...and I'm gonna be going away awhile."

I frowned. "Where are you going, Mamaw? Can I come too?" We *always* went on adventures together.

Mamaw smiled, but shook her head. "No, girlie. Where I'm going, you can't follow. Not yet. But some day, many years from now, you'll see me again."

My mama let out a sob from behind me, but I just stared at my mamaw, confused. "But where are you going, Mamaw? I don't understand." "*Home*, sweetie," my mamaw said. "I'm going *home*." "But you are home," I countered.

“No”—Mamaw shook her head—“this isn’t our true home, girlie. This life ... well, it’s just a great big adventure while we have it. An adventure to enjoy and love with all of our heart before we go on to the greatest adventure of all.”

My eyes widened with excitement, then I felt sad. *Really* sad. My bottom lip began to tremble. “But we’re best buddies, Mamaw. We always go on our adventures together. You can’t go on one without me.”

Tears had begun falling from my eyes down to my cheeks. My mamaw lifted her free hand to brush them away. That hand was just as cold as the one I was holding. “We do always go on adventures together, girlie, but not this time.”

“Aren’t you afraid to go by yourself?” I asked, but my mamaw just sighed.

“No, girlie, there’s no fear to feel. I’m not scared at all.”

“But I don’t want you to go,” I pleaded, my throat starting to ache.

Mamaw’s hand stayed on my cheek. “You’ll still see me in your dreams. This isn’t a goodbye.”

I blinked, then blinked again. “Like you see Pawpaw? You always say he visits you in your dreams. He talks to you and kisses your hand.”

“Exactly like that,” she said. I wiped my tears away. Mamaw squeezed my hand, and looked at my mama behind me. When she looked back to me, she said, “While I’m gone, I’ve got a new adventure for you.”

I stilled. “You do?”

The sound of glass being placed on a table came from behind me. It made me want to look around, but before I could, Mamaw asked, “Poppy, what is it that I always say was my favorite memory from my life? The thing that always made me smile?”

“Pawpaw’s kisses. His sweet boy-kisses. All the memories of all the boykisses you ever got from him. You told me they’re the most favorite memories you have. Not money, not things, but the kisses you got from Pawpaw—because