

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

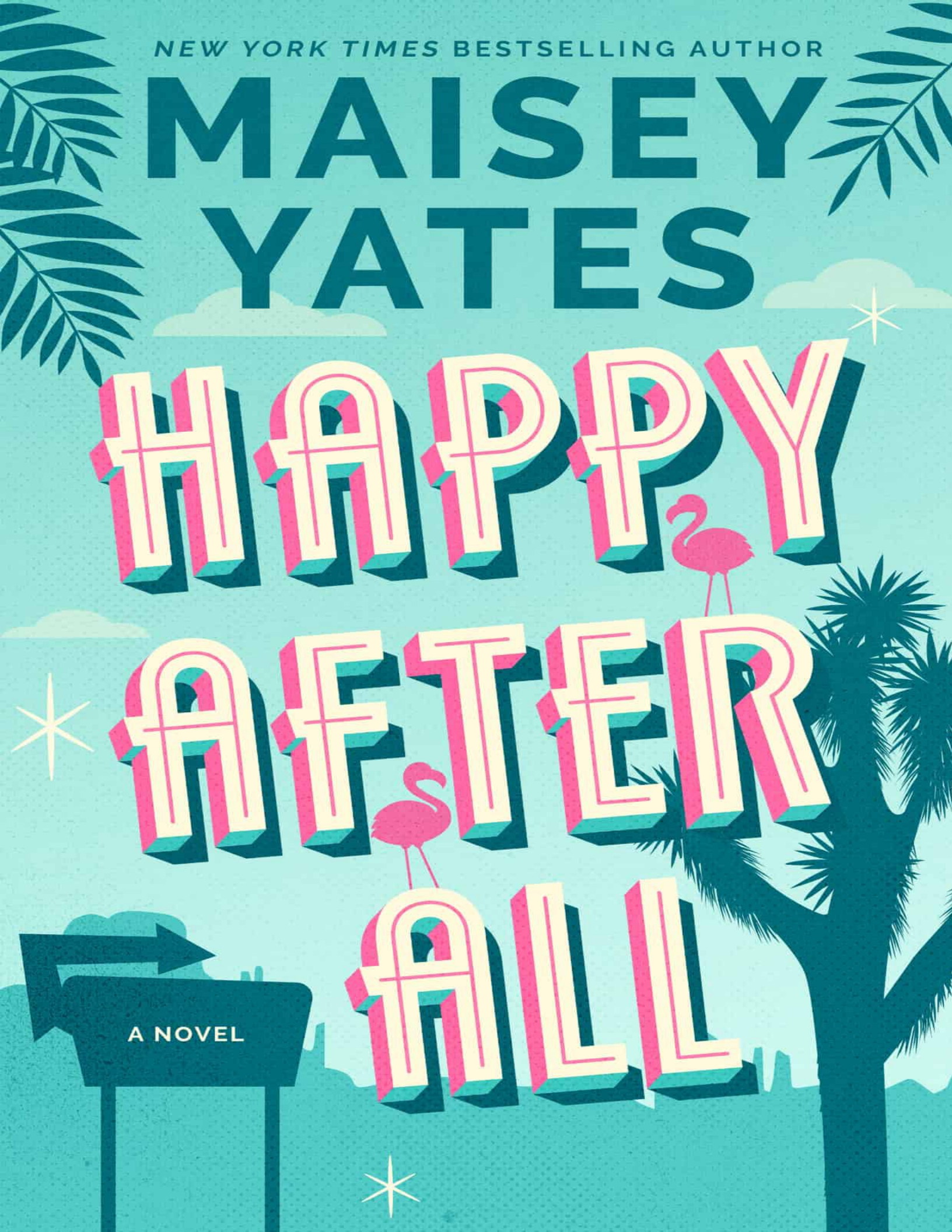
MAISEY
YATES

HAPPY

AFTER

ALL

A NOVEL



**HAPPY
AFTER
ALL**

OTHER TITLES BY MAISEY YATES

Other People's Weddings

Hero for the Holidays

The Hometown Legend

The Rival

The Lost and Found Girl

Sweet Home Cowboy

**HAPPY
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A NOVEL

**MAISEY
YATES**

 Montlake

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Published by Montlake, Seattle
www.apub.com

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ISBN-13: 9781662526374 (paperback)

ISBN-13: 9781662526367 (digital)

Cover design by Letitia Hasser

Cover image: © TopVectors, © Toltemara / Getty; © Callahan / Shutterstock



For Haven, my very own happy ending. I'm glad we ended up together.

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Trope (noun)

a: a word or expression used in a figurative sense: figure of speech

b: a common or overused theme or device: cliché

the usual romance novel *tropes*

CHAPTER ONE

The Meet-Cute—an amusing or charming first encounter between two main characters that typically results in a romantic entanglement.

It's a truth universally acknowledged—at least, in a romance novel—that the moment the main character has her life in order, the exact person she doesn't want to meet will come along and knock all that careful order into disarray.

For example, when a respectable motel owner who has decided to focus on her career and her own personal happiness is beginning to feel satisfied with the way she's rebuilding her life, a disastrously gorgeous man will walk in and disrupt everything.

When Nathan Hart—room 32, staying for the whole summer, special requests: to be left alone—walks into the newly renovated lobby of the Pink Flamingo, I can't escape the feeling that that's exactly what's just happened to me.

I'm immobilized by the impact of him. I don't know where to look. I don't know how to breathe. I don't know how to talk to him.

I know how I would write him, though.

He was tall with dark-brown hair and green eyes that held mysteries she could only guess at. His hands were large and . . . capable. Capable? Well, they do look capable. His forearms muscular, but not from work in a gym—oh no, he looked like a man who got his muscles from working the land or fighting a bear or . . .

Then he makes eye contact with me. That's when I remember I've sworn off men until I pick up every last piece of my shattered self and glue her back together. That's when I remember I'm dedicated to the Pink Flamingo—my newly opened, newly refurbished motel in Rancho Encanto, California—and to my fledging career as a romance author.

Most importantly, I'm newly dedicated to myself.

To the refurbishment of Amelia Taylor, who lost herself in LA and had to move to the desert to begin to feel something like joy again.

If I were writing this, it would be a meet-cute. But I'm not writing it, so it's just me checking in a guest.

“Checking in. I have a reservation under—”

“Hart,” I say, and then immediately want to go back in time.

He looks at me, and it's not friendly. It's not unfriendly per se, but I can see he wants to make conversation with me as much as he'd like to turn around, wander into the desert, and die

of heatstroke. “Yes.”

I came across as too eager.

I have nothing to be eager about except a guest. A guest—other than my long-term residents—which I’ve been told is a rarity in the summer when the heat hits 114 degrees.

This is my first summer.

My first summer since I answered a real estate listing that said: Midcentury Gem of a Motel on Route 66 on Sale for a Steal . . . If You’re Able to Weather Record-Breaking Heat!

The record-breaking heat had seemed theoretical then. It does not seem theoretical now. It’s . . . oppressive.

I’ve been questioning myself the whole time. As the renovations got more and more expensive, as the people in town treated me with abject skepticism. (And I get why—because they don’t expect me to last. I’m not sure if I expect me to last either.)

It doesn’t surprise me to feel like an outsider. I grew up barely feeling like part of my own family.

My mom is professionally bitter at my dad, and I look like him. Sometimes I think it would be easier if she’d found someone new and loved him more than she loved me. Had some new kids and loved them more than me, and lived *happily*.

Instead, it’s just vitriol.

My dad remarried when I was eight and moved an hour north on I-5. I’m always welcome to come visit. But all my siblings are half siblings, and I’m like some odd mouse out, my hair brown and dull next to their shiny blond. I’m the kid from the Oops Wife. The accidental life. My dad loves me, I think. He also doesn’t know where I fit. His real kids are half him and half Stacy, who is lovely and gracious, even to me. I’m half him and half the weird, bitter woman down the freeway who actually called Stacy while drunk once and told her she was a skank for stealing her husband.

I feel caught in the middle of this, or maybe I would if I’d stayed. My mom thinks my dad had an affair. I think he probably did too. He’s been with Stacy for more than twenty years. He was with my mom for less than a decade. Who’s the love story? In the end I believe it’s him and Stacy, no matter how they got there.

Though, I think if I tried to sell that as a romance to my publisher, they’d say he was unsympathetic.

People are too complicated to be sympathetic, generally speaking.

I’m not naive enough to believe my life would have been perfect if he’d stayed with my mother. It would have been weird and bitter in a different way, that’s all. Like I said, he tries.

Sometimes I just can’t bear to be something he has to try quite so hard for.

Sometimes I wonder if I'm repeating the same dynamics here. Trying to fit in somewhere that doesn't really need me. Where I'm not really wanted.

Though, dealing with standoffish strangers isn't the same as a distant father.

From February to now has felt like a trial run for a new life. Like I'm working on a pitch for a book and not the book itself. Nothing has felt all that deep. Nothing but the weather has been scorching.

Until this man walked into my motel and I'm torn between the urge to sit in the wonder that desire might still exist inside my body, and the horror that I'm this easily pulled out of my Amelia as a Work in Progress Project by a (very) handsome face.

"I guessed," I say. "Not a lot of people checking in this time of year. The other reservation I have today is a family." I don't know why I feel the need to offer all this information. Even as I do that, I realize I wouldn't if he weren't so gorgeous.

Because he's handsome, I feel the need to try to make it clear I'm not responding to his looks (I'm really not)—I'm just a professional. So very professional.

I assume he's the kind of attractive that gets a lot of reactions all the time, not just from motel owners in small towns.

"Great," he says. I'm not sure why he says that. His tone doesn't make it sound like anything is *great*. He does *not* try to smile.

I've been so caught up in how handsome he is, I didn't notice that he looks . . .

Unhappy. Angry. Definitely not excited to be here in any way.

"The Hemingway Suite," I say.

"What?"

"Room thirty-two. That's what you reserved."

The corners of his mouth tense, then relax, and a crease appears between his brows and just as quickly goes away. Then he almost smiles. "Right. Of course. It has a desk."

"Yes," I say.

I hold up the keys, which are physical keys, and I feel like there's a certain charm to that. At least, I tell myself there is because my budget hit its limit four months ago.

In reality, I need to update. I've already had guests lose keys or take them, and it's just such a liability. I want a new, electronic system, maybe even a system that can allow guests to unlock doors through an app. But that's a dream for down the road when business picks up a little bit.

He looks at the keys as if they're more a nuisance than anything retro or charming. Then I pass them to him and our fingers brush.

I feel . . . something.

The heat from his skin, the roughness of it. It's like static electricity against my fingertips.

I thought that part of me was dead, I really did, until right this minute.

I look at him, at his dark-green eyes. I don't think he feels anything, and I feel a rush of what I tell myself is relief.

What would I have done if he'd responded to the invitation my body is issuing without my permission?

The answer is nothing. Because the truth is, *he* specifically isn't the worst man to walk into my motel. *Any* attractive man would be. I'm not going there, I decide.

I can't go there.

I'm just six months *after*. There was a *before*. I was a different person before, and I had a different life. I had different dreams. I was planning for a different future.

I made a vow to myself that until I'd had as much time in the *after* as I'd had in the *before*, I needed to keep my focus squarely on myself, my new life, my friendships, my writing, the Pink Flamingo Motel. All the things I've dedicated myself to in the time since.

If I don't focus on that, I might run away. Back to LA. Or, God forbid, back to Bakersfield.

No. I'm not running. I chose this, even when it's hard to remember that. I'm committed to trying to last at least a year.

"I'll show you to your room," I say, because the reminder of why I'm standing there talking to him is one I desperately need.

"I think I can find it."

"I don't want you wandering around outside and dying. Plus, there are . . . armadillos."

"I don't think there are armadillos here."

I shrug. "I'm new. It feels like there should be." The truth is, I know there aren't armadillos. I looked it up as soon as I arrived.

But sometimes I just say things when I'm nervous. He makes me nervous.

He crosses his arms over his chest and looks at me. It's a very particular expression, and something about it scratches at the back of my brain. He looks familiar, even if I can't place him.

I lived in LA for years, so I've seen my share of unreasonably hot men, but I don't think he's an actor. Mind you, in LA there are unreasonably hot men who only ever wait tables. Toiling hotly in obscurity. It's a common story.

My ex Christopher was one of those men for a very long time.

Sadly, now he's a lot less obscure. At least to a niche group of people who love cheesy, romantic holiday movies. I did at one time. Another thing Christopher ruined.

Thinking about Christopher right now should help, though. His memory is a libido killer at this point, regardless of how good looking he might be. Nathan Hart transcends the tyranny of my Christopher memories.

I round the counter and find that the impact of Nathan is even stronger without it between us. He's not *Hollywood* handsome, I decide. He's too rugged for that.

So I still can't figure out why he's familiar.

"This way," I say cheerfully, leading us through the bright-pink lobby and out into the punishing heat.

I do my best not to react to it. I definitely don't have the fortitude of a local yet. I try not to let him see that.

The exterior of the motel is painted bright pink, and all the doors are turquoise. There's a gold sunburst on each one, around the peephole, and gold numbers on the left side. It's all arrayed in a horseshoe around the courtyard, our social area.

The courtyard is empty, which has become the norm during summer. My long-term residents spend their mornings and evenings there and retreat into the AC once it gets surface-of-the-sun-level hot. We have croquet, and tables set with checkers, backgammon, and cribbage—my older guests love that.

"We just revamped the courtyard area," I say, gesturing toward the gleaming pool surrounded by magenta loungers. "We do these things called dive-in movies where everyone sits on little floaties and watches films on a big projector screen. It's fun."

He doesn't react to that. He seems to be taking all this in with a level of skepticism.

"Every room has a different theme," I say. "But you probably saw that on the website. Malibu Dream House is pretty great, but I can see how it wouldn't be to your taste."

He says nothing, and I keep talking. "Yours is my favorite, actually. I mean, other than mine. I live here. So if you need anything, I'm around most of the time. I love your room because it's set up specifically for a writer and . . ."

I stop.

Suddenly I imagine him standing with his arms crossed and that expression on his face.

"Oh my God." It hits me then. "You're Jacob Coulter."

His eyebrows lift slightly. "I'm Nathan Hart."

"You . . . *write* as Jacob Coulter, though, don't you?"

He makes a deep noise in the back of his throat, and I can see that he's searching the doors for his number.

Jacob Coulter, who writes bestselling hardcover military thrillers. His real name is never on anything, and I think I read somewhere he protects it closely because he doesn't want backlash from the government for revealing details that border on classified.

When I was deciding whether I wanted to write under a pseudonym, I'd looked into all the reasons people did it. I'd also chosen one to protect my privacy, though more because I didn't want the people who knew me before to keep tabs on me in any meaningful way.

Though I'm writing category romances, and your picture doesn't go on the back of those. The author is secondary to the publisher and the category itself when you write them. If people want a small-town romance with no sex, they know exactly which line to choose. People who want glamorous settings, angsty conflict, and lots of sex choose the line I write for. The story is more important than the name on the cover.

Not true with Jacob Coulter, whose book series became a huge show on Amazon Prime. I've watched it, even though it's historically not my thing. The lead actor is extremely hot, though, and I'm only human.

I've never read one of his books, though I've seen them in so many bookstores, grocery stores, and airports that I've picked them up before and examined them.

"You looked just like the picture on the back of your book when you were glaring at me in the lobby," I say.

"I don't think I was glaring at you."

"You were. You're doing it now," I say. He continues to glare. "I'm sorry, I realize you probably came here to work and be left alone."

"I'm not used to being recognized," he says. "That's sort of a new thing."

Right. The TV show had most likely pushed that into a different sphere.

"Are you on deadline?" I ask, even though I've always found that to be an annoying question. When I was writing scripts, if I wasn't on deadline, I was out of work. I still feel that way now that I'm writing romance novels. It's one reason I chose the niche I did. It was the closest thing to steady work you could get in publishing.

Plus, I'd always read them, and I'd always gravitated toward stories with a romantic bent, even in my previous writer iteration.

Right before my life imploded in LA, I'd been working on a Christmas movie about a prince who marries a commoner, and I adapted it into a short romance novel instead—with way more graphic sex—and sold it.

After that book, I got offered a four-book contract, which I just started working on. I consider being on deadline a blessing, not a curse.

I work on writing while I man the front desk. It keeps me busy, and I like it that way. "Always," he says.

In that moment I like him just a little bit more.

Just then we arrive at the door of room 32. "This is it," I say.

I consider telling him I'm also a writer. I consider telling him my name.

"I would appreciate it if you . . . if you don't mention who I am." He looks pained at having to say that, which I think is funny. I've watched many minor celebrities posture and act as if being recognized is the last thing they want, when in fact they want it more than anything

because it never happens. “I’ve never been recognized in public before. I’d rather continue not to be.”

“Of course. You absolutely have my discretion.”

“Thank you.”

“There’s an itinerary. I forgot to give it to you.”

“I don’t need an itinerary.”

“We do a lot of really fun things.”

“I’m just going to be working.”

I nod, and he pushes the key in the lock and opens the door. Then he disappears inside and closes it behind him.

Over the rest of the summer, I barely see him. Every so often he leaves the motel property, though not regularly. Mostly, he gets food delivered to his room, and on the odd occasion I have to bring it from the lobby to him, we exchange few words.

I realize I should give thanks. Because the moment he walked into the motel, I felt like everything in my life had been turned on its head, but it wasn’t. It was exactly the same as when he had first shown up.

Before he leaves in August, he makes a reservation for the whole of next summer. I start to wonder if I’m wrong.

If Nathan Hart is going to find a way to disrupt my life after all.

It makes me all the more resolved to stay until at least next summer.

CHAPTER TWO

One Year Later

Grumpy/Sunshine—a romance trope where one character exhibits a sunny, optimistic personality and the other has a more taciturn demeanor, resulting in friction between the two.

I'm slightly surprised when Nathan Hart keeps his reservation. Almost as surprised as I am to discover I really am gritting out a second summer in Rancho Encanto.

Not that it's all gritty.

Maybe he's returning because I kept his secret. I didn't broadcast to all and sundry that A Very Famous *New York Times* Bestselling Author Who Happens to Also Be Sexy had stayed in my motel while writing a book, and honestly, I could have. It might have been good for the motel.

His newest book released in May, right before he was due to show up the second time, and I bought it to put in the motel lobby because *someday* I'll tell the world he wrote some of it here.

I read the back to see if it was set in Rancho Encanto, or a town that looked like it, but no. It's set in the Pacific Northwest.

When he walks into the lobby and our eyes meet, I have to come to terms with the fact that his return likely has nothing to do with me at all. He seems almost furious that I'm at the check-in desk, which is weird because I'm a goddamn delight actually, and his options are limited either way.

The only other person who ever works the desk is my friend and new tenant, Elise, who lives in the motel with her daughter.

Elise seems to have an endless well of energy. She's everything, everywhere, all at once. Always with a perfect manicure.

I'm supporting local businesses, she says whenever she shows up with a new sparkling set of nails.

Elise is the reason this summer started to feel possible. She moved in at the beginning of January, and I hired her to help me in February. She used to work full-time at Get Your Kicks Diner, but working at the motel gives her better hours and keeps her close to her daughter, and she's given me an emotional link I didn't know I was missing.

A reason to stay that isn't just . . . it was the place I ran away to.

I mark him as checked in, and I take out the key. This time I set it on the counter in front of him. He puts his hand over the top of it, and I can't help but notice how big his hand is.

I haven't felt anything like electricity since the last time I saw him. I've been working, and I've been happy—mostly.

I'm starting to feel more connected with people in town. I'm getting involved in different community organization efforts and small-business coalitions.

I don't need electricity. I've disavowed it, in fact.

But looking at his hand makes me miss it.

Before he can leave, I take out my printed handout and press it onto the counter with purpose. "This is general information about Rancho Encanto, including restaurants that offer delivery." He stares at me blankly. "And this"—I take out another paper and put it on top of the other—"is the itinerary for the week. A new one will be available in the office every Sunday and will offer information on events happening at the Pink Flamingo."

"Do I have to take those?" he asks.

I want to say yes. To see what he'll do. Unfortunately, I'm not that wedded to testing him, and also I'm supposed to be engaged in customer service, which means behaving in a manner that suggests the customer is always right, even when the customer is being silly.

Now, I'm also the owner of the motel, so I can do whatever I want. I can disenfranchise a customer if I feel like it, but I really shouldn't disenfranchise a famous customer whose stay last year was very helpful to me the whole following year and whose repeated business would be a big help into the next year.

So I don't say he has to. Instead, I smile and pull them back. "Of course not."

He turns and walks out of the lobby, leaving me there feeling . . .

Affected.

I don't indulge myself. I remember a conversation I had with Alice—one of my nonagenarian long-term residents—just the other day.

Alice was married for fifty-seven years. She's been widowed now for twenty. A couple of months ago I asked her if she'd ever marry again.

She'd smiled, serene, her chin-length white hair ruffling in the breeze. "No."

"Because you loved Marty so much?"

She'd laughed. "I did love him. But that isn't why. We married so young, we were flexible. Like saplings. Two young trees who bent around each other as they grew. Well, I'm a mighty oak now, Amelia. And I can't bend. Not again. Not for anyone else."

Alice is broad in all ways. Her smile is broad, her shoulders are broad, and so are her gestures. Age hasn't shrunk her or made her demure. I want to claim that energy for myself

without waiting sixty years to do it.

I claim it now.

I get my word count for the day in the comfort of the lobby, fielding the occasional guest request, and once the sun starts to go down, I head into the courtyard, where most of my long-term residents have assembled for their evening social.

In addition to Elise and Alice, there's also ninety-one-year-old Ruth Moore, who told me that back in her cocktail waitress days she'd had to hide a knife in her girdle to keep handsy men in check. She's still petite and feline, her movements as precise and cutting as her dark gaze.

Then there's Albert Feynman, who is a playwright, or so he says. His hair is always slicked down, his glasses black framed and thick. He has a rotating collection of pastel button-up shirts, all with small embroidered palm trees on them. He's always a little indignant that I earn money writing *down-market smut*, while he can't sell his masterpieces.

I'm not entirely convinced he isn't on the run from the law and the whole frustrated playwright thing isn't a shtick.

Mostly because that's what Ruth told me one night while giving me a hard candy from her purse. I have no reason to doubt her. It gives me something interesting to think about while I clean out the pool, and I'm always looking for something interesting to think about when I clean out the pool.

Albert is nothing if not snide about genre romances, and while it annoys me, fighting with him about it gives me life.

I actually do like Albert, even if sometimes I'm not in the mood for disapproving eyebrows and snide asides.

I am *always* in the mood when he's being snide about others, of course.

All my long-term residents—except Elise and Emma—are over sixty. There's also Jonathan and Joseph Stevens-Fielding, and the cribbage ladies—Lydia, Wilma, and Gladys, who I think of as my personal Golden Girls.

I try not to let myself get roped into cribbage games because they destroy me every time without mercy, and sometimes they play for money, and frankly I haven't got any extra to lose.

The motel is my life, and it pays for itself almost entirely. My books pay for me, modestly. Somehow it all fits together, even if it's a bit rickety.

I *definitely* don't need to lose money to some canny old ladies who will only spend it on booze and cigarettes. I don't feel bad thinking this because I'll tell them to their darling faces.

"You'll only spend your winnings on booze and cigarettes," I say as I settle at the table, full from our barbecue dinner and a little sweaty from the lingering heat in the air. The sun is behind the mountains now, and it's finally starting to cool down.

"I am shocked, Amelia," says Wilma, her southern accent suddenly coming on much

thicker than usual. "I am a lady."

I'm powerless against them. They're too cute. I love them too much.

I've spent the past year making a family here, and they're certainly better than any of the family I've left behind. I decide to join, resigned to losing my hair salon budget.

It's not a big budget. I've scaled back. I used to get my hair cut and dyed every six weeks. My natural hair color is a very dull brown (my mother calls it that), and Chris called it *mousy*. I didn't want to be a mouse in LA. I wanted to be glossy. I wanted to stand out. Even though I never had aspirations of being in front of the camera, I knew that my looks mattered.

The role of Amelia in LA was played by a fancier version of me.

But now my looks only matter to me, and I don't mind mousy, I decided.

The game immediately becomes hostile in the best way, with Gladys hurling insults at Wilma, and Lydia and I hooting with laughter.

Then I hear a door open. I look and see Nathan Hart walking out of room 32. He must be having an emergency, because if he leaves the motel, he certainly *has never done so* while we're sitting out here.

He doesn't seem bothered or seem to notice as he locks the door behind him.

"Oh, the handsome man is back!" Lydia says, her eyes going wide.

Lydia manages to look young and innocent despite being eighty-seven. I don't know how she does it.

"If I were younger . . .," Gladys begins.

"I don't need to be younger," Wilma says, squaring up her shoulders in a way that emphasizes her assets. "I just need him to have mature taste."

It takes me a second to realize they're talking about Nathan. And his hotness. Which is apparently a universal thing, regardless of age.

"*Amelia* is just the right age," Lydia muses, that innocent tone not seeming so innocent to me now.

"Amelia runs the motel," I say, "and therefore can't fraternize with guests." Guests who are famous authors and who also *hate me*.

Hate might be a strong word. Maybe. But he certainly doesn't like me or want to be charmed by me in any way.

Wilma shuffles the cards in her hands. "What's *this*, then, sugar?"

"You know what I mean!" I hiss, looking back over at Nathan, who is now headed down the path that will take him through the courtyard and right past—

"Excuse me, darlin'," Wilma calls over to Nathan. "Could you help us with something?"

They all like to run their mouths, but Wilma will run it loudly and without shame. I should have known she'd cause me trouble one day.