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By Lyra Parish

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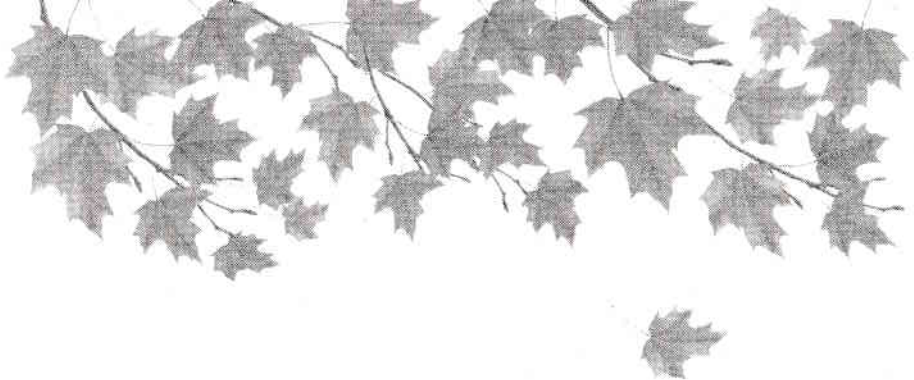
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STANDALONES

Fall I Want



Fall I Want

THE COZY CREEK COLLECTION

LYRA PARISH



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CHAPTER 1

Autumn

I'm three steps from the office when the bell above the main door of Cozy Coffee sounds. I pause, realizing I forgot to lock it after I entered. My heart rate doesn't increase, but I spot a clear path to the emergency exit in case someone is being nefarious.

The two very full glasses of cheap wine I drank before bed and the fantasy that ripped me from dreamland haven't done me any favors this morning. I might as well be a zombie because my brain isn't functioning yet.

"Autumn!" my best friend, Julie, yells in her motherly tone from across the building. Thankfully, she's not a murderer. Not that I was concerned. Cozy Creek is safe, and most people don't even lock the doors to their homes.

I flick on the overhead light and set my keys on the desk.

As I look around the tiny room with its single exposed redbrick wall, I realize how disappointed younger me would be knowing we're working the same job I had at sixteen. The only difference is now I have the fun title of Assistant Manager, thanks to Julie's parents, who promoted us both.

Back then, I believed I'd become an inspirational story: barista turned mega best-selling author. I went to a prestigious university for undergrad and received a master's degree in fine arts from

another. As it stands, I graduated nearly a decade ago and have nothing to show for it.

By my thirties, I was supposed to be thriving, but my creative well is bone dry and has been since the breakup from Hell.

"What if I were a robber?" Julie scolds as her chunky-heeled boots clunk against the hardwood floor.

As soon as September first rolls around she pulls those vintage, dark leather Doc Martens from her closet. They have a distinct sound when she walks.

Less than a minute later, my bestie greets me at the doorway wearing a serious expression and stares at me. Her bright red hair is twisted into a low bun, and her spider headband matches her dangly earrings. When the Halloween accessories appear, I know my favorite season has officially arrived. Autumn isn't just my name; it's my entire personality 365 days out of the year.

"What?" I finally ask.

"You know better, Autie. Considering you devour slasher movies like you'll croak next week, you'd think you'd be aware of the risks."

"At this point, I'd welcome *any* adventure to break me out of the monotony of my so-called life."

I'm not even Bill Murray in that 90s movie *Groundhog Day*; I'm in an oblivious, non-supporting role stuck in a loop. My soon-to-be psychologist sister believes it's one of my cycles and has given me solid advice, but nothing has worked. I'm broken and boring.

"You should be careful what you wish for," she warns. "Words carry power. You of all people know that."

"I'm not into the superstitious stuff," I remind her, or maybe I'm just trying to convince myself.

"You say that, but you won't walk under a ladder, and you've complained about that bad luck mirror you broke for two years."

She's right. Maybe I'm a *little* superstitious. It's better to be safe

than sorry, right? While it's annoying that she's almost always right, she knows me better than I know myself and I wouldn't trade her for the world.

I bend down and type in the code to the safe. The door clicks open, I remove the money drawers and then count them down to ensure we have the correct starting bankroll.

"Sometimes I worry about you." She sets her coffin-shaped purse on the desk next to my keys.

"This is Cozy Creek Jules." I don't explain further because she's memorized the safety statistics.

"Yeah, and you've always heard people on TV say *I never thought it would happen here*. It only takes one bad pumpkin to ruin the whole damn patch. You're too trusting, and your situational awareness is lacking. Did you even notice me on your walk to work this morning? I trailed you the entire time."

She tucks a tube of dark brown lipstick into her back pocket then waits for my answer. "You *never* saw me," she finally says, not needing confirmation.

She's been overprotective of me and Blaire, like a big sister, for as long as we've known each other. Not to mention she is a year older than us both. However, her paranoia about being kidnapped is why her parents enrolled her in karate lessons in second grade. They thought she would grow out of it. She hasn't.

Pretty girls going missing in neighboring small towns kept her up at night for years. Nothing like that has or will ever happen in Cozy Creek.

"Don't worry about me, bestie. On my walks here in the early morning, I always have this." I pick up my key chain, showing her the pepper spray in its orange and black bedazzled case. It sparkles under the overhead light.

"At least I'll sleep better knowing you're protected." She's being sincere.

"Good. I'm fine. I promise. And who knows? Maybe I'll find a strong man to walk me to and from work every day."

"I hope so," she says.

"Hate to change the subject, but guess who visited me last night?" I singsong.

"Oh, Mr. Dreamy?" She grins wide.

It's the nickname I've given the tall man with dark, messy hair who has haunted me like a ghost in my dreams for thirteen years. It's a good omen when Mr. Dreamy arrives. It usually means something *big* is about to happen, something life changing.

"Tell me everything." She plops onto the office desk and swings her feet as I count the loose coins, stacking them in tens.

My expression softens and I replay it in my mind like a movie. "We made out, a lot."

"Of course," she says, because that's typical when I have dreams about him.

"He told me to be patient a little longer and that it will work out. Oh, and he called me Pumpkin in that deep growl of his." I sigh. "Then I asked the stupid question and was jerked awake."

Anytime I have a dream about this mystery man, I ask him if it's real, and it pushes me awake. When I woke up this morning, my heart was pounding hard in my chest. I tried to close my eyes and fall back into the fantasy, but it was useless.

"I hope he's real," she says. "Because whoever you date next will have some big fictitious shoes to fill. Your subconscious has created the perfect man for you, and I'm not sure anyone can live up to him."

I laugh. "Honestly, I feel the same."

I have a journal where I've scribbled down my Mr. Dreamy dreams. Because he swept me off my feet each time, I planned to put the scenes in a future romance book. At least I will one day, when I go back to it.

"Maybe you should write about Mr. Dreamy and trash what you wrote when you were with *Sebastard*. I'm convinced you can't finish your novel because the story reminds you of him."

"I don't think that's the reason," I admit, but he *is* responsible for stunting my creativity.

"Hmph." Julie was never and will never be a fan of my ex, Sebastian. If he crawled back tomorrow, apologized for everything he did and admitted he was a cheating bastard while kissing the ground I walked on, she'd still dislike him. After the first time they met, she said he was a sleazy fuck boy. Her first impression of someone has never been wrong.

"I'm not writing anymore, Jules. At least not right now. You know that." I squeeze past her and move through the storage area to the front counter.

"You should. You're wasting all that talent."

It's a valid opinion because I've always let her read everything I've written, from my teenage poems to short stories about butterflies. I've left her on the cliffhanger of a lifetime, and she's been upset I won't finish it because she loved the characters. She's more invested in the story than I am.

Julie follows behind me, flicking on the main lights. The hums of the multiple espresso machines fill the quiet room. It's the only time they can be heard.

As I slide the cash drawer into the register and flick on the computer, Julie whips us up two strong shots. Taking them together before our shift for the day has been one of our traditions for over a decade. "You made me promise I wouldn't let you give up."

"We're back on that again? Come on."

"I had a repeat reminder to bother you all day about it. Sorry, but you knew what you signed up for when you asked me to remind you about how bad you wanted this."

"I appreciate the monthly nudges, but I'm not ready."

I used to be a hopeless romantic, now I'm just hopeless.

"Disagree. Authors who write thrillers with serial killers don't murder to legitimize their story. Watch some romcoms or porn, maybe both? Get the emotional aspects with one and the physical with the other."

Scents of freshly brewed coffee waft through the large space.

"I've tried it all. I have the literary version of erectile dysfunction. I don't believe *everlasting* love exists, and it's kind of a requirement. Happily ever afters and all that. How do I create when the magic is gone?"

"Start small, like a haiku," Julie says, grinning.

"Are you serious?" I ask.

Julie moves to the junk drawer where we keep extra pens and notebooks. Back in the day, it's where the phone books were kept. She finds a small leather-bound book and flips through it.

"It's blank," she says, handing it to me. "One per day. Your theme is love. You can do that."

I look down at the Moleskine notebook that's the size of my palm and stare at it like it might bite me.

"Kids write haikus. Unless you don't think you can? Scared?" Julie reaches for it and I shove it into my apron pocket.

"You're using reverse psychology," I tell her. "Don't forget who I grew up with."

"Out of the Three Musketeers, you were always going to be the famous one. I'll run the coffee shop when my parents retire, and Blaire will be selling love spells online and crafting cute jewelry in a cottage away from everyone. You're the only one of us in the position to write a mega bestseller, get feature films, be on billboards, and travel around the world. You promised me a red-carpet affair."

The fairy tale I used to share still makes me smile. "I had tons of ambitions, Jules, like getting married by thirty. We're going on

four years beyond that. If I've learned anything, it's that we don't always get what we want in life, and that's okay. I will fully support your coffee house dreams and Blaire's obsession with witchy cottage core."

"I'm grateful you didn't marry that scumbag. And then have his children. Ew." She shakes the thought away as I grab the sanitizer pail and fill it full. Years ago, I wished on every star for that to happen.

I wring out the fresh towel, then wipe down the counter.

"Right now, my love life is the punch line. I can't even get a random hookup. I've visited Bookers several times over the summer, hoping some single tourist would take me back to the town inn and rail me. The only free drink I got was the water I ordered from the bartender."

Bookers is a local pub that's packed with tourists and regulars, regardless of what season or time of the day it is. It's the place to hang out in Cozy Creek.

She snickers. "I could always hook you up with my brother."

"He's very much not my type." I glance up at the oversized clock on the wall, knowing Blaire will arrive within the next twenty minutes.

"Ah, right. Almost forgot. You go for total jerks who need their mouths taped shut in public settings."

"I just require him to be attractive, a few years older, and not be local. Which seems to be *way* too much to ask because, as it stands, I'm practically a virgin again."

She laughs and checks the amount of milk, half-and-half, and whipped cream we have in the lower fridge under our station.

I can pinpoint the moment when my life changed.

"Honestly, I should've been more careful with that mirror. How will I survive five more years of bad luck?"

"Here we go again," she says with a snicker. "I don't want to hear

the story about how it shattered on the pavement and you cut your hand. You're not cursed."

"How else would you explain my situation? I'm thirty-three going on thirty-four and if a penis comes anywhere near my vag, it might actually bark and growl. Shit, it might bite. I swear there is a tiny No Trespassing sign hanging on my *mons pubis*."

"Autie," she says, laughing.

"You'd think I'd have a revolving door of men I'd never have to see again considering how many people visit this town. I should have a bazillion numbers in my phone. I even downloaded a dating app and didn't match with a single person. Not one."

"Because you have a certain type, and they usually aren't on apps trying to get laid."

"Next full moon, I'm stripping out of my clothes and saying Beetlejuice three times, hoping he's desperate. Beetlejuice, Jules. He hangs out in a fucking graveyard and has gross as hell teeth. That's where I am. I'm so sex deprived I'd let Beet—"

"Don't say it. But also, I can't with you," she says, smiling. "A guy tried to pick you up last week when we had margaritas. You literally rejected him."

"He tried too hard. It's supposed to happen naturally and I should at least want it."

"Your problem is you're secretly searching for forever."

I'm not afraid of falling in love. My biggest fear is being alone. I've learned that if I don't give anyone a chance, then they can't leave me.

She stocks cups and lids.

"Would still like to spice things up in my life," I say, and my thoughts drift back to Mr. Dreamy.

"What conversation did I just walk into?" Blaire asks, looking between us as she walks behind the counter. Her bracelets jingle with each step forward. She gives a magical vibe with her black

hair, purple lipstick, and sharp-winged eyeliner. Her matching glittery eyeshadow sparkles when she turns her head. "What are we spicing up?"

"My love life," I explain, but she knows that I've been in a dry spell, too.

Blaire chuckles. "You're too intimidating. Most guys can't talk to someone who looks like you. And the ones who can . . . they're typically trouble or ex-Olympian skiers with tiny dicks."

I snicker and they high-five. "Sebastian wasn't that small."

Blaire rolls her eyes and holds out her pinkie. "I witnessed it with my own eyeballs."

"Average is perfectly fine," I say.

They both glare at me. Neither ever understood what I saw in him. Sebastian was my rat boy ex. We all have one, right?

When Blaire grabs an apron and ties it around her waist, I notice her black cat earrings with dangly tail and paws.

"I want a pair of those," Julie says, stealing the words out of my mouth as she carries a few gallons of milk to the extra storage fridge. "I would wear the *fuck* out of those."

"Guess it's an F-bomb day?" I ask with a brow lifted.

"Every day is."

I shake my head. "Two dollars of your tips are going into the fuck jar. It's too early for all that."

While Julie can do whatever she wants, last month her parents ripped us a new one over our inappropriate language. Apparently, the pastor overheard one of our "rowdy conversations," as they labeled it. We're convinced his hearing aids were in spy mode. The two of us were practically whispering. The *fuck jar* was created, and it's covered the expenses for several margarita days.

When the store is ready for the morning rush, I glance out the wall of glass, noticing the line of regulars that's already formed. The sidewalk outside of Cozy Coffee is one of the hot gossip spots and

one reason I'm convinced so many show up weekly. Or it could be our kick-ass java. Probably both.

"Food is almost done," Blaire says as she enters from the back. "Five more minutes."

Sweetness wafts through the air, and though we make chocolate croissants every day, it never gets old. I glance out the window, seeing the sky has brightened as Blaire sets fresh vases of flowers on each table.

"I'll be happy when we can light the fireplace," Julie says, placing a few decorative pumpkins on the mantel. It's not officially autumn yet. Honestly, everyone is lucky she doesn't start with the spooky decorations on July fifth.

The timer rings from the back and I run to grab the pastries. With two mitts, I slide the trays from the commercial oven and carry them to the front. Once they're put away, it's time to open. Julie goes to the door and unlocks it. The early morning chatter fills the space, and every person is smiling as they enter.

"Ready to rock this?" I ask.

"Yep," they say in unison.

Blaire moves to the cash register and I move to one espresso machine. "It's a great day to have a Cozy Coffee. Welcome in, everyone," she says with a wide smile, like it's a grand opening.

Soon, the printer is spitting out orders and we make drinks like bartenders. Most other shifts run with more people, but Julie and I can predict each other's movements and we're efficient baristas. For the first hour, we nonstop set drinks at the end of the counter. No one waits longer than four minutes. It's an art and why this place has continued to stay in business for eighty years straight.

I pull the next order from the machine and immediately snicker, then show it to Julie.

She shakes her head. "Glad it's you and not me."

While I have a degree in literature, I trained at one of the most

prestigious coffee shops in the country when I was in undergrad. Making a ristretto shot is nothing, all the finance men in the city drank them, but it's also a dickhead drink nine times out of ten.

I go to a manual machine, knowing I need a precise amount of liquid. After finely grinding the beans, I carefully tamp the powdered grounds. Soon after, the espresso drips from the metal tips and it looks like a thick honey. The crema on top is perfect. This cup is a ten out of ten and whoever Alexander is, hopefully they're impressed.

I check the name on the side of the short cup and move to the end of the counter. "Ristretto for Alexander."

When I glance up, his deep ocean-colored eyes are on me and my mouth slightly parts. The pulse in my neck increases and I nearly lose my ability to speak. My temperature rises and I forget how to breathe as my eyes scan down his tall, muscular body. The sleeves of his stark white dress shirt stick to his carved biceps. The cuffs are rolled to his elbows and his navy-blue suit pants sit perfectly on his waist. He's clean-cut like he should be on a yacht sipping dirty martinis with his swimsuit-model girlfriend.

I force a friendly smile and search for words as he approaches because he shouldn't exist.

Mr. Dreamy.

My palms grow sweaty as he stares at me. Everyone and everything fades away and in that moment, it's the two of us. I clear my throat and glance back down at his name. "Alex?"

"Alexander," he corrects, his voice deep and smooth just like the ristretto I prepared. He pauses, and his gaze wanders from my eyes to my lips then back up again. This man is trouble, and not intimidated by me whatsoever.

I'm frozen in place.

"Do..." He stops speaking with his head tilted. There's a flash of recognition from him. Or am I imagining it?

He's too familiar. He shouldn't exist. The voice is the same one I've heard in my dreams a handful of times. A chill runs down my spine.

"Do I know you?" he finally asks.

"I don't think so." I'm breathless as I push the cup toward him. His fingers brush against mine and electricity swarms between us. My skin feels singed where we connected.

I pull away as he places his perfect lips to the rim and drinks. I expect him to smile, maybe even give a compliment. In my fantasy, he'd call me a good girl.

Instead, he scowls.

"No." He sets the cup on the counter, breathing out. "This isn't right."

My brows furrow, because that's not what he's supposed to say. "Excuse me?"

"This is made *incorrectly*. Apologies, but it tastes like total shit."

My mouth falls open and Julie walks past me carrying two cups in her hand. "Peter. Two vanilla lattes for Peter."

She notices my disdain.

"I'll remake it for you," I offer. "Please? I'd love to make sure you're one hundred percent satisfied."

He shakes his head and narrows his eyes. "Did you make *this* one?"

"Yes. I—"

"No, I'd rather not. I'll try anything once, even disastrous coffee. However, I cannot handle that atrocity twice." He glances down at my name tag, and I see the ghost of that sexy as fuck smirk playing on his lips. "*Autumn*."

He meets my gaze for a few more seconds then leaves, shaking his head.

Julie's eyes are wide and her jaw is on the floor. "Who was that?"

The cup sits on the edge of the counter where he left it. I pick it

up, remove the lid, then swirl it around. The crema still floats on top and the warmth of it seeps into my fingertips.

"Alexander. Mr. Ristretto Shot, and he *hated* it." I take a sip of the hot liquid. "What an asshole. I made this perfect."

I glance at the door.

Julie just shakes her head.

"What a dickhead," I say between gritted teeth, in case anyone is being nosy, and we move back to our espresso machines.

"By the looks of him, he ruins days for a living. Any man who wears navy slacks with brown shoes does. Don't let him get under your skin. The day just started." She pats me on the shoulder, knowing how proud I am of my barista skills. Right now, it's the only thing I'm good at, other than running half marathons.

I try my best to shake it off. I've dealt with men like him before, the rude, attractive ones who only drink beans that come from civet poop. Kopi Luwak is the most expensive coffee in the world and something we'd never have here.

If that's what he wants, he's shit out of luck. Literally.

"He must have a terrible palate. Poor guy." The delicious chocolate notes of the ristretto dance on my tongue. "Some people will always be miserable."

"We'll probably never see him again," she says with a snicker. "He looks like he's staying at the resort."

"Good. Hope he enjoys the gross shit water they have up the mountain."

Fifteen minutes pass and I can't shake the feeling that man left me with. "This will sound ridiculous, but when I met his eyes, I thought—"

"He was Mr. Dreamy? I noticed he matched the description you've given me over the years."

I nervously chuckle. "I think I need a vacation."

"Shit, me too. Somewhere tropical, though. I'm not picky."