

## Chapter 1

This is adulting, Darya told herself as her high heels clacked against the concrete entranceway. This is what mature, grown-up people do—they ask for what they want from people they care about.

So why did she feel so damn uneasy?

She stepped inside the bar and squinted into the dim lighting. The door wheezed closed behind her, sealing out the noise of downtown Toronto, and a blast of air conditioning shivered her hot summer skin. A crowd of college-aged kids pushed by in a wave of oversized sweats, Vans, and laughter. Darya moved aside and pressed against the cork board notice of live music that included Glympse Mythic, the band she'd come to see. Her new boyfriend Finn was the lead singer. She'd taken the day off to support him, even though Fridays were good tip days at the restaurant where she worked and she was behind on student loan payments for a degree in English literature that she didn't know what to do with.

Darya twisted the lower half of her slinky dress back into position and pulled her purse strap higher on her shoulder. She was extraordinarily overdressed—or, as she looked down at the low neckline to her dress, underdressed—for an afternoon in a basement pub, but she was trying to look the part.

Her best friend Gavin sat at the bar, a watermelon cocktail in one hand. Their gazes met in the mirror behind a row of hard liquor bottles and he swiveled to face her.

“Sorry,” she said, kissing his cheek. “Subway delay.”

“This is why I only Uber.” He touched a hand to the swoop of white-blond hair

**Deleted:** She stepped inside the bar and squinted into the dim lighting.

**Commented [JD1]:** Give a little more description. What kind of bar? She's in heels so is it a classy bar? Below it says there are college kids in more casual clothes, so is she just overdressed? As a reader, I want to be able to picture it a little more.

**Commented [JD2]:** I would consider using a different word here. While I understand what you are stating, this particular word doesn't quite hit right. Perhaps something like “and a blast of air conditioning released a shiver down her spine”...

**Commented [JD3]:** Rounded bar? Straight line bar? Is the bar made of wood?

riding high on his forehead, while the other hand wrapped around the extended lens of his beloved Canon camera sitting on the bar beside him. He wore an “I’m With the Band” T-shirt, and thrust his chest forward proudly. “Too much?”

“No way.” Darya grinned at his enthusiasm, then gestured to the tight-fitting bodice of her dress. “Is this?”

“Definitely. But I don’t think you’ll hear any complaints.”

Across the bar, past pint glasses spread out over square wooden tables and shoulders rolled forward in conversation, Finn and his band were settling into position. His back was turned to her, a guitar strap around his neck, while bandmates checked microphones and adjusted equipment. Their relationship was still new enough that it caused her heart to leap at seeing him. She sat beside Gavin and ordered a draft.

Commented [JD4]: Great description.

Darya liked following Finn through various bars and pubs across the city. In the two months they’d been dating, her favorite venue was still the rowdy Irish pub on the east end where she first met him. He’d sent a cocktail to her table with his phone number, and her friends had squealed like piglets.

Commented [JD5]: Perhaps ‘delighted children’ as it has a better connotation than piglets.

“Tell me you’re finally going to ask him,” Gavin said.

“I am.” Darya spun the leather bracelet around her wrist like she always did whenever she was anxious. It was a simple black strap with a silver infinity symbol, so worn and molded to the shape of her arm that it was practically part of her body. She liked the comforting feeling of sliding it between her thumb and index finger. “If I don’t do it now, Candace says she’s giving his seat to someone else.”

Darya ~~knew she had~~ to ask Finn to be her plus-one to her sister Candace’s rapidly approaching wedding, which was being held on her family’s farm up north. ~~Sooner,~~

Deleted: After today’s performance,

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[rather than later](#). It felt early in their relationship to muddy it with family and a long weekend away, but bringing Finn home would demonstrate to the family that Darya the Struggling Middle Child was finally getting her shit together. She'd never brought a boyfriend to meet her family before, or to visit the farm, but it was time to get over her issues from the past. And the people from it.

One person in particular.

"Good on you," Gavin said. "You need a romp in the hay, or whatever farmers do when they're frisky."

"Do you have any idea how uncomfortable that would be? Have you ever touched hay before?" She nudged him playfully.

"Sounds fun to me. Anyway, he's going to say yes. Then you'll have your emotional support boyfriend to get you through a family event. Plus, it'll bring a whole new level of intimacy to your relationship. I'm telling you, this man is the best thing that's ever happened to you."

"Don't I know it." Darya loved Gavin like the brother she never had, and was grateful for his guidance and advice.

He lifted his cocktail glass toward her. "Maybe you've struggled to find your groove, but look at you now!"

She grinned and their glasses clinked. Thanks to Finn, a new world of music was opening to her, and it felt so good to have something to get absorbed in. Finn had been teaching her the hidden meanings in song lyrics by the Sex Pistols, and why the Clash would forever be the greatest band of all time. He gave lessons on his guitar and she'd already mastered all three chords to "Old MacDonald Had a Farm." She'd been adopted

into his world.

“Okay, here we go.” Gavin checked the focus on his camera. He was obsessed with getting himself hired as the band’s photographer and catching hold of their rapidly rising star. He held the camera ready.

Darya locked eyes with Finn. He lifted his guitar pick in greeting, then moved into position within the small space where tables had been pushed back to make room for live music. His outfit was weirdly similar to the farm wear Darya had grown up in—tight jeans and a long-sleeved, navy work shirt with the collar flipped up, and big belt buckle; his curly black hair rolled out from beneath a mesh trucker’s hat with a straight brim. The pop music playing over the speakers faded out and the bar manager made a brief introduction.

Finn tapped the microphone and cleared his throat. “This first song goes out to my girl Darya.”

Heat roared into Darya’s cheeks as Gavin elbowed her. “Told you. The man digs you.” Gavin zoomed in on Finn’s face with his camera and the shutter made a rapid shick-shick-shick sound.

Gavin was right. This was going to be awesome. She was a band guy’s girlfriend! She could already see herself rolling up to the farmhouse in Finn’s hatchback, Mom rushing out to greet her and meet the attractive stranger, her sisters gawking from the front window. In the six years since she’d left, Darya rarely went home, only on holidays or the odd weekend here and there. Even knowing that a time like now, so close to harvest, there was a lot more work to do. A familiar guilt corkscrewed through her abdomen. Not that Dad couldn’t handle it—he was the family’s rock-solid foundation they all rose from.

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Besides, her parents had encouraged the girls to find their own way, do their own thing.

That's exactly what she was doing, and her relationship with Finn was proof that she was finally crushing it, that she'd made the right decision to leave.

It'd be nice to go back for a visit. She still thought of the farm as home, still got homesick now and then. She missed the family's black lab, T-Bone, and the barn cats, chickens, their two horses, and the cattle scattered across the property in various pens, fields, and yards. She missed the forest and open fields and the rich, green smell after a summer rain, and the way the barn creaked and swayed in the wind like a living thing breathing. And she missed her parents, missed watching Dad tinker under the combine harvester while she passed him a greasy wrench, and the way the kitchen smelled when Mom combined vegetables from the garden into a spicy stew.

Heck, she even missed her sisters sometimes.

Finn held the microphone toward the crowd and urged the audience to sing along. His black curls bobbed, and Darya noticed he'd pierced his left ear since she saw him a few nights earlier. A silver bar slid through the top and out the side. The outline of an unfinished dragon tattoo winding up his neck flexed and bent as he sang.

She tugged the hem of her dress toward her knees. Her dad would hate Finn's piercings. Her sister Nina would grill him about his income, and Candace would analyze the stability of his lifestyle. Across the bar, Finn sang with the drummer, a tall woman with superhero-red hair, at ease in his musician's haven. On the farm, practicality was king. Finn wouldn't fit. Not even close. What had she been thinking?

Finn waved at her. He was so relaxed, so chill, so unlike anyone she had known growing up. Maybe that was the point.

**Commented [JD6]:** Aside from Finn, I don't have a good indication of who Darya is. Is she still in college? What is she studying? She left home, seemingly because she wanted more than farm life, but what is she doing with herself?

While all these questions don't have to be answered at once, chapter 1 is so important. It's where you're setting up who the reader is going to be following for the next X amount of pages. You want to make sure that shines through.

**Commented [JD7]:** Good descriptions.

**Deleted:** back home

Gavin snapped a picture of Darya's face, then looked at her image in the LCD display. "I'm going to call it, 'Woman Chickening Out from Doing What She Came Here to Do.'"

"Hey," she said over the music. "Chickens are noble creatures. They're fragile and clueless, but they contribute to food production systems in important ways."

The song shifted to a lengthy guitar riff and Finn said something muffled into the microphone.

"I know what's going on." Gavin wiggled a finger at her. "You're seeing Mr. Big Shot up there and you're feeling like Little Miss Small Fry, and coming up with a thousand excuses as to why you shouldn't ask him a simple question." Gavin let his camera dangle around his neck as he scrutinized her. "You know that it's okay to speak up for what you want, right?"

"Finn won't get the whole farming thing. He's going to look at me differently. And what if no one likes him? It's not like I can just cut off my whole family and never see them again because they don't like my boyfriend."

"Relax. It's time to give this relationship a little nudge forward, and this is the perfect opportunity. Wait, don't tell me you're worried about running into a certain someone at home and thinking things could get awkward?"

Darya flinched. "What? Not at all. Not even a little. That's all in the past." She spun her bracelet so hard it was hot against her skin.

"Uh huh."

At the end of the set, the music faded and left a distant ringing sound in her ears. Finn set down his guitar as servers refilled empty pint glasses. The band funneled toward the

Deleted: you used to spend time with

bar, and she felt an electric jolt as he approached.

“Thanks for coming, babe.” His arms opened and she stepped into them, his body damp with sweat. He gave her a long, salty kiss.

“You remember Gavin?” she said.

Gavin pumped Finn’s hand. “You guys are great. I took photos. They’re amazing too, I might add.”

“Wow, look at you.” Finn sized her up. He brushed a wavy strand of blonde hair from her neck and slid a hand along her back, her skin lifting in its wake. “Hey, can you get a picture of the two of us? I’ll post it on our band’s socials.”

Finn pulled her against his chest and Gavin positioned his camera.

“We loved your performance,” she said, wondering if this was the kind of thing said to a musician about a gig.

“Clearly you’re coming along in your music appreciation.” He winked, then kissed her again, tipping her backwards in the process. He wasn’t a particularly handsome guy—he had a slightly under-nourished quality—but adrenaline had made him erratic.

She laughed as they both regained their balance.

Gavin cleared his throat and elbowed her. “Didn’t you have something you wanted to ask tonight’s leading man?”

She gave him a menacing look. “Maybe later.”

The drummer approached, the one with electric red hair and long legs, and she fist-bumped Finn then slammed her empty beer bottle down on the bar. Gavin snapped a few photos of her as she returned to the stage.

“Hey, sweet tat,” Finn said, noticing the Celtic love knot on Gavin’s forearm. Gavin

**Deleted:** strapping

**Commented [JD8]:** I’m not quite sure I understand the correlation here. Erratic in attitude? If you mean in looks, I would consider another word as it doesn’t conjure up quite the right meaning.

**Deleted:** a tall woman

**Deleted:** superhero-

flexed proudly as Finn rested his arm over Darya's shoulders. "I still think a little flower on your ankle would be cute."

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Darya shrugged and smiled and could already hear her dad questioning why anyone would pay to mutilate their body. "Yeah. Maybe."

Commented [JD9]: If Darya rarely goes home, if she left home to get away, why is she still so concerned with what her parents think? It would be good to give more insight on that.

Finn motioned for her to follow him through the kitchen and up a narrow staircase to a fire escape that looked over a loading dock. In the bright afternoon sunlight, his dark eye makeup made him look melancholy. He leaned against the metal railing, lit a cigarette, and took a long, greedy drag.

"Don't you have to get back for the next set?"

"Maude's doing her thing first. I have a minute. So whatcha got?"

A streetcar rumbled past and everything wobbled. Below, a busboy hustled out carrying garbage bags and tossed them into a dumpster. Someone pressed a car horn, and a flock of pigeons burst into the air. A drumbeat started up inside.

"Um, yeah. It's nothing really..." She inhaled and took in a strong scent of hot asphalt, car exhaust, and cigarette smoke. She was overthinking it. Having Finn with her at home might initially be awkward, but it could be the start of something new and better. Finn was exactly who she needed in her life right now, and her family would see it too.

"My sister's getting married at home on the long weekend." She tugged at her bracelet.

Commented [JD10]: What long weekend? When?

"Want to come with me? As my date?"

Finn took another drag, a smile twitching at his mouth. "Meet the family, eh? Bold move, babe."

Was that a yes? Or a no? Darya's stomach knotted as she waited for clarification.

"Yee-haw," he teased, using that weird accent he assumed all people from the country

had. “I gotta see this Hicksville place that you escaped from. Damn right I’ll come.”

She clasped his forearms, nervous and grateful—and a little scared. “The farm is awesome, you’ll love it. Do you like animals? Maybe you can help with chores. It’s a lot of work though. Nothing you can’t handle but—you’ll see.” She was rambling through her nerves and couldn’t stop. “It’s no big deal, it’s just that life on the farm is...different. We’ll have to talk about a few things beforehand. On the farm, well—there are ways of doing things and stuff that happens...it’s hard to explain.”

Finn shrugged. The tiny orange glow at the end of his cigarette flared, then fizzled to black.

Darya’s phone vibrated in her purse. She glanced down to see “Mom” on the screen. She couldn’t think of the last time her mom called in the middle of the day.

“Sorry, one sec.” She [swiped the screen to answer](#) and covered her other ear to drown out the deepening drumbeat from inside. “Hello?”

Deleted: tapped the green button

There was a muffled sound on the other end like the phone was swimming through tissue paper.

“Honey.”

“Hi, Mom. What’s up?”

“Your father...”

Father? Mom never called him that.

“Dad? What about Dad?”

There was a long pause. The drumbeat grew louder, pulsing in her chest, thump-thump-thump. She waited, not breathing.

“Your father’s had an accident.”