

Juliet's Kiss

P.L. Harris



Western Australia

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Dedication

To all the thespians out there who know the
dedication and hard work it takes to bring a
Shakespearean classic to life.

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Chapter One

Ava Jenkin's sweaty hand pressed the phone against her ear. She was barely able to believe the words her sister uttered. *Dad's sick, really sick.*

"What do you mean he's sick, like a bad cold sick or worse?" Ava felt tiny footsteps of worry skulk up her spine. Since their mum had passed away, her dad had always been a pillar of strength, physically and mentally. Surely, Rachael was exaggerating the situation.

"Worse, Ava...much worse, and I really think you should come home as soon as you can. Maybe by the end of the month," Rachael said with a quiver in her voice.

End of the month? That would mean she would miss the *Festival of Love*. Portland's largest arts event, held every Valentine's Day.

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“By then we’ll have his test results back and we’ll be able to plan for the future.”

Future? What future? I’ll have no future if I go back home.

“Come home? Are you serious?” said Ava. Rachael’s words were like a knife to her soul. “The end of the month is less than three weeks away, surely you can wait to find out what’s wrong with him before you summon me back home?”

Rachael cleared her throat. Something she always did when things weren’t going her way. “Wait a minute, Dad wants to talk to you.”

“Rachael...Rachael?” Silence greeted her call. Ava willed herself to stay calm.

“Ava, love, it’s Dad,” he said in a semi-muffled tone.

Her dad’s voice speared her heart and an instant pang of guilt knotted her stomach. “Hi, Dad, it’s so good to hear your voice. I miss you. Rachael tells me you’re sick.”

He grunted in annoyance. “I miss you, too, love. I told her not to bother you when you’re so close to opening night. I know I’m getting on, but it’s

nothing to worry about. Now, tell me how the play is going. Your mother would have been so proud.”

“Oh, Dad, it’s wonderful.” She felt her cheeks warm with a blush. “How can it not be, when I’m playing the most famous role ever written by Shakespeare; Juliet.”

“That’s my girl. Don’t worry about me love, I’ll be fine.” His normally jovial tone had returned to his voice. “Hang on a moment, Rachael wants to speak. Love you, my darling girl.”

A wave of homesickness hit her hard. “Love you, Dad.”

Rachael paused as if waiting for their father to move out of earshot of their conversation. “He’s not exactly going to tell you the truth now is he? You can act anywhere, Ava, even here in Perth. Why does it have to be on the other side of the damn world, in Portland for God’s sake?”

Frustrated, Ava dodged the horde of commuters as she headed for the theatre stage door. A sense of loss pitted in her stomach. “Oh, come on, Rachael. I’ve worked so hard and given up so much. The *Festival of Love* is a huge event in this part of the

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world. It's not like the festivals back home. People travel from all over the world to attend this event, and playing Juliet here is a sure way to jumpstart my career on Broadway.”

“And I'm really proud of you. I'm sure you'd do great,” Rachael said with an air of sincerity embedded in her words.

It's been years since she's seen me on stage and they were all chorus roles, then. Nothing like playing the superlative role of Juliet, in Shakespeare's classic tragedy.

Rachael continued. “But you need to face reality. Dad is sick and it's not going away.”

She sighed, tension sprouted from every nerve ending. Focused on her conversation with Rachael, she didn't see the man barreling toward her with a tray of take-away coffees.

Thwack.

“Ahhhh.” She squealed as the burning, hot coffee flew in all directions. Ava jumped out of the line of fire, just in time to see the tray plummet to the ground in a puddle of steaming liquid.

“Oh, my God, I am so sorry,” she said, praying he wasn't scalded, due of her absentmindedness. She

watched his strong hands shake off the excess droplets of coffee. “How stupid of me. I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

He smiled and his warm, chocolate-brown eyes caught her gaze. She paused, shocked by his outrageously good looks, and for the first time, she noticed how perfectly proportioned his facial features were. His dark-brown hair was cut short and his five o’clock shadow was positively sinful.

A shiver ran up her spine. The deep timbre of his voice broke her wayward thoughts. *Thank goodness.*

“That’s quite all right. It was as much my fault as yours. I should have been paying more attention,” he said, throwing the empty coffee tray in a nearby bin.

“Ava... Ava... Ava! Are you there?”

They both stared at the voice echoing from the phone in her hand.

“Ava, can you hear me?” Rachael shouted, an octave higher. “What’s going on?”

“Ava, is it?” He smiled a heart stopping smile.

She nodded. His voice hummed in her ears like pure heaven.

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“I think whoever is on the other end of the line really wants to talk to you.” He pointed to the phone in her hand.

Her gaze followed his to her phone. Rachael's picture slapped her in the face, as sure as someone had just hit her with a wet rag. She gasped, jolted back to her previous conversation, and rushed the phone to her ear. “Rachael, I'm so sorry. Can I call you back?”

“Don't hang up on my account, I'm off to replenish my coffee supply,” he said as he held the stage door open for her.

That square jawline looks good enough to nibble on, she thought.

Nodding, she eyeballed his cute arse as he swaggered toward Coava Coffee Roasters down the street. She felt the burning heat work its way up her neck and firmly plant itself in her cheeks.

“Ava?” Rachael said.

Oh, my God. Stop checking out that man's arse.
There's no room in your life for men.

“Yes, yes, I'm here. Sorry,” she said, heading inside toward her dressing room. “I accidentally ran

into someone with hot coffee at the stage door. I'm just lucky I'm not wearing any of it. A scarred Juliet, with third-degree burns, wouldn't look good for opening night." She chuckled, her thoughts firmly back on her conversation with Rachael.

"Listen, Ava, I'll start looking at plane fares, just to see what's available. All right?"

Ava knew Rachael wouldn't give her a moment's peace until she agreed. Out of the two of them, Rachael always had been the demanding, forceful one. "Yes, all right, but don't book anything until you've spoken with me."

"Sure thing," Rachael said with a groan. "Okay, bye. Love you, sis."

A twinge of uncertainty niggled at her gut. "Love you, too."

By the time she made it to her dressing room, her thoughts were back on her the show. She'd played a lot of lead roles back in Australia and in New York, but playing Juliet has always been her childhood dream. Thanks to Portland's Rose Water Bay Theatre Company, her life's dream was about to become a reality.

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Ava grabbed her water bottle and towel, and headed to the rehearsal room for warm-up. She stopped dead in her tracks outside the director's office and her stomach took a nose dive.

Oh, my God, there he is again, and with fresh coffees.

Who is he? Ava hadn't seen him around the theatre before. Maybe he was a new addition to the crew. So, then why is he talking to the director?

Ava continued toward the rehearsal room and halted by the vending machine. "Damn it," she muttered, shaking her head, annoyed with her lack of focus. She'd left her script back in her dressing room and Nelson Carwright, the director insisted on scripts at all rehearsals. Turning, she hadn't taken two steps before she ran smack into his tall, robust frame, her water bottle and towel tumbling to her feet.

His sturdy hands righted her in seconds. "You, again," he blurted.

She felt her cheeks reddened under his constant stare. He studied her through squinted eyes, waiting for her to speak. Her skin burned under his touch. She shrugged. "Yes, me again." She started to bend to pick up her things.

“No, don’t move,” he said, holding up his hands. “I think it would be safer for both of us if you’d stand still while *I* get your things.” He chuckled.

Oh, my Lord, could this get any more embarrassing? Ava was speechless. She froze, as if her body were a mannequin stuck in a shop window display. She sniffed subtly at the spicy aftershave he wore. *Mmm, yummy.* Ava shook her head. *Focus on the show, not the gorgeous man at your feet.* She giggled. He sort of looked like Romeo, bowing before her, confessing his love.

He placed her water bottle and towel in her open hands. “Something funny?”

She cleared her throat. “No, sorry. I was just thinking of a scene from the show.”

“Now, is there anything else I can get you?” he asked. “Next time we run into each other, I want to be prepared.”

“Well.” She paused. “I could sure use a coffee, since you seem so good at doing the coffee run.” She held her breath, unsure if he would be offended by her Australian humour.

“As you wish. How do you like it?” He smiled.

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There he goes again with that sexy smile, sending my body into sensitive overdrive. “You really don’t—”

“I insist.”

“Thank you. White, two sugars, please,” she said. Rolling her eyes, she added. “I know, sugar is bad for you, but I have a big sweet tooth.”

“No problem. Be back soon.” He turned and left, leaving her stunned *and* eyeing the sexy sway of his arse...*again*.

She slapped her forehead. *Stop it, damn it.*

He stopped and turned, catching her in the act. “By the way, love the Australian accent.” Then he continued on his way, leaving Ava wide-eyed and speechless.

Rehearsal had been going well over the past week, but today had been a particularly trying morning rehearsal. Very trying, indeed. With only one day left ‘til opening night, it seemed everything that *could* go wrong, *did* go wrong.

Bad rehearsal, good performance. At least, that’s what her mother used to say.

Ava struggled to focus. The odd humidity was throwing her off her game. She should be used to it, since she came from Perth, one of the most humid states in Australia. Steely determination gripped her. Infused with purpose, she headed over to her Romeo to tackle the last scene again.

Her brow creased as she took in Harvey's pale complexion. "Harvey, can we run act three, scene five, again? The connection wasn't there and I don't want a fake performance tomorrow night. I'm just not happy with the scene."

He smiled. "Sure, just let me have a few minutes to recoup."

"Are you sure you're okay?" she asked, her words etched with worry. "You don't look so great."

"Of course, it's just this crazy humidity playing havoc with my mind," he said. Harvey stood and wiped the sweat from his brow with his towel. "The humidity is unusually high at this time of year, even for Portland."

Ava swallowed the lump in her throat. Her performance anxiety was starting to surface again. Ava's palms itched and she had to control the urge to

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squeeze her fingers into tight fists. "Are you ready now?"

"Sure," Harvey said, as he followed her on to the stage.

Ava's mind was focused on Juliet's lines, they ran through her mind like clockwork. *Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day: It was the nightingale, and not the lark, that pierced the fearful hollow of thine ear; Nightly she sings on yon pomegranate-tree: Believe me, love, it was the nightingale.*

Ava was oblivious to the commotion behind her. Her thoughts interrupted by scattered screams. Concern knotted her insides as she spun to see Harvey's lifeless body splayed on the stage. "Harvey," she shrieked.

She froze and stared, her blood turning to ice in her veins. Ava was paralysed with a multitude of emotions. She swallowed hard against the bile lodged in the back of her throat.

People ran from all directions and voices yelled over each other. "Someone call the doctor..."

"Get an ambulance..."

"Stand back."

Stumbling backward, Ava stared wide-eyed at the disorder in front of her. She shuddered, tears stinging her eyelids as she watched everyone in action.

“Oh my God, Harvey,” she said as she bent beside his fallen figure. “What’s wrong? Are you all right?”

“I...” he mumbled, his clammy palm grabbing for her hand.

“It’s okay, don’t move.” Panicked, she babbled on. “You’re going to be fine, Harvey. Everything will be okay.” Although she said the words out loud, she knew deep down that things were *far* from okay.

The ambulance arrived and it was as if she was watching a slow-motion movie play out before her eyes. Cast members gathered by her side as they watched paramedics take Harvey away on a stretcher. She wanted to scream at the top of her voice, *Harvey, stop playing tricks on me this instant, it’s not the first of April so get up right now.*

She was utterly numb. Ava shook her head, hoping to dispel the nightmare that crushed her

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world like a speeding train. Her childhood dream fading by the second.

“Ava, honey, it’ll be all right,” Audrey said.

“All right? ...I’m glad you think so, but I’m not so sure. My poor Romeo has just been taken to hospital and we open tomorrow night. Tell me, how is it going to be all right?”

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