

If All of This is True

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IF ALL OF THIS IS TRUE

June 1978 Blankenship Estate Falls Mill, West Virginia

don't know why I shake, because I'm not afraid of him. Guess I blame it on the sun filming my neck with sweat, the buzz of too many conversations, or the tangy bite of lemonade left too long without ice.

With deliberate movements, Harrison skirts around the white lawn tables. He's different. Black hair feathers over his ears, meeting a well-trimmed beard, hiding too much of his face. He wears plaid. He always did. But instead of the dirt-smudged overalls and bare feet, he's dressed in caramel-colored bell bottoms and Ray-Ban glasses.

My stomach dives.

I've stared at his face for too many years. I've scribbled down scraps of his life and collected every piece of him I could find—shifting here, nudging there, until everything worked.

Until my story made sense.

The fact that he's here—at Grandfather's twenty-year memorial picnic—proves it does.

HANNAH LINDER

Wiping damp palms down my denim dress, I nod to the local preacher, shake hands with great-aunt somebody, and navigate toward the statue.

Dad had it fixed center of the yard, so anyone approaching the green, Victorian-style estate house in the mountains would see Grandfather Blankenship before they even climb out of their car. Overkill, if you ask me.

If you ask anyone, probably.

Harrison is already there. He dips his hands in his pockets and stares up at the granite statue, seemingly oblivious to the thirty-some guests mingling around him and the waft of grilling burgers.

"I'm surprised you knew about this."

He doesn't stiffen, or react, to my voice. I thought he would. "Read about it."

"From where?"

"Dunno. I travel." He finally glances over and his brow twitches in recognition. "Belinda, right?"

We used to build forts in the woods outside this estate, catch crawdads in the creek with mason jars, and throw rocks into the abandoned barn windows.

My bedroom is overwhelmed with him.

"Yeah." I try not to show it bothers me. That he'd forget. "I guess twenty years does something to a girl, huh?"

"You look great."

"Thanks." Like a tidal wave, a hot sensation rushes through my cheeks. Strange, because of everyone here, I should be affected by him the least. I know what he's done.

But he's always been...

Well.

So, Harrison.

Even in grade school, his easiness, his quietness, made him addicting. You just wanted to sit next to him. Not to hear him talk. He didn't really say much. But just to interact with him—feel his fingers brush against yours as he handed you a straw, or

catch a whiff of his laundry detergent, or be the person on the other end of his smile.

"Hey, uh, I know this may come off a little weird, but do you care if we talk a sec?" I'm flexing my fingers. A nervous habit. "Like, in the house?"

I wish I could see his eyes beyond the shades. "Sure." He gestures toward the house, like he's giving me permission to lead the way.

I try not to think about what I'm doing. I make eye-contact with no one, as we weave through the yard, climb the porch steps, then enter the hundred-year-old family home. My knees wobble a little, as I ascend the carpeted stairs.

I take him down the hall.

Then to my old bedroom.

Funny, how the musky smell of potpourri and childhood always sweeps me back to long lost days. Afternoons when I used to watch out the window for Harrison's bicycle. Or write love letters he never read in the back of my school notebooks.

The door clicks shut with finality, closing us in.

"What's this about?"

"Um, hold on a sec." I get on my knees at the quilted bed, pull out four cardboard boxes, and pop off the lids. Then I spread everything out. All my notes. My photos of him. The newspaper clippings. The funeral brochure.

In Harrison fashion, he doesn't shake or flinch, as he pulls the sunglasses from his face. His steady brown eyes travel the length of my mess. He blinks hard. Then meets my gaze. "I don't understand."

"It's complicated, I know." I lick my lips and point to the first collage of photos, heartbeat drumming in my throat. "This was two weeks before it happened. You'd won first place for best hog in 4H."

"I remember."

"I found this receipt in Birdie's Gun Shop the next day. Doesn't say your name, but you signed with an H. I think you

used the hog money." I flip through more papers. "This is four months prior. About the time your sister dropped out of school." I hand him the doctor's report. "You told me she went to live with an aunt. You never told me she was..." Why can't I finish? My mind is haywire, circuiting in too many directions, as I shuffle through until I find the manilla folder. "This is all stuff about Grandfather. I talked a deputy into giving me complaints filed against him. I knew there'd be a lot, what with him owning the Blankenship & Son Mining Company, but I didn't know there'd be one from your family."

A muscle jumps in his jaw.

"Anyway, shortly after it happened, I went traipsing about your cabin. I found one of these outside your sister's window." I lift a plastic baggy, with a half-burnt cigar. "Arturo Fuente. The only kind he smoked. And then of course"—I dump another box — "there's this." The coroner's report. "What Grandfather was shot with."

"A Colt .45."

"Yeah."

"Same as the one I bought."

A fist tightens around my lungs, as I use the bed to pull myself back up. Then I just stand there, the evidence littered between us, and look at him.

I look into him.

"You think I did it."

"I think you had reason to."

He stuffs the Ray-Bans in his shirt pocket, glances away, then back into my eyes. He stays there a long time. I feel things now—things I never felt, not in all my digging and sleuthing—and I think it's because I get that faint scent again.

His laundry detergent.

I remember things about him I'd forgotten. The softness of his brown eyes. The smile lines at the corners of his lips. The goodness, despite everything, that emancipates from his being and pulls me toward him. "If you thought this was true, why didn't you go to the sheriff?"

"I don't know." A beat of silence. I swallow. "Harrison, I just want to know the truth."

"I think you should do what you need to do."

"And turn you in?"

"If that's what you think is right."

"Then you killed him. You admit that."

With moisture in his gaze, he shakes his head. "No." I'm not sure if he means no, he didn't shoot Grandfather, or no, he can't tell me the truth.

Either way, he reaches over, shakes my hand with a warm grip, then leaves. I glance at the obsession sprawled at my feet. Tears stinging my throat, I place everything back into the boxes, scoot them under the bed, and smooth the bed ruffle that hides it all away.

I don't know if I believe Harrison.

I don't know if he killed Grandfather or not.

But I know now—for the first time in all these years—that I wouldn't do anything about it, even if he did.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Hannah Linder resides in the beautiful mountains of central West Virginia. Represented by Books & Such, she writes Regency romantic suspense novels filled with passion, secrets, and danger. She is a five-time Selah Award winner, a 2025 Carol Award finalist, and a member of ACFW. Also, Hannah is an international and multi-award-winning graphic designer who specializes in professional book cover design. She

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