

Rider's Kiss

Chapter One

After Victoria reached the bridge and jogged to the other side of the small suburb of Summit Glen, Ohio, she stopped and leaned against the railing. Great gasps of crisp morning air filled her lungs as she battled to control her heart rate after completing half of her four-mile run. A couple of other early morning joggers sped past, and Victoria couldn't help comparing herself to the two women. They both had perfect hourglass figures. Formfitting clothes showed off their spectacular muscle tone to perfection. They were in complete contrast to her bulkier build and baggy sweats. Would she ever have a figure like that? Fat chance. She shook her head and closed her eyes. Besides, wasn't her mom always telling her to be happy with the gifts God gave her? As the sun started to rise over the horizon, more and more people filled the streets. Summer was right around the corner, and the small town she called home seemed to be bustling with people coming out of hibernation from the unusually cold winter. Summit Green had always been Victoria's home. Unlike so many of her old schoolmates, Victoria had never had an overriding need to leave in favor of a bigger city and better opportunities. She liked small-town life. Nothing could ever compare to the peaceful solitude she found here.

But it hadn't always been so peaceful. The sad memories invaded her mind as if it were yesterday, and with them came the same awful sinking sensation as the scene played out for the thousandth time.

Her mother, Anna Kiss, had always longed for a daughter of her own to love. She used to tell Victoria that when the doctor had announced she was pregnant with a girl, after so many years of trying to conceive a child, it'd been the happiest day of her life. Her mom had wanted someone to share laughs and feminine secrets with, the way only a mother and daughter could. And she was more than thrilled when her prayers were finally answered. Victoria had been spirited as a young girl, causing all sorts of mischief that would bring stern looks from her dad and lectures from her mom. Her antics would bring about long talks about what was expected of a proper young lady. But nothing had prepared her for the awful turn her life would take. Even now, Victoria feared she would never forget the haunted look in her dad's eyes as he delivered the terrible news that her mother had lost the battle with breast cancer.

Victoria watched the water slowly drifting in the shallow river below as she attempted to breathe away the sadness. More years than she cared to count had come and gone since that fateful day. Still, no matter how much time passed, she still couldn't stave off the cold loneliness that crept through her body. Her mom's sunny kitchen sprang into her mind. She could still remember the helplessness she felt as her mom received the news of the cancer for the first time. Tears had streamed down her mom's cheeks. Her mom so rarely cried, and the moment would be etched in Victoria's memory always.

...

“Mom, I am perfectly capable of doing some yard work. Being a woman doesn’t make me helpless.”

Her mom laughed. “Oh, so you’re a woman now?” When Victoria only stood rigid with her nose in the air, Anna went on to explain, “You’re all of eleven years old, Victoria Lynn. And I never said you were helpless.”

Victoria scrunched her brows in confusion. “Then why can’t I mow the lawn? Dad said it was okay with him.”

“Well, your father should have talked to me before he made that decision. It’s too dangerous. That mower is on its last leg, and I don’t want you getting hurt. Heck, just last week your father nearly ran over his own foot with that crazy thing!”

Victoria hung her head and sighed. There would be no budging her mom on this point. “Are you ever going to admit that I’m growing up?”

Anna dropped her knife on the butcher block and set the apples she’d been cutting aside. She moved around the counter and wrapped Victoria in a familiar, warm embrace. “You are my only child, sweetheart, and I love you with all my heart. But I can’t help it if I’m a little overprotective. Is it so terrible?”

Victoria smiled, knowing she could never stay mad at her mom. “I love you too.”

“God saw fit to give me the most beautiful little girl ever, and I aim to raise her right.”

Victoria thought of her messy ponytail and the gray shirt she wore that was two sizes too big, and stiffened. “You’re my mom, so you have to say things like that.”

“Nonsense.” Her mom sniffed as if insulted. “I’ve never lied to you a day in my life.”

She didn’t know how to respond to her mom’s compliments. She never quite knew what to say actually. Victoria had a mirror, and beautiful wasn’t what she saw when she looked into it. Heather Clemmens, with her long blonde hair and blue eyes, was beautiful. She was the most popular girl in her sixth-grade class. Even the teachers smiled extra wide whenever Heather was around. Victoria cringed. Heather thought she was really something just because the boys drooled all over themselves whenever she was near. It was gross, really. Still, Victoria did wonder what it’d be like not to have mousy brown hair and dull hazel eyes.

Her mom pulled back a few inches and said, “Victoria, look at me.” She did as her mom asked and saw understanding in her kind brown eyes. “I realize that you will never be the frilly-dresses-and-flowers type—and heaven knows I wouldn’t know what to do with you if you were. Still, you must see that beauty comes in all forms. Someday, you’ll understand just how perfect God made you, just the way you are.”

Victoria heard the worry in her mom's voice, and she hated it. Victoria smiled. "You win. I'll stay away from the lawn mower."

When her mother smiled contentedly at her, Victoria felt it was essential to announce one other thing. "But I'm not dressing like Heather Clemmens. She looks dumb with those stupid skirts she wears, not to mention those tight jeans."

Anna burst out laughing. "I should hope you never dress like that either. Heather's mom should get that girl in check. Those jeans she wears are way too tight for such a young age." She patted Victoria's cheek and walked back around the counter. "How about you grab the sugar and a bowl so we can get this apple pie in the oven. At this rate, it'll be midnight before it's ready."

Victoria and Anna went to work on the apples, laughing over the day's events. But as the hours wore on, Victoria noticed her mom frowning. She had that look on her face whenever something was wrong and they just hadn't found out what yet. Her mom had a way of knowing things sometimes. Her mom once told her that it was God's way of preparing her for something bad. She was looking like that now as Victoria started to dump the heaping bowl of cut fruit into the sugar-and-cinnamon mixture.

"Mom, is something wrong?"

Anna looked up, a frown marring her brow. "I'm not sure."

Victoria reached out and grasped her mom's hand. It was ice cold, not warm like usual. Her eyes were distant and blank. "Want me to get Dad?" Just as the words left her mouth, the phone rang.

Her mom's face turned ashen. She strode across the room and picked it up off the table. Victoria heard the words "doctor" and "mammogram". At eleven years old, Victoria didn't understand what it meant, but she could see it wasn't good news. Everything changed after that.

...

Victoria shoved the dark memory out of her mind and pushed away from the railing. It wouldn't serve any purpose to think of things she had no power to change. Instead, she concentrated on finishing her four-mile run. Even though it was Sunday, she had a long list of things to do, and she wouldn't get them done by sulking.

By the time she was within a mile of her house, her cell phone rang. She grabbed it out of the pocket of her sweatshirt and looked at the number on the screen. Reena. Her spirits lifted immediately. Victoria hit Send. "Hey, lady."

Reena had been Victoria's friend since high school. Reena and her brother Rider had been transplants from a school up north. The first day of their freshman year, Reena had lost her locker combination and spilled orange juice down the front of her shirt. Victoria had walked in on her crying in the bathroom, and she'd offered to help. They'd been friends ever since.

Rider was another story altogether. Upon first sight, Victoria had fallen head over heels in lust with the dark-haired bad boy. His brooding stares and confident attitude had captured her teenage heart—along with several other hearts of Summit Green High girls. Unfortunately, he'd taken one look at Victoria and kept on walking, as if she didn't warrant more than a cursory glance. He'd barely said two words to her throughout high school. Of course, that hadn't stopped her from daydreaming about him. Then and now.

"You sound winded," Reena said. "Please don't tell me you're jogging."

"Yep. I'm nearly finished, though. What's up?"

Reena sighed. "You make me feel like such a lazy ass, I swear."

Victoria snorted. "Yeah, right. You work out harder than anyone I know."

"Yoga is great, but I'm no marathon runner like you."

Victoria looked down at her bulky clothes and rolled her eyes. "I'm not even close to being marathon ready. Not that it matters. All I want is to lose this winter pooch."

"You and me both, sister. But that's not really why I'm calling."

"I didn't really think it was." Victoria heard a noise in the background that sounded like a microwave ding. Knowing Reena, it was probably a frozen breakfast sandwich. The chef in Victoria recoiled at the thought.

"Can I come over? I wanted to talk to you about something."

The serious tone in Reena's voice had Victoria slowing her pace as she turned onto her street.

"Sure. Is anything wrong?"

"No, no, nothing like that."

Victoria was curious, but she let it go. "Give me an hour, okay?"

"I'm still in my PJs, so that works fine."

They said their good-byes, and Victoria tucked the phone back into her pocket. She didn't know what was on her friend's mind, but she was glad she was coming over. Victoria didn't want to be alone. For some reason, she was feeling overly sentimental, and the company would do her good. Maybe she could even get Reena's help on the hors d'oeuvres for the Williamses' wedding reception.

She loved her catering business. Turning her love of cooking into a thriving business gave her a sense of pride, and it made her feel closer to her mom. Cooking had always been something

they'd done together. Something they'd shared. Some of their best discussions had taken place over a pot of boiling water and sliced vegetables.

After Victoria got home, showered and dressed, she headed to the kitchen to make a fresh pitcher of iced tea. She was just adding ice when she heard a faint but cheerful, "Victoria? You here?"

"In the kitchen," Victoria yelled out. "I was just about to pour a glass of tea."

When Reena popped around the corner, Victoria noticed perspiration on her friend's forehead and her shiny black hair was up in a bun. "Make that two glasses. It's already getting hot out there. I think spring is passing us by without blinking an eye."

Victoria was already getting out another glass by the time Reena took a seat at the table.

She handed her the iced tea, a spoon and a couple of artificial-sweetener packets before taking the chair across from her. "You sounded all mysterious over the phone. What gives?"

Reena took a long drink before saying, "I'm not sure you want to know."

Now Victoria was getting worried. She reached out and took Reena's hand and said, "Reena, you're like a sister to me. You can tell me anything." She paused and added, "Is there a body and do I need to grab a couple of shovels or what?"

As Victoria turned to offer her friend a chocolate chip cookie from the batch she'd freshly baked the night before, Reena said, "Nothing quite so sinister." She took the cookie and shook her head. "You're always feeding me." She bit into it and hummed her approval. "How is it that you stay in such great shape?" she asked around a mouthful of the sweet treat. "Damn, if I cooked like you, I'd weigh a ton."

Victoria plucked at her oversized shirt. "If I were in such great shape, I wouldn't have to cover my bulk with extra material, now would I?"

Reena shook her head. "That's not why you dress like that."

"Oh?" Victoria cocked a brow, not sure she liked the direction the conversation was going. They'd been down this road before. Reena had been begging to take her shopping to give her a total makeover. So far, Victoria had declined. She liked the way she looked. So what if it wasn't sexy? She was too busy to be sexy anyway. She had Victoria's Catering to run. Running your own business wasn't for sissies. It took all her concentration and most of her energy, although it was worth it.

"You hide," Reena answered as she finished off the cookie. "We both know that's true."

Okay, that was out of left field. "Huh?"

"You wear big clothes like armor, Victoria. It's not because you're hiding extra pounds, though. You just don't want to be...noticed, I think."

Victoria was getting increasingly uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation, so she tried to lighten the growing tension. “Is this the part where you offer to take me shopping? Like an intervention or something?”

Reena laughed. “No, you dork, but that’s not a bad idea. I keep telling you that if you would just let me help a little bit, you’d have men clamoring to go out with you.”

“Who says I want men clamoring?” A lie and they both knew it. “And who the hell has time? I have a business to run. Remember that little tidbit?”

“Plenty of career women have a personal life.” She quirked a brow in that regal way only Reena seemed to possess. “That’s no excuse. Try again.”

Victoria stiffened. “Maybe I like the way I look. Ever consider that?”

Reena’s bright blue eyes turned sympathetic. God, Victoria hated that look the most. She didn’t want sympathy. Sympathy was a useless emotion. She’d gotten plenty of it when her mother had passed away. It hadn’t brought her back, and it hadn’t lessened the pain. Sympathy sucked.

“If you did,” Reena went on, “then you wouldn’t constantly put yourself down.”

Victoria held up both in hands. “Fine, I surrender. I hate the way I look. My clothes practically scream boring, and my hair hasn’t been touched by an actual hairstylist in ages.” She held up a hand before Reena could say anything more on the subject. “But that’s not why you stopped by.”

Reena sighed and looked away. “No, it’s not.”

“You’re stalling,” she replied. “Out with it.”

Reena’s gaze connected with hers. “Rider is coming home.”

For a second, Victoria thought her heart had stopped beating. Like, shut down entirely. She couldn’t breathe. Rider? She hadn’t seen him since graduation. He’d picked up and left town a month later. Even though he hadn’t given her the time of day, even though he barely knew she existed, Victoria had missed him for weeks afterward.

Reena patted her on the back. “You okay?”

“Terrific. Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?” Victoria did not want to get on the subject of Rider James. Reena was one of the few people in the world who knew the truth. She understood that Victoria had always carried a torch for Rider. She was also the only person who knew that the feelings were all one-sided.

Victoria quickly stood and busied herself with the dishes. “Is he coming home for a visit, or is it permanent?” She couldn’t help the hope that sprang up inside at the notion that maybe he was coming home for good.

“An extended visit,” Reena explained in a quiet voice. “He’s opening a branch of his auto-detailing business here in town.” She paused. “Mom and Dad are thrilled. It’ll be nice to spend time with him.”

“Yes,” she said, knowing how much Reena missed her older brother. “I know how hard it was for you when he left.”

“We keep in touch. E-mail. Social networking sites. Text messages. We see each other on holidays and all that too. But it’s just not the same, you know? It’ll be nice to have him home longer than a few days.”

“I’ll bet.” She turned and kept her voice under control as she asked, “So, is that what you wanted to tell me?”

Reena sat back in her chair and crossed her arms over her chest. “You don’t fool me, Victoria. I know you’re freaking out right now. Might as well admit it.”

Victoria slumped, admitting defeat. Reena was her best friend, after all. There was no way she could hide anything from her. “Okay, if you must know, then, yes, I’m freaking out. I haven’t seen him in...ten years. A lot has changed since then.” Victoria felt like a teenager all over again as she thought of seeing Rider. So much time had passed. What would he think of her? God, must she be so transparent whenever the man’s name was mentioned?

“I bet he’s missed you too.” Reena reached out and covered Victoria’s hand with hers. “More than you think, sweetie.”

Victoria snorted. “Right, because we were so close before he skipped town.” She shook her head. “No, whatever fascination I had for your brother is in the past. I’ve moved on. Besides, I’m sure he’s got some gorgeous woman stashed away somewhere.” Even the thought made Victoria slightly queasy. Then a thought struck. Would he be bringing her with him? Would Victoria have to watch him kiss another woman? Please, life couldn’t be that cruel.

Reena pulled her hand back. “Nope, no girlfriend. No wife either. He’s one hundred percent available.” She bobbed her eyebrows. “Interesting, don’t you think?”

Victoria tapped her fingers on the table. “It would be if he even knew I existed. Since he doesn’t, the point is moot.”

“Then why are you so nervous?” She pointed to Victoria’s spastic hand and said, “Always a dead giveaway.”

Too late, Victoria realized she had revealed more than what she’d intended. This was why she never told lies; she was just too lousy at it. She always got caught somehow. She decided it was time to come clean.

She forced herself to stop tapping. “We’re adults now,” she explained, using her best grown-up voice. “Rider has a life of his own, and so do I. The time for crushes is over. Way over. There are other fish in the sea.”

“And when was the last time you went fishing? Six months ago, if I remember correctly. George, wasn’t that his name? The guy with the comb-over, right?”

George had been a guy she’d met at church. Nice guy, but boring to the extreme. His idea of a hot date was to listen to classical music and discuss politics. Not the worst thing to do, if you were sixty years old and heading toward retirement. “George was an okay guy,” she said, skirting the full truth.

Reena grabbed another cookie and took a bite. “Oh joy, just what every woman dreams of, an okay guy.”

“Fine, the man was duller than dirt. Happy?”

“I’ll be happy when you’re happy. And you’re not happy, Victoria.”

“I’m content. I have my health, and I have a job I love. That’s more than a lot of people have.” When Reena began to protest, Victoria shot right over her.

“Really, don’t worry about me. I’m fine.” Victoria smiled and hoped it was convincing.

“Whatever. But just so you know, he’ll be home day after tomorrow.” She shrugged. “In case you were wondering.”

“Thank you, but I wasn’t.”

Reena laughed. “God, you suck at lying.”

“Bite me,” she groused as she stood and started getting out ingredients to make the hors d’oeuvres.

Reena stood and leaned against the counter. “You’re telling that to the wrong member of the James family.”

“You’re incorrigible.” She handed her a knife and asked, “Now, are you going to help me with this wedding or what?”

Reena took the knife. “Whose wedding?”

“Rita Williams. Her family has a lot of money and a lot of friends, so I really want to wow them with my culinary skills. Sadly, I’m a little behind here.”

“You have employees and a factory for this sort of stuff. Why don’t you do like most business owners? Sit back and direct.”

“Pfft, I’ll never run a business that way. I’d be miserable.” Feeling unaccountably weepy, Victoria hugged her friend. “Thanks for caring about me.”

“You’d be lost without me, and we both know it.”

“True.”

“Now, what am I chopping?”

“We’re serving smoked mozzarella profiterole. It’s a blend of smoked mozzarella, cream cheese and fresh herbs in a delicious pastry. You garnish it with roasted red pepper. But I wanted to perfect the recipe first. So you’re going to be my guinea pig.”

“Yum, I love being your guinea pig. Bring it on.”

As they went about creating the tasty appetizers, Victoria’s mind strayed back to their previous conversation. Rider was coming home. Oh God, how was she supposed to keep the past buried and her feelings in check with him living in the same town? It’d been easier with him off in New York. She could almost forget about his dreamy sapphire eyes and ornery grin. Old insecurities resurfaced, but she was determined to tamp them down. She refused to cower and hide just because her high school crush was back. Victoria would damn well hold on to her newfound independence. It was much too precious to her to let latent feelings ruin it.

The day flew by as Reena and Victoria baked. By the time they were finished, the sun had gone down. After promising to take Reena shopping and to lunch the following day for her birthday, Victoria walked her friend to the door.

Victoria locked up and kicked off her tennis shoes with a sigh of relief. Exhaustion overcame her, and she was only too glad the day was at an end.

Tomorrow would prove to be a long one. Shopping with Reena always wore her out. No one did extreme shopping quite like that woman. She had things to prepare for the wedding too. For now, she couldn’t even imagine anything beyond getting up the stairs and falling into bed. She’d figure out a strategy to avoid one very sexy Rider James tomorrow.

Buy Now!

Amazon: https://www.amazon.com/Riders-Kiss-Anne-Rainey-ebook/dp/B074DZ3C2Y/ref=sr_1_1?s=digital-text&ie=UTF8&qid=1503521951&sr=1-1&keywords=riders+kiss+rainey

Barnes & Noble: <https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/riders-kiss-anne-rainey/1118915390?ean=9781640632875>

Kobo: <https://www.kobo.com/us/en/ebook/rider-s-kiss-1>

iBooks: <https://itunes.apple.com/us/book/riders-kiss/id1265748003?mt=11>

Rider's Kiss by Anne Rainey