



a
thousand
boy

Kisses

a novel

USA Today Bestselling Author

Tillie Cole



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Thousand

Boy

Kisses

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Dedication

For believers in true, epic, soul-shattering love.

This one's for you.

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Rune

There were exactly four moments that defined my life.

This was the first.

* * *

Blossom Grove, Georgia

United States of America

Twelve Years Ago

Aged Five

“Jeg vil dra! Nå! Jeg vil reise hjem igjen!” I shouted as loud as I could, telling my mamma that I wanted to leave, now! I wanted to go back home!

“We’re not going back home, Rune. And we are not leaving. This is our

home now,” she replied in English. She crouched down and looked me straight in the eye. “Rune,” she said softly, “I know you didn’t want to leave Oslo, but your pappa got a new job here in Georgia.” Her hand ran up and down my arm, but it didn’t make me feel any better. I didn’t want to be in this place, in America.

I wanted to go back home.

“Slutt å snakke engelsk!” I snapped. I hated speaking English. Since we set off for America from Norway, Mamma and Pappa would only speak to me in English. They said I had to practice.

I didn’t want to!

My mamma stood up and lifted a box off the ground. “We’re in America, Rune. They speak English here. You’ve been speaking English for as long as you’ve been speaking Norwegian. It’s time to use it.”

I stood my ground, glaring at my mamma as she walked around me into the house. I looked around the small street where we now lived. There were eight houses. They were all big, but they all looked different. Ours was painted red, with white windows and a huge porch. My room was big and it was on the bottom floor. I did think that was kind of cool. Sort of anyway. I’d never slept downstairs before; in Oslo my room was upstairs.

I looked at the houses. All of them were painted bright colors: light blues, yellows, pinks... Then I looked at the house next door. Right next door—we shared a patch of grass. Both houses were big, and our yards were too, but there was no fence or wall between them. If I wanted to, I could run into their yard and there’d be nothing to stop me.

The house was bright white, with a porch wrapped right around it. They had rocking chairs and a big chair swing on the front. Their window frames were painted black, and there was a window opposite my bedroom window. Right opposite! I didn’t like that. I didn’t like that I could see into their

bedroom and they could see into mine.

There was a stone on the ground. I kicked it with my foot, watching it roll down the street. I turned to follow my mamma, but then I heard a noise. It was coming from the house next to ours. I looked at their front door, but nobody came out. I was climbing the steps to my porch when I saw some movement from the side of the house—from next door's bedroom window, the one opposite my own.

My hand froze on the rail and I watched as a girl, dressed in a bright blue dress, climbed through the window. She jumped down onto the grass and dusted off her hands on her thighs. I frowned, my eyebrows pulling down, as I waited for her to lift her head. She had brown hair, which was piled up on her head like a bird's nest. She wore a big white bow on the side of it.

When she looked up, she looked right at me. Then she smiled. She smiled at me so big. She waved, fast, then ran forward and stopped in front of me.

She pushed out her hand. "Hi, my name is Poppy Litchfield, I'm five years old and I live right next door."

I stared at the girl. She had a funny accent. It made the English words sound different to the way I had learned them back in Norway. The girl—Poppy—had a smudge of mud on her face and bright yellow rain boots on her feet. They had a big red balloon on the side.

She looked weird.

I looked up from her feet and fixed my eyes on her hand. She was still holding it out. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know what she wanted.

Poppy sighed. Shaking her head, she reached for my hand and forced it into hers. She shook them up and down twice and said, "A handshake. My mamaw says it's only right to shake the hand of new people that you meet." She pointed at our hands. "That was a handshake. And that was polite because I don't know you."

I didn't say anything; for some reason my voice wouldn't work. When I looked down I realized it was because our hands were still joined.

She had mud on her hands too. In fact, she had mud everywhere.

"What's your name?" Poppy asked. Her head was tipped to the side. A small twig was stuck in her hair.

"Hey," she said, tugging on our hands, "I asked for your name."

I cleared my throat. "My name is Rune, Rune Erik Kristiansen."

Poppy scrunched her face up, her big pink lips sticking out all funny. "You sound weird," she blurted.

I snatched my hand away.

"Nei det gjør jeg ikke!" I snapped. Her face screwed up even more.

"What did you just say?" Poppy asked, as I turned to walk into my house. I didn't want to speak to her anymore.

Feeling angry, I spun back around. "I said, 'No, I don't!' I was speaking Norwegian!" I said, in English this time. Poppy's green eyes grew huge.

She stepped closer, and closer again, and asked, "Norwegian? Like the Vikings? My mamaw read me a book about the Vikings. It said they were from Norway." Her eyes got even bigger. "Rune, are you a Viking?" Her voice had gone all squeaky.

It made me feel good. I stuck out my chest. My pappa always said I was a Viking, like all the men in my family. We were big, strong Vikings. "Ja," I said. "We are real Vikings, from Norway."

A big smile spread across Poppy's face, and a loud girly giggle burst from her mouth. She lifted her hand and pulled on my hair. "That's why you have long blond hair and crystal-blue eyes. Because you're a Viking. At first I thought you looked like a girl—"

"I'm not a girl!" I butted in, but Poppy didn't seem to care. I ran my hand through my long hair. It came down to my shoulders. All the boys in Oslo had

their hair like this.

“—but now I see it’s because you’re a real-life Viking. Like Thor. He had long blond hair and blue eyes too! You’re just like Thor!”

“Ja,” I agreed. “Thor does. And he’s the strongest god of them all.”

Poppy nodded her head, then put her hands on my shoulders. Her face had gone all serious and her voice dropped to a whisper. “Rune, I don’t tell everyone this, but I go on adventures.”

I screwed up my face. I didn’t understand. Poppy stepped closer and looked up into my eyes. She squeezed my arms. She tilted her head to the side. She looked all around us, then leaned in to speak. “I don’t normally bring people with me on my journeys, but you’re a Viking, and we all know that Vikings grow big and strong, and they are really really good with adventures and exploring, and long walks and capturing baddies and... all kindsa things!”

I was still confused, but then Poppy stepped back and held out her hand again.

“Rune,” she said, her voice serious and strong, “you live right next door, you’re a Viking and I just love Vikings. I think we should be best friends.”

“Best friends?” I asked.

Poppy nodded her head and pushed her hand further toward me. Slowly reaching out my own hand, I gripped hold of hers and gave it two shakes, like she’d shown me.

A handshake.

“So now we are best friends?” I asked, as Poppy pulled her hand back.

“Yes!” she said excitedly. “Poppy and Rune.” She brought her finger to her chin and looked up. Her lips stuck out again, like she was thinking very hard. “It sounds good, don’t you think? ‘Poppy and Rune, best friends for infinity!’”

I nodded because it did sound good. Poppy put her hand in mine. “Show me

*your bedroom! I want to tell you about what adventure we can go on next.”
She began to pull me forward, and we ran into the house.*

When we pushed through my bedroom door, Poppy rushed straight to my window. “This is the room exactly opposite mine!”

I nodded my head, and she squealed, running toward me to take my hand in hers again. “Rune!” she said excitedly, “we can talk at night, and make walkie-talkies with cans and string. We can whisper our secrets to each other when everyone else is asleep, and we can plan, and play, and...”

Poppy kept talking, but I didn’t mind. I liked the sound of her voice. I liked her laugh and I liked the big white bow in her hair.

Maybe Georgia won’t be so bad after all, I thought, not if I have Poppy Litchfield as my very best friend.

* * *

And that was Poppy and me from that day on.

Poppy and Rune.

Best friends for infinity.

Or so I thought.

Funny how things change.



Chapter 1

Broken Hearts
&
Boy-Kiss Jars

Poppy

Nine Years Ago

Aged Eight

“Where are we going, Daddy?” I asked as he held my hand gently, guiding me to the car. I glanced back at my school, wondering why I was being taken out of class early. It was only lunch break. I wasn’t supposed to leave yet.

My daddy didn’t say anything to me as we walked, he just squeezed my hand. I searched along the school fence, a strange feeling pulling in my stomach. I loved school, I loved to learn, and we had history next. It was my absolute favorite subject. I didn’t want to miss it.

“Poppy!” Rune, my very best friend, was standing at the fence, watching me go. His hands were holding real tight to the metal bars. “Where are you going?” he shouted. I sat next to Rune in class. We were always together. School was no fun when the other wasn’t there.

I turned my head toward my daddy's face for answers, but he didn't look back at me. He stayed silent. Looking back at Rune, I shouted, "I don't know!"

Rune watched me all the way to our car. I climbed in the back and sat on my booster seat, my daddy buckling me in.

I heard the whistle blow in the schoolyard, signaling the end of lunch. I glanced out the window and watched all of the kids running back inside, but not Rune. Rune stayed at the fence watching me. His long blond hair was blowing in the wind as he mouthed, "*Are you okay?*". But my daddy got in the car and started driving away before I could answer.

Rune ran along the fence, following our car, until Mrs. Davis came and made him go inside.

When the school was out of sight, my daddy said, "Poppy?"

"Yes, Daddy?" I replied.

"You know Mamaw has been living with us for a while now?"

I nodded my head. My mamaw had moved into the room opposite mine a while back. My mama had said it was because she needed help. My pawpaw had died when I was only a baby. My mamaw had lived on her own for years, until she came to live with us.

"Do you remember what your mama and I told you about why? Why Mamaw could no longer live by herself?"

I breathed in through my nose and whispered, "Yes. Because she needed our help. Because she's sick." My stomach flipped over as I spoke. My mamaw was my very best friend. Well, her and Rune were tied at the absolute top. My mamaw said I was just like her.

Before she was sick we would go on lots of adventures. She read to me every night about the great explorers of the world. She would tell me all about history—about Alexander the Great, the Romans, and my favorite, the

samurai from Japan. They were Mamaw's favorite too.

I knew my mamaw was sick, but she never acted sick. She always smiled, she gave tight hugs and made me laugh. She always said she had moonbeams in her heart and sunshine in her smile. Mamaw told me that meant she was happy.

She made me happy too.

But over the last few weeks Mamaw had slept a lot. She'd been too tired to do much of anything else. In fact, most nights I would now read to her, as she stroked my hair and smiled at me. And that was okay, because Mamaw's smiles were the best kind of smiles to get.

"That's right, pumpkin, she is sick. In fact, she's very, very sick. Do you understand?"

I frowned, but nodded my head and said, "Yes."

"That's why we're going home early," he explained. "She's waiting for you. She wants to see you. Wants to see her little buddy."

I didn't understand why my daddy had to bring me home early to visit my mamaw, when the first thing I did every night after school was go into her room and talk to her, while she lay in bed. She liked to hear all about my day.

We turned into our street and parked in our driveway. My daddy didn't move for a few seconds, but then he turned to me and said, "I know you're only eight, pumpkin, but you have to be a big brave girl today, okay?"

I nodded my head. My daddy smiled a sad smile at me. "That's my girl."

He got out of the car and walked around to my seat in the back. Taking my hand, my daddy guided me out of the car and toward the house. I could see there were more cars here than usual. I had just opened my mouth to ask whose they all were when Mrs. Kristiansen, Rune's mamma, came walking across the yard between our houses with a big dish of food in her hands.

"James!" she called out, and my daddy turned to greet her.

“Adelis, hey,” he called back. Rune’s mamma stopped in front of us. Her long blond hair was down today. It was the same color as Rune’s. Mrs. Kristiansen was real pretty. I loved her. She was kind, and called me the daughter she never had.

“I made you this. Please tell Ivy I’m thinking of you all.”

My daddy released my hand to take the dish.

Mrs. Kristiansen crouched down and pressed a kiss on my cheek. “You be a good girl, Poppy, okay?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I replied, and watched her cross the grass to go back into her house.

My daddy sighed, then tipped his head for me to follow him inside. As soon as we were through the front door, I saw my aunts and uncles sitting on the couches, and my cousins sitting on the floor of the living room, playing with their toys. My aunt Silvia was sitting with my sisters, Savannah and Ida. They were younger than me, only four and two years old. They waved at me when they saw me, but Aunt Silvia kept them sitting on her lap.

Nobody was speaking, but lots of them were wiping their eyes; most of them were crying.

I was so confused.

I leaned into my daddy’s leg, clutching on tightly. Someone stood in the doorway to the kitchen—my aunt Della, DeeDee as I always called her. She was my absolute favorite aunt. She was young and fun, and always made me laugh. Even though my mama was older than her sister, they looked like each other. Both had long brown hair and green eyes like me. But DeeDee was extra pretty. I wanted to look just like her one day.

“Hey, Pops,” she said, but I could see that her eyes were red, and her voice sounded funny. DeeDee looked at my daddy. She took the dish of food from his hand and said, “You go on back with Poppy, James. It’s almost time.”

I started to go with my daddy, but looked back when DeeDee didn't follow. I opened my mouth to call her name, but she suddenly turned around, put the dish of food on the counter and rested her head in her hands. She was crying, crying so hard that loud noises came from her mouth.

"Daddy?" I whispered, feeling a strange feeling in my stomach. My daddy wrapped his arm around my shoulders and guided me away. "It's okay, pumpkin. DeeDee just needs a minute alone."

We walked to Mamaw's room. Just before daddy opened the door, he said, "Mama's in there, pumpkin, and Betty, Mamaw's nurse is in there too."

I frowned. "Why is there a nurse?"

Daddy pushed open the door to Mamaw's room, and my mama got up from the chair beside Mamaw's bed. Her eyes were red and her hair was all messy. Mama's hair was never messy.

I saw the nurse at the back of the room. She was writing something on a clipboard. She smiled and waved at me when I came in. Then I looked to the bed. Mamaw was lying down. My stomach flipped when I saw a needle sticking in her arm, with a clear tube leading to a bag hanging off a metal hook at her side.

I stood still, suddenly frightened. Then my mama moved toward me, and my mamaw looked my way. She looked different to last night. Her skin was paler, and her eyes weren't as bright.

"Where's my little buddy?" Mamaw's voice was quiet and sounded funny, but the smile she gave me made me feel warm.

Giggling at my mamaw, I rushed to the side of the bed. "I'm here! I came home early from school to see you!"

Mamaw lifted her finger and tapped the end of my nose. "That's my girl!" I smiled real big in response.

"I just wanted you to visit a little while. I always feel better when the light

of my life sits beside me and talks to me some.”

I smiled again. Because *I* was the ‘light of her life’, ‘the apple of her eye’. She always called me those things. Mamaw secretly told me it meant I was her favorite. But she’d told me I had to keep it to myself so it didn’t upset my cousins and little sisters. It was our secret.

Hands suddenly gripped my waist, and my daddy lifted me to sit beside Mamaw on her bed. Mamaw took hold of my hand. She squeezed my fingers, but all I could notice was how cold her hands were. Mamaw breathed in deep, but it sounded funny, like something was crackling in her chest.

“Mamaw, are you okay?” I asked and leaned forward to press a soft kiss on her cheek. She normally smelled of tobacco from all the cigarettes she smoked. But I couldn’t smell the smoke on her today.

Mamaw smiled. “I’m tired, girlie. And I’m...” Mamaw sucked in another breath and her eyes briefly squeezed shut. When they opened again, she shifted on the bed and said, “...and I’m gonna be going away awhile.”

I frowned. “Where are you going, Mamaw? Can I come too?” We *always* went on adventures together.

Mamaw smiled, but shook her head. “No, girlie. Where I’m going, you can’t follow. Not yet. But some day, many years from now, you’ll see me again.”

My mama let out a sob from behind me, but I just stared at my mamaw, confused. “But where are you going, Mamaw? I don’t understand.”

“*Home*, sweetie,” my mamaw said. “I’m going *home*.”

“But you are home,” I countered.

“No”—Mamaw shook her head—“this isn’t our true home, girlie. This life ... well, it’s just a great big adventure while we have it. An adventure to enjoy and love with all of our heart before we go on to the greatest adventure of all.”

My eyes widened with excitement, then I felt sad. *Really* sad. My bottom lip began to tremble. “But we’re best buddies, Mamaw. We always go on our adventures together. You can’t go on one without me.”

Tears had begun falling from my eyes down to my cheeks. My mamaw lifted her free hand to brush them away. That hand was just as cold as the one I was holding. “We do always go on adventures together, girlie, but not this time.”

“Aren’t you afraid to go by yourself?” I asked, but my mamaw just sighed.

“No, girlie, there’s no fear to feel. I’m not scared at all.”

“But I don’t want you to go,” I pleaded, my throat starting to ache.

Mamaw’s hand stayed on my cheek. “You’ll still see me in your dreams. This isn’t a goodbye.”

I blinked, then blinked again. “Like you see Pawpaw? You always say he visits you in your dreams. He talks to you and kisses your hand.”

“Exactly like that,” she said. I wiped my tears away. Mamaw squeezed my hand, and looked at my mama behind me. When she looked back to me, she said, “While I’m gone, I’ve got a new adventure for you.”

I stilled. “You do?”

The sound of glass being placed on a table came from behind me. It made me want to look around, but before I could, Mamaw asked, “Poppy, what is it that I always say was my favorite memory from my life? The thing that always made me smile?”

“Pawpaw’s kisses. His sweet boy-kisses. All the memories of all the boy-kisses you ever got from him. You told me they’re the most favorite memories you have. Not money, not things, but the kisses you got from Pawpaw—because they were all special and made you smile, made you feel loved, because he was your soulmate. Your forever always.”

“That’s right, girlie,” she replied. “So, for your adventure...” Mamaw

looked to my mama again. This time, when I did look around, I saw she was holding a big mason jar filled to the top with lots and lots of pink paper hearts.

“Wow! What’s that?” I asked, feeling excited.

Mama placed it in my hands, and my mamaw tapped the lid. “It’s a thousand boy-kisses. Or at least, it will be, when you’ve filled them all out.”

My eyes widened as I tried to count all the hearts. But I couldn’t. A thousand was a lot!

“Poppy,” my mamaw said, as I looked up to see her green eyes shining. “*This* is your adventure. How I want you to remember me while I’m gone.”

I looked down at the jar again. “But I don’t understand.”

Mamaw reached out to her nightstand and picked up a pen. She passed it to me and said, “I’ve been sick for a while now, girlie, but the memories that make me feel better are the ones where your pawpaw kissed me. Not just everyday kisses, but the special ones, the ones where my heart almost burst from my chest. The ones that Pawpaw made sure I would never forget. The kisses in the rain, the kisses at sunset, the kiss we shared at our prom ... the ones where he held me close and whispered in my ear that I was the prettiest girl in the room.”

I listened and listened, my heart feeling full. Mamaw pointed to all the hearts in the jar. “This jar is for you to record your boy-kisses, Poppy. All the kisses that make your heart almost burst, the ones that are the most special, the ones you want to remember when you’re old and gray like me. The ones that will make you smile when you remember them in your mind.”

Tapping the pen, she continued. “When you find the boy that will be your forever always, every time you get an extra-special kiss from him, take out a heart. Write down where you were when you were kissed. Then when you’re a mamaw too, your grandbaby—your best buddy—can hear all about them,

just like I've told you all about mine. You'll have a treasure-jar of all the precious kisses that made your heart soar."

I stared at the jar and breathed out. "A thousand is a lot. That's a lot of kisses, Mamaw!"

Mamaw laughed. "It's not as many as you think, girlie. Especially when you find your soulmate. You have a lot of years ahead of you."

Mamaw sucked in a breath and her face screwed up like she was in pain. "Mamaw," I called, suddenly feeling very scared. Her hand squeezed mine. Mamaw opened her eyes, and this time a teardrop fell down her pale cheek. "Mamaw?" I said, quieter this time.

"I'm tired, girlie. I'm tired, and it's nearly time for me to go. I just wanted to see you one last time, to give you this jar. To kiss you so I can remember you every day in heaven until I see you again."

My bottom lip began to tremble again. My mamaw shook her head. "No tears, girlie. This isn't the end. It's just a little pause in our lives. And I'll be watching over you, every single day. I'll be in your heart. I'll be in the blossom grove that we love so much, in the sun and the wind."

Mamaw's eyes flinched, and my mama's hands came down on my shoulders. "Poppy, give Mamaw a big kiss. She's tired now. She needs to rest."

Drawing in a deep breath, I leaned forward and pressed a kiss on my mamaw's cheek. "I love you, Mamaw," I whispered. Mamaw stroked my hair.

"I love you too, girlie. You're the light of my life. Never forget that I loved you as much as a mamaw ever could love her baby granddaughter."

I held on to her hand and didn't want to let go, but my daddy lifted me off the bed and my hand eventually broke away. I clutched onto my jar super tight, my tears dropping onto the floor. My daddy put me down and, as I

turned to go, Mamaw called my name. “Poppy?”

I looked back, and my mamaw was smiling. “Remember, *moonbeam hearts and sunshine smiles...*”

“I’ll always remember,” I said, but I didn’t feel happy. All I felt was sad. I heard my mama crying behind me. DeeDee passed us in the hallway. She squeezed my shoulder. Her face was so sad too.

I didn’t want to be in here. I didn’t want to be in this house anymore. Turning, I looked up to my daddy. “Daddy, can I go to the blossom grove?”

Daddy sighed. “Yes, baby. I’ll come and check on you later. Just be careful.” I saw my daddy take out his phone and call someone. He asked them to check in on me while I was at the grove, but I ran before I could find out who. I headed for the front door, clutching my jar of a thousand empty boy-kisses to my chest. I ran out of the house, then off the porch. I ran and ran, and never stopped.

Tears fell down my face. I heard my name being called.

“Poppy! Poppy wait!”

I glanced back and saw Rune watching me. He was on his porch, but immediately started to chase me over the grass. But I never stopped, not even for Rune. I had to get to the cherry blossom trees. It was my mamaw’s favorite place. I wanted to be in her favorite place. Because I was sad that she was going away. Going to heaven.

Her real home.

“Poppy, wait! Slow down!” Rune shouted as I turned the corner to the grove in the park. I ran through the entrance; the large blossom trees, which were in full bloom, made a tunnel above my head. The grass was green beneath my feet, and the blue sky was above. Petals in bright pinks and whites covered the trees. Then, at the far end of the grove, was the biggest tree of all. Its branches hung low. Its trunk was the thickest in the whole grove.

It was mine and Rune's absolute favorite.

It was Mamaw's too.

I was out of breath. When I got below Mamaw's favorite tree, I sank to the ground, clutching my jar, as tears fell down my cheeks. I heard Rune stop beside me, but I didn't look up.

"*Poppymin?*" Rune said. That's what he called me. It meant 'my Poppy' in Norwegian. I loved him speaking Norwegian to me.

"*Poppymin*, don't cry," he whispered.

But I couldn't help it. I didn't want my mamaw to leave me, even though I knew she had to. I knew when I returned home, Mamaw wouldn't be there: not now, not ever.

Rune dropped down to sit beside me and pulled me in for a hug. I snuggled into his chest and cried. I loved Rune's hugs, he always held me so tight.

"My mamaw, Rune, she's sick and she's leaving."

"I know, my mamma told me when I got back from school."

I nodded against his chest. When I couldn't cry anymore, I sat up, wiping my cheeks. I looked at Rune, who was watching me. I tried to smile. When I did, he took hold of my hand and brought it to his chest.

"I'm sorry you're sad," Rune said and squeezed my hand. His t-shirt was warm from the sun. "I never *ever* want you to be sad. You're *Poppymin*; you always smile. You're always happy."

I sniffed and leaned my head on his shoulder. "I know. But Mamaw is my best friend, Rune, and I won't have her anymore."

Rune didn't say anything at first, then said, "I'm your best friend too. And I'm not going anywhere. I promise. Forever always."

My chest, which had been hurting so bad, suddenly didn't hurt as much. I nodded my head. "Poppy and Rune for infinity," I said.

"For infinity," he repeated.

We stayed quiet for a while, until Rune asked, “What’s that jar for? What’s inside?”

Pulling back my hand, I took hold of the jar and lifted it in the air. “My mamaw has given me a new adventure. One that will last all my life.”

Rune’s eyebrows drew down and his long blond hair fell over his eyes. I pushed it back, and he smiled his half-smile as I did. All the girls at school wanted him to smile like that at them—they told me. But he only ever smiled at me. I told them none of them could have him anyway, he was my best friend and I didn’t want to share.

Rune waved at the jar. “I don’t understand.”

“Do you remember what my mamaw’s favorite ever memories are? I’ve told you before.”

I could see Rune thinking hard, then he suddenly said, “Kisses from your pawpaw?”

I nodded my head and pulled down a pale-pink cherry blossom petal from the branch hanging down by my side. I stared at the petal. They were my mamaw’s favorite. She liked them because they didn’t stay for long. She told me that the best and prettiest things never stay around for long. She said that a cherry blossom was too beautiful to last all year. It was more special because its life was short. Like the samurai—extreme beauty, quick death. I still wasn’t real sure what it all meant, but she said I would understand more the older I got.

I think she was right, though. Because my mamaw wasn’t that old, and she was going away young—at least that’s what Daddy said. Maybe that’s why she liked the cherry blossom so much. Because she was exactly the same.

“*Poppymin?*”

Rune’s voice made me look up.

“Am I right? Was kissing your pawpaw your mamaw’s favorite of

memories?”

“Yes,” I answered, dropping the petal, “*all* of the kisses she got that made her heart almost burst. Mamaw said that his kisses were the bestest thing in the world. Because they meant he loved her so. That he cared for her. And he liked her for *exactly* who she was.”

Rune glared down at the jar and huffed. “I still don’t understand, *Poppymin*.”

I laughed as his lips stuck out and his face screwed up. He had pretty lips; they were really thick with a perfect cupid’s bow. I opened the jar and pulled out a blank pink paper heart. I held it up in the air between me and Rune. “This is an empty kiss.” I pointed to the jar. “Mamaw gave me a thousand to collect in my life.” I put the heart back in the jar and took his hand. “A new adventure, Rune. To collect a thousand boy-kisses before I die, from my soulmate.”

“I ... what ... Poppy? I’m confused!” he said, but I could hear the anger in his voice. Rune could be real moody when he wanted to be.

I lifted my pen from my pocket. “When the boy I love kisses me, when it feels so special that my heart might almost burst—*only* the *extra*-special kisses—I’m to write the details down on one of these hearts. It’s for when I’m gray and old, and I want to tell my grandbabies all about the really special kisses in my life. And the sweet boy that gave them to me.”

I jumped to my feet, excitement running through me. “It’s what Mamaw wanted from me, Rune. So I have to start soon! I want to do this for her.”

Rune jumped to his feet too. Just then a gust of wind blew cherry blossom petals right past where we stood, and I smiled. But Rune wasn’t smiling. In fact, he looked downright mad.

“You’re going to kiss a boy, for your jar? A special one? One that you love?” he asked.

I nodded. “A thousand kisses, Rune! *A thousand!*”

Rune shook his head and his lips pursed again. “NO!” he roared. The smile fell from my face.

“What?” I asked.

Rune took a step closer, shaking his head harder. “No! I don’t want you kissing a boy for your jar! I won’t let it happen!”

“But—” I tried to speak, but Rune took hold of my hand.

“You’re *my* best friend,” he said and puffed out his chest, pulling on my hand. “I don’t want you to kiss boys!”

“But I have to,” I explained, pointing to the jar. “I have to for my adventure. A thousand kisses is a lot, Rune. A lot! You’d still be my best friend. No one will ever mean more to me than you, silly thing.”

He stared hard at me, then at the jar. My chest hurt again; I could see he wasn’t happy by the look on his face. He’d gone all moody again.

I stepped closer to my best friend, and Rune’s eyes fixed on mine.

“*Poppymin,*” he said, his voice deeper—hard and strong. “*Poppymin!* It means *my Poppy*. For infinity, forever and always. You’re *MY* Poppy!”

I opened my mouth to shout back at him, to tell him this was an adventure I just *had* to start. But as I did, Rune leaned forward and suddenly pressed his lips to mine.

I froze. I couldn’t move a muscle as I felt his lips against my lips. They were warm. He tasted like cinnamon. The wind blew his long hair over my cheeks. It started to tickle my nose.

Rune pulled back, but his face stayed near mine. I tried to breathe, but my chest felt funny, kind of light and fluffy. And my heart was beating so fast. So fast that I pressed my hand over my chest to feel it racing underneath.

“Rune,” I whispered. I lifted my hand to press my fingers against my lips. Rune blinked and blinked again as he watched me. I pushed my hand out and

pressed my fingers against his lips.

“You kissed me,” I whispered, stunned. Rune lifted his hand to hold mine. He lowered our joined hands by his side.

“*I’ll give you a thousand kisses, Poppymín. All of them. No one will kiss you ever, but me.*”

My eyes widened but my heart didn’t slow down. “That would be forever, Rune. To *never* be kissed by anyone else means we’ll be together forever, and ever and ever!”

Rune nodded his head, then he smiled. Rune didn’t smile a lot. He normally half-smiled or smirked. But he should smile. He was real handsome when he did. “I know. Because we’re forever always. For infinity, remember?”

I nodded my head slowly, then tipped it to the side. “You’ll give me all my kisses? Enough to fill this *whole* jar?” I asked.

Rune gave me another small smile. “All of them. We’ll fill up the whole jar, and more. We’ll collect way more than a thousand.”

I gasped. I suddenly remembered the jar. I pulled back my hand so I could get my pen and open the jar lid. I snatched out a blank heart and sat down to write. Rune kneeled before me and placed his hand over mine, stopping me from writing.

I looked up, confused. He swallowed, tucked his long hair behind his ear, and asked, “Did ... when I ... kissed you ... did ... did your heart almost burst? Was it extra special? You said only extra-special kisses make it into the jar.” His cheeks turned bright red and he lowered his eyes.

Without thinking, I leaned forward and wrapped my arms around my best friend’s neck. I pressed my cheek to his chest and I listened to his heart.

It was beating just as fast as mine.

“It did, Rune. It was as special as special can be.”

I felt Rune smile against my head, then I pulled back. I crossed my legs and

placed the paper heart on the jar lid. Rune sat cross-legged too.

“What will you write?” he asked. I tapped the pen to my lip as I thought hard. I sat up straight and leaned forward, pressing the pen to the paper:



When I finished writing, I put the heart in the jar and closed the lid tight. I looked up at Rune, who’d been watching me all along, and proudly announced, “There. My very first boy-kiss!”

Rune nodded his head, but his eyes dropped to my lips. “*Poppymin?*”

“Yes?” I whispered. Rune reached for my hand. He started tracing patterns on the back with his fingertip.

“Can I ... can I kiss you again?”

I swallowed, feeling butterflies in my stomach. “You want to kiss me again ... already?”

Rune nodded his head. “I’ve wanted to kiss you for a while now. And well, you’re mine and I liked it. I liked kissing you. You tasted like sugar.”

“I ate a cookie at lunch. Butter pecan. Mamaw’s favorite,” I explained. Rune took a deep breath and leaned toward me. His hair blew forward. “I want to do it again.”

“Okay.”

And Rune kissed me.

He kissed me and kissed me and kissed me.

By the end of the day I had four more boy-kisses in my jar.

When I got home, Mama told me that my mamaw had gone to heaven. I ran to my bedroom as quickly as I could. I hurried to fall asleep. Like she promised, Mamaw was there in my dreams. So I told her all about the five boy-kisses from my Rune.

My mamaw smiled big and kissed me on my cheek.

I knew this would be the best adventure of my life.