

KATE CLAYBORN

Georgie,



Along

"Clayborn's writing is magnetic, witty, and expansive. The world is going to fall hard for this deliciously whimsical and captivating story, and I cannot wait to see it!"

—Ali Hazelwood, *New York Times*
bestselling author of *The Love Hypothesis*

Praise for Kate Clayborn and her novels

“Kate Clayborn’s writing is a study in syntax and rhythm; her storytelling is a perfect example of patience and pacing. With her trademark eye to detail of setting and scene, she has built a pitch-perfect love story, in a precious world-within-the-world setting, and honest-to-God the most delightful cast of characters I’ve met in ages. Tonally perfect, deeply romantic, and exquisitely crafted, Clayborn delivers a modern romance masterpiece.”

—*New York Times* bestseller Christina Lauren on *Love at First*

“Kate Clayborn’s luminously beautiful *Love at First* is playful, heartbreaking, wise, and wonderful. I adored this story about two souls finding their way out of loss and grief and forging their own paths to true love.”

—Ruby Lang, author of *Playing House*

“A novel of lush complexity, one bursting with humor, a tender melancholy, and meditations on love, friendship, and life, any reader can find solace and inspiration in. It’s lyrical and engrossing, a novel that possesses all the colors, idiosyncrasies, and range of the alphabet. Like the pages Meg designs, *Love Lettering* is a novel bursting with hidden messages essential to discover—as long as we open our hearts to analyze the codes.”

—*Entertainment Weekly*, A+ for *Love Lettering*

“Quirky and winning.”

—*USA Today* on *Love Lettering*

“Fresh, funny, clever, and deeply satisfying.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*, STARRED REVIEW on *Love Lettering*

“What if you and your two best friends all went in together on a winning lottery ticket? The romance between Kit, a no-nonsense scientist who dreams of her first real home, and Ben, a recruiter and builder (I promise, it works) is emotional and real. Plus, I adored Kit’s strong relationship with her two best friends.”

—*O, The Oprah Magazine*, Best Romances of the Year, on *Beginner’s Luck*

“Clayborn’s characters are bright and nuanced, her dialogue quick and clever, and the world she builds is warm and welcoming.”
—*The Washington Post*, 5 Best Romances of the Year for *Luck of the Draw*

Books by Kate Clayborn

Georgie, All Along

Love at First

Love Lettering

The Chance of a Lifetime series

Beginner's Luck

Luck of the Draw

Best of Luck

Novellas

“Missing Christmas” in *A Snowy Little Christmas*

Georgie, All Along

Kate Clayborn



www.kensingtonbooks.com



All copyrighted material within is Attributor Protected.

Table of Contents

[Praise](#)

[Also by](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter 1 - Georgie](#)

[Chapter 2 - Georgie](#)

[Chapter 3 - Georgie](#)

[Chapter 4 - Levi](#)

[Chapter 5 - Georgie](#)

[Chapter 6 - Levi](#)

[Chapter 7 - Georgie](#)

[Chapter 8 - Levi](#)

[Chapter 9 - Georgie](#)

[Chapter 10 - Levi](#)

[Chapter 11 - Georgie](#)

[Chapter 12 - Levi](#)

[Chapter 13 - Georgie](#)

[Chapter 14 - Levi](#)

[Chapter 15 - Georgie](#)

[Chapter 16 - Levi](#)

[Chapter 17 - Georgie](#)

[Chapter 18 - Levi](#)

[Chapter 19 - Georgie](#)

[Chapter 20 - Levi](#)

[Chapter 21 - Georgie](#)

[Chapter 22 - Levi](#)

[Chapter 23 - Georgie](#)

[Chapter 24 - Levi](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[**Discussion Questions**](#)

KENSINGTON BOOKS are published by
Kensington Publishing Corp.
119 West 40th Street
New York, NY 10018

Copyright © 2023 by Kate Clayborn

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without the prior written consent of the Publisher, excepting brief quotes used in reviews.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

To the extent that the image or images on the cover of this book depict a person or persons, such person or persons are merely models, and are not intended to portray any character or characters featured in the book.

The K with book logo Reg US Pat. & TM Off.

ISBN: 978-1-4967-3730-4 (ebook)

ISBN: 978-1-4967-3729-8

This one's for the quaranteam

Chapter 1

Georgie

Well, well, well.

If it isn't yet another reinvention.

From the sweat-damp bucket seat of my old Prius, I stare in disbelief out my windshield at a storefront I hardly recognize. The last time I came to Nickel's Market and Deli, the red-orange sign above the door had read "Nickel's Market & Deli" and the front window had been haphazardly adorned with white posterboard signs, each crookedly hung rectangle bearing a red-markered message about the week's sales on six-packs or pork rinds or paper towels.

In fact, that isn't just what it looked like the last time I came here.

That's what it looked like *every* time I came here. All throughout my childhood, all throughout my adolescence.

But Nickel's now is a different story, clearly—its once-dingy brick façade charmingly whitewashed, its new sign artfully vintage-looking and hung perfectly straight above the sparkling-clean front window. Instead of posterboard signs, there's an Instagram-worthy display of seagrass baskets, each filled with fresh produce and rustic-looking loaves of bread, Mason jars full of jewel-toned preserves and jams.

"What the heck," I mutter to myself, even though I shouldn't be surprised. For months, it's exactly this sort of thing that Bel has been banging on about—the various transformations in our once-unremarkable, slightly shabby hometown of Darentville, Virginia. The shops, the tourism, the redevelopment of land along the river—they've all drawn my best friend back here for her own brand of reinvention: city to small town, child-free to mom-to-be, in-the-office workaholic to remote-work part-time consultant.

I should be happy seeing this transformed version of Nickel's—happy for Ernie Nickel, who's run the place forever, and happy for Bel, who probably loves this version of it. But I'm uneasy, and not only because the very

specific strawberry milkshake I've stopped to order on a last-minute impulse probably doesn't even get served here anymore.

No, this uneasiness is bigger, more diffuse—a tide of frustration at being so bowled over by a storefront facelift, a looming doubt about my decision to come back here. My eyes drift to the rearview, and I wince at the backseat evidence of my haphazard departure from LA, my whole life from the last nine years shoved into two suitcases, a duffel bag, and four extra-large black garbage bags.

It's a mess back there.

It's a mess in here, I think, pressing my palms to my eyes, gusting out a heavy sigh. Twenty-seven hundred miles on the road and I'm not ruminating any less about what's happened to my life over the last month, a sort of slow-motion reverse reinvention that's left me jobless and homeless and entirely without a plan for myself. Every five minutes, I hear a phantom chiming from my phone, the tone I have set specifically for Nadia, as if I'm expecting that any second now, she'll call to tell me her own sudden, shocking plans for changing her entire life—giving up her hugely successful career, her hugely influential existence in LA, her absolutely *indispensable* personal assistant—were a total mistake.

“This will be so good for you, Georgie,” she'd said to me, as the movers had packed up the last of her things. “You'll finally be able to do all the things *you* want to do.”

I'd smiled and nodded and made a checkmark next to the *primary bedroom* entry on the moving list, and tried desperately to ignore the terrifying blankness in my head at that phrase: *all the things you want to do*.

I reach for my phone, too late remembering that I've already made more than a dozen pledges over the course of this cross-country drive to check it less, to stop treating it like it still needs to be superglued to my hand.

There's only one message, and it's from Bel: a string of emojis that represent her excitement over my imminent arrival. Exploding celebration cone, heart-eyes face, those two Playboy-bunny looking ladies standing in some kind of weird formation, a bunch of pink sparkle hearts. It's not the sort of frantic *can you do this immediately?* type of text that's dominated my life over the last few years, but still, it's a good reminder. If there's one thing that's cut through the terrifying blankness problem, it's the prospect of spending time with Bel.

I want that, at least.

I take a deep breath, gathering my resolve. Get in, get Bel's favorite milkshake, get over to her new house, and start helping her with whatever she needs. *You're good at that*, I tell myself, unhooking my seat belt. *You're used to that*.

Before I get out, I drop my phone into the center console, removing the temptation and recommitting to this new plan, the only one that's made even a hair of sense since Nadia rode off into the sunset of her reinvention-slash-retirement. I think of Bel on the phone last month, begging me to come, and it's the motivation I need to finally shove open my door and unfold my tired, tense body from the driver's seat.

Of course, my settled resolve lasts only until I catch sight of my reflection in that sparkling-clean front window, at which point I remember what I put on this morning in the last lousy hotel room of this trip: a threadbare white tank top that I'm pretty sure I spilled coffee on somewhere back in Tennessee and a pair of ankle-length linen overalls that very much have the appearance of having been pulled from a garbage bag.

I do not look like a grown woman who's managed to make a functional life for herself.

I look like the nineteen-year-old screw-up who left this town nearly a decade ago.

I check over my shoulder, relieved that the small parking lot is empty except for a lone, ancient pickup truck that looks as likely to be abandoned as it does to be waiting for the return of a Nickel's customer. Maybe it'll be some random teenager working in there today, someone I don't know and who doesn't know me. Maybe this will be as quick and easy as I need it to be—a win for all the losses I've been hit with over the last few weeks.

But almost as soon as I hear the old, familiar bells tinkle above the door, I know quick and easy isn't in the cards, because even though my first sight of the inside of Nickel's shows everything new—new layout, new lighting, new shelves, new products—my second sight is of something familiar: Ernie Nickel wheeling himself into view, his salt-and-pepper mustache a bit thicker and his hair a bit thinner, his smile warm and inviting and full of recognition.

“Georgie Mulcahy, as I live and breathe,” he says, and I feel pretty good about that greeting until he adds a gentle, knowing chuckle. “You haven't changed a bit.”

I silently curse my overalls, even as I stuff my hands into the deep, comforting pockets.

“Hi, Ernie,” I say, stepping up to the counter and trying an old tack, familiar from my years of being a topic of conversation around here.

Deflection.

“I sure can’t say the same for this place.” I paste on a smile, trying to affect the confidence of a person who totally planned to appear in public exactly like this. I am suddenly extremely aware of the size of my hair, which is no doubt humongous from the wind I’ve been letting blow through it all day. “It looks great in here.”

Thank God, Ernie—always a talker—takes the bait.

“Well now,” he says, his smile growing wider as he maneuvers to the low-slung counter. “I’ve got all them tourists to thank for it! Them and the retirees. You wouldn’t believe the money they’ve brought around. I sure gotta stock and serve different things.”

He gestures to a chalk-lettered menu above him, full up with a list of soups and sandwiches that bear names with no resemblance to the “tomato” or “turkey and swiss” items I remember as favorites. I squint up at the Beverages section, stalling on a listing for a kale smoothie that makes me wonder if I hallucinated my whole entire road trip. Nadia loved a kale smoothie.

“Do you still make milkshakes?” I blurt, because it is not my job anymore to know what Nadia loves.

Ernie scoffs in mock offense. “Now you know I do.”

I’m so relieved that I order two strawberry milkshakes, even though I’ve always preferred chocolate.

Ernie’s in it now, a full-on thesis about how well Darentville’s doing, property values on the rise and even a mention in a *Washington Post* article about up-and-coming destinations along the Chesapeake Bay. He tells me we’re well on our way to being as good as Iverley, the town right to the southwest of us that’s got more waterfront and so has always had more wealth. I can’t say I’m in the mood for more talk of transformation, but at least this way, Ernie’s not going to focus on my apparent lack of one.

But then the bells over the door ring out again, and as soon as I hear the voice accompanying them—a sing-songy, drawling, “Hey, Ernie!”—I know my reprieve is over.

“That *must* be Georgie Mulcahy,” the voice calls, and I take a breath through my nose. What I wouldn’t give not to be wearing a trash-bag outfit at this moment.

I send a nervous smile toward Ernie and turn to face the music.

In the form of my ninth-grade music teacher.

“I *knew* it,” Deanna Michaels says, laughing. “I sure did see the back of you enough!”

Behind me, I can hear Ernie swallow a laugh, and I concentrate on controlling the heat in my cheeks. I laugh, too, all unbothered self-effacement, but my brain is doing a highlight reel of every time Mrs. Michaels sent me out of her classroom. Tardiness, talking too much, the time I made up a new set of lyrics to “The Circle of Life” and taught them to the rest of the alto section.

“Hi, Mrs. Michaels,” I say, definitely trying not to dwell on those lyrics. “Nice to see you again.”

“Well, I had no idea you were coming into town,” she says, clasping her hands in front of her chest, a move so familiar it gives me flashbacks to standing on the risers in her classroom. “I ran into your mother last month, and she didn’t mention a word about you visiting!”

“I didn’t know I would be visiting last month,” I say, but even as it comes out of my mouth I realize I’ve made a mistake, giving her the kind of information she can make use of.

Her eyes light in a way I recognize—the part-pitying, part-indulgent look that so many of my teachers gave me once I no longer had them in actual class—and she laughs lightly. “That’s so like you, Georgie. You always were a fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants type!”

It’s a little unfair, this accusation; it isn’t as if I decided to come yesterday or something. And also, my current pants are not even technically pants. But Mrs. Michaels isn’t entirely wrong. I was impulsive, flighty back when she knew me, and I haven’t really changed. It’s just that I’ve put flying by the seat of my pants to good use. I’ve pretty much made a living off of it.

But now I don’t have that living anymore.

“You know me,” I say.

“Now, Georgie,” Ernie says, something gentle in his voice, “tell us about that fancy job you’ve got! Your daddy says you went to the Oscars last year.”

“Actually, I—”

“Ernie,” chuckles Mrs. Michaels, “you know better than to believe anything Paul Mulcahy says!”

“I did go,” I say, and for the first time I’ve let an edge of annoyance slip into my tone. It’s good-natured, I know, this teasing about my dad’s legendary tall tales and exaggerations, but it’s always chafed me, enough that I’m willing to exaggerate a little myself. I hadn’t *actually* gone, but I had worked that day, had done a flurry of complicated errands for Nadia, including delivering things to the hotel room where she was getting ready. Then I’d ridden with her in the limo over to the Dolby so she could practice the speech she didn’t ultimately get to give.

So technically, I *had* gone. Sort of.

Mrs. Michaels raises her eyebrows, and I feel a fleeting moment of satisfaction. But there are limits to my own capacity for stretching the truth, and in a moment of absurd overcorrec-tion, I say, “I’m in between jobs at the moment, though.”

An awkward silence falls, and then Ernie—blessed, heroic Ernie—turns on the blender. I use the time to tally up things that there’s no point in saying. *My boss decided to change her life. She said it’s time to think about changing my own. I could pick up the phone and have a job exactly like my old one tomorrow, if I wanted it, except the problem is I don’t know if I do.*

I don’t know if I want anything.

The blender quiets. Is my face the color of a strawberry milkshake? Probably. Mrs. Michaels’s eyes have gone more in the direction of pitying. She smiles kindly and says, “Well, a good idea to move back home! It’s very expensive out there in Los Angeles, as I understand it!”

“Oh, I haven’t moved home,” I say, but I think I might’ve swallowed those last two words a bit, imagining Mrs. Michaels walking past my garbage-bag-stuffed Prius out there. Embarrassingly, I have an extremely late-breaking realization: I *have*, functionally, moved home, since I don’t have any solid plans beyond these couple of months I’ve promised to spend with—

“Bel,” I blurt, because if there was ever a way to get Mrs. Michaels’s attention deflected from me, it was by drawing it to my best friend. “I’m here to spend time with Bel.”

It works like a charm.

“Oh, *Annabel*,” she says with the kind of reverence reserved for a straight-A, perfectly behaved, always-on-time student. “Everyone is *thrilled* she’s moved back. And with that lovely husband of hers! Have you met him?”

I want to roll my eyes, but refrain. It’s a subtle dig, but a dig nonetheless. Bel and I were always unlikely best friends in the eyes of teachers.

“I was her maid of honor,” I say.

This clearly is more impressive than (only sort of) going to the Oscars, judging by Mrs. Michaels’s expression. I smile, maybe a tad smug, thinking of the dream of a bridal shower I threw for Bel three years ago, exploiting every connection, every favor I was owed to make it luxurious. A destination weekend in Palm Springs with a bank of hotel rooms, beautiful catering, gift baskets, and spa treatments. Bel says her friends still talk about it.

Take that, trash bags! I’m thinking, but the truth is, this fleeting, polite exchange with my former teacher has only served to bring back that parking lot doubt. I want to be with Bel, sure. But I don’t want to be in this fancy new Nickel’s, looking a mess. I don’t want to be in this town, where people know me as a flake, a failure.

Where I spent a lot of years with the same sense of blank confusion about my future as I have right now.

That smug smile I’m wearing wavers, and before it can wobble completely off, I turn back to Ernie, who’s moved over to a sleek iPad that rings my neurotic *better check your phone* internal alarm. I try to refocus on the milkshakes and on the reason I came all this way—Bel and her new home, Bel and the baby that’s coming soon. That isn’t a blank, at least.

“It’s \$8.42 for the shakes,” Ernie says, and my smile firms up at the price increase. Counting out change at the counter like Bel and I used to do probably doesn’t cut it for the kids in Darentville these days. Well, good for Ernie. And good for me, too, not to need to shake out quarters anym—

Shit, shit, shit.

I pat uselessly at my pockets—God, why do overalls have so many pockets!—and sense the self-satisfied stare of Mrs. Michaels behind me.

Typical Georgie, I can practically hear her thinking.

But when a throat clears in a low rumble behind me, it obviously hasn’t come from Mrs. Michaels.

I lower my head and let my eyes slide shut. Two witnesses to my humiliation is bad enough; does there have to be a third involved? Am I going to turn around and find someone else who recognizes me, another person eager for a light, no-harm-meant laugh at my expense?

“Ernie,” I say quietly, raising my eyes again. “I left my card out in the car. I’ll just run—”

The throat clears again, and this time, I look over my shoulder to find a stranger watching me from beneath the brim of a weathered, olive-green ball cap that’s pulled low over his eyes.

I narrow my own at him, at the way he’s standing there with impatience clear in every line of his long, lean body, at the way he holds his dark-bearded jaw tight. If it weren’t for how obviously irritated he looks, I might feel a kinship with him, since his clothes are in worse condition than my own—work boots and faded jeans that are both pretty well caked in dried mud, a T-shirt with a wide, dark stain along one side. Even Mrs. Michaels looks to be keeping her distance, but she’s clearly still interested in what’s coming next.

I face Ernie again, though something is tugging at my memory about the man behind me. *Is* he a stranger, or—

“Do you need to borrow some money, Georgie?” Mrs. Michaels chirps, her voice the kind of sweet that sets my teeth on edge.

“I have the money in the car,” I say, only to Ernie. “It’ll only take a second.”

A basket thunks onto the counter beside me.

“I’ll get it,” says the stranger, his voice pitched low. So low that I’m certain he’s also trying to shut out Mrs. Michaels.

I can’t bear to look over at him yet. Instead, I focus on his basket, full of staples—milk, eggs, a bag of rolled oats, a bunch of underripe bananas, one of those loaves of fancy bread.

“I have the money,” I repeat, my voice barely above a whisper. “I only need to—”

I break off when I notice his fingers curling tighter around his basket, his knuckles briefly going white, the muscles along his tanned forearm flexing.

“Ernie,” he says tightly, not acknowledging me in the least. “I’m in a hurry. Put her stuff on mine.”

I try to ignore his nice forearm so I can focus on his not-nice manners, in spite of the fact that he’s offering to pay my bill. But when I finally look

over at him, I find that his face—even in profile, even half-covered by the brim of his hat—is as distracting as that flexing forearm. The line of his thick beard is cut close along his square, set jaw, the slope of his nose is sharp, the fan of his dark eyelashes is lush enough to cast a small shadow on his cheeks.

“Sure thing,” says Ernie, which at least snaps me out of my fixation on the most attractive, most irrelevant details about this entire situation.

“Ernie, wait,” I try again, but he only gives me a small shake of his head, as if he’s trying to warn me off any further challenge to this man’s *I’ll-pay-for-it* demands. Behind me, Mrs. Michaels has either gone mute or finally slinked off somewhere into the store, but I don’t want to look either way.

“Pardon,” the stranger mutters, reaching an arm past me and pushing his card into the reader. When he pulls it out, the edge of his hand grazes briefly across the front of my *ridiculous* overalls, and he grumbles out an irritated apology. I’m warm all over with embarrassment, with hyperawareness of how foolish, how *flaky* I must look.

“You’re all set, Georgie,” says Ernie, his smile soft and kind and forgiving.

I grab hastily at the milkshakes he’s pushed toward me on the counter, try to focus on the weight of them in my hands instead of the whirring in my head. It suddenly feels so important, so telling that I’ve botched this. Not even a full week without my job and I’m a puppet with its strings cut. If my phone isn’t pinging all day with to-dos, I’m lost, irresponsible. A blank, a mess.

“I’ll pay you back,” I say to the man beside me, pitching my voice louder this time. Whether Mrs. Michaels hears me doesn’t seem to matter quite as much, though, when the stranger is determined to pretend he hasn’t. He’s unloading the contents of his basket as if he’s trying to make up for the time he lost in having to say the fifteen words he’s spoken over the course of the last minute and a half.

“I’ll get cash and leave it with Ernie,” I add, determined now, like paying back this random man is my best shot at reversing the course of this homecoming.

“Fine,” he says, in a tone that says he just wants me to stop talking.

Well, fine then. I’m oddly and unexpectedly buoyed by his gruff dismissal. It’s better, somehow, than the schoolroom-flashback spectacle of

the last five minutes. It's no *Typical Georgie* for this guy; it's *Broke Woman Holding Me Up*. That, at least, simplifies things.

"Tomorrow," I promise Ernie, and the stranger who is still ignoring me, and myself. It feels good to say it, like I'm gathering up some of my puppet strings, or filling up some of that blankness that's ahead of me. Tomorrow I'll be helping Bel. Tomorrow I'll pay back this bill. Tomorrow there'll be *something*.

I don't bother waiting for a reply. I raise my chin and turn to find Mrs. Michaels still there, too pleased by half. I send her what I hope passes for a confident, unbothered smile as I move past her, and I make myself an additional promise.

I am not going to spend the next two months this way—a topic of conversation or a target of well-meaning but rudely executed excuses. And I am not going to avoid that blankness anymore, the same one that chased me for almost the whole last two years I last lived in this town.

I'm going to fill it up; I'm going to figure it out.

What I *really* want.

Somehow, this time, when I leave Darentville, I'm going to be well and truly different.