

A Small Town Second Chance Romance

Always
&
FOREVER

Lola Clarke

LOLA CLARKE

Always & Forever

A Small Town Second Chance Friends-to-
Lovers/Enemies-to-Lovers Short Story
Romance

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“To understand everything is to forgive everything.” – Osho

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One

Chapter 1



10 years earlier

“**Y**ou have to come, Laurel! It’s the last weekend that I’ll be here before leaving for Florida!” Stacy, my best friend since kindergarten, whines.

I roll my eyes at her. “Why can’t we go to the movies, Stace? I don’t wanna go hang out with a bunch of stuck-up snobs in the middle of nowhere.”

Stacy huffs, “Because the movies are booring! And they aren’t a bunch of “stuck-up snobs”, they’re our friends, and it’s the first bonfire of the summer. I won’t get to go anymore since my parents are shipping me off to my granny’s place all summer before college starts in the fall.”

She pokes out her bottom lip, like that’s gonna persuade me to go. “Please? Just come with me to this one and I won’t ask you again the rest of the summer. You can shove your nose in your lovey-dovey romance novels and forget about having any kind of fun once I’m gone.”

I wring my hands together and bite the inside of my cheek. Stacy loves to party and is the most social out of the two of us. I, on the other hand, would rather stay home with my Kindle reading or watching some cheesy romance movie on Netflix.

I've never been interested in large crowds of people because they make me feel super-awkward and when I get that way things get a little embarrassing for me. My mouth spews word-vomit and my famous clumsiness makes an appearance. It's better for everyone if I don't show my face to any of the bonfires.

"Jake will be there." She wiggles her brows at me and smirks.

A shiver runs down my spine and goosebumps prickle my skin.

Jake Caulder.

The boy I've crushed on since I learned to walk. He's lived next door to me our entire lives and our parents have been best friends since they were in school. I think our mothers have secretly been planning our wedding since we were in the womb and they found out our genders. Jokes on them though, because Jake stopped being my friend when he became the first-string quarterback on the football team. He's the popular kid and I'm just the booknerd that he only associates with when our families get together for vacations or backyard barbecues.

Looking up at my best friend, I groan. She knows I can't say no now. "Fine, but you better not get drunk and start trying to strip out of your clothes again."

She glares at me. "That was one time! You can't keep holding it over my head. Now, get up and get dressed in something hot so we can go. You've gotta look hot if you plan

on catching your Jakey-poo fish from the sea. Come on, move it!”

I roll my eyes. *Something hot. Yeah, right.*

All I own are jeans and T-shirts, and Stacy knows this, but every time we go out somewhere she gives me the same speech about needing to always look my best in case I run into the man I’ll marry one day, even though we are only eighteen years old. I don’t plan on settling down right now. My life has been planned out in chronological order since I was fourteen. College, Grad school, snag an amazing job and start my career somewhere far away from this small town.

After all that, I’ll think about finding a good man with goals and ambitions just like mine to settle down and start a family with. If Jake was the one I could marry and have kids with, then my future would be completely planned out. I wouldn’t have to search for the right man because I already met him the day I was born. But that isn’t an option because he doesn’t acknowledge my existence anymore.

Standing up, I walk over to my closet and go on the hunt for something to wear. T-shirt. T-shirt. T-shirt. What the hell is wrong with me? I’ve never been a normal girl that enjoyed shopping for pretty things. Whatever was the easiest to throw together has always been my go-to item, hence the casual clothes that my closet and dressers are full of.

My head falls back as I groan and throw my arms up. They fall back down, slapping the sides of my thighs. “This isn’t gonna work, Stace. I don’t have anything “hot” to wear.”

Stacy lifts her hand and taps her red manicured nails against her cheek as she twists her lips in thought. It hasn't been two seconds and her face lights up, and she rushes forward, grabbing my hand and drags me from the room.

“Where are we going?” I almost trip over my feet and place my other hand against the wall to help balance myself.

She glances my way and gives me a wry smile. “Trust me?”

“Of course.” I tell her confidently.

No matter how crazy she is, I have always trusted Stacy with my life because she would never do anything to hurt me or embarrass me.

“Good, because I have the perfect outfit that you can wear, but first we have to go over to my house to get it. I'll do your hair and makeup, too. You're gonna be smokin' by the time I'm finished with you. Jakey-poo won't know what hit him.”

Her words are coming out so fast I barely catch them but she's excited and it won't do any good to try stopping her now.

Great. What have I gotten myself into?

Stacy lives behind the patch of trees behind my house, so getting there only takes a few minutes. Throwing open the door, she pulls me up the stairs to her room. Her closet is jam-packed with all different outfits and clothes. Sitting on the edge of her bed, I watch as she starts throwing things behind her on the floor.

“Stace, why the hell do you have all these clothes and never wear half of them?”

“Most of them are from my sister. She buys things and, if she doesn’t like the way they fit, she throws them in here. Found it!” Turning around, she has a cute tank with ripped shorts.

Reading the tank, I burst out laughing. Of course, she would have something that goes perfect for the night. In black letters it says, “*ARE WE DRUNK?*”.

“You have to be kidding me. Where in the world did you even get that from?”

“Doesn’t matter, you’re wearing it. Now, strip so I can make you sexy for Jake.” She tosses the clothes at me and goes to her bathroom to get everything she will need to do my hair and make-up.

I do as she says because I already know she will yell at me if I’m not done when she returns. The top makes my boobs look huge and fits my body perfectly. Laying down on the bed, I zip the shorts. Stacy is one size smaller than me but, with a little work, I can fit ninety percent of her bottoms.

“These shorts are too small for me. My buttcheeks are playing peekaboo already!” I yell out to her.

Stacey comes out of the bathroom carrying an armload of hair and make-up products. I watch as she sits everything down on her dresser and then scans me from head to toe.

“Laurel, you look hot so stop complaining. Forget about the shorts because when Jake takes one look at you, he’s gonna choke on his tongue.” I don’t respond to her as she starts messing with my dark brown hair, parting it in different directions and teasing it at the roots. I have no idea what she has planned but I’m sure she’s gonna make it look awesome, like always.

Thirty minutes later, she steps back and pretends to dust her hands off. “Perfect! You’re gorgeous, babe.”

I get up and walk to the full-length mirror she has on her wall and stare silently at myself. My hair is up high on my head in a ponytail, and it cascades down in soft waves around my head, past my shoulders. My eyes are rimmed in dark eyeliner that makes my hazel eye color pop and clear shiny gloss coats my lips. I would’ve never been able to master this look if I was trying myself.

“Let’s go, hot stuff! Time to get our party on!” Stacy links her arm with mine and leads us out of the room.

By the time we make it to the party, there are people everywhere. Girls are dancing on the tailgates like they’re on a stripper pole instead of in the middle of a corn field and the guys are hootin’ and hollerin’ at them.

This is gonna be a long night.

Stacy takes off to get us a drink, beer, I’m sure, even though I don’t normally drink. I scan the area taking in all the activity that’s going on. The sun has gone down, and the bonfire is blazing. I see a few guys in a circle on the other side

of the fire. My body heats and my breath freezes in my chest as my eyes latch onto one guy in the circle.

God, why does he have to be so hot?

Jake stands there, sipping on whatever he has in his red solo cup, his lips tilted up in a sexy smirk. I notice a few other girls staring at him too, one of them tugging her tank top lower, so low her breasts are practically popping out the top. She's the bold one, obviously. I watch as she sashays over to Jake and raises up on her tiptoes to whisper something in his ear. He laughs and then throws a wink her way as he places his arm around her shoulder, pulling her closer to his side.

I stand watching, wishing it was me that he was holding, but that's just a dream. He would never even take a second look at me. Not these days, anyway. Sometimes I wish it could go back to how it used to be when we were younger. Back when he didn't care if we were seen together because he always had my back. Now, you couldn't get him to give me the time of day, not even if I stood in front of him butt naked. Okay, maybe he would give me a chance if I stood in front of him naked, but that's only because I have an awesome rack, not because he would actually want anything to do with me as an individual.

Oh well. Life goes on, Laurel.

Stacy comes bouncing through the crowd and stands in front of me, placing a cup in my hand. I sniff it and wrinkle my nose. The smell is strong and I have no clue what it is.

Stacy stares at me expectantly, waiting for me to drink whatever it is she has forced on me. Bringing the cup to my lips, I take a hesitant drink. Immediately I start coughing from the burning in my throat. Stacy laughs her ass off as I practically choke to death. After a few seconds, the coughing stops and I slowly breathe in and out to keep from further embarrassing myself. Right as I'm getting my bearings, someone slams into my shoulder from behind.

“Sorry.” The deep voice rings through my ears and the word echoes in my mind. My eyes go wide, and I stand frozen in place, looking at Stacy for help. She raises a brow at me and a slow, devious smile springs to her face.

“Jake Caulder, fancy meeting you here. Shouldn't you be on the other side with your football buddies?” she says snarkily.

He raises his arm to show the cup in his hand. “Just came for a refill.”

His eyes pass over me, scanning me from head to toe. “Laurel.”

The way he says my name makes my heart speed up and my belly is doing flip flops. That's the first time he's spoken to me directly in four years.

Stacy's elbow connects with my arm, “Don't be rude, Laurel.” She turns, looking at me with a big cheesy grin on her face.

Sighing, I look up at him and mumble a quick, “Hey.”

“You look different.” His words are short and to the point. Jake has never beat around the bush when it comes to what he thinks and that’s one of the things I’ve always admired about him, because I’m the complete opposite. I usually keep my mouth shut because I don’t like people getting their feelings hurt or being mad at me for something I’ve said to them.

“She looks hot, right?” Stacy says, as she places her arm around my shoulders.

I shoot a glare her way. “Stacy!”

“Oh, come on! Don’t get embarrassed. You’re totally smokin’ tonight.”

My cheeks heat at the way they are both staring at me. Attention hasn’t ever been something I like.

Jake’s lips twitch with something resembling a smile. “She’s right.”

My head pops up and I stare at him like he’s grown two heads because he’s never said anything in response to my looks before. I’m not ugly or anything but I tend to keep myself from standing out. My dark brown hair always stays in a ponytail, and blue jeans and oversized T-shirts are my clothing of choice. I like to cover up as much as I can to keep all the attention away.

“You need another drink?” Jake asks.

I look down at my cup, it’s still half-full but I’ve only taken a sip from it. Most of it spilled out when he bumped into me.

“She could use a refill,” Stacy answers for me.

I want to melt to the ground in a puddle of embarrassment right now from the way everyone is staring at us. I’m sure they’re just as confused as I am about why Jake is over here talking to me.

He chuckles. “I’ll be back.” His eyes rake over me one more time before he turns and heads toward the beer keg.

As soon as he’s out of sight, I release the breath I’ve been holding practically the entire time and Stacy squeals so loud that I wince.

“Oh. My. Gawd! This is so perfect!” She is bouncing up and down on her toes almost like it’s more exciting for her than me.

“I’m so embarrassed, Stace. Everyone keeps staring at me and I hate it. You know I don’t like all this attention. I just want to go home and lay in my bed reading until I fall asleep.” I turn to walk away and she grabs my forearm, stopping me from taking another step.

“Don’t you dare walk away, Laurel! He’s *finally* interested in you so enjoy it! Don’t let this be a regret you have for the rest of your life. You’re totally in love with him and now’s your chance to do something about those feelings!” Her eyes burn holes into mine with how serious she is right now.

“He’s just being nice, Stacy. He doesn’t actually like me.”

“Did you see how he was checkin’ you out? That’s not a guy just being nice, that’s a guy who wants to do so much

more.”

I groan. “I don’t know how to talk to guys. I’m awkward and clumsy and I definitely don’t look like half the girls here. He could take any one of them home tonight so why is he wasting his time with me?”

A strong, muscular arm wraps around my shoulders and I’m pulled to his side. Jake reaches out to hand me the fresh drink in his other hand, and says, “I wouldn’t say I’m wasting my time.”

My thoughts are scrambled, the confusion is strong. Something doesn’t feel right about him suddenly having an interest in me, but maybe it’s the beer fogging his brain and making him stupid.

“Stupid, huh?”

Oh. No. I totally just said those thoughts out loud. Can I die now?

“Uh... I-I mean,” I stumble over my words and don’t know what to say.

He laughs, his perfect teeth shining in the light of the fire. My hand wipes at my mouth to be sure there’s no drool running down my chin.

“It’s cool, Laurel. I know we never hang out anymore, but I’d like that to change. Hang with me tonight. Let’s get to know each other again.”

I turn my head to look up at him and squint my eyes. “How drunk are you, Jake?”

The smile he gives me lights up his face. “Not drunk enough to not know what I’m doin’, if that’s what you’re asking.”

I tilt my head, studying him to make sure he’s telling the truth. He seems sincere so maybe it’s just my brain telling me something feels off. Shaking my head to rid the thoughts that are floating around, I turn to look at Stacy and realize she’s taken off. She’s standing on the other side of the bonfire, chatting it up with some guy over there. Great! She left me alone to deal with Jake. How convenient, considering I should’ve guessed that’s what she was gonna do. Always playing matchmaker, even when the couple she’s trying to set up doesn’t make any sense together.

“Let’s get out of here.” Jake grabs my hand and pulls me through the crowd, walking us back toward where all the cars are parked and away from everyone around the bonfire.

I follow behind him silently because my mouth’s too dry to speak. I know I should say no, tell him to get lost because I know he’s playing mind games with me, but I don’t do it. As much as I want to, I just can’t bring myself to ruin this moment with him. He’s finally acknowledging my existence. So, even if it’s just this one night, I will always be able to look back at this moment and remember that I was the girl he was interested in. The nerdy, book-loving, clumsy dork finally got the attention of the hot football jock that everyone loved.

Jake stops when we make it to the dirt road that leads to the cluster of trees on the backside of the field and he looks

over at me. “Wanna go down to the ditch?” he asks.

The ditch is on the other side of all the trees and it’s a long walk, especially in the pitch black darkness. I turn and look back to where the party is and see we have made it a good distance away from all the noise.

“I-I don’t know,” I stammer.

Jake tugs at my hand. “Come on, we can be alone over there, away from all the noise.” He starts walking again, pulling me along behind him.

“Jake, it’s dark and we don’t have a flashlight. What if we get eaten alive by a big bear or a skunk sprays us and we stink for the rest of our lives?”

He full-on belly laughs, “A big bear? Really, Laurel? There aren’t any bears out here.”

I bump his shoulder with mine. “You know what I mean!”

“Come on, scaredy cat, I’ll protect you.” He smirks.

“Fine, but if I get eaten, just tell my parents it was all your fault, ‘kay?”

“Deal. Now let’s go.”

By the time we make it to the clearing on the other side of the trees and sit on the bank of the ditch, I have scratches all over my legs from the sticks and my ankle is throbbing from tripping a million times because I couldn’t see well enough to keep my balance. Sweat coats my forehead and upper lip from the humidity in the air and, when I look over at Jake, it seems

like he isn't affected by the long walk at all. It's gotta be because he's used to the exercise, but me? I'm clearly not.

After a little while of sitting in silence, Jake speaks to break the tension. "I come sit here when I need to be alone and get my thoughts together. Especially when my parents are fighting and I'm sick of hearing all the screaming."

This news catches me off guard because his mom and dad seem like they've never had a fight. They are always so happy, smiling and touching each other constantly. I never would've guessed they had trouble in their marriage.

"Oh." I don't know what else to say that won't sound like I'm being nosey.

He looks at me, studying my face, as he rests his arms across his knees. "You don't talk much, do you?"

I clear my throat a little and stare up at the stars shining brightly in the night sky. "I used to love watching the sky at night, waiting for a shooting star so I could make a wish and hope it came true."

"What would you wish for, Laurel?" he whispers, his voice closer to my ear than before. I'm too nervous to look over at him to see how much closer he is to me.

I shrug. "Different things. But mostly I wished to get out of this small town and go to a big city, somewhere like New York, or maybe LA. Anywhere that I could blend in and not be the outcast each time I went out."

He hums in response, kind of like he understands what I'm saying, but that doesn't make sense because Jake fits in anywhere he goes. He's always gonna be the one everyone loves, and nobody will mess with him either.

“So, are you?”

My brows wrinkle in confusion. “Am I what?”

“Getting your wish. Are you getting out of this small town?”

“That's the plan.” I say no more.

We stay quiet, staring up at the sky and, after a bit, we lay on our backs, each of us with our arms resting on our stomachs. Tension surrounds us but I try to ignore it. Biting my lip, I inhale a deep breath through my nose, taking in the smell of the dirt and trees mixed with Jake's musky cologne. I want to remember the smell for as long as I live, locked away in the back of my mind, so I can always come back to this moment with him anytime I get to missing home once I'm gone.

“Why'd you stop speaking to me?” he finally breaks the silence.

“What?” I'm so relaxed that I think I heard him wrong.

“I said, why'd you stop talking to me?”

“What are you talking about? I ain't the one that stopped speaking to you, that's the other way around, Jake.”

He props himself up on his elbow and looks down at me. “That’s not how I remember it. One day we were playing on our bikes together and picking at each other, like always, and the next, you avoided me like I had the plague.”

“Because you started ignoring me the day you became the shining football star at school.”

“That’s not true and you know it. You just didn’t like that more people were coming into our circle of friends, and it wasn’t just you and me anymore.”

A single tear rolls down the side of my face at his words. Maybe he’s right and it was all my fault from the very beginning.

“I wanted you by my side, Laurel, to celebrate each winning game, to cheer for me in the stands. I wanted you to be the one I could still go to when life became shit, but instead, you tucked your tail between your legs and avoided me.”

I sit up quickly and cross my legs underneath me. “Yeah, well you didn’t reach out to me either, Jake! This isn’t all my fault so take some blame for yourself. You think I didn’t feel the change in our relationship when you got popular? You weren’t the same person as before.”

“We all change, Laurel! It’s called growing up!”

I scoff, “Yeah, okay. More like the nerdy friend wasn’t good enough to be seen with once your perky cheerleaders got in the picture.”

“I never, not once, was ashamed of you. If that’s how you felt, you should’ve talked to me about it and we could’ve figured something out. I didn’t treat you any differently.”

“Then why do you avoid me every chance you get now?”

“To see if you’ll understand how it feels to be given the cold shoulder when you’ve done nothin’ wrong!”

I stand up and wipe the dirt off my shorts. “Is this what you brought me out here for? To berate me for “ignoring” you all these years? Because the last time I checked, you weren’t the greatest at checking in with me either.” I turn my back to him and start walking away.

“No, I brought you out here to call a truce!” He shouts at me.

My legs stop on their own, halting me from moving any further. Slowly, I turn back to face him. “You what?”

Jake comes to stand in front of me, placing his hands on my cheeks. His touch causes my pulse to race. “I want us to be friends again, Laurel.”

“Why?” I whisper.

He pulls me in and wraps his arms around me, places a light kiss on my forehead. “Because I’m a jerk. And because I’ve missed you.”

I knew I should’ve never believed his words that night but, being young and stupid, I thought I could trust him. Oh, how I was wrong. After that night, Jake and I became inseparable. From the time we woke up until the time we went to bed, if we

weren't hanging out together, we were on the phone with each other. We chatted about anything and everything, from small things to big things, and I fell more in love with him as the summer came to a close.

I didn't realize my heart was gonna be crushed into a million tiny pieces the last time I saw him, and I didn't realize the hurt would stick with me and inevitably change my entire outlook on love and relationships in my adult years.

Jake made me feel like I was the only girl that mattered that summer and I thought we would stay together, even though we were both leaving for different colleges in the fall. But, as it turns out, me always being the outsider ended up being a good thing in the end or else I would have never overheard the conversation between him and his friends the night before I was set to leave. The conversation that changed absolutely everything.

That night, I promised myself to never let my heart be put on the line again and I damn sure would never trust Jake Caulder again. He was a liar and he'd never get another chance to break my heart again.

Two

Chapter 2



Present Day...

Hidden Ditch, TX

I swore to myself that I would never come back to this town once I was left, but fate has a fucked up way of making us eat our words, doesn't it? I swear that fate and karma hate me as much as I hate them right now.

When I hauled ass out of this shithole town ten years ago, my life's plan didn't include getting fired from one of the biggest marketing firms in LA, and it damn sure didn't include having to run home to live with my parents again.

Fuck you, Karma, you evil bitch.

I pull my car into the driveway of my parents small, two-bedroom house and sit there, debating on putting the car in reverse and leaving. I don't want to be here but, to be honest, it's my only option. When I lost my job, I tried living off my savings while searching for a new place to work but, as luck would have it, nobody wanted to hire me. Slowly my savings dwindled down to zero and my time had run out. I had no other choice but to call my parents and beg them to let me come home. Okay, maybe *beg* is a little dramatic. My parents love me, and they were overjoyed to finally have me back

home. I, on the other hand, would rather eat a toad from one of the dirty ditches outside of town than to be here again.

I inhale a deep breath and slowly let it out.

Okay, let's get this show on the road, Laurel.

After grabbing my suitcase from the trunk, I walk to the porch and knock on the door. My mother opens it up, a big smile covering her face.

“You finally made it! We are so glad you're home, Laurel.” She squeezes me in a tight embrace. Tears spring to my eyes at her happiness.

I've only seen my parents a handful of times in person since I left, when they came out to LA. They tried getting me home for holidays or family celebrations, but I wouldn't budge. I didn't want to chance running into the person whose name is not allowed to be spoken in my presence.

Asshole.

“It's good to see you too, Mom,” I sniffle.

“Come in, come in! Let's get you settled and then grab you a plate of supper, hm?”

“Sounds great.” I fake a smile for her benefit.

As we walk through the front door, I notice my parents haven't changed anything on the inside of the house. The furniture is still in all the same spots, the smell is the same, and the '70s-style wood paneling is still the largest feature of each room. I always hated that paneling.

“Where’s Dad?” I ask my mother, as she goes to the fridge to grab a container of leftovers to heat up for me.

“He’ll be home soon, he’s just over at the Caulders’ helping Mike work on a busted water line under their house.”

I bite my lip at the mention of the Caulders. “Oh.”

“You’ll have to go over for a visit with us one night. Cheryl would love to see you again. She always asks about you and how you’re doing.” She sits the plate in front of me then takes a seat across the table from me.

“Yeah, maybe.” I stuff some food in my mouth, so I don’t have to continue this conversation.

“Jake would love to catch up too, I’m sure.”

I start coughing and my eyes begin to water as I try to breathe. My mother rushes to the fridge and grabs a bottle of water for me. I quickly take a sip and get the coughing under control.

“Honey, are you alright?” My mother stares at me with worry in her eyes.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just swallowed my food a little too quickly.” I push my plate away, suddenly having lost my appetite. “I think I’m gonna go put my things away and lay down for a bit. The drive really wore me out.”

I get up and place a gentle kiss on my mother’s cheek and head to my old bedroom to unpack. As I put away my clothes, I ponder the nagging question in my mind.

Why is Jake back in town?

The last I heard, he was some big football star in the NFL and never visited, always being on the road for games. And, no, I didn't stalk him to know that information. Stacy does enough stalking on him for the both of us. I try to tune her out when she calls to hand out all the new information she's come up with, but it's hard to ignore Stacy when she's on a roll. You would think that after being best friends for over half our lives that I would've mastered the art of Stacy 101 but I haven't.

She's told me every little descriptive detail of Jake's life for the past ten years that it feels like I never left his side. I know about how, when he was a junior in college, he entered the draft and the New York Falcons picked him up in the first-round picks. I have been informed about each supermodel, actress, and Playboy bunny he's had on his arm when he goes out and is photographed in the gossip rags. Stacy has told me about every single scandal that has darkened his doorstep, from gold-digging paternity suits to his most recent speeding ticket.

Of course, I never wanted to know any of it because I vowed to never think or speak of the jerk-off again, as long as I'm alive and breathing. But try telling Stacy that, and she'll act as if you simply sneezed or something and keep on talking. Deep down, I do still care about him but it's not the type of feelings I had for him before. But I'd never let Stacy in on that piece of information because if I did, her matchmaking services would be back in business.

Oh well. It doesn't matter why he's here or how long he's here for because I don't want anything to do with him. As long as he stays on his side of town, I'll stay on my side. Far, far away from him.

After a few days of laying around doing nothing but playing catch up with my parents, I'm going stir-crazy sitting in the house, so I decide to venture out and get some fresh air. Over the years, I've become the opposite of the girl I was at 18. Now, I actually try to do something with my appearance instead of covering up and shying away from attention. It doesn't bother me if people stare now because I'm confident in my body these days. My large breasts aren't an embarrassment, I've learnt that they are my best asset, along with my hips and butt. I'm not skinny but I'm not overweight either, I'm just... Me.

And I'm okay with that.

After throwing on a pair of running shorts, my sports bra, and tank top, I put my tennis shoes on and take off for a run. The humidity isn't too bad today but a sheen of sweat still quickly covers my face, neck, and chest. Exercise has never been my strong suit, but I've gotten my routine down over the past few years.

I make it about a block before I lose my balance, when my right foot twists and I hit the ground. After flailing to protect my face, the skin on my hands is torn and bleeding from the asphalt, and I don't want to think about how bad my knees look right now. Slumping to the side, I roll over on my back

onto the grass, and bite my lip to keep from crying from the pain. My eyes are closed, and the sun is beating down on my face, causing me to sweat more than when I was running. After a few minutes, a shadow falls over me, blocking the rays of sun that were causing me to see spots behind my eyes.

“Hey, are you okay? You’re bleeding pretty badly.”

Oh. Hell. No.

Karma, you dirty bitch.

This can not be happening to me right now. I growl in frustration at the way my day has gone to shit within the past twenty minutes, and I struggle to sit up.

“Here, let me help you. I think you might need stitches in that knee.”

I shoot daggers at him. “Don’t touch me! I can do it myself, Jake.”

At the sound of his name, he pauses and cocks his head to the side, staring at me. “Laurel? That you?”

“No, it’s Marilyn Monroe!” I roll my eyes at his ignorance. Had I truly been *that* invisible to him? Asshole. Ugh.

He chuckles, “I think I would know if I were talkin’ to Marilyn, sweetheart.”

Squinting my eyes, I curl my lip up in disgust at his use of the word “sweetheart”.

“Hey, I didn’t know you were back in town. How long-”

“I gotta go,” I mumble out a quick excuse and jet off, back toward my parents’ house.

“I’ll see you around, Laurel,” he shouts behind me.

I don’t fucking think so, jerk face.

When I make it back to the house, I go straight to the bathroom so I can bandage my hands and knees. I grab the first-aid kit from the cabinet and get to work with the alcohol pads, cleaning the dirt and blood, then the antibiotic cream, and I slap a Band-Aid over the ruffed-up areas.

There. Good as new.

I hear my mother rattling pots around in the kitchen, so I decide to go see if she needs any help. When I round the corner, I collide with a wall of hard muscle.

It’s *him*. Again. Dammit.

Trying to gain my composure, I plaster on a fake smile, so Mom doesn’t scold me for being rude. I may be a fully capable adult, but my mother’s lectures make me feel like I’m a little kid again.

“Jake! Nice to see you. Again,” I say between clenched teeth.

He quirks a brow at me and smirks. “I was just telling your mom how I saw you take a horrible fall around the block and I wanted to come make sure you’re alright.”

Mom pipes up with her two cents next, “Isn’t that so sweet, Laurel? He wanted to check on you!”

“Oh yeah, so sweet of him,” I mumble.

“Jake, honey, why don’t you stay for dinner. I’m making my famous chicken pot pie.” My mother wipes her hands on her apron as she comes to stand beside us, waiting for his answer.

“I’m sure he has somewhere to be, Mom,” I say sarcastically.

He grins at me, a devious glint in his eyes. “Actually, I’m free the rest of the night.” He turns and smiles at my mother. “I love chicken pot pie.”

She claps her hands together, “Wonderful! You both go have a seat and I’ll start getting supper ready.”

Jake looks at me and winks, then goes to the front room and takes a seat on the couch. He kicks back, locking his fingers together behind his head and extends his legs out in front of him, his feet crossed at the ankles. I want to stomp my feet and throw a tantrum like a child but that won’t get me far, so I glare at him instead. My right eye is twitching from the anger I’m holding inside so my mother doesn’t get mad at me for embarrassing her in front of the precious Jake Caulder.

This is gonna be an awfully long night.

I stay, leaning against the wall outside the kitchen doorway, because I don’t want to be anywhere near him. I watch as he pats the cushion next to him and smiles at me. Crossing my arms in front of my chest, I stay rooted in my spot.

“Come on, don’t leave me sitting here alone, sweetheart.” I hate the way his voice still stirs something inside me.

That’s not butterflies in my stomach, it’s gas.

“I think I’ll stay right here, thanks.” I tap my foot on the floor, barely able to keep my composure.

“It’s not like I’m gonna bite you. Unless that’s your thing, then I can make an exception.”

“Ugh! You’re such a pig!” I stomp down the hall to my room so I can get away from him.

As I’m laying on my stomach across my bed, I take deep breaths trying to calm my nerves, but the anger still radiates off me. He gets under my skin and I know *he* knows that he does. Jake’s just trying to get a rise out of me, but I can’t let him win. I won’t go down without a fight this time. I’m not the same dumb little girl that wore her heart on her sleeve years ago. Especially when it comes to Jake Caulder and all his asshole sexiness.

A light knock taps my door.

“Go away!” My voice is muffled by the pillow I have my face smashed into.

My bed dips with the weight of a body and I lift my head, turning it in the direction of whoever decided to come in.

“I said-” I groan when I see his sexy - No! Jerky - face. “Not you again. Go away!”

“Are you mad at me?”

I blink, unsure if I actually heard him ask that. “Are you serious right now? I can’t believe you have to ask that!”

His face is blank, his eyes give nothing away. It’s like he doesn’t have a clue about why I would be mad at him. This has to be another one of his mind games because I remember it like it was yesterday.

I went to the ditch bank to see if he was out there so I could say bye to him before I left the next day. I was almost through the last bunch of trees when I heard laughter. He wasn’t alone, his friends were with him and that confused me, because he told me he only went out there to be alone.

But I forgot all about the confusion when I heard one of his friends speak.

“So have you hit it yet, Jake?”

“Hit what?” he responded.

“You know. Have you bagged Laurel yet?”

They all start laughing again and then another voice pipes up. “She’s a prude so I say he’s lost the bet.”

What he said next broke my heart.

“Naw man, I ain’t had sex with her. Don’t plan on it either. I bet she’s lousy in the bedroom.” he laughs. “She’s probably a virgin and that’s why she keeps trying to hang around me all the time. Guarantee, she wants me to be her first and y’all know I don’t do that shit. Virgins are psychopaths.”

One of the other guys respond, "Are you saying you're backing out of the bet?"

"Hell yeah, man. That's exactly what I'm saying."

I never hung around to hear the rest of the conversation so I never knew what he had to do since he lost the damn "bet", but I can guarantee you that it wasn't half as bad as what I wanted to do to him. It might seem trivial to some, but that broke my heart into so many pieces, and it's never been put back together since then. What kind of person makes a bet that they can sleep with someone? A skeezeball that's who. Jerk-face asshole.

Jake snaps his fingers in front of my face, which irritates me even more, and I quickly shake the thoughts away. I'll never trust him like that again. Ever.

"If you don't know why I would be mad at you, no, scratch that, if you don't know why I *hate* you then you're even more delusional than I thought. Now, get the hell out of my bedroom."

"But I really don-"

I grit my teeth and my nostrils flare. "I. Said. Get. Out!"

His eyes burn holes into mine and I watch as he lifts his hands in surrender and he sighs. Thankfully, he stands up without saying another word, and leaves. By the time I get to the table for supper, I notice Jake isn't there, and I sigh in relief.

Three

Chapter 3



It's been two glorious days of peace and quiet.

There hasn't been anyone named Jake around to interrupt me or around playing head games with me. I've lounged in the backyard getting some sun and have been enjoying playing catch-up on my long and neglected reading list. I have plans to start putting together a to-do of things that need to be done to get my life back on track, but I've needed some down time for a while now.

Stripping out of my tank and shorts, I sit on the side of the lounge and start rubbing my tanning lotion on my legs. I'm almost finished with my other leg when I hear a throat clear from the other side of the fence. The fence that divides the property line of my parents' home and the Caulders' home.

Not today. Not. Today!

"Hey sweetheart, need some help rubbing yourself down?" I can just imagine the sexy smirk on his face right now.

No! Not sexy. Irritating jerk-face, I meant.

Without turning I say, "I wouldn't let you touch me if you were the last man on earth and a big bear was gonna eat me and my only option was you. I'll take my chances getting eaten alive by the damn bear."

I hear the gate open and clink shut. “Oh, my gawd! Can’t you take a hint? Go. Away!”

When I turn around, my mouth dries up, and it feels like I’ve swallowed twenty pounds of cotton. Jake struts my way, in nothing but a pair of swim trunks. His tanned skin glistens in the midday sun, my eyes zero in on his six-pack abs and that sexy lower ‘V’ of his obliques, that no woman can ever deny they salivate over. Tattoos cover his chest, shoulders, and arms. I didn’t notice any tattoos the other day, but I was trying to avoid him at all costs then.

He clears his throat again. “My eyes are up here, sweetheart. I know you wanna spend the day droolin’ over me, but you’ll embarrass me.” He bows his head, pretending to hide a blush, while he covers his nipples with his palms.

I wrinkle my nose and huff. “I wasn’t drooling over you, far from it.”

Jake cocks a brow at me. “Then what were you doin’?”

Leaning over, I start spreading my towel over the lounge chair. “I was figuring out where I should stab you first.”

He holds his hands to his heart, pretending to be hurt. “Oh, come on, you don’t wanna kill me. You’ll miss me too much.”

“Keep dreamin’, jerk.”

“If you continue calling me those pet names, I might start to think you like me.”

“They aren’t pet names.” I lay down on my back and put my sunglasses on my face. “I can’t stand you.”

I watch from behind the dark lenses as he grabs the extra lounge and shoves it up right next to mine. “What the hell are you doing? I told you to go away!”

“What you really meant to say was you wanted me to lay out here with you and enjoy the day.”

I grit my teeth. He’s really starting to piss me off. Why can’t he just leave me alone?

“No. I. Did. Not.” I tell him between clenched teeth.

Jake hums then lays down, getting comfortable. Almost like he’s staying for a while. Well, I think not! I don’t want him here and he’s gonna leave one way or another. I glance around trying to think of something to do that will make him leave when I spot the green hose that’s leading to the swimming pool.

Perfect!

I stand up and calmly walk toward the pool. Once the hose is in my hand I turn and walk back over to the big turd that’s blocking my serenity today. His eyes are closed, his lips turned up in a content smile. Not for long though. My left hand is aimed directly at my target while my right hand quickly releases the kink in the hose.

It all happens at lightning speed. He jumps from the lounge as soon as the ice cold water douses his heated skin. But his feet get tangled and he trips over the top of the lounge chair, with all of his 6’4 frame toppling over and landing across it on his stomach.

“What the fuck, Laurel?!”

I laugh my ass off at his big body struggling to get up while tightening my thumb over the end of the hose to increase the water pressure.

“Knock it the hell off. I’m warnin’ you!” He manages to get up on his feet and, by this point, his body has adjusted to the temperature of the water. Jake turns heated eyes on me.

My eyes widen a fraction because I can see the wheels turning in those blue pools. “No. Don’t do it...”

With each step he takes in my direction, I take one step back. Still aiming the hose at him, I give him a look of warning. His feet pause and he crouches down like a tiger ready to pounce on his prey. And I’m the prey.

Shit, shit, shit.

Looking around for a place to escape, I realize the pool is directly behind me, about ten feet. If I can run fast enough, I can dive in before he catches me. With my mind made up, I turn and give it my best shot. The ground is soaked from all the water and the mud squishes between my toes as I gain speed. I’m not ten steps away when Jake’s large arms wrap around my waist and lift me off my feet. He hefts me up easily, as if he didn’t just add a hundred and fifty pounds to himself.

I scream, “No! Put me down!” Adrenaline courses through my veins. “Please!”

“You started this war, now I’m gonna finish it.”

Two seconds later, we're sailing through the air, my arms flapping wildly as Jake keeps his locked tightly around my waist. I suck in a deep breath right before we splash into the pool. I'm coughing and sputtering when we finally break the surface.

"I'm gonna. Kill you. Caulder!" I say between pants.

His lips press against my ear and the heat from his breath wafts across my skin, making me shiver. "You'd have to stop being in love with me to kill me." He whispers.

I still as my pulse increases. "What?" I say in a hushed tone.

Jake glides his hands lower on my stomach and presses his crotch firmly against my ass. My core tingles and my nipples pebble behind my swimsuit top.

Abort mission, abort mission! Houston, we have a problem. Oh my God!

Warning sirens to jump away and get the hell out of this pool are going off in my head but something's holding me back. I hate this man for the pain he caused my teenage self with just a handful of words, but deep down, I know the feelings are still there. Feelings that are waiting on the edge to come spiraling back in and take hold of my emotions once more. I can't let that happen.

However, to stop that, I need to get out of here fast, but I'm rooted in this spot, his hands gliding back and forth across

my flesh as his lips rest against my ear, his cock nestled between my ass cheeks.

“Laurel, you’ve been in love with me our entire lives. Did you think I didn’t know that?” he chuckles.

I’m taken back by his sudden brazen attitude. Jake has never been this forward with me so all I can think is, what’s changed? Well, if he can be this blunt, I can, too. But first, I have to put some distance between us. I push his hands off me and swim a few feet away because I need a clear head and I don’t think him being so close is gonna help with that.

“So, you’re just gonna put it out there like that? You think I’ll ignore all the hurt you caused me because you,” I make air quotes, “‘know’ I’m in love with you?”

Jake groans, obviously annoyed now. “Not this again. I have no idea what you’re talkin’ about.”

I swim over to the edge of the pool and lift myself out because I don’t want to deal with him anymore, but apparently, he doesn’t take the hint because he gets out right behind me.

“At least fucking tell me what you’re talkin’ about, Laurel. I deserve that much, don’t I?” I feel his body heat against my back, he’s standing close again.

I spin around, my face heating with anger. “Why do you care so much? You didn’t give two shits about me when we were younger so I have to believe you’re just playing games with my head again like you did the entire summer we spent together.”

We're nose to nose, now. Well, nose to chest because he's so much taller than me. His head cocks to the side and his forehead creases in irritation. "I never played games with you, sweetheart. You did enough of that for both of us, didn't you?" he scoffs and crosses his arms. "Hell you couldn't even be bothered to say goodbye before you hauled ass out of here for college."

My nostrils flare so hard I think I'll start blowing smoke. "I tried to say goodbye! I went over to your house and your mom told me you weren't home so I thought I would try the one place you said you liked going when you needed a break." I pause, trying to collect myself before I deck him in his smug, cocky face.

"You went to the ditch?"

I ball my hands into tight fists and keep them smashed against my thighs. "Yes."

"When?"

I'm biting down on the inside of my cheek so hard I'm surprised it's not bleeding.

Jake places his hands on my shoulders, "When, Laurel?"

I sniffle, so angry that the tears start to flow. Dammit, I hate this. I stare up at him through wet lashes. "The night before I left."

"Oh, shit," He mumbles.

I shove him away and take off toward the house. He doesn't need to see the effect his words had on me all these

years.

“Laurel, wait! It’s not what you think!” I hear his feet slap against the concrete, but I don’t make the mistake of turning around this time. “I can explain everything!”

With my hands on the sliding glass door, I pause and look back at him. “There’s nothing to explain, *sweetheart*. The *psycho virgin* doesn’t want to hear it.”

With that. I walk through the door, sliding it closed behind me and twist the lock, hoping that I’ll never see his turd face again. But something, deep down, tells me that’s just wishful thinking.

Four

Chapter 4



My emotions have been all over the place since the fight between Jake and me. I'm so confused about what to do. Do I act like an adult and forgive him, or do I continue to play this hate/love game that's at war inside my brain?

I know we were just teenagers at the time but my feelings for him were real. I was head-over-heels in love with him and his words ripped me to shreds. They have affected me for the last decade and, the more I try to move on and ignore what he said, the more my relationships suffer. Trust me, I've tried dating and it never goes further than a second date. Sometimes, if the guy is lucky, he'll get a third date with me, but it's rare that happens. I tend to stick to one-night stands or just casual hook-ups because there's no real emotional attachment.

I'm browsing on my laptop, searching for any new job listings, when I hear a knock on my door.

"Come in!" I shout.

My dad opens the door and smiles at me. "Hey pumpkin, I'm going to the store and wanted to see if you wanna ride with me?"

I shrug. "Sure, Dad. Give me ten minutes to get ready."

He taps the door frame. “Okay, I’ll be waiting in the car.”

Once I’m in the car and buckled up, Dad pulls out of the driveway.

“How’s the job search going?” he says, breaking the silence.

I sigh. “It’s not. There aren’t any marketing firms within a hundred miles of this town.”

He glances over at me then focuses back on the road. “You know you don’t have to stay here, right? If you need to branch out to find something, do it. Your mother and I will stand beside you, no matter what you decide.”

I pat his hand resting on the gear shift. “Thanks, Dad. I might just have to do that.”

He pulls the car into a vacant spot in the grocery store parking lot and we head inside. Dad grabs a buggy and starts going around the store, gathering everything that’s written on the list Mom gave him, and I go in the other direction to grab all the necessities I need.

The thing about small town grocery stores is sometimes the items are all mixed up on the aisles. For instance, all the feminine items are on one side; behind me are the snacks, like, chips, cookies, and crackers. I’m searching the tampons for the brand that I use when someone bumps my hip with their buggy.

I scoot closer to the shelf without turning around. “Excuse me, didn’t mean to get in your way.”

I continue scanning all the boxes, still on the hunt for what I'm looking for, and my eyes land on what I need on the top shelf. There's no way my 5'1 frame can reach all the way up there without some help, so I put my right foot on the bottom shelf, prepared to climb.

A long, tanned arm with tattoos reaches above me and grabs the box, pulling it down and holding it in my reach. "That explains it." His deep voice sends a shiver down my spine. And now, I'm almost convinced he's stalking me. Great.

I remove my foot from the shelf and snatch the box from his hand. "Explains what?" I turn around and look up into his eyes.

He motions his hand to the box. "That explains your moodiness."

My cheeks heat with embarrassment mixed with a little irritation. I sigh, "Jake-"

He cuts me off, "It's fine, I get it."

I shake my head. "No. It's not okay. I owe you an apology."

Biting the corner of my lower lip, I hug the box to my chest. "I'm sorry I've been so hateful to you. I shouldn't hold a grudge for something that happened over ten years ago."

Jake puts his hands on his hips and stares at the floor, nodding his head. "I understand, sweetheart. What I said that night, it wasn't-"

I hold my palm up to stop him and take a step closer. “You don’t owe me any explanations for what you said. We were just a couple of kids. Shit happens. Let’s let it go.”

I hold my hand out for him to shake, finally ready to move on, but Jake stares at my hand then raises his head, a devilish smile on his lips. “I’ll tell you what, you can make it up to me by going on a date with me.”

My mouth opens and closes like a goldfish. I’m stunned that he would want a date with me. I still have my arm extended between us and no words will come out.

He walks back to his buggy. “I’ll pick you up at 7.” He winks at me then he’s gone.

What the hell just happened?

I smile a little to myself and shake my head at his forwardness then finish getting everything I need and meet my dad at the checkout line.

When we get back to house, I drop my items off in my room and head back toward the kitchen to talk to my mother. I stand in the doorway, watching her prep everything and wring my fingers together nervously. I need to let her know Jake’s coming to pick me up for dinner so she doesn’t make too much food, but I’m worried she’ll make a big deal out of it.

I inhale a deep breath and exhale slowly.

Here goes nothing.

Leaning on my elbows at the island, I place my hands under my chin as I watch her chop some veggies.

She glances up at me and smiles then resumes her chopping. “Hey, sweetie. Everything okay?”

Sighing, I decide to just get it out. “Yeah, everything’s fine. Listen, Jake’s gonna take me out for dinner, so it’ll be just you and Dad tonight, alright?”

She doesn’t even react, just continues chopping and smiling.

I raise a brow, suspicious of why she isn’t freaking out with joy right now. “Did you hear what I said? Jake’s taking me to dinner so I won’t be here.”

She nods her head. “I heard you, dear.”

I hesitate before walking off. Just before rounding the doorway, I look back over my shoulder and see her fists punching the air as she silently cheers. I smile and laugh to myself at her crazy antics. I knew she would have some sort of reaction to that news, especially since she and Mrs. Caulder have been playing matchmaker since we were kids. It just never worked.

A little while later, I stand in the mirror inspecting my handiwork. My hair falls down around my shoulders in soft waves and my make-up is light; some mascara, eyeliner, and lip gloss. I’m wearing an off-the-shoulder bohemian-style maxi dress that’s fitted around my chest and has a flowy, ruffled hem. It’s blue and covered in tiny white flowers, the color goes well with my summer tan and hazel eyes. Walking to my closet, I grab a pair of white flat-sole sandals that lace up around my ankles.

Just when I'm tying the last string in a bow, I hear my mother holler down the hall, "Laurel! Jake's here!" I can hear the smile in her voice.

I sigh and stand up, giving myself one more glance in the mirror before walking out of my room. When I see Jake standing in the front room talking to my dad, I pause and take him in. I've been so hell-bent on giving him hell that I haven't taken the time to appreciate the way he's grown into a sexy man. The dark scruff on his chin trimmed neatly and cut close to his face. The dark brows that rest above his blue eyes aren't bushy and long, he must trim them too.

Figures he would get his eyebrows done. High maintenance, are we, Jake?

I laugh to myself because, no matter what I do, I can't stop giving him a hard time, even in my own head. It goes to show how much I genuinely like him, I guess.

I try not to drool over how tight-fitting his black t-shirt is. I can see the outline of his six-pack through the thin material. He has on a pair of khaki shorts that rests just below his knees and a pair of Chucks on his feet. I'm still staring when he looks over and notices me. Jake winks and comes to stand in front of me.

He grabs my hand and rubs his thumb along my knuckles. "You look beautiful."

Heat creeps up my neck and into my cheeks. "Thank you."

"You ready for our date?"

I nod then tell my parents I'll be home later and to not wait up. They both grin at us and shoo us out the door. Once we're buckled in and on the road, Jake lays his hand on my thigh, giving it a gentle squeeze.

“So, tell me what you've been up to since you left.”

Ah, okay. We're gonna do small talk first. Sure, I can do this.

“Well, I graduated college and landed a job at Lawson Marketing Firm in LA. I started out as an intern but was eventually promoted to marketing research analyst. I loved it. Until I got fired.”

He glances at me then back to the road. “Maybe there's something better out there for you.”

I change the subject because I'm not so sure there is right now. “What about you? Aren't you some big famous ball player?”

He chuckles. “Something like that.”

“Then why are you back home?” I study the side of his face, waiting for his answer.

Jake lifts a shoulder in a half shrug. “I got injured in the last game. Coach told me to take a break and I'll go back when PT clears me.”

“Oh, so you aren't a ‘man of steel’, are ya?” I ask him sarcastically.

He squints his eyes at me, a smirk playing on his lips. “Are you always such a smartass?”

I smile and shrug. “Every day of my life.”

“You’re a brat, you know that?”

I laugh. “So I’ve been told.”

We pull into the restaurant parking lot and Jake comes around to open my door. He grabs my hand and helps me out of the car and, without letting go of my hand, we walk inside. This place is the only somewhat fancy restaurant in town, but the food’s really good, so nobody complains.

Once we’re seated at a booth in the back, the waitress brings us two menus and gets our drink order. We’re both quiet while perusing the selections and when the girl brings our drinks, she asks if we’re ready to order. I order a steak and a loaded baked potato but start to second guess myself when I notice Jake staring at me.

“What?”

He shakes his head at me. “Nothing. I just didn’t take you for a steak kinda girl.”

Laughing, I say, “What? Did you think I’d stick to a salad and a diet Coke? I don’t think so. I like food,” I shrug. “Deal with it.”

“Trust me, your curves are out of this world, so I don’t care that you like food. Hell, order the entire damn menu if you want.”

“Oh, really? OK, well, that appetizer sampler with the hot wings did look pretty damn good...”

“A girl after my own heart.”

Clearing my throat, I attempt to change the subject. I’m sure he didn’t mean it the way it sounded, but I’m trying to keep my feelings in check. I meant it when I told him we needed to move forward from the past but that doesn’t mean I’m not afraid of having my heart broken again. We’re a lot older now so I know the pain that comes with that kind of heartache could be a lot worse than it was back then.

After we’ve eaten and our bellies are full, we aren’t ready to say good night yet, so we go for a walk around town. I tell him stories of all the chaos Stacy has gotten me involved in over the years and he tells me of all the places he’s traveled to and the things he’s seen. His life sounds exciting and I’m a little jealous of how free he gets to be.

Don’t get me wrong, my life in LA wasn’t all bad. It was just lonely. The only friend I had there was Stacy once she moved to LA from Florida for her job and, even though we were roommates there for a while, she was gone all the time for her work. She’s a traveling photographer, and it’s taken her all over the world to take pictures of some amazing things. Eventually, she moved out and into her own place when she met Isaac, her now fiancé. That’s when it got a whole lot lonelier for me. Don’t get me wrong, I’m ecstatic that my best friend found her fish in the sea, but deep down, I’m a little jealous.

I glance over at Jake and am caught off-guard when I see he is already staring at me. And here comes the blush.

He stops us and pulls me against his chest, placing his left hand in the spot where my shoulder meets my neck, resting his thumb against my jaw.

“What’s goin’ through that pretty head of yours, sweetheart?”

I lick my lips and watch as his pupils dilate as he follows the movement of my tongue. “Just thinking about how difficult it must be to walk around with a big head like yours.”

Sarcasm is my go-to defense mechanism, but I don’t realize the double entendre until the words are out of my mouth.

Jake leans in, his lips almost touching mine, and whispers huskily, “You have no idea how big my head is. If ya wanna find out, just say the word. Choice is yours.”

He nips at my bottom lip with his teeth as he stares into my eyes then steps away, grabbing my hand to lead us back to his car. I’m stunned at his brazen words and now my panties are soaked, too.

Great, just what I needed. A pair of soaked panties and no relief in sight. Unless...

On the way back to the car, I toss around the idea brewing in my mind. Jake said the choice was mine... why can’t we have a simple hook-up? A “work out the tension between us” kind of thing. We’ve practically been doing a sort of foreplay

for days already, with the sarcastic remarks we've tossed at each other.

Gah! Don't get me started on the looks and the way my body feels, like it's gonna combust with a simple touch from him.

Once we're in the car, Jake looks at me with sincere eyes. "I don't want to take you home yet."

"Then don't."

He speeds off and, after a while of driving down the dirt roads, I start to recognize the scenery surrounding us. I shoot a look of confusion his way and he looks over at me.

"What?" He thinks he's playing innocent, but I know exactly where he's taking us.

I'm not sure if I'm prepared to go back to that place again. The last time I was there, I left heartbroken, and I'm afraid of that now.

Five

Chapter 5



As he slows the car to a stop, I stare out at the rows of trees in front of us. Staying silent, I keep my hands locked together in my lap. I don't know how to feel about this place now, but I'm uneasy about why we're here. He should know that I don't want to be here.

Jake shuts off the engine, but he doesn't make a move to get out of the car.

Looking his way, I watch as he swallows, his Adam's apple bobbing with the action. "I want to explain what you heard the last time you were here, sweetheart."

He unbuckles his seat belt then turns in his seat as best as he can to face me, reaching over and grabbing my hands, linking our fingers together. "I did say those things about you but not because of what you think. I didn't play mind games with you, Laurel. What happened between us that summer, all the time we spent together, it meant a lot to me. I never intended for you to hear any of those hateful words that I said but it had to be done."

I don't understand. If he didn't mean the words then why did he say them?

Tears begin to fall from my eyes. He places his fingers under my chin, raising my head to look at him.

“That night at the bonfire, the one when I brought you here?” he says. I nod, acknowledging I know what he’s talking about. “My buddies were all drinking, wasted actually, and they got bored, so ideas started being tossed around about how they could liven shit up.”

He stares down at our linked fingers then back into my eyes. “One of them started jokin’ around about a few of the girls that were at the party. He could get any one of them to have sex with him by the end of the night. Once he opened his mouth, it all kinda went from there. Each of us was supposed to pick a girl and bang her, then show proof that we did.”

Jake takes a deep breath, lets it out. “Only problem was, they knew I could get any girl there I wanted. So, they said it had to be an even playing field. They’d pick the girl. I can’t remember which one pointed you out, but I tried playing it off and getting them to choose someone else. But that didn’t work, they’d already made their choice.”

At this point, I’m full-on crying. The tears are falling faster down my cheeks, and I keep sniffing to keep from being a snotty mess. I’m sure I look real attractive right now. *Hold on, Laurel. Focus.*

Opening my mouth to speak, Jake cuts me off. “No Laurel, I need you to hear this.” He squeezes my hands tighter.

“Once I figured out they weren’t gonna change their minds, yeah, I went with it. But not because I planned to

actually sleep with you. Well, sure, I would have in a heartbeat, but not for a fucking bet. Never. I went with the stupid-ass game because it was finally my chance. I had to take the bet, you have to understand that, Laurel. I had to.”

“Why did you have to take it, Jake?” I rasp out.

“Because...” he pauses for a second then stares at me intently. “I just couldn’t run the risk of any of the other guys sleeping with you, Laurel. You were my best friend and I was in love with you. I couldn’t let the any of the guys or that stupid-ass game hurt you or ruin your reputation.”

“Then why did you say all those hurtful things about me? You called me a psycho virgin, Jake! Do you know how much that hurt me to hear?” I yank my hands from his and lean back against the door.

“I know, and I’m so sorry about all of it, but you have to understand, I could handle whatever bullshit they threw at me for losing the bet. Your reputation would’ve been ruined, Laurel. Those guys were douchebags, and they were gonna make sure every person in this town knew if I ended up sleeping with you.”

All of a sudden, he gets out of the car. I twist around, facing forward, stunned from his words. They were going to tell everyone if we’d had sex. But, why? Jake opens the door and grabs my hand and tugs, so I step out and close the door behind me.

He pushes me against it and presses his body to mine, raising his hands to hold my face while whispering, “If I

wouldn't have said all that shit about you, they would have caught on that somethin' wasn't right. That I had some sort of feelings for you. I couldn't let them know; they would've spread so much crap about you."

Jake rests his forehead against mine and I exhale a shaky breath. "Why would they do that to me? I never bothered any of you. I don't understand."

"Because you were better than all of us dipshits, baby. You are so beautiful, and everyone saw it, they still see it. You're the only one that didn't see it. You never saw it back then. All the girls, they were jealous of you because of your beauty." He gently kisses my forehead and I close my eyes at the touch of his lips on my skin. "Your beauty and your brains. You were so smart, baby. And the guys? They all wanted you-

I shake my head, cutting him off. "That's not true."

"Yeah, it is. The shit they would say about you in the locker room would piss me off. I threatened to beat their asses every day until they stopped talking shit near me. At that time, they thought it was because our families were so close and I was like a brother to you," he gives me a sad smile. "But that wasn't even close to true. I never, ever, wanted to be like a big brother to you."

I encircled his neck with my arms. "You were right before, you know."

"About what?" he asks, confusion clouds his face.

“That I’ve been in love with you for my whole life.” I smile at him and his eyes widen a bit. “No guy has ever compared to you, Jake, and you’ll always be the one that holds the key to my heart.”

His lips slam against mine in a bruising kiss, his fingers tangling in my hair, and he pushes his knee between my thighs. I rub against his thigh unabashedly, not worried anymore of making a fool of myself or being awkward in this moment.

I moan as the friction increases against my clit and heat spreads through my body. Jake pushes his tongue between my lips and I willingly open for him. Our mouths war with each other to win this battle, but neither of us will. We’re both losing the game that we’ve played for years.

Jake slides his hands down my back and grabs my ass cheeks, squeezing them roughly in his big hands and I increase the speed of my hips, wanting enough pressure to ignite the impending orgasm that’s quickly building.

I can’t even force myself to be embarrassed about dry-humping his leg like a horny dog on the hunt for a bitch in heat, because it feels so fucking amazing.

Jake pulls his lips away from mine and we both pull in gasps of air.

“I want you so bad right now, sweetheart.”

“You have me,” I tell him.

He groans and puts his hands on my thighs, pausing as he watches me, waiting for permission to take this further. I nod giving him the answer he needs.

Jake hikes my dress up over my hips, while I tug at his shirt. We move at a frantic pace, each of us anxious to get the other half-naked. Once he's done, he steps back to take me in, his gaze makes my skin tingle from his perusal. I close my eyes, afraid of what he might think of my not-so-perfect body, then I hear him curse silently.

I slowly open my eyes and my gaze connects with his. He reaches out and palms my large breasts through the top of my dress and gives them a firm squeeze, then he runs his hands down my body, slipping his fingers into my panties, and takes a swipe at my clit. My head falls back and I moan loudly, not caring if a bear comes out to eat us right now.

Oh my god, if a bear cockblocks me right now, I swear, I'll kill it myself.

My panties are completely soaked and my clit throbs, desperately wanting relief.

“Please.” I want him to fuck me so badly that I'm on the verge of tears from the anticipation.

Jake steps back and quickly toes off his shoes as he undoes his shorts, letting them fall down around his ankles. He grabs my hips roughly and turns me around, with my back to his front. I lean onto the hood, my dress bunched in front of me. This is so fucking hot.

“I hope you aren’t fond of these panties.”

“Wha-” I gasp as he rips them in half in one tug.

Oh. My. Gawd.

Looking over my shoulder, frowning at him. “That was such a caveman move. This isn’t a romance novel. Besides, I kinda liked those panti-”.

“Shut up, Laurel.” Suddenly he grabs the back of my neck and pushes my cheek against the hood of the car, using his foot to spread my legs apart. He leans forward and speaks roughly in my ear. “This isn’t gonna be some hearts-and-flowers type of sex. I’m gonna fuck you hard and fast and you’re gonna scream my name over and over again while your pussy clenches around my cock. Then we’re gettin’ dressed and going to the motel in town so I can take my time eating your pussy while you gush all over my tongue and I lap up every single drop.”

Another moan escapes at his words. No man has ever said that kind of stuff to me before. I love it. He has me so turned on from his words that I squeeze my thighs in anticipation, feeling myself quiver inside. I push my ass out, giving him all the encouragement he needs to know he can do as he pleases with my body. I watch him over my shoulder as he bends down and grabs a condom from his shorts pocket.

I smirk. “You’re a little full of yourself, aren’t you? Figured you’d get lucky on the first date, did you?”

He grins wickedly. "I'm about to stuff your pussy with my big dick, ain't I?"

He rolls the condom on in record time and grips my hip with one of his hands.

"You ready?"

I nod. "Yes, please fuck me already."

Not saying another word, he reaches down and grabs hold of his cock. He lines himself up and, with one solid push, he glides in easily from my wetness. I scream out from the fullness that I feel and how big he is.

Jake starts at a slow and steady pace, pulling out then easing back in. With each push and pull, my body tightens and my pussy clenches around him.

"Your cunt was made for me, sweetheart." He reaches around and grabs my nipples, rolling them between his thumb and forefinger. He tugs at the hard nubs, pinching them tightly as he picks up the pace with his hips. I meet each of his thrusts with vigor.

"Jake! Yes!"

The orgasm is right there on the brink and I reach a hand down and rub fast circles on my clit.

"It feels so good. Don't stop," I moan.

"Come on, sweetheart. I'm not gonna last much longer, let it go. Give me everything you got," he says between grunts and thrusts.

I reach behind me with my free arm to grasp Jake's neck, as I turn my face to him and bite his bottom lip. He kisses me as he keeps thrusting into me. The kiss is sloppy and wet and everything I've ever wanted. It's perfect.

His hands keep massaging my breasts and pinching at my nipples, causing a smidge of pain that mixes with the pleasure going on down south. My fingers increase speed on my little nub and the orgasm hits out of nowhere. My toes curl up and legs lock against his thighs. I close my eyes tightly and see stars sparking behind my eyelids, like a fireworks display, my own personal Fourth of July.

"Laurel!" Jake shouts my name as my pussy clenches down and begins contracting around his dick. With a couple more thrusts, he groans deep in his chest as his cock throbs and cum shoots out. It's so much, I can feel it leaking out from around the top of the condom. Jake slowly brings the thrusting to a complete stop and I lean all my weight against the car, my legs ready to give out. Jake leans against me as we both catch our breath.

"Holy fuck," he whispers.

"Yeah," I whisper back.

I always knew we would be great together, but I never knew it would be like that. The feelings I feel for him are all-consuming, I don't ever want to lose this. Everything that's happened has moved at lightning speed, but it just feels so right. Having been in love with this man for my whole life, I

know this is finally right. We would be fools to let whatever this is go.

After our breathing returns to normal, Jake puts his clothes back on as I tug my dress back down and adjust the top. After we drive back into town, Jake rents a room at the motel for us to stay in for the night. Once inside, we strip down, and take a hot shower together. He sticks to his word and laps up every drop of my juices while eating me out in the shower and then again on the bed. By the time he lets up, I can't move because my limbs feel like jelly.

Jake cradles me in his arms and we stay up all night laughing about dumb things that we did as kids, talking about our dreams, and everything we want out of life. He makes me feel like I can do anything at all, he truly believes in me. It doesn't matter that it's been only a handful of days since we walked back into each other's lives, I've known Jake Caudler since forever, and have been in love with him since I learned how to say my A-B-C's, since my "*One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*". He's the one for me.

He's my fish in the sea.

"I love you, Laurel. I've loved you for as long as I can remember." He whispers to me in the early morning light, the sun shining through the window and reflecting in his eyes as he stares down at me.

I wrap my arms around his neck and grip his hair in my fingers, tugging him closer to me. "I love you, too, Jake. With all of my heart."

Our lips meet in a slow and sweet kiss. This one is different from the rough and needy kisses that we've shared so far. His love pours out through this kiss, showing me all the love I've ever wished for. And I give it back just as much as he gives it to me.

There are still things we need to figure out, but what I do know is that we're gonna be fine. We were meant to be together from day one, we just had to go through some shit to get to where we needed to be before finally admitting how much we loved each other. I'm okay with that now.

Everything happens for a reason and I feel like if I would have never come home, neither of us would have gotten here today. So, I thank Lawson Marketing Firm for firing me because, if not, I would still be in LA and still lonelier than I'd ever been.

I'm happy now. This feeling I have inside is indescribable. Jake has always been my person, but it took going through heartache and trial and error to finally have him.

Now that I do, I'm never letting him go.

Always and forever.

Six

Epilogue



1 year later...

Over the last year, so many things have changed. After the night Jake explained everything to me, it was like we were reliving the summer after graduation. The time we spent together made us not only closer, but it taught us about the things we missed out on while we were separated for all those years. I quickly learned so many things about the boy who had grown into a man, and he learned so many things about me as a woman.

It was like we picked up where we left off before the night I overheard him and his friends. Our relationship bloomed quickly after crossing paths again, but there isn't a single thing I would ever change about any of it. No, everything hasn't been all peachy with us. We fight and argue just like any other couple. I throw sarcasm at him every day and he spits back some kind of smart-ass response that only pisses me off more. You know, typical relationship stuff. But the difference now is that we have some really hot hate sex and then we get to have even hotter make-up sex. Either way, it's a win-win for us both.

After about six months of searching, I finally found a new job and I love it so much more than I did Lawson's. Of course,

I might love it more because it's in New York and a certain Falcon football player lives there. When I told Jake about the job opportunity, without hesitation, he asked me to move in with him. Being in his bed every night and putting my hands on him anytime I want? Who could say no to that? Not me.

After I moved in, I convinced him to let me redecorate his penthouse because I couldn't stand staring at the barren bachelor pad walls any second longer. He agreed but had some conditions of his own, of course, which included me painting the walls naked except for a pair of red stilettos. There was more paint on me than there was on the walls that day, and then he plastered me against them, leaving the imprints of my body everywhere. He says it's art and I say it's ridiculous, but he refuses to let me cover any of it up. He's a mess. But I love it.

I'm turning the lights off in my office when my cell phone rings.

A smile spreads across my face when I see his name on my screen.

I answer, "Hey, you."

"What are you wearing right now?" Jake asks.

A laugh escapes my throat. "I'm butt naked, standing in the middle of Times Square."

He growls in the phone. "Don't play with me, sweetheart."

"I love you." I smile at his jealous streak.

“I love you, too, get home so I can smack your ass for that little stunt you just pulled.” The phone beeps when he ends the call.

When I make it to our apartment building, I get on the elevator and hit the button for the penthouse. Once the doors open I step out of the elevator and walk to the only door on this floor and unlock it, poking my head inside before entering. I scan the foyer and I listen for any movement, but there’s nothing. Tip-toeing inside the door, I push it closed with both hands as quietly as possible. I walk down the hallway to the left and ease past the office door as quietly as possible, in case Jake’s in there. We play this game of cat and mouse all the time, where I try to sneak up on him before he can me, but he always wins.

I push open the door leading into the master bedroom and what I see makes me pause. There are candles everywhere and the flames flickering in the dim room giving it a peaceful feeling. I continue scanning the room and look down at the floor, seeing the rose petals trailing to the bathroom, so I follow the path. The petals lead to the sunk-in tub where Jake has filled it and added a shit-ton of bubbles. I’m pretty sure there’s more bubbles than water.

A smile takes over my face and tears line my vision. My emotions are all over the place right now.

I turn around, in search of him, and stop when I see Jake leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed and staring at me,

watching my reaction. Butterflies erupt in my stomach at the sight of him.

God, he's so hot!

“What’s the occasion?” I ask him in a soft voice.

Jake shrugs. “No reason.”

I squint my eyes, suspicious of his casual words. “You’re up to something.”

He chuckles. “Why do I always gotta be up to something when I wanna do something romantic for the woman I love?”

I lift a brow. “Uh, because I know you and you don’t do “cheesy, romance novel shit”. Your words, not mine.”

He shrugs again. “Maybe I’m a changed man.”

“Somehow, I doubt that. What’s really going on?”

He pushes off the doorframe, stripping out of his clothes. “You gonna just stand there or are ya joining me?”

I don’t waste a second of time. My clothes are off and tossed on the floor before he can blink.

“In a hurry for something?” He smirks.

I step over the edge of the tub, easing down into the water, moaning when heat hits my skin. “Yes.”

Jake gets in, settling at the other end across from me, and I rest my legs over the top of his. He grabs one of my feet and begins kneading.

“How was work?”

I sigh, “It was good. How was your practice? Did the coach kick your ass today?”

Jake laughs “Coach kicks our asses every day so there’s nothing new about that.”

“Well good, you need someone to keep you in line. You’re a handful.” I lay my head back against the tub and close my eyes.

Jake grabs my hands and gently tugs me up onto his lap. Water sloshes over the side of the tub soaking the floor. “I’ll show you a handful.”

He tangles his fingers in my hair, like he always does, and stares into my eyes. “You’re so beautiful. I’m the luckiest man alive, you know that?”

Leaning my forehead against his, my arms rest over his shoulders. “Of course I know that. I’m a real catch.”

He reaches down and pinches my nipple. “You’re a brat.”

I moan. “I know. Why don’t you teach me some manners?”

I grind my hips against his hardening cock and lower my lips to his. Our tongues tangle together and I scratch my nails lightly at his back. His hands squeeze my breasts, pushing them together. I arch further into his hands and he breaks our kiss.

“What do you want, sweetheart?” His voice is deep with need.

Raking my teeth along his jawline, I nip at his ear. “I want you to fuck me,” I whisper to him.

Jake growls as his thumb goes to my clit, rubbing light circles over and over. It isn't the pressure that I need and I whimper. My skin is on fire with his touch and I love that the passion we have for each other just keeps getting hotter as the days pass.

He lowers his head and pulls one of my nipples between his teeth, biting down then sucking it into his mouth, his tongue flicking the tip. My head goes fuzzy as the orgasm builds. Jake increases the pressure of his thumb on my clit and switches his mouth to my other breast. He inserts two fingers inside my pussy, in concert with his wicked thumb on my clit, pumping me at a steady pace. My hips buck back and forth, riding his hand and chasing the orgasm raging inside me, right there on the edge, waiting to explode.

“Let it go, Laurel,” Jake tells me, his voice straining.

I reach my hand down and grab hold of his hard cock, squeezing as I pump my hand up and down his length. He shoves his hips up with each of my downward strokes, and I feel his dick grow larger in my hand.

“I want you to cum with me,” I pant out.

Jake lays his head back on the tub, his fingers still working me over, building up that delicious pressure inside me. I lean forward and suck at the skin on his neck, increasing the speed of my handjob as he continues rubbing hard and fast circles on

my clit, his thick fingers still plunging deep inside me. Jake reaches around and grips my ass cheek tightly.

“Come for me, sweetheart.”

A few more swipes of his thumb and the orgasm hits me with vigor. My body seizes up and heat spreads across my skin. My hand tightens around his cock and I keep pumping as my pussy contracts over and over again. I bite down on his shoulder, sure that it'll leave a mark, and release a muffled moan into his skin. He groans loudly as his dick pulses in my hand, his cum shooting up and into water around us. I know my ass is gonna have an imprint of his fingers from how tightly he has it clenched in his hand, but I love it. I collapse against his chest and rest my head in the crook of his shoulder. I breathe out a sigh of relief at the relaxation I feel.

When the water starts to cool, we get out and lay on the bed, facing each other. I think about everything that's happened in our lives to get us where we are today. Nothing has been easy, and it damn sure hasn't been perfect, but we've made it. One day, I'll be Mrs. Jake Caulder and that makes me so happy. I know he says he's the luckiest man alive, but what he doesn't realize is I'm the lucky one. Jake will always be it for me. I can't wait to see where the future takes us.

Always and forever, he will be mine.



About the Author

I live in Missouri with my hubby, our four children, my fur babies (dogs, cats, and goats) and my amazing staff that runs my sprawling ranch...just kidding. They aren't my staff, they're my family members but there are way too many to count so just trust me on this.

Energy shots are my daily caffeine addiction because caffeine is life. I love all things romance, the dirtier the better, and even though I've never traveled far away from home, in my imagination I've been all around the world a few hundred times.

*I've been an avid reader for as long as I can remember, but the first romance novel I ever read was *Midnight Whispers* by V.C. Andrews. My mom and aunt owned all of her books and I snuck that one off the shelf when I was twelve and never looked back. I enjoy writing contemporary romance with strong and sexy heroines, hot and hunky heroes, and lots and LOTS of panty-melting steam!*

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