

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
BROOKE ST. JAMES



Somewhere
in Seattle

THE ALEXANDER FAMILY ~ BOOK ONE

Somewhere in Seattle

A Romance

Brooke St. James

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Chapter 1

Jordan Matthews

Amarillo, Texas

Early October

A few weeks ago, I won some concert tickets on a radio station, and now I found myself in the middle of a whirlwind of new experiences. A Friday night that would have otherwise been ordinary was now completely surreal.

I left work early today and made a two-hour drive to the concert with a friend of mine, Monique. Tonight, the two of us were VIP guests at a sold-out show at the Civic Center in Amarillo, Texas.

The trip was all my doing. We were seeing Micah Lacey in concert, and he happened to be my favorite singer-songwriter in the whole world. I was a true fan. I would have traveled much farther to see him live, so when he released the dates for his tour and Amarillo was one of them, it was a no-brainer that I was going. I bought tickets before I ever won them, but the ones I won were much better so I turned around and sold the ones I had previously bought.

I had left Monique out of all that. She had no idea what I went through to get the tickets. She didn't like Micah Lacey nearly as much as I did and was just along for the ride.

Not much happened in the small Oklahoma town where we lived, so the trip to Amarillo was a big deal to both of us. Monique worked all the time, and she was a creature of habit who hung out at the same places and with the same people after work. She was six years older than me, and she had done her fair share of partying, but she never left town. This whole experience was even more overwhelming to her than it was to me. I wasn't necessarily an old pro at traveling, but I was determined when it came to seeing Micah Lacey.

This afternoon and evening had been a lot, even for me, though. We were two girls from the middle of nowhere on the open plains of Oklahoma, and now we were thrust into a crowd of five thousand people. Taylorsville only had about ten thousand residents in the whole town, and there was never a time when half of them converged in one place. We had a park or two, a Walmart, two grocery stores, and several restaurants, but Taylorsville was the absolute middle of nowhere compared to Amarillo.

I was the one who had spearheaded this trip. I was desperate to see Micah Lacey in person, so the process of making it here, even though it had been complicated and intense, seemed like nothing to me. Today, I would get to see Micah perform live and even meet him.

I worked until noon at the bank, and then I drove over to Monique's house to pick her up. She was nowhere near the Micah Lacey fan that I was, and she drug her feet getting out of the door which bugged me. I had a one-track mind to see that we made it to the radio station on time to ride with a DJ and the other contest winners to the show. I didn't want to miss a thing.

There were eight of us who won tickets from the radio station. I got to the station first and was really friendly with the DJ, so our seats were the best—front and center.

It was surreal to finally be at the show. I found myself gazing at the amazing Micah Lacey from what must have been only ten or fifteen feet away. I could see the mole on his cheek. I could make out the specks of his facial hair. I could see with my own two eyes the way his mouth moved when he sang and spoke. I had fallen in love with his lyrics and music before I ever knew how very handsome he was. He was amazing. The feelings I had for him—they were an official crush.

For the last two hours, I had sat in this audience, mesmerized. Monique got up to use the restroom once, and I laughed when she asked me if I wanted to go with her. I intentionally had nothing to drink specifically so I could avoid the restroom during this show. It was Micah Lacey. His music

was mellow and cool, and so was he. Seeing him live was like nothing I'd ever experienced.

Micah always played an acoustic guitar, and he had used about five different ones during the show. He took off his guitar after he played one of his biggest hits, and I had to face the fact that the concert was over.

"He hasn't played Madeline yet!" someone shrieked. The girl sitting behind me made her statement loudly enough to be heard over the sound of the crowd. "Whooooooo!" she added, yelling right in my ear. "Playyyy Madeline!"

I was so thrown off by her that I didn't yell for Micah even though I wanted to. I just clapped and stared at the stage as he handed his acoustic to an assistant before giving a little wave to the crowd and walking behind the curtains. The whole band followed him, leaving the stage empty.

"*Madeliiiiine!*" the woman behind me yelled at the top of her lungs.

Everyone in the audience began yelling for it. Even Monique, who was clueless about all of the songs he had played, was cupping her hands around her mouth and calling out for, "*Madeline!*"

The woman behind me took a breath and continued yelling, screeching in my ear. I was annoyed by her, and maybe it was because someone was even more excited than me.

"Madeline!" Monique called again, clapping vigorously. I glanced over at her, and she smiled and shrugged at me. The whole crowd was erupting, begging for another song. I had never been to a live concert of this magnitude, but I had read enough books and seen enough movies to know that we were calling for an encore.

I wondered if an encore was given every time it was called for.

It seemed to be taking forever.

We clapped and yelled to an empty stage.

“At least we still get to go backstage!” I said, leaning over to yell near Monique’s ear.

“He’ll come back out, don’t worry!” It was the woman on the other side of Monique who leaned in and said it to me. “I’ve seen him four times, and he *always* comes out for an encore.”

I continued clapping as I looked behind me, at the gigantic group of fans. I wondered what it would be like to stand on that stage and have all these people screaming for you. The audience carried on like this for another ten seconds of straight clapping and screaming. And then suddenly, we saw Micah come back onto the stage, followed by the four members of his band.

“Thank you so much, I really appreciate it,” he said, coming over to the microphone. “You can go ahead and have a seat, and we’ll play one more song for you.” He gave us a moment to sit down as he strapped on his guitar and strummed it, making the notes I recognized as the beginning of Madeline, his first and biggest hit.

“I was homeless and penniless when I wrote this song,” he said softly into the microphone. There were a few scattered yells as a response to Micah’s statement, and they caused him to smile thoughtfully. “I wrote it, and then the very next day, I met a woman who became like a mother to me. I was sitting on a corner with my guitar and a bag that contained literally everything I owned. I was a mess, and I’m sure I didn’t smell very good. Anyway, this lady and I became friends that day. She owned a restaurant, and for the next two years, I became close to her and her family. I lived in this tiny room while I... got my stuff together.” He smiled and sighed thoughtfully, remembering. “May we all be like Rita and see potential in people.” He stepped away from the mic and strummed the first notes of Madeline again on the acoustic guitar, and the crowd went completely berserk.

Micah was a mellow guy, and he grinned shyly and tried not to flinch at the eruption. I sat there and gazed adoringly at him as he reacted and then continued playing.

Who was this Rita lady, anyway? I felt like I wanted to shake her hand. I thought I would ask Micah about her if I had the chance backstage.

Most of us knew every word and sang along as he played Madeline. I had suffered loss in my life, and I was going through a rough time when it first came out. I thought about how much it helped me. I imagined myself being Madeline back then, and I pictured a better life for myself. I thought about someone loving me for who I was and it kept me going. I sang some, but I liked it more when I was able to listen to Micah's voice rather than my own. It was a slow song, and he sang with honesty and raw passion. His voice was unique and wonderful. His talent was so undeniable that I couldn't fathom how this lady, Rita, was the first one who noticed it.

It was surreal to be staring up at this man from the first row and I took it all in, knowing I would remember this concert for the rest of my life.

The song ended, and Micah took off his guitar to a chorus of cheers. We chanted for another encore for a few seconds, but we quickly realized they weren't coming back out when the theater lights came up.

Justin, the radio DJ, and his lady friend were sitting next to me, and he led us to a backstage area once the show was over. We weren't the only ones with lanyards getting in line. There were probably thirty or forty people backstage in the waiting area where Justin led us. One of Micah's representatives spoke to Justin and someone else who looked like they were in charge. Then he turned to address us all.

"You'll each have a few seconds with Micah," he announced. "You can pose for a photograph. Micah has got to get on the road, and there's a whole line of people here, so he is not going to get to spend more than a few seconds with each of you. *Please have your cameras ready.*"

Justin gave me insider information. I had talked to him and gotten along with him and his girlfriend all night. He put his hand around my arm when we went to form the line.

“Micah’s going to spend the most time with the ones in the back,” he said.

So, I got in line last with only Justin standing behind me, and he was off to the side with his girlfriend like they weren’t interested in talking to Micah.

The line moved slowly, but it moved. It took about thirty minutes before I came to the place in the doorway where I could clearly see Micah. The woman that got to see him just ahead of us gushed about how she had been to so many of his concerts she couldn’t count. They reminisced about one of them where Micah had been sick, and I could hear Micah telling her he tested positive for strep throat after the show. She went on and on about how good the concert had been in spite of his condition, and Micah seemed to react well to her.

They took a picture and Micah said how nice it had been to meet her. It had been an engaging conversation, and I was too busy watching it to realize that it was now my turn to step up and meet Micah. Monique and I were ushered up to where he was standing, and we took turns shaking his hand.

“Hey, I’m Jordan. I’m a huge fan, and it’s my first time to see you live,” I said, regurgitating the thing I had imagined I might say to him.

“Oh, hello, Jordan. I’m glad you made it to the show,” Micah said.

“I want to know more about Rita,” was the next thing that came out of my mouth.

“My Rita?” he asked, putting a hand to his chest and looking surprised that I knew her name.

I nodded. “The lady you were talking about that helped you out.”

“She’s amazing. She was once homeless and living in that same room she leased me.”

“You’re kidding!”

“No, yeah, she’s the best. She’s got this whole wonderful life now.”

“What a cool story. She sounds amazing.”

“She is,” he said with no hesitation. “We should all have a Rita in our lives.” Micah had been smiling as he spoke, and I was awestruck by his cool, calm demeanor. He held the smile as he gestured at Monique. “You can hand that to him,” he said, pointing at the guy who was strategically placed in the room to take a picture for us.

I wanted to ask more about Rita. I wanted to talk to Micah about experiences he had being homeless. I could have stayed there and asked him questions all night. But instead, I went through all the normal, rushed meet-and-greet motions. I posed for a photograph with Monique and Micah, and then I turned and shook his hand, feeling like I wanted to say something genuine.

“Thank you for your music,” I said. “It helped get me through some hard things.”

“Oh, thank you for saying that,” he said, sounding humble and surprised.

I wanted to reach out and hug him, but I had to remember that he didn’t know me nearly as much as I felt like I knew him. Monique stepped forward to retrieve her phone from the other guy. I absentmindedly shook Micah’s hand again and before I knew it, we were back in the rented limo that would take us back to the radio station.

Chapter 2

Three months later

I could not get Rita out of my mind. The concert in Amarillo was unforgettable, but the part that stuck with me the most wasn't Micah's smile or his lyrics or voice. It was the story he told before the encore. I was not a writer, but I wanted to write a story about Rita. I had a feeling that her story needed to be told, and writing was the only way I could think of telling it.

I had done that only one other time in my life. I had followed my heart about a writing project when I was in high school, and my teacher had adored it. She submitted it to several local papers, but nothing ever came of it.

The urge to write that story in high school was the same feeling I had about Rita. The problem was that I couldn't find any information about her. I hadn't asked Micah about her when I had the chance. I didn't even know what her last name was. That one bit of information would have changed everything for me. It would have saved me a ton of trouble.

I emailed Micah after the show, explaining myself and stating my intentions, but I never heard back from him. I figured he never even saw my email.

I was enough of a Micah Lacey fan that I knew he grew up in Utah but that he lived in Seattle when he got noticed. I was almost certain that Seattle was where Rita lived. But it was a gigantic city that was situated across the country, and I didn't have a lot to go on without a last name.

I had seen footage from a live concert where Micah mentioned working in and living near a sandwich shop once in his life, and one of his songs mentioned *living on the ends of other people's roast beef*. I figured that Miss Rita and the roast beef were connected.

"And then, finally, I called this restaurant," I said, gesturing around us and talking to the man sitting next to me at the counter. "It was a guy who answered the phone, and I

asked him what I asked everyone else... does Miss Rita work here, and he said she did, but she wasn't available right then. And I just knew I had found the right place. I asked if they sold roast beef and he laughed and said that was the main thing they sold here."

The man sitting next to me chuckled and pointed to the hand-painted sign that covered one wall. It matched the one on the front of the building and the windows. All of them said Jimmy's on 2nd, and in smaller letters, across the bottom of the logo, it said *Your Favorite Roast Beef*.

He was exactly the type of guy I was expecting to meet in Seattle—a fisherman type. He had a full beard and scruffy hair, and he was wearing outdoor gear. He seemed to be about fifty and had introduced himself as Brian.

"And it was just like this one time when I wrote a paper on the water tower off Baker Road—all of the pieces were falling into place," I said.

"So, you're an investigative reporter?" he asked.

"No, no I'm not a reporter. I don't have any intentions for writing the story, other than I think it's interesting. I'm not trying to get famous or anything. I don't even consider myself a writer."

"What do you consider yourself?"

"I'm a bank teller, and I work at a restaurant part-time. But I don't think of myself as either of those things, really. They're just jobs. I'm just a girl right now, I guess. I'm figuring it out. I don't really have a lot going on in Oklahoma, other than working and trying to save money."

"And you came all this way to talk to Rita?"

I laughed. "Yeah, basically spending all of the money I've been saving. I was curious to see about that room, though. I thought it was a refuge for homeless people."

"I don't know anything about that," Brian said, looking upward. "I looked at one of the apartments here one time for my son, and he couldn't afford it."

“Oh, well, I don’t know. I thought it looked like a nice building, too. I might be mistaken. I just need to talk to the lady. I tried to call, but I’m finding that if you want to talk to someone, it’s better to do it in person. Plus, I had barely been outside of Oklahoma, so I figured I’d follow my curiosity and come see another part of the world.”

“Pretty smart choice to come here in the middle of January.” The deep voice had come from the guy at the end of the counter. It wasn’t the first time I had noticed him. It wasn’t even the second or third. He had been talking to the guy next to him, but I saw him when he tuned into my conversation. At first, I had good thoughts about him—I thought he was handsome. My waiter was a good-looking man as well, and those two guys had made me think about how jaw-dropping west coast men were.

I wasn’t even sure what he said to me, but he was scowling when I glanced at him, so I asked him. “What did you say?” I asked, smiling, assuming the best.

“I said it’s a really odd time of year to come here.”

He ruined it when he spoke. He was being mean to me—saying that I had chosen a bad time to travel to Seattle. And maybe he was right. Maybe that was why tickets and hotel accommodations had been half price compared to the last two months and the next several. It didn’t matter. He was being so rude. I was taken aback by him eavesdropping and commenting on my conversation, and I turned to him and spoke with syrupy sweet sarcasm.

“Oh, do you work for Travelocity?” I asked, smiling and acting completely serious and trying to be as mean and sarcastic as he was. “Because I could use recommendations on a few other restaurants.”

“I suppose anywhere would be fine,” he said. He swiveled on his stool and looked at me. “Anywhere but here. You should mind your own business. Nobody wants an article written about them.”

“Rita might want an article if it gives her and Jim publicity,” Brian said.

“Do they look like they need that?” The hulking brute on the end was impatient, staring at me with a look of contempt.

“Hey, how’s everything going over here?” It was my waiter who cut in with the comment. He had been across the way, talking to someone else, but he cut in because he could tell the customer was being cross with me.

“She’s trying to reach Rita,” the rude guy said, explaining.

“Oh okay, just leave your information on this, and I’ll have Rita contact you when she gets back. In the meantime, can I get you one of our roast beef sandwiches?”

“I’d love one,” I said.

“Half or whole?”

“Whole.”

He smiled and placed the piece of ticket paper on the counter and handed me his pen.

“Do you want it loaded?” he asked.

“The sandwich? I don’t really care for tomatoes,” I said, shaking my head a little.

He smiled and cringed as if that bit of information hurt. “That fresh tomato makes it, but if you don’t care for them, you don’t care for them.”

“Yeah, I guess leave it off,” I said reluctantly as I wrote down my name and phone number on the ticket. “Do you want me to write the sandwich on here?” I asked, handing it to him. He grinned at me and shook his head. “No, I got it,” he said. “Just your name and number are fine, and I’ll give that to my grandma. Did you want to ask for a job?” he asked.

“A job? Me?”

“Yeah, because you were trying to write the order on my ticket,” he said, smiling and taking it from me.

“She’s not here for a job,” the other customer said, unamused.

He was the one who wasn't minding his business. I almost said as much. This guy was winding me up. I felt blood rush to my cheeks as the handsome waiter reached in front of me to retrieve my menu.

"Would you prefer potato chips or French fries?" he asked.

"It doesn't matter," I said easily. I smiled at him even though I was thrown off by this other guy. "Wait... did you say Rita was your grandmother?" I asked once my brain had time to catch up with what was going on.

"She's everybody's grandma," he said, nodding and smiling. "But, yes, she seriously is mine. And JD's, and Claire's. He pointed all around him as if JD and Claire were right there in the room with us. It was a large restaurant with five or ten employees clearly visible. I smiled dazedly, trying to take it all in. "Do you happen to know anything about a room in this building? I don't think it was a full apartment like they advertise upstairs. I know Micah Lacey stayed here. I met him and he mentioned it and your grandmother."

"Yeah, Micah's a cool dude," the waiter said. His name was Isaac. I could see it written on his shirt. "Rita and Jim own this whole building, and floors two through five are apartments, so..."

It seemed friendly but vague, and I glanced at the stubborn one and saw that he looked satisfied with Isaac's answer.

Isaac went to the kitchen and Brian sat back and threw his napkin on the counter with a groan. "Great as always," he said.

"Do you need a box?" another server said, walking by and seeing him throw in the towel.

"No thanks," he said, "I don't eat fries once they're cold."

"I just throw them in the oven," another lady said, overhearing us. There was a lot going on in the restaurant with people chiming in and dishes clanking. I had been listening to different conversations the whole time I sat there. They were

all so smart and worldly, and it was nothing at all like my hometown.

“I’m good,” Brian said, shaking his head to say he would pass on boxing the fries. “Thanks. It was nice meeting you, Jordan,” he said to me. “I hope you find what you’re looking for in Seattle.”

He walked off and I heard the other guy say, “I don’t think you will,” at my back when I was turned. He was the mean one—tall and broad with dark hair and eyes. He was dressed nicely in jeans and a plaid button-down shirt. He had come in wearing a coat that was now hanging over the back of his chair. He was no longer handsome to me. I wasn’t scared of him, but I also didn’t like him. As far as I was concerned, he was the one who should mind his own business and leave me alone.

Chapter 3

I moved down a chair when Brian left, putting me one spot further from the guy on the end. “I didn’t know Miss Rita was your grandma,” I said to Isaac a little while later. I was in the middle of eating my roast beef sandwich by the time Isaac came back and looked like he had a second to talk.

“She sure is,” Isaac said proudly.

“So, is it Isaac Alexander?” I asked, since I knew Rita’s last name.

“It is.”

“What’s your name? What’s up, Cal, you’re early today.” Isaac shifted gears in the middle of talking to me. He looked over my shoulder just as a guy came up behind me, bumping into me as he rounded the corner, reaching out to shake Isaac’s hand.

“I see you got JD, you, Claire, Cindy... and is Jim over there probably?”

“Yeah, we got Jim in the kitchen,” Isaac said smiling as he shook Cal’s hand.

“Hey, Cal, what are you doing over here before lunch?” a man said from the kitchen.

“I came over for chocolate milk because we were out, and Mom’s watching Shanna’s little twins over at the store, and they’re making too much noise, and she told me to walk over here and get some chocolate milk from Mister Jim’s to see if we can make them quiet down.”

“I’ll get you some chocolate milk,” a waitress said, going around them.

“Thanks, Cindy,” Isaac said.

“How much?” she asked, talking to Cal. “Enough for two?”

“Two gallons,” he said, nodding and sounding convinced. I couldn’t tell how old Cal was. He had some grey hair, so I

knew he was older, but he had a childlike way about him. “Cal, I know your mama didn’t send you for two gallons of chocolate milk. We don’t even have two gallons of the stuff.”

“You don’t? Why not? That’s probably not good. You probably need Mister Jim to buy more chocolate milk. How about one gallon?”

“No, I don’t think we can even do that much.”

Cindy and Cal continued talking about chocolate milk while Isaac came closer to me.

“That’s Cal. His parents own the appliance store next door.”

“My Aunt Charmaine went crazy at Christmas and got in a fight with my cousin and her boyfriend, and my dad told us not to let her back in the store after that,” Cal said. “And now Mama’s got Shanna’s little twins over there.”

“Well, go take them some chocolate milk,” Isaac said to Cal. He patted him on the shoulder. “I don’t know if we can spare a whole gallon, but Cindy will hook you up. Are you still coming over later for your burger?”

“Yeah, but I’m already hungry for it now,” Cal said, holding his stomach and looking forlorn like he might not make it much longer.

Isaac laughed and then leaned over to refill my coffee. I locked eyes with him when he did that. His eyes were a gorgeous, soft shade of green. He was a nice guy with a charismatic personality, and I loved how he interacted with everyone at this place.

“Where’s Miss Rita?” Cal said, causing me to smile.

I took one last bite of the sandwich, which was delicious.

“She’s not here,” Isaac said. “She had some errands to do.”

“Where’s Anne and Becca?”

“Becca’s here, and Anne’s got the day off.”

“Oh, well, Becca can take my order when I come back. Or you can. Where’s Misty?”

“Misty quit. Remember? She moved to Portland. Friday was her last day.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I think she just wanted to.”

“Is that a gallon?” Cal asked, looking at Cindy suspiciously.

“No, but I figured this was enough for the twins, and you can come back and get some more later if you need to.”

Cindy had done a good job of securing enough chocolate milk to satisfy Cal. She handed him two large disposable cups that had lids taped to the top. Cal was making the transaction with Cindy when Isaac turned to me.

“You were telling me your name,” he said.

“Oh, me? Jordan,” I said. “Jordan Matthews.”

“That’s both boy names,” Cal said.

“Cal,” Isaac said in a pleading tone.

“It is. Jordan and Matthew are both boy names, and she’s a girl.”

“Jordan is either a boy or a girl name,” Isaac said.

“But Matthew’s not.”

“Matthews is her last name,” Isaac said. “And it doesn’t matter. Lots of people have whatever names they want to have nowadays.”

“Well, I have a cousin named Jordan Washington who’s a boy, and I know Jordan Lewis, who is also a boy. So is Michael Jordan, and Matthew Abbott,” Cal said. “Every Matthew and every Jordan I know.”

“He doesn’t mean anything by it,” Isaac said, looking at me apologetically.

“I don’t mind,” I said in a quiet tone, shaking my head.

“We’ll see you in a little while for your burger,” Cindy said to Cal.

“Okay, tell Jim I’ll be here.” He looked at Isaac. “Tell Jim I’ll be back, and tell Misty she can take my order.”

“Misty’s in Portland,” Isaac called.

“Misty’s in Portland,” he said, remembering. “Will she be back by twelve-thirty?”

“No, Becca’s going to take your order, or I will,” Isaac said.

Isaac turned to me with a kind smile as Cal walked away. “He comes most days at twelve-thirty,” he said. “When his parents are next door. They live outside of Seattle, and Cal lives with them. They come in to run the store on most weekdays. Mister Washington still works in there, repairing and refurbishing old appliances.”

“Oh, that’s cool. I saw that place, Washington’s Appliances. I like Cal. He’s a cool guy,” I continued, smiling and thinking about his raw honesty and his expressive features. I did like Cal, but I braced myself after I said it, thinking the guy on the end might tell me Cal was none of my business. Maybe he would be right to say that. Cal was a likable person, though, and I found myself smiling after the interaction in spite of the fact that he had basically offended me.

I slowly finished the last couple of bites of my sandwich as I listened and watched other people at the restaurant. It was a busy place with a lot going on. A few people came in as Cal was leaving, and they filled the stools between myself and the irritable customer on the end, so he wasn’t really an issue by the time I got ready to leave.

I was thankful for that because I was intensely intrigued by Rita’s story. She was the owner of this successful restaurant, a place that was really soulful and interesting. She was surrounded by some really cool family and friends. I liked her and I didn’t even know her yet.

“Don’t forget to give my number to your grandma, if you don’t mind,” was the last thing I said to my waiter.

“I won’t forget,” he promised. “It was nice meeting you, Jordan.”

“You too,” I said.

I went onto the sidewalk. I had only walked a little way from the door when someone caught me up by the arm. I turned to look over my shoulder and I found the guy from the end of the bar. I would have pulled my arm away from him, but he had already dropped it by the time I realized who he was.

“Just forget about your little paper,” he said.

“My little paper?” I said, making a face at him.

“Yeah, whatever you were talking about. I heard you say something about a water tower and then trying to write about Rita.”

“My little paper? What if I write for the New York Times?”

“Do you?” he asked, dryly.

“No.”

He scowled. “Has it ever occurred to you that you shouldn’t go snooping around in other people’s lives?”

“You seem to be in these people’s lives way more than I am,” I said, feeling defensive and having nothing else.

“Look, I don’t want to be rude, but just find something else to do with your day,” he said. He smiled at me and raised his eyebrows before turning to walk off in the opposite direction. He had me so flustered that I didn’t even have a comeback. I wanted to yell at his back, but just stood there, overwhelmed, watching him walk away. He was movie star handsome, which made it even more awkward. I felt like I had just been chewed out by someone really important. I wondered if he was famous. So many men in Seattle were chiseled and good-looking. No offense to Oklahoma men, but there were no men like this back home. Maybe it was just because I saw the

exact same guys over and over. Even in Amarillo, I hadn't noticed any amazing-looking men.

This one was mean, and he was distractingly good-looking, and I hated him even more for it. *Who did he think he was going around trying to kill people's dreams?* I watched him walk away, having random thoughts and feeling stupefied by how rude he was to me for no reason at all.

And then the chain of events got weirder.

I turned to walk the other way, only to find that Rita Alexander was headed right toward me. I had seen some photos of her on the internet, so I recognized her right away.

"Hey, hello, I was, goodness... Mrs. Alexander, you were just the woman I was looking for. I don't know if you have a second, but I actually just left my phone number inside for you. They were going to give it to you." I didn't mean to sound overbearing, but the stranger's vote against my mission only made me want to pursue Rita and the story.

"Oh, you'd like to talk to me?" she said with a friendly smile. "What have I done now?"

"Oh, no, you haven't done anything."

She smiled. "I know I haven't. I was just playing. You didn't come to apply for a job, did you?" She was a comforting woman—I felt at ease in her presence. Her smile was welcoming, and her gaze was sincere. She was a well-put-together lady, but she was approachable. Her hair had been cut since the photos I had seen of her on the internet. In those, her white hair was shoulder-length, and now it was cut into a stylish, chin-length bob.

"Yes ma'am. Maybe. Probably. I don't know. Why, are you hiring?"

She smiled. "We sure are. You'd need to talk to my grandson, Isaac. He's the manager. He handles all that." She tapped my arm and winked. "But I can pull strings around here, and you have a kind smile that I'd like to keep around. Do you have experience as a waitress?"

“No, but I do as a hostess.” I cleared my throat. “I work as a hostess at a restaurant on the weekends... and a bank teller... during the week. I don’t know if you need a hostess, but that’s what I was doing at my other job. It’s nothing like this, though. It’s just a little Mexican restaurant.” I could feel myself getting antsy, feeling nervous. I could tell that I was about to start blabbering to hide the fact that I didn’t even live in Seattle.

What was I even doing?

“Well, there’s nothing about waiting tables that I can’t teach you,” she said. “Sometimes, I honestly feel like it’s better to have somebody with no experience. At least you don’t have to un-teach them any bad habits.”

“I don’t have any habits at all with waiting tables,” I said, seeing that she was serious. “I’ve never tried it.”

She patiently smiled at me. “Would you like to come in and talk right now? Isaac’s working, but I can give you your paperwork, that way you have it done if we decide to move forward.”

“Sure,” I said “That’d be wonderful. Thank you.”

Chapter 4

I had no idea how I let myself tell Rita Alexander that I was looking for a job. *Had this ever been done before? Had someone ever gone on a trip to a place and ended up getting a job and moving there?*

“I see you found my grandmother,” Isaac said as soon as we walked in the door. “She was looking to fill out an application,” Rita said.

“Oh yeah?” Isaac said. He looked a little confused. “Is that what you wanted to see Rita about?”

I was insanely nervous. There was no way I could have prepared myself for the way I met Rita on the sidewalk. I imagined a calm quiet conversation where she was working behind the counter and we sat down with a cup of coffee while she told me everything about herself and Micah and the special room where they both stayed.

“I wasn’t sure if you guys would even hire anyone without experience waiting tables,” I said to Isaac, being vague. “I’ve only ever worked as a hostess.”

“Were you thinking we’d interview her to replace Misty?” he asked his grandma.

She shrugged and smiled at him, nodding a little as if saying in some unspoken code that she thought I could handle it.

“Are you looking for something full-time?” Isaac asked me.

“Uh, yeah,” I said, since this whole scenario was theoretical to me, anyway.

“Okay, well, I’ll be able to sit down and talk to you at about three o’clock today. Do you want to come back then?”

“Sure,” I said. “Thank you.”

It was barely noon when I left Jimmy’s on 2nd with paperwork in hand. I took an Uber straight to my hotel so I could be alone and clear my thoughts.

I figured I could just never go back there. I got nervous that I was in over my head, but then I remembered that it was not necessary to go back there at three o'clock. Nobody was forcing me to do it. The fact of the matter was that I wanted to go back. I wanted to go back on a regular basis. I liked Jimmy's on 2nd. It was a restaurant, and that wasn't a big deal since I already worked in one of those at home. But this place was different. It was special.

And my motivation in wanting to go back was not at all that I was a fan of Micah's. It wasn't even that I wanted to uncover Rita's story. I did think there was probably an interesting and maybe secret room hidden somewhere within that building, but I also just wanted to stay in that restaurant and hang out with these people.

I liked Isaac and the crew at Jimmy's. I had sat at the counter there long enough to know that Big Jim (Isaac's uncle and Rita's oldest son) was in charge in the kitchen. I heard him chime in on conversations. I liked the vibe in that place, and I felt honored that Rita would be willing to give me a chance so quickly. The truth was that I wanted to work there. Quite frankly, the idea of going into Jimmy's on 2nd instead of the dusty credit union and dingy restaurant where I currently worked sounded wonderful.

Moving to Seattle to work at a restaurant was probably a half-hatched idea. But sometimes in life, you have to jump into the water and be in over your head for a moment, trusting yourself, knowing you'll adapt and get better at swimming. It would have to be sink or swim in Seattle. That was what I told myself when I was sitting in the hotel thinking about moving. I knew I could do it.

I wasn't so sure after I looked at rental property nearby. I started by viewing a two-bedroom place near the restaurant. I couldn't find anything in the same building, but I found one close to the restaurant. The problem was that it was going for twenty-five hundred dollars a month. It was a small, apartment—the same size as the one I currently rented for eight hundred dollars back home in Taylorsville.

Finally, I found a room for rent five blocks up the street. It was a bedroom with a shared bathroom. It was a shared apartment with three other people, and it was about the same price as the apartment where I currently lived. I looked at a ton of options, and this was the only one that was even *close* to obtainable for me in this neighborhood.

The only thing in question was my car. When I first thought of staying in Seattle, I just assumed I would go home and get my car. But this apartment was close to the restaurant, and selling it meant that I would have more in my savings and I wouldn't have gas or insurance to pay for.

I exhausted a ton of different ideas and options, and at the end of it, I was left with a bedroom for eight-fifty a month and a plan of probably selling my car. I imagined the possibility of being stuck on the west coast with no transportation, and the weirdest part of it all was that it seemed like a better option than going back home, back to my same two jobs and apartment.

For years, I had basically been stuck in a loop where days turned into weeks, turned into months. I worked for the weekend, and then on the weekend, I worked some more. I didn't mind it because my jobs were routine and fairly mindless. My work was basically my social life, and I rested at home. I hadn't managed to save a whole lot considering how many hours I put in, but I had a little in savings, and I was no longer in debt. I had a note on my car, but it was almost paid off. I considered all this, and even wrote down a list of pros and cons about moving. I had never done anything like this before.

And then suddenly, I looked at the clock in my hotel and realized that it was time for me to go back to the restaurant.

But was I even going? I thought about it for all of three seconds before I hopped up so that I could use the restroom and freshen up.

I wore the same jeans and sweater I had on before. It was cold enough that I brought a beanie and gloves, and I tried them on, but I hadn't worn them earlier, and I opted to leave

them off again. I was nervous, and I told myself there was no reason to be. All of this was on my terms.

I called a ride and met the driver outside of my hotel. It was all me—all of it—from the interview with Rita to the job at the restaurant. All of it was my choice. The ball was in my court. If I didn't want to be there, all I had to do was leave. This was why I had no reason to be nervous. I'd go in there and live my life. I would have a conversation with Isaac Alexander and if I wanted to take a job working with him and move to Seattle, I would. It was my life and my choice. I told myself these things as I was on my way back to the restaurant. I was smiling and feeling much better when I went inside.

"What's going on, she came back!" I heard Isaac's voice the instant I came into the restaurant. I came inside and crossed the large room, which was now much emptier than it had been at noon when I left.

Isaac had such a kind smile. He was handsome, too, an all-American hunk with green eyes that I could see shining from across the room. "Come on over here," he said, gesturing for me to follow him. He had been near some tables, but we walked to the kitchen where he opened the swinging door and stood back, letting me walk inside. "Would you like something to drink?" he asked, stopping at the soda fountain, which was near the door.

"No thanks," I said instinctually.

"Are you sure?" he asked, putting something in a cup for himself.

"Uh, water would be fine, I guess, if you don't mind." He made me a cup of ice water and then turned to me with a smile, handing me my cup. "Let's go back to the dining room and grab one of those tables."

I nodded and moved to follow him again. His uniform was a black three-button polo with the restaurant logo and his name embroidered on his chest. The shirt was tucked into a pair of jeans that fit him like a... I took my eyes off of Isaac's jeans and told myself it didn't matter what they fit him like. I tried to take it all in, the smells and the sounds—it was

somewhat familiar to me since I worked in a restaurant, but this place was so different.

It was bright and open compared to the dark, low-ceiling Mexican restaurant where I worked. We went out of the kitchen, around the counter, and through the dining room where we found a spot at a large booth that was meant for at least four people.

“Is this okay for you?” he asked.

“Of course, I’m following you,” I said.

We sat down across from each other, and Isaac grinned at me once we got settled. His lips were full and his smile was curved and wide enough to spread across his face. I wasn’t normally the type to go crazy over men, it was just that Seattle seemed to have noticeably strapping hunks. These guys were visually stunning with their symmetrical faces and movie star jawlines and facial hair. It almost seemed like he and the rude guy were brothers with their strapping good looks. I figured it was a fluke since their personalities couldn’t be more different.

“When you were eating lunch earlier I thought you said you didn’t live here—that you were only here visiting.”

It was the first thing out of Isaac’s mouth, and it made me smile. I honestly liked people who could cut to the chase, and I cleared my throat to respond to him.

Chapter 5

“I don’t live here, actually,” I said to Isaac, opting for honesty. “I am just here for a week—not even—five days. But, I ran into your grandma out there on the street, and I was trying to talk to her for a totally different reason, but she asked me if I was looking for a job, and I thought, *well, maybe I am looking for one*. It seemed like you guys were having fun in here, and I like Seattle so far. So, I’ve been back at my hotel for the last three hours, trying to see if I could make it work.”

I paused and looked at him, wondering how he would react to the truth. “What was the other reason?” he asked.

“The other reason of what?” I asked.

“Why did you want to talk to my grandmother in the first place? You said you wanted to talk to her for a totally different reason.”

“Oh, I was telling Brian a little about that. He was the customer I was sitting next to when—”

“I know Brian.”

“Oh, well, I was telling Brian that I wanted to see if I could talk to your grandmother about a room she has for rent upstairs.”

Isaac smiled “She has all the rooms for rent upstairs. She and my grandfather own this entire building. My dad and Uncle Jim each own and manage a few of the apartments, but the building is ours—our family’s. I don’t think we have anything up for rent right now, though.”

“We, uh, I, uh, I don’t think I could... how much are the rooms in this building?”

“Depends on the size. I think most are somewhere between two and three,” he said.

“Thousand?” I asked.

He nodded.

“Dollars a month?” I continued.

He smiled and nodded again.

“Yeah, no. I was looking at a bedroom for rent. I thought there was some kind of special room in this building. I imagined it to be like some Anne Frank hideaway room for homeless people. It’s like I’ve got all these loose clues. One of the songs mentions someone named Birdy.”

“Birdy is Rita,” he said.

“What?”

“Birdy is what we call her. The grandkids.”

“Birdy is Rita?”

“That’s what I said,” he agreed. “How’d you know we call her that?”

“It says, I was hiding away in the walls of Birdy’s building.”

“What says that?” Isaac asked, looking at me with a comically confused expression.

“The song. Micah Lacey.”

“Oh, that’s right, you were asking about Micah.”

He was so cool and aloof that it almost felt like he was hiding something.

“Yeah,” I said, shaking my head. “I came to Seattle in the middle of January, on an idea that your grandmother was some amazing woman who I…” I hesitated, not even knowing what I wanted to say. “I don’t know what I wanted to get out of this whole situation when I came. I don’t know what I thought of your grandma. I got pieces of her through Micah’s music, and I just felt like I wanted to meet her. I know that sounds weird. It sounds weird to me, even coming out of my own mouth.”

“So, you picked up different things in the lyrics of Micah’s songs and they led you here to my grandmother’s restaurant?” He looked at me like he was putting things together.

“Yes, I saw him in concert and I spoke to him briefly in person. He said some things about her that weren’t in the

lyrics of a song.”

“Like what?”

“Like she stopped and helped him when he was homeless—that she took him in.”

Isaac shrugged. “My grandma volunteers with the church,” he said. “She’s always helping somebody. And she probably let him stay in one of the apartments. Like I said, she owns the whole building.”

I stared at him and took in a deep breath. “Well, so, the story of your grandma maybe wasn’t nearly as intriguing as I thought. But I’m still sitting here, thinking about asking you for this job.”

He grinned. “Why is that?”

I let out a sigh. “I don’t know. Maybe just because. Is it okay to do something just because? I don’t know anyone in Seattle. I didn’t plan on moving here. But for some reason, I still might.”

“Well, I guess you could always come back and talk to me again once you decide.”

“No, no, I’m talking to you about a job first, and then that’ll make me decide if I’m going to stay or not.”

Isaac laughed at that. I loved his personality. I could already tell that we would get along great just by the playful but straight-faced demeanor that we used with each other.

“The job would be replacing Misty,” he said. “We need someone working full-time. Your schedule will vary a little each week, but I can work with you some. That’s what Misty was doing. I’d love to get someone in here full-time, but if you only feel comfortable part-time, we could probably still work with you.”

“It might be a while before I’m any good at waiting tables,” I said.

“Why? Are you a slow learner?”

“No, I’m a fast learner, but I’ve never tried waiting tables. I’ve only worked as a hostess, and I know there’s a lot more to waiting on tables. I hate to promise that I wouldn’t get overwhelmed right at first.”

“You probably will get overwhelmed right at first,” Isaac said with a patient half-grin. “No one can really promise they won’t.”

“I guess you’re right, but I saw your lunch rush today, and I’ve never tried to deal with anything like that. I saw how busy you were. Plus, carrying the trays.”

“Carrying trays? What about it?”

“I don’t know how.”

“Go back to where we just were, in the kitchen. Grab a tray and make the following drinks for this four-top.” He pointed to the place in front of himself. “I’ll have an ice water, no lemon.” He pointed to the place next to him as if there was someone sitting there. “An ice tea—unsweetened.” He pointed at the place next to me. “A Sprite with very little ice.” He pointed to my place. “And whatever you want.”

“I already have water.”

“Pretend you don’t,” he said. There was a hidden smile in his expression. I looked at each spot on the table, doing my very best to remember. *Ice water, no lemon. Ice tea, unsweetened. Sprite.* There was something about the Sprite, but I couldn’t remember.

“Do you want me to go right now?” I asked, hesitantly.

“Yes,” he answered, grinning.

I got up and walked toward the kitchen, staring at the floors and feeling like I was in a dream as I moved. There was a second drink station behind the counter, but I went to the one in the kitchen like he told me. I was prepared to explain myself to whoever questioned me, but no one did.

There was a stack of trays near the drink station, and I took a small one and placed it face-up on the counter next to me. I didn’t give myself time to think about it. I didn’t reach

for the paper cups. I went straight for the plastic cups Isaac had used earlier. They were much nicer than the ones at my restaurant, and I immediately started putting ice into the first one with the scooper. *Ice. It was ice. The Sprite. It had something special with the ice.* I was relatively sure Isaac said take it easy on the ice.

I placed a small amount of ice in the Sprite cup, and then I made all of the others with just over half a cup of ice. I made a water with no lemon, an unsweetened tea, the Sprite... and... I stood there, trying to remember the fourth drink. I stared straight ahead for what must've been ten seconds until I smiled at myself and remembered that it was my choice. I proceeded to make the drink of all drinks, a graveyard.

I tapped the fountain, letting small spurts come out of each dispenser.

Sprite.

Coke.

Root beer.

Root beer.

I moved to the diet soda but then decided against it and went to the Fanta.

Fanta.

Fanta.

Coke.

Sprite.

I considered lemonade, but I passed on that also.

Coke.

Root beer.

I smiled at the familiar color of the liquid I used to order at concessions stands when I was a kid.

I had worked in that restaurant a year, and I had never once made a graveyard or carried drinks on a tray. I had no idea how that had happened. In this moment, I hated the fact

that I had no practice at carrying trays. I was fairly coordinated, though, and maybe it helped that I was blindly confident and determined to rise to the challenge. I balanced the cups evenly toward the center of the tray and then carefully slid it to the edge of the counter, balancing it on my fingertips, which were placed as centered and as evenly spread as I could.

I didn't give myself time to think about it.

I picked up the tray and held it in front of me, balancing it on one hand in what I imagined was the appropriate way to carry a server's tray. I balanced it with all my might, concentrating on each step as I walked out of the kitchen and through the restaurant. I knew there were a few employees who noticed me, but I didn't stop. I walked straight to Isaac's table.

I was concentrating so intently on getting the tray from point A to point B without dropping it that I hardly remembered to breathe. I set the tray down on the table, smiling at myself for making it all the way there.

And then I continued the job. I remembered the order in the correct places. I placed the water with no lemon in front of Isaac, the ice tea, unsweetened in the place next to him. I put the Sprite next to my spot and then I set my mixed soda in front of me before sitting down. I sat back in the booth, relaxing and finally breathing as I looked at Isaac.

He smiled and shook his head at me. He raised his eyebrows, his green eyes twinkling with mischief.

"You should have another inch or so of soda in these, and you should take them off of the tray while you're holding it rather than setting the tray on the table first."

My eyes widened at him.

"What? What's that face for? Was that difficult?" he asked, smiling at me.

"Yes," I said. "That was so hard. I can't believe I actually did it. I've never even tried to hold a tray before, let alone with something on it. I thought you were about to stand up and cheer for me when I got over here."

He laughed.

“No, really, I knew they needed more, but I didn’t want to spill. I figured you’d rather me be safe than sorry.”

“Seriously not bad for a first try,” he said. “How do you get away with working in a restaurant and not ever hold a tray?”

I laughed. “I have no idea! I have practice at the cash register and getting to-go orders in bags. I’m your girl for either of those things. But I’ve never so much as picked up a tray.”

Isaac leaned over and picked up the tea and took a sip of it, tasting it to make sure if it was right.

“What’d you make yourself?” he asked. “It looks like you mixed everything.”

“I did mix everything,” I said. “It’s called a graveyard.”

He smiled. “A graveyard, huh?”

I took a sip out of the side of the cup. “I wish I would have brought myself a straw,” I said. “I forgot that.”

“You can go get one if you want,” he returned.

“It’s okay.” I smiled, still feeling proud of myself.

“Misty would usually make tips anywhere from eighty to a-hundred-and-fifty dollars in a day, if she’s working a double, which she always did.”

“Whoa, really?” I asked, thinking that sounded great. “It seems like Misty had some experience. Do you think I’ll be able to keep up?”

“Rita seemed to think so. She told me not to let you leave here without giving you a job.”

“She did? She said that?” I asked, beaming and feeling like I had just won the lottery. I had no idea why it made me so happy to get Rita’s approval, but it definitely did.

Chapter 6

“But regardless what Rita thinks,” Isaac said. “We should make sure you’re actually interested in the job before we go any further.

“I am interested,” I said.

“When would you be looking at moving here?” he asked. He absentmindedly sat forward and adjusted the tray and the extra glasses so that they would be out of our way.

“Right now,” I said. “I think I’d be ready to start anytime. You know, once I got a place and everything. I don’t even think I would need to... I could have my parents and a few friends... the long story short is that... uh... I think I could... February. February first is when I can start.”

“And you would be settled in and living in Seattle by then?”

“Yes,” I said, taking a sip of my soda. Drinking the graveyard made me feel like I was a kid again, which was comforting in a moment where I was out of my element and trying to think on my feet.

“Are you just deciding today that you’re moving here?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“That’s kind of cool, I think.”

I grinned. “I hope it’s cool,” I said. “I feel a little cool right now.” I made a face and Isaac laughed. He was entirely too handsome.

“That’s what my grandmother saw in you, right there.”

“What do you mean?”

“That smile. You, just being you, being real. People come here for the experience. If you can show up and just be into it and try your best to make people happy, then you’ll fit in. What’s your last name?”

“Matthews.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s right. Cal. He asked about you today when he came back.”

“Did he really?”

Isaac nodded. “Did you graduate from high school?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“How were your grades?”

“Is this part of the interview?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t you need a piece of paper or something?”

“No. Why, do you need a piece of paper?”

“No. I just thought... aren’t you going to write stuff down?” I trailed off and shrugged. “I had good grades. I just didn’t go to college.”

“Any college was my next question.”

“Nope.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-three.”

“Any criminal record?”

“No. Do you?”

“Do I have a record? No. How about your previous work experience?”

“I’ve been full-time at the bank as a teller for three years. I worked at a daycare and babysat a bunch during high school, and then I went to the bank. I also work cleaning and things like that. I only do a couple of houses now that I have both of my other jobs.”

“The bank teller and the restaurant?”

“Yes. El Poncho. Like I said, it’s just hostessing. I mostly take to-go orders and package them, I already mentioned that. But seriously, that tray was a feat for me. I can’t see myself being able to do that a hundred times on day one.”

“I can’t see myself asking you to do it a hundred times on day one,” he said. “Take one home with you and practice. We’re busy and it’s a big restaurant, so you’ll have to build certain muscles, but that’s no big deal. That takes time. We can train you and start you at part-time for the first week or two if you want.”

“I’ll practice,” I said. “I’ll pick up on it quickly. I just need to know if you’re okay waiting on me if I can’t be in Seattle until the beginning of February.”

“Yeah, that’s why I’m still giving you the interview.”

I smiled when he said that. It was honestly surreal that we were interviewing. He was just sitting there talking to me like we were friends.

“Would you be okay with putting me in touch with your other bosses?”

“Yeah, definitely,” I said. “We get along really well. If I move back home, I’ll probably go back to those same places to work. My bosses like me. I never call in sick or anything like that. They’ll give me a good reference.”

I could feel myself getting nervous and feeling like I wanted to impress him, and I made myself pause. I took another sip of my drink just to have something to do with my mouth.

“I’ll have you write down their contact information before you leave. We have a short application that I’ll have you fill out with your contact information also.”

“I already did it,” I said, nodding.

“What are your interests? What type of person would you describe yourself as?”

“Like hobbies?”

“Yeah.”

I took a deep breath. “I don’t know. I’m not sure that I know myself very well yet, to be honest. I started working while I was still in high school, and my life has pretty much been work since then. I work every day except Sunday, and

most of the time, I pick up a shift on Sunday, too—whether it’s cleaning or the restaurant. I was doing that to pay something off, but even after that was done, I kept working all the time. If I have to think about something I like... I love music, and I like animals, although I don’t have any pets. When I’m home, I’m usually tired from work, so I just do something fun or relaxing. I read mostly, or watch TV—nothing too educational.”

“How much do you read?”

“About a book a week. During the week, I read and then watch TV at night.”

“Do you ever go out?”

“No. It costs too much. I have friends who do that, and they’re always broke.”

“You don’t have to tell me, but what were you paying off? I’m curious about why you were working so hard.”

“It was a medical bill. I got into a car accident when I was in high school. My parents had bad insurance coverage, and we ended up owing fifty-thousand dollars. It was hospital bills for myself and car repairs for the other guy. I had surgery and everything. Anyway, my parents weren’t really concerned with my health. They hated me for wrecking the car and putting them in debt with the medical bills. I was sixteen when that happened, and I just finished paying off those bills eight months ago. They still live in Oklahoma, not too far from where I live. I paid for it, and my parents forgave me, but our relationship is... strained.” I said the word while I was making a face, and he sucked air through his teeth.

“Yeah, you think so?”

“I didn’t mean to get so deep,” I said with a little smile. “I’m a happy person and everything. But I guess it does help if you were wondering why someone would even think about picking up her life and moving across the country. I don’t have too much going on back home.”

“I was wondering that a little,” he said, with a sweet half-smile. “And I can tell that you’re a happy person.”

I shrugged. “I’m happy because your grandma told you to hire me. I think that’s the coolest thing ever.”

“I think you’re cool for thinking that’s cool,” he said.

“Do you have any physical repercussions?”

“From the accident?”

He nodded.

“My calf. It’s a little messed up. My leg was broken. I had to have surgery, and I have a few pins, and my calf on my left leg doesn’t look normal.”

“What’s not normal about it?”

“There’s a chunk-looking-thing taken out of it.”

“A chunk?”

“It’s not a bloody chunk or anything. It’s skin now, and it’s healed and everything, but shape-wise it’s not quite right. They had to take some of my muscle out right there.”

“Did you have to get over your surgery with your parents being mad at you?”

“Yeah, and that was not fun,” I said with a smile.

“How did you get through that?”

“God.”

“Really?”

“Yes. It probably sounds cliché, but there were some dark days back when it first happened, and yes. God. Big time. I don’t know what I would have done if I didn’t have Him—some sort of hope that this world isn’t all there is.” I shrugged. “Music helped, too.”

“That’s probably why Rita loved you.”

I gave him a smile. “Why do you call her by her name?” I asked.

“I call her Rita up here, usually, and Birdy at home or when I’m talking to family. But she would love your story, though. You should tell it to her sometime.”

I smiled. "I'm sure I will, if I get the job."

"You have the job, Jordan. I'll give you some time to get home and let your employers know, and then I'll call and double-check with them. But I'm giving you the job if you want to work here."

"Thank you," I said, feeling excited and trying not to let it be obvious.

"I don't mind waiting until the first of February," he added. "But please call if you change your mind because I... Claire, this is Jordan."

A female who was about my age was walking past, and Isaac pointed at me when he spoke, talking to her. Without hesitation, the girl sat on his side of the booth, collapsing next to Isaac in a way that was extremely familiar.

"Jordan, this is my sister, Claire."

I smiled and waved at her, and she extended her hand for me to shake. She had lighter hair than Isaac, and she wasn't a stranger to a salon. She was beautiful, and she looked me in the eyes and smiled sincerely like her brother did. Miss Rita was the same way. They were a nice family.

"Are you coming to work here?" Claire asked. Her expression was hopeful.

"Yes," I said, trying to seem sure of myself.

"Yesssss! I cannot do any more of this three-days-a-week stuff. I have at least fifty hours a week of stuff to do at my other job."

"Whoa, what's your other job?" I asked.

"Next door. It's a clothing store. A thrift store."

"Oh, you work there? That place is *amazing*. I went in there before I came here to eat lunch earlier, and I wanted everything I saw. I've never been to such a cool thrift store."

"Thank you," Claire said. "I love it. It's my baby." She made a face and rolled her eyes, pointing a thumb at her

brother. “I need to be over there right now, but *someone* can’t take me off the schedule.”

”*You* can’t take you off the schedule,” Isaac said.

“I’m usually only here on Tuesdays and Thursdays,” Claire said, winking at me. “I used to be here full-time before I started the shop. I love this place. You’re going to love working here. We have a good core group that has been here for years. Do you live close by?”

“I don’t, no, not yet, I don’t live anywhere. Yet. I live in Oklahoma currently. I’m moving here in a couple of weeks—by the first.”

Isaac grinned at me. “She’s starting on the first.”

Chapter 7

Three weeks later

Today was my second day on the job at Jimmy's. I had only been in Seattle for three days, and I was out of it and exhausted, but it was probably better that way so I didn't start to second-guess myself. Actually, all I did was second guess myself. I had been nothing but second-guessing since I moved.

Jimmy's was fine, though. I was overwhelmed with the new surroundings and information, and things hadn't gone as planned with my living situation, but it was good, considering.

Isaac started me behind the counter. I made drinks and bagged to-go orders. I also did some cash register work. Those tasks came to me easily because of experience from my old job. I was still nervous. I wanted to be so good that no one would be disappointed or have to correct me.

I was an hour-and-a-half into my second shift when Cal walked in. I knew he would be my customer. I had shadowed Isaac all day yesterday, but today I was given some responsibility. I would serve the two customers at the end of the counter, and I knew, because of the timing with them being empty, that Cal was going to sit in one of them. He did his best to sit at the counter every day. I had already served two customers, but both of my stools were empty when Cal walked in. He crossed to the end of the counter, talking to a few people on his way.

I was busy wiping another spot that had just opened up. It was in Isaac's station, but I had been helping him out since I was only covering two spots.

"Hey Cal," I said.

"Hey, I saw you here yesterday," Cal said.

"Yes, you did," I said. "I'm starting to work here, and so Isaac let me take orders over here on these two stools." I gestured to the one he was about to sit on. "If you sit there, I'll be taking your order." I pointed at the spot where I had just

wiped. “This is Isaac’s station. If you want him to take your order, you should sit in this one.

“Where’s Cindy?”

“She’s over by the windows today.”

“Oh, she’s not at the bar?”

“No.”

“What about Misty?”

“Nope. Portland. It’s just me and Isaac.”

He gave me a sideways glance like he was trying to decide whether or not he trusted me.

“You should try me out,” I said, gesturing to the place where he was about to sit down. “I think I already know your order even though I’ve never waited on you before.

“What is it?”

“A hamburger with extra pickles, fries, and barbeque sauce.”

“How do you know my order?”

“I was following Isaac around yesterday. You sat over there.”

“Yeah, because this stool was taken up by someone with a fish sandwich.”

“I know, Isaac mentioned that you prefer the end.”

“Yeah.”

“And you don’t want fish,” I added.

“No, I do not eat fish.”

“You order a hamburger.”

“With pickles only and extra ketchup on the side.”

“I thought it was barbeque.”

“It was yesterday, but I change which one I want.”

“Okay. I can’t remember what you had to drink.”

“The same thing I have every day,” he said, smiling and seeming in a chipper mood since I had gotten his order correct.

“I can’t remember what it is,” I said.

“I have one cup of Sprite with my hamburger and then I have one cup of coffee once it hits the nine.”

“Once what hits the ... oh, the clock?” I asked, understanding once I saw where he was aiming his gaze.

“At twelve-forty-five you have coffee?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Okay. I can do that. Do you want your Sprite right now while you’re waiting on your burger?”

“What does Misty do?” he said.

“You tell me,” I said. “I didn’t get to ask Misty that before she moved.”

“She gets my Sprite right now.”

“Okay, you can sit right there. I’ll go grab your drink and let the kitchen know about your burger.”

I went to the kitchen window and placed the ticket for Cal’s burger on the track.

“I saw Cal come in,” Mister Jim said from the grill. “Isaac’s out there if you need a hand.”

“Oh, it’s fine. Cal’s warming up to me, I think.”

“How’s it going for you out there?” he asked. “Did the man with the hat leave you anything?”

“Yes, sir, four dollars, I think. Three and some change.”

“That’s good,” he said. “I was worried because he stayed for a while after he ate.”

“Oh, it was fine,” I said. “I’m kind of glad to not be too busy on my first day doing it alone.”

“Isaac said you were doing great out there.”

“Thank you,” I said. “It’s a lot faster-paced than my old restaurant. I’m doing my best to keep up.”

“My mom told me you moved into Mrs. Blankenship’s extra bedroom.”

“I did,” I said. “Temporarily. It was really nice of her to offer.”

“What happened with your place?”

“That room was a scam. The guy took my money. It wasn’t even his house. He was over there with a friend of a friend when he gave me the tour.”

“Oh, man, I’m sorry. So, you just lost your money?”

“Yes. I was about to leave Seattle because there was nothing else on the market that I could afford, but your mom introduced me to Mrs. Blankenship. I told her I’m just staying for a couple of weeks... really, I’d like to stay ten days, at the most... just until I find another place.”

I walked out after that. I had been filling up Cal’s drink as I spoke to Jim, and I left once it was full. Jim had been listening to me while I spoke, but I left once I was done with the drink. Neither of us said goodbye—that was just the way conversations worked in a kitchen. I took Cal his drink and set it in front of him.

I had only been talking to him for a minute or two when I noticed someone coming our way. I saw the movement from my periphery, and I smiled as I looked in that direction.

My smile faded when I realized who was approaching. It was a tall, dark, handsome man. It was the same guy who was rude to me on the first day. I actually dreaded seeing him. I secretly hoped that he’d never come into the restaurant ever again.

“This one’s open,” I said to him, referring to Isaac’s section. He was getting dreadfully close to my open stool, and I gestured to the spot where he would be seated with someone else.

“This one’s open for you, JD.”

I cringed as I looked at Cal to find that he was patting the stool next to him.

“He might want to sit right here,” I said, tapping the bar. I said it loudly enough to get the man’s attention, and he stopped walking and looked at me.

“This one’s open,” I repeated.

“But so is that one. Isn’t it, Cal?”

“It’s open. And JD doesn’t eat lunch at the same time as me because he’s too busy at work.”

“I’m about to sit here and eat with you today, my man. I had stuff to tie up, so I’m eating late.” He had been walking as he spoke and by the time he finished, he was standing behind my open barstool.

“I’m serving this section,” I said.

He made eye contact with me. His eyes were so dark, I almost couldn’t see the pupils. He seemed mysterious, verging on dangerous.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked.

“Nothing. I just thought you might want to sit in Isaac’s station since you knew him.”

“I know Cal, too,” JD said. “What’s up, Cal?”

“JD’s my best friend over here,” Cal said, standing to give JD a half-hug.

“This is Misty’s new girl,” Cal said, informing JD. “She’s got a boy’s name, but then she told me she likes the Beatles and she’s always wanted to try throwing a frisbee. And then... what did you say about the Beatles?” he asked, looking at me.

“Just that I liked them.” Cal looked confused, but I wasn’t sure what he was trying to say, so I turned my attention to JD. I grabbed a nearby menu and went to set it in front of him. “Can I get you something to drink while I give you a minute to look at the—”

“I don’t need a minute. I don’t need a menu. My dad’s in the kitchen. He saw me come in. I will take a cup of coffee, though, please. Black. And some ice water. Thank you.”

“Sure,” I said, without reacting to the bomb he just dropped on me. There was only one man in the kitchen who could be his dad and that was Jim. That would mean he was Rita’s grandson and Isaac’s cousin. I had heard them mention JD. *Was this JD Alexander?*

I went to the nearest drink station and made a water and a coffee.

For the next half-hour, things went great with JD and Cal. I brought Cal his coffee at twelve-forty-five on the dot, and he liked that I remembered. The two of them talked, mostly, but I chimed in when I went over there to check on them.

Cal’s departure was as timed as his arrival. He left every day at one o’clock just as sure as he came in at twelve-thirty. Back in the day, he used to hang out in one of the bar stools for hours at a time, but for years now, he had been staying for thirty minutes every day and not a minute more. Two different people had told me that fact.

Cal walked out before JD, and as soon as he did, I went over to clear his dishes. “Hey, I wasn’t trying to say anything with Cal here, but what do you think you’re doing? What is it you’re trying to do by working here?”

I looked at JD with a shocked expression. He stared at me like he expected me to answer his question. There was a man sitting right next to him on the opposite side of where Cal had been. I leaned over the bar, favoring the empty spot so I could speak quietly.

“I’m trying to earn money,” I said. I wanted to add, “That’s what you do at jobs,” but I held my tongue.

“By trying to dig up some story and sell it to the tabloids? There’s nothing to tell. So, leave my family alone.” He wasn’t speaking loudly, but he also wasn’t whispering. JD was straight-faced and unflinching, and I cringed, feeling embarrassed and humiliated. I took a deep breath, fighting to hold back tears at his scorn.

“Just so you know... no. You’re way off about me.”

“Why are you here, then?” he asked.

“To work.”

“To wait on tables?” he asked, tilting his head at me like he couldn’t believe anything I was saying.

“Yes, to wait on tables,” I said. “Maybe I came here thinking I would talk to your grandma, but I have nothing to do with the tabloids. Miss Rita asked me if I wanted a job and I took it. I’m not trying to write a big story. Maybe at one time, I thought of that, but I didn’t have any actual plans. And then your grandma offered me a job, and I really did just want to work here. I’m not trying to expose anything. Although your touchy attitude makes me think you guys are hiding something. Are there dead bodies in the freezer or something?”

He looked at me seriously. “No.”

I grinned a little, encouraging him to lighten up.

He leaned forward, crooking his finger to tell me to go toward him. “There are no dead bodies in the fridge, Jordan, but there is a good reason for you to mind your own business about the room that Micah Lacey stayed in. Don’t ask questions about it. Don’t try to talk to my grandma about it. It doesn’t matter. Just leave it alone.”

“Fine,” I said, pulling back a little and giving him an offended stare. He smelled amazing, and I shouldn’t have been close enough to tell. “But, just so you know, your attitude about it makes me even more curious.”

“It’s not even that big of a deal, and you’re putting people’s safety in danger. So, please.”

“Fine,” I said. “I wasn’t even going to do anything. I’m staying with a lady in this building, and I didn’t even ask her one thing about it.”

“Who are you staying with in this building?”

“Mrs. Blankenship.”

“How do you know her?” His expression seemed concerned. I wasn’t sure if it was for me or for her.

“Your grandma introduced us. I got scammed on a room for rent, and I was having a hard time finding a place to stay.”

“What’d you get scammed out of?”

“The price of the room.”

“How much?”

“First and last month’s rent.”

“How much?”

“Seventeen-hundred.”

“Just go over there and get your money back.”

I scoffed. “I can’t. No one knows him. He was just over at their house. I have no idea where he is.”

“You shouldn’t have let that happen. You shouldn’t leave yourself vulnerable to losing that much money to a scam. Where are your parents, or husband, or someone to take care of you?”

I made a face at him again. *Who was he to be so bold?* I pulled back and stared straight into his eyes with an expression that said I was disappointed with him for being so unlikeable. He was the only person who had been rude to me in Seattle.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Because you’re not a very nice person,” I said quietly and through a fake smile. “Can I get you a to-go bag?” I asked the question from over my shoulder, but he was already standing.

“No,” he said.

Chapter 8

Roughly a week later

I loved Seattle. I loved Jimmy's on 2nd, and I, like Micah Lacey, loved Rita Alexander. I was quite fond of all of her offspring as well. Even the brutish, surly JD Alexander had grown on me. He and I were on good terms now and had engaged in several lengthy conversations which were all cordial and had nothing to do with Micah's room. JD was totally tolerable in the grand scheme of things. Isaac, on the other hand, was amazing, and so was Claire. Big Jim in the kitchen had quickly become like a dad to me. I went straight in there and hugged him every time I came to work, and now he expected it.

I hadn't met Papa Jim. yet. Rita had been in the restaurant a few times since I started work, but her husband stayed at their home in the woods where he tended to their dogs, chickens, koi pond, and massive garden. I had heard all about it in spite of me not asking any questions about Rita or her family.

I knew she owned the building, and I figured JD was valid when he said it was none of my business whether her apartments were secret or not. But the family was open and friendly. I heard their conversations with customers and with me and each other, and there was nothing that seemed secretive. They were sweet and down-to-earth, and that was why people kept coming back to Jimmy's. The food was good as well. The roast beef was amazing. I had eaten half of a sandwich for lunch every day since I had been working there. I was only in my second week at Jimmy's and it already felt like home.

It was Valentine's Day, which happened to fall on a Saturday this year. I was working, and I dressed for the holiday. I wore a pink and red striped shirt, a red scarf tied around my high ponytail. I even lined my eyes with eyeliner and shadow, giving them a darker smoky look, and wore pink lipstick.

I had nothing against Valentine's day, but I wasn't especially fond of it since I didn't have a significant other. I was mainly excited because last night was my first night in my new apartment and I absolutely loved it.

I got up at the crack of dawn because I was so pumped. I spent extra time getting dressed, and I left for work early because I wasn't sure how long it would take me to walk there. I was in such a good mood that I had a spring in my step and I got to Jimmy's quickly. I was supposed to clock in at 11am, but I got to work fifteen minutes early.

"Hey," I said, coming into the kitchen. There was a different crew working—the weekend crew. I had already talked to Becca on my way in. I thought I would see Robert at the grill, and I was surprised when I got there and found Jim. "Hey, Mister Jim. What are you doing here on a Saturday?"

"Robert asked for the day off to spend Valentine's with his lady. I could have got someone else to cover for him, but I didn't mind coming in. You look beautiful, Jordan. Where are you going? Do you have a Valentine's date I didn't know about tonight?"

"No, sir, I just got a new mirror," I said, laughing. "But I moved into my new apartment yesterday, and I love it so much. It's only five blocks from here."

The kitchen was busy, but Jim was such an old pro at this that he could cook quickly and with excellence while holding a conversation. I stood a few feet from him, giving him space to work.

"Where'd you hear about your new place?" he asked me.

"Your mom told me. I had that thing happen with the scam when I first moved here, and then I stayed with Mrs. Blankenship, which has been amazing. She's a cool lady. But then, just like three days ago, your mom told me about a friend of hers that had a place for rent. It was seriously straight from heaven. It wasn't even posted online—just word of mouth. It's a gorgeous studio apartment, and I got it for the same amount as I was going to pay to rent that scam bedroom."

“That’s amazing,” Jim said. “Where is it?”

“Down on Virginia. It’s in the Piedmont Building.”

“Oh, yeah, I, I know that building well,” Jim said. “It’s a real nice place.”

“Yeah, I don’t know how I got it. I would say it’s too good to be true, but I already signed the lease and everything. I think I’m locked in and I get to stay there for a year. I mean, goodness, if all else fails, I can move back to Oklahoma after the year is up. I’m so happy that place worked out.”

“What about your car?”

“That worked out, too. I thought I might hold onto it and try to get it up here later, but I went ahead and put it on Craigslist when I got scammed. I knew I’d need the money to get a place over here. But good news with that, too—it already went through. That guy bought my car.”

“Did he?”

I nodded. “My friend took care of it. She got a cashier’s check from him. She already took it to the bank for me.”

“That’s great,” Jim said. “I didn’t know you found that place on Virginia. That’s crazy. That changes things for you.”

“I know. I’m so excited. I hope it’s not too good to be true. I slept there last night, so it seems like everything’s fine. I just can’t believe it. I thought I would have to get an apartment miles away, and I walked here in like five minutes just now. I almost busted into song as I was walking down the sidewalk, like I was in a musical.”

Jim laughed and handed me a small plate. It was a singular piece of toast, cut in half diagonally with butter, along with a small portion of scrambled eggs.

“Thank you,” I said. “How’d you know I haven’t eaten?”

“Because you moved into a new apartment yesterday. You probably don’t have any food in your fridge yet.”

“I don’t. You’re exactly right. But I do have a little grocery store close by,” I said. “And I still want a bite of your

eggs even after I do go to the market. Thank you for this.” I took it from Jim and set it down so that I could give him a hug. He smiled as he took me into his arms. We exchanged a quick, tight hug like we had done since the first day I started work.

Jim would say that he was the black sheep of the family even though he was the one who had been working at the restaurant the longest. He would tell you that all the pretty girls liked Samuel, his younger brother. He told me that working at the restaurant was the last resort after a long line of bad decisions, including a few for which he had to ask his children’s forgiveness. But I loved Jim. He was a good man who had regrets, and he had become a father figure to me since I moved there.

“Go get a cup of coffee and take a minute in the back before you clock in,” he said.

“Yes, sir,” I agreed, walking off with my small plate of food. “Thanks again!”

It was only my second time to work a Saturday, so I wasn’t sure what to expect. We were busy, but I felt confident and comfortable already. In the last few weeks, I focused all my energy on learning the job and being good at it, and I had caught on quickly. I kept up with my section and was even able to chip in at the counter some.

I was in a great mood, and I put on a Valentine’s party playlist that had us singing along and dancing in the kitchen. We had a good crew working, and we had fun doing the whole day-of-love thing even though over half of us were single.

Rita and Papa Jim came by during our slow time at around 3pm, and I was excited that I finally got to meet him. It had been my favorite day in Seattle so far, and it had gone by quickly.

We were at the end of our dinner rush when I saw JD Alexander come in. I was standing near the end of the counter, and I looked at the clock to find that it was 7pm.

“What are you doing here at dinnertime on a Saturday night?” I asked, going right up to him when he walked in.

“What are you doing playing this music?” he replied, looking me over.

“And why are you dressed like that?”

“Hello to you, too,” I said, smiling at him.

He glanced at me as he walked. He was headed to the only open spot at the bar, and I said, “Becca’s going to be right with you.”

He hesitated.

JD hesitated, pausing in mid-motion, and looking at me like he might shift gears and go somewhere else. “Okay,” he said, shaking his head a little. He still went for the barstool, but there were a few seconds where I thought he might not. I thought he might ask for my section, and I got a hot, liquid, gushing feeling in the pit of my stomach because of it. JD Alexander had hesitated, and for whatever reason, maybe it was his expression, but I thought it was because he liked me and wanted me to be the one to wait on him.

My heart raced the next few times I walked by JD. I had to do it every time I walked from my station to the kitchen.

He looked at me and leaned back a little when I walked by this last time. Everyone else was hunched over the bar, so I easily noticed JD as he leaned back to get my attention.

“How are you doing, Mister Alexander? I love your father, by the way. Did you know your dad and I love each other? I’m just, I... I just love your dad. I think he’s a good person and we get along great.”

“Thank you,” he said, looking at me, staring at my face.

I was hesitating near the back of his stool, and he was staring at me in such a way that held me there.

“Did you need me to get you something?” I asked.

“Why are you dressed like that?” he asked instead of answering my question.

“Because it’s Valentine’s Day. And Isaac said as long as I was wearing my apron and dark pants, it didn’t matter what

shirt I wore. I moved into my new apartment yesterday, and I found this when I was putting up some of my stuff.”

He reached up and touched the back of my hair—my ponytail.

“What?”

“Nothing,” he said. His dark eyes were completely unreadable, and I didn’t know what to say, so I shrugged and turned and kept walking to the kitchen.

James David Alexander was not a man who typically stared at me for no reason. He wasn’t a man who wasted time by reaching out to touch my hair. I had been around him enough and I knew enough of their family dynamics to know that he took after Samuel, Isaac and Claire’s dad. They were both brilliant businessmen and investors. JD had gotten his first job at fifteen, and by eighteen he had made a million dollars. (That part I heard as a rumor from a customer, and not from family. But it checked out with other hints I had gotten since I had been there.)

JD definitely wasn’t the type to get lost staring at me or anyone else for no reason. Not just that, but he seemed to be looking at me with a different expression tonight.

My heart hammered in my chest, and I found it extremely difficult to concentrate on my work after that interaction. I stayed on track with my tables, being careful to avoid conversations with JD when I walked past him.

He finished his sandwich and was still sitting there when a couple of places opened up at the counter. Jim came out of the kitchen and sat next to his son. “Are you about done?” Jim asked as I walked behind them.

“I am done,” I said. “I just gave Becca my last table.” I stopped near the back of their stools, and they both turned to face me.

“I called my son up here and I really think you two should get something to eat together.”

“Dad, wh-, no, I’ve already eaten. I just ate.”

Neither of us expected Jim to say that, but JD instantly rejected the idea and I felt hurt by it, so I nodded and smiled as I started to walk off, headed toward the kitchen. I was having certain feelings about him, and that stung. I had to play it off.

“Yeah, that’s cool. I might just eat something here. I would have eaten with JD, no problem, but he’s busy. He’s already too full. Thanks though, Mister Jim. I’ll eat here or get some food on my way home.”

I grinned widely as I left them, passing off the moment like it had been a casual suggestion on Jim’s part. I acted really unaffected and aloof as I continued walking to the kitchen, but my heart was pounding, and if I was being honest, it was slightly broken.

Chapter 9

James David "JD" Alexander

"What are you doing, Dad?" JD asked when Jordan turned and walked away.

Jim shrugged casually, taking a sip of coffee and not even bothering to look at his son. "You're the one paying the girl's rent," Jim said. "I figured you'd want to take her to dinner. It is Valentine's Day, after all." Jim spoke quietly over a cup of coffee, and JD just stared at his father.

"Who told you?"

"She did. She came in smiling from ear to ear saying she rented some apartment in The Piedmont building on Virginia."

"How do you know it's one of my apartments?" JD asked. "There's eighty-something units in that building."

"Yeah, and you own half of them."

"I only own fifteen of them."

"Still. She said her rent was eight-fifty."

"She told you that?"

"Yes."

JD grimaced. "She shouldn't go around telling her business."

"It's fine. We're friends. She came up to me beaming this morning. She thinks she's getting some great deal from her landlord."

"She is," JD said.

Jim shrugged. "Well, I thought you might at least want to take her to dinner if you're gonna do all that."

"I can't believe that's why you called me up here."

"I can't believe you're losing thousands of dollars a month on a woman, and you won't admit that you want to take her to dinner."

“I’m not helping her because I want to take her out,” JD said, speaking quietly to his dad. “And I just sat here and ate.”

“Yeah, but you do want to take her out.”

“No, I don’t, Dad. She’s just naïve and trusting, and she got taken advantage of. I wanted to take care of her. I didn’t want to see her get disappointed and give up as soon as she got here, that’s all. I’m making money hand-over-fist on those units. I just roll the loss into it. It’s no big deal.”

Jim knew his son well enough to know that was a lie. JD did not “roll any losses” whatever that meant. He had a lot of money because he managed every cent.

“Birdy said Mrs. Blankenship loves her,” Jim said.

JD cut his eyes at his dad. “Why are you telling me that?”

“Because she must be a saint if she can get along with Ms. Blankenship. It’s like living at a perpetual church service up there. Mom said Jordan’s really smart with the Bible. She said she was talking a bunch of theology with Mrs. Blankenship the first time she introduced them. That was why Mrs. Blankenship was going to let her stay there indefinitely.”

JD wanted to marry a good, trustworthy woman, and Jordan’s ability to match old-school Biblical wits with Mrs. Blankenship was oddly attractive to him. It felt like his dad was exposing him by talking about it.

“Well, Jordan wasn’t going to stay with Mrs. Blankenship any longer. She was planning on going back to Oklahoma if she couldn’t find a place.” He shrugged. “I just reconciled with her staying there for a year. It is funny, though, that I would try to make a way for her to stay when I was trying to get rid of her at first. I like her now. I think she’s a good person.”

“I remember you said she was snooping around about Mom’s room when you first met her, but I’ve never known her to mention it.”

“She doesn’t,” JD said. “She’s not even curious. I talked to her about it, and she just dropped it.”

“And Lila’s fine, anyway,” Jim said. “She’s been safe and well for a year, JD. Everybody has kind of seen her coming and going. Mom said she’s working and saving, and she’ll be able to move into her own place soon. That guy’s not coming to look for her.”

“I know, but there’s still no point in chancing it,” JD said. “I don’t want some article being written. The last thing she needs is for her ex to find out where she is.”

“You could probably just tell Jordan,” Jim said. “She’s a nice girl. You could just tell her the truth about the room and that you don’t want anyone to find out about Lila.”

JD cut his eyes at his dad. Rita’s room wasn’t talked about. There were a few people who knew the details of it, but by and large, it was kept under wraps.

Jim shrugged. “Anyway, it’s probably good that you don’t care because I think your cousin has a thing for her.”

“Has a thing for who? Jordan?” JD squinted and Jim nodded.

“Isaac?”

“Yes.”

“For *Jordan*? No, he doesn’t.”

“Yes, he does, and you do, too.”

“You said that same thing about Lila. You said we were going to fight about Lila, and we didn’t.”

“I thought you did like Lila at first,” Jim said. “Everyone did. You get so touchy about her.”

“Because I’m the one who found her,” JD said. “I’m the one who had to see her all busted up on the side of the road.”

“Then what’s it with Jordan?” Jim asked. “She’s perfectly healthy. She has some money saved. She’s got a plan B back in Oklahoma if she needs to fall back on that.”

“What are you asking me?” JD said to his father.

“I’m wondering why you’re trying so hard to help her when she’s perfectly fine on her own.”

“Because she’s *not* fine. She needed my help. You’re confusing my generosity with feelings. I don’t care about her. She just needed my help, and I helped her.” Even as JD said those words, he knew they were untrue. He almost cringed outwardly when they came out of his mouth.

“Would you be okay if she started going out with Isaac?” Jim asked. “Because I could see that happening with the way they interact.”

“I didn’t say that I would or wouldn’t be okay with that. And don’t bait me about it. The girl can go out with anybody she wants.” JD tilted his head and squinted. “Why? Did Isaac seriously tell you he was interested in her? What do you mean, the way they interact? What do they do?”

“Nothing, but I can tell he likes her. He’d be smart to. She’s a sweetheart. She’s different than most girls.”

“Yeah, she’s *too* sweet,” JD said, scowling. “She must be walking around flirting with every single guy in the universe if Isaac and everybody else gets the idea that they want to go out with—”

“Whoooa, buddy,” Jim said. “Don’t get all worked up. I didn’t say anything about anybody else but Isaac going out with her. Although, I do see guys looking at her when she’s working.”

JD peered at his dad, knowing he was trying to wind him up. It was working, honestly. He was wound up tightly.

Unfortunately, JD couldn’t say anymore because Jordan came out of the kitchen. She was carrying her purse and a to-go cup with a lid and a straw. She stopped behind the counter to do something at the computer, and JD could not take his eyes off of her. He ached at the thought of her walking out of the restaurant. He was such an idiot. He watched as Jordan lifted her drink and absentmindedly took a sip of it. He was captivated by her face. She moved to walk toward them, looking up and meeting JD’s gaze. He looked away

immediately, turning to stare at his dad who was looking at Jordan and smiling.

“I still think you should go somewhere with my son tonight,” Jim said.

JD could not believe his father. It wasn't like Jim did this type of thing all the time. He had never put JD on the spot like this. It completely threw JD off. He reacted like an idiot again. “Dad!” he said, with wide eyes, begging his dad to stop.

Jordan came to stand next to them. She smiled and put her hand on JD's shoulder. He felt an electric shock, and he pulled away simply because his body reacted and did it by instinct. Moron.

Jordan's face fell a little, but then she shook her head and smiled at Jim. “I would personally love to hang out with JD anytime, but don't pressure him, Mister Jim, he doesn't want you to—”

“I was fine with it,” JD said. “I didn't want him pressuring *you*.”

“I feel no pressure whatsoever,” Jordan said. “I'm seriously having the best day ever. I moved into my new apartment yesterday.”

“I was telling JD about your new apartment,” Jim said suspiciously. JD shot his dad a warning glare that Jordan could not see.

“I made good tips today, too,” she added. “Thank you for cooking so good. That helps. Should I tip you?”

“No, baby, no, I'm just here because I want to be. Thank you, though. You should get something for your fridge with that tip money.”

“I am. I think I might stop at the grocery store on my way home.”

JD turned to her. “I never said I didn't want to go somewhere with you,” he said. Their eyes were locked. He had several good conversations with Jordan since she started working there, but JD hadn't been able to fully relax and be

himself around her. She stood right beside him, looking brave, staring unrepentantly into his eyes. JD was so attracted to her that he could hardly breathe.

Jim got up and walked off, and Jordan leaned in to stand even closer to JD as she moved to let Jim walk behind her.

“You never said you *did* want to go somewhere with me, either,” she said, being lighthearted. “You don’t need to take me somewhere just because your dad’s bugging you about it.” She smiled and took a sip of her soda like the whole thing was all really low-key.

“Fine, then it’s you who doesn’t want to go somewhere with me,” he said.

“What?”

“I’m offering, and you’re still here, acting like we’re misunderstanding each other.”

“I’m not misunderstanding anything,” Jordan said, looking him right in the eyes. “Your dad likes me, JD. He and I get along well. He’s messing with me, and messing with you. It’s no big deal. Bye Anne!” she said, looking past him.

“Bye!” Anne said. She came in for a hug. “Thanks for dancing with me today.”

“Oh, you’re welcome, thanks for dancing with me. I’m glad you guys let me play music,” Jordan said.

“You were a fun DJ,” Anne said. She started to walk off but then added, “Are you working tomorrow?”

“Yep,” Jordan said, nodding.

“Okay, I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

Anne walked off, and Jordan looked right at JD. “Anyway,” she said. “Don’t worry about your dad, or about me. I’m having a great day. I’m really excited about my new place.”

She leaned in and kissed JD on the cheek. It was a short, meaningless kiss to her, but it caused JD to snap to attention.

She grinned at him as she moved to walk away. “Happy Valentine’s Day, anyway, Mister Alexander.”

Chapter 10

Jordan Matthews

“Jordan!” I heard my name being called from behind me on the street, and I turned to find JD. I had just left work. I was on my way home and I was at the other end of the block when I stopped walking and waited for him. The night was still young, but it was dark out, and I smiled at the sight of JD approaching me with all of the city lights surrounding us. I could see Seattle’s Space Needle in the background of the scene with the way we were situated, and I smiled and thought of what a gorgeous picture it was. But then I registered JD’s scowl.

“You didn’t even give me time to leave a tip,” he said. “You just walked out.”

He was annoyed, and I scowled playfully back at him as I threw my cup away in a nearby garbage can. “I sat there and talked to you before I walked out JD.”

“Yeah, but then you just left. I didn’t know we were done. I-I had... other stuff to tell you.”

“Like what?” I asked, staring at him curiously. I stepped to the side to let someone get by me on the sidewalk, and JD did the same thing, making space for the person.

“You shouldn’t tell everyone what apartment you live in and how much you pay for rent. You shouldn’t do that. You need to keep that information to yourself. You could get yourself followed or hurt.”

JD’s expression was harsh, and I took offense. I didn’t think that’s what he would say to me, and I glared back at him.

“I didn’t go around telling people all those things,” I said defensively.

“You told my dad,” JD said.

“Yeah because I...” I gawked at him, feeling embarrassed. “Your dad’s *mother* got me the apartment, so I

didn't think it was a secret from him. Plus, I thought your dad was my friend. I didn't think it would matter."

"He is your friend."

"Then why are you so mad at me for telling him about my apartment?"

"I'm not mad that you told him. I'm just saying that you don't need to tell anyone else. Nobody needs to know your business, Jordan. You can get yourself hurt."

"What are you, the business police JD?"

He pulled back, looking like he was being taken off guard by my question. "I'm trying to help you," he said.

There was something about the way he stared at me. I could tell he really meant it. He did think he was helping. I took a second to think about what he was saying.

"Thank you," I said with a sincere half-smile. "You're right. I see what you're saying. I don't know anyone in this town. I shouldn't be telling a bunch of people about where I live." My smile broadened and my eyes widened with delight as I thought of it. "But you should see it, JD. It's gorgeous. I think some of my neighbors pay way more than me to live in that building. I guess I just have a small unit. I don't know. It's smaller than the place I had in Oklahoma, but it is waaaay nicer."

"Really?" he said, finally cracking a smile.

"Yes. Everything's so nice and new. I love it so much. I know it sounds weird, but I'm pretty sure God Himself gave me that place."

"What do you mean by that?"

"It's hard to explain standing here on the sidewalk, but there was this thing with Mrs. Blankenship. Long story short, we were talking about Ruth, a book in the Bible, and I was taking some notes about Ruth when your grandma called. She gave me the number for a lady named *Ruth* and told me to call her about an apartment. It was amazing. It's the same apartment that I'm living in right now—and it was right when

I was writing the name Ruth in my notes! Isn't that crazy? That's just God."

"That is crazy," JD said, looking at me like he was a little stunned.

"A kiss for a picture of you on Valentine's Day!" A very old, very Asian man came right up to us, speaking in a heavy accent. He was all decked out in a complicated outfit that involved a pointed straw hat, a robe, and a bunch of light contraptions hanging over his shoulders. He looked like a Chinese fisherman mixed with one of those street salesman guys who had a trench coat full of watches. He was an imposing character who moved and spoke swiftly. He came right up to us, crowding our space.

JD stepped between us protectively.

"Okay, good, get in the picture. Come on, Valentine's Day is for you two lovers. I have flowers and a picture for your lover on today, happy, happy Valentine's Day for you. Five dollars for a picture, five dollars for a flower. I will give you two for ten, three for ten. Two pictures and one flower for ten dollars."

He opened his robe, which was lined with beautiful red roses.

"This lover is okay to take your picture. If it prints, you're paying, okay? You kiss each other, and I take the picture and then you pay five dollars for your Valentine photoshoot, okay?"

He was speaking so quickly and aggressively, that I wasn't even sure if JD understood what he was saying. I had understood him, mostly, but JD just stared at him with an unreadable expression. I, however, had a pocket full of cash from tips, and I was easily willing to part with a few dollars for a chance at kissing JD. He was a proper gentleman, and I felt like it would never happen if I didn't jump on the opportunity.

"Okay," I said, nodding.

"Okay? Okay, good," the man said.

“Okay?” JD asked, looking confused.

I shrugged. “I have ten dollars.”

The stranger was waiting for that, and he was faster than greased lightning aiming the camera at us.

“Okay, okay, happy couple! One, two, three...” he said, waiting for us to kiss.

I didn’t give myself time to think about it. I grabbed the sides of JD’s face while I stretched upward and pressed my mouth to his. I held it just long enough for the guy to take a picture before pulling back.

It happened, and I barely got to enjoy it.

I looked at the guy. “Did you get it?” I said.

“Oh, yes, yes, yes. It’s a good picture.”

He clipped it to his hat in a practiced maneuver before picking up his camera again.

“Okay, I give you two pictures for ten and a rose. They’re nice. Nice paper. Four by six. See? They come out good. You want to take two? You need two of them, hubby. One for your office at work.”

“Don’t you think we need another one?” I said, playing along and looking at JD. “One more, for work?”

He stared at me for a moment and then opened his mouth slowly like he was trying to say something but was speechless.

“You know what? Let’s get one more,” I said, not waiting for him. “For the office, right? It is Valentine’s Day, after all.”

I turned, took JD’s face in my hands again. I kissed him again. I wasn’t sure why I did it or how I had the bravery. It was just a misunderstanding with this guy, and for some reason, I couldn’t stop myself from kissing him at the slightest opportunity.

I pressed my lips firmly against JD’s and I kept them there for one calculated second, a little longer than before. We didn’t break apart right away. Our lips lingered there long enough to soften and mold to each other. My body buzzed at

the feel of his warm lips. It was an actual kiss, and I didn't know if JD was pulling me in or I was pressing against him, but either way, we connected for a tender moment. Our mouths connected for a few glorious seconds before we finally broke apart.

JD was stunned, obviously. He looked at me with a serious expression when I moved, and I smiled and started to dig in my bag. I had to clear my throat to get words to come out. "Did you say ten dollars for both pictures and the flower?" I asked the man. "Three for ten?" I knew the price. It was a filler question to mask my nerves. I didn't care about the cost.

"Okay, oh, okay, you're going to buy for the gentleman," the guy said, sounding surprised.

"Okay, for you we do ten, okay?"

"No, she's not buying. The gentleman is going to buy it for her." JD took out his wallet and gave the guy ten dollars."

"Oh, you want just the one picture?" he said, sounding disappointed. "Two pictures. I want both of those pictures and the flower. You said that was the deal. Two pictures and a flower for ten dollars."

"Okay, okay, you drive a hard bargain... "

The man handed JD the underdeveloped pictures and a rose and just like that he turned and was gone.

JD took a deep breath as he looked at me, and then he held out the pictures and flower like he assumed I would take them from him, which I did. He seemed introspective.

"What?" I said.

"Nothing, I—"

"I'm sorry for doing that. I was just playing along. It's Valentine's Day, and the guy thought we were together, so... I just did it. I'm sorry. But I think ten dollars is a good deal for all this stuff, anyway. The rose alone would be ten at some places." I shrugged. I had a ten-dollar bill handy from a second ago when I dug for it. I handed it to him, smiling.

“Seriously, JD take it.” I held up the rose. “I just used it as an excuse to buy myself roses on Valentine’s Day.” I raised my eyebrows playfully and smiled at him. “I got kissed, too,” I added.

“That wasn’t a real kiss,” he said.

My smile fell. “Thanks JD,” I said sarcastically.

“And you can’t be going around doing that.”

“What? Kissing you? I said I was sorry.”

“I was talking about giving that guy money so easily. You can’t just give money to every person who asks you for it. And kissing me. You can’t go around doing that.”

“Thanks a lot for being so romantic, JD. I knew it was fake, and I knew you hated every second of it. It was just a joke, and I said I was sorry.”

“I didn’t say I hated it, I said it meant nothing to you and you can’t be going around doing that to people when it means nothing to you.”

He was agitated, staring at me seriously.

“You know what, JD, you sure do know how to talk to a lady.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means—nothing.” I moved to start to walk away, but he caught me by the arm.

“Tell me what it means. You can’t say something like that and then just walk away.”

“You’re harsh. You basically hurt my feelings when you’re trying to just have a normal conversation with me.”

“What did I say that hurt your feelings?” he asked, looking confused.

“Look, I’m sorry I kissed you. I’m sorry I told your dad about my apartment. I’m sorry for getting scammed out of my money and for being too friendly to people and for all the other things that really bug you about me. I’m sorry you don’t

like me. But I am who I am. That's just me. The guy told me to kiss you, so I did it. I was joking around. I thought it would be fun. I'm sorry. I reacted in the moment, and I'm sorry you didn't like it."

Chapter 11

JD Alexander

In those seconds, as Jordan turned and walked off, JD considered yelling out for her. He watched her begin to retreat down the sidewalk, wanting to say something to get her to stop but unable to get any words out.

He almost came clean about everything. He could tell Jordan about Rita's room. He could also tell her that he was her landlord and that there was a perfectly good explanation as to why she was put in touch with a lady named Ruth. He also wanted to tell her that he really, really enjoyed that kiss. His chest felt tight as he tried to think of a way to say any of those things.

JD didn't want to keep anything from Jordan, but he also didn't know how to say any of it. *Was she right about what she said? Was he mean to her?* He certainly hadn't meant to be. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt her. Everything he ever said to Jordan was meant to protect her and help her. He was stunned that she thought he was mean, and he just stood there and let her walk away.

JD couldn't get Jordan off of his mind all evening. He had gotten to know her some since she moved to Seattle, and the last impression he hoped to make on her was that he was rude. He didn't want it to be that way, and he didn't know what to do to fix it.

JD wasn't an expert when it came to matters of the heart. He grew up with women in his life, and no one had ever told him he was mean or rude. He had a no-nonsense personality that served him well in business and other life endeavors. He played division one college basketball on a team that went to the playoffs multiple times. Also, during college, he invested two thousand dollars in his roommate's app idea. That created his first windfall, which he invested in a couple of apartment units. JD made one good business decision after another, and he was now extremely successful.

He was focused and determined, and not the least bit distracted. He did not get tempted by consumerism or impressing people with his lifestyle. He lived well within his means, and it just so happened that his means were now a lot. JD now owned and managed over a hundred properties, quite a few of which were completely paid off. Most were apartments, but he also owned and leased a couple of retail spaces. He went to school for engineering, but he was mentally built for obtaining property and maintaining it, so that was what he did with his time. Sometimes, he was a construction worker, a plumber, or an electrician. He did most of the handyman work himself until it became too much. He now had a full-time assistant in the office, Ruth, and a second employee who did the handyman work alongside him.

JD was a busy man. Nobody would ever describe him as a time-waster. He was not one to beat around the bush. If there was something that needed to be said, he would say it. He hated the thought that his matter-of-fact personality had been hurting Jordan's feelings. She had said he hurt her feelings just about every time they spoke, which JD couldn't believe because he actually *liked* her and thought they were becoming friends.

He thought about it for so long that night that he ended up calling his sister. Gwen was older than him only by three years, and she already had a husband and three children. Two of them were girls. Surely, she would have some advice for him.

"Hello?" Gwen said, answering her phone. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, why?" JD asked.

"Because you normally text me."

"It's, no, it's, everybody's fine. I just... I figured the kids were in bed already, and it was too long to text, so I thought maybe you could talk on the phone for a minute."

"Uh-oh."

"No, no, it's no big deal. It's just... a female."

”*Uh-oh*,” she said, with even more enthusiasm. “That is a big deal, JD. You met somebody? Oh, my gosh. It’s Valentine’s Day, too. How sweet. Does Dad know?”

“No, Gwen. Please. No. I didn’t meet anyone. I met someone, but she’s, it’s, I’m not dating anyone or anything. There’s just someone that I like and I’ve miscommunicated with... not that I think I’ve done that because I meant everything I’ve ever said to her...” JD trailed off with a groan, knowing he was suffering from an unusual bout of inarticulation.

“Oh my, are you tripping over your words?”

He breathed, doing his best to calm himself. “I just didn’t expect you to mention Dad, and don’t want you to go run off and talk about it to Dad—or even Claire or Isaac.”

“Why not?”

“They all know her, and we’re not there yet. Not even close. I’m just trying to communicate with her, and she said I’m, I... she said that I’m mean.”

“Who said you’re mean? You went out with some girl and she told you that?”

“No, I didn’t go out with her. I told you, we’re not dating. We’ve never been on a date. She doesn’t even know I like her. I don’t think she would like me back even if she did. She told me I hurt her feelings a bunch.”

“Did you?” Gwen asked, sounding stunned.

“I didn’t mean to if I did. When I first met her, I probably wasn’t the nicest, but that was because I had the wrong impression of her intentions. But since then, I thought I was being nice.”

Gwen took a deep breath. “Is she worth even messing with?” she asked. “Is she being high-maintenance? Some people have issues with stuff like that. They’ll beat you down and tell you what you’re doing wrong all the time to get you dependent on their approval. I think it’s called narcissism.”

“She’s not a narcissist, Gwen, she’s really sweet. She’s the one who’s telling me I’m hurting *her* feelings.”

“That’s what those people do. They trick you into thinking it’s your fault.”

“She’s not like that. I really do think I came across as... too serious for her or something.”

“Well, JD, if you’re being yourself and trying to act normal, and she thinks something is wrong, then maybe it’s just that your personalities don’t work together. You dated that one girl back in college, and your personalities just didn’t click.”

“My personality clicks with Jordan’s. If it doesn’t, then it’s my fault. She’s sweet and innocent, and if something is wrong, it’s my fault.”

“Oh my gosh, JD, you seriously sound bad over this girl. Did you say her name is Jordan?”

“Yes, but please don’t mention that to anyone. I don’t have it bad for her.” JD felt odd saying that. He did have it bad for Jordan, and denying it felt wrong. “I’m only telling you about her because you live in California, and you don’t know her. I don’t want Dad and them to find out.”

“How does Dad know her?”

“She works at the restaurant.”

“I knew you were going to say that. Me and Dad have a bet about which one of you is going to fall in love with the waitress first.”

“Which one of who?”

“You or Isaac.”

“I don’t know about love, but I feel something. I like her, and right now she thinks I dislike her. I’m trying to remedy that.”

“Have you tried explaining that to her in exactly those words?”

“No.”

“That’d probably be a good place to start.”

“I thought you were going to tell me I should send her flowers or something.”

“I mean, not from what you’re telling me. JD, as far as I’m concerned, you don’t need to send flowers. I don’t know this girl, but you’re a catch. You’re a good guy. You’re a young, single hunk. You’re a genuinely good person, and you have a lot of zeros in your bank account. What more could she want, and what’s there to prove?”

“Yeah, you’re right,” JD said, sounding convinced even though he didn’t mean it.

Gwen didn’t understand the situation, and there was no use wasting any more time trying to explain it to her. JD changed the subject, asking his sister about the kids. They spoke for a few more minutes, and he got off the phone with her without saying any more about Jordan.

JD was already questioning his ability to communicate with women, and now he couldn’t seem to get his point across to his sister. He was a black and white type of guy. He had never been one to express a whole lot of emotion. He wasn’t even the type to *have* a lot of emotions. He had never found himself in a scenario where he had hurt someone’s feelings when he meant to do the exact opposite of that. This was all new to JD, but he was strong and determined. If there was a problem in his life, he was going to face it head-on and fix it.

Chapter 12

Jordan Matthews

I was mad and embarrassed when JD reacted coldly to me kissing him. I thought we had shared a moment during that second kiss, and it broke my heart when he just stood there afterward and told me I shouldn't have done it.

I thought about JD all night. I already knew a lot about him—definitely more than he thought I knew. I talked to his dad all the time at work, and he told me countless stories about JD. Jim told me enough about their life that I knew JD's mom had passed away and he raised the kids as a single dad. He had told me that family had chipped in with raising Gwen and JD, but he left out certain details—like the fact that he had two short marriages and a battle with alcoholism before he got his life back on track and took over the kitchen in the restaurant. Gwen and JD were teenagers by then. All of this, I learned through other people. I could tell Jim had regrets in life, but he was doing his best, and he truly loved his children.

Gwen lived out of state with her family, but they usually came to visit once or twice a year. This information was only the tip of the iceberg of things I had learned about JD and Gwen by talking to his dad.

In my heart, I knew him well. I thought I knew him well enough that I could kiss him. Even his dad seemed to be encouraging me about it. *Who was I kidding? I just wanted to kiss him.* I had liked JD ever since we met. He was everything I could ever want in a man. He was stable and smart. His face was flawless, and his physique was that of an athlete, which he was. JD was determined and focused on his own goals, but he cared about his family.

I had good conversations with JD. Sometimes we got along fine, but he was not shy about telling me what I should do differently in life, and apparently, kissing him was on the list of things I should not be doing. I thought about the kiss. I remembered how good it felt and how elated I had been, and

then I would get waves of embarrassment when I remembered how he reacted to it.

I had no idea why JD was always disapproving of me. I knew I shouldn't let it get to me, but it was difficult. That kiss had not been a joke on my end. I wouldn't have done it had it not been for the mysterious salesman, but I secretly had new feelings for JD and I hoped he would like it and take me seriously.

Needless to say, it wasn't my best night.

Normally, I didn't care that I was single on Valentine's Day. There was no one in Taylorsville who I was pining over. But this Valentine's Day, I actually felt rejected, and it was no fun at all.

I knew there was no use in beating myself up about it, but I still went to the grocery store that evening to get some extra ice cream for my pity party.

I had to work the following day.

I was scheduled to go in at 11am, but I went early so I could go upstairs and say hello to Mrs. Blankenship. She was in good shape for her age and able to get out, but she didn't drive, so she depended on other people for rides. It was Sunday, and she already went to early church, but I went by her apartment twenty minutes before my shift started so we could visit. She expected me to come and always said how she looked forward to my visits. I was thankful that she had taken me in when that first room had fallen through.

We talked for about fifteen minutes, and then I told her I needed to be going downstairs to work my shift.

I had just made it downstairs and was walking toward the back entrance of the restaurant when I saw a young woman walking toward the alleyway.

I saw her round the corner, so I followed her. I made it just in time to see her disappear into a passageway that I didn't even know was there. The woman opened a door and disappeared into the wall. I watched for a minute to make sure

she didn't come back out, and then I walked a few steps closer to where she had been.

I inspected the wall. It was an exterior door in the back of the kitchen, near the alleyway. It was an area I had passed through several times before, and I had simply never noticed it. I went right up to it, feeling the wall, and marveling at how hidden it was. There wasn't even a knob. I had no idea how she had gotten in. I was touching the wall when someone came up next to me, causing me to jump and yelp.

"Oh, Robert, whoa, you scared me to death. I was just... I just saw..."

"You saw Lila come out of that door?" he asked, smiling at me. Robert was a huge guy, and I stared up at him, still feeling caught.

"I guess," I said. "There was a woman."

"That's Miss Lila. She's a sweetheart. She comes into the restaurant sometimes. She lives up there, but the Alexanders don't talk about it much. I heard some of the girls talking about saying they thought she might be in witness protection or something. That's what the girls were saying, Becca and Cindy. The family's really protective of her—especially JD. It's better just to leave it alone. Don't knock or anything. You'll have to ask one of the girls if you're curious. I do know her name is Lila."

Robert had been smoking, and he casually flicked his cigarette butt before both of us headed into the restaurant. I was smiling on the outside, but all I could think about was one statement. *The family is really protective of her—especially JD.* I had just learned that there was an actual secret room. I had so much to be thankful for. It was a huge piece of information in the big mystery of Micah's music.

And yet I didn't even care. I could not care less. I didn't need or want to know anything about the room. All I could think of was this Lila woman and how JD was protective of her. I remembered how protective he was when I brought up the room. It all made sense now.

I barely caught a glimpse of the woman, but I knew she was beautiful. I was frustrated instantly by it. It didn't occur to me to feel bad for whatever had happened to land her in witness protection. None of that even crossed my mind. I was j-e-a-l-o-u-s of her.

I prayed that God would take that feeling from me.

I clocked in, smiling and talking to people like normal, while my mind raced with different thoughts. It was twelve-thirty by the time I simmered down. Feeling bad for the woman named Lila helped me. *How could I have bad thoughts about a woman who was possibly running for her life and having to walk out of secret doors?* I made myself relax and not worry about James David Alexander.

I was mad, though, and I had to talk myself out of trying to fall for Isaac out of spite. There was nothing I could do to stop those types of vengeful thoughts from crossing my mind. I was jealous of someone who was probably a really sweet woman, and I hated that. Feelings were like that. Sometimes I just fixated on things and no matter how hard I tried to forget it, my brain just kept going back to it.

“What do you do when you're trying to get yourself to stop thinking about something?” I asked a coworker of mine, Anne, who came to stand beside me at the drink station.

“What's on your mind. Huh? JD on a Sunday?”

“What? How did you... “

But then I realized that she actually saw JD.

“JD Alexander,” she said. “He's here on a Sunday. Weird.”

I turned to look out of the window on the swinging door, and I saw JD walking to the counter. He was dressed sharply but casually in dark jeans and layered shirts in dark reds and khaki with a grey jacket. His hair was combed back off of his face. I could see him looking around and my heart began to race. His eyes made their way to me so quickly that I had no warning at all. His gaze was focused on other places in the

restaurant, and then he instantly looked toward the kitchen window, catching me staring at him.

I didn't mean to move, but I reacted by leaning slightly to the side so he could no longer see me.

"Oh, JD's coming this way," Anne said a few seconds later. "Maybe he thinks Jim is working."

"Yeah," I said.

I finished what I was doing before she did, and I left the kitchen, heading into the restaurant. I met up with JD at the door. He stood back while I opened it.

"What are you doing here?" I said. "None of your family is working today."

I smiled and acted nonchalant even though my heart was beating entirely too fast. I moved to slip past JD. He let me walk by, but he called to me on the way out.

"Hey, I was coming back here to see if you were working the counter before I sat down." He spoke quietly because there were three or four people in earshot, and they would all be curious about what he was saying.

I shook my head and smiled at him. "No, I've got a section in the back today. Anne's at the counter. She'll take good care of you, though." I knew I was being short with JD, but my heart was pounding, and my feelings were hurt, and it was just how I reacted at that moment.

I was holding a tray of drinks, so he didn't expect me to stick around and talk to him any longer than I did. Once I was across the room, I could see that JD sat at the bar and Anne went over to talk to him.

I was mad at myself for making him do that, but there was no way he could sit in my section by himself. JD sat at the counter every time. Everyone would notice if he switched it up. I wanted to talk to him, though, and now I was regretting being aloof.

I was busy with my tables, and it was a few minutes later when I headed to the counter to talk to JD. I was nervous, and

I made a stop at the restroom first just to make sure I didn't have anything on my face.

“Hey,” I said, coming up to stand near his stool.

“Hey,” he said back to me. His voice was low and serious, and he stared at me with those impossibly dark eyes. I glanced at his mouth and my stomach tied in knots when I imagined what happened last night. I went back to looking at his eyes, which wasn't any better. His face took my breath away. I was standing there, literally feeling breathless.

Chapter 13

“I didn’t think you’d come in on a Sunday,” I said to JD. I was pretending to be calm even though I was thoroughly shaken up.

“Yeah, I...” he hesitated and turned to face me more fully. “I needed to apologize to you, Jordan.”

I could see that he was being sincere. I felt bad for being mad at him. “No, no, no, it’s fine,” I said. I went in a little closer to him. “I shouldn’t have done that yesterday,” I admitted. “And I’m sorry for saying you hurt my feelings and all that. I was just... I don’t know... embarrassed. You were just trying to help me. I get it. It’s all good.” I patted him on the back. I knew my voice was a little shaky, and I was glad to have gotten through the interaction without it being too obviously nervous.

“I still didn’t get my picture,” he said.

My heart might as well have fallen out of my chest and onto the floor at the mention of the picture. I never expected him to say that.

“What picture?” I asked, smiling and trying to control my voice and keep it from shaking.

“You got two pictures, and you walked off with both of them.”

I gave him a little smile. “You don’t want that picture,” I said.

I was unable to do this. I thought of the girl in the wall, and I could feel my eyes start to burn with tears. I blinked and began to move.

“I need to go check on my table.” I turned, but JD touched my arm, so I stopped and looked at him.

“Can I please talk to you for more than two minutes? I can tell you’re still upset.”

“I’m not,” I lied, trying to smile. “I-I just heard you liked somebody, so I think we should try to please forget that I ever

did that last night.”

“What?” he asked, looking annoyed.

“Nothing,” I said, smiling and shaking my head. “I can see one of my tables looking for me. I’ll come back in just a minute.”

It took me ten minutes to get back over to JD, and by that time, he was halfway done with his sandwich. I made eye contact with him as I headed his way.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I had three tables finishing up at the same time.”

“That’s fine. I just... Jordan, you were not out of line.”

“When?” I asked, not understanding what he was saying.

“Last night,” he said.

“Oh, y-yes I was. I was way out of line. I shouldn’t have... done that.” I spoke quietly and he stared at me with a serious expression. He was so handsome that I could hardly look at him.

He touched my hand. “Jordan, I’m telling you, I did not mind what you did.”

I was staring at his shirt when I leaned in closer and said, “I feel bad about it, though. I saw a girl walk into a hole in the wall this morning, and someone told me you like her.”

“You saw Lila?”

My eyes snapped to his as soon as he said that name. “Is she your girlfriend?”

“No, she’s not,” he said, shaking his head a little. “She’s just a friend. Who told you that?”

“One of the guys here,” I said.

“Did he see her, too?”

“Yes. He’s the one who told me about you—how you liked her. He said you were really protective of her. That’s why you didn’t want me around.” I breathed a sigh, closing my eyes and knowing I should stop talking. I didn’t stop. “I

figured it has to do with that thing I was talking about when I first came here—that place in the wall where Micah stayed. I don't really care what it is anymore, but I'm sure, whatever it is, I'm probably not going to work here now that I know about it.”

JD drew me in slowly to the place where our faces were only a foot apart. “It’s one room, and the entrance you saw was the only way in or out. There’s a dingy staircase that leads up to it. It used to be a storage room. Birdy, as a young woman, fled a relationship that almost killed her. She lived in central Washington and she escaped on a train to Seattle. She left the train station and made her way here, to this restaurant. Papa Jim’s dad, the original Jimmy, was alive and running the restaurant at the time. He let Birdy stay in that room for two cents a month. They didn’t own the building back then. The restaurant was barely making it. Birdy is to be credited for its success. She gave this place new light. She fell in love with the owner’s son, and the rest is history. Anyway, she pays it forward by letting people stay in that room—people who need it—people who she takes a liking to and also have no other place to go. Micah was here for a while, and then no one’s been in there until Lila got here. She wasn’t just homeless. She was in really bad shape, like my grandma had been. We’re all protective of her, not just me, but she’s doing good now. She’s got a job. She’ll be moving out soon.” He tilted his head at me. “So, that’s the story about the room. It’s small in there, but it’s nice, and the rent is still the same as it was then. Two cents. Lila’s supposed to watch out for people and not go in or out if anyone’s around, but you’re not going to get fired over it.”

“I won’t tell anyone,” I said staring blankly at him. My mind was so full of thoughts that it took me off guard when a coworker walked by and touched my shoulder. “Table fifty-two left this,” she said. She handed me a wad of loose cash and change.

“Thank you,” I said as she walked away. I looked at JD “I’m only working the lunch shift today. I’ve got about a half-hour left, but I’ll be done after that.”

JD stared into my eyes. “I’m going upstairs to visit my dad for a minute. You can text me when you get done.”

I knew Jim lived upstairs on the third floor, and I nodded. “Okay,” I said.

And just like that, JD stood up. He left a tip on the counter.

“I don’t have your phone number,” I said.

“Do you have Rita’s?”

“Yes.”

“It’s the same, but my last four digits are two-two-three-eight.”

“Two-two-three-eight,” I repeated.

He nodded.

“I’ll talk to you in a minute,” I said.

JD gave me a small smile and turned to walk away. I turned to walk the other direction. JD could no longer see me, but other people could, and I had to bite the inside of my lip to keep from grinning from ear to ear. JD told me the whole story about the secret room, and he didn’t even seem mad about it. He also clearly said that he did not regret it when I kissed him last night.

I was so happy that I basically floated on clouds after that conversation. I had thirty minutes of work to wrap up, and texting JD was the first thing I did afterward.

Me: Hey, it’s Jordan. I just got off work. Are you still around?

I saw the thought bubble come up on the screen, and I stared at it, wide-eyed.

I heard back from him within seconds.

JD: I’ll be down in five minutes. Meet me downstairs, by the alley entrance.

I wasn’t far from that area of the restaurant, anyway, so I went over there the instant he replied. I found a spot leaning

against the wall, and it was three or four minutes later when JD walked up to me. I expected him to come out of the same door that I had, but he came from outside, from the other side of the building.

“What are you doing?” I asked, walking toward him.

JD was grinning a little as he came up to me. It was cloudy but not misting or raining. I was cold, though, in spite of wearing a jacket. I put on my hood.

“You need a thicker jacket,” he said.

He was staring at me.

Something had changed with him.

“I’m fine,” I said. “I do need a thicker jacket, in general, but I’m also fine.”

“Do you want mine?” he asked, starting to take it off.

“No, no, no, no, that’s okay, I was just saying... it seems like it’s colder now than it was on my way over here.”

JD pointed down the side of the building once we rounded the corner. “Is that the door you saw?”

“Yes,” I said.

He nudged his head, telling me to follow him. “Micah was in here for two years,” he explained. “He was strung out on drugs at first. Rita told him he couldn’t stay if he was doing any of that, and he turned his life around. His name was Logan back then. He changed it legally. Rita has a verse from the book of Micah painted on one part of the wall up there, and he felt like he needed a new name at a moment when he was looking at it. It’s still on the wall up there. You don’t need to go telling everyone that story or anything, but I feel like you won’t. I know Micah wouldn’t mind me telling you that because I called him and asked him to make sure.”

“No, you didn’t,” I said grinning and not believing him.

“I did. I can show you my phone.”

I nudged his shoulder. I knew he and Micah were friends. I could tell by certain things he and his family said. We were

walking slowly as he spoke and we came to the place that was right in front of the secret door.

“So, that’s it,” he said. “That’s the handle. Birdy would kill me if she knew I told you all this.”

I made a quick disapproving noise as I roped my arm in his and started walking away. “Why did you tell me, then?” I asked, holding onto him with my arm latched in his. I didn’t look at him. I just walked away quickly, leaving the vicinity.

“Because I know you wanted to know. I trust you, and I wanted you to know I do. I think you have the wrong impression of me.”

We kept walking, my arm in his, but I glanced at him when he said that. “What impression do you think I should have?”

Chapter 14

Over a month later

It was officially spring, which in Seattle, just meant more rain. I didn't mind the weather. It was cloudy a lot, but it wasn't like it was just dumping rain all the time. Usually, it was a light drizzle or mist. I had definitely expected worse when people told me that it rained all the time in Seattle.

Today was another one of those cloudy but not rainy days. It was a Saturday, and I was headed back to my apartment between shifts. I was scheduled to work a double, and I was planning on going home for an hour between my shifts. It had been a busy morning. I loved my couch, and I was looking forward to propping my feet up for a little while before I headed back.

I walked to my apartment feeling thankful for my job, and for comfy couches, and for Seattle in general. I loved living there, and I was so happy that I made the move. I had a neighbor named Rachel who was a new attorney, only a couple of years out of law school. She and I had become friends and we got into the rhythm of hanging out a couple of times a week.

She had left a note on my apartment when I got home between shifts.

Come over, was all it said.

It didn't even have Rachel's name, but I knew she had written it. I walked the few feet to her door instead of mine. I gave a few light taps on the door, and she told me to come in.

"Are you done for the day?" she asked.

"No, I'm working the dinner shift tonight. Why?"

"Because my brother is in town. His flight gets here at four. I'm about to leave for the airport to pick him up. I wanted you to come with me."

"Oh, I forgot he was coming today. I'm working a double. I should be back by nine if you want to hang out later

tonight for a little while.”

“I’m trying to fix you up with him, you know.”

I smiled at Rachel for being so unrepentant about setting me up with her brother.

“He doesn’t like living in California, and he could totally get a job doing computer stuff here. You can be the one to help me get him back home. You’d like him. He’s really handsome.”

“You told me he was trying to be an actor,” I said.

She shrugged. “There’s showbusiness in Seattle. He’d see that if he came back home. All we need is to make him fall in love.”

I shook my head at her. “I’m sorry, Rachel, but I can’t do it.”

“Because you’re in love with the guy from work.”

“Maybe, yes, maybe I am,” I said in a playful tone, grinning and pretending to mess around even though I meant it.

“I don’t want to remind you of what you already know, but you’ve been waiting forever, and he never makes a move on you.”

“It seems like you did want to remind me of that,” I said, making a face at her.

“Seriously, though. If he’s not going to do anything, I say he loses his chance. At least *meet* my brother. You could fall in love with him. Or you could just get to know him a little bit...” she shrugged suggestively, but my heart felt nothing. I had seen photos of Rachel’s brother, and I knew he was a nice-looking guy, and I had no interest in meeting him in a romantic way.

“I’ll come over when I get off tonight if you want me to,” I said. “Just text me if you’re hanging out here, and I’ll stop by.”

Rachel agreed to that plan even though I made no promises, and I left her apartment and went next door to my own.

JD was on my mind. He and I had become really good friends during the last month—talking on the phone or texting almost every day, and seeing each other at least several times a week outside of the restaurant. We had fun together. He stopped worrying so much about me being a single woman in the city, and once he relaxed, I was able to get to know him for who he was.

JD was as smart as a whip and industrious, but he had a funny side. His dry sense of humor fit mine perfectly, and we bantered with each other constantly. I had a similar relationship with Isaac and Claire and others at the restaurant, but my relationship with JD was different. With JD, I had hope that there would be more between us eventually. It was for that reason that I called him once I got to my apartment. He picked up on the second ring.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey, what are you doing?”

“I’m at Papa and Birdy’s. We’re about to go trout fishing on the lake.”

“What lake?”

“Lake Washington,” he said. “What are you doing? I thought you had work.”

“I do. But I came home for a few minutes between shifts.”

“I know we talked about that hike tomorrow,” he said. “But if I catch a bunch of fish today, I’m going to take you fishing instead.”

“I wouldn’t mind going fishing,” I said. “I don’t know how to do it, but I wouldn’t mind trying.”

“Okay good, I’m going to see how it goes today and how the weather is, and I’ll let you know.”

“JD?”

“What? Is everything all right?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m good. I was just wondering how you would feel if... you know my friend, Rachel, my neighbor?”

“Yes.”

“Well, she’s having her... she’s having her brother come into town, and she was talking about me hanging out with them when I get off work tonight, and I told them I would because it’s no problem, but she was talking about her brother and me... ” I trailed off.

I had called him to ask if he was okay with me hanging out with someone Rachel considered a set-up, but then I realized that I was only doing that to make him feel jealous enough to tell me not to do it.

“She was talking about her brother...” JD said reminding me what I was saying when I didn’t continue right away.

“We don’t know each other. Me and Tristan. So, I’m not saying I... I just wanted to make sure that you didn’t care if I was hanging out with a guy tonight.”

I felt so weird saying it that. It was as if I was outside of my own body.

“Hang out with a guy, how, Jordan?”

“What?”

“What are you asking me?” he said. “Are you talking about just being in the same room with your friend’s brother?”

“Yeah, well, kind of, yeah, Rachel was mentioning... trying to set us up or whatever.”

What was I doing?

Why was I saying this?

I got the words out, but they were rushed, and I felt like a big goober. It didn’t help matters that JD was completely silent.

“JD?”

“So, you’re calling me to tell me you like someone else right now?” he asked. His voice was rigid sounding.

“No. I-I don’t even-haven’t ever even met the guy. I was just asking... I was curious if you thought we were to the point of... did we want us to not go on any dates with anyone but us?”

“If you’re asking my permission to date some other guy, Jordan, the answer is no. Is that what you were asking?” His tone was disbelieving and serious and my heart was pounding.

“Kind of, I guess, because I was just... I like you, and I wasn’t sure if you liked me, but I like you, and I definitely didn’t need to go out with anyone, but if you didn’t think you ever wanted to do that with me, then I wanted to... you know... run it past you or whatever. Just to make sure.”

Was that in English?

I had opened my mouth and I was pretty sure that a bunch of gibberish came out. I made myself stop talking, and I just sat there with JD on the other end. I could hear him take a deep breath.

“Where are you, Jordan?”

“I’m at my apartment. I have to go back to work in a few minutes. I’m just here for a minute. JD, listen, I know I’m not making a whole lot of sense. I’m not trying to pressure you into anything. I don’t need to hear that you want to start going out with me right now, I just was wondering if maybe one day you thought we would—”

“Do you not know that I like you?” he asked.

“As a friend?” I asked.

“No, Jordan. Not as a friend.”

“No, then, I didn’t know you like me as not a friend. I thought you like me as a friend.”

“You must be kidding me.”

“No.”

“Did you think we hang out every day and check-in with each other and I didn’t... like... you... Jordan?” His question was serious, and I sat there with my heart pounding, trying to figure out how to answer it.

“I thought you might like me as a friend since you never try to...”

“Since I never try to what?”

I paused for a few seconds. “To kiss me,” I said even though it sounded cheesy to my own ears.

“I-I was giving you... time, Jordan. I thought you didn’t like me very much at first, and I didn’t want to rush you.”

“Oh, I definitely don’t feel rushed at all,” I said. “I just keep waiting and waiting, thinking it’ll happen.” I had to say the words quickly because otherwise, I would have chickened out.

“Thinking *what* will happen?” he asked.

“That you’ll kiss me, ” I said. “Sometimes we’ll be talking, and you’ll look at me, and I’m sure you’re about to.”

“I am about to all those times,” he said.

“Then why don’t you?” I asked breathlessly.

I couldn’t believe we were having this conversation. I was so nervous that I curled up on my bed.

“Because I didn’t want to just freak out and be all over you, Jordan. I want to, but I fight that. I’m trying to let you get to know me.”

I was silent for a few long seconds, thinking of everything he said and everything that had happened between us since we met.

“Well, by now, I already know you plenty,” I said. “I just thought you weren’t that interested, or, you know, that you liked being friends better.”

“Uh. No. No, I don’t.”

“Okay, so, that’s good to know, JD. I guess I’m not going to hang out with Rachel tonight.” I said that statement tentatively, waiting to gauge his reaction.

“No. Uh, please? Not with her trying to push some other guy on you.”

“She wasn’t necessarily trying to push me. She just mentioned it, and I didn’t know how you felt.”

“Uh, terrible. I feel terrible about it. I really thought you knew that. I thought you knew I was waiting on you, Jordan.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Now you do,” he said.

“Well, now I’m telling you that you can stop waiting.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll stop waiting. Oh, they’re waving. My dad’s out here with us. They’re waiting for me.”

“Okay. Go ahead. I’ll call you after work tonight. Will that be okay?” My voice was tender and vulnerable because I was tender and vulnerable.

“Yes, it’ll be okay,” he said. “I’ll talk to you in a little while.”

“Okay.”

“Jordan?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re with me, okay?” I knew what he meant by that, and it sent an electric shock type feeling through my body.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, you are?” he asked.

“Yes, I am.”

“Okay. I’ll talk to you later. Bye.”

“Bye,” I said.

Chapter 15

It was almost 8pm that same evening when JD walked through the door at the restaurant. I knew we would talk on the phone later that night, but I wasn't expecting him to come in. My body felt a surge of adrenaline at the sight of him. He was wearing a lightweight waterproof jacket with a baby blue t-shirt under it—one that fit him like a glove. Even from across the room, I could make out the muscular curves of his chest.

I fanned myself with menus as I walked toward the kitchen. I had no idea what to expect with JD. I figured it was safe to assume things would be different between us after that conversation, but there was no way to know how much things had changed until I talked to him face-to-face.

Our relationship was easy and natural, and I prayed I hadn't ruined anything with him by rushing him along. I went straight to the back hallway where I found the employee restroom. I washed my hands and stared at myself in the mirror for a few seconds, freshening up before I went back out there to see him. We were slowing down after the dinner rush, and I had plenty of time to go over to him but I wasn't sure if I had the nerve.

I saw him from across the way as I headed over. By the time I made it over there, Becca had already spoken to him and was walking off, headed toward me. She stared straight at me with wide eyes.

“What did he say?” I asked.

“That he wasn't here to eat—that he just wanted to talk to you.”

I nodded like it was no big deal when, really, I was freaking out inside. “Thank you,” I said to her. I smiled as I continued heading toward JD.

“Hello James David Alexander,” I said, trying to seem calmer than I was.

“Jordan,” he said, nodding a little. I went to stand right next to him, which was maybe a mistake. Being in his

proximity had gotten ten times crazier today. My body was absolutely buzzing. JD looked casual, but he was always sharp, and he smelled clean, like leather and expensive soap. I stared straight into his dark eyes.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“What do you think I’m doing here?” he asked back.

Goodness—the way he was looking at me—I wanted to melt. I wanted to fall into his arms.

“Becca said you weren’t eating.”

“No, I’m not eating,” he said.

I moved, leaning in to speak closer to him. “Did you come to see me?” I asked.

I was standing close enough to his stool, that I didn’t even notice when his hand came up. But suddenly, JD was touching my lower back. My eyes widened at him, and he smiled. I smiled back at him as I stiffly said, “Everyone will see you.”

“Okay,” he said. He gave me a gentle squeeze before taking his hand off of me.

I was mad at myself for saying anything about it. My back felt empty without his hand there.

“How was fishing?” I asked.

“Good. Great. Uncle Samuel and Isaac came out with us. How was work?”

“Good. We weren’t as busy as usual.”

“Are you done with your tables?”

“I’ve still got two groups here—a table of six and a two-top. I’d say I can be done in ten minutes, but I’ll probably be twenty or thirty, realistically.”

I absentmindedly reached out and rested my hand on the counter, and JD put his hand on my arm. It was a subtle connection, but he was touching me—it was the second time we had made contact in as many minutes. I moved, letting my

hand fall but touching his leg on my way down. He knew I was touching him back, and he smiled at me.

“We are definitely going to get noticed in here,” I said.

“Yeah, I know,” he said. “That’s what I was saying. That’s why this didn’t happen sooner.”

“Do you think it’s a mistake? Will your dad get in trouble or something?” I stepped away discreetly.

“I wasn’t saying that it was a mistake,” JD said. He stood up.

“Where are you going?”

“Upstairs,” he said. “To my dad’s. He’s not home, but I have a key, and I have a couple of emails to look at for work. Just call or text me when you’re done down here.”

It was a half-hour later when I sent him a text telling him that I would be finished in five minutes and asking where he would like me to meet him. I ran my customer’s credit card and by the time I brought it back to their table, I saw JD coming into the restaurant.

He was a gorgeous-looking man, and my heart leapt at the sight of him. His gaze found mine instantly, and we didn’t break eye contact until we converged near an empty section in the middle of the restaurant. There were a few tables still finishing up, but it was slow in there.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey.”

I came to stand only a foot or two from JD which forced me to look up at him. We were close enough that it wasn’t completely outrageous for him to reach out and touch me, which was exactly what he did. His hand came into contact with my forearm. It was a gentle touch, and my body was blazing because of it. This kind of thing had never happened between us before, and I knew all of my co-workers would notice.

“I didn’t know you were coming up here tonight,” I said, feeling shy. I blinked at him, and his face morphed into a slow grin.

“You left me no choice,” he said.

“You mean about Tristan? That was nothing. I don’t even know him.”

It was at that moment when Becca walked past us. “Hey, I don’t mind finishing that table for you if you... have somewhere to go.” She hesitated and glanced at my proximity to JD. He had already dropped his hand, and I instinctually shifted where we weren’t standing so close.

“Thank you, but I already closed them out,” I said to Becca. “I already got my cleaning done, so I’m leaving in a second.”

“Okay. I was just making sure. Hey, JD.” She looked straight at him, waving.

“Hey,” he said.

Becca must have thought that JD’s sudden willingness to be close to me translated to him being fair game for anyone, including herself. She was a friend of mine, and she smiled with puffy lips and flipped her hair at JD in a way that made me know she was trying to impress him.

I told myself to give her the benefit of the doubt. I had never staked any claim on JD, and before tonight, we had never so much as made physical contact. I told myself that Becca hadn’t noticed the way he was touching me. *Or was she just always flirty with JD and I never noticed? Was I stealing him from her?* I felt confused for a moment.

“I’m going to the back,” I said to him. “If you want to come with me, we can go out that way.”

“Yeah, that’s fine,” he said, but neither of us moved. He stared at me, and I couldn’t move. I felt like my feet were glued in place. “I was going to walk you over to the Berk Building,” he said.

“Tonight?”

“Yeah. A reservation fell through, so I have a suite empty. It’s busy over there at night.”

“I’m sure it is, but we’d run into all kinds of fancy people, and I’m nasty from work.”

“I wouldn’t say you’re nasty,” he said, looking me over.

I smiled at him and shook my head. JD was smiling and staring in a way he had never smiled and stared before.

“People are looking at us,” I said, even though I hadn’t taken my eyes off of him.

“Let them,” he said. “I’ll kiss you right here right now.”

“You’ll what?” I asked, laughing and not expecting him to say that. “You’ll do no such thing,” I said, still smiling at him.

“Why not? Would you not let me? Did you change your mind?”

“Did I change my mind about what?” I asked.

“About letting me kiss you.”

He spoke so plainly that it made me laugh. “No, JD, I didn’t change my mind.” I looked all around. No one was within earshot, but there were quite a few other people still in the restaurant, and I was very aware of them. “Somebody’s going to hear you,” I said with a wide-eyed expression.

“Good,” he said. “Let ‘em. I thought you said you were ready for everyone to know about us, anyway.”

I was speechless. “I-I you don’t, you shouldn’t, you can’t do that. For yourself. Not me. I mean you.”

“What?” he asked, his expression reflecting his confusion.

“You’re an Alexander,” I said.

“So, what’s that mean?”

“Your family owns this whole place. Your name is literally on the sign.” I pointed upward.

“So?”

“So, you shouldn’t be seen with a waitress.”

He flinched and blinked at me. “What do you mean by that?” he asked.

I shrugged, feeling shy. “I’m not trying to be down on myself or anything. I’m actually really proud of all I’ve done in my life.” I leveled him with a stare, and he shrugged.

“But what?” he said.

“But I’m still just a waitress, JD. Your family probably expects you to be with someone like my neighbor. A lawyer or something.”

His eyebrows furrowed. “Are you still trying to go hang out with that guy?” he asked. “Your neighbor?”

“No, this is not about... that’s her brother. I’m talking about Rachel. For you. She’s the lawyer. It has nothing to do with... uhhh... I’m saying that for you. Not me. I don’t care about people knowing things about me, but these people talk to your dad and grandma, and I’m just saying, I understand if you don’t want your family to find out we—”

I could not finish the statement because my lips suddenly became occupied. JD moved toward me. He leaned in and kissed me right there in the middle of the restaurant. He placed his mouth on mine, stopping me from talking in mid-sentence. We kissed. I was still and stiff at first, but JD stayed there, gentle but relentless, until my lips relaxed. He was soft and sweet when he kissed me, but he regarded me with a mischievous grin when he pulled back.

I smiled uncontrollably. It was a nervous smile, and I shook my head at him discreetly, trying my best to control it. My eyes were trained on his as I put my fist on his chest in a fake attempt to punch him.

“You just did that,” I said, wiping the edge of my mouth with the back of that same hand. I knew people were watching us and I couldn’t care. I was crippled with desire for JD—too distracted to think of anything else.

“I did, and I’ll do it again,” he said confidently. “It definitely needed to happen if you think I feel any kind of way

about you being a waitress.”

“I guess you don’t mind,” I said slowly, staring at him.

“No, Jordan. I don’t mind. It’s insane that you thought I did mind.”

“They’re going to tell your dad,” I said, feeling the stares that were coming our way from the other side of the room.

“Let them,” he said. “My dad was the one trying to set us up.” He was right. His dad had asked me several times if I was dating his son.

JD took off, reaching back for me and pulling me by the hand. He pulled me back, past the kitchen doors and down the hallway that led to the offices. He stopped near the door that led to the office. We were alone in the hallway, and JD leaned against the wall, pulling me close to him.

“Do you like me, Jordan?” he asked the question as he stared down at me.

I could not believe he had to ask. *Who wouldn’t like him?*

“Yes, James, I do. I like you more than... more than I’ve liked a guy.”

“When? Ever?”

“Yeah, kind of ever,” I said gazing at him.

JD’s jaw muscle flexed as he stared toward the side for a second. I reached up and touched the side of his face since I wanted to feel it.

“You’re my most favorite guy I’ve ever seen,” I said. “I love being friends with you and all, but I would really love to... not... be... friends with you sometime.”

He reached up and took control of my hands, wrapping them around his body. “Well, I would love to not be friends with you starting right now,” he said, staring at me.

My body was on fire.

My hands were on fire.

I could feel the tautness of his muscles and the soft heat of his skin, and I was on fire everywhere we touched. I wanted to melt onto him like two warm candles that just become one.

“They’re going in and out,” I said, talking about everyone who had passed the end of the hallway and had, no doubt, been looking our way.

“You should know that I don’t care,” he said.

The deadpan statement made me smile. “No?”

“Yeah. No. I don’t.” He used his fingertips to adjust a piece of my hair, tucking it behind my ear. He was staring at me, touching me. I wanted this so badly that I almost cried.

“I need a shower if we’re going somewhere,” I said, breaking the spell.

He nodded reluctantly. “Let’s go back to your place so you can shower or whatever you need to do, but then I’m taking you over to the Berk Building. It’s early still, and it’s Saturday.”

Chapter 16

JD had a truck parked near the restaurant, and he gave me a ride to my apartment. I had ridden in his truck a few times before, but not until recently. Our relationship had built slowly. Both of us treated the other as a friend because we each thought that was the right thing to do.

And maybe it had been. Maybe we had taken things at an appropriate pace after all. Either way, it had seemed to take an eternity for me to get this close to him. My body was on fire with all of the attraction and emotion that had been building up. I felt a perpetual urge to cling onto JD when we left the restaurant—to physically be situated in his arms.

My apartment came with a parking spot in an attached garage, and JD parked his truck in my assigned spot. We walked into the building and then into my apartment.

I went straight to the shower, leaving JD in my living room. I went as quickly as I could, trying to hurry while still getting the restaurant smell off of me. I scrubbed my hair and body twice with shampoo and shower gel before rinsing quickly, drying off, and getting dressed.

I barely had clothes on my body when I heard voices that sounded close by. I listened for a moment to make sure I wasn't hearing things. I thought JD might be on the phone, but sure enough, there were multiple voices, and they all sounded like they were in my apartment.

I abandoned towel drying my hair, and instantly jogged out of the bathroom and into the living room. I was planning on wearing a sweater, but all I had on at the moment was jeans, a bra, and an undershirt. I didn't mind. I was decent, so I went straight out there to see what was going on.

JD was standing near the door, talking to someone. I could see as I got closer that it was Rachel and her brother. Tristan was exactly what I expected—he looked like a commercial for Martin Outfitters with all of his name-brand all-weather gear and earth-tone accessories. I was relatively

sure he drove a Subaru back home in California. He was a handsome enough guy, but JD blew him out of the water.

“Hey,” Rachel said, seeing me come up behind JD. “I texted you so many times.”

“Oh, sorry, I haven’t even looked at my phone,” I said, honestly. “I think it’s in my purse. What’s up? This must be your brother. Tristan, right?”

“Yeah,” she said. “We’re about to head over to The 2nd Avenue Inn. I thought you said you were thinking about coming with us.”

“Yeah, I’m so sorry. I forgot to text you back earlier. It’s been a busy afternoon at work, and then JD met me over there, and we made plans. We’re planning on hanging out. This is JD Alexander. This is my neighbor, Rachel, and her brother, Tristan.”

We all shook hands. I even shook Tristan’s hand since we were just meeting. I knew I should have invited them in, but we stood in the doorway with them in the hall.

“I made plans to hang out with JD,” I continued. It wasn’t at all awkward because I was confident with my choice.

“We could all hang out, if you want,” she said. She looked at JD. “If you’re hungry, the place where we’re going has great food. It’s pub food, but it’s really good.”

“JD has a place in the Berk Building.”

“You live in the Berk?” Rachel asked, looking impressed.

“I own a couple of properties over there. I have a place between tenants, so I was going to take Jordan over there to see all that action.”

Rachel knew of the Berk Building. It was a famous, trendy building with an exclusive nightclub on the first floor and then eight stories of upscale apartments. The suites were all owned by the rich and famous.

JD could afford to live there if he wanted to, but he would sooner stay in a more modest apartment and rent the Berk suites to someone who would pay a premium. I knew all of

this from talking to Claire and Isaac, both of whom took investment advice from JD.

“We’re not set on going to that one place if you wanted company,” Rachel said, inviting herself to come along with us. She stared at JD with a hopeful expression, and he smiled and shrugged, looking at me like he didn’t care if I invited them.

“I need a few minutes to finish getting dressed,” I said. “I was in the shower. Do you need to go back to your apartment before we leave, or do you just want to come in and wait for me here?”

“We’ll come in, if that’s okay,” Rachel said. “We were heading out the door when we stopped by, so I don’t need to go back to my apartment.

I started to move, and they followed me, coming into my apartment. “JD’s coming to my room to help me choose a sweater,” I said, pulling JD by the arm toward my bedroom. “We’ll be right back.”

I held onto him until we made it to the other side of the door, and then I turned and took hold of him by his arms. I smiled and made a wide-eyed expression when he brought me in. He caught me in his arms, pulling me firmly into his embrace.

“I’m sorry about this,” I said, whispering to him. I held onto him closely, staring at the side of his face and feeling like I might actually melt.

“Why would you be sorry?” he asked, speaking softly and slowly. He leaned in and took a breath in through his nose like he was smelling me.

“I’m not even dressed,” I said, holding onto him. “I still have to dry my hair for a minute and put on a swea—”

I was going to talk about my clothing, but JD kissed me. I was so desperate and hungry for his touch that I didn’t even try to finish what I was saying. I kissed him back.

This wasn’t the same as it had been before. I had kissed him on two other occasions, and neither of them were open-mouthed. This time, JD went straight to that. He tugged my

lower lip into his mouth, sucking on it and coaxing me to open to him. I did so willingly, tilting my head back and pulling him in by using my hand on the back of his head. It was glorious. JD opened his mouth even further when I gripped him, and the two of us connected in a way we had never connected before. I felt and tasted his kiss. It was warm and silky and my insides turned to hot honey as he continued moving, holding me and kissing me. He broke away gently and then kissed me again and again—lazy, hot sticky kisses. Our contact was light and gentle, but I was pressed against him, holding onto him. I let my hands roam over his shoulders. He had taken his coat off, and a thin t-shirt was all that separated my skin from his.

“You’re so beautiful, Jordan. I’ve been waiting so looong to do this.” He groaned when he spoke, and hot blood rushed through my veins at the sound of his voice. I held onto him lightly as we kissed again.

Three minutes ago, I was on track, getting ready to leave, and now Rachel and Tristan had come and everything had changed. I couldn’t be mad at them, though, because they had pushed us in here—into each other’s arms. He kissed me several more times before he pulled back, holding me at arm’s length.

I was still reeling from that kiss. JD was greedy and impatient, and I leaned into him and let out an uncontrollable whimper at the thought of how we had just connected.

“Are you okay?” he whispered.

I nodded. “I didn’t think she was going to invite herself.” I obviously didn’t want Rachel to hear that, so I got even closer to his ear and whispered.

“I don’t really care if they come,” he said. “We’ll tell them to get their own ride home, and I’m not paying attention to them right now, anyway.”

“Who are you paying attention to?” I whispered. My mouth was so close to his ear that I let it brush against him on purpose. I ran the curves of my upper lip smoothly against his earlobe.

“I’m only paying attention to you,” he said. He held me close with a firm grip on my back. He took a deep breath before he spoke again, and I had no idea what he was going to say. “I’m going to let you get dressed,” he said in a slightly louder tone than before.

“We’ll lose them later,” I promised, whispering again.

JD nodded. “I’m not worried about it. They’ll want to stay downstairs, I’m sure. That place is packed on a Saturday night.”

“Can you even get this many people in with you?” I asked.

He grinned and squeezed me. “Yes, Jordan, I can get this many people in.”

We kissed again, and he walked out to wait for me.

I moved like the wind. I spent the next five minutes drying my hair and putting just the bare essentials of makeup on my face. I wasn’t the type who felt like I had to be dressed to the nines everywhere I went, and JD knew that about me. I wore jeans with a sweater and a light jacket. It was a nice outfit, but probably casual for a night out at the Berk. I put on a pair of red Converse. I chose them because I wore them to work sometimes and I knew JD liked them.

Rachel and Tristan rode with us over there and we made conversation about Tristan’s job in California and his life over there. Rachel was excited about going to the club, and she had talked it up to her brother saying it was Seattle’s hottest spot and things like that. Her enthusiasm seemed to spread to her brother, because they were both in a great mood, talking and laughing and saying things to impress JD. It might have seemed, to JD, that Tristan was trying to impress me, but I could tell it was more about JD and his connections.

There was a back way into the downstairs at the Berk, and JD had to take us through several locked doors to get there. I felt famous and so did Rachel and Tristan because they were pumped.

“We’re about to get wild,” Tristan said, clapping his hands together as we walked from the elevator to the entrance to the club.

“I’m just letting you two in,” JD said. “You can get as wild as you want.”

“Are you not coming in with us?” Tristan asked, sounding shocked.

“Jordan doesn’t like to go out,” Rachel said, trying to make me seem boring.

I didn’t care. I shrugged and was about to say that she was right, but JD spoke before I could.

“We’re here for the view tonight,” JD said. “I’m taking her upstairs for a minute, and then I’m sure we’ll probably head out. Jordan’s been on her feet all day.” I glanced at him, feeling thankful that he would take up for me and that he would be so thoughtful. “That’s why I was making sure you guys were okay walking back or taking an Uber,” JD continued. “I knew Jordan and I would pass on this place.”

We stopped in the hallway, and JD paused with his key card near the door handle. “It’s going to be really loud when I open this door,” he warned.

“Okay, well, I guess this is goodbye,” Rachel said, looking disappointed even though we had made her no promises.

“You two have fun,” I said. I waved at her and smiled before focusing on her brother. “It was nice meeting you,” I said to him.

“You too,” he said. “Thanks for getting us into this place.”

“Yeah, do we need anything? Any information? Do we need to know what apartment you’re in?”

“No,” JD said, shaking his head. “Once you’re through this door, they’re not going to mess with you. This door will be locked if you try to come back through, but there are other

exits and you don't need to get in here, anyway. You can just go out through the public exit whenever you're done."

"Thank you," she said, looking excited. "It was nice meeting you."

Chapter 17

“Oh my gosh, you weren’t home all day yesterday, and I was *dying* to know what happened with that guy!”

“Hey, Rachel,” I said, as I turned to lock the door to my apartment. “What are you doing?” I asked since she was out in the hallway for no apparent reason.

“I’m going out for some coffee. Tristan and I were out till three Saturday, so we just slept it off yesterday. I had the day off today.”

“I went fishing yesterday,” I said. “I caught eleven trout.”

“You’re kidding. Fishing? With who?”

“JD.”

“He was smoking hot, Jordan. Is that the guy you’re always talking about from work? Your boss’s son?”

She knew it was. “Yes,” I said. “Same guy.”

“Were you up on one of those balconies?” she asked.

I nodded. JD’s third-story apartment had a balcony that overlooked that nightclub, and we had so much more fun watching the action from up there rather than being down in it. “We only stayed up there for a little while,” I said.

“If I had that apartment, I would be out on the balcony all the time. That room is so cool, even when nobody’s in it. I can’t believe he owns that place and he’d rather rent it out than live there.”

I shrugged. “Neither of us really care about going out.”

“And you hung out with him again yesterday?”

“Yes.”

“Fishing?”

“Yes,” I said, laughing. “Why aren’t you at work?”

“I have off today and tomorrow, since my brother is in.”

“Oh, yeah, I forgot.”

“So, are you supposed to be dating that guy now?” she asked.

“I don’t know. But yeah, I think we are. We like each other a lot.” I was smiling and staring into space, and knew I looked like a lovestruck teenager, but I didn’t care.

Rachel and I ended up riding the elevator together. She was really curious about JD, and she asked questions about him the whole time we were together. We parted ways when we made it to the street.

I smiled the whole way to work, and I kept smiling once I got there. I was in the best mood, and it was because I was in love with JD Alexander. I loved this man, and it felt really good.

I was still in that same blissful state later that day when I had a game-changing conversation with Isaac near the kitchen service station. Both of us were waiting for our dishes, and we took a couple of minutes to catch up. It had been a busy morning, and we hadn’t had much time to talk.

“I heard you went to the lake with JD,” Isaac said.

“Yeah. I’d never been fishing before.”

“Never? Are there no fish in Oklahoma?”

“Yeah, I’m sure there are fish, but no one ever showed me how to catch them, and it never occurred to me to try to learn on my own.”

Isaac shook his head, smiling at me. “I knew my cousin had it for you from the beginning. I told Rita something was going on with him before he ever set you up in that apartment.”

“Yeah,” I said, smiling blankly even though my heart began to race.

It was one of those times when my thoughts directly correlated to a spike in my blood pressure. Isaac had said one simple sentence... *before he ever set you up in that apartment*. But it led to a whole flood of thoughts.

I was suddenly aware that my life situation in Seattle was the result of JD's charity. I smiled and said something vague and lighthearted to finish the conversation with Isaac, but my thoughts and realizations during the next little while were painful to experience.

I realized so many things.

The one that took me a few minutes to figure out was that Ruth was JD's assistant.

I was humiliated.

He had let me talk to him about how proud I was to be making it on my own in Seattle.

He must've thought I was naïve and helpless.

I figured he must've pitied me.

I was so embarrassed that it resulted in a feeling of stubborn anger. I was mad at JD for lying to me and putting me in this position where I had looked like such an idiot in front of his family.

By the middle of lunch service, I already had plans to pack up and move back to Oklahoma where I could actually afford the rent. All of this was happening in my brain while I was trying my best to smile and go along with my work at the restaurant.

"Why isn't your smile in your eyes today, Jordan?" It was Cal who asked me the odd question. I was working the counter with Isaac today, and Cal had been staring at me funny since he arrived.

"Whatcha mean, Cal?" I asked, pretending nothing was wrong.

"Your smile is usually in your mouth and your eyes, and today it's just in your mouth."

"Aww, you're so thoughtful for asking, Cal. Thanks. I'm probably just tired." I smiled at him again, making the effort to squint my eyes.

“What’s the matter with you, though?” Cal said, not budging.

“Nothing’s the matter,” I said. “If anything, I’m just tired. It’s Monday, you know.”

I felt bad for lying to Cal, but I wasn’t about to explain the truth to him.

“Uh-huh, but you never had your mood bad on another Monday.”

I leaned over the counter, getting closer to him. I knew there was no tricking Cal. “It’s not because it’s Monday,” I admitted. “I got embarrassed about something that happened to me earlier, that’s all. I’m trying to forget about it, so I’m not going to talk to you about it or tell you what it was.”

“Did you forget to zip up your pants?”

“No, it wasn’t that, but it was similar,” I said, even though it wasn’t.

“Did you forget to put on deodorant?”

“No, but something similar,” I said, walking off and pretending to be busy while smiling as genuinely as I could.

I went into the kitchen to take a breather after my conversation with Cal. My day was a whirlwind of self-doubt and embarrassment, and I was thankful I got off at three instead of having to work a double. My mind had been working all afternoon, and I was about to leave when I ran into Jim in the kitchen.

“Hey, are you off for the day?” he asked. I nodded, smiling at him.

“I’ll be back in the morning, though,” I lied.

“I didn’t get to talk to you much today,” he said.

“I know. We were so busy.”

“My son said he took you fishing.”

“Yes, he did. It was fun. Hey, do you happen to know if JD’s secretary’s name is Ruth? He mentioned it before and I

forgot.”

“Miss Ruthie. She’s a sweetheart. Did you meet her?”

“No, but I’ve heard JD mention her before. I wasn’t sure about her name. I think she was the one I talked to when I first moved into the apartment.”

It was a baited statement, and I watched Jim to see how he would react. But he didn’t skip a beat. “Probably,” he said, with a nod and a shrug.

My blood began to actually boil. I turned hot, and I knew that my face would be red within seconds. I pretended to dig in my purse for something.

“Well, I’m out of here,” I said, trying to sound like I was in a chipper mood.

I hugged Jim because that was what I would normally do. It felt weird, though. It was as if I was telling him goodbye—like it was the last time I would ever hug him.

“Are you okay?” Jim asked.

And I told him I was tired just like I had told a few others.

I was tired. I had been stewing all afternoon. I thought of the long conversations I had with JD. He had hours and hours of opportunity to tell me the truth. I thought of all the clues, and I knew I should have figured it out. I knew in my heart that my apartment was too good to be true, and it turned out that it was.

I called Rachel on my way home. “Hey,” I said when I heard her pick up the phone.

“Hey, are you okay?”

“Yeah. I was wondering about your apartment. Your lease. Did you sign with a lady named Ruth?”

“No. I bought mine, remember?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Why? Is everything all right with your apartment?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you looking to move?”

“No, no, I was just wondering. I know I get a good deal on my rent, and I was just wondering what you pay, but I guess it’s not the same if it’s a mortgage.”

“Yeah, I have it financed for fifteen years, so my note’s pretty high. But I know Ross next door. He rents. I don’t know if his landlord is the same lady you’re talking about, but he’s got the same layout as you.”

“You don’t know what he pays?”

“No, but he’s cool. You can ask him. What’s going on?”

“Nothing. I’m just... tired.”

“You’re tired and it’s making you ask about Ross’s rent?” she said, laughing.

“No, I thought you were asking if something was wrong with me. Just tiredness or whatever. No, I was just curious about the rent. I was thinking about my lease and how long I was going to stay in Seattle and all that.”

“Well, probably forever now since you’re in loooove.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, pretending to smile so that she could hear it in my voice. “Okay, well, thanks. I was just curious. I’ll probably see you later.”

Chapter 18

I held my tears inside the whole time I walked home, but as soon as I crossed the threshold to the apartment, I cried. Tears poured down my cheeks.

I was so embarrassed.

I thought I loved JD.

I thought I knew everything about him and had told him everything about me. He knew he had left out a huge piece of information, and I felt betrayed because of it. I had been so confident and secure in my own ability to make it in this city, and I was humiliated that it had all been a lie. There was nothing quite so embarrassing as being proud of yourself for something only to find out that you didn't do it.

JD had given me that apartment way back when he didn't even like me. *How was I supposed to have put those pieces together?* I had all sorts of confused, desperate, terrible thoughts that led to me picking up the phone to call JD several times before putting the phone down again. Finally, I decided to send a text. I typed a long composition that took me twenty minutes and several drafts. And then I decided to delete it.

I couldn't face him.

I decided I was just going to leave Seattle and not even tell JD that I knew the truth. There was no telling how much rent he was losing on this place every month. He would be better off without me in this apartment, anyway. I would just rip the band-aid off and leave. I would pack everything I owned into a rented vehicle and drive myself back to Oklahoma. I wouldn't have to stay there forever, but at least I could go back to my old job and some place that was familiar for a while to regroup and come up with another plan.

I didn't talk to God about it. My mind was too full, and in my frantic state, I forgot to pray. But I felt liberated once I decided to leave, so I figured that was similar to having God's blessing about it. It didn't matter, really. There was no way I

would continue staying in this apartment that was three or four times the amount I could afford. I had no choice but to go.

I composed a text because I knew JD was planning on coming over when he finished with his work.

Me:

I know we were supposed to get together later tonight, but I can't. I'm not feeling well. I'll text you tomorrow.

I pressed send as I thought... *but tomorrow I'll be gone.*

I got a text back right away.

JD:

What's the matter?

I didn't answer him back right away, and within a minute or so, my phone rang. I silenced the call and composed a text to him.

Me:

It's no big deal. Just a cold, probably. I'll call or text you tomorrow.

I included a couple of playful emojis because it was something I would normally do, even if I wasn't feeling well.

I went straight to work, packing my things. The apartment was partially furnished when I arrived, and I just left all the furniture where it was and put my personal stuff in a bunch of trash bags. I didn't have a ton of stuff, but I rented a U-Haul van. It was reasonably priced and could be available by 6am, so I reserved it. I told them I would be there first thing tomorrow morning. I would sleep in the apartment one more night and leave Seattle first thing when I woke up.

I had enough friends back in Oklahoma, and my parents were there if it came to that. I knew I wouldn't be out on my ear once I made it back.

It was now dinnertime, and I had everything I owned in a huge pile of trash bags near the door. I wasn't hungry, but I knew that I needed sustenance for tonight and caffeine for the morning, so I decided to go to the grocery store.

I was just about to leave when I heard a knock on my door. I thought it might be Rachel and her brother, and I didn't feel like explaining the trash bags, so I stood in the crack of the door when I opened it, preventing them from looking inside.

But it wasn't Rachel and her brother.

It was JD, and I did the unthinkable. I stepped back and closed the door, locking the deadbolt so that he couldn't come in. I should've been expecting him, but I wasn't and the shock of seeing his face made me do that without even thinking about it.

I stood there and heard him pound on the door three times. "Jordan, what's going on?"

He was not speaking softly, and I opened the door a crack.

"Rachel's going to come out if you don't be quiet," I said with wide eyes. "I'm sorry I did that—that I closed the door. I don't want to give you anything... if I'm catchy."

"I kissed you last night," he said. "I'm pretty sure if you have something, I already caught it."

"I know, but still, I don't want you to come in here."

"Have you been crying?" he asked.

I wiped my face, making a confused expression.

"What are you doing?" He tried to look around me like he thought someone might be trying to cause me harm in my apartment.

I shook my head and motioned like he should stay in the hallway, but my refusal only alarmed him even further. He moved toward me peering inside, and I backed up, letting him in and burying my face into my hands.

"What is all this?" he asked, looking around and sounding utterly confused. His eyebrows were furrowed as he searched around the room.

“No one else is here,” I said, knowing what he was looking for.

“What’s all this?” he asked again, pointing at the stack of bags near the door.

“I’m, that’s, we, I’m, that’s my stuff.”

He blinked. “What’s it doing in trash bags?” he asked. He tilted his head at me. I couldn’t see his expression because I was not looking directly at him—I couldn’t bear to.

“Why is your stuff in trash bags, Jordan?” he asked again when I didn’t answer right away.

“I’m leaving.” I barely got the words out, and when I did, it didn’t seem like they were enough.

“What? Why? What’s going on? What happened? Where are you going?” He tried to move to get me to look at him, but I couldn’t.

I shook my head, turning away. “You own this apartment,” I said, my own disdain for myself dripping off every word.

“What? Yes, I do. What’s the matter with that?”

“What’s *the matter* with it?” I said, meeting his eyes for the first time.

His dark brown eyes looked worried, and I blinked, turning away.

“The matter is that this was a big charity case to you, JD. I sat there and told you—I gushed about how God helped me find an apartment, and that lady named Ruth calling, and you just stood there and let me... uhhh... even your grandma... she thinks I’m a... uhhh...” I was so mad and embarrassed that I couldn’t even think straight. Hot blood rushed through my body. It was so distracting that I couldn’t finish what I was saying.

“Jordan, my love, please come here.” JD pulled me into his arms, and I went, but I didn’t return the affection. I just stood there, limply relaxed in his arms, devastated. “Please

listen,” he said, holding me gently and touching me with calming strokes.

I didn’t care. I was numb to it—immune to it—blinded by shame. “Please just let me go,” I begged weakly.

“No,” he pleaded, softly holding onto me. “I’m sorry, but no. I don’t even understand what’s got you so upset.”

My face was pressed against his shirt, and I pulled back enough to see that there was now mascara on it. I was barely even wearing any makeup, and what I did have on had gotten all over his shirt. “I’m sorry,” I said, feeling disgusted with myself. “I just need you to get out of here, and I’ll be gone in the morning, JD.”

“Stop, Jordan. Come here. What in the world, Jordan, baby, slow down, please. Just, goodness, come here.”

I didn’t relax onto him like he expected me to. I just stood there, staring at his shirt, and standing so close to him that I knew he wasn’t able to see my whole face. “I’m not staying, JD. I can’t stay here.”

“Tell me why.”

“Because I’m a big joke to your family. It’s not like Micah or Lila where everyone knew what was going on. I was tricked. I was talking about my amazing apartment, and you just sat there and let me brag when you’re the one who gave it to me. You tricked me into thinking God helped me. You lied to me all this time, and now I’m ashamed. How am I supposed to talk to your dad and Rita knowing that all of you were talking about how badly I needed... JD, how did none of you tell me that I was a charity case? It’s humiliating. I thought I was your equal this whole time. I thought we were together and that we were equally into each other and equally able to contribute. But the whole time, you just see me as some helpless person.”

I was mad at him because he was making me have to do this. I had my heart so set on having him and now I had to give him up.

I felt like I had been hit by a truck.

JD slowly went to his knees. He slid downward, gently holding onto my legs and not letting me go. It was the last thing I expected him to do, and I glanced at him when he did it. His expression was serious.

“Please stay with me,” he said when I looked away. “None of that is true, Jordan. I mean, I understand what you’re saying, and I see how you could feel... I’m not saying your feelings aren’t... I’m sorry, Jordan. Look at me. Please. I’m so sorry. This is not supposed to happen like this. This can’t just end like—just take a second, and listen to me, please. Try to understand. I never did see any of this as some kind of lie that I was keeping from you. Maybe right at first, I thought about telling you and didn’t take the opportunity, but Jordan, I didn’t even think about it after that. I put it out of my mind.” He showed me his palm in a gesture of surrender. “I adjusted your rent, and then I put it out of my mind. It’s not like I woke up every day thinking about how I hoped you wouldn’t find out about it. It wasn’t even in my thoughts. And it wasn’t in Dad or Birdy’s thoughts either. You are not less than us in any way.”

Chapter 19

JD stood up, never breaking contact with me. He kicked off his shoes and began walking toward my living room, pulling me along with him. He led me straight over to the couch. His couch.

He fell onto one corner of it, pulling me into his arms. I went, but again, I was not into it. I was so ashamed to face him that my emotional walls were impenetrable. He was trying hard, but I felt hopeless about the situation.

“I need you,” he said, pulling me onto his lap. He situated me in his arms where he latched on and held onto me.

I wasn’t resisting, nor was I participating. I just sat there, resting in his arms and feeling indifferent about it. My heart was in a broken state, and it caused me to feel numb.

“You, Jordan. You’re the prize in this scenario. I’m the one who needs you. Twenty-six hundred dollars a month is nothing to me. I’m sorry to put it like that, but it’s not a big deal to me compared to having you. It’s not a large amount of money in the scope of all the properties I have, Jordan. You have something far greater than money. I never once thought you needed my charity. If I didn’t offer that apartment, you would have left Seattle and started over somewhere cheaper.”

“Which was what I should have done,” I said indignantly.

“No, it’s not what you should have done. Please don’t go somewhere else. I was being selfish by trying to help you stay. Even when I was trying to tell you to bug off on that first day, I could just tell that you had something about you that I wanted to get to know. I knew, even then, that you were special, and then the more I got to know you, the more I knew I actually needed you. I want you in my life. There’s no one else like you. No one could have gone through what you went through with your parents and come out like you did. You dug yourself out of a hole mentally and financially. You’re amazing, Jordan—like some freak of nature. You had an accident, and you got completely abandoned because of it, and still ended up so positive and happy and wonderful. You were

so determined to do it on your own that I *didn't want* to tell you. I knew you wouldn't agree to stay if you knew."

"I certainly wouldn't have," I agreed.

"It made me happy to see you here in this apartment, though, Jordan. It wasn't just for you that I did it. It was selfish of me. I liked knowing it was safe here and you were close to work." He put his hand on my head, holding me to his chest, stroking my hair gently. "But please don't say that anyone thinks of you as any less than us, because it's just not true. Birdy loved you from the first time she talked to you. And my dad loves you, too, Jordan. Please, please don't ever say that any of us don't love you or that we underestimate you. It's just untrue. We all think you're an amazing woman. I need you in my life. I need your positivity. I don't see it as me taking care of you by letting you live here. You are a light in my life. I knew I needed you and wanted you way before you let me get close to you. I love you, okay? Please just unpack those bags and say you'll never leave me."

JD held me close, patiently hugging me to his chest. He was unbelievably sincere, and the unpleasant thoughts I had been seeing as truths melted away and instantly felt like lies to me. My perspective shifted in those moments as he talked to me and held me. I felt JD's love. He had professed it. I leaned into him. It was only a couple of inches of movement, but JD knew something had shifted.

"I love you," he repeated, holding me. "I know I do. What kind of woman could do the things you do? No one. No one could have had the life you had and turned out so strong and determined and close to God. You're beautiful, and you're easy to please. You're funny and you're sarcastic. I have to have you. There's no other woman who I want in my life. No one else would ever do. You have to be mine Jordan. Please. I'm begging you. Stay. Stay, not only in Seattle, but with me. I want you with me. I want to get you a car and a closet full of new clothes. I want that closet to be at my house, and that car at my house, too. I just got you, and I can't, I won't just let you leave me now. I can't believe you were actually going to

leave without talking to me. What in the world? My girl. Please say you'll stay with me."

I held onto him, being silent and still in his arms. I had been so fixed on leaving that I was cold to him. My heart had been hard. But my walls had melted away magically as he spoke. I knew JD was telling me the truth. He loved me. He needed me. He was passionate about it, and he was being honest, I could feel it in my bones.

And the truth of the matter was that I loved him back. I loved him so much. If it hurt him to see me go, then I was going to stay. I would obviously stay. I adjusted, holding onto JD, hugging him. He shifted, pulling me closer, wrapping me in his arms.

"Are you staying?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You are? You promise?"

"I promise," I said. "But I can't live here. I have to really do it by myself, or I'm not going to feel right."

"That's ridiculous," he said, trying to look at me. I glanced at him and he gave me the sweetest half-smile. "Why is needing me a bad thing? I need you. I'm not afraid to admit it. Why are you being so proud?"

I flinched. "I never thought of it like that," I said. "I'm not proud. I'm just not going to be a burden to anyone."

"That's the thing, though, Jordan. I don't know why you see it as being a burden."

"A financial burden," I said.

JD took me by the side of the face, holding onto me and drawing me back to the exact distance where he could best focus on me and stare into my eyes. "Listen to me because I am only going to say this once. I will never see you as a financial burden. Why don't you just be in my life and I'll just be in your life. We'll get into money talks later. I'm not worried about it. I am not like your parents. I will never leave

you and hurt you like they did. I want *you*. There's no amount of money that would make me abandon you."

I stared at him. "I don't know how I was all the way out the door. I was convinced in my heart that things could never work," I said. "I don't know how I could possibly go from packed and leaving to melting in your arms right now, JD. How do you do that?"

His chest shook with laughter. "It's just a matter of talking to each other," he said. "You assumed one thing when something else was actually the truth. You assumed people were thinking things about you. All I did was tell you the truth. Just be willing to talk if you have something to work out with me. Don't get frustrated and run off."

I'd been watching his mouth move as he spoke. JD was a gorgeous looking man, and his mouth curved and shifted as he spoke, causing my insides to feel warm. I touched the side of his big, handsome cheek. He had a barely there five o'clock shadow, and I loved the texture of it under my fingertips. "How'd you get so dang sweet?" I asked.

"I felt like I was dying just now when I thought of you leaving." He let his head fall back and flop on the back of the couch, sighing a long, relieved breath. He swallowed, and I watched his Adam's apple shift in his throat.

I leaned in and kissed his neck tentatively. "I'm sorry I scared you," I said with my mouth close to his neck. I kissed him again. They were gentle, reserved kisses.

He rubbed my back.

"I was scared, too," I added. "I'm so sorry. With the way it was built up in my mind, I just thought that—"

"I know, but that wasn't reality," he said.

I snuggled next to him, feeling eternally thankful for the way he hunted me down and sought me out just to shower me with love and forgiveness.

"Can you stay in this apartment for a little while, until we get married and you move in with me?"

“Yes,” I said. I almost mentioned something about paying more rent, but I figured thankfulness was a better way to show gratitude than self-doubt. “Thank you,” I added. I kissed his cheek. “Thank you for this place. It’s beautiful, and wonderful, and you’re so nice for helping me out.”

”*You’re* so nice,” he said, flirting with me.

He licked his lips, and as if that were my cue, I leaned in and kissed him. I softly kissed his mouth, tugging ever so gently on his lower lip, pulling it into my mouth. He tasted like heaven. I loved him. It wasn’t just physical... although physically... my body was reacting.

“I love you,” I said. “I know you said it earlier, and I didn’t get to say it back, but I want you to know, JD, that I do love you. I will be nothing but loyal to you and fiercely protective. I’m so thankful for you and what we have together. Thank you for not letting me go. I’m not going to react like this when something scares me anymore. I’m sorry I did this today.”

“I love you too,” he said simply.

“And?” I asked.

“And what?”

“You don’t want to give me a hard time about the trash bags and U-Haul?”

“What U-Haul?”

“The one I have to cancel.”

“No, I don’t want to give you a hard time about a U-Haul you have to cancel,” he said easily. “What I want is to feel your mouth on mine again.”

I smiled because that would be no problem at all.

I leaned in and kissed him.

Chapter 20

A month later

Everything changed for JD and me that day when I almost left. We were inseparable after that. That misunderstanding was a wakeup call to both of us, and we knew we no longer wanted to spend any time apart.

I was madly in love with him. In my heart, I was wholly devoted to JD, and I knew he felt the same about me. We made plans to get married the following summer, which was only a few months away. But then we changed our minds and bumped it up. We simply couldn't take it. The two of us were like an old couple already, and both of us wanted to make it official and get on with our lives together. We saw no sense in waiting a specific amount of time just because that was what we said we were going to do in the first place. We were in control of our own destiny. So, when JD came to me wanting to bump up the wedding, I easily agreed.

Today was a beautiful Friday in April—it was a rare sunny day, and it happened to be the day before my new wedding date.

I was so excited I could burst.

I had been that way since we committed to each other. I smiled all the time and I doodled hearts and stars and smiley faces on my tickets. Today, I had been especially excited, though. The smiling was out of control, and my doodlings included wedding bells and extra hearts. Jim was working the lunch shift, and he put wedding-themed songs such as Chapel of Love and White Wedding on our playlist. I sang along when I was in the kitchen, and Jim loved it. We danced. He loved me and wanted me in his family, and the restaurant kitchen at Jimmy's may as well have been Justin Bieber's house with how famous I felt when I was back there.

It was one-thirty, and the lunch rush was finally starting to settle down a bit when Claire came to the back. She wasn't working today, but she often came to pick up food, so I wasn't surprised to see her back there.

She was, however, staring straight at me with an intense expression.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Yeah, I just sat someone in your section,” she said. “Table thirteen.”

“Oh, okay. It’s not your cousin is it?” I asked, smiling and hoping it was JD.”

“No,” she said. “It’s not JD.” She reached out and pinched the backside of my arm playfully, and I stared at her.

“Who is it?”

“No one. Just go. I already gave them a menu.” Claire was hiding something from me, and I walked away from her with a narrow-eyed expression.

“It is my husband,” I mumbled under my breath as I walked toward the dining room. “Oh my goodness, it’s Micah Lacey,” I corrected. I stopped in my tracks when I realized who was sitting at table thirteen. “It’s Micah Lacey,” I whispered to no one. I glanced behind me, but Claire had disappeared and was already talking to the guys in the kitchen. “It’s Micah-for-crying-out-loud-Lacey,” I said to myself.

Seeing him was stunning, and I had to work up the nerve to walk over there.

“It’s your table,” I told myself. “It’s just another customer. Simply take his order like you do with everyone else.”

Micah waved at me when he caught sight of me coming, and I was so nervous about mistaking his wave that I turned and looked over my shoulder. I turned back to him and waved when I realized that he had been looking at me the whole time. He smiled. Micah Lacey was looking directly at me and smiling like we were old pals. It was already different than the last time I had met him, and we hadn’t said a single word to each other.

“You must be Jordan,” he said.

“I am,” I said. “And we met once before, believe it or not. Back over in Texas. It’s nice to see you again. Do you want to take a minute to decide your order, or do you know what you want? I could just take your drink order, if you’re waiting on someone.”

I was completely comfortable waiting tables, but I had a hard time getting words out with Micah. I stopped talking, smiling at him. I could not believe Micah Lacey was sitting at my table.

“Sit down,” he urged, gesturing to the seat across from him. “Do you have time to sit for a minute?”

“Sure,” I said, feeling completely taken aback that he would ask such a thing. I sat with my leg on the edge of the booth, barely teetering there and waiting to hear what he was going to say. I assumed he had some complicated order, and I set my pad on the table in front of me and held my pen, poised to write it down.

“Are you taking notes or something?” he asked, sitting back and smiling calmly.

“I thought I was taking your order,” I said, smiling back at him.

He shook his head. “No, I just wanted you to sit and talk to me for a minute. I have to get to know the lady who won JD’s heart.”

“Oh, JD, you told, he told, you know JD? I mean, of course you know JD, but I didn’t realize you knew I was... I’m sorry. Hey. It’s nice to meet you.” I stuck my hand out. “Like I said, I met you once before at a concert in Texas, but it’s nice to meet you again.”

“Thank you. It’s nice to meet you again, too.”

“There aren’t many musical artists in the world that I listen to enough to have their stuff memorized. Your music has been in the soundtrack of my life for years.”

“Wow, that’s a cool compliment,” he said, grinning at me.

“You’re a cool customer to be sitting in my section,” I said, grinning back. “I didn’t even know you were coming to town. Are you playing a concert?” I hadn’t been on social media lately, but I didn’t remember a concert in Seattle.

“No, I’m just here for a wedding,” he said.

“My wedding?” I asked with wide eyes.

He smiled and nodded at me. “Yes,” he said, looking amused by my excitement.

“Yessss! Are you serious?” I high-fived him, and he laughed and reached out to high-five me back.

“My boy, JD, told me he was getting married this summer. He said he found his best lady and that he was going to marry her, and of course I told him I had to be there for it. I knew it was supposed to happen this summer, but I’ll be out of the country, so I begged and begged, and here we are.”

“Did our wedding get moved up for you?” I asked.

Micah shrugged guiltily, and my face fell. “Thank you!” I said. “I was fine with doing it this summer, but I’m so happy it’s happening early. I love that guy.”

Micah appreciated seeing how happy I was, and he reached up and offered me another high-five over the table, which I gladly returned.

I was nervous talking to Micah, but it wasn’t because I had a crush on him. Maybe I used to, but at this moment, all I could think of was my man.

“JD was happy about it, too,” Micah said. “That dude took absolutely no convincing at all. All I did was say I want to come to your wedding, but I’m about to leave for Europe, so it’s got to be in the next few weeks, and he was like *okay, sure, no problem, let’s do it*. Anyway, I had to come meet this girl who has my boy so in love.”

I grinned and shrugged shyly as if presenting myself humbly, and he laughed.

“Claire told me you let her pick your dress,” he said. “She was all excited about doing that.”

“I was excited about letting her,” I said. “It’s a vintage dress that she got at an estate sale for ten dollars.”

“Most brides wouldn’t want to admit that.”

“Admit what? That their dress only cost ten dollars? I love it. I was so excited when Claire showed it to me. She could probably get a lot more than ten for it, reselling it. To me, it’s just as beautiful as anything you’d find brand new in a store, though. Better. You should see Claire’s store. She’s really a genius when it comes to finding cool, vintage clothes.”

“I know, he said. “Half the stuff in my closet is from Claire. She mails me stuff all the time.”

I glanced at my other tables to make sure they were doing okay, which they were. I was having a lighthearted, casual conversation with one of my favorite musicians of all time, so I wasn’t positive that I could refrain from neglecting my tables once they did need me.

“I met you at that concert in Texas,” I said, “and not in a stalker way or anything, but something you said about Rita was what led me here.”

“I know. JD told me about it. He was asking me what I said to you, and I couldn’t remember. But I remembered you. I remembered you asking me about Rita backstage.” He shrugged. “I usually don’t mention her on stage. It was a random occurrence that night.”

“I’m starting to realize that there’s no such thing,” I said.

“Random occurrences?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I think God just enjoys giving us interesting curves in our paths.”

“I think JD’s mad,” he said.

“Why would he be mad?” I asked, but then I realized that Micah saw something I didn’t. I turned to find that JD was in the restaurant and walking toward our booth. Indeed, he looked mad. He was staring at Micah like he had done something wrong. I turned to Micah who was just smiling like he wasn’t scared.

“I had to see her, my brother,” Micah said standing up to greet JD. “Don’t get mad at me. I was hanging out with Claire, and she said your lady was working, so I had to come down here.”

JD had walked up to our table by then, and I stood up to greet him. He took me in, placing one hand protectively around my waist.

“I have to go check on my table,” I said. “I’ll be right back. I love you.”

“He was supposed to surprise you at Birdy’s tomorrow,” JD said, explaining Micah’s presence.

“Thank you,” I said. “I’m surprised either way. Are you staying to eat?”

“Yes,” Micah said, answering for JD. “He’ll stay.”

“Fine, I’ll stay,” JD said, looking at me.

“What’s this a family reunion?” Isaac said, coming up to us.

“I’m going to check on my other table,” I said. “I’ll be right back.”

JD leaned in and gave me a kiss on the mouth that was way too patient for the situation. I leaned upward and kissed him back, and we broke apart slowly, staring at each other.

“Okay, I’ll be back in a second and I’ll take your order,” I said.

“You know what I want, and Micah will have the same thing.”

“I will?” Micah said, but he was smiling.

“Yes,” JD said, shaking his head at his friend.

Isaac said something to Micah, and I walked away, smiling as I made my way to my other table.

Perspective was everything. I was the happiest person in the whole world, and I was a waitress. I was currently walking through a restaurant to check on a table. I had on Levi’s and an

apron with busted-up Chuck Taylors that were several years old. These customers would inevitably ask me for a paper box, at which point I would have to walk to the other side of the restaurant and retrieve it before taking it back to them. I was a waitress. Some people in my position would say I was *just* a waitress. But life was what you made it, and in that moment, I couldn't be happier. I didn't mind going to check on my table. I didn't mind taking them a box. I loved Jimmy's and I wanted these people to have a good experience.

Rita was smart with money, and she could have retired by now, but she still came in and worked, waiting on a few tables here and there to check in with her regulars. JD was also smart with money, and he assured me that I no longer needed to work at all. But I enjoyed being a waitress at this place. I appreciated the concept of blooming where you were planted, and I loved being planted there at Jimmy's.

Epilogue

The following evening

The wedding

Micah Lacey wrote a song about me.

That statement would have an entirely different meaning to me if you had told me that a year ago. But this song was about me and JD.

It was poetic that Micah Lacey had been my biggest crush, and now he was here, at my wedding, singing a song for me and my husband.

And I wanted no one else but JD. I loved JD more than I knew it was possible to love a man, and he loved me, too. We were fully committed to each other, and that was a wonderful feeling. The song Micah performed at our wedding was written and performed in Micah's style, but it had specific information about me that I had only told JD. It was surreal, dancing with my husband in Rita's living room while Micah Lacey performed a love song that was written for us.

I fought the urge to cry the whole time Micah sang. I danced with JD and I thought of how perfect this moment was. My thoughts went back to all the tears I had shed in those desperate times when I had no one. I remembered praying that God would deliver me. I thought about my mindset back then and how it led me to Micah's music, which ultimately led me here. I had sought God and clung to him in those many desperate, painful moments years ago, and for years, it seemed like I had to claw my way out of it.

But now it had all changed. I could see now how everything led to this moment. All the pain had led me here. If I hadn't learned how to be a diligent and good worker, I might not have made the same impression on JD, and right now, whatever impression I had made on him, it was the right one. He loved me with all his heart. He had already made a speech about it.

I was at home with JD and his family in Seattle. It was truly one of those times in life where what was waiting around the bend was better than I could have imagined. I appreciated that in this moment. The lights were low, Micah sang our song, and JD's strong arms were wrapped around me. I clung to him. I didn't pay attention to anyone around us.

We weren't the only ones dancing. It was an impromptu group slow dance when Micah started playing. Everyone who had a partner joined us, which meant everyone at the party was dancing. This was not a huge wedding with a dance floor. It was a small gathering with friends and family at Papa Jim and Rita's, and we all danced right there in their living room. She had decorated, it was dark in there, and it was perfect.

Micah went seamlessly into another love song after our song ended. We kept dancing, but JD pulled back and looked at me.

"That song," I said.

JD smiled. "He did good."

"I can't believe Micah wrote it. I thought maybe you did with how specific it was."

He shook his head. "Micah surprised me with it. That's the first time I heard it just now."

"I thought for sure you wrote it with all that stuff it said about me."

"That's just how much I talk about you," JD said.

"You must love me," I said, looking upward through my lashes and flirting with him.

"I do love you," he said. He was good at saying it, and I wanted to melt at the confident, unrepentant sound of his voice.

"I love you, too," I replied, not caring who heard. No one was paying attention to us, anyway.

"I didn't expect a song or a dance," he said.

“I didn’t expect any of this,” I said. “I thought it was just going to be dinner and a few little vows and stuff.”

“Oh, our little vows?” he asked, looking me over.

I grinned, knowing he was being playful with me. “I loved those vows. I loved that song. I love this dance—I love the feel of your hands,” I added, leaning in closer to him.

He responded. I felt his hand slide downward to my lower back. “One more hour,” he said. “Let’s set that goal. Let’s make it home within the hour.”

“We’ll need to leave here in about forty minutes,” I said.

“We could easily do that,” he said, gripping me a little tighter.

“I have a cute little outfit to wear,” I said, leaning in.

He moved with me. “You’re trying to make me leave right now,” he said.

“No, no, we should stay the full... thirty-seven minutes.”

His hand moved, shifting, holding me.

“An even thirty sounds reasonable,” JD said.

The song played, and he looked at me with a hungry expression that had my blood running warm again.

It was a wonderful party and everything, but we had done what we went there to do. We gazed at each other with all sorts of unspoken promises, and in that moment, I knew that we’d never make it the full thirty minutes.

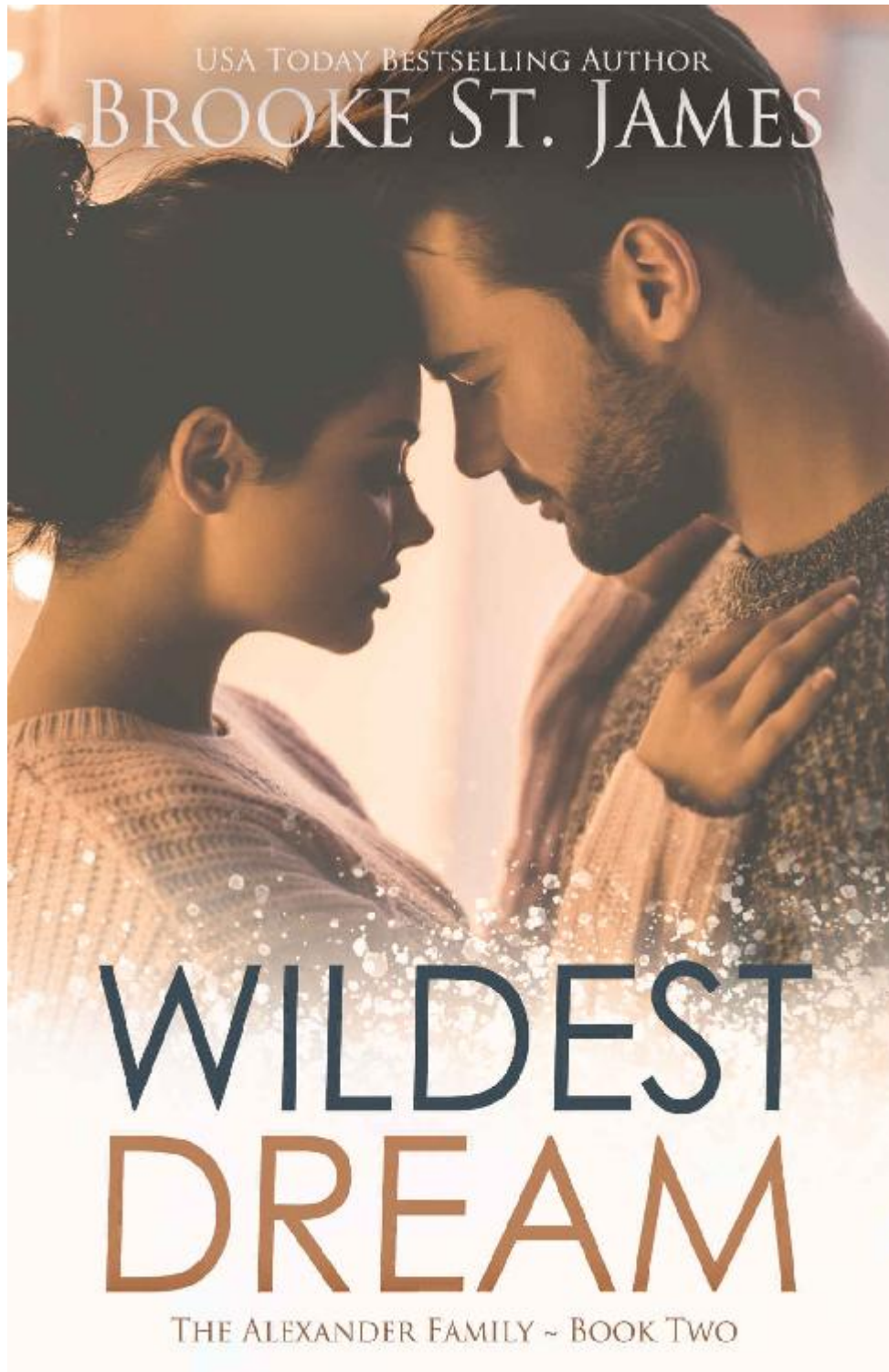
The End

(till book 2)

Thank you for reading! As an added bonus, the first five chapters of **Wildest Dream** (The Alexander Family Book 2) are included below. **Wildest Dream** is now available.

Bonus Chapters

Wildest Dream



Chapter 1

Isaac Alexander

Seattle, Washington

May

Isaac had a long, epic, unusual dream, and he woke up feeling dazed and confused by it. He was still rattled when he went to work. Isaac rarely dreamed as vividly as he did last night, and he spent his morning in a totally different state of mind because of it. He was the general manager and part-owner at his family's large restaurant in downtown Seattle. He had to work today, and the last thing he needed to be was disoriented.

But it was a long, real dream of Biblical proportions. There were scenes in the dream that actually felt Biblical. He dreamed of war and horses. He dreamed of ships and storms and everything seemed to be set in historical times even though he couldn't remember an exact historical event.

There were so many horses. Trampling horses. There was one whole scene where Isaac seemed to be carried away with a pack of wild horses. They were kicking up dust, but Isaac wasn't riding one of them. It was more like he was running along with them. He couldn't see himself in the dream, but he wasn't scared of the horses or being hurt by them.

"There was a loud rumbling noise... the trampling of hooves. I can still hear it," Isaac explained to his sister who blinked at him.

"Yeah, you lost me way back the first time you were talking about the horses. Then you went to the thing about the boat." She was staring at him like she was lost and hadn't even heard his story. "Dreams are so out there. My brain went to other things while you were talking about it."

Isaac stared at his sister. "So, you're telling me you're not listening?"

“Basically,” she agreed, cringing at the sound of her response. “I’m so sorry. I’m not *not* interested. I’m just kind of thinking about this huge lot of boxes I have to go through next door.”

“It’s fine,” Isaac said. He was out of it from the dream, and it didn’t bother him that his sister didn’t want to hear about it.

Isaac was a full-time server and restaurant manager at Jimmy’s on 2nd, and today he was working the counter. Claire had been working at her thrift store next door, and she walked over to eat lunch. Claire wasn’t the least bit interested in Isaac’s dream, which was no big deal since he was busy and didn’t have much time to talk anyway.

“I’ve got some size eleven leather casual shoes in that stuff from the estate sale last weekend. They look like you. There are several good shoes in your size, and most of the men’s clothes look like your size, too. You should come check it out. That stuff looks like it hasn’t been worn. Some of it hasn’t. It still has tags. I’ll set some things aside for you and call you to come look before I price it.”

“Thank you,” Isaac said.

“I’m sorry I don’t care about dreams. Just tell me later if you want. Mom’s making a big soup tonight.”

“What kind?” he asked absentmindedly.

“Black bean, I think,” Claire answered.

Isaac nodded at her and went about his business. He was still thinking about his dream. He could hardly get his mind off of it.

Claire didn’t think anything about their short conversation. She had grown up in the restaurant. Her great grandparents started Jimmy’s, and her grandparents built it into what it was today. Claire had worked there for four years. She stayed on even after she started her store and had only recently stopped waiting tables part-time. She still came in multiple times a week. That was the main way she saw her

brother. Half of their conversations took place in that restaurant.

Isaac went to check on his other customers, and with how busy and fast-paced the restaurant was, before he knew it, the lunch rush was over. He went through the motions, and just like that, he was down to two customers at the bar. They were a couple of Isaac's regulars, and they didn't need his attention, so Isaac decided to make a trip to the front door to fix it from dragging. It was something that had been bothering him all morning. Fixing it was a simple matter of tightening the screw on a hinge, and he carried a screwdriver with him as he walked that way.

Isaac had been managing the restaurant full-time since he was eighteen years old, which unbelievably, was eight years. He was already working there part-time in high school, but the tipping point was when his grandmother, Rita, went through a medical procedure that made her unable to work for an extended period of time. Business would have continued if Isaac hadn't stepped in for his grandmother, but he was the only one who could come close to replacing her in presence and personality.

Isaac had worked hard all these years and he now owned a percentage of the restaurant. He had saved a lot of money and made some investments. At this point, he could choose to do something different with his time than continue to manage the day-to-day operations at the restaurant. But it was a rewarding daily routine, and it was a known fact that Jimmy's would not be the same without Isaac there. He was the next generation of his grandmother, and that was saying a lot.

Isaac's grandparents owned the entire five-story building. The restaurant took up the whole first floor and there were high-end apartments above that. Papa Jim and Rita had given the second floor to their younger son, Samuel, and the third floor to their oldest son, Jim. Each floor had eight apartments, and Isaac's dad, Samuel, had given all three of his children their own unit.

Isaac had lived upstairs until a year ago when he decided he spent enough of his time in this building. He would always

own the apartment upstairs, though. It was written into his contract that if he ever did sell, it had to be to family. But Isaac would never sell his apartment in the Alexander building. In fact, if he ever stopped working at the restaurant, he would probably move back.

He walked toward the skidding door, smiling and thinking about how much this small task was going to change something that had been bugging him all morning. His mind went back to the dream during those seconds as he headed toward the door. He saw and heard those trampling horses.

“Hey, Jill, how’s it going?” he distractedly asked the lady coming in the door.

Jill Phillips was a novelist who had come into the restaurant several times a week for the last month.

“Everything’s great. I’m meeting Sherman today.”

“Oh, that’s cool,” Isaac said.

Jill was loosely basing her fiction novel on a few different customers or stories that happened at this restaurant, and Sherman and Linda Hendrix were a couple Jill had been interviewing.

”*You* look like a leading man,” Jill said, pointing and smiling at him in the kindhearted way of a female relative.

“What? You like my haircut?” Isaac asked, running a hand through his hair for dramatic effect.

Jill laughed at him. “I was talking about the screwdriver.”

Isaac tilted his head at her. “The screwdriver?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m just tightening a hinge,” he said, gesturing to the door.

She shrugged. “It’s still pretty boss of you.”

Isaac gave Jill a bright smile while shaking his head and moving toward the door.

Within a minute, the problem was fixed and the door was no longer dragging as it opened and closed. It would hold like this for a week or two until Isaac would have to come tighten it again. Eventually, he would have to replace something, but for now, this was a good solution.

And then he saw it.

It was straight out of his dream.

The

exact

horses.

They were suddenly plastered right in front of Isaac, in full view, and just like that, Isaac was transported to the dream. He could feel the wind move and hear the trampling sounds. It was the same scene, and he stared at it, feeling completely swept away by the memory and the motion.

“These ladies were just leaving, Isaac,” Cindy said, cutting in. “Thank you so much, ladies!”

“No problem. We enjoyed it.” But the woman’s response was reluctant. Isaac’s stare was aimed at the horses, and he was unable to believe that his exact dream was in front of his eyes. It was like he was there.

“Uh, *excuse us!*” someone said rudely.

It was at that moment that Isaac realized that the horses were connected to a shirt and the shirt was connected to a woman. He stared at it again, just to make sure he wasn’t seeing things, and it was like the picture was ripped straight out of his dream.

“Excuse us,” the woman said, moving.

Isaac didn’t realize that he had been so transfixed until she stepped to the side.

“Move!” the other woman said, cutting between Isaac and the woman with the horse shirt.

They were already walking away by the time Isaac was able to process what was going on. He had been staring at the

horses while memories of his dream flashed before his eyes. They were mad at him, and it was because he was staring at the front of her shirt.

“I’m not, I wasn’t...” he called out for them, trying to explain, but it was too late. It was a group of two women, and they walked through the restaurant in a huff. Both of them looked over their shoulders at Isaac. The one in the denim shirt was scowling at him like he was a big pervert, but the one on the right—the one in the horse shirt—she just stared at him. She was wearing an unreadable expression as the other woman turned and led them both out of the door.

The door did not scrape the floor when it opened and closed.

Isaac should have caught them and explained, but the truth was almost as odd as someone just standing there staring. *What would he tell her if he caught up to her? Would he say that he had a dream about horses and war and shipwrecks, and could she please tell him what it all meant?* Of course he wouldn’t say that. He wouldn’t even follow her. She was already out of the restaurant by now.

“What’s going on with you, boss?” Cindy said.

Isaac felt dazed already, and it was surreal to stare straight at a scene of stampeding wild horses and then have it walk out of the door.

“That woman’s shirt,” he said. “I had a dream that looked exactly like that last night. I had a crazy dream, and then her shirt was just like it.”

“Oh, I heard you talking about your dream earlier.” Cindy let out a relieved laugh. “Those women thought you were staring at her you-know-whats.”

“I know,” he said, looking ashamed. “I figured that out after the other woman shoved past me.”

“It was a little weird looking with you standing there staring at her chest like your eyeballs were about to pop out of your head. Especially holding that screwdriver.”

Isaac laughed at the thought. He was out-of-it, but he could still appreciate the humor in the situation. He knew he had most likely looked like the creep of the century in that scene, and in the moment, there was nothing he could do about it. He didn't know either of those women. They were both young and beautiful, but their faces had been a blur compared to the shirt.

What was it with the horses? Was God trying to tell him something? "I wonder if I should invest in a ranch," he said thoughtfully.

"A ranch?" Cindy said, her tone reflecting her confusion. "Like a *dude* ranch?"

"A horse ranch," he said. "I really don't know. I'm looking at some property, and I don't know. I had this really vivid dream that was exactly that girl's shirt. That was weird seeing it on a shirt. It makes me think there's more to it, you know? Like maybe God wants me to do something with horses."

"With horses?" Cindy said, still sounding perplexed.

"I don't know," Isaac said. "The dream was just so strong."

Isaac was always joking around, and Cindy didn't know what to think about his behavior right then. She laughed, assuming he was joking.

"Don't you think that's weird, though?" he asked. "The dream and then the shirt?"

"I heard Rita tell Vicki Clark that dreams mean nothing. You know Vicki was having those nightmares and she had bad anxiety about it, thinking they were going to come true, and Rita told her multiple times that dreams mean nothing. And the shirt—lots of people have shirts like that. I've seen shirts like that all the time. I don't think it means you need to open a dude ranch. You wouldn't even know how to be a cowboy, Isaac."

"You're right," he said, laughing even though he wasn't convinced. The whole thing hit him harder than that. The

dream and the feelings it stirred had been strong, and the shirt... it had unexplainably brought him back to his dream in a way that had him feeling transported. Isaac felt like there was more to it than just coincidence.

Chapter 2

Ariel "Ari" Moreno

Willow drug me along, pulling me vigorously out of the restaurant. She was my friend, Sabrina's, roommate.

"Sabrina would kill me if we walked down the block and you got murdered by some creepazoid with a screwdriver on your second day in Seattle."

"He wasn't *with a screwdriver*," I said, smiling at her. "He wasn't holding it like a weapon. He fixed a door with it. I watched him."

"Don't take up for him," she said.

I looked through the restaurant windows before we rounded the corner. I didn't see the waiter when I glanced inside, but I didn't look for very long. Willow tugged at my arm again when she saw me hesitate, and we kept walking. That had been an odd experience.

"That guy was a total creep with the way he was staring at you," she said in a frustrated tone. "He might as well have been drooling."

"Yeah, exactly," I agreed. "Which is why I think something was wrong. Men don't walk around gawking shamelessly like that."

"Do you think he... had something wrong with him? Like his brain?"

"No, I'm just saying... it didn't seem like he was... looking at my chest."

Willow laughed. "Oh, yes he was," she insisted. "He was clearly checking you out. That shirt looks good on you, but it is a little tight around the chest. It does bring the eyes to that area."

"What?" I said, laughing at her. It was a size large—not too tight at all. I had a little room in it, honestly.

“Willow, I’ve worn shirts or dresses that are way tighter than this in public, and no one has ever just walked up and stared at me like that.”

“What a whack job,” she said, glancing back on the sidewalk to make sure we weren’t being followed. “I guess I’m never going back to that place again.”

I turned and looked behind us.

Jimmy’s on 2nd

Your favorite roast beef

I hadn’t tried the roast beef.

Willow and I had gone in there for a drink while Sabrina was on the next block purchasing a pair of shoes to wear with her graduation gown. I had recently come to town to go to Sabrina’s graduation. Sabrina and I were childhood friends who had been as close as sisters for a season when we were younger.

I had met Willow a few other times, so I was comfortable around her as well.

“I don’t think real creeps can be that handsome,” I said, smiling. I hadn’t even realized I was voicing my thoughts until Willow whipped her head around to stare at me.

“What? Yes, they can. Are you taking up for that guy? It doesn’t matter how good-looking you are. There’s no excuse for that kind of misogyny.”

“What kind of misogyny?” Sabrina asked.

She met us at the door to the shoe store like she had been watching for us.

“There was a waiter at the restaurant just now who blatantly stared at her...” Willow cleared her throat to indicate an obscene area.

“Her what? Her butt?”

“My shirt,” I said.

“Ohhhh!” Sabrina said, shaking her head and making a face like it was all a real shame.

I didn't even respond to it. I mentioned the shoes she just bought, and she started talking about her experience at the shoe store. Maybe I was too forgiving, but the guy at the restaurant wasn't that big of a deal to me. I thought he was nice-looking. He was handsome, but he was also *nice*-looking as in he looked like a nice person.

I thought about his dumfounded expression as he stared at me. It almost seemed like he was hypnotized.

“Did you want to?” Sabrina repeated. She was directing her question at me.

“Did I want to what?”

“What are you so spaced out about?”

“She just got violated,” Willow said.

“I didn't get violated,” I said, smiling at them.

“Did you want to go in this other store with me?” Sabrina repeated.

“Yeah, that's fine,” I said.

I honestly didn't think that much more about the guy after that. I met a gorgeous guy with mesmerizing green eyes who happened to gawk at my shirt. It was only for a second, and even though it was weird, I put it out of my mind without a problem.

I certainly wasn't thinking of it the following day when I caught sight of that same guy at a completely different location. I saw him in a huge crowd of people at the University of Washington.

The graduation ceremony was over, and we were about to leave Husky Stadium. Willow and another friend of theirs went with Sabrina's dad to get the vehicle. They would come back this way in a minute to meet me, Sabrina, and Sabrina's mom. Those two had run into a family they knew and were taking a minute to talk. I had been given the task of watching

for Sabrina's dad and motioning to the ladies when he pulled around.

I was positioned at my post when I caught sight of the waiter from yesterday. He was standing on the sidewalk with a large group of people. They had one graduate with them—a young man who was strikingly handsome, looking like he could be the brother of the waiter. There were what must have been twenty or thirty people in the group, and they were taking pictures with the graduate. I absentmindedly watched them while I waited for Sabrina's dad. I knew they had to walk several blocks and navigate traffic to get back, so I wasn't in a hurry to stare at the street just yet.

I watched that family instead. They were all smiles, beautiful, and dressed nicely, but they also looked comfortable and fun. The waiter from yesterday was wearing slacks and a button-down shirt with a belt and dress shoes, and the whole nine yards. He looked like a male model, and I watched him unabashedly because he was far away and no one could see me or know what I was looking at.

He didn't look like a creep at all. He was smiling and talking and, if anything, *I* was the creep for being unable to stop looking at him. Even when his eyes met mine, I still couldn't look away.

Wait.

He.

His eyes.

I looked away.

I glanced away, but only for a few seconds before curiosity got the best of me and I glanced at the waiter again.

We were separated by enough distance that he had to squint, peering through the sunlight. He was definitely focused in my direction.

I thought he was focused on me.

I looked away again because I didn't want to stare. But when I glanced back at him again, he was heading my way. He

was smiling and looking larger than life as he took long strides, heading my way.

I didn't move.

One, I was strategically positioned where I could see Sabrina and her mom. And two, I wasn't entirely sure that I was the focus of his attention. Either way, he was walking right... yep... he was definitely coming my way, making eye contact with me.

He was close enough now that I could clearly see his green eyes, and they were staring straight at mine. He smiled, and his teeth were perfect. They were white and straight, and sharp in all the right ways that made him look dangerous.

I instinctually adjusted myself as he came toward me. I fixed my posture, and I placed my hand over my chest since I knew I had on a dress that was more revealing than the t-shirt from yesterday.

"Hey, are you the lady who came into my restaurant yesterday?" he asked when he got close enough for me to hear him.

"I am, yes," I agreed, nodding.

"Oh, man, I am so glad I ran into you. What are the chances? What are you doing here?"

"My friend just graduated. We were childhood friends. How about you?"

"My little brother, Ryan." He gestured to the family who was still standing around talking and taking photos. "He graduated."

"Yeah," I said. "I saw the hat."

"Hey, I wanted to... I'm actually really thankful I ran into you. I need to apologize to you for yesterday. I didn't even realize until after you left that I was looking at your... I had this extremely vivid dream the night before you came in. It was like nothing I ever dreamed before. I was picturing it in my mind all morning, and then you came in wearing that shirt. I could not tear my eyes from it. It was like..." The waiter

trailed off but he made a motion with his hands and a sound with his mouth. “Tractor beam,” he said. He smiled at me. His eyes were soft and sweet and they hadn’t left mine the whole time. I was distracted by them.

“This is a completely different experience than yesterday,” I said, smiling at him.

“Sorry about that.” He stuck out his hand. “I’m Isaac.”

“Hey, Isaac. I’m Ari.”

“That’s pretty. Ari. Is it short for something?”

“Ariel.”

“It’s pronounced differently,” he said.

I grinned at him since that was obvious. “Yeah,” I agreed.

Both of us were relaxed with easygoing demeanors. “I’m really sorry about yesterday,” he said. “That dream was surreal, and it had me thrown off all day. Even today.”

“It’s fine. I mean it’s not fine if you’re a perv or anything, but I could sort of tell that you were looking at my shirt. It’s just a... with the horses.” I was rambling because I regretted saying the word perv. Isaac was gorgeous and his direct gaze was too much for me to handle at the moment. I sort of wished he would look at my clothing again. I glanced away, looking at the scene around us.

“Are you waiting for someone?” he asked.

“Oh, I have a job to do, but it will be a minute.”

“A job? Are you working right now?”

“No, no, I’m just looking out for my friend’s dad. When he pulls up, I have to go get my friend.”

“Is it your friend from yesterday?”

“She’s is in the truck. My other friend is the one who graduated.”

“With what degree?”

“Dance.”

“Dance?”

“Yes. That’s how I know her. We were dancers when we were kids.”

“What kind of dance?”

“Hip hop.”

“You’re a hip hop dancer?” he asked, standing back and looking me over with newfound curiosity.

“I used to be more than I am now. I still do it some, but not like Sabrina. What about you?”

“Me?”

“Your brother. What did he study?”

“Oh, Ryan? Business. He just came here to play soccer, really. Our dad teaches us more about business than he learned here.”

“Your brother was on the soccer team?”

“Yes, he was. Men’s soccer,” he added dazedly. He was staring into my eyes and smiling, and it was so different from the encounter I had with him yesterday that I was stunned.

I tore my gaze from Isaac’s and glanced at the parking lot, but I didn’t see Sabrina’s dad.

“So, what do you do if not dancing?” he asked.

“I still dance, I’m just more behind the scenes now.”

“That’s good,” Isaac said.

His eyes met mine, and the simple act of eye contact felt way too... intimate, too serious. I wasn’t sure what I was feeling. I smiled and looked away.

“It’s amazing that we ran into each other,” Isaac said. “Have we ever met before?”

I shook my head. “No, I don’t... I don’t think so.”

“Crazy that we would go all this time and then see each other two days in a row,” he said. “I’m so glad, though. I felt awful, and I’m happy I got to explain.”

“I knew you weren’t a big creep like my friend thought you were. She used another word to describe you, too. I can’t remember, but it sounded bad.”

“Thank you for trusting that I wasn’t a bad guy,” he said, smiling at me. “I just couldn’t believe that shirt after I had been picturing horses all morning.”

“That’s a hilarious coincidence—w-wait, there’s my friend’s dad. I see him.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Yeah, I’ve got to…” I glanced at Sabrina who was preoccupied with her conversation. “I have to go get my friend,” I said, seeing that she didn’t happen to be conveniently looking at me like I hoped.

“Yeah, I should get back, too. I’m happy I saw you, Ari,” he said.

I smiled and nodded, waving and taking off in the direction of Sabrina. “Me too,” I said. “Mystery solved.”

“Dinner’s on the house if you ever want to come by the restaurant again!”

There was already some distance between us when he said that, and I waved at him. “Thank you!” I yelled.

Chapter 3

Isaac Alexander

The following week

It was lunchtime on Thursday when Jill, the author, came into the restaurant. Isaac was working the counter, and he saw her come in.

“How’s it going, Miss Jill?” Isaac said. “I thought you were done with your book.”

“I’m done interviewing,” she answered. “I’m meeting Sherman and Linda for coffee to give them the notes I have on their story. I wanted them to read over some things.”

“Isaac called every woman in the phone book with that same name,” Cal said.

Cal’s elderly parents owned the appliance store next door, and Cal came into the restaurant most days for lunch. He was an older gentleman, but he had a lot of childlike qualities. He always brought colorful, brutally honest conversations to the counter at Jimmy’s.

“All I did was search one time on the internet,” Isaac said.

“What’d you search for?” Jill asked as she sat down.

Isaac made a face at Cal, asking him to please not spill his guts about everything. Isaac honestly wasn’t sure how much Cal had heard. He had been looking for Ari for nearly a week.

“I searched for a woman one time,” Isaac said, explaining to Jill.

Her eyebrows shot up excitedly, and Isaac gave her a shake of the head that was meant to shut down her hope.

“It didn’t turn out to be anything. All I knew was her first name. It’s impossible.”

“Why did you want to reach this woman?”

“Oh, because he fell in love, and then she dropped off a shirt for him that day when he wasn’t working,” Cal said.

“Thanks, Cal. I hardly fell in love, but otherwise, he’s right. I met a woman, and there was this whole misunderstanding with her shirt, and then she brought the shirt here to give it to me. I told her I would buy her dinner, but she came on a Sunday and I wasn’t here. She told Robert she was heading to the airport. So, I assume she lives out of town.”

“And all you have to go on is her first name?” Jill asked.

“And he has her shirt,” Cal said. “And it smells like perfume, so he sleeps with it every night.”

Isaac leveled Cal with a stare. “Now you’re just repeating Uncle Jim and giving me a hard time about it. I definitely don’t sleep with anything every night.” Isaac didn’t sleep with the shirt, but he did pick it up now and then and take a big whiff of it. It smelled like Ari. He imagined her dancing. He wished he could see her do it. He searched ‘Ari hip hop dancer’ on the internet, but there was nothing that seemed to pertain to her. There was so much he didn’t learn about her. He had nothing—other than the fact that she went to the airport, which seemed like bad news.

He knew her friend went to the University of Washington and studied dance, but he could not let himself take such extreme measures to track her down that way. Besides, he couldn’t even remember what she said her friend’s name was. It all happened too fast.

“What did I do?” Jim asked, calling from the kitchen.

“You were teasing Isaac about his love life,” Jill said, calling to Jim and hoping to get them talking.

“There’s nothing to tell, unfortunately,” Isaac said. He wiped the counter and a few of the menus.

“How did you get her shirt, again?” Jill asked. “Tell me what happened.”

“She dropped it off up here at the restaurant, but it was when I wasn’t working,” Isaac said.

“And all he has is a note and a shirt, so it’s impossible to find her again,” Cal added, informing Jill.

“Thanks, Cal.”

“Isaac, I need to hear more of this story.”

“I’ll be right back, and I’ll tell you everything,” Isaac said. “But there’s not much to it.”

Before Isaac made his way back to Jill, Sherman and his wife came to share coffee with her. The couple had met in this restaurant twenty years ago, and their story would be one of three main storylines in Jill’s book.

“How’s the book coming?” Isaac said to Jill a little while later as Sherman and Linda walked out of the restaurant.

“It’s great. I’m in the final draft. But there’s still a chance that I... Isaac, would you please tell me the story about the girl?”

He leaned onto the counter, getting comfortable.

“Last week, the day before Ryan’s graduation, I woke up after dreaming a really vivid dream. It was long and draining, and the most memorable part was running with these wild horses—like a herd of them. They were kicking up dust, and I was right there with them, hearing and smelling the whole scene. And then, the next day, this girl comes in wearing a shirt that was a scene straight out of—bye, Cal,” Isaac said, seeing that it was 1pm on the dot and Cal stood up and began walking out even though he was interested in the story.

“Bye!” Cal answered. He high-fived Jill on the way out, but she was focused intensely on Isaac. She blinked, staring at him.

“A scene straight out of what?” she asked.

“Out of my dream,” Isaac said. “The woman had on this shirt that was a bunch of horses running—just like my dream. I was staring at it. I just stood there and stared, not realizing

where I was looking. And then she walked out before I could really explain.”

“Weird!” Jill said.

“But that’s not all. I thought I would never see her again, and the very next day I ran into her at Ryan’s graduation.”

“What was she doing at Ryan’s graduation?”

“She wasn’t there for Ryan. She was there to see her friend. The dance girl. I can’t remember what she said her name was.”

“The girl didn’t tell you even her first name?”

“No, her name is Ari. I don’t know the friend’s name.”

“But you talked to her at the graduation?”

“I did. We had a good conversation.”

“Were you able to explain about the shirt? Or did she not even ask you about it?”

“No, it was the first thing I brought up. I told her about the dream and apologized and everything, and the next day, she came by the restaurant and left me the shirt. She assumed I would want it.”

“Did you want it?” Jill asked.

“Yes, I did,” Isaac said. “I hate that Robert didn’t ask her for her contact information, though. I know it’s not his fault, but he’s the one who talked to her. Like I said, I have nothing.”

“Why wouldn’t she leave a note?” Jill asked.

“She did. There was a note. She remarked about the shirt and signed her first name. It’s the worst. I have no idea why she did that. I liked her, too, Jill. I’m starting to think that dream was less about the horses and more about the woman.”

“Oh, my gosh, do you think you missed your soulmate?” Jill asked, sinking her face into her hands theatrically.

“I don’t know about all that, but I liked her. I didn’t even realize how much I liked her until she was gone. I can’t stand that she came up here and I missed her.” Isaac shook his head.

“I have no choice but to put it out of my mind. There’s nothing I can do.”

Jill rubbed her own face, making a pained expression like putting a soul mate out of one’s mind was the worst thing she could ever imagine.

“Give me a minute or a day to think about this.”

“There’s no solution,” Isaac said. “Aside from going full stalker mode with the University dance team, or whatever her friend was a part of.”

“No, no, I’m not thinking of that. I’m thinking of something else. I’m thinking of a way I can maybe get involved. I was looking for something, anyway.”

Isaac had gotten to know the fiction writer while she was doing research, and she was an interesting person. Isaac shook his head, smiling at her and having no idea what she was talking about.

“What would you think about me telling your story? I could use a dynamic side couple, and it would be perfect.” She touched the sides of her head with her fingertips and made an intense face like she was conceiving the whole thing. “I’m getting a plan. We could do a book within a book. I could tell your story from the perspective of a writer who’s going into the restaurant looking for inspiration. Oh my gosh, this is what I need to tie together this ending.”

“I don’t know specifically what you’re asking, but I think I’m fine with it,” Isaac said.

“Yeah, thank you, and I’ll figure it all out,” Jill said, nodding and smiling. “I’ll have to fabricate an ending that hasn’t happened, but there’s a slim chance if we keep all of your beginning details the same—about the shirt and the graduation and everything—there’s a slim chance that we can reach her.”

“In *this* book? You just told me your book was finished.”

“Yes, this book needs it. I’ve got to rethink a few things, but this is going to be fun. I’m going to write about this whole situation—me writing the book and everything. I’ll make her

read the book from wherever she is—I'll probably set her in Chicago or Buffalo, I'm not sure."

"Jill, I am so lost right now," Isaac said. "Are you writing part of your book where a waiter meets a girl and the whole horse shirt and everything, and then he tells the writer who publishes a book that leads the girl back to the restaurant?"

"Yes! Isn't it amazing? It's going to be wonderful."

"It's crazy. It's trippy. I guess you know what you're doing."

"I do."

"What if she actually reads it?"

"We could *only hope* she does."

Isaac shrugged. "I honestly have no idea how you would sort all this out and add it to your story."

"You leave that to me," she said.

"Don't force anything for my sake," he said. "I had already put her out of my head. I wasn't even going to mention it until Cal said something."

"Cal," she said with wide, sparkling eyes. "I'll have to write Cal in there. Thank you for reminding me. I have to take some notes. Isaac, I love this idea. I seriously think I can make it work."

"Fitting in with your book is all I'm worried about."

"Do you not have hope that we're going to find her?"

He shrugged. "I am just not entirely sure that she wants to be found. It seems like she would have left her number."

"What if she is out there and she does want to be found? Would you want to find her if you knew she was interested in that?"

"Yeah, for sure. I'd like to talk to her. I can't shake the feeling about the dream and the shirt and everything."

"Okay, we're doing this. I'm going to need to email you to ask some questions," she said, seeing him walk over to

another customer.

He gave Jill a nod, agreeing to answer her questions.

“Does Isaac usually have girlfriends?” Jill asked.

It was a waitress who was walking by, and she stopped, shaking her head. “He goes out with women all the time. One date here and there. Never more than a date or two. A few have made it a little longer. But no. He’s usually single. Why? Are you trying to fix him up with somebody? People try all the time.”

“No, no, I was just wondering.”

“Isaac, one more question before I go,” Jill said a few minutes later when Isaac came back to her area.

“Sure,” he said.

“First of all, here’s my email. That goes directly to me. If you don’t mind, just send me a quick email so I have a way to get in touch with you. I need to get going on it, so I’ll probably have some questions for you by tonight.” She leaned in closer to him. “But here’s the real question. Here’s the question of the day, Isaac.”

“Oh, man, this sounds deep.”

Jill leveled him with a stare. “What if I get her here? What if I write this whole thing and I actually get this girl, Ari, to come to Seattle? What then? Will you actually want to *date* her? Your staff said you only date women for a day or two.”

“Who said that?”

“Cindy.”

“Cindy?” he said, furrowing his eyebrows playfully.

“She didn’t just come out and offer the information. I asked her who all you date. I thought about it, and I don’t want to go making any sort of promises to a girl in a book. What if she comes here expecting you to want some kind of relationship with her?”

Isaac thought about that for a few seconds.

He searched his heart.

He took a deep breath and started to say something but then stopped himself.

“What?” Jill said.

“You know, honestly, Jill, I’m excited for you if you like the story for your book and you want to do it, but I think the chances are pretty astronomical that the specific girl would read it and respond to it.”

“Gee, thanks,” Jill said.

“No, I know it’s a good idea, and you sell a lot of books. I’m not saying that.”

“What if she comes here?” Jill asked bluntly. “What if I write it and she comes back? Would you want that? Do you even *want* a girlfriend?”

“I don’t know how to answer that because I didn’t expect to be having this conversation. I really regret letting her get away if that means anything,” he added with a shrug.

Isaac didn’t think Jill’s plan would work, but he was fine with his story being a part of her romance novel if she wanted it that way.

Chapter 4

Ari Moreno

The following November

“You’re managing the largest dance studio in Atlanta,” my mom said. “There’s going to be some drama.”

“I’m used to drama, but disciplinary actions like these are really rare,” I said. “We had to kick her out. She’s never allowed to come to the studio again.”

I was on the phone, talking with my mom on my way to work—sharing some of my stresses with her.

“How old is she?” Mom asked.

“Sixteen.”

”*Sixteen?* I thought you were going to say four or five. She’s sixteen and you had to kick her out for fighting?”

“Yes. She was a nightmare, honestly. I hate to put it like that, but it’s true. It was bad from the beginning with her attitude. We really struggled with her. But the last straw was this fight. It got physical.”

“Who had to be the one to talk to her parents?”

“Me. I did the talking, but Miss Kathy was right there.”

“Did the other girl get kicked out?” Mom asked.

“No. Everyone who was there said it was only Violet’s fault.”

“And what’d they do... just cussed you out and left?”

“Basically. It was just her mom. The dad wasn’t there. But, yes, she did a lot of cussing. I see where Violet gets it.”

“I hate that you had to do that. I wish Ms. Kathy would have stepped in, or that her husband would have been there, or her son.”

“I know, but that lady surprised us. I had called her earlier that morning to try to schedule something, and she just dropped in. I’m lucky Ms. Kathy happened to be there.”

“How’s it going with Eddie?” Mom asked.

“It’s good. We’re taking it slow because we don’t know how Kathy would feel if he asked me out.”

“Isn’t that offensive?” Mom asked, taking up for me.

“No. She loves me and wouldn’t want something with me and Eddie to make her lose me at the studio. She would have mixed emotions about me dating Eddie. We’re not even officially dating, as far as she’s concerned.”

“Are you officially dating as far as you’re concerned?”

“I don’t know. I think maybe so. I like getting to know him.”

“When did he move back?”

“In August.”

“And you just started talking?”

“It’s been a few weeks, but we’re going really slow with Ms. Kathy and stuff. Why so many questions about Eddie?”

“Because I was wondering about Thanksgiving. Do you think he’ll be coming down here with you?”

“Oh, Mom, no. We’re not there yet.”

“The other night you were all excited about going out with him.”

“I was, and we had fun, but that doesn’t mean he’s coming to Savannah with me for Thanksgiving. Ms. Kathy would definitely know.”

“I still don’t get it why you don’t just tell her. You love her. You love the studio. I think she’d be happy for you to date her son.”

“She does love me, and that’s the point. Several times, I’ve heard her notice when girls check out Eddie. She sounds

so disapproving when they do it. I know she doesn't want him dating her employees."

"Well, I hate to break it to her, but if he's right for you, it doesn't matter."

"I know. I'll figure it out, Mom."

"I just don't want you getting hurt. I don't want him to take advantage of you and then say he can't make it official because of his mom."

"It's not like that. If anything, Eddie wants to tell her and I'm being cautious."

"I don't want you to get hurt."

"I'm not, I promise. I was just calling to check in. I'm pulling up at the studio, so I'm going to let you go."

"Okay, love you, I'll talk to you soon."

I told my mom goodbye and hung up the phone as I pulled into a parking spot at the studio.

It took about ten minutes for me to get inside and go through my morning ritual where I opened things up and turned things on. I was in the middle of that routine when I got another call on my cell phone. I had just talked to my mom on it, but was used to listening for the office phone while I was at work. I rarely got calls on my cell phone, so the ring tone sounded foreign.

I had to search for it in my bag. As I picked it up, I saw that it was my friend, Sabrina, from Seattle.

"Hello?" I said, putting the phone to my ear.

"Hey, are you awake?"

"Yeah, I'm just getting to work. Are *you* awake?"

"Barely. I just set an alarm to call you."

Her voice was so groggy that I had to listen closely to make out what she was saying.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

“Yes, I was just up till two last night finishing that book, and it was like five your time, and I didn’t want to call you in the middle of the night, so I got a few hours of sleep and set my alarm.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked since she was mumbling.

“There’s a book, Ari. It’s a popular book. My old roommate, Willow, has this friend who read it and she called Willow because she thought that story about your horse shirt and the restaurant on the corner sounded familiar. Willow sent me a message about it, but she didn’t read the book, so she didn’t know what was going on. Plus, I was busy when I read the text. She gave me the name of the book, but I didn’t do anything about it for like a week. And then I remembered that conversation and I went back to that text, and oh my gosh, Ari. It was too late by the time I made it to the part with you in it so I couldn’t call last night, but oh, my gosh, you’re in a book. Do you know that already? Do you live in Seattle now?”

“I’m gathering about fifty percent of what you’re saying, but I’m having trouble understanding what happened, Sabrina. Can you please slow down and explain it? Hey Lauren.”

“What?”

“I was talking to one of the instructors. Go ahead. What happened with a book?”

She sighed. “I’m tired. I stayed up late, and my alarm just went off. But Willow told me about this book where the character has the same shirt situation as you, only they find each other and fall in love and stuff. Somebody must’ve seen your interaction that day at the restaurant, though, because it’s exactly what happened to you. She wrote this whole ending. The girl in the book ran into him the next day at a *graduation*. Can you believe it? You were at my graduation that day.”

“Yeah, Sabrina I ran into... what? Are you saying you read this book?”

“Yes. I downloaded it and read it last night. Willow’s friend read it. She was telling me about it last week, but I

didn't understand. Ari, it's unbelievable. That woman, the writer, must have been at the restaurant and overheard you guys. It's a whole bit with the horse t-shirt and everything. It's all in the book where he's just staring at the front of your shirt like you and Willow said."

"I did run into him the next day at the graduation and I did take the shirt by the restaurant."

"You are messing with me. Did you leave it with a big dude, a cook named Robert?"

"I don't know what that guy's name was. It was probably Robert. You're freaking me out right now, Sabrina."

"I was freaking myself out, and that was before I even knew you saw him at graduation or went by the restaurant. Are you marrying that waiter? He owns that restaurant, you know."

"Marrying him? W-what? No."

"Okay, well not everything happened the same as the book, then. In the book, Ari reads the book and finds out that Isaac is looking for her."

My heart was pounding. All of this seemed like a big deal. I took a deep breath. "Okay, Sabrina, so what you're telling me is that there is a book, a fiction book, and in this book, they tell the story of a woman named Ari and a guy named Isaac meeting at the restaurant and then at your graduation?"

"Yes, exactly, but in the book, he can't find you because you don't leave your last name on the stinking note, Ari. So, the woman in the book writes a book to try to get you to come back to Seattle."

"Wait, so there's a book within that book?"

"Yeah."

"And, in this book, I came back? I am so confused."

"Yes, you came back to Seattle. You read the book and you knew he was looking for you so you went back. And you live In Chicago."

“Chicago?” I asked.

“Chicago.”

“Why Chicago?”

“I was wondering the same thing.”

“Did you say her name was Ari?”

“Yes, and the guy’s name is Isaac.”

“That’s his name in real life. I know because I ran into him at graduation and we had a whole conversation.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I don’t know. You were telling me about that guy you were talking to, and we got off of the subject. You had a lot going on that day. So, I dropped the t-shirt off at the restaurant on my way out of town.”

“Oh my gosh, I did not know all that happened. Well, he must have thought you had some big connection because your whole story is in that book, and it all ends with you going back over there and falling in love with him.”

“I’m still so confused, Sabrina. I guess I can get this book and it will explain it.”

“Yes, you should definitely get the book. You’re the one who lived through the experience. You can tell me if it’s what happened. But I know it is. I know it’s you. It’s your name and everything.”

“Okay, I’m trying to keep up. Just tell me the name of the book.”

“It’s Jill Phillips. I’m looking at it right now on my Kindle. The Café on the Corner. That’s the name of it. It was released a couple of months ago. It’s got several love stories, and yours is a little later, but... I can’t believe it’s your exact story. It’s crazy. I thought next I was going to find out that you were an ad executive and already married to this guy.”

I laughed nervously. “An ad executive?” I said, focusing on the most nonsensical part of what she said. “No, I’m in Atlanta. And I’m dating someone else.”

“Who are you dating?”

“A guy. I’ll tell you about it later since I’m at work.” I spoke quietly and glanced over my shoulder even though I knew there were only two of us in the building at the moment.

Sabrina breathed a sigh. “I hadn’t talked to you since graduation. I thought all of that happened like in the book, and I would find you in Seattle and married to that guy.”

“No, and that is seriously crazy. I don’t have a Kindle. I use my phone or buy paperbacks. But, oh my gosh, I’m looking at that book on the computer. It’s a picture of a skyline on the cover.”

“I know. It’s Seattle. Read the book right now, Ari. Your characters don’t come in until later, like, chapter fourteen or fifteen.”

“Okay, I’m going to download it on my phone.”

Chapter 5

Chapter 14

Isaac and Ari

The one that almost got away

Isaac was the golden boy of the family. He was the face of his family's successful Seattle restaurant. He was the heartbeat of the operation, and he set the tone there. Isaac was a man's man with the face of an angel. He was the most handsome man Ari had ever seen. She wanted him, and she didn't even know his name. She watched him tighten the screws on the front door, staring at his tight jeans and wondering what a guy like Isaac was doing working in a place like this. He could have been a male model, for crying out loud.

I put down my phone after reading one paragraph of the fourteenth chapter. I held it to my chest while fanning myself with my free hand. *What in the world was going on?* I had watched Isaac tighten the screws on the door, and I had thought he was handsome. It might have even crossed my mind to wonder what a guy like him was doing working there.

I grabbed the front of my shirt and picked it up a few times to create a flow of air on my chest. This book was about me, and I was reeling from it. I was basically alone in the dance studio, but I looked all around to make sure no one was coming before continuing reading. My heart was hammering as I found the place on the page.

Isaac turned, and Ari hoped he would talk to her, but he had other plans. His eyes roamed to her chest, and they stayed there, fixed like glue to one concentrated area. To Ari's chagrin, Isaac just stood there and stared at her chest.

Ari misunderstood him in that moment. She had no idea about the visions Isaac was experiencing. Isaac had spent a restless night dreaming, and it was too much when his dream was literally brought to life on this customer's shirt. He had no idea who this woman was, and she stood in front of him like

some other-worldly messenger. Isaac stared at the running horses on her t-shirt, unable to rip his eyes away. It was exactly like the dream he had the night before, and he gawked at it for what must have been a long time.

Ari did what any girl would do. She reached up and slapped him across the face. It was a hard one, and it was the wake-up call Isaac needed. Isaac was a true gentleman. He had never been slapped before. But Ari had to do it in that moment. She had no other choice but to get him to snap out of it.

I put the phone down again. I had not slapped Isaac. *What was this romance novel version of what happened?* Maybe this story wasn't about us, after all. But it was, and I could not stop the wave of excited butterflies I felt from reading it. I knew it was talking about me, and I felt drawn to the whole situation—drawn to the memory of Isaac.

I continued reading.

“What did you do that for?” Isaac asked, touching his cheek where she slapped him.

But before he knew what was happening, the woman's friend called Isaac a pervert and drug her from the restaurant. He wanted to apologize, but he didn't have the chance.

Isaac assumed he would never see her again, so you can imagine his shock when he noticed her at his brother's graduation ceremony the following day. Ari had on a dress instead of that horse shirt, and Isaac was able to look at her gorgeous face for the first time. She had dark hair and eyes, and he liked her instantly.

They introduced themselves, but only by their first names. The conversation flowed easily. She was friendly and held no grudges for his behavior the day before. She seemed to know he was telling the truth when he explained the dream.

She might have very well have been the girl of his dreams, and her first impression of him could not have been worse. Isaac had never made this bad of an impression on a woman. He was normally a confident, outgoing guy who had

it all together, but his heart was pounding the entire time they spoke. They made small talk as they stood on the expansive sidewalk at Husky Stadium, and during that brief period of time, Isaac finally got his apology off his chest.

The two of them were talking for almost no time at all, and then suddenly, just like she was Cinderella and it was midnight, Ari ran off, smiling at Isaac and saying goodbye forever.

Finding out that she came into the restaurant the following day and that he missed her was devastating enough. But the nail in the coffin was that Ari left a note and she only signed her first name. It was a handwritten note on one of the restaurant tickets. Isaac had a handwritten note and a shirt that smelled like her, but that would not be enough to find her.

He knew that her friend was a dancer at the university, but he didn't remember the girl's name and he had no other ideas for finding Ari. He thought they connected that day out there on the sidewalk, but she must have seen it differently. He thought she would have left him a way to get in touch with her when she left the shirt, but she hadn't.

Maybe she had a boyfriend, he told himself.

I dropped the phone again when I read that.

I did have a boyfriend.

Eddie.

Eddie was my boyfriend. I needed to get my mind on Eddie. *How could I, though, when this story was making me want to drop everything and go to Seattle?* I was absolutely rattling with adrenaline and excitement. I was shaking. I picked up the phone to read some more. "I don't even know if it's about me," I mumbled, even though that was untrue.

I looked at the screen again.

Isaac was doing his best to forget about Ari. It was an odd chain of events, and he chalked her up as "the one that got away".

The t-shirt incident, however, was brought up one day when Margaret Winterbottom, bestselling romance author and habitual eavesdropper, happened to be in the restaurant doing research for a novel. She sat next to Sherman and Linda who were at the restaurant, enjoying a cup of coffee at the counter.

Margaret overheard a piece of a conversation where Sherman asked about Isaac and the mystery horse shirt. Margaret's curiosity was piqued, and she interviewed him that very same day. It was a story of lost love, and she felt like if she wrote his story in a book, there was a chance the real girl would come back to Isaac.

I quickly put the phone down again when I heard someone come into the room.

"Hey, oh, hey, Ms. Kathy. I didn't know, I didn't know you were coming in this morning."

"Yeah, I... are you okay, Ari? You look kind of pale?"

"Me, no, this, I'm," I cleared my throat. "I was thinking about the stuff with Violet's mom yesterday." I swallowed hard, and Kathy turned and let out a long sigh as she hung up her jacket.

She went on talking about Violet's family and the discipline issues, and I just nodded and agreed and half-listened to her.

"I think I need to actually go use the restroom," I said, standing up a minute later.

"Yeah, you look kind of pale," Kathy said.

I made sure to take my phone.

I saw proof of just how pale I was when I went into the restroom. I stared at myself in the mirror for a few seconds before going into a stall.

I stood with my back to the door. Information about the book was in the history of the desktop computer, but I didn't care if Kathy saw that. I had to leave the office. I had to see what happened in the story. I stared at my phone again.

Weeks passed and Isaac had no idea what Margaret Winterbottom had planned with the novel. She crafted it with intrigue, mystery, and suspense. She wrote about the shirt and how the couple met twice in so many days. She wrote her characters with the same beginnings of their relationship. Her plan was to draw Ari back to Seattle, back to Isaac.

I put the phone down again, breathing heavily. *What was happening to me?* This was a book within a book, and it was hard to keep up. It was my real life and then there were so many books and so much fiction mixed into it that my head was spinning.

I couldn't keep anything straight. I blinked, staring at the screen. My vision was now blurry with tears. My eyes stung with how surreal and personal this all was. It was the most dreamlike thing that had ever happened to me. And as icing on the cake, I was standing in a restroom stall. I looked at the words on the screen again.

Margaret's book was released to rave reviews. It made the New York Times bestseller list for five consecutive weeks, and there was still no sign of Ari. Margaret had even gone so far as to put a photograph of Isaac on the cover of her book, and still nothing. Ari had seen the book at newsstands out of the corner of her eyes, but she wasn't looking for it and didn't notice Isaac. She didn't see it until six weeks later when a copy of it was sitting on her assistant's desk.

"What's this?" she asked.

"Oh, it's a romance novel."

"Who's that?" she asked. She stared at the cover, getting lost in Isaac's piercing green eyes. She knew instantly that it was the man from the restaurant in Seattle.

"Who's this guy? I've met this guy," she said.

"Oh, his name is Isaac Alexander."

"Ari?" Kathy asked, coming into the ladies' restroom and startling me.

I needed to know what Ari in the book did next. I was hanging on to every word. I was so into the book that I gasped

and choked at the sound of Kathy's voice. I could not respond other than to cough.

"Are you okay?" she asked over my coughing.

"Yes," I squeaked out. It took me five or six more coughs to clear my throat. "I'm fine," I added as soon as I could. "I choked on spit. What's up?"

"Eddie's here. He asked if you were here, but he's only got a minute before he has to leave for work. I didn't know if you were feeling okay..." she trailed off.

"Yeah, I'm coming," I said.

About The Author

Brooke St. James



Brooke St. James is a USA Today bestselling author and Amazon Kindle All-Star. She writes contemporary romance novels with Christian and inspirational themes and happy endings. She was born and raised in south Louisiana but has had the opportunity to travel and live throughout the U.S. An avid reader, writer, audio book addict, and fan of all things artistic, Brooke constantly has her hands in some creative activity. She's currently back home in Louisiana enjoying life with her husband, children, and two lazy dogs.

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