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Sarah Jio

a novel

always

Always

A NOVEL

SARAH JIO



BALLANTINE BOOKS
NEW YORK

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Have enough courage to trust love one more time
and always one more time.

—MAYA ANGELOU

one

NOVEMBER 15, 2008

"Oh no, why do I *always* do that?" I say to my fiancé, Ryan, as we walk into the restaurant.

"Do what, baby?"

"Leave my purse in the car."

We've just valet-parked, and as we look out the window, Ryan's white BMW is being driven off. "I'll go get it, my forgetful one," he says, kissing my cheek. "You grab our table. I'll be back in a sec."

Four years ago, we had our first date at Le Marche, the French restaurant on Fourth Avenue with a waiting list five months out. Somehow Ryan was able to get us a table, just like he got us one tonight. My fiancé, it seems, can move mountains.

"I want you to have a perfect night," he said when he surprised me with the reservation. He reached for my hand as if he never wanted to let go, the diamond, much larger than I wanted, sparkling on my ring finger. We're getting married in July, at the Fairmont.

"Do you have a reservation?" the host asks as I check my coat.

"Yes," I say. "Two. Under Winston." It's hard to believe, but in a matter of months I'll be Mrs. Ryan Winston; that is, if I take Ryan's name. He wants me to, and part of me does, as well. I mean, this is the *Winston* family, confidants of the Gateses and the Nordstroms. This is a family name one doesn't eschew.

But I've always been Kailey Crain. KC, although no one has really called me that since, well, the sixth grade. Still, it's hard to just let that go. I close my eyes tightly, then open them again, trying to banish a memory that's fighting its way to the surface.

"Right this way," the host says, leading me to an intimate table by the window. I peer through the glass, noticing the way the raindrops make the lights outside look like gemstones. Seattle may be an old gray lady, but she still sparkles under cloud cover. I tug nervously at the right sleeve of my dress, pulling it higher on my arm, the way I do when I'm mingling

with the type of people Ryan grew up with. He isn't a big fan of the tattoo on my shoulder, and I suppose I'm not either. Skin inked a decade prior is a glaring reminder of a past that didn't become a future, of the dreams that evaporated into thin air. I couldn't hold on to them, and yet the word *toujours*, French for "always," remains branded on my skin. I rub my shoulder, wishing for a magic eraser.

I sit down, place my cellphone on the table, and watch as couples stroll by outside, hovering under hoods and shared umbrellas. A woman in her twenties clutches her boyfriend or husband, and they laugh as they precariously dodge a mud puddle. The scene transports me back to age twenty-two, to the year Tracy and I moved to Seattle. Back then, we were wide-eyed and idealistic. We believed in true love and happy endings.

Funny how things turn out.

I catch my reflection in the window. My shoulder-length brown hair is showing signs of frizz, rendering the time I spent flat-ironing my thick, naturally wavy locks a veritable waste of time. But what did it matter—wasn't Ryan always telling me he liked my natural curls? My green eyes? My nose dusted with freckles? I smile to myself. My life is full now, with my job at the *Herald*, making plans to remodel the Craftsman in Wallingford, the one I bought with...Ryan, of course.

I smile as he walks into the restaurant with my purse in hand.

"It's a monsoon out there," he says, handing me the black Michael Kors bag he bought me for Christmas last year, then smoothing his rain-soaked hair. *Handsome* is the best word to describe him. Classically handsome. Tracy's initial impression, whispered in the bathroom of a restaurant the night I first introduced them, was that he resembled a strapping Disney prince come to life. He did, and he does. Tall and toned with a thick head of dark hair: Give him a shield and white horse and Ryan is the spitting image of the cartoon prince who swept Cinderella off her feet. I'm lucky.

He reaches for my hand across the table. "I called earlier and made sure they had your favorite Bordeaux. Remember, our perfect night is just beginning."

I grin as he pulls my hand to his lips.

"Every detail counts," he says with a sweet smile. "You've seemed a little distracted, and I want to be there for you."

I tug on my engagement ring and nod. He's always been able to read me, perhaps better than I can read myself. "It's been hell at work since

I've added the business beat to my ongoing reporting on life in Seattle," I reply. "I've been crunching to get that series about Pioneer Square written."

The first of three pieces was published today. I'm certain Ryan has read it, but we've agreed to disagree on the areas where our professional interests diverge. He's a smart man, sharp enough to know that his taking issue with my article would ruin the night before it has even begun.

He bends the rules by steering the conversation to other people's opinions, people who are not present at this cozy table for two. "You know, a lot of my colleagues think they should dynamite that six-block radius."

I shake my head. "Is that you talking or your risk-management team?"

"It's difficult to ignore the fact that there isn't much down there but addicts and vagrants. You can barely walk two feet without stepping in human excrement."

"Well," I say, weighing the satisfaction of making my case against Ryan's romantic plans for the evening, "the people there need help, and the Hope Gospel Mission is the only organization doing anything about it. The way I see it, the vitality of a nonprofit is a crucial measure of neighborhood longevity. You can't blame me for wanting to help them keep their doors open."

The sommelier arrives and uncorks Ryan's preselected bottle of red before pouring us each a glass.

"Honey," Ryan says tenderly as I take a sip of my wine. "You have the biggest heart of anyone I know. How could I ever blame you? For anything?"

I think of the sensitive content of the series, how hard I have to work not to let emotion cloud the impartiality that being a good reporter demands. Earlier today, I spent the afternoon interviewing the mission's director, a heavyset woman named Melissa. She looked into my eyes and practically begged me to protect the organization from the very developers Ryan works with—builders hungry to throw up cheap apartment buildings, displacing the lifelines for hundreds of homeless people in the process.

True, Seattle's Pioneer Square neighborhood is a bit on the seedier side, and development could bring new life to its streets, but Ryan painted a grim picture of a place I loved so long ago and still do. Anyone with a heart for the down-and-out could see that the plan to overhaul the

neighborhood would not only close the doors of the Hope Gospel Mission, it would entail demolishing thousands of low-income units and two shelters. As such, property developers, many of whose financial outlooks Ryan manages, remained in gridlock with the city of Seattle.

"I guess I just like it the way it is," I say. "The neighborhood has an old Seattle feel. It's gritty, I know. But it's real. And it's home to so many people."

"Didn't you used to live down there?"

His question is one I would rather not answer, so I busy myself refolding the napkin in my lap.

"No," I finally say. "But I used to know someone who did."

I don't tell him that over the years my curiosity about that *someone* has gotten the better of me, eaten at me like a cancer at times. I squeezed the marrow out of Google. *Cade*, it seemed, had not only left me but had possibly left the face of the earth. But that is all in the past.

Ryan raises a suspicious eyebrow. "And who is this someone?"

"No one," I say, eager to change the subject. I'm as uninterested in speaking about my past love life as I am in hearing about his, especially the woman he dated before me: Vanessa, the Southern belle whose father and Ryan's were blue-blooded best friends and real-estate moguls with connections on the East and West Coasts. She was a shoo-in to be Mrs. Ryan Winston until I stumbled into his life and ruined their collective plans. Imagine the look on their faces: "Mom, Dad, this is Kailey. I love her. And she has a tattoo!"

When I tried to wrap my head around the situation early on in our relationship, Ryan was direct. "You know as well as I do that Vanessa and I were best suited as friends," he said. "We grew up together."

"And she's still in love with you," I replied without missing a beat.

Ryan shook his head. "No, she's not."

"Ryan," I said. "I'm a woman. I saw the way she looked at you in West Virginia." She had been with her family at the Greenbrier for the annual extravaganza Ryan and his family and friends have taken part in for generations. The men golf, and the women lunch. I survived the ordeal by conning a sympathetic waiter into spiking my sweet tea with bourbon.

Ghosts, as Tracy calls these youthful loves. We must not let them haunt.

I look over at my handsome fiancé as he straightens in his chair. Yes, we come from different places and see the world in different ways. He challenges me, and I wouldn't have it any other way. But what informs our past stays there. Ryan is my present. I am grateful that our once-separate paths have converged, brought us here together. Tonight. Forever. Always.

"I love you so much," I whisper, sliding my arm across the white tablecloth to hold his hand.

"I love you, too," he says with an intensity that I swear I can feel in my soul.

As he speaks, rain splatters the window. A full moon shines behind a tiny patch of clearing in the sky, trying desperately to emerge from its cloudy cloak. A supermoon, Tracy said. A physician with a quirky penchant for the mystical, she has talked nonstop about some astrological eclipse that is apparently taking place tonight. And though I have no interest in astrology, I secretly love her daily reports. Somehow I can stomach the woo-woo when carefully curated and sifted by my best friend.

And now I wonder if Ryan's edginess can be blamed on the metaphysical. The thought lingers as I take another sip of wine, silky and peppery at the same time. I hear the telltale crackle inside the glass and a memory surfaces. Like always, I tuck it away, far away, where it belongs. I've long since stopped feeling the ache in my heart that I lived with for so long.

I may not have had closure, but I have tasted wisdom. Anyone who has ever had their heart broken, or even just bruised, has learned that there's finality in the facts. He left. And I've realized that when someone wants to leave, you let him go.

Ryan refills my wineglass and begins telling me about his day. He modestly recounts an incident when a coworker fell asleep during a meeting with the company president. Events could have turned dire, until Ryan surreptitiously set off his cellphone alarm, waking his sleeping colleague in the nick of time. My eyes crinkle with emotion at his kindness. My face melts into a smile.

"I'm happy," I say unprompted. The words leap from my mouth, or maybe my heart. I can't keep them in. "You make me so happy."

"Me too, baby," he says.

My cellphone buzzes, alerting me to a new voicemail, but rather than check it I tuck it into my purse.

Ryan winks and waves his hand to summon the waitress; she appears at our table a moment later. "Can I get a negroni?"

"Yes, sir," she says, turning back to the bar.

We share the salmon and duck-fat potatoes and an order of the prawns. "They're a little spicy," Ryan says, taking a bite, "don't you think?"

Ryan has an adventurous palate, a necessity for the fiancé of a food enthusiast, and yet unlike me he doesn't tolerate the taste of heat. I swear I nearly gave him a third-degree burn on his tongue the first time I made him breakfast. The Tabasco I'd whisked in with the eggs for an added kick didn't go over so well. Lesson learned.

"Want to order something else?" I suggest, but Ryan tells me he's happy to watch me enjoy the food. We talk about the wedding. Our gazes drift off to separate corners of the restaurant during the occasional lull in conversation as each of us pauses in turn to consider a key detail that would never have occurred to the other. We're a complementary pair. It's comfortable and nice, the way life is with Ryan, the way it will be for a lifetime. I finish another glass of wine, drinking in the feeling of contentment.

Ryan pays the bill, and we collect our coats. "Why don't you wait here while I get the car," he asks as I button my black wool coat and take what's left of pre-wedding cake, a gift from the chef that our waitress has carefully boxed up.

It's stopped raining, but the temperature has plummeted. "You're so thoughtful," I say. "Thanks, honey."

I watch him walk up the block in his perfectly tailored suit. I'm lucky, I know. This man, with these good looks. He's successful and funny and has eyes only for me. Ryan has it all. I take a deep breath and nod to myself.

Outside the window, a bearded homeless man approaches a couple also waiting for their car. Visibly annoyed, they turn and walk in a different direction as he shrinks back and sits cross-legged on the sidewalk.

The host shakes his head. "Sorry about that," he says. "Once they start loitering, it's hard to get rid of them."

"Maybe he's just hungry," I say. "Do you have any leftovers in the kitchen for him?"

The man shakes his head. "With all due respect, miss, we're not a soup kitchen. Besides, they usually just want money, probably for drugs."

I know from my reporting that this remark is a generalization. Homelessness cannot be singularly blamed on substance abuse. There are hundreds of other reasons why people find themselves on the streets. But I can do more by engaging this kind of thinking in print than in an impromptu confrontation.

I exit to the sidewalk, where I cast a cautious glance at the homeless man. His frame is thin, painfully thin, and his clothes hang from his limbs. I remember the bag of leftover food in my hand and I take a step closer. If only I had more than sugar to offer, but eggs are ingredients in cake.

"Excuse me?" I say. He doesn't seem to hear me, so I repeat myself, a bit louder. "Excuse me, I have some food here. Would you...like it?"

He looks up as I approach, and when our eyes meet, I am overcome with a feeling of familiarity that I cannot place. I lose hold of the bag, and it drops from my grasp to the rain-kissed sidewalk at my feet. My brain's circuits fire, and the contents of my memories flood out like an overturned file cabinet. If this man recognizes me, his eyes don't show it. Headlights strobe ahead, and I hear the sound of tires rolling to a stop. I look behind me and see Ryan pulling his car up. Just then the man reaches his bony hand toward the bag and pulls out the box of food. He looks at it for a moment before tentatively opening the container. I can see the hunger in his eyes, and then his hands grab for the cake and he crams it into his mouth, crumbs sticking to his beard.

Ryan rolls down his window. "Kailey, is everything okay?"

I nod and take a step back, then numbly walk to the car, get in.

I don't tell Ryan that I am not okay.

I don't tell Ryan that I know this man.

I don't tell him that his name is *Cade* and he used to be the love of my life.

APRIL 19, 1996

"Do you believe in soulmates?" Tracy asks, book in hand, looking up from the futon in the Seattle apartment we share. With its one wall of exposed brick and floor-to-ceiling windows, we instantly fell in love with the space, even if it was smaller than my childhood bedroom. Two people should not inhabit a 380-foot shoebox of a studio, but recent college graduates who want to live in the coolest building on First Avenue, with a view overlooking Elliott Bay, have to make concessions. Thankfully Tracy doesn't snore.

"No," I say to Tracy, observing the deft flick of her wrist as she rubber-bands her long dark hair into a loose ponytail. Effortlessly beautiful, she has the kind of high cheekbones, lithe frame, and inherent style that would make her a lot of money as a model, except she'd rather gouge her eyes out than pose for a camera.

We were college roommates in Chicago, and after graduation we both took a good long look at a map of the U.S. and pointed to Seattle. A week later, we packed all of our belongings into the back of her dad's old Subaru with the broken stereo and drove across the country (singing for hours on the long stretches, terribly out of key) to the rainiest city in America. That month, I got a job as a junior reporter for the *Seattle Herald*; Tracy spent her days studying for the MCAT exam. We were living our fledgling dreams.

"Staying home every night is *not* how you do it, my dear," Tracy says, setting her book down and pushing her glasses higher on her nose.

I pour a cup from the Mr. Coffee machine that Grandma bought me at Target on that shopping trip the week before I left for college and plop down in the threadbare red egg-shaped IKEA chair by the window. We're an advertisement for IKEA, the two of us.

"Have you read your horoscope?" Tracy asks.

"Trace, you know I don't believe in that stuff."

"Well," she says, "I'll read it for you, then." She picks up the newspaper from the coffee table, turns a few pages, then reads in silence for a minute. "Aha," she finally says. "New love is in your future." She nods. "But it says, 'You have to open yourself up to it. Instead of staying home, do something spontaneous and unexpected. You never know who you might meet.'"

I roll my eyes.

"Come out with us tonight!" Tracy exclaims.

She's dating a guy named Mark who's doing his surgical residency at the University of Washington. He's tall, with thinning hair and a loud laugh. Whenever they have a free night together, which is rare, he takes her to concerts or plays, or on walks around Green Lake. Sometimes I think I need a Mark in my life. Sometimes I think I'd like someone to take me to the theater or the farmers market or a symphony. "Mark got tickets to Mazzy Star at the Crocodile."

"By agreeing to this," I say, raising my left eyebrow, "am I walking into a blind date?"

"Well," Tracy says mischievously, "his friend Eric is coming."

"I don't know," I say, watching the slow path of a ferry leaving the bay.

"Just come," Tracy says, "if only because you love Mazzy Star."

"I do love Mazzy Star," I say with a grin.

She nods. "Good. All settled."

It's just begun to rain, and Tracy, Mark, and I huddle under an awning in front of the club, where a tattooed woman with short bangs and a nose ring takes our tickets. It's dark inside, and some moody music I don't recognize seeps through the overhead speakers. The air is smoky, and every third person around us sports a pair of weathered Doc Martens. I love Seattle.

"Eric will be here in a few," Mark says. "Can I get you girls something to drink?"

"I'll have a vodka soda," Tracy says.

"The same," I add as Mark dutifully approaches the bar.

Tracy elbows me. "Mark says that Eric is one of the top surgical residents at the hospital."

I shrug.

Tracy smiles. "Just have fun. Who knows, you may really like him. Besides—"

I take a step back when someone bumps into me. He's holding a camera with a huge lens, and after the flash goes off, he lowers it to his side. "Oh, I'm sorry," he says, smiling. "I didn't see you standing there." He's a little older than me, with dark hair and a trace of stubble around his chin. His boots and faded plaid shirt hint at his association with the music scene, and yet there's something entirely unique about him. I can't tell by the way he smiles if he's confident or cocky. Or both.

"How great does the stage look under these lights?" He lifts the camera to his eye again, and flashes go off in rapid succession. "Hope has one of the most haunting voices," he says. "But she's humble, you know? She's not one of those diva singers who believes she's God's gift to music."

My eyes narrow. "You talk as if you know her."

"I do," he says, smiling only at me.

Definitely cocky.

"I signed her to my label five years ago," he says. "Just a solo album, but I like to think that it gave her some traction."

"Your label?"

He winks. "I'm in the music biz."

Biz.

"You should have heard her demo tape," he continues. "Pure magic." He taps his chest lightly. "The kind you can feel."

"What do you mean?" I ask cautiously, intrigued.

He takes a step closer to me. "Good music moves you. It *changes* you, even." He reaches for my hand and presses it against my chest as the skin on my arms erupts with goosebumps. "Right there. A gifted artist can create music that hits the heart." He lets go of my hand, but I keep it pressed against my chest. "Anyway, that is the type of artist I'm always searching for."

Mark returns with the drinks, and I return my arm to my side.

"I'm Cade," he says, eyes fixed on mine. When he extends his hand, I feel like we're the only two people in the club.

I take it limply. "Kailey Crain."

"KC," he says, grinning.

Mark clears his throat, and I notice that there's a tallish guy with curly brown hair standing beside him. He's wearing a dress shirt tucked into his

jeans, which are about an inch too short. "Kailey, this is Eric."

"Well," Cade says with a smile and a quick false bow, "it's been a pleasure. Enjoy the show."

I feel Eric's eyes on me. "So... Mark tells me you're a writer," he says eagerly.

"Yeah," I say, taking a sip of my drink. It's stiff and smells like rubbing alcohol; I shudder a little as it goes down. "I report for the *Herald*, but food is my favorite topic."

Involuntarily my gaze wanders across the room to where Cade now has his hand on the shoulder of an attractive blonde. "How about you?" I say, willing my eyes back to Eric's face. "What's your surgical specialty?"

"Feet," he says.

I begin to laugh, then immediately stop when I notice that his expression remains unchanged, not even the hint of a smile.

"Oh, you mean you're not joking? You're really specializing in"—I pause to collect myself—"feet?"

"Yes," he says, straight-faced. "I may be biased, but I think that toes, ankles, heels are, well, some of the most amazing parts of the body. Don't you agree?"

"Well," I say, trying very hard not to laugh, "I guess I really haven't put much thought into, er...feet. But I suppose they're...pretty great? They do take us where we need to go."

He glances down at my feet just as the opening band walks onstage and begins playing a song I don't recognize. The crowd erupts in applause. After two songs, the foot doctor leans in closer to me. "This may sound a little forward," he says with a smile, "but I bet you have really beautiful feet." He raises an eyebrow. "I'd love to see them sometime."

I nearly choke on my drink. "You know," I say, edging to the left, "I think I need another cocktail."

"Let me get you one," the foot doctor says.

"No, no," I say quickly. "There's a huge line. I'll...just...go."

He nods and takes a swig of the beer he's been nursing, then turns to say something to Mark, who I want to murder at this very moment. Tracy too. I make my way to the bar and order another vodka soda, this time a double.

"I'll have the same," Cade says, appearing out of nowhere beside me.

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I give him a nervous smile and turn my gaze to the stage.

"So how's your date going?"

"I'm not on a date," I protest.

"Oh c'mon, you two have first date written all over you," he says with an amused smile.

"Well," I concede, "if you must know, it's a very unfortunate setup that I did not agree to."

"So you escaped to the bar."

"I did."

"What does the dude do?"

"He's a doctor who specializes in"—I pause and grin—"feet."

"No way."

"Way," I say. "He asked to see mine!"

"Tragic."

"Truly."

The bartender returns with two vodka sodas, and before I can protest, Cade tells him to put it on his tab.

"Hey," he says, taking a sip. "I have an idea."

"What?" I ask curiously.

"Why don't you let me sabotage your date?"

I raise an eyebrow.

"I mean, your nondate." He smiles. "Want to escape backstage?"

"Backstage?"

"Yeah," he says. "You can watch the rest of the show from the best seats in the house and avoid more banter with Dr. Short Pants."

"His pants were short, weren't they?"

"Seriously. They're probably illegal in some countries," he adds.

I laugh.

"Come on, what do you say?"

I give him a cautious smile. "Why not," I finally say.

He reaches for my hand and leads me through the crowd to a dark door that blends in with the black walls. We walk down a long hall and find a seat on a couch at the side of the stage.

"Not bad, huh?" After a few more songs, Mazzy Star takes the stage and begins the opening to "Fade into You."

"I love this song," I say.

"Me too," Cade says.

He moves his hands together to the beat of the music, as if he's holding an imaginary instrument. "The tambourine," he continues. "That was a brilliant addition."

"I can hardly imagine Mazzy Star without it," I say. "It's their sound."

He nods, then lifts his hand just as the piano begins, as if to cue it into motion. "Best transition, right there," he says.

"You must be a musician, then?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "No, I can't read a note. I just know music." He pats his heart. "Just like I told you earlier, I feel it." He pauses for a second, then says, "Right here."

I should be watching the band, but I can't take my eyes off him.

"Listen to that line," he says softly. "'I want to hold the hand inside you.' Such a beautiful lyric. Gets me every time."

I nod. "I discovered this song in college. I'd play the song over and over again."

"What does it mean to you?"

I pause, feeling light and floaty from my second drink. I close my eyes, remembering for a tiny moment my naïve imaginings of love.

"I think it speaks to wanting to be entirely united with someone you love. Like the idea of being one room away from someone and missing them, or sitting right beside someone yet feeling this powerful desire to..."

"Be even closer," we both say in unison.

I smile and look away. Cade's eyes return to the stage. He reaches for my hand. I let him take it.

Three

NOVEMBER 15, 2008

My heart beats furiously as the phone rings. I stare at the kitchen clock: 11:34 P.M. *Tracy, you'd better be awake. Wake up. Wake up. Wake up.*

"Hello?" She sounds groggy and grumpy.

"Thank God you picked up," I whisper.

"Kailey," she says, her voice robotic and annoyed. "This had *better* be important. I've been on call for a week straight. I *just* closed my eyes."

"Sorry," I say.

"Wait, why are you whispering?"

"I don't want to wake up Ryan. You wouldn't believe who I saw tonight."

She yawns. "I give up."

"Tracy, listen. I saw *Cade*."

"*Cade Cade?*"

"Yes, *Cade. Cade.*"

"Are you sure?"

I hear a creak at the top of the stairs, so I tiptoe around the corner to see if Ryan's woken up. He hasn't. It's only Eddie, my aging black Lab, on the landing. He's eleven but still a puppy at heart.

"Yes, I'm sure," I whisper. "But, Trace, he wasn't himself. He...he didn't even know me."

"What do you mean?"

"Outside of the restaurant tonight, he was...he was..." I pause for a moment. I almost can't say the word. "He was...homeless."

"I don't understand," Tracy replies.

"I hardly recognized him under the beard," I continue. "And his clothes were dirty, rags. I didn't know what to do or say, after all these years. After he just vanished. I thought for sure he'd moved somewhere crazy like Australia, or got married, or *something*." Tears sting my eyes.

"But I think he got into some real trouble, Tracy. I think something terrible happened to him."

"Wow," she says. "Does Ryan know?"

"No," I reply. "Not yet. I was so stunned. I just...couldn't."

"What are you going to do?"

"I have to help him," I whisper, shaking my head at the enormity of the situation.

"How, Kailey? What if he's on drugs? What if he's dangerous? What if...?"

I shake my head. "No," I say. "Cade could never be dangerous."

Tracy is silent for a moment. "Do you want me to come with you?"

"Yes," I say, wiping a tear from my cheek. "Could you?"

"I can," Tracy says.

"I loved him, Trace," I whisper. "I loved him so much."

"I know you did, honey. I remember. I remember everything."

As I wake, light streams in the window; I roll over and bury my face in the pillow.

"Morning, you," Ryan says sweetly from the bathroom. He has a towel wrapped around his waist. Water droplets glisten on his muscular chest.

"What time is it?" I ask groggily.

"Nine-thirty," he replies. "You haven't slept like that in ages. I'm glad. You needed the rest."

I stretch, which is when the fog lifts and the events of last night come back into focus. I saw Cade outside the restaurant. I sit up in bed nervously as Ryan slips into a pair of jeans and a T-shirt and flops down beside me. "What's on tap for today, soon-to-be Mrs. Winston?"

I crinkle my nose. "Ryan, you know I haven't decided yet about changing my name."

He looks momentarily wounded but quickly recovers. "I know this is one of the most important choices you'll ever make. I'm proud of you, and I want us to share a name as a sign that we've chosen each other."

"When you put it that way," I say, marveling anew at his romanticism, "how can I refuse? I promise I'll decide soon."

He rubs my neck for a moment. "Want to get breakfast?"

"There is nothing I enjoy more than your company on a lazy Sunday morning," I say, "but I have too much on my mind to relax. The second

piece in the series is due soon, and I don't even have the background research finished. The business angle is new to me, and I can't afford to make any rookie mistakes." It isn't so much a lie as a half-truth. I planned to interview some of the regulars in Occidental Park.

"All right," he says. "Want me to bring you back something?"

"Nah," I say. "To be honest, I'm still full from dinner. And I have to get some Tracy time in at some point. I'm sure she'll insist on caffeine at the very least."

He nods, kisses my forehead, heads for the doorway. When his footsteps quiet and I hear the front door close, I reach for my cellphone and call Tracy.

"Can you come over?"

She groans. "Can I at least sleep another hour?"

"No," I say urgently, in the way that only good friends can speak to each other. "I need you, Tracy."

"Okay," she says, letting out a long yawn. "Let me get dressed and maybe inject some coffee into my veins. I'll be there in a half hour."

"Thanks," I say.

"Kailey, you don't sound like yourself."

"I'm not," I say honestly. "My life just got turned upside down."

I push down the filter of my French press, pour myself an extra-large mug, walk despondently to the living room, and sink into the couch. Eddie sidles up beside me, leaning his head on my lap the way he did as a puppy so many years ago. The way he did with Cade. I look up when I hear the creak of the door.

"Kailey?"

"Come in," I say. "Thank God you're here."

She doesn't waste any time. "Tell me everything."

"Well," I say, setting my coffee mug down. "Like I said, I was at Le Marche with Ryan, and there he was, right outside the restaurant."

Tracy nods. "And you're sure it was him?"

"I'm positive," I say. "At least I think I am."

"It's been a long time, Kailey," she says. "Maybe he just looked like Cade? Or he's been on your mind and you had some sort of transference? Like you saw his face in this homeless guy's face. That's a thing, you know. Psychics talk about that stuff."

I sigh. "I don't know."

"What are the chances that he's been living, unrecognizable, under our noses all these years?" Tracy continues.

"I know it seems impossible," I say. "But I saw his eyes. I know those eyes."

Tracy nods. "All right, let's go downtown and see what we can do."

"What can we do?"

"Get him some help, social services, that sort of thing."

I nod, thinking of all the connections I've made in my reporting on Pioneer Square, and yet part of me feels paralyzed, too. "Trace, I hardly know where to begin with this."

"First off," Tracy says, "we'll talk to him. See what he says. See if he wants our help."

"And if he doesn't?"

"Then that's his choice. We can only offer."

I bury my head in my hands. "What do you think happened to him?"

She shrugs. "It's hard to say why people fall into homelessness, and I'm just a humble pulmonologist. But it's pretty well accepted that mental illness is the number one culprit."

I shake my head. "Cade had his challenges, but mental illness wasn't one."

"Then it might have been something else," Tracy says in her clinical voice, one that I so rarely hear.

"Like what?"

"There are countless possibilities. He might have had some sort of accident that left him with acute amnesia. Some people never recover."

"So you don't think there's any chance for him, then?"

"No, no," she says. "I'm not saying that at all. We wouldn't be able to accurately assess his condition without a thorough examination, brain scans. And, frankly, I'm not convinced this guy you saw is even Cade."

I clear my throat, unable to accept her doubts. "And if he recovers..." I say, pausing for a moment, feeling the weight of it all. All these years, I thought he'd gone away for good. And now he might be back. "Tracy... I'm getting married."

"I know, honey," she says, her face softening. "This has to feel very heavy. But let's not jump to conclusions. Don't worry just yet. We'll find him. If it is him, then you can proceed from there." She squeezes my hand. "A lot of time has passed. We're not even the same people anymore."

I let her words marinate for a moment. Eddie licks my hand, and I reward his affection with a scratch on the sensitive spot behind his right ear.

"Maybe you're right," I say, looking around at the beautiful home I share with my fiancé. The mantel is punctuated with little objects we've found together on our travels. The paintings on the walls he commissioned from a favorite artist. The dining room table where we've entertained dozens of friends, and so many more to come. My life is seemingly perfect now. How can I let my past tarnish the carefully curated present I've worked so hard for? I wince inwardly.

"Speaking of past lives," Tracy says, flipping through a magazine on my coffee table, the latest issue of *Dwell*. I've dog-eared a few pages to show Ryan for our remodel. "You know who I ran into at the grocery store the other day?"

"Who?"

"A cheerleader from my high school," she continues. "Chrissie Gearheart." She shakes her head in awe. "She lives in Seattle with her husband and two kids. And I will admit that I do take comfort in knowing that the prettiest girl in school has officially let herself go. Chrissie Gearheart. Every boy's dream."

"Funny," I say, chuckling, "why is it that everybody can always remember cheerleaders' first and last names?"

"You know, you're right," Tracy replies. "I can't even tell you the last names of the girls I sat with at lunch all through the ninth grade, but *Chrissie Gearheart* just rolls off the tongue."

"Sheena Thompson," I add. "Roosevelt High School's it girl with pom-poms."

"Weird how the past gets embedded," Tracy says, standing as she tosses the magazine onto the coffee table beside a stack of bridal magazines that I keep telling myself I'm going to find time to browse through. She buttons up her coat and takes a deep breath. "You ready to face the present?"

I nod, giving Eddie a final nuzzle before I stand up. "I think so."

four

MAY 18, 1996

Tracy and I sling our bags of laundry over our shoulders and step out of our apartment in pursuit of Sit & Spin. There are other closer laundromats, of course, but none with that certain cachet of the iconic café on Fourth Avenue, where you can sip coffee while your clothes tumble in the dryer.

"Look," Tracy says as we round the corner to a street lined with cherry trees, all with stunning pink blossoms.

"They're beautiful," I say.

"Yeah," Tracy says, "but I mean, that." She points to a tree branch as we walk closer. Above our heads is a single red ribbon tied to an upper branch.

"What do you think that is?"

I shrug.

"Maybe it's like those yellow ribbons people tie onto trees to remember soldiers at war," she says. "But this is the long-lost-love version."

"Trace," I say. "You crack me up."

"No, really," she says. "I bet it's a thing. Like, tie a red ribbon around a tree branch for your one true love."

I roll my eyes as we walk into Sit & Spin. The air smells of laundry detergent and coffee grounds. Tracy and I find a table in the corner and scope out a couple of empty washing machines. Tracy pulls a textbook out of her bag. Anatomy. Not exactly pleasure reading, but it's what you do when you're cramming for the MCAT exams. I slide into an orange chair and take a sip of my foamy macadamia nut latte in a gigantic orange teacup. Only here could a gritty laundromat-café combo have so much appeal.

"I think that's the guy from Soundgarden," Tracy whispers.

I peer shamelessly over my shoulder and spot a bearded Kim Thayil having a beer with an equally burly-looking man.

"Mark loves Soundgarden," she says dreamily. "I don't know. I guess I do, too. But I'd really flip if I saw Eddie Vedder in here."

I take a sip of my latte. "If I ever get a dog, I'm naming him Eddie."

Tracy grins. "Look at you, you've been a Seattleite for barely a year and you're already naming your imaginary dog after the city's most beloved rocker."

"Eddie," I say, nodding. "A golden retriever—no, a black Lab." I lift up my laundry basket and a pair of panties with a visible hole in the backside falls to the ground.

"Man, I need to go shopping," I say.

Suddenly Tracy's eyes widen. "Don't look now," she says, pushing her book aside and turning her attention to her latte, "but I think that guy from the Mazzy Star show just walked in."

Without my permission, my heart begins to beat faster. Even though I scrawled my number on a napkin that night at the Crocodile, it has been a whole month, and I haven't heard a peep from Cade. *Did he lose my number? Did I connect more with him than he did with me? Was it just a fleeting Seattle moment?* I'm not sure.

"You should go talk to him," Tracy whispers.

"No way," I say, playing it cool, though the truth is, I had hoped to run into him by now, and even peered into the Crocodile one night after a work dinner to see if he might be in view.

"Wait," she continues, returning to her book, which she pretends to read, "he just looked this way."

"Did he?" I'm instantly aware that I'm wearing my rattiest T-shirt and haven't a speck of makeup on. Of all the days to reunite with Cade, this is not the moment.

I quickly smooth my bangs into place and wish I'd at least put on some mascara.

"Kailey?"

"Oh, hi," I say, as my eyes meet his. "It's Cade, right?"

Tracy almost chokes on her latte.

"Right," he says. "It's good to see you." His eyes are kind and confident.

"You too," I say, glancing down at the laundry in front of me and feeling a sense of panic when I realize that my holey panties are at the top of the stack.

"No better place to do laundry in Seattle," he says, grinning. *He saw them. He totally saw them.*

"Can you imagine seeing Kurt Cobain folding his boxers in here before he was famous?" Tracy asks. Though over two years have passed since the tragic loss of the local great, all of Seattle continues to mourn him actively.

"Well," Cade says with a respectful pause, "I actually did."

Tracy clears her throat. "No way."

Cade nods and points to where an anemic-looking ficus tree wallows in the corner. "He was standing right there, next to a big pile of laundry, putting a quarter in the jukebox. That was way before Nirvana even played their first show." He shrugs. "He changed a lot after that. Fame really sucked the joy out of him, and he knew it. It's sad, but it happens to a lot of artists."

A hip-looking red-haired woman, barely twenty if that, approaches our table before I can respond. "Excuse me," she says to Tracy and me with a nervous smile before turning to Cade. "Are you...*Cade McAllister* from Element Records?"

"I am," he replies with a quick smile.

"Wow," she says, gushing. "I'm such a fan. Such a fan. I love all of your bands. I mean, your record label is probably the reason I'm alive today. The music you put out got me through some hard times. You know? I mean, wow. It's so good to meet you."

"Thank you," Cade says casually, and somehow I have the feeling that this kind of thing happens all the time.

"I'm Jenna," she continues, touching her heart. "Thank you." She looks back at me. "Sorry, I just had to say hi. I'll let you get back to your conversation now."

After she's gone, my eyes meet Cade's. "So, it seems you're kind of a big deal."

He shrugs. "I'm just a lucky guy who gets to do what he loves. So what's your passion, Kailey? I know it can't be laundry." He winks in the direction of my basket.

"She'd spend her last dollar on the rarest goat cheese at Pike Place Market," Tracy says.

"So will you make me dinner sometime?"

Tracy pretends to be focused on her book, but if there was a thought bubble over her head, it would be littered with exclamation marks.

"Uh, well..." I fumble with my words.

"Sorry, was that presumptuous of me?"

I grin. "Well, maybe a tad."

"How about this," he continues. "I take you out for dinner, and if you have a good time, then you make me dinner one night? Deal?"

I smile coyly, prolonging the moment until I say yes. "Deal."

"Good," he continues, turning to the door. He waves at a guy with a beard and a sleeve of tattoos who's just walked in, before turning back to me once more. "Speaking of laundry, you wrote your number on a napkin the night we met. I put it in my pocket and then, in tragic form, accidentally washed those jeans." He grins. "So, well, can I get it again?"

"Sure," I say, grinning back. I dig through my purse and find a pen.

Cade extends his hand. "This time, you better write it on my hand. Safer."

"Okay," I say with a laugh, taking his hand in mine. I print my name and number on his palm. "Now, don't wash it off."

"I promise," he says with a wink.

Tracy catches my eye after Cade is gone. "You know what I think?"

"What?"

"That one," she says, shaking her head, "is going to get under your skin."

I don't tell her that he already has.

—
Later that night, I'm in the kitchen, gently folding batter for a cinnamon coffee cake. "My grandma used to always say that cinnamon is the scent of a happy home," I say to Tracy, smiling. "I always liked that."

"Cinnamon?" Tracy says, looking up from the coffee table, where books and notebooks are splayed out.

"Yeah," I say. "It was this quirky theory she had, that the more cinnamon a person consumed, the more love in her life." I pour the batter into a Bundt pan, then lick the edge of the wooden spoon. "Cute, huh?"

Tracy nods. "The world was more romantic in our grandparents' time. Remember, mine got married two weeks after they met. Two weeks!"

I smile. "My grandparents met at a wartime dance hall. My grandpa asked my grandma to dance, and that was that. Love, to the tune of Glenn Miller."

Tracy holds her hand to her heart in dramatic fashion. "'Moonlight Serenade,'" she says with a swoony look, just as the phone rings. She

answers it as I tuck the cake pan into the oven.

"Hello," Tracy says, pausing for a moment, smiling. "Yes, she's here. Just a sec." She points to the phone and mouths the words "It's him!"

My heart beats fast as I wipe my hands on a towel, then run over to take the phone. "Hello," I say, intending to sound breathy and effortless. Instead, the word comes out like a squeak.

"Hi, it's Cade." His voice is somehow deeper on the phone than it was in person. I like it, and my stomach feels fluttery.

"Hi," I say.

"It was good running into you today," he continues. "I was thinking that maybe we could get together on Saturday for dinner. I mean, if you're free."

"I'd like that," I say.

"Ever been to Wild Ginger?"

"No," I say. "But my editor raves about it. I've been meaning to check it out."

"Good," he says. "Meet me there at seven?"

Tracy is frantically waving at me, but I ignore her.

"Sure," I reply, catching Tracy's eye.

"Ask him what his sign is," she whispers.

"No," I mouth back.

"Seriously," she says. "For me. I have to know."

"Tracy!" I whisper.

"Please?" she asks, grinning.

"Um, so," I say into the phone. "My best friend is a nut and she wants to know what your sign is."

"My sign?" He chuckles.

I roll my eyes at Tracy, wishing I'd kept my mouth shut. "She loves astrology. I don't. But I love her."

Cade laughs some more. "I don't know anything about all of that, but I do know that I'm a Taurus."

"A Taurus," I say, as Tracy nods in approval.

"Tell her I'd love to hear my horoscope someday," he says.

I grin. "Really, it's best not to encourage her."

"Okay," he says, laughing. "See you Saturday."

"See you then," I say, grinning as I hang up.

Tracy squeals as I sink into the couch beside her. "Someone has a date."

I can't help but smile. "I do."

"And he's a *Taurus*," she adds in a dreamy voice.

I shrug.

"That's good, Kailey. *Really*. Tauruses are lucky in love. They're ruled by Venus, which is known for beauty and pleasure." She smiles to herself. "Just make him one of your fabulous meals and you're golden."

I smile. "That simple, huh?"

"I think so." She brushes a bit of flour from my shirt. "Told you this is the beginning of something big."

A ferry streams across Elliott Bay in the night, and I think maybe, just maybe, she might be right.

five

NOVEMBER 16, 2008

Rain splatters the windshield of Tracy's car as we whiz down I-5. The wipers squeak back and forth frantically in time with the beat of my heart.

"I remember your first date with him," Tracy says a little nostalgically.

"You do?" I ask, turning to her.

"You were so nervous. You tried on a thousand outfits before you left."

"Wild Ginger," I say, my brain spitting out memories in rapid fire. "We went to Wild Ginger."

"And I almost called the cops because you, always the homebody, didn't come home until two A.M. You nearly gave me a heart attack."

Tracy takes the James Street exit and winds her way down to Fourth Avenue. "We can park here, then walk around a bit. See if we find him by the restaurant."

"Okay," I say nervously.

When we pass a café, Tracy stops. "Coffee first."

"Someone should make T-shirts with that phrase," I say.

"I'd buy one," Tracy says.

I follow her in, and we each order a double Americano, then Tracy changes hers to a triple at the last minute. "Remember the lattes we used to drink?" she says with a laugh.

"All that sugar," I reply. "I think I drank a macadamia nut latte for at least a year straight."

"I had a thing for toasted marshmallow," she says. "Remember that?"

I nod.

Her eyes light up. "And tiramisu." She laughs. "What were we thinking?"

I laugh, but it's hollow, and lonely. A laugh filled with regret and longing for the way things used to be. Those bottles of Torani syrups, like

49000

Enjoying a romantic candlelit dinner with her fiancé, Ryan, at one of Seattle's chicest restaurants, Kailey Crain can't believe her good fortune: She has a great job as a journalist and is now engaged to a guy who is perfect in nearly every way. As she and Ryan leave the restaurant, Kailey spies a thin, bearded homeless man on the sidewalk. She approaches him to offer up her bag of leftovers, and is stunned when their eyes meet, then stricken to her very core: The man is the love of her life, Cade McAllister.

Alternating between the past and the present, *Always* is a beautifully unfolding exploration of a woman faced with an impossible choice, a woman who discovers what she's willing to save and what she will sacrifice for true love.



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