



PROVIDENCE

Jamie McGuire

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*For Beth, who gave Providence its wings,
And for Mom, who provided the wind for it to fly*

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Chapter One

Loss and Found

The average daughter respects her father. She might regard him as her hero, or she may place him so high on a pedestal that no object of her affection could ever compare. To me, my father deserved more than respect, or loyalty, or even love. I had a reverence for him. He was more than Superman; he was God.

One of my earliest memories was of two men cowering in my father's office as he spoke words I didn't understand. His verdict was always final and never argued with. Not even death could touch him.

When I answered my phone on December fourteenth, that reality came to an end.

"Nina," my mother sighed, "he doesn't have much time. You should come now."

I set the phone beside me on the bed, careful to keep my hands from trembling so much that it tumbled to the floor. The past few weeks had been an alternate universe for me, as I had been faced with one horrible call after another. The first from a nurse at the hospital informing me of my father's car accident. My number was the most recently dialed on his cell phone, leaving me with the horrifying task of being the one to break the news to my mother. In his last days, when reports of no improvement were replaced with gentle suggestions to prepare for the inevitable, I was thankful to be at the receiving end of the phone calls.

It felt strange to walk across the room and grab my coat and keys. The tasks seemed too mundane to begin the journey to say goodbye to my father. I lamented the ordinary life that seemed so long ago as I walked out to my car and turned the ignition.

My father had risen to the top of the shipping industry ruling with an iron fist, but I knew the gentle side of him. The man that left important meetings to take my trivial phone calls, kissed my scrapes, and rewrote fairytales so that the princess always saved the prince. Now he lay helpless in his bed, fading away in the vast bedroom he shared with my mother.

Our housekeeper, Agatha, greeted me at the front door. "Your mother's expecting you, Love. You best get upstairs."

Agatha took my coat, and then I climbed the stairs, feeling the bile rise higher in my throat with every step.

His private nurse brushed past me as I entered the room, and I winced at the sight of him. His face was sallow with a thin sheen of perspiration, and his usually clean shaven jaw was darkened with whiskers that crowded his parched lips. My mother spoke soft, comforting words to him as his chest heaved with every labored breath. The muted beeps and humming of the pumps and monitors were the background music to my worst nightmare.

Like the other times I'd visited my father since his accident, my legs transformed into deep-seeded roots that tunneled through my shoes and plunged into the wooden floor. I

couldn't go forward or retreat.

My mother looked up with weary heartbreak in her eyes. "Nina," she called. "Come, dear."

Her hand lifted to summon me forward but my feet wouldn't move. She sighed in understanding and walked toward me, her arm still reaching out in front of her. I couldn't take my eyes off of my father's feeble attempts to breathe as she cupped her fingers around each of my shoulders and eased me forward. After a few reluctant steps, I stopped again.

"I know," she whispered.

Peeling my shoes from the floor, I let her guide me to his bedside. My first instinct was to help him, but the only thing left to do was to wait for his suffering to end.

"Jack, darling," my mother said in a soothing tone. "Nina's here."

After watching him struggle for sufficient breath, I leaned down to whisper in his ear. "I'm here, Daddy."

His breath skipped a bit and he mumbled inaudibly.

"Don't try to talk. Just rest." My shaking fingers reached out to his hand. "I'm going to stay with you."

"Cynthia?" My father's attorney and friend, Thomas Rosen, called to my mother from the back corner of the room. With a pained expression she glanced at my father, clutched me to her chest for a moment, and then quietly walked to Thomas' side. Their voices became a stream of humming no louder than the machines attached to my father.

He sucked in another breath while I tenderly swept his salt and pepper hair away from his moist brow. "Neen...", he swallowed, "Nina."

My eyes wandered to my mother, who was in silent conversation, searching her face one last time for a sign of hope. Seeing the sorrow in her eyes, I looked back to my father and prepared to say goodbye.

"Daddy," I began, but words failed me. My eyes closed as the urge to ease his suffering grew insistent. A faltering breath escaped from my chest and I started again. "I should tell you that it's okay...that you don't have to stay for me, but I can't."

His breathing slowed. He was listening to me.

"I don't want be the one to let you go, Daddy. I want you to get better. But, I know that you're tired. So if you want to sleep...I'll be okay." The corners of his mouth shook as they attempted to turn up.

My mouth smiled as my face crumpled around it. "I'll miss you, Daddy. I'm going to miss you so much." I sucked in another breath and he did the same, but his was different this time. He had no more fight left in him.

I glanced back to my mother, who watched me with heavy, wet eyes. He took in another deep breath and slowly exhaled. His life slipped away as the last bit of oxygen left his lungs. The sound reminded me of a tire losing air, slow and level until there was nothing left. His body relaxed, and his eyes became vacant and unfocused.

The nurse silenced the solid tone of the heart monitor while I scanned his peaceful face. The realization that my father was gone washed over me in waves. My insides wrenched, and my arms and legs felt foreign, as if they no longer belonged to me. I nodded and smiled, ignoring the tears that spilled over my cheeks. He trusted my words, and so he let go.

Thomas touched my shoulder and moved to the head of the bed. He reached over to place his hands over my father's eyes and whispered something beautiful in Hebrew. I leaned over my father's chest and hugged him. For the first time in my life, he didn't hug me back.

Looking down to my hands, I scanned the obituary from the funeral. Separated by a dash, the dates of my father's birth and death were displayed in elegant font on the front cover. I grimaced with the recognition that such a short line of ink was meant to signify his life.

The paper fit snugly in the inside pocket of my coat just as the wet sloshing of bus tires approached, slowing to a stop in front of me.

The door opened, but I didn't look up. The sounds of commuters stepping out onto the sidewalk never came. My neighbors had little need for public transportation, specifically so late in the evening. Those that used it at all were the hired service that worked in the colossal residences nearby.

"Miss?"

The bus driver cleared his throat to get my attention, and when I failed to acknowledge him, the door swept shut. The air breaks released, and the bus slowly pulled away from the curb. I tried not to think about the day that had just taken place, but my memory became saturated with it.

Just as I did in childhood, I rocked back and forth to comfort myself. The warm peach hue had long since left my fingers, reminding me of my father's folded hands as he lay in his coffin.

A frigid breath of air flooded my lungs and my chest heaved, giving way to the sob that had been clawing its way to the surface. I had thought moments before that my eyes couldn't cry anymore, and I wondered how much more I would have to endure before my body would finally be too exhausted to continue.

"Cold night, huh?"

I sniffed and shot an annoyed glance to the man settling into the space next to me. I hadn't heard him approach. He breathed on his hands, rubbed them together and then offered a reassuring grin.

"I guess," I answered.

He looked down at his watch and sighed. "Damn it," he muttered under his breath. "Guess we missed the last bus."

He pulled a cell phone from the pocket of his black motorcycle jacket and dialed. He greeted someone and then requested a taxi.

"Did you want to share a cab?" he asked.

I peered over at him, immediately suspicious. His blue-grey eyes narrowed as he raised one eyebrow at my expression. I must have looked like a maniac, and he was

reconsidering his offer.

I folded my arms, suddenly feeling the discomfort of winter breaking through my coat, seeping into my skin, piercing through to my bones. I had to get back to school; I still had a paper to write.

“Yes. Thank you,” I said with a shaky voice.

After an awkward moment of silence, the man spoke again. “You work around here?”

“No.” I hesitated to continue the conversation but found myself curious. “You?”

“Yes.”

How odd. He didn’t look like hired help. I glanced at his watch out of the corner of my eye. Definitely not help.

“What do you do?”

He didn’t answer right away. “I’m...involved in the home security sector,” he nodded, seeming to agree with himself.

“I’m a student,” I offered, trying to clear the ridiculous quivering in my voice.

He stared at me with an expression I couldn’t quite decipher, and then looked forward again. He was older than I, though not by more than five or six years. I wondered if he knew who I was. There was a glimmer of familiarity in his eyes, though I couldn’t quite place it.

His cell phone vibrated, and he opened it to read a text message. He attempted to hide an emotion and then snapped the phone closed without replying, and didn’t speak again until the cab arrived.

He opened the door for me, and I scooted over to the farthest end of the seat while he slid in behind the driver.

“Where to?” the cabbie asked in a throaty voice.

“Brown University,” I instructed. “Please.”

“Uh-Huh. One stop?”

“No,” my unanticipated companion said.

I noted that he was careful not to mention his address, and that struck me as odd. Maybe it wasn’t odd at all; maybe I was more curious about him than I would have liked to admit. I was surprised that I had noticed anything at the moment, and found myself grateful to this stranger for the diversion he’d inadvertently created for me.

“I’m Jared by the way,” he grinned, holding his hand out to take mine.

“Nina.”

“Wow, your hands are freezing!” he said, clasping his other hand over mine.

I pulled my hand away, noting his exceptionally warm grip. I watched him for a moment, listening to any inner voices that might have sensed danger, but the only feeling that stood out was curiosity.

After the realization of his offense, he apologized with a small smile. I tucked my hair behind my ears and stared out the window. The wind whipped around outside, blowing the collecting flakes across the road like white snakes slithering ahead. I shivered at the image and pulled my coat tighter around me.

“Brown, huh?” Jared asked. His cell phone vibrated in his pocket and he flipped it open once again.

I nodded. “Brown.” He continued to look at me so I offered more, “Business major.”

The residual frustration from the unwanted caller melted away once our eyes met. It seemed as if he’d just noticed I’d been crying.

“Are you all right?”

I looked down, picking at my nails. “We buried my father today.” It occurred to me that I had no idea why I was sharing such personal information with a stranger.

“You were close,” Jared said. It was more of a statement than a question.

I waited for the expected pity in his eyes, but there was none. My relief caused me to smile which in turn made a grin turn up one side of his mouth. I noticed then that he had a nice face. It was more than nice, now that it had come to my attention. He was quite attractive, really....

“Where’s your place?” The cabbie squawked. I peeled my eyes from Jared and pointed in the direction of my dorm. “East Andrews Hall.”

The cab pulled in, and Jared automatically stepped out. As soon as his door had shut, mine opened.

“Thank you,” I said.

“It was nice to meet you, Nina.” There was an edge to his words. It went beyond politeness or even sincerity. He spoke the words with conviction.

I nodded and side-stepped toward my dorm. He paused before getting into the cab to smile at me once more, and for the first time in weeks I felt something other than hollow. I watched the cab pull away and then turned against the wind to walk toward Andrews.

Once inside my room, I noticed my appearance in the mirror and gasped. Good God, it was no wonder that Jared felt compelled to come to my aide! I looked like a homeless, desperate crack addict overdue for my next fix! My brush ripped through my blonde bob and I pulled my bangs straight back, pinning them away from my face. I went to the sink and scrubbed away the smeared mascara and streaky foundation.

With a frown, I pulled my cell phone from my pocket and pressed the speed dial to call my mother.

“Nina?” she answered.

“Back in my room, Mom.”

She sighed. “Good. You know I don’t like for you to take the bus. Robert could have driven you. Take two of those pills I gave you today, all right? They’ll help you sleep.”

I rolled my eyes. My mother: the frequent flier of Providence drug stores.

“I’ll probably fall asleep the second my head hits the pillow.” Not the pure truth, but it would do to keep my personal pharmacist at bay.

“Okay, Darling. Sleep well.”

My dorm room seemed smaller. The white walls were pitifully empty on my side. Feeling I was being watched, I peeked across the room at my roommate. Her side of the room was covered in posters of teddy bears and team colors. My decor consisted of an ornamental frame on my night table displaying a picture of me and my parents at high school graduation just a few months before.

“How’s your mom?” Beth asked from under her baby pink comforter.

“She’s...sad.”

“How are you?”

“The same,” I sighed. My conclusive tone seemed to relax Beth, and while I changed into my pajamas I noticed her breathing even out.

I sat on my bed and pulled myself against the pillows. My thoughts effortlessly moved toward the last hour. Jared’s grin kept my mind occupied for awhile, but before long

my thoughts brought me back to the funeral. I rolled onto my side and curled into a ball, trying to cry quietly. Relief finally replaced the crushing grief as I slipped out of consciousness.

I turned to the side and blinked my eyes, noting the large, red numbers on the clock. Five A.M. had come quickly. My eyes felt swollen and scratchy. It was then that I realized my dreams had been cruel. There would be no miracles, and my father was still gone.

The finale of the worst experience of my life hadn't ended with what was supposed to be my closure.

I clambered from my bed and opened my laptop, determined to finish my term paper by eight. The screen lit up, and I peered over at Beth, her head buried under her pillow. My fingers tapped out the next cross-reference and soon began a muted symphony of clicking against the keyboard.

The paragraphs formed swiftly and I finished by a quarter after seven. With a click of the mouse, the printer lurched and buzzed with its new task. I looked over at Beth, knowing a newspaper press wouldn't wake her. I gathered my toiletries to make my daily commute down the hall to the showers.

Red-faced and sufficiently exfoliated, I tightened my robe and walked down the hall. While brushing my teeth over the quaint sink in our room, Beth sat up in bed and stretched out her arms. Her chin-length auburn hair was smashed in some places, and stuck out in others.

"Good morning," she chirped. Then reality set in. "Oh...I mean...."

"It's okay, Beth. It is a nice morning." Glancing out the window, I noticed the sky was looking bleaker from the onset, but I wasn't going to mention that.

Beth smiled and began making her bed, setting her stuffed animals haphazardly in front of her frilly pillow.

"Are you going to the game Saturday?" she asked.

"I don't know. Maybe."

She usually invited me to go, and at times insisted I go, always in her cheery, pleasant voice. Beth hailed from the south. She worked hard and had been awarded numerous scholarships to make her escape from the small Oklahoma town she called home. Her side of the room was covered in trophies, sashes and crowns from the numerous pageants she'd entered and won. She wasn't the typical beauty queen. Although beautiful, she seemed very introverted—a trait she was trying desperately to break away from. She explained to me the day we moved in that the pageants were a necessary evil for tuition.

"Well, I'll give you a break this week if you decide to opt out. I'd understand with finals and...everything else," she conceded without looking in my direction.

"I appreciate it."

I pulled my hair back into a small burst of ponytail at the nape of my neck, looking like a bouquet of wheat shooting out from the back of my head. I sighed at my closet

and gave myself a pep talk before dressing in the inevitable layers: one after another; bra, tank top, undershirt, sweater, socks, jeans, boots, coat—and not always in that order.

With my backpack bursting at the seams, I pulled up the handle and angled the bag onto its wheels.

“I’m going early for coffee.”

Beth smiled as she booted up her laptop. “Good luck getting that thing across the ice.” I stepped out of the elevator into the hallway wondering if Beth was right about the weather. I held my breath and pushed the door open, waiting for the freezing temperature to sting my face. The wind blew the heavy glass door against me, working against the already pitiful pressure I had managed with one hand. Using my arm and shoulder, I forced the door open and gasped at the frigid burst of air burning my face.

I stumbled into the dining hall the student populace affectionately and appropriately dubbed “The Ratty”, and brushed off my coat. Shuffling across the muted tile floor, I made a bee-line for the coffee pot. Dark, brown liquid created the steam that would help me function that early in the morning. Out of habit, I reached for my favorite hazelnut creamer and two packets of Splenda.

“That stuff is death in a package, you know,” Kim said from behind me.

“You sound like my mother,” I grumbled.

“I’m surprised you came today. Sucks that your dad died during finals.”

Kim was never one for holding back or mincing words. I usually found it very refreshing, but I hadn’t had time to brace myself before the words left her lips, and my ribs wrenched in response.

“Yeah.”

Kim watched me for a moment, and then shoved a blueberry corn muffin at my face.

“Breakfast?”

I shook my head, uncrossing my eyes from looking at the muffin. “No, thanks. I need to get to class.”

“I’ll walk with you,” she said, pulling the muffin back.

Kim pulled a faded, red plaid hunter’s cap complete with ear covers over her short brown hair. If I thought I could laugh, I would have.

“Oh, Kim,” I said, attempting to make my voice sound cautious.

“What?” she asked, stopping in her tracks.

“Nothing,” I shook my head, deciding to leave it alone.

If any hat could be made for Kim, it was the ridiculous atrocity she’d placed on her head. Kim was above average in height, a head taller than my five feet, seven inches. Her short, caramel-colored hair framed her face in care free waves. Crazy and unpredictable as she was, people were drawn to her. I knew we would be friends the moment I met her in the hallway of Andrews; I couldn’t fathom having someone more interesting in my life.

Kim walked with me across campus to class, keeping my mind from more somber thoughts by regaling me with her most recent week of fantastic mishaps and blunders. She never failed to entertain me with her unbridled honesty and lack of brain-to-mouth filter.

Once in class, Kim leaned toward me and kept her voice low. “So, the funeral....”

I squirmed in my seat. “I...don’t really want to....”

“Oh, right. Yeah. So...it was yesterday?” Unlike Beth, Kim didn’t avoid unpleasantness. At times she seemed to slam face first into it with a smile on her face.

“Yes,” I sighed. “It was very nice.”

“Very nice,” Kim echoed, nodding. “I tried to call you last night. You didn’t answer.”

“I didn’t get in until late. I missed the last bus and ended up taking a cab.”

Kim eyed me with disbelief. “The last bus? I didn’t know public transportation had a curfew.” I considered that for a moment before she continued. “Why didn’t you drive? Your mother picked you up, didn’t she?”

“I ended up sharing a cab.”

“With your mom?”

“No, Kim. Not with my mom,” I deadpanned. “I met a man at the bus stop. We both missed the bus.” I didn’t confess that I’d had a momentary conscious black out and let the bus pull away.

“You shared a cab with some random guy at the bus stop? Interesting.”

“Not everyone’s stories end with a dramatic punch line like yours. We just shared a cab,” I said, trying to make my answer sound final.

“Was he old?”

I rolled my eyes. “No.”

“Ugly?”

“No, Kim. He was nice.”

“I didn’t ask if he was nice. So...he was cute, young...and?”

“Jack’s funeral was yesterday, Kim. I was a mess,” I said, feeling my eyebrows pull together.

“Why do you do that?”

“Do what?” I asked, exasperated.

“Call your dad ‘Jack’? I thought you were close?”

“We are. We were. I don’t know...because that’s his name?” Kim stared at me, unimpressed with my answer. I began again, “It’s always felt weird calling him Dad to other people. Just like I wouldn’t call a boyfriend ‘Honey’ to you. It’s just...personal.”

“That’s weird, Nina.”

“Well, you are the authority on weird.”

Kim nodded, unaffected by my insult. “So who was the mystery guy? Does he go here?”

“I don’t think so. His stop was after mine,” I murmured, rolling my pen between my fingers.

Because my stop was first, I was curious if he resided near the university, and if I might run into him again. I cringed at the thought of that prospect. What would I possibly say to him? “Hi, Jared. Remember me? The Alice Cooper look-alike that you shared an awkward cab ride with for twenty minutes?”

“What’s with the face?” Kim’s expression screwed in a way I could only assume mirrored my own.

“Nothing. I just...,” I shrugged, “he probably thought I was nuts.”

“That could possibly be the most boring story I’ve ever heard,” Kim said, deflated.

“I tried to spare you the non-details. He did have a nice smile, though,” I mused.

Kim looked up at me with renewed interest and opened her mouth to say something, but Professor Hunter walked in the room. I hadn’t noticed the numerous empty seats.

Some of the students were tossing their papers on his desk and leaving the way they came instead of meandering to their seats as usual.

“What are you still doing here? Turn in your papers and get out. Your grades will be posted on the web site. Happy Holidays,” he said to those of us still peppered across the room.

As finals week came to an end, the nightly ritual of curling into a ball to cry seemed to be a permanent fixture in my life. The first week of break, I had a bit more control over the emptiness when it hit. After that, there were a few nights that I escaped the sadness all together. The grief found new strength Christmas night, but to my relief falling asleep without tears became a bit easier after the holidays came to a close.

I found it disconcerting that although time provided some relief, I was also further from when Jack was a part of my life. Each passing day was that much longer since I’d been able to call him or hear his voice. With time, relief and apprehension intertwined.

When the spring semester began, Jared had become a blurred image from a day I wanted to file away, so it was a surprise to see him standing a few feet away from me in line at the Urban Outfitters off campus. I wasn’t confident that it was him at first, but when he accepted his receipt from the sales person and turned, I stared at him long enough to be certain. He didn’t suffer from the same hesitation that I did.

“Nina?”

I felt my eyebrows rise while I tried to think of something besides ‘yes’ to reply with. My mouth opened, but nothing came out.

He pointed at his chest like he was speaking to a deaf mute. “I’m Jared. We shared a cab?” He patiently waited for me to recall his face, and I realized I hadn’t forgotten an inch of it.

“I thought that was you,” I said, trying a polite smile. Something was wrong with my throat. It felt dry, and as if I was drowning in my own saliva at the same time. I swallowed hard and tried to remember how not to be a ridiculous teenaged undergrad. Jared’s expression skipped from relief to elation as a broad smile appeared across his face. A warm feeling bubbled up from my chest into my face, and I felt the heat release from my cheeks.

Oh, God, don’t blush! I thought to myself. But it was too late. I had no idea how to recover. “You seem to be having a better day. Made it to the bus on time and all that?”

“Something like that,” I mumbled. “How is the security business?”

“Interesting.” A glimmer touched his eyes that I wasn’t quite sure how to translate.

Our attention was simultaneously drawn to the phone vibrating in his jacket pocket. He smiled apologetically before reaching down to silence the distraction.

“Did you have a pleasant Christmas?” I tried not to cringe once the words left my mouth. Ugh. So unimaginative, I thought.

“Something like that,” he quoted.

I smiled at his teasing. He seemed so comfortable around me. I wasn’t sure if it was

confidence or that he was just one of those people that could carry on a conversation with anyone and make them feel he'd known them for years.

I raised the silver sweater tunic in my hands. "Birthday shopping for my mother."

A man behind me cleared his throat, and I realized that we were holding up the line. Jared smiled and took a step backward toward the register. I realized our conversation wasn't over, and I turned my attention to the red-haired girl behind the counter, trying to conceal my enthusiasm.

She handed me the receipt, and Jared accompanied me outside. He stared down into my eyes, warmly scanning my face. I didn't remember him being quite so tall. He towered over me, at least six feet two inches. How had I not noticed the incredible color of his eyes? They seemed to glow as he watched me fidget.

"Are you from Providence?" I asked.

"I am," he said, seeming amused by my awkwardness.

"Did you go to Brown?"

"No."

If his eyes weren't so animated by the conversation, I would have guessed by his short answers that it was my cue to excuse myself with my tail tucked between my legs.

"Really? I'm trying to place you. It seems like we've met before." Did I just issue him a pick up line? Fantastic, I've now sunk to the level of desperate teenage boys everywhere.

"I don't think so. That's not something I would forget," he said. "I was just going to grab a bite to eat at the end of the block. Would you join me?"

I thought I had said yes, but he continued to stare at me expectantly.

"Nina?"

"Yes? I mean yes. That would be great." I tried to smile through my humiliation and wondered if I was always so articulately clumsy. I couldn't imagine why he was still speaking to me.

We walked to the end of the block to cross the street at the light. Jared guided me forward with his hand on the small of my back, and looked all around us as we crossed. I stifled a giggle; he reminded me of the President's security detail. The only thing missing was a communication device in his ear and standard issue black Ray-Bans.

Jared once again opened the door for me. I had seen the restaurant several times, with it being close to campus, but I'd never ventured in.

"You'll like it," he assured me. I paused in a thought wondering if I'd said anything out loud.

"Welcome to Blaze," the hostess said, motioning to us that she could seat us immediately. The waitress appeared a few moments later, and Jared waited for me to order.

"I'll have a Dr. Pepper."

"Make that two," Jared said, raising two fingers. His eyes didn't stray from mine.

The waitress nodded and left us to each other. I was curious if he would have ordered a beer had he not asked a toddler to accompany him.

"I don't think I thanked you for getting me home."

"Actually, you did," he said, putting his elbows on the table and crossing his arms.

"Oh. That night is sort of a blur," I grimaced.

“I’m sorry you lost your dad, Nina. I’m glad I was there.”

I tucked my hair behind my ears. “I’m glad you were there, too.”

“It probably wasn’t the safest idea...sitting alone in the dark. Lots of crazies out there,” his tone was casual, but underneath I caught a hint of anxiousness.

“I grew up in that neighborhood. It’s safe, I assure you.”

He laughed and shook his head. “It’s always safe until something bad happens.”

The waitress brought our drinks and asked if we were ready to order. Once again, Jared waited for me to begin.

“I’ll have the Greek salad,” I said. I glanced over at Jared, who studied me with raised eyebrows and a wry smile. I wasn’t about to be one of those girls, “And the linguine.”

The waitress turned her attention to Jared. “For you?”

“I’ll have the house salad with blue cheese and the Shrimp Scampi. And would you bring us some of those sweet potato fries, please?” he said, handing the menu to the waitress. Once she left I looked around the restaurant and then peeked over at Jared, who still hadn’t taken his eyes off me.

I floundered for conversation under his stare. Jared’s eyes were an incredible blue-grey; they almost glowed against his lightly bronzed skin. His thick brown eyebrows sat atop his almond-shaped eyes and were just slightly darker than his strategically messy dark blonde hair. His natural highlights glimmered in the early afternoon sun that broke through the windows. He was clearly more than just attractive. I wondered again why he was still speaking to me.

“Sweet potato fries?” I asked.

“They’re famous. Well, they’re famous to me. You have to dip them in these little sauces they give you to fully appreciate them. It’s an experience.”

“Sweet potato fries,” I said, still unsure.

He smiled. “Trust me.” His cell phone vibrated, and he flipped it open. It was more than a text message this time; he masked an irritated look and pressed it to his ear.

“Ryel,” he answered.

Righ-el? I was fairly sure that was his last name, but I couldn’t be certain. He lowered his voice and tilted his head away from me. He was unhappy with the caller, but it was only the tone I could understand; he was speaking what I guessed to be Russian. He was devastatingly handsome, kind, and spoke a second language. If the sweet potato fries turned out to be all that he’d promised, I might have fallen out of my chair.

He became impatient with the person on the other end of the line and hung up the phone.

“Sorry about that,” he said.

I shook my head, fielding his apology. “No, it’s fine. I just inadvertently learned two new things about you.”

His eyes were still focused on mine, but they were a bit fogged over as if his attention was divided between me and the problem with the caller.

“Ryel?” I asked.

“My last name.”

“And was that...Russian you were speaking?” I raised my eyebrows.

“Yes,” he sighed. His shoulders relaxed as he exhaled. “Doesn’t everyone speak a second language these days?”

“You only speak two?” I said, feigning dissatisfaction.

He laughed, and a new twinge formed in my chest. I couldn't get over his smile and how remarkable it was, as if he had come straight out of a magazine.

"I took French in high school. It didn't stick," I said, feeling inferior.

"My dad spoke fluently. I learned from him."

"Oh, your family is from Russia?"

"Er...no," Jared said, looking uncomfortable with the question.

"It was beautiful," I said. "You're very popular. Business must be fantastic."

His eyes tightened as he studied my face. "Business is..." his eyes softened and he leaned in a bit towards me, meeting my gaze, "better than it's been in a long time."

I forced myself to breathe. It felt unnatural when he looked at me like that. "So you enjoy what you do?"

"Some days more than others," he shrugged.

"And today?"

He smiled again. Something was amusing him about our conversation, and I wasn't in on the joke. "Today's a good day."

My attention was diverted to the waitress walking up behind him, bringing our sweet potato fries and salads. Jared looked down at the table and then to me with a calculating grin.

"Feeling brave?"

I leaned over to get a better look inside the woven bowl. "You're making me awfully nervous over a basket of fries. These should be some earth shattering potatoes."

"Truly, potatoes that deserve an introduction." We both laughed. He picked up a few and dipped them in a cup of strange looking goo.

"No ketchup?" I asked, eyeing the misshapen spear in my hand.

Jared wrinkled his nose. "Ketchup is for those who don't want to taste their food."

"Ketchup is for suckers." I concentrated on the basket, my eyebrows pressed together.

Laughter erupted from his throat, and I plunged my fry into the sauce. He took a bite and watched me raise my hand to my mouth. His expression grew playfully anxious as I chewed.

"Not...bad. Pretty good, actually," I said, nodding as I swallowed.

His face was triumphant. We joked and laughed as we eliminated the remaining fries, and politely discussed the weather through our salads. After we finished our entrées, he eyed my empty plate and nodded his head in satisfaction.

"I like a girl with an appetite."

"I have a feeling we'll be good friends, then," I laughed. "That's the first non-Ratty meal I've eaten since I've been back to school. Thanks for bringing me here."

Jared beamed. "It was absolutely my pleasure. I'm glad we ran into each other."

The waitress brought the ticket and Jared scooped it up, placed his card in the pouch and handed it back to her. He looked as if he'd just won the lottery. I couldn't believe that my enjoyment of some alternately flavored french fries had made him so cheerful.

He helped me with my coat. I wasn't the type of girl to enjoy gallantry, but the casual way he went about it made me a tad giddy. I picked up my Urban Outfitters bag, and he followed me outside.

"You walked?" Jared asked.

"I walked." I tucked my hair behind my ears and waited for him to be chivalrous again.

“It’s getting colder. Do you mind if I drive you?” he asked, shoving his hands in his jeans pockets.

The grin that swept across my face was uncontainable. “Do you remember where I live?”

“Andrews, right?” he said. I nodded, and he seemed pleased that he could give me the correct answer. “I’m this way,” he said, directing me down the street.

Jared parked beside the curb next to my dorm, and I subliminally willed him to ask for my number, for another date, anything. I didn’t want to have to wait so long this time before I saw him again.

“Thanks again,” I said, stalling.

He smiled, but it wasn’t as broad as it was during lunch. He seemed to be as disappointed as I was that our brief encounter was over.

“You’re welcome. Truly, the pleasure was mine.”

He stepped out and less than a second later, opened my door. I stood to face him and after a small pause, began making the walk to my dorm. A sense of urgency overcame my nervousness and I turned on my heels.

He hadn’t moved. Standing in front of his black Escalade, he looked exactly like a security guard. The glass was blacked out, and it looked more like a scene in the Middle East than on a quiet Providence street.

“Jared?” I pulled my cell phone from my purse to ask for his number, but the words left me. I gulped as his eyes pierced through mine. I didn’t know if the attraction was mutual, but on my end at least, it was intense.

“We’ll run into each other again,” he said, grinning. I started to argue, but what could I say? If I wondered aloud how soon that would be, I would sound more desperate than I wanted.

“It was good to see you again, Nina,” he said, before disappearing behind the dark tint of his windows.

I smiled and waved, then continued my trek to Andrews.

Chapter Two

Invitation(s)

“It’s raining again,” Kim grumbled. “That’s something new and different.” She lit her cigarette and jostled her knees back and forth to ward off the cold. I gave her a disapproving look. “What?” she asked.

“That’s really disgusting. My father smoked cigars. I just don’t get the appeal.”

She shrugged. “There is no appeal. I’m a non-conformist.”

“You’re a masochist,” I said, rolling my eyes.

We waited outside for Beth to finish her class, planning to kidnap her to the nearest coffee shop off campus. A group of students emerged in mass exodus, and I scanned each face. I noticed a shaggy-haired boy break away from the river of students and smile at Kim.

“Hey, Josh,” Kim said.

“Hey, Kimmie. Did you get the calculus homework finished?”

Kim shrugged. “I’ll do it before class.”

Josh’s friends meandered closer to us and talked among themselves.

“Nina, this is Josh. We went to high school together in Quincy. He wants to be me when he grows up,” Kim teased, playfully punching him in the arm.

Josh laughed and shook my hand. “Only if I get to wear a hat like that.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Josh.”

Josh pointed to each of his friends. “Tucker...Chad...Ryan.”

Tucker and Chad nodded in typical boy fashion, but Ryan reached his hand out, first to Kim and then to me.

“Hi... hi,” he said to each of us. His eyes lingered on me for a moment.

“So, we’re going to The Gate later for pizza if you want to come,” Josh said.

“We’ve already made plans with another girlfriend of ours, but maybe next time,” Kim said.

Josh nodded and Chad followed him as he left. Ryan stayed for just a moment and then trailed behind them.

Kim looked at me with her eyebrows raised. “Well. Who says there’s no such thing as love at first sight?”

“Quit it,” I murmured.

Beth joined us a few moments later.

“It’s about time! Gah!” Kim said in her typical dramatic fashion.

Beth laughed. “Who’s he?” she asked just as Ryan turned to look at us again.

“Ryan. Friend of a friend. Isn’t he dreamy?” Kim said as she nestled against Beth’s shoulder.

“You’re so...weird!” Beth giggled, pushing Kim away.

Beth and I huddled under an umbrella while Kim walked in the rain unaffected. We reached Kim’s elderly Sentra and climbed in, Beth taking the back seat. Kim pretended to say a little prayer and turned the ignition. After a few sickly whirring noises, the engine erupted and Beth clapped.