

Prologue

The blood was too much for me to handle. I couldn't stomach the rusty smell. I couldn't figure out what was happening to me. Why was this happening to me?

I tried to force my eyes open, to keep my thoughts coherent. Why wasn't Nate here? He needed to be here; something was wrong.

My thoughts were becoming hazy, mixing together with reality and nightmare. I heard Becky order me to lie down, and I did just that. She had spread a dark blue towel on the bathroom floor and I sank down, propping my head on the bathtub. I hoped Cari wouldn't get too upset that I was destroying her bath towel. Becky was asking me questions about my doctor, and I tried to work past the fog in my thoughts to respond to her.

I heard Becky yelling for Kiley, and I saw the pale face and trembling body of my friend make her way into the bathroom. Her eyes widened when she saw me laying there, blood in between my legs, sweat shining on my forehead. I couldn't look her in the eyes. I had kept a terrible secret from her, from everyone.

Becky was giving instructions to Kiley, who stood frozen in the door frame. Becky shouted once, making her daughter run into the bedroom. I heard Kiley on the phone, saying my name and our address on campus. Were they sending an ambulance? Everyone would know my secret if they sent an ambulance. I wanted to shout at Kiley, tell her not to tell, but my body couldn't respond. I was too weak. Weak and pathetic.

I know I should have felt something at being half naked, covered in blood in front of my friend's mother, but I couldn't feel self-conscious at the moment. Worry was overtaking me, pulling me under. I needed Nate. I needed my doctor. I needed help.

Chapter 1

I woke up on a humid Saturday morning in August struggling to breathe. I opened my eyes to darkness, feeling sweat trickle down my forehead. It felt as though an elephant had taken up residence on my chest. I tried to scream for help, but my shrieks sounded muffled in my ears. I tore at whatever predator was trying to kill me, thrashing my legs and flinging my arms. I was only nineteen; I was getting ready to go off to college in less than a month. How could this be happening? An intruder must have broken into the apartment I lived in with my mom. I needed to escape.

Right before I really started to panic, my vision suddenly cleared. I blinked in the harsh sunlight streaming through my open bedroom window, breathing in sweet freedom mixed with the scent of lilacs. But where was the intruder? Had he gotten my mom?

“Mom!” I gasped when I saw her sitting on my desk chair beside my bed. “What the hell?”

She watched me with an amused expression, arms folded casually across her chest. “You need to pack.”

I sat up in bed, still feeling dazed. “I have to what?” I looked around me then, and realized that half my wardrobe was piled on my bed. I was being suffocated by my clothes. “Mom!” I yelled, pushing the dresses and shirts away from my body. “What were you trying to do—give me a heart attack before I turn twenty?”

“No, I’m trying to get you to get serious about packing. Three weeks is not a lot of time, and you haven’t even brought up your suitcases from storage yet.”

“But I can’t pack up all my clothes yet! What am I going to wear for the next three weeks?” I argued, still trying to calm my racing heart. My mother could act more like a teenager than a grown woman sometimes—well, most of the time.

Mom just shrugged. “I only want you to go get your suitcases down from storage and start rounding up some cardboard boxes. You don’t have to do all your packing today. But it will be a start.”

“So you decided to take out half my closet and dump my clothes on me? That helps so much. Thanks,” I said sarcastically, swinging my legs out of bed. What a mess. I was going to have to spend the morning putting my clothes back on their hangers.

“Oh, come on, JJ, lighten up,” Mom said, using the nickname many of my friends called me. My name is Jasmine, Jasmine Jones, and I get called everything from JJ to Jas to Jazzy. “You’re going to be gone before you know it and then who am I going to get to pull pranks on?”

“Yeah, yeah,” I grumbled, walking out of the bedroom. “You better make me some breakfast to make up for this!” I called over my shoulder as I walked into the bathroom.

Thirty minutes later, I was stuffed with gooey apple cinnamon French toast and a side of chocolate chip pancakes. At least my mom was good at cooking. That slightly made up for almost causing me to go into cardiac arrest that morning.

I drug my pink suitcases up the stairs to our second floor apartment. Mom and I spent most of the morning going through my belongings, deciding what could stay, what could go and what needed to be tossed. Beside my scare of waking up, the day was a good one. Mom and I had been having more bonding days than usual due to my impending move to college. We would no longer be living together, and I would no longer be living in Julien.

I didn’t want to think about moving day. My mom was my best friend. I couldn’t stand the thought of not seeing her every day—that I couldn’t come home and gripe about my classes or friends while she made supper and I read celebrity gossip magazines aloud to her. But I knew college was the right choice for me and I wasn’t too sad about leaving Julien, my home of the last nine years. It seemed overnight it had changed from a quaint Iowa river town along the Mississippi to a place where you couldn’t take a walk past nine at night. The violence, especially among teens, was at an all-time high.

“What time are you going to Nate’s?” Mom asked me, right before we took a break for lunch. She took her glasses off and wiped the lenses with her shirt, inspecting them before slipping them back on. Her blonde hair was dyed almost the same shade of champagne as mine, and was gathered into a low ponytail. When she wore her hair that way, she could almost pass for my older sister instead of mother.

“I’ll probably leave here in an hour or so,” I said, sitting back on my heels. I surveyed the mess in my bedroom. It was like a clothes bomb had exploded. The neat piles we had started out with were now pushing into one another and there was little organization that met the eye. I sighed. “Oh, how I hate packing.”

“Oh, woe is you. Don’t worry. We’ll get you all squared away before you have to leave,” Mom said, patting my leg. “Why don’t we be done for the day so you can get ready while I make you a quick lunch?”

“Thanks,” I said gratefully. “But now I have to figure out what I can wear in this mess.”

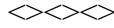
Mom helped me find an outfit—a black skirt just an inch too long to be called a mini and a white silk top with pink lace overlay. Both were in my to-go pile but made the perfect outfit for a night out with my boyfriend.

After a quick grilled cheese sandwich, I climbed into my Plymouth Breeze and headed my car for Nate’s house, out in the country of Julien. As the summer days ticked down, I was getting more and more anxious about my move to college. I was leaving behind my mom, my little brother, my boyfriend. At least I had my best friend coming to college with me. That thought helped put me at ease but I was still nervous about starting over in a new city. My family had moved to Julien when I was nine, and I had an easy enough time finding new friends. But now as a teenager—an adult—that task could prove a lot tougher.

I tried to focus on happy thoughts during my ride. The summer day was a beautiful one, yet probably scorching to most people. I loved the high temps, bring on the humidity. I would much rather be sweating than in the middle of a snowstorm. I was getting ready to move away from this faltering town, away from the violence in schools and on the streets. And I was going to be the first in my family to go to college, a fact I was very proud of. I may not have been sure what exactly I wanted to achieve with my life, but I knew college was the place I needed to be to figure that out.

I hated the inevitable question, “So what do you want to do with your life?” Heck, I didn’t know. I had just turned nineteen, fresh out of high school. I couldn’t tell you what I was going to do tomorrow, let alone with my whole life. I knew I loved writing, and flirted with the thought of going to journalism school but decided that wasn’t practical. Everyone wanted to be a writer or a journalist. That would be like me moving to Hollywood in hopes of becoming a movie star. Probably would never happen. So I chose the sensible route, accepting an offer from Irving, a business college in Des Moines.

I hoped while I was there I would make great friends and find a fabulous career. One that hopefully paid a lot of money and could help put my family’s life back on track. Put my life back on track.



I waited outside, small white sunglasses shading my eyes, focused on the hill Nate would be climbing up. His father insisted that even though the temperature crept towards one hundred and five degrees, the farming chores still needed to be done. And with Nate's older brother already gone away to college, Nate was all they had left.

I scraped the hair off my sweaty neck and pulled it into a high bun. The five minutes I had been waiting seemed more like fifty. The sweltering summer sun beamed down, leaving all who dared brave the outdoors a sticky hot mess. Heat rose off the blacktop driveway, warming my ankles and lower calves. Without a cloud in the sky and no breeze to relish in, the summer day begged for air conditioning.

Another five minutes dragged on. I bit my lower lip, hoping Nate hadn't passed out in the heat. His family field stretched on for miles behind the house, a deep slope dipping into the confines of the woods. I knew the black kitten heels I was wearing wouldn't stand a chance against the grassy hill, so I couldn't go look for him. Especially since I could see muddy patches poking through the green, remnants from the two severe thunderstorms we suffered last week.

I glanced at my watch, tapping my finger against the glass face. Mom let me borrow her favorite timepiece for that night, after I haggled with her for twenty minutes and laid the guilt on thick about her morning prank. I thought the watch was sophisticated, and paired with my gold necklace I knew I nailed my date night outfit. Now if I could only find my date.

"Jasmine!" His voice was faint, but enough for me to hear. I ran along the walkway until the cement stopped and the grass loomed, not wanting to ruin my heels. About halfway down the hill stood Nate—shirtless—treading his way up the steep slope. Since we had only been dating for three months I hadn't had many opportunities to see Nate with no shirt. But even from my stance at the top of the hill I could make out his chiseled chest and toned muscle definition. I wanted him shirtless more often.

I waved so hard my elbow cracked twice. "Hi!" I yelled down, watching him get closer. When he finally reached the top I lunged for him, but caught myself and withdrew at the last minute.

Nate laughed. "Yeah, you might want to have me shower first before touching me. Let's get inside. You shouldn't even be out in this heat."

“I’m fine,” I protested, but grateful at the thought of the indoors. “I wanted to wait for you.”

Nate—always a gentleman—held open the door for me and I took another appreciative glance at his body. His tanned skin looked even darker than when I last saw him four days ago, and glistened with sweat from working in the heat. His bicep muscles flexed when he held the heavy door open for me, and I had to restrain myself from touching them.

“If you want to watch some TV or something I’ll just shower quick and then we can head. You look beautiful as always, by the way,” Nate said, bending down to kiss my cheek.

I beamed at his compliment, stepping into the airy open kitchen. “Thank you. And, yes, that’s fine. Take your time. Are your parent’s home?”

“Nope. At my uncle’s house. Be right down.” Already halfway up the stairs, Nate disappeared onto the second level. The groan of the water pipes filled the aging farmhouse, angry they were put to work. Stepping across the sleek hardwood floor, I settled onto the couch, flicking the television set to life. Not even two minutes later the water shut off and floorboards creaked overhead. How do guys do that? I couldn’t have conditioner in my hair in that amount of time.

Nate dressed faster than he showered, and less than thirty minutes later we arrived at Marta’s Grill, the number one steakhouse for a Saturday night date. Pale yellow walls danced in the flickering lights of the multiple fireplaces and dim lighting gave the ambiance a cozy romantic vibe. Each table showcased a unique centerpiece of brightly colored flowers, and ours held deep red tulips surrounded by yellow marigolds.

The host presented our table with a flourish. “Luca will be your waiter this evening,” he announced in a grandeur voice, placing our menus on the table. “Enjoy.” After a slight bow he left, off to take his hosting duties seriously elsewhere in the restaurant.

Nate glanced at me over his menu, sticking his nose in the air. I laughed when I realized he was making fun of the host and his uppity demeanor. I eased one pinky away from the menu, and Nate joined in my laughter.

We calmed down only once Luca arrived, clad in the standard all black uniform complete with a skinny black tie. He wrote down our orders of steak dinners, then scampered off to retrieve our sodas.

“Two more weeks, babe. Getting nervous?” Nate opened the conversation with talk of my impending move. Four hours away, down to Iowa’s capital city of Des Moines. The real world loomed on the horizon.

“Oh, I don’t know. Not really nervous. Just going to miss everyone. A certain boy, especially,” I said, giving Nate a wink.

“Which boy?” Nate asked, sliding his elbows back on the table as Luca set our drinks in front of us.

“One with curly hair. Usually shows off a farmers tan. Goes by the name Tate. Or Nate, not sure which one.”

“Sounds like he might not be that special to you,” Nate teased.

“Ah, that’s where you’re wrong, sir.” I reached across the table, placing my palm over Nate’s wrist. “He’s very special indeed. The specialist, some may say.”

“All right, now you make me sound like a doctor,” Nate said.

I laughed, knowing Nate’s ability to make me smile was what sparked my interest in him. When I first met him three months ago I wouldn’t have taken a second glance if it wasn’t for his humor. Nate was a farmer boy, complete with the scruffy boots, dirt under his fingernails, perma tan from working long hours outdoors. I lived in the city of Julien with my mom, was head cheerleader of the varsity squad, kept up my blonde highlights and waxed my eyebrows monthly. Me, date a farmer? Unthinkable.

But when his infectious humor kept a smile on my face and the butterflies flapped each time he called me ‘miss,’ I figured I should take this farm boy seriously. And to think I almost didn’t go to the dreaded house party that led me to Nate, all because I was still licking my wounds from a messy breakup with Kameron, my first boyfriend and first love. Sometimes, I still couldn’t believe Nate was interested in me. Or that he seemed like such a decent guy. It was almost like I was waiting for his bad boy persona to let loose, to finally show some characteristics that didn’t belong in the pro column. I shook myself from thinking these thoughts and tried to concentrate on what Nate was saying.

“So I have to get the combine out tomorrow. We’ll have ourselves a busy day with all the crops in our field and grandpa’s field. I can only hope the heat won’t be as bad as today,” Nate said, losing me at the word ‘combine.’

“Ah, yes, the combine,” I nodded my head, trying to sound farm knowledgeable. “For all those crops.”

“You have no idea what I’m talking about, do you?”

“You’re talking about crops and fields! And... combines. Okay, yes, I have no idea what a combine is.” I admitted defeat.

Nate laughed. “No reason to feel bad. I didn’t know what an eyelash curler was until last week. That’s a scary widget.” I smiled, remembering how horrified he seemed when I tried to curl his lashes. The scene in my bathroom was hysterical. “But a combine is just a machine we use—think of a really big tractor—that harvests the crops like wheat and corn.”

I nodded. “Okay, I get that. Kind of. I’ve seen all sorts of machines down in your field. They look huge. And expensive.”

“Like you wouldn’t believe. Hundreds of thousands of dollars for just one of them.”

I nearly spit out my Sprite. “Are you serious? I can’t imagine spending that much money on a machine!” An all-inclusive vacation to the Bahamas, maybe. And then another vacation to Italy.

“Well, you have to realize these machines keep our farms running, which keeps income rolling in. Without those expensive machines, work would be done by hand, meaning longer hours and more manual labor than I want to think about. So the cost really isn’t so bad.”

Our dinner continued smoothly. The food was excellent as usual, and our conversation didn’t stop. Nate and I didn’t have much in common. I was more into celebrities, fashion and traveling while he preferred the rugged outdoors, but that didn’t stop our talking. We were open to each other’s worlds. I finally got Nate to buy a few brown polo’s for the fall—the season’s “it” color—and he got me to paddle a canoe over the summer. Fair trade.

I loved that Nate helped me push limits, go beyond my comfort zones. We enjoyed a fantastic summer, one that would be unforgettable. But now I was about to leave, moving away from Nate and our still-budding relationship. Nate was only going into his senior year of high school. It would be another year before he could find a college near me. Could we survive the long distance?

“You’re looking sad again, JJ. What’s on your mind?” I had been quiet on the ride home, my thoughts filled with questions on my relationship. But I didn’t want Nate to know my worry, that I had doubts we could make it.

“Nothing, babe. Just so full of steak. I can’t believe you let me eat that whole thing.” I leaned over and pecked him on the cheek, inhaling his scent of body wash mixed in with hay and the outdoors. So manly. No one I met at college would compare to Nate. They just couldn’t. He was everything I wanted in a boyfriend: caring and affectionate and treated me like a princess. But he was also rugged and pure alpha and knew what he wanted to do with his life and could one day provide for me. Not that I was thinking marriage already. It was much, much too soon for those grown-up thoughts.

We reached my apartment at last and I invited Nate inside. A note on the table informed me Mom was out with Aunt Janet, so the place was ours. “Do you want anything to drink?” I called to Nate, who veered left into the living room while I stood in the kitchen, minding my hostess duties.

“No, thanks.”

I walked the fourteen steps from the kitchen to the living room and joined him. Mom’s apartment wasn’t huge, but the two bedrooms and one bathroom were enough for me and her. I thought the apartment was cozy and in a good location for the price we were getting. After Mom’s money troubles we were lucky to be on the west end of town at all and not banished to the east side in low-income housing.

I found Nate staring at an eight-by-ten photograph, my favorite picture in the living room. It was a family portrait with Mom, my older sister Grace and little brother Jeremy. The three kids were standing behind Mom, all huddled close together with bright smiles shining. Jeremy and I looked somewhat similar, the same shade of light blonde coloring our hair and sharp noses paired with high cheekbones. Grace, with her strawberry-blond hair and more relaxed facial features, didn’t blend as much with us, but all three children looked similar to Mom. I loved that I got her eyes, deep green jewels shaped like almonds. I’ve had complete strangers compliment me on them.

Nate cleared his throat in that awkward manner that meant he was uncomfortable. “JJ, are you ever going to tell me about your dad?” he asked, looking at me with questioning eyes.

My back stiffened, reacting like the allergy doctor gave me my seasonal shot. The story of my dad. Nate didn’t need to know that. “I’ve told you before, I don’t have a dad.”

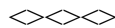
“Everyone has a dad. Or a father, a biological father,” Nate countered with. “I can understand if he did something that upset you but he would still be your father. And you can tell me, talk to me.”

As if. Nate’s parents were happily married after twenty-one years. They ate family dinners and went on camping trips together. He wouldn’t understand. My family past was far from perfect but I was doing the best to make up for what had happened. No need to relive the past.

“It’s nothing, Nate, really. I don’t have a dad. Lots of families don’t have two parents. It’s the twenty-first century. Big deal,” I shrugged my shoulders, turning away from him. I heard him take a breath—probably to argue with me—but cut him off before he could say anything else. “No. Not right now, anyways. Maybe some other time we can get into it.” *Like never.* “But your curfew is in two hours and I don’t want to spend that time talking family. Now come here.”

The finality in my voice kept Nate’s mouth shut and he begrudgingly wrapped his arms around me. “You’re lucky you’re wearing that skirt or you wouldn’t get off the hook that easily.”

Lowering his mouth onto mine, I settled into his strong arms and let his kisses fill my mind, erasing all the dad talk from my thoughts. Nate would never turn on me like Stuart Romney, the man’s name on my birth certificate. The father I never had the chance to meet.



During the next two weeks, I went along my business getting ready to move: cleaning out my bedroom, packing boxes, sending thank-you cards for my graduation gifts. I tried to squeeze in as much time with Nate that I could, but between his busy farming schedule and my going-away tizzy, that time was limited.

My mother pattered around our apartment during the last two weeks, offering her input and trying to be helpful, but generally just getting in my way. I could sense her sadness about my move. Well, sense it, and I saw her making sad eyes while staring at my senior picture last week. When I asked what was wrong, she shoved the framed picture under her pillow and turned her back to me. I inherited my unwillingness to talk about my feelings from her.

“Now, don’t pack your winter clothes. Just keep those here. Why are you packing your DVD player? I thought Abby had one?”

“Well, just in case. What if hers breaks?”

“Then you come home and get yours. It’s just going to be another object in your box and something that will collect dust at your apartment. Leave it here.”

I obliged, setting the silver DVD player back on the shelf. It was best not to argue with her when she thought she was being helpful.

“Is Abby getting excited?”

“Eh, she hasn’t said much the past few days. I think her and Jason have broken up for good.”

“About time. He’s scum. But I guess you can’t help you love. Who am I to judge?”

I chuckled. “You sounded pretty judgmental right there, mother dearest.”

“I’m just saying. Anyways, make sure you find a good dentist down there. You’ll be due in four months for a checkup. And you *are* going to keep looking into Invisalign, aren’t you?”

“Mom!” She was relentless about my teeth. My smile wasn’t that bad. I had one crooked bottom tooth. One. Not a big deal. “Just—I’m trying to pack, okay? Either help or go read a book or something.”

She narrowed her eyes at me but stayed quiet for the next few moments, watching me deposit a pile of summer shirts into a waiting cardboard box. I filled the box to the brim with tank tops, tube tops and halter tops, and tried squeezing in a few swimsuits as well until the box was ready to bust. I didn’t want to leave any of my favorite shirts behind. Mom wordlessly handed me the packing tape, and I stretched the handle around until satisfied my clothes were not going anywhere.

“Is Nate coming tomorrow to see you off?”

“Yeah, he plans to be here around eight or so.”

“Sad?”

I looked up at my mom, curious. The last time I tried to talk to her about leaving Nate I got teary-eyed and Mom changed the subject. Even though now she was only saying one word, it still caught me by surprise. It took me an extra moment to find a response.

“Well, yeah. Yeah, of course. It’ll be weird not having him just across town. But I’m going to come back home a lot, and he’ll be able to visit me some weekends. So it’ll be fine. Just fine.”

Mom must have noticed me trying to reassure myself with that speech, as she seemed to choose her next words with consideration.

“You know, Jas, long-distance relationships can be tough. Once you get down to Des Moines and settled in you’ll be busy with classes and college parties and making new friends. You might not want to come home every weekend or every other weekend.”

I just shrugged, letting her words go in one ear and right out the other. Why wouldn’t I want to come home and see my boyfriend and my mom and my little brother and all my high school friends? Well, the ones who hadn’t already moved away for college themselves. Mom was just trying to protect me, trying not to let me build up my expectations.

“Mom, please don’t worry. No need. Now, can you help me pack up the bathroom stuff? I want to make sure I don’t steal anything of yours.”

I walked into the bathroom, glancing over my shoulder. Mom stared back at me, her eyes filled with worry and doubt, and something tugged at my heart. Things would work out—they had to. Besides, what could be the worst that could happen?