

THE HEART WILL LEAD

THE HEART FACTS BOOK 2



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BLUSHING BOOKS

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Published by Blushing Books®,
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ABCD Graphics and Design
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901
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EBook ISBN: 978-1-61258-803-2
Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

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CHAPTER 1



Flopping in the oversized patio chair, Jessica gazed up at the stars. It had been a while since she'd admired the beautiful night sky. Too long. She felt as if her life had stalled. She didn't know which direction to take, what she wanted to do. Opening the second bottle of wine and taking a hit off the joint Preston or one of his party buds left on the bathroom counter probably wasn't a good idea considering her unusual moodiness.

Hearing the doorbell, she cursed under her breath that Preston forgot his key again. It rang two more times before she unlocked and pulled the front door open. Her eyes didn't meet those of Preston, but the ones of Corey? The single dad from across the street who had been involved with Frannie, her best friend, for several months then broke her heart. She never saw him up close before and to say he was a sexy beast of a man was an understatement.

Just as she realized she must have stood there ogling him with her mouth gaping open far too long, he introduced himself. "Jessica, I know we have never formally met, but I'm Corey, Max's dad." He stretched his hand out to shake hers. She took it, aware of the heat radiating from it and looked back into his eyes. They were a

unique, rich, bronze shade that she found mesmerizing. “Anyhow, I know Frannie thought a lot of you, and you were a huge help to her with Zach and all—”

With an extended blink of her eyes, she stepped back into the house, bumping into the door. “Do you want to come in?” She didn’t need to socialize with anyone. Especially him. The alcohol had definitely taken effect and she hadn’t smoked any weed since high school. She had no idea when the effects of that might kick in.

One eyebrow lifted as he accepted her invitation. “Um, sure.” He looked around the room noticing the pictures of Adam, Frannie, Zach and Hannah. “This is the new baby?” he asked picking up the frame.

“That’s her. She’s a real beauty,” Jessica responded. “I was up there a few months ago just after her birth.”

Returning the picture to the shelf he leaned forward regarding the other photos. “What did they name her? Frannie and Adam both look very proud and happy.”

“Hannah. They are incredibly happy,” she blurted, her tone laced with more venom than she intended. “You want a beer? I was sitting out back enjoying the cooler temps.”

Straightening, he gifted her a cocky, crooked smile. “Sure.” She hated it felt like a gift, at the moment, but would no doubt become a curse when she regained her wits. Hell, Frannie had long been over him. She remarried Adam and moved to Alaska. It’s not that Jessica wanted anything more than maybe some uncomplicated, hot sex with him. Did she even want that? Closing the fridge after grabbing two beers, the planned glance at him converted into a thorough eyeballing. Sure, she checked him out from a distance and recognized him to be a definite stud but being up close and personal with him, a whole other ballgame. Dressed in gym shorts, a logoed t-shirt for some youth team sport and a ball cap, she noticed his toned calves, thighs, pecs, biceps, anywhere her eyes landed she saw a muscular masterpiece.

Chuckling at her, he reached for one of the beers. "Are you moving off the wine now and on to beer?"

Focused on and hating that he caught her admiring his physique, his question made no sense to her. Raising the beer in front of her, she stared at it. "Huh?" Her mouth went dry. Her tongue felt too large for her mouth. Her thoughts bounced around and she couldn't recall what he just asked her.

Pointing to the countertop, he stated, "There's a half glass of wine here."

She fixated on the glass. She couldn't comprehend his implication. So what? Being of legal age and without any intention of getting behind a wheel, she could indulge in a glass of wine if she wanted. Or a bottle, or two. "Yeah, it's mine."

Chuckling, he expressed the obvious, "I didn't know if you wanted to open a beer when you had wine?"

Her lack of standard perception frustrated her. Why did she think having a hit off that joint was a good idea? Oh yeah. Today she turned twenty-three. Preston called earlier, but as usual she didn't hear from her parents. She would find the normal 'sorry we forgot and missed your birthday' deposit in her account by week's end.

Corey interrupted her musings. "I wanted to come over, introduce myself and discuss the possibility of you helping me out with Max a little. I won a bid to repair and maintain residences for a big property management company with jobs located in this and surrounding counties. I know I bit off more than I can chew, but it's quite an achievement, and I want to be able to put in the time and attention required."

Unable to process what he rambled on about, she wanted him to stop talking. She wanted her hands on him and his hands on her. Closing the distance between them, she set the beer on the counter, threw her arms around his neck and tugged his mouth down to hers. His hands wrapped around her, clutching her ass. The kiss involved no tongue. Just lips roaming over and around each other,

a patient, seductive, explorative grazing. Lifting her off her feet he dragged her up the length of his body. She wrapped her legs around his waist, sliding her hands up the back of his head, knocking his hat off.

As he carried her, her back slammed into the fridge, shaking it. Startling her, his kiss turned hard and demanding, and her immediate alarm transitioned into a vigorous match between their tongues and lips. The more he increased his pressure, the more aggressive he became, she augmented. Grinding her center against him, she moaned into him. Running her hands over his shoulders, up his neck, she clung to his hair, holding his mouth to hers.

He nipped and sucked her lips and tongue. She replicated his every action. Never had she felt so abandoned and aroused. She yearned to have his skin under her hands and on her, but that would entail breaking their mouth connection, and she didn't want that. Maybe ever.

Much to her displeasure, as anticipated, he broke the kiss. His lips inches from hers, they panted, their breaths fusing. He leered at her with sweltering observation. Squeezing her left ass cheek, his hand traveled over her hip, over her waist, stopping at her shoulder. He massaged it a few times before he stuck his hand under the collar of her loose t-shirt pushing down her arm.

Thank God she'd put on a matching lovely set of lingerie that morning in the hopes it would boost her mood. His appreciation for this manifested in an enormous, sexy grin. Cupping her breast encased in the flimsy lace, she closed her eyes. Continuing to fondle her breast his mouth came down on her neck. He sucked then bit it to the point she started to scream out. He stopped his zealous torture just before she squealed and commenced in licking that spot, lipping it and licking it in an enthusiastic tempo.

Pulling back, he lifted her t-shirt to its original position and set her on her feet. Turning away from her he bent and picked his hat off the floor. Without facing her, he grumbled, "I got to go."

What did that mean? He got to go? He wanted to go? He started

for the front door, she followed him. Opening the door, he paused, looking out for a moment. He spun around. Starting for her, she started for him and they crashed into each other producing a loud thumping sound. Bending forward, she held her chest. Her assumptions were correct. She imagined landing on a granite countertop would hurt less. Rubbing her back, he sounded concerned. "Are you okay? It didn't feel so great to me, I'm sure it felt worse to you."

Gripping his thigh, she straightened. Seeing him, the worry in his features, the massive sex appeal emanating off him, she rushed him. One hand she threw around his neck, the other she grasped between his legs. His want of her evident and in complete opposition with his desire to leave.

Prying her arm from around his neck and her hand from his package, he held her arms to her sides and gave her a quick peck on the forehead. He groaned, "I really have to go."

Either from liquid courage, marijuana courage, or both, the second he released her hands she ambushed him again. Dodging her, he yanked his hat off and smacked her on her rear in several, quick hits. Her reaction she attributed to a strange possession phenomenon by a wanton nymphomaniac. Thrusting her derriere back and up providing him a more accessible target, she cooed, "Yeah, baby. Daddy likes it rough."

After a few more swats, he laughed. "Later, you little minx." The door shut behind him.



WAITING ALMOST a full hour since she saw Corey pull up in his driveway with Max, she went to the kitchen, pulled out the casserole and placed it in the carrier. What a dumb 'Suzy homemaker' gesture. It's not that she dreaded going over and apologizing for last night's behavior. She didn't know Corey. She didn't care if she ever did. The thought of having that stigma hanging over her both-

ered her. He came over for some reason, and she intended to find out exactly what. It's not like she never did things she regretted, especially under the influence, but she didn't want to be that girl. In the past she always tried to make things right. It's who she was. She prided herself on being the sensible, receptive and humble one in her family. The type of individual she gravitated to.

Her purpose in mind, she headed to his house. Ringing the bell, the door flew open and Max greeted her. "Hi, Jessica. What are you doing here? You know Zach moved with his mom and dad?"

Kids made her smile, always straight to the point. "Yes, Max. I was in Alaska in July and I stayed with Zach and his new baby sister."

Scrunching his lips together he professed, "Now that I am six, people call me Maxwell... or Maxwell Allen. At school I write Maxwell Allen Webb on my papers."

Suppressing her laughter which proved difficult, as he jutted out his chin, swayed and held his shoulders back with his announcement. "I see. Well, Maxwell, is your dad home?"

"Did I hear the doorbell?" asked Corey entering the room behind Max. His eyes met hers and her chest tightened. Sweat covered his bare chest and beaded on his forehead. She swore she heard quick pants of breath behind his words. "Jessica. I didn't expect to see you... now... ever."

Not certain how to interpret his statement, she lifted the case higher in front of the door. "I brought you and Max..." She glanced down at Max and mouthed "I'm sorry" followed by a grimace. "Maxwell... some cowboy casserole," she corrected.

Craning his neck, Max peered through the screen door gazing at the carrier. "Do cowboys eat it?"

"I believe they do. Seems I've heard that cowboys like their beans and their bacon. This casserole has rice with bean and bacon soup and some hamburger," she replied.

Pushing open the screen door, he rambled on. "I used to want to be a cowboy... when I was three maybe. I think maybe I want to be

a hero guy now. Do you watch Indiana Jones movies... Star Wars? Maybe the King Kong one? Did you ever want to be a hero, or just girlie things like a princess or something stupid?"

Rushing up, Corey held the door open wider. "Max, give her a minute. You are asking her questions without letting her answer the first one." Reaching out, he took the casserole from her placing it on the coffee table. "You didn't have to do that."

Every word he spoke to her felt prickly and she worried she made a mistake. "You never finished discussing why you came over last night and..." He had a generous amount of dark hair covering his sweaty pecs and her eyes drifted down his abdomen to discover it too advertised boosted masculinity. Staring at the band of his gym shorts she wondered if what lay beneath was worthy of the visible attributes he bolstered. No matter how hard she tried to fight it, she couldn't stop admiring him. And he knew it. She recognized the arrogant twinkle in his eye and the tilt of an assured smirk. Guys didn't rattle her and it's not that he did. She needed to expand her circle. Her social life consisted of hanging out with Preston and all his frat brothers. Most of them would sell an organ for any attention from her—but not Corey. "Do you think we could speak just the two of us for a moment?"

Swiping the sweat from his brow, he moved his attention to Max and scolded him, "Zip that right back up. You are being very rude, Son."

Doing as his dad told him, he frowned and said, "She said it was for us. I wanted to see what it looked like."

"Go out back and play with Tsar for a little bit then you can bring him in to eat," Corey instructed, incorporating a solid pointer finger aimed toward the back of the house.

She recalled seeing a small dog in the yard in the past and wondered if they just gave a small dog a large name or if they got another pet. Corey crossed his arms across his chest peering into her face. His obvious impatience made her feel rushed. "I'm sorry for my... behavior last night. That really isn't who I am, or how I-

“So, it was someone else then? Just a rare moment that happened to occur while I was there?” His blatant sarcasm pissed her off.

Shifting most of her weight from one leg to the other to slow her retort, she spoke clearly, accentuating certain words to convey her position, “I wasn’t expecting *company*. I don’t have to explain myself to *you*, or *anyone* for that matter. I wasn’t breaking any *law*. I had a *bad* day, not that that is any excuse for getting sloppy drunk, but I did.” She cringed when she stated she didn’t break any law, because marijuana wasn’t legal in Alabama. It’s not like she advertised she had smoked it. He probably didn’t know. Even if he did, she hadn’t done it in years, didn’t plan to do it again. Look where it got her.

Taking a step closer to her, his gaze never left hers. His eyes held a tenderness that made her feel all warm and cozy, longing to be comforted and adored by them. Yet they sparked with a definitive shimmer of mischief and bad boy that made her knees weak and her pulse quicken. Leaning in, he positioned his face in front of hers. She felt the air pass through his lips as he spoke. “So, that wasn’t you last night. You made dinner and came over here to tell me that. I suppose I should say *thank you*?” He shrugged, then straightened, putting a little more space between them.

She discovered him to be most infuriating. What an asshole, she thought. Breaking eye contact, she moved to the door. “It seemed you may have wanted to ask for some help with Max? I wanted to tell you I’d be happy to help. I miss Zach like crazy. If you did want me to help out, I seriously doubt you want to entrust some drunk chick with your son. So, I came over to clear that up.”

Raising his arms, he walked right up on her pinning her against the wall, a hand on each side of her head. “You have a pretty good recollection of what transpired between us last night. Do you remember doing this?” Clasp her right wrist, he lowered it to the front of his shorts, placing her hand on his erection. He was hard. Lifting her eyes, she stared at him. He looked at her with the

same raw desire radiating through her. Ready to pounce. It's not that she forgot she made such a bold move, she hoped she imagined it. At least she no longer needed to doubt if the incident occurred or wonder if it corresponded with the rest of his amazing physique. It did.

"Dad! Tsar won't play. He just keeps standing at the door scratching," Max's yells sounded from the back of the house.

Turning away from her, he opened his mouth to respond to Max when a dog raced into the room. It jumped up on the couch for a second before it sprang to the floor running circles around their feet. "Tsar, down. No," commanded Corey. The dog settled down then darted out of the room. "I didn't get to introduce you but that is Tsar. He has mellowed some with age, but still gets wound up when he first comes inside."

It's not that Jessica didn't like pets, her parents never allowed them. Without animals being a constant in her life, she didn't miss them. She never considered getting one. "I'm going to head home. I can give you my cell number if you ever need help with Max. My schedule is pretty flexible. My classes are online, or the majority of the curriculum is."

"You don't want to stay for dinner?" he asked.

The whole 'Corey' thing confused the hell out of her. "No... thank you." Putting her hand on the door handle, she planned on bolting if he got too close. If for any other reason, it wasn't the right time. They had Max to think about. Damn. She had a whole heck of a lot more than that to think about.

Lifting his phone off the sofa table, he tapped it a few times. Gawking at her, he prompted, "I'm ready for your number. What I may need, and I will let you know prior to say noon, is to meet Max out front here at 3:15 when the bus drops him off. Just stay with him until I get home... probably five-ish, maybe a little later."

Nodding, she accepted, "I can do that. No problem. My number is 493-1174."

Typing it in, he set it back on the table and strode in her direc-

tion. Opening his mouth to say something, the dog ran in the room again with Max charging in behind him. "Dad! Tsar is being a little bastard," Max hollered.

Flipping his attention to his son, Corey chastised him. "What did you say? Where did you hear that ugly phrase?"

His eyes reflected his immediate apology and he chewed on his bottom lip. "That's what Mom always calls him when she is here."

This statement didn't surprise Jessica. From what she heard and knew about Sheila, it seemed appropriate. "I hope you enjoy the casserole. Just call or text me if you need me to help out." Leaving the house, she closed the front door behind her. She heard Corey reprimanding Max explaining that they didn't talk like that in their house.