

Prologue

Little Rock, Arkansas

1994

"It's not my fault." Jade sighed, closing her eyes as her foster brother complained on the other line. Although they hadn't lived in the same home for more than nine years after she aged out of the foster system and went to the University of Central Arkansas, she still felt responsible for him. She always had, from the moment he walked into Madeline and John Westin's house and was introduced to her as her new foster sibling. His wide, scared brown eyes, overgrown curly black out-of-control hair, and gaunt frame touched her fifteen-year-old heart. Logan Mitchell had held it ever since.

But that neglected, frightened child was now twelve years old, and once again he was in lots of trouble. And as always, it wasn't his fault. While he continued his tirade of blaming everyone else but himself for his predicament, Jade opened her eyes and glanced at the clock on the wall in her tiny office at *The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. In a little while she had to meet Sebastian for

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their lunch date. Despite her frustration with her brother, she smiled a little.

If anyone had told her when she joined the accounting department at the paper six months ago that she would be having weekly lunches with the most incredible man she'd ever met, much less date him for four months, she would have said they were crazy. Jade didn't date. She didn't do much socializing either. But that had changed since she met handsome Sebastian Hudson. He might be a newspaper columnist, but he had the body of an athlete—not surprising since he played football in high school. “*Tight end*,” he'd told her. “*Bench rider too, although I did play in a couple of games my senior year. My coach felt sorry for me.*”

She had no idea what a tight end was, but she had no complaints about his backside or the rest of him. And she wasn't surprised he downplayed his role on the team. Sebastian wasn't just good-looking and charming. He was humble, which made him even sexier.

“When can you get me out of here?” Logan whined. “These people suck.”

Her temple started to throb, and she was a little irritated that Logan had interrupted her Sebastian reverie. “Those people are trying to help you. And you wouldn't be in youth detention if you hadn't been caught smoking marijuana behind the school building. Henderson, right?”

“Pulaski Heights,” he muttered. “You can't even remember where I go to school.”

She tried to ignore the guilt his words triggered, and logically she couldn't be expected to remember all the schools he'd gone to over the past several years. Logan had been in one foster care and child home after another since she left the Westins. That made her feel guilty too. She could have stayed at their house as an adult,

like they offered, and could have commuted to UALR instead of going to UCA and living on campus. She could have continued to be the surrogate mother she'd been to him since day one. If she'd given up her dream of finally living a normal life, maybe Logan wouldn't have gone off the rails.

"It was only one joint anyway." He sniffed. "I promise I'll follow the rules."

"You said that the last time—"

"I mean it now." His voice wavered. "Please, Jade. I just wanna go home."

Her heart broke. Logan didn't have a home—not a real, permanent one. Until she graduated college and got her own apartment, she didn't either. Not since she was nine. *It's not fair.* Logan didn't deserve to live a transient life like she did. Like so many other kids had to. "I'll see what I can do," she said, looking at her suddenly shaking hands. "I'll call Mr. Brink."

"Who's he?"

"My lawyer." She paused. Should she tell him? Get his hopes up when she wasn't sure she could deliver on the promise?

"Thanks, Jade," he said, sounding relieved. "You're the best. I miss you."

"Miss you too." Her fingers grew steadier now that he sounded appeased.

"I wish I could live with you."

"I know." He said that every time they talked on the phone or met in person, usually once a month and on holidays. Even though she wasn't around all the time, she made sure to be a presence in his life. Unfortunately she had limited influence on him. This time he sounded so dejected she had to give him some hope. "Mr. Brink is trying to figure out something."

"Like what?"

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“Like me adopting you.”

“Really? You’re going to adopt me?”

She grinned, his excitement fueling hers. “I’m trying to.” She heard someone yell his name in the background.

“I gotta go. Social worker time.” His tone turned crabby again.

“Do what they say, Logan, and stay out of trouble.”

“I will.”

“I mean it. I love you, and I’ll always be here for you—”

“Bye!” Logan hung up.

Jade put the phone in the cradle and sat back in her chair, worried she’d said too much. Now that she’d told him, she’d have to make sure Mr. Brink did everything possible to make the adoption happen. That would cost money—more than she had. But Logan was worth it.

She looked at the clock again and her stomach churned. Talking to Logan was easy compared to what she had to do next, and she had ten minutes to figure out what she was going to say to Sebastian.

A printed contract from Preston Ustace was on her desk, ready for her signature. She looked through the media company’s offer one more time, then picked up her pen. The ballpoint hovered over the signature line. Once she signed this, her world would change, and she suddenly felt weary. She was tired of change. Her entire life had been one upheaval and disappointment after another, with a few victories along the way—making it through foster care almost unscathed, graduating from college in three years, finding an accounting job right away, then moving on to *The Democrat-Gazette* . . . and meeting Sebastian.

Her chest squeezed. But she knew what she had to do. With a surprisingly steady hand, she quickly signed the contract, sealed

it in a brown envelope, and put it to the side of her tidy and organized desktop to mail on the way home. There. A done deal. She was doing the right thing—for her career and, most importantly, for Logan.

This wouldn't be the first time she'd had to put her happiness on the back burner. She doubted it would be the last.

SEB'S VIEW

BY SEBASTIAN HUDSON

In the immortal words of Snoopy, it was a dark and stormy night. But storms didn't deter fans of the Quisenberry Golden Rockers and the Sterling Spring Chickens as they watched the two senior teams vie for the coveted *We Ain't Too Old for This* bowling trophy at the Little Rock Professor Bowl. The sassy and steadfast septuagenarians battled through three close games, with the Spring Chickens emerging victorious.

"We'll get 'em next year," Horace Quisenberry, the Rockers' team captain, said, shaking off the loss as he spooned a stack of sauerkraut on his foot-long hot dog. "This is all in good fun, and we raised over two hundred dollars for the senior center."

Mr. Q.'s wife of fifty years, Pearl June, wasn't as magnanimous. "Those Chickens cheat," she muttered, her frosty pink lips pursed in a scowl while her good-natured husband strode off. "We should have won the second game

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Briiiiiing!

Sebastian jumped at the jingling sound coming from the sleek black telephone perched on the edge of his desk. His fingers froze over his manual Smith Corona typewriter as he switched his thoughts from the Professor Bowl to his office. He shoved aside the ever-present stack of papers in front of him, found the phone, and picked up the receiver. "Hudson here."

"How are things in the big city?"

Seb smiled at Buford Wilson's gravelly voice. "Still hustling and bustling."

"That's why I like it here in Clementine. No hustle or bustle."

Leaning back in his creaky antique chair, Seb grinned. "It's good to hear from you, Buford. It's been a while."

"Far too long." A pause.

His grin faltered. "Everything okay? Glenda doing all right?"

"Yeah, she's fine. Everything's fine. I just needed to ask you something."

Seb glanced at the paper in the typewriter. His column was due by end of day, but he could spare time for his old mentor. Besides, it was his own fault he'd procrastinated so long on it. Not something he normally did, but the muse had struck during the weekend, and he'd spent both Saturday and Sunday working on his novel instead of the writing that paid his bills. "Sure," he said to Buford. "What's up?"

"My retirement."

Seb sat up. "Really?"

"Don't sound so surprised."

"I'm not surprised. I'm shocked. You said you'd retire when you were dead. Wait. You're not—"

"No, no. I'll be alive and kicking as long as the good Lord wants

me to. It's just . . . I'm tired, Sebastian." His voice turned gruff. "And with my nephew, Bo, happy with his farm and having no interest in the newspaper business, I realized I need a succession plan. I want you to be a part of it."

That was the last thing he'd expected to hear.

"I want to sell *The Clementine Times* to you. Before you say anything, just listen to my offer. I talked it over with Glenda and Bo, and they agree with me—you should be the one to carry the paper into the future. But I know how important your work for *The Democrat-Gazette* is, and I don't want to pull you away from that."

Seb wouldn't call it important work—not really. After *The Arkansas Gazette* merged with *The Arkansas Democrat* and formed one paper with a rather uninspired yet self-explanatory moniker, Seb had moved from hard reporting to writing slice-of-life features for Seb's View. He didn't think his column would be missed all that much if it were to disappear tomorrow. His new editor sure wouldn't mind if it was gone. Frank had little respect for what he called "boring" little columns. "*Readers want excitement,*" he'd said more than once. "*They like stories with conflict, not fluff.*"

He didn't share Frank's opinion, and he had enough reader mail to prove his column was popular. But how long would that last? He'd been in the newspaper business since he was twelve, working for Buford in Clementine, his hometown. The business had changed a lot since then, and the changes seemed to come at a faster clip the closer they approached the twenty-first century. "Why me?" he asked.

"You were the best carrier I had, and then you turned into the best reporter I'd seen in years, even at sixteen."

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Seb grinned. He hadn't thought about those days in a long time. "I was just the local sports reporter. Not a big deal."

"There you go, selling yourself short again. Let me guess—all those awards you've won are in a box, right?"

He didn't have that many awards, but Buford was correct. "Just like yours are in the cleaning supply closet on the bottom shelf. They should have twenty feet of dust on them by now."

Buford chuckled. "Touché. I'll cut to the chase. You have the writing talent and reporter instincts. You've been around a newsroom for most of your life. You're the future of *The Times*, Sebastian. No doubt about it."

Seb was glad Buford couldn't see him blushing over the compliments. It meant the world that his mentor thought so highly of him. Yet there was one hang-up they both had to face. "I'm not a businessman."

"Exactly why I want you to continue my legacy. I don't need a bean counter who will put the bottom line before journalistic excellence and integrity. The people of Clementine deserve better."

Clementine, a tiny town nestled in the Arkansas Ozark Mountains, had exactly one general store, one gas station, one motel, a Southern-fried diner that was always packed with hungry patrons, and zero traffic lights. Not exactly the big time. But the paper's total circulation was larger than Clementine's population and included several smaller towns in the area. It was also Seb's hometown, and he hadn't been there since . . . huh. He couldn't remember the last time he'd made the two-and-a-half-hour drive to visit. Here his mentor was offering him the family business, and Seb had been too busy to see him, although they did keep in touch over the phone every once in a while.

"Sebastian, I'm prepared to offer you *The Clementine Times* for the princely sum of . . . one dollar."

For the second time since answering Buford's call, Seb's jaw hit the floor. "Now I know that's a joke."

"I'm serious, son."

And Seb didn't really doubt him. The man wasn't only his mentor, he'd been a second father to him after his own dad ran off with the Clementine High School secretary and never looked back, leaving Seb, his mother, and his younger sister, Evelyn Margot, to fend for themselves. They made it through some tough times, and Evelyn was still finding her way. Seb probably would be too, if it weren't for Buford.

Still blindsided by the offer, Seb said, "It's very generous, but I don't know. It's a big decision. Can I have some time to think about it?"

"Take all the time you need. I'm not in any hurry to retire, and there will be a training period before I turn the reins over to you."

"You sound pretty sure I'm going to accept."

"I'm cautiously optimistic. Just let me know when you're ready to talk."

"I will. Regardless of my decision, I appreciate the offer." A lump formed in his throat. "I'll be in touch."

They said their goodbyes and Seb hung up the phone. He leaned back in his chair, still dumbstruck. He'd never aspired to be anything more than a reporter, and now a columnist. There was the pipe dream of being a novelist too. But at the rate he was writing his first book, he'd be near retirement age, if he could even get it published.

But owning and running a newspaper? That wasn't on his radar, and he wasn't sure it should be. He also had more than a lack of business sense that made him hesitant. And there was something else—or rather someone else. *Jade*.

Simply thinking about her made him happy. For the first time

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in six years, since his last disastrous relationship in college, he was considering his personal future again. He and Jade had been casually dating for the past four months, emphasis on casual. But he wanted more. And if things worked out between them, he'd have to take her into consideration when thinking about Buford's offer.

He glanced at his watch. In a few minutes, he would meet her downstairs at her office in the accounting department, and they would go to the Sports Page for hamburgers and fries, their usual Wednesday lunch.

Seb got up from his chair and shoved Buford's offer out of his mind. Good thing Buford had given Seb plenty of time to think about it. He didn't like being rushed. Never had.

He was about to head out when he saw a female figure behind the frosty glass window of his door, which used to enter an empty closet that his former editor had agreed to let him change into a tiny but usable office. Seb grinned, his pulse quickening as she knocked. "Hey," he said as he opened the door with a smile, resisting the urge to take her hand even though they agreed no PDA at work. It wasn't a secret that they were dating, but they didn't draw attention to it either. "I was just heading downstairs to get you."

She nodded, her gaze focused on her black pumps. "Can we talk first?"

His smile tempered. "Sure. Come on in." He stepped back as she closed the door behind her and clutched her hands together. That wasn't a good sign. "Is something wrong?"

"No." She pressed her lips together. "Not exactly."

He didn't believe her. He was also more than a little distracted by how pretty she was in her brown pants and crisp white shirt. He'd always had a thing for redheads, and her pixie-cut auburn

hair framed a flawless face with round malachite eyes and long russet eyelashes. Irresistible. When his eyes dipped to her rose-colored lips, he fought not to linger. They'd kissed a few times, and if he had his way, he'd kiss her a lot more. She'd made it clear in the beginning that she wanted to take their relationship slow, and he respected that. Hopefully he could speed things up soon, though. Very soon.

As she lifted her gaze to meet his, she said, "I, uh, have some news."

"Well, you're in the right place then. News is our bread and butter." He chuckled, but her expression remained unreadable. "What's going on?"

She moved toward his desk, her heels tapping on the wood floor. He half expected her to comment on how disorganized it was, and she'd have a right to. Twice she'd helped him get his office in order, and both times he vowed to keep it that way, only to immediately revert back to his habit of setting things down and dealing with them later. But when she faced him again, she remained silent.

"Whatever it is, you can tell me."

A quick nod. Then, "You know that new website? Thompson Recruiters?"

"Never heard of it." He didn't use a computer at the office, although Frank had given him one. Forced it on him actually. He'd never been on the internet and didn't plan to. He figured it was just a flash in the pan anyway. No one in their right mind would give up a tangible newspaper or printed book to read a screen all the time.

"It's a place to post your resumé and find jobs," she said. "I made a profile last week."

"You did? Why?"

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"I've been looking for another job."

Whoa. She hadn't given any indication that she was wanting to work somewhere else.

Her hands were wringing now, and she shoved them behind her back. "I got an offer for an analyst position. I start next week."

"Oh." Well, that stunk. He wouldn't be able to see her every day. But if she was happy, he was happy for her. He put his arms around her, fully intending to give her a hug. "Congratulations," he murmured into her hair. She smelled so nice. Jade wasn't one to wear perfume or more than minimal makeup. He found her simplicity enticing, and before he could stop himself, he was kissing her. To his shock and pleasure, she melted against him, returning his kiss with more fervor than she ever had before, and he was happy to match her. Bliss, pure bliss.

Suddenly she jerked away, slipping out of his arms and turning. "I'm sorry," she mumbled, so low he almost didn't hear her.

He scrubbed his hand over his face. Even though his office was well out of the way of everyone else on the floor, he'd blown it. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that. But I love you—"

"What?" She whirled around, stunned.

He froze, shocked he'd said the words when he hadn't even thought them before. No, that wasn't true. He had, but only once or twice . . . maybe a little more lately. But now that they were out there, he couldn't take them back. He didn't want to. After having his heart trampled in the past by someone he thought he loved, he realized what he felt for this beautiful woman was the real thing. She was smart, determined, caring. Sure, she could be a little uptight, a little overly focused on her work. But he liked the passion and fire he saw inside her. No, he *loved* it.

"I love you, Jade." He smiled, the phrase sounding more natural. More *right*.

She didn't move or respond. She stared at him, her mouth slightly parted and more than slightly red from their fierce kissing. As the seconds ticked by and she remained mute, his stomach turned into a sour mess.

Seb tried to brush it off. "You don't have to say it back." So awkward. "How about we just forget it and go to lunch? I'm starving." The last thing he wanted was food, but he had to leave his stifling office and get some air, because it was becoming clear that he had messed up. Big-time. He started to open the door.

"The job is in Atlanta."

The door latched shut and he turned around. "Georgia?"

"Yes."

Now it was his turn to remain silent as reality set in. She wasn't just leaving *The Democrat-Gazette*. She was leaving Arkansas. *Leaving me.*

"I'm sorry, Sebastian."

To her credit, she sounded genuine. That didn't make him feel any better. "I didn't realize you were so unhappy here."

"It's not that. I . . . need a fresh start. This is a good opportunity—one I couldn't pass up."

With every word, she deflated him. "What about us?"

Jade's hands stilled and she looked him straight in the eye. "We weren't that serious."

After his declaration of love, she didn't think they were serious? After kissing him like she couldn't get enough of him? Like she'd been telling him . . . goodbye.

"It's for the best," she continued, her earlier hesitation gone. "We're different people, we have different goals. It wouldn't have lasted."

"I just told you I love you." He shook his head, trying to make sense of what was happening. "Doesn't that mean something?"

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A pause. Her bottom lip quivered. Then stilled. “No, Sebastian. It doesn’t.” She brushed past him and walked out the door.

He could hear her clicking heels down the hall, percussing in his spinning head. *It can’t be over. Go after her. Tell her again that you love her. Don’t let her go.*

But his feet wouldn’t move. He’d done that before, chased after Karen, who in the end didn’t want him either. They dated for three years in college, and he’d been so sure she was the one for him. Just like he’d been sure about Jade.

Seb plopped down on his chair and leaned his elbows on the desk, his head drooping. He was the guy who didn’t like to be hurried or rushed, and then he prematurely and inexplicably voiced his love to Jade. While he blamed Karen for breaking his heart, in hindsight she wasn’t the only one at fault. When he finally came around to wanting to marry her, she had moved on to someone else.

Now Jade was moving on too. He was a loser either way.

He could try talking to her again. Convince her to stay. But what would be the point? If she wanted to be with him, she wouldn’t take a job hundreds of miles away. She didn’t even ask him to go with her. He was truly confused by that, since he thought—felt—they’d been growing closer during their short relationship, even before that amazing kiss.

“*Your girl picker’s broken.*” Evelyn Margot’s words entered his brain. She’d said that after Karen had dumped him, and considering his high school girlfriend had kicked him to the curb before graduation, his little sister might be right. He’d also been completely wrong about Jade. His own emotions too. Minutes ago, he’d been so sure he was in love with her. Now he never wanted to see her again.

BEHIND ENEMY BYLINES

His logical brain kicked into gear, instantly hardening his feelings. Fine. In fact, better than fine. She had done him a favor by ending things before they got too deep. He was the idiot who had read more into their *casual* relationship. He wasn't going to spend years moping over her like he had Karen. Jade Smith wasn't worth it.