

JUDI WILLIAMS MORAW



ALL
BETS
ARE
OFF

BOOK 1



a novel

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One

Comfortless. That's how Allie Babineaux felt since first learning of her cousin's death. Allie's emotions had run the gamut, leaving her in a wretched frame of mind.

Only her own, private memories of growing up with Celeste had sustained her through the long drive from Bossier City to Bogalusa and then through the funeral and short graveside service.

But, in the assembly hall of the small church they had attended all those years ago, she was beginning to feel overwhelmed, somewhat lost in a sea of faces-some familiar and others completely unknown. Gatherings such as this reception always proved to be stressful. Catch phrases and sentimental statements coming at her from every direction, Allie was feeling the pressure. "I'm so sorry for your loss." "What have you been doing with yourself?" "Is there anything I can do?" Why haven't you remarried?" And the ever-taxing....."You remember me, don't you?"

As Allie visited with people she had known her entire life but had not seen in years, she continued to drift in and out of the grips of grief. She managed to keep her sanity by assessing those around her, critiquing them, if you will. She marveled at how well some had endured the ravages of time, while thinking to herself that others seemed older than their years.

She found herself crying over the loss of Celeste one minute and laughing over some long-forgotten childhood escapade the next. She experienced an unbelievable range of feelings that could only be described as a roller coaster ride, albeit one filled with strong emotions that left her genuinely tired.

The only saving grace, if there truly was one, had to be the plethora of food. Partaking of a veritable feast of mouthwatering, homemade fare lent new meaning to the colloquialism “comfort food.”

After endless picking at the smorgasbord on her plate, Allie needed a break from the constant banter around her. She stole away to the restroom for a few minutes of solitude.

As she stood before the basin, Allie studied her own reflection in the mirror. Fifty. Already! How could she possibly be at this point in her life? And now, she would have to cope without Celeste, without that heart-warming, down-home version of wisdom she had come to respect in Celeste.

But, Allie would survive. She knew the woman looking back at her from the mirror was as vibrant as ever. At least her face was not filled with sad regrets like some people she had known, like some she had seen at the funeral. Instead, her engaging green eyes seemed to reflect a certain contagious energy even during this, the saddest of times.

Instantly her thoughts raced back to her current circumstance, the reason for her trip home; and, all at once, Allie felt completely foolish for having thought about such nonsensical, unimportant matters. She flashed herself a sad smile and turned to rejoin the gathering in the assembly hall.

As she walked through the main doors, Allie saw him again. Jaxon. He was still strikingly handsome, standing across the room, consoling his nieces and nephew. Could he console her as well? Would he? Could he provide an escape from the grieving masses? Possibly he was the perfect getaway. “Jaxon, take me away,” she giggled under her breath.

Unavoidably, as Allie made her way across the room, she found herself reflecting on the high school years when she and Jaxon had been considered a couple; it almost seemed like someone else’s lifetime.

Why had they gone their separate ways? As is the case with many adolescent romances, there had come a point in time when one of them, and she really didn’t remember which one, suspected the grass was possibly greener on the other side of that proverbial fence. They both began dating other people; neither had ever looked back, but neither regretted the time they had spent together either. Opportunely, they had left their courtship with a strong bond, a true friendship...a real relationship, by any definition.

Despite their divergent lives, they had managed to stay in touch across the state, across the years. Jaxon had gone through an unfortunate divorce late in his marriage and still carried a faint hint of bitterness, even now some five years later. Consequently, due to uncontrollable curiosity, Allie felt the need to visit with him so she could judge

firsthand his current state of mind. And then, there was that pressing issue of escape. It was definitely time to get away.

But, there was something else, something drawing her across the room. What was it? As Allie walked toward him, she contemplated the possibility that she found Jaxon appealing, more attractive than she had remembered. Or maybe she had just forgotten how tall and muscular he had always been.

It had been quite some time since she had seen him. His hair, now salt and pepper, provided the perfect backdrop for those piercing, crystal blue eyes. Allie suddenly realized she was absent-mindedly tugging at her ear lobe, an annoying habit she needed to break, had been trying to break.

Surprisingly, Allie felt sixteen again, a reaction she found most improbable and uncomfortable. It had been a long time since she had experienced the youthful giddiness of a teenage girl attracted to, but intimidated by, a current love interest.

As always, Jaxon welcomed her with open arms; and they engaged in the warm conversation of old friends, tainted only by occasional sad references to Celeste and Graham. As they talked for the first time in many months, Allie moved easily past those unexpected, initial feelings she had experienced and into the safe haven of their lifelong friendship.

“So, Jaxon, why haven’t I heard from you? How long has it been anyway?”

“You know how mundane my life can be at times, just plain boring. I guess I haven’t had any news worth sharing lately. But I understand where you’re

coming from. I have no excuse, so let me apologize for neglecting you, my friend.”

“Come on, Jaxon, you gotta do better than that. Surely you don’t expect me to let you off with nothing more than a glib apology. Fill me in. What have you been up to since I saw you last? Are you living in the same place? Still working or have you followed the crowd to the retirement line? Are you seeing anyone?”

“Didn’t you promise to come to Bossier the last time we talked?” Allie found herself chuckling under her breath as she realized she was guilty of the same infringement others had been imposing on her; she had just bombarded Jax with questions similar to those she had been fielding all afternoon. It felt good. It could be his turn for a while.

“Wow. You’re just full of questions, aren’t you? Been saving them up, have you? I’m afraid my tedious existence will not do much to fuel your never-satisfied lust for excitement, but I’ll give it my best shot.

“Let’s see...since our last conversation, which, FYI, has been almost a year ago. You could call a guy, you know. There is no law, written or otherwise, that says you have to wait for me to call you. Phones work both ways.” Jaxon tried his best to stifle a smile. “Anyway, I decided I was ready to retire; thought I wanted to get out of law enforcement altogether. Believe it or not, about ten months ago, I filed my walking papers and left the police department in Baton Rouge.

“Hold on a minute, Allie. Are you as ready to get out of here as I am? Listen, I’ve already told you

my life is boring by any standard; but if you want the blow by blow, my update may still be too lengthy for our current situation. Let me ask you a quick question. How did you get here, to Bogalusa? Did you drive in from Bossier City today?"

"No, actually, I drove to Slidell yesterday afternoon and rode to the funeral with Cheyenne."

"So, you are headed back to Slidell with your sister when you leave here?"

"That's the plan. Why?"

"Do you think she would mind if I drive you back to Slidell? That would give us at least an hour to satisfy your desire to commiserate with me over my lack of a life. Never mind how that conversation is going to affect me; let's disregard the fact that, on some level, it just might make me feel worse than I already do," he taunted.

His suggestion caught her a little off guard but was not completely unappealing. Allie liked the idea of being able to catch up without the threat of constant interruption. And she was decidedly ready to break free of the current horde of mourners. So, after a brief hesitation, she agreed. She went to tell Cheyenne about her change of plans and to express her farewells to Graham and her aunt, while Jaxon explained the sudden road trip to his brother, Graham.

Jaxon waited for Allie at the exit; and, despite the sadness of the occasion, he smiled broadly when he saw her approaching. Tall and slender, she seemed to glide across the room toward him, her long legs reaching in his direction. Blonde by choice but suitably so, Allie had absolutely flawless, olive

complexion. It was somehow apparent she had no idea she was attractive; and Jaxon found that all the more alluring. And there was that endearing tic, that inclination to gently massage her ear lobe when she was deep in thought or nervous. It had been a long time, too long really, since Jax had spent time with his old friend. He needed this, especially now.

As they left the building and crossed the parking lot, Allie felt the need to ask, “Jax, what are you driving these days? Surely you don’t still own that old VW bug...or do you?”

“Hmmm, the short answer is yes. You know that car represents a huge piece of my youth. It took two years of my teens just to get it cranked.” He laughed as he thought back to those years.

“I recall exactly how persistent you were as a teenager. There was never an endeavor you wouldn’t tackle and you’d see it through to the end, regardless of the outcome,” Allie reminisced. “No, wait, maybe persistent is the wrong word. Stubborn. There you go. That’s what I’m trying to say.” She playfully poked Jax in the shoulder.

“Well, lucky for you, Moonbeam, I’m not driving the VW today. I guess you haven’t seen my truck, have you?”

Amused by Jaxon’s use of her moniker from the past, Allie followed his line of vision and sweeping arm motion until she caught sight of a 2008 Cadillac Escalade EXT parked well out of the way of every other vehicle on the lot. “No way, Jax. Is

that yours? Tell me you are not one of those guys who spent his entire retirement fund on a vehicle.”

“Yep, it’s mine but I thought you knew me better than that. My friends don’t call me Scrooge for nothing. I got a heck of a deal. A friend who works in software development bought it new in late 2007 and within a year had an opportunity to transfer to Japan. He needed to get rid of it in a hurry and offered me a deal I could not refuse.” Jaxon bragged as he raised and lowered his eyebrows playfully. “Best decision I’ve made in a while.”

As they wound their way back to the main highway, Jaxon made a halfhearted attempt to steer the conversation toward Allie, to her life; but she quickly reminded him he was the current topic of discussion. He laughed aloud as he backtracked and picked up again with the fact that he had retired from Baton Rouge Police Department.

“Are you still living in the same apartment complex in Baton Rouge?”

“No. A couple of years ago, Graham and I decided to sell Mom and Dad’s property in Bogalusa; we agreed to pool our resources, to spend our weekends making repairs and renovating the old place so we could get top dollar for it. But, after a lot of hard work with a lot of long-forgotten memories unearthed in the process, when it came right down to it, I just didn’t want to sell it.”

“Oh, yes, and then there’s that sentimental streak I remember so well. I’m glad to see that hasn’t changed.” Her candid remark may have come across as catty to Jaxon but she didn’t mean it that

way. She was being truthful, nothing more, nothing less.

His face flushing red, Jaxon hurried his response. “Well, regardless, we had the property appraised and I offered to pay Graham his half; he accepted. Then when I retired, I moved home; and the rest is history, as they say.”

“So you’re telling me that you’re living in Bogalusa, living in Lee’s Creek again?”

“Yeah, ain’t that a hoot!?! But it didn’t take long for me to realize that I definitely do not like being retired and, shall we say, emotionally unattached at the same time. I am one of those individuals who needs a reason to get up every morning.

“With no prospect of a love life in the immediate future, I eventually decided I needed to go back to work. I contacted the Washington Parish District Attorney about working as a special investigator for his office. He offered me a full-time position; but, after careful consideration, I asked how he felt about a part-time gig and he readily agreed.

“And there you have it, the long and the short of it. I work when he needs me, and I spend the remainder of my time making repairs on the house or my old VW. I can’t tell you how thankful I am that I had already moved back home before Celeste got sick so suddenly. At least I was here for Graham when he needed me.”

As Allie listened attentively, she also remembered what a thoughtful, considerate person Jaxon was known to be. Thinking about how effortlessly he seemed to interact with those around him, she knew without a doubt he was helping Graham through

this life-altering experience without ever being asked to. “What a blessing that it played out that way. I can only imagine what your presence has meant to Graham over the past few weeks.”

“I haven’t done anything for him that he wouldn’t do for me, if the roles were reversed.”

In an effort to redirect the conversation, Allie added, “I also like that you’re using your law enforcement background in Washington Parish, at home, even if it is on a part-time basis. What kinds of cases have you caught so far? Worked anything exciting, challenging?”

“Eh, it’s been six months of one routine inquiry after the other; mostly, I tie up loose ends on investigations started by one of the local PDs or the Sheriff’s Office. I see a lot of thefts, narcotics, and burglaries. I guess most of what I do can be classified as pretrial investigation.”

“Jax, look out! There is something in the road! Oh, my God! Is there a car under that tree?” Allie all but screamed as she reached for the dashboard to steady herself.

Jaxon swerved to the left to avoid hitting the stalled car, crushed under the weight of a fallen tree. “Let me pull over out of the way. Call 911 while I check it out.”

“I have no idea where we are. Give me a point of reference.” She frantically looked through her purse for her phone.

“Tell them we are southbound on Highway 21, between Sun and Bush.”

With that, Jaxon was gone, running toward the wrecked vehicle. Allie stayed on the line with the

dispatcher as she moved closer to where Jaxon was feverishly attempting to clear a path to the car.

She suddenly realized he was yelling to her, telling her to inform the dispatcher there was a female in the driver's seat of the car; but she was trapped, and he could not reach her. He could not get close enough to determine if she was dead or alive, but he was getting no response from her.

It seemed forever before they heard the somber wail of sirens approaching the accident scene. Rarely had Allie felt such relief as she experienced at that moment, just knowing the first responders were close.

Jaxon updated the EMTs and the sheriff's deputy with his limited knowledge of the accident, as Allie listened from her well-detached location. She was visibly shaken, trembling even; yet Jaxon, after years of responding to such calls for service, remained completely calm and collected.

He removed himself from the scene and they stood quietly on the shoulder of the road, together, watching as the authorities decided how to extricate the victim from the horribly mangled vehicle.

She could tell Jaxon was systematically analyzing the scene; but after a lifetime in law enforcement, he undoubtedly felt obliged to respect the unwritten "blue code" that kept him from intruding too far into an investigation being conducted by a fellow officer.

Not really meaning to interrupt his train of thought, she mumbled to herself, “What are the odds that such a huge pine tree would fall on this road at the exact time the only car within five miles happened to be passing by? Man, this is bizarre!” Allie paced back and forth on the side of the road, vying for a better vantage point.

“Allie, some people might call me a conspiracy nut; but, at first blush, I’m not completely convinced that tree just fell on the car.”

“Huh? I don’t think I understand what you mean, Jaxon.” Allie stopped pacing.

“Come over here. From this angle, look at the remainder of the tree trunk that’s still attached to the root ball. What do you see?”

“Splintered tree bark everywhere, gnarled roots. What? What am I looking for?”

“Do you see that off-color area? From here, it appears to be blue.” Jaxon pointed to the demolished tree trunk.

“Yeah. Is it paint transfer from the victim’s car? Hey, wait a minute. Her car is white and that appears to be blue paint, and a lot of it. What are you thinking?”

“At this point, I’m not exactly sure; but I definitely need to point out the paint to the investigating deputy before it gets too dark out here to see it. I’ll be back in a minute.” So much for the “blue code.”

Jaxon pulled his identification credentials from his pocket and approached the sheriff’s deputy.

As they talked, it was evident he was showing the deputy the random paint on the jagged remains of the tree trunk. He and the deputy examined it more

closely as they walked completely around the debris field.

Jaxon opened his identification folder and removed what appeared to be a business card. Handing the card to the officer, Jaxon shook his hand and turned to walk back toward Allie. He stopped abruptly and returned to talk further with the deputy. They slowly walked to the shoulder of the road near the rear of the car.

As the minutes ticked by, Jaxon returned to Allie's side; they watched silently as a news crew from one of the local television stations arrived on scene. Jaxon immediately suggested they retreat to the privacy of his truck to avoid being caught in any of the footage.

Watching as the crew filmed the accident scene from various angles, Allie had no way of understanding what an epic tragedy this accident would prove to be.

However, the unexpected appearance of a graceful, white egret on the accident scene served as a herald for Allie, if for no one else. For her, it signaled the possibility that this situation just might be more complicated than she had originally imagined. Nevertheless, revealing the significance of such an omen to Jaxon required that she first explain to him, confide in him, the reason for her intense fascination with egrets, the graceful white herons prevalent in and around the bayous of Louisiana.

And truthfully, Allie wasn't prepared to share her very personal reasons with anyone, not even Jaxon. Glancing at her watch, she suddenly realized her arrival in Slidell was long overdue. Retrieving her cell phone, she made a quick call to Cheyenne to explain.

Then Jax and Allie sat quietly, completely absorbed in the rescue activities unfolding in front of them, until the tree was moved off the auto, the roof of the vehicle was cut away, and the female victim was removed from the wreckage and placed on an awaiting gurney.

When a car from St. Tammany Parish Coroner's Office arrived on scene, Allie became conscious of the fact that darkness had fallen heavily around them; and she knew all too well there is no darkness like that of an inky, country night. That very darkness, filled with shadows and noises all its own, seemed to intensify the situation at hand.

They lingered, continuing to watch a few minutes longer. It was as if they were mesmerized by the macabre scene ominously illuminated by various spotlights and strobes. After what felt like hours, Jaxon cranked his truck to leave; the deputy glanced in their direction. He slowly, intentionally, shook his head, as if to eliminate any hope that the victim might have survived the crash.

Jaxon and Allie drove away in total silence, stunned by the sudden turn of events they were now involved in, together, whether they wanted to be or not.