

~ Joe ~

The return address: *Las Vegas, Nevada*. Scribbled in nearly illegible handwriting. No street or number. No name. Just, *Las Vegas, Nevada*. But there was no question to whom the envelope was sent: *Joseph Clayton*.

He flipped through the remaining mail, tossing in the recycling bin the collection of summer catalogs and flyers, credit card offers and coupon books. There were a few bills, a postcard to Allison from her parents on vacation in Brazil, a letter from Ashley's elementary school (*To the parents of Ashley Clayton*) regarding try-outs for the end-of-year musical.

Joe took the bills, leaving the postcard and school notice on the center island for Allison. She'd be home soon from picking up Ashley at her hip hop class. Joe still had a tough time

accepting his 8-year-old daughter was taking hip hop. There used to be just ballet and gymnastics, cheerleading. Now, hip hop. Little girls wearing crop tops and booty shorts. But she'd begged, and he'd caved, and later that night as Allison's silk nighty slipped off her shoulders and over her erect pink nipples, he realized both of his girls had him wrapped around their fingers.

He walked into his study, closing the French doors behind him, and placed his briefcase on the desk. The envelope was white, business-size. The ink, black. He flipped it over, taking notice of the lickable seal before holding it up to the light. Inside was lined paper, clearly a handwritten letter. Joe's cell phone rang, startling him, and he dropped the envelope onto the desk.

Allison appeared on the screen.

"Hi honey," he said as he answered the call.

"Hi babe," she replied. Even after 11 years of marriage, her naturally raspy voice still turned him on. He didn't need to see her naked skin. All she had to do was whisper his name.

"You on your way home?" he asked.

"Yep. Ashley said she wants pizza for dinner."

Joe laughed. "Of course, she does."

"Can you call it in?"

"Done," he replied.

They said goodbye, and as Joe pushed the speed dial for *Papa John's*—the envelope now resting on his desk, his name in black ink screaming at him—he thought about the last time he'd been to Las Vegas. Five years ago. Mike Ratkin's bachelor party. Joe had flown in for just one of

the two nights, and even that had made him uncomfortable, but he and Mike had been friends since high school, had enrolled at UCLA together, had even pledged the same fraternity until Mike transferred to Oregon State, following the girl who'd eventually become his wife.

Joe took a cab that night from the airport to The Bellagio where he met the guys for dinner. There were eight of them, four of whom were Joe's fraternity brothers (five including Mike). They were also the groomsmen at his own wedding six years before, and who he still saw on occasion in Los Angeles. Since Mike's bachelor party, though, Joe had lost touch, by his own choice following his decision to retreat to a single room at The Bellagio after dinner.

"Wait," Tom Decker had said. "You can't bail on us now. Don't you wanna see if she's still there?" He was slurring his words by then. "You two got some catchin' up to do." He took a long, slow pull from the can of beer in his hand.

Rex and Allen chimed in, making gestures of grabbing tits and smacking ass, whistling and yelling.

"She was so fucking hot," Allen shouted.

Gary Mathers threw his arms over the shoulders of Rex and Allen, pulling them away from Joe, and when all their backs were turned, Joe stepped to the side, camouflaging himself in a dispersing crowd of drunks. He didn't see any of them again, but he lay awake that night, wondering if she was, in fact, still there. He fought every aching nerve in his body, all of him wanting to see and touch and smell all of her. Just one more time, so he could feel that way again because he hadn't yet, and after six years of marriage to Allison, knew he never would with her, no matter how much he loved and adored her, no matter how spectacular of a woman she was, how beautiful and sweet and caring, how remarkable of a wife and mother.

Dalila

“Hello? Anyone there?”

Joe was squeezing the phone. “Oh, yes. Yes. Sorry. I need a large pepperoni pizza and garlic knots. Delivered, please.”

He gave his name and number, his address, all the while his eyes fixed on the envelope, his stomach twisting just enough for a small cramp to bite at his left side. He pushed the disconnect button on his phone and sat at his desk, leaning back in the chair to keep himself at a distance that would require he stand up again to retrieve the envelope. The longer he left it alone, the easier he could pretend it wasn't even there.

But why? He had no idea what it was or who it was from. He hadn't seen or spoken to her since that night, 11 years ago. And the only other people who thought they knew, he hadn't seen or spoken to since Mike's bachelor party. All the boys were married now, with young children or babies. There'd never been any mention of it, other than Tom Decker's drunken spat while leaving The Bellagio, of which Joe was certain the guy didn't remember the next day. Tom had always been a big drinker, that dude at the party who woke up naked, wrapped in cellophane because the rest of the group knew they could get away with it, and he could never recall what the hell had happened.

Joe checked the time on his cell phone. 6:20 PM. Allison would be home in ten minutes or less. Ashley would come bounding in, her hair in braids, a sweatshirt covering her crop top, leggings pulled over those damn booty shorts. She'd wrap her thin arms around Joe's neck and say, “Hiiiiii Daddy!” It melted his heart, every time. The pizza would arrive shortly after, and the

three of them would sit at the kitchen table, talking and laughing and sharing all they'd done that day. It was all so perfectly perfect.

Joe stood up and grabbed the envelope. His palms were sweating. He turned around and pulled from the bookshelf one of the four law citation manuals Allison would never consider reading. He cracked it open, straight down the middle, dropped the envelope between the pages, and placed it back on the shelf.

Maybe in a few days, he'd forget it was even there. Maybe.

* * *

Joe was in the middle of a dream, of heat and skin, silky smooth and damp with perspiration. It was dark, but he felt her. He ran his finger over her lips, down her neck, between her breasts. He placed the palm of his hand on her stomach where it stayed, rising and falling with her breathing, slow at first, but then picking up as he continued down, down. He stopped, inhaled deeply, and then opened his eyes, his erection hot.

Allison lay with her back to him, her long blonde hair appearing silver in the streak of moonlight that had found its way through the crack in the curtains. He thought about sliding over to her, kissing her neck and shoulder, waking her in hopes she might let him take care of the ache that had now swallowed the entire lower half of his body.

But he didn't. Instead, he rose from the bed and padded softly to the bathroom where he took himself in his hands, knowing it wouldn't have been fair to do that to his wife when it wasn't her he'd been dreaming of. When he finished, he quickly rinsed himself in the shower, and then crawled back into bed.

There was a hint of jasmine in the air. Allison's perfume. Subtle, but enough to bring him back to the night they met. He was 24 and in his final year of law school at UCLA. Rare was there time for him to enjoy a night out, but on that Friday, the other two interns he'd been working with at Ligati and Conwell—Roger Monroe and Alex Tackitt—wanted to blow off steam. The three of them had just completed a rigorous 12 weeks of late nights and constant ass-kissing. It would prove to pay off for Joe. Steve Ligati would offer him a full-time position ten months later, one week after he graduated from law school.

They decided to meet at a pub called Pogo's in Studio City, far enough away from the office and in a neighborhood the partners at the firm would likely not venture to. It catered to a young, clueless crowd of Hollywood wanna-be's, many of them determined to do whatever they could to become to the next big star. It had been a favorite of Joe's at one time—close to his apartment and often filled with beautiful women. A few of them had gone home with him during his senior year of undergrad, but only because they'd been too drunk to realize he wasn't associated with NBC or CBS or HBO. Over time, Joe became bored with the lack of educated conversations, and when he started law school, he stopped going to the pub altogether.

On that Friday night, though, he couldn't think of a better place to celebrate the survival of a summer internship that had robbed all three of them of both sleep and dignity. They could use a hearty helping of booze and gorgeous, empty-headed women. And Pogo's had an unlimited supply of both.

They arrived early enough to grab a booth and start drinking, and within an hour, two very chatty 20-somethings had joined them, the taller of the two wielding a cackle that made Joe's teeth hurt. When the beer pitcher was empty, he grabbed it from the middle of the table and promised to return.

But he didn't.

He was standing behind the crowd at the bar with the pitcher in his hand, waiting for a chance to squeeze to the counter for a refill, when he felt a hand on his back. A brief encounter, and then the scent of her perfume. It was the combination of her touch and the sweet fragrance that made him turn around, for no other reason than to excuse himself for being in the way, but when his eyes met hers, he found he couldn't speak. They held each other's gaze for a long time, neither saying a word, drunk patrons trying to get by and while doing so, pushing them toward one another until they were just centimeters apart.

"Allison," a female voice shouted.

"Allison," Joe said, still staring into her big brown eyes, but taking in every fine feature of her face—petite button nose, splash of pale freckles, full pink lips, wavy blonde hair cut to just above her shoulders.

The woman shouted again, and this time, Allison turned in the direction of the voice. She raised her hand and said, "Hold on," loud enough for only Joe to hear, but by the rolling of her friend's eyes, the throwing back of her head and the flailing of her arms, it was apparent Allison's words had been deciphered.

"I have to go," she said. She had a raspy edge to her voice. Sexy, but sweet.

"I think you should stay," Joe replied.

She *was* from Southern California. He wasn't sure how he knew, but he did, and she wasn't at Pogo's in search of someone who might help her break into showbiz. She wasn't showing cleavage. She wasn't wearing stilettos and a short skirt. Rather, she wore jeans and Converse

sneakers and a fitted V-neck t-shirt in white just tight enough to accent her small breasts and toned stomach.

Allison looked back toward the door. Her friend was gone. “Well. There goes my ride.”

Joe smiled and offered his hand. “I’m Joe.”

As it turned out, Allison *was* from SoCal. San Diego. She was in Studio City for the weekend, visiting her cousin Jamie who’d moved to Los Angeles from Orlando the year before in pursuit of an acting career. Jamie had places to go that night, people to see, parties to crash in hopes of meeting that one person who might open a door for her. She’d had no time to wait for Allison. And Joe was grateful.

Allison didn’t see Jamie again that weekend. Rather, she left Pogo’s with Joe, and for two nights and two full days, they didn’t leave his tiny one-bedroom apartment. In fact, they didn’t leave his bed except to tumble naked to the bathroom or to the kitchen in search of whatever scraps of food they could find. By Sunday night when it was time for Allison to go back to San Diego, every muscle in Joe’s body ached, and when she’d finally gone, he lay with his head on her pillow, the sheets—soiled with their sweat and cum—wrapped around him, the scent of her jasmine-laced perfume filling his head with images of a long life together.

Three weeks later, Allison moved out of her parents’ house in San Diego and moved in with Joe. She had a nursing degree and four years of waitressing experience. While Joe tackled his final year of law school, Allison found a part-time nursing job at a nearby family clinic, and she worked nights at a steakhouse on Ventura Boulevard. In the spare hours they had together, they made love. Slow, passionate, deep. Joe’s sex life in college had consisted of a whole lot of one-

night stands—mostly raunchy, dirty, drunk sex unfulfilling except for the orgasms. He'd never been with a woman like Allison. Sweet and caring, loving, innocent.

On Valentine's Day, he proposed to her. He had no doubt in his mind she was the woman he wanted to spend his life with. He'd known it when their eyes met at Pogo's, when she'd driven away that Sunday, leaving an empty space in his heart only she could fill. When Joe told his parents, they were skeptical.

"You're just so young, sweetheart," his mother had said.

He'd turned 25 the month before and was certain he was the last of his high school friends to be engaged. Several had married at 18 and were already on their second child.

"Kind of fast, don't you think?" his father chimed in.

"You'll understand when you meet her," Joe replied.

And they did. The following weekend, Joe and Allison flew to Scottsdale to visit his parents. His mother's blessing came within the first 15 minutes of meeting her. His father's, 15 later. After a 30-year career as an attorney in Los Angeles, Stephen Clayton was pretty good at finding the bad in just about anybody. With Allison, there wasn't anything to find. She was tender in her touch, honest and compassionate with her words, deeply genuine in every little action, from holding Joe's hand to hugging his mother goodbye.

When Joe graduated from law school that spring, both families got together for a celebration at the Malibu beach club where his father had once been a member. Their parents had yet to meet, but neither Allison nor Joe was worried. Since meeting Allison at Pogo's, Joe hadn't really worried about anything. Even that last year of law school, as exhausting and stressful as it had

been at times, seemed to float by with an ease Joe couldn't have expected under the circumstances.

And so, like everything else since Allison came into his life, dinner at the beach club was perfect—their parents became immediate friends, and Joe and Jason, Allison's older brother, shared a round of 100-year-old bourbon, solidifying their bond as though they'd sliced their hands and pressed their bloodied palms together.

They would wait until the following April to get married, at the same Malibu beach club, on a beautiful sunny day, a cool ocean breeze blowing, the view of the Pacific unobstructed from where they stood in front of family and friends. It was the best day of Joe's life. And yet, his heart was being tugged. Not much, just slightly, but enough to make him wonder, to make him close his eyes as he kissed his lovely bride and see a set of green eyes, black hair, scarlet lips. When Allison placed her kind hands on his cheeks, her nails cut short and brushed with a pale pink gloss, they were not her fingers touching his skin.

Long nails, red polish, strong hands. Hot tongue.

Joe sat up in bed, beads of sweat clinging to his forehead. Allison shifted in her sleep, rolled over, her face briefly illuminated by the moonlight before it was cast again in shadow. He held his breath, waiting for her to settle, waiting for her breathing to become heavy before he'd once again leave her side for a moment.

But this time, there was no erection to tend to. Just an unopened envelope downstairs in his study, tucked between the pages of a law manual.