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## Chapter 1

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### Hailey

**E**very Thursday afternoon, Joshua visits her. He's been doing this for the past year. Not so odd, really, except that Hailey Rose is his palm-reader.

Each week, the blue-eyed beauty with blonde-highlighted hair tells him what she sees in his future, sometimes by reading his palm; other times, she uses a crystal ball or tarot cards. And so far, she has been right about everything. What's the problem there?

Well, Hailey Rose has fallen madly in love with the hot, brown-haired hunk with the chocolate-colored eyes who comes to find out what is in store for him. He got the big promotion he had wanted at his place of employment. That had come with the big raise he had asked about. He found the perfect condo, bought the car he'd always dreamed about, and his life seemed to be shaping up.

Now, he wants to find someone to share it all with. How Hailey wished she could read his palm and will it to show that she was destined to be that lucky lady. But to actually flirt with

the elusive Joshua, to let her feelings be known, there was just no way. After all, he was her client. She couldn't bend the rules in her favor. It would be unethical, wouldn't it?

She knew he would be here any second. She hurried around, freshening her hair and makeup, then she seated herself at the table to greet him.

She glanced at the clock on the wall. Joshua was never late. He should have been here five minutes ago. She hadn't gotten any strange vibes, so she was certain everything was fine. He was there every Thursday like clockwork.

And then, there he was, looking as dashing as ever in his business suit, hair perfectly groomed. He was the exact opposite of Hailey Rose, who was a throwback to the sixties with her love for boho style, long blonde hair flowing down her back.

She smiled, and then he pulled his arm from behind his back and produced a bouquet of beautiful spring flowers. As he handed them to her, he said, "For the lovely lady. A vendor was selling them down the street, and I couldn't resist stopping to grab some for you. I'm sorry it made me a few minutes late. Hope I haven't messed up your schedule too much."

Hailey sat there staring at him and then at the bouquet. She was speechless. He'd actually thought enough of her to bring her flowers! Stammering, she replied, "Uh, thank y-you, Joshua. That was very sweet of you. Just let me put these in some water, and we can get started. I know you're on your lunch hour."

She started to get up when he said, "Actually, I have the afternoon off. Are you booked all day?"

"Well, yes, I have a few appointments after yours." She took the bouquet and went into the kitchen.

When she returned, he was sitting in his usual chair waiting for her.

"Ready to get started?" she asked.

He smiled and his face lit up the room for Hailey. Finally, he said, "Ready when you are, beautiful lady."

Hailey sat down and took his hand, turning it over and studying it as she ran her finger over the lines. She closed her eyes. She knew the answer he was searching for. He wanted a clue as to when he was to find his true soul mate. He wanted to know who he was meant to spend his life with. Would he find true love, or was he destined to be a bachelor for years to come?

There was no easy reply. Yes, she could see that he would indeed find the girl of his dreams. They would marry and raise a family. But so far, that was all she was getting from their weekly sessions. There was no timeline, no description, no name.

All of the other things he had asked her about had been so much clearer. She had been able to tell him the promotion and the raise in salary were a definite. The condo had come to her with a general location in mind. And the automobile, well, that one had been easy. He'd told her many times of the car he'd dreamed of owning since childhood. She had been able to tell him where to go to find it. But this, this most important life event, was proving to be somewhat of a challenge for her. And it was frustrating for him, she knew. And as much as she would like to throw caution to the wind and just invent the perfect blonde version of herself for his result, she couldn't.

"I'm sorry, Joshua. It still isn't clear to me. Obviously, that must indicate that the time is not right yet. Please be patient. I know it is difficult."

The brown-haired man sighed and said, "It's not your fault, Hailey. I shouldn't be so impatient. We'll just try again next week. Same place, same time?"

"Of course," she answered as she let go of his hand. How could he not feel the current of electricity that flowed between them when they touched?

As he stood up, he tossed out the usual fee and a tip. Joshua preferred to pay in cash, which was perfectly okay with her.

He turned as she thanked him and asked, "Hailey, what time do you finish for the day?"

She glanced at her appointment book. "I should be finished by four."

"How about having dinner with me? I mean, I guess I should ask if you are in a relationship before I just assume, but I think it would be nice for two friends to share some time again outside of the professional realm. Am I overstepping?"

Completely taken aback, it took a few moments for her to answer. "I-I am not in a relationship at the moment, actually. And I would love to spend some time with you. Maybe it will give me a chance to have a better look into your heart and give me some new insight into your situation."

And then he laughed. He threw back his head and the deep laugh was surprising. Hailey had seen his gorgeous smile many times but had never experienced this with him.

"I'm sorry. I'm not laughing at you. I find it funny that you want to turn this casual dinner into a session."

"I-I just meant that in a d-different setting, I may be able to see something I haven't seen before," she explained with an embarrassed stammer.

"It's fine, Hailey. I just found it humorous, is all. I'll pick you up at six?"

"Six is good. I'll be ready. Casual, I'm guessing?"

"Yes, casual. We'll go to a place I know over on Bourbon Street. Sound okay?" he asked.

"Oh, that sounds perfect. I'll be ready."

Joshua left, and Hailey sat down, staring at the crystal ball on the shelf. "I wish you could tell me what my own future holds," she said softly.

Just then, her next client came in and she looked up, smiling, determined to give the woman her undivided attention. "Mrs. Lottes, good afternoon."

"Hailey, so good to see you. You look, I don't know, different. What secret are you hiding?"

Hailey laughed. "I have no secrets. Come, sit down. Tell me what's on your mind today."

When four o'clock came and her last client for the day was gone, she rushed upstairs to her apartment above the shop and changed into a dark blue summer sundress with a pattern of the sun and moon and a pair of strappy sandals. She had no idea where he meant to take her, but for a balmy New Orleans evening, this outfit would be perfect.

He was waiting outside the locked door of the shop when she came back down. Always punctual, that one. She ran to open it and let him in.

"I'm sorry you had to wait. I locked the door and put the closed sign up so I could run upstairs and change. I hope you weren't waiting long."

"I just got here, actually. Do you live upstairs?" he asked.

"Yes, I got a good deal when I rented the space for my shop. There was a loft apartment available on the second floor, and I rented both as a sort of bundled deal. There are a few other living spaces up there. A friend of mine rents one, and the lady who owns the coffee shop next door, also a friend, lives in the other."

"Wow, that's nice. You don't have to go far to your job," he said as they walked out to the street and she locked the door again.

"My friend, who lives in the loft next to mine, told me about the place. Her uncle owns the building."

"What does your friend do?" he asked in an attempt to make conversation. He really didn't know much about his palm-reader, except that she was pretty, in a boho sort of way, and that she was very nice.

"She works in one of the restaurants on Bourbon Street," Hailey said with a smile. "We've been pals since high school."

"Speaking of Bourbon Street, how does Saints and Sinners sound for dinner?"

"Oh, that's a great place. I say yes!"

Once they had walked to the restaurant and a hostess had seated them, he asked, "So, did you grow up in NOLA?"

Hailey looked up from her menu and said, "In Harahan, actually."

"Really? I grew up in Elmwood."

They started talking about the menu then, and soon their server came over with water.

Joshua ordered a bottle of wine for the two of them, and they decided to share a seafood dish for two.

"So, tell me how you got into palm-reading, Hailey?" he asked when the server had gone.

Hailey laughed, the sound pleasant. "Well, I grew up near New Orleans, you know, where voodoo and palm-reading are very popular. My aunt taught me, and since I've always been a bit of a free spirit, I decided to set up shop after college. My folks weren't too happy about that, but I make a decent bit of money at it, so they've gotten over the disappointment by now."

"What is your degree?" he asked as he took a sip of water.

"Don't laugh, but it's in business management."

"Why would I laugh? That's probably one of the reasons you 'make a decent bit of money.'"

"It does come in handy. The coffee shop next door pays me to keep their books, too."

"So, see there, you're using your degree after all."

The server brought the wine then, and after Joshua tasted it like a pro, he gave the signal for the server to fill the glasses.

Hailey took a sip of the white vintage. "This is very good," she said.

"I know a little about wine. My maternal grandparents used to own a vineyard in California. When they retired, they came here to be close to my mom and the rest of the family."

"So, you vacationed in California as a kid?" Hailey asked.

"Every Christmas and any other time I could, summers and

school breaks. They came here when they could get away. I probably would have moved there when I was grown if they hadn't always planned to retire early and move here."

"Interesting," she said as she took another sip of wine.

"How so?" he asked just as the food arrived.

She waited until the server had gone and had scooped some of the food onto her plate before answering his question. "It's just that you would have had an entirely different life if that had happened."

He swallowed his food and said, "Yes, but it wasn't meant to be."

She laughed again, and her face lighted up the room. "Now, that sounds like something I would say."

After that, they enjoyed their dinner while they discussed movies they'd each recently seen and books they had read. They seemed to have certain tastes in common, surprisingly enough, since their lifestyles were completely different. Joshua was a businessman in every sense of the word. He'd been in the corporate world since graduating college, and of course, Hailey was the epitome of laid-back and casual. She read palms and did a little bookwork on the side; she liked incense and candles and yoga. She meditated, for crying out loud. The beach was one of her favorite places to relax. Joshua was more the fancy club type of guy, the nice condo, business suits, preppy haircut, and expensive resort vacations. They had nothing in common except their tastes in movies and books. Even music preference was as different as day and night. She'd learned that he liked classical, while her tastes ran to pop, jazz, and old-time rock and roll. He was a modern guy, while she would have survived well in the sixties and seventies. He liked wine; she could drink a beer, even though she did like an occasional glass of vino.

When they finished eating, he suggested they walk down Bourbon Street and possibly dip into a bar for a nightcap before he walked her home. Hailey agreed, and they walked into the

XO Lounge. It was upscale, not a place she frequented, but she thought it suited him perfectly. They ordered drinks and listened to the music for a while. Finally, he said, "I have work tomorrow, so I should get you home."

"Okay. I'm ready," she said as he pulled her chair out for her.

They strolled down the street and over one to where she lived and worked. She suggested they take the stairs to the outside entrance of the loft apartments rather than going in through the shop, and he took her key from her and unlocked the outside door then the door to her loft, making sure she was safely inside before he left.

"I had fun tonight, Hailey. Thank you for agreeing to have dinner with me," he said before he turned to go.

"I did too. Thanks for the invite. It's nice to get out once in a while."

"See you next week." And he was gone.

Hailey told him to turn the lock on the outside door as he left, then she closed and locked her own door and went into the bedroom to change for bed. A short time later, she was snuggled under the covers with the TV on, thinking about her 'date' with Joshua. Even though she knew he only considered it a dinner with a friend, she chose to view it as a date since it was the closest she would ever get to the actual thing with the handsome client.

He'd been lonely, had the afternoon off, and had asked her to spend a few hours with him. That's all it was. But those few short hours had given her a glimpse of what spending leisure time with him would be like. And she found that despite their many differences, she had enjoyed herself.

She looked forward to her next session with him.

The next morning, she got up early even though her first appointment wasn't until ten. After dressing in a paisley skirt and white peasant top, she added some of her clunky jewelry, purchased from the shops in town, and pulled the sides of her



hair back with a clip. She added a pair of flip-flops and went out the outside entrance to the coffee shop next door.

Gayla, the neighbor who owned the quaint little shop, was already there putting out baked goods in the display case.

"Morning, Hailey, what can I get you?" the redhead asked.

"Have a cup with me before the crowd comes in?" Hailey asked. "I'll take one of those beignets too. I swear, you could give the other places in town a run for their money on those if you advertised them."

"Ah, but that's the trick. They're a hidden little secret surprise to those who come in here. Word of mouth is a powerful marketer, my dear friend."

Hailey laughed as Gayla joined her for breakfast.

"I heard you come in last night. Did you have a date?"

"Man, there are no secrets around here, are there? Except for your beignets, that is."

Gayla nodded and laughed. "That's why we can depend on each other. If you had been in distress, I would have come out of my loft with a baseball bat."

"Oh my, I'm glad you didn't. One of my regular clients took me to dinner. That was all."

"So is this client by any chance a hot guy?" Gayla encouraged as she sipped her latte.

"He is, but it wasn't a date. He had some time on his hands and asked me to share a meal and some conversation. That's *all*."

"Why am I getting vibes that you'd like for it to have been a date?"

"Because you are a romantic and you think because you have a hot guy in your life, all your friends need a man too."

"I am lucky to have my Paul. He is a sweetie. Now, if you and Carlotta would stop being so picky, we could all have some nice times together as couples."

"Carlotta and I are doing just fine, thank you very much.

We'll both settle down one of these days. We *are* a few years younger than you. We're still playing the field."

Gayla shook her head. "Want a refill on that Chai before you open the shop?"

"Sure, thanks." She handed her cup to the redhead and followed her to the counter. With cup in hand, she waved goodbye and ran next door to unlock her door before her first client arrived.

By the time she had set the mood by lighting candles, Ms. Louella Brown was walking through the door.

Ms. Brown was a pretty woman, in her thirties. She was seeking clarity about her current relationship. She had been in a few times before.

"How are you, Ms. Brown?" Hailey asked as she sat down and gestured for her client to do the same.

"I'm coming close to making a decision about the man in my life. You know he's proposed to me, and I just want to be sure before I give him an answer."

"Ah, yes, he had just proposed when you came in the last time. How much time did he give you to decide?"

"No timeline, but I don't want to leave him hanging. I'm leaning toward telling him yes, but I felt I wanted to see you one more time before I do. Please, can you tell me anything?"

Hailey took her palm and began to run her fingers over it. She began to speak. "I see that you often put others' needs before your own. You are considerate of other people's feelings."

"Is that bad?"

"It's not unless you lose yourself in the process. I want you to think. Are you planning to say yes to spare this man's feelings, or are you truly committed to sharing a life with him? Food for thought before you decide."

"I love him. But is that enough?"

"Only you can make that choice. As long as you are considering marrying him for the right reasons, I see no reason why

you shouldn't. But it is ultimately your decision and no one else's."

"Thank you, Hailey. I think you've helped me. I will think on it some more and make my decision soon."

She stood and took her credit card out of her purse, handing it to Hailey. Hailey handed it back a few minutes later with a receipt. "Thank you. Be sure to let me know what you decide."

"I will. Have a good day."

Hailey had a few minutes before her next client, so she flipped through her emails while she waited.

The next person to come in for a reading was Mrs. LeBlanc. She was a middle-aged woman who had recently lost her husband. She was trying to decide whether to stay put or move to Shreveport to be near her daughter.

After telling the woman about her long lifeline and her strong character, Mrs. Le Blanc said, "What I'm getting from this is that I can stay here a few more years and take care of myself before I must make that move. Inevitably, the day will come, but there is no rush."

When the woman was gone, it was lunchtime, so Hailey blew out the candles, put the 'out to lunch' sign on the door, locked it, and headed to a café down the street for a quick bite.

She spotted some acquaintances and joined their table when they invited her. She had a wonderful lunch with them, catching up on all their news while they ate. When it was time for her afternoon to begin, she told them goodbye and went back to her little shop.

She filled the air with incense and waited at her table, sipping some iced tea while she did so. Finally, the next client was there. At five, exhausted, she closed up shop and practically ran up the stairs to collapse on her couch.

A little while later, she got a text from Carlotta, inviting her over for spaghetti and meatballs. She accepted, splashed her face, took the clip out of her hair and brushed it, then she went next

door to join her friend. When she got there, Gayla was sitting at the table.

"Hey, there. Must be girls' night," Gayla said when Hailey handed their hostess a loaf of French bread. "I brought the wine."

"Carlotta, you cooked after working all day in a restaurant?" Hailey asked.

"Of course not. I brought it home from work. Now, let's sit down, crack open that wine, and you can tell us all about your date last night."

"Gayla, did you tell her?" Hailey looked at the redhead.

"No, I did not. And I thought it wasn't a date."

"I have ears too, you know. I heard you come in. I knew it wasn't Gayla because I had talked to her earlier and she was staying in."

"It *wasn't* a date," Hailey insisted.

"We want to hear all about it, anyway," Carlotta said as she sliced the bread Hailey had brought, slathered it with butter, garlic, and seasonings and tossed it in the oven. She set the timer, checked on the pasta and sauce, and sat down.

Gayla had opened the wine and poured it into three glasses. Both girls looked at Hailey expectantly, waiting for her to give them details of her night with Joshua.

"I may as well spill it all. I can see neither of you will rest until I do. But where do I begin?"

"Uh, like maybe at the beginning would be good," Carlotta said.

"We want to know the whole story, Hails," Gayla said, using Hailey's nickname.

"Okay, okay. It all began last year when this handsome, preppy, clean-cut guy started coming to me for sessions."

"Preppy?" Gayla asked.

"Clean-cut?" Carlotta added. "Doesn't exactly sound like your type."

Hailey sighed as she realized it was going to take a while to get this story out. She settled back in her chair and took a sip of wine before continuing. She had her friends waiting with bated breath to hear how a guy who did not fit her usual characteristics in a date had managed to take her to dinner a year after they'd met. And he was a client, which was also unusual for their blonde friend.

"He is a client as I said..."

And so, she went on, with the whole story coming out, even her feelings for him and her dilemma with those, only being interrupted by the dishing up of the food. Her two friends were mesmerized by her description of Joshua and the fact that she was in love with him.

By the time the evening was over and the dishes were done, the three of them had discussed this development at great length. Hailey was even more confused than she had been before. The girls thought she should go for it, but she still wasn't sure that he would even be remotely interested.