

H O L L Y H E A L E

B E C O M I N G

A N O V E L

“I have heard it all my life,
A voice calling a name I recognize as my own.
Sometimes it comes as a soft-bellied whisper.
Sometimes it holds an edge of urgency.
But always it says: Wake up, my love. You are walking asleep.
There’s no safety in that!
Remember what you are, and let this knowing
Color the shape of your humanness.”

The Call – Oriah Mountain Dreamer

TURNING POINT

The remaining leaves on the large oak rustled as if irritated as early dawn light peeked through dark, billowing clouds. I suppressed the urge to cry and instead, yanked on the elastic that I kept hidden beneath my bracelet, letting it snap against the scarred skin of my wrist.

The pain is real. Let it go.

Then, with a deep breath I broke into a brisk pace along West road, in front of Hills Hall – my dorm – my new home.

I turned onto the trailhead a couple of minutes later. The forest had been on fire with color only a few weeks earlier, but now the barren trees were a blasé gray and the forest floor was carpeted in brown, decaying leaves.

Running keeps me in shape and helps my sanity – it's the only time my mind goes blank. This morning, I was running my usual loop, which included a climb to a cliff that overlooked the school. I liked to stop and stretch there – I could usually count on it being void of people. But as I began the ascent I had the feeling that I was being watched. Thanks to my mom, I felt quite comfortable in the outdoors, but also like her I knew to listen to my instincts. A quick glance around came up with nothing. I slowed my pace and pulled off my headphones and listened over the song birds that flitted in the trees above.

My whole body tensed as a branch snapped behind me and for an instant, the birds stopped too. A moment later a murder of crows cackled from the tree tops. I was sure there was something up the hill and I waited, facing the thick pines.

Come on.

One heartbeat, then another and suddenly a dark figure tore down the slope and out of the trees. I dove out of the way, at the same time reaching for a solid piece of deadwood that lay on the ground and then I spun to face my attacker, poised to defend myself.

His face grew intense as he looked up at me with surprise. He had obviously stumbled and was now sprawled on the ground. Suddenly, laughter filled the space between us.

I stared at him in shock until my anger over ruled my panic. “Are you insane? *What* are you laughing at?”

“Myself. I knew I shouldn’t have barreled down that bluff. It didn’t save me any time at all.”

He sprang up and I took a startled step back. I didn’t recognize him, but the logo on his hoodie was from our school. I slowly lowered my hands, as he brushed himself off.

“You alright?”

“Yeah, it’s all good,” he replied. His laughter hovered around a broad, opened-lip smile. “Sorry Cora. I wasn’t expecting that. I mean running into you, or well, thankfully, not running into you.” He grinned.

That threw me. “How do you know my name?”

“Seriously?” He cocked his head and a looked at me with disbelief. “It’s a small school.”

“Why were you running through the bush?” I asked, looking in the direction he had come from.

He looked me up and down. “You’re a runner. Why don’t you join me and find out?”

His grin turned impish and he raised one eye brow.

I looked at him skeptically and was just about to reply, “Thanks, but no,” when he cut me off.

“Another time then. Gotta run!” And with that, he took off into the forest again.

I stared after him, flabbergasted. He hadn’t even waited for my reply.

“Wait!” I called, amazed at my impetuous response; it was more characteristic of the *old* me.

I kept my arms up like a boxer to protect my face from the branches that hung in my way and he slowed so I could catch up.

“Glad you decided to join me. I’m Jay.” He smiled.

I just nodded and fell in line behind him.

“Where are we going?” I hoped he knew.

He looked at what I thought was a watch and then at a large arm band I hadn’t noticed earlier.

“Here,” he replied pointing to the arm band. It was a clear piece of vinyl, strapped to his forearm – a map bag of sorts and in it was a topographical map. “We’re racing to Lovell Hall.”

“Eh? Racing? Racing who? What for?”

“You ask a lot of questions,” he chuckled. “The *who* are my teammates. The *why* is for fun. It’s a form of training.” He looked at his wrist again and I realized it wasn’t a watch he was looking at, but a compass. “That way.” He nodded and veered south-west.

“This is bizarre.” I commented.

Looking at his map and compass again, he redirected us before replying, “This is nothing, we also mountain bike, paddle, rappel, zip line, and swim all while orienteering. Ever heard of adventure racing?”

“No, but it sounds like a quixotic venture.”

He started laughing so hard he had to slow the pace. “Okay, you’re writing my next English paper. What in the world does *quixotic* mean?”

“It means foolishly impractical, especially in the pursuit of unreachable goals.”

He nodded – not in understanding.

“We’re not far now. Think you can pick up the pace?” He looked at me; I guessed he was gauging my fatigue. I was already tired from my own run, but I wasn’t going to yield. I gave one confident nod.

We didn’t talk much for the next while. We were both focused and that made good conversation difficult. Plus, I was desperately trying not to make a fool of myself by running into a tree. Branches on the other hand were harder to miss.

I was impressed with his precision when he landed us on Lovell Road, almost directly across from the back of the boy’s dorms. To my surprise, Jay sighed. When I followed his gaze I understood. We weren’t the first to arrive. In fact, we were the last.

“Hey, you finally decided to join us!” The bigger of the two guys jeered. My eyes slid involuntarily from him to his friend. The guy stood up from his relaxed lean against the tree and took a stepped forward, as if eagerly awaiting us. I felt instantly drawn to him and when I found myself staring, I turned my head too fast not to be noticed. Jay looked at me funny and I felt my face warm with color. Thankfully he didn’t say anything.

To compensate for my inexplicable need to look at boy with the blue eyes, I focused on the bigger guy. There seemed to be a resemblance between him and Jay. Their facial features were a lot alike and they both had russet colored skin, but Jay's face was rounder, still baby-like, where the other's was leaner, more defined at the jaw. The most notable difference though was their hair. Jay wore his dark hair in a well-coiffed mess, his curls accentuating his baby face. The other guy – well, you could tell his hair was also dark, but only by the peach fuzz that was growing back – it had been completely shaved off.

“Is that your brother?” I asked, nodding to the big guy as we approached.

“Yep. That's Gavin.” Jay was smiling, but there was another emotion behind it, disappointment maybe? I could empathize with that. I was disappointed, too. I didn't want to be known as, *the girl who slowed him down*.

“Ouch, we lost to your brother?” I said, and he looked at me and laughed. “What?”

He continued chuckling. “You said, *we lost*. Until ten minutes ago you weren't part of this race. You're competitive. You don't like losing.”

I stopped and looked at him. “And?” I said, caught off-guard by how perceptive he was.

“And nothing, it was just an observation.” He tapped the brim of my ball cap and continued walking.

“Look who I ran into. Cora.” Jay said, as Gavin, who was sitting on the ground, stood up.

“Hi.” I lifted my hand in an uncommitted wave.

“Why are you running with *her*?” The question was directed at his brother, but Gavin's icy look was aimed at me.

Jay threw an arm around my shoulder. “It was the least I could do after almost running her over.”

I smiled halfheartedly and discreetly ducked out from beneath his arm.

Gavin raised an eyebrow and gave his brother a punch in the shoulder. “How did you manage that one Jay?” His tone was almost accusatory.

Jay rubbed his forehead and laughed as if uncomfortable.

“So, I’m Jay Curtis and this is my brother, Gavin.” Gavin nodded curtly. “And this,” Jay waved his arm, over-embellishing the introduction, “is Vincent Archer.”

Vincent smiled. I tried hard not to look directly at him, but remarkably, I found myself smiling back.

“Hey,” Jay said, “did either of you see that *really* creepy looking dog?”

Vincent gave Jay an oblivious look.

“Creepy dog?” Gavin echoed in suspicion.

“Yeah, big, black. Kind of reminded me of those Cane Corso police dogs you sometimes see on TV.”

“Did you see it?” Gavin grilled me.

What was it with this guy?

“No, I saw it before I ran into her,” Jay clarified.

It was then I noticed the activity around us. Campus was coming alive and I couldn’t be late for my first class.

Stupid American history.

“Ah, I have to go. Thanks for the run, eh.” As I turned to leave I added, “Nice meeting you.” But I wasn’t entirely sure I was happy to meet Gavin.

I was finishing up a quick shower when the thought of Jay, sprawled on the ground and laughing at himself, popped into my head. I couldn't help but smile at the thought. He had such a cheerful disposition, a stark contrast to my morose mood. It intrigued me though that Vincent hadn't said a word throughout the whole exchange.

Vincent Archer, I contemplated his name with curiosity and found myself hoping that I might get a chance to run with them again.