

THE Jackets



LIZ DEJESUS

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To Kurt,
te amo, mi amor





Acknowledgments

Thanks first and foremost to God for listening to my prayers and answering them. I never could've imagined any of this for myself.

I want to thank my husband Kurt, I know it isn't easy being around someone that's constantly living inside her head so thank you for your love and patience. I also wish to thank my family and my friends who have stood by me through thick and thin.

Mason, my little boy . . . the little star of my life. Every day with you is amazing. I love you so much.



Red

She was a spot of red that could be seen from miles away. Like a blood-red cardinal flying above an ocean of grey. The sky, the sidewalks, the streets, even the cars. Laura stood out as she walked slowly, steadily from her house to her job at the paper store. The cold wind blew across her face like cold knives slicing across her skin. She pulled her cherry jacket tighter against her body. Her short brown hair became a tornado on top of her head.

People couldn't help but stare. Laura's face remained stagnant, but out of the corner of her eyes she could see men pressing their faces against the windshield of their cars to get a better look at her. She was a flash of color in the middle of all that colorless muck. She hadn't really planned on wearing that jacket that day or the days that followed. It was the first thing she grabbed from her closet. Then again, everything in her closet had color. Sapphire. Amethyst. Moss. Fire. Sunflower. Crimson. Colors she loved more than life itself. That was all she ever cared about . . . color. It was the only thing she ever wanted to talk about.

"Why are they staring?" Laura wondered as she shook her head in confusion. "It's just a red jacket."

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Allen was in the kitchen, trying to stay awake so he could get to work alive and get the day over with. He couldn't start the day without a cup of coffee. He muttered to himself as he moved around the kitchen. He glanced out the window and sighed. He thought about all the things that needed to get done at the office. He took a sip and made a face.

"Ugh." He pulled the cup away from his body like it was something that meant to do him harm.

He brewed fresh coffee and poured a cup, spilling some on his hand. He pulled it away and tried to shake off the burning feeling.

Stupid, friggin' . . .

Allen looked up and stopped everything. Red. He couldn't help but stare. He couldn't turn and look the other way. His dark blue eyes stayed on her. He didn't understand why the blood that ran through his veins had suddenly caught fire.

She's a rose trying to bloom in the middle of a storm.

"Where's she going?" he asked himself. Allen made it his morning habit to stand in front of his kitchen window and watch "The Woman in Red" walk by as he drank his coffee. Allen didn't want to call her "The Girl" or anything silly like that because she most certainly wasn't a girl.

Every morning, Allen waited for her to appear. She was always punctual. At eight-thirty without fail she would walk past his house. It was one of the few things in this world he could count on. Saturdays and Sundays were the only two days he didn't see her.

One day, she didn't appear. At first he thought that maybe she was late.

Maybe . . . she's sick.

He took a sip of his coffee, and already it didn't taste the same. For some reason, seeing her made it a little easier to

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swallow the watery tar he called coffee in the mornings. Allen didn't know why he persisted on making it.

I should stop buying the dollar store brand.

He poured it all down the sink and made up his mind to buy the more expensive brand the next time he went grocery shopping. He watched as the brown liquid swirled down the drain, until it was no more. He waited. Allen looked for her like a man lost at sea seeking a sandy shore. She had never been late before. Even on rainy days she was on time. Always.

Why go crazy over a woman who I don't even know?

He looked again and saw a woman who reminded him of her.

It can't be her . . . she's not wearing her red jacket.

He took a closer look and saw that it *was* the same woman. Only she lacked the ghost of a smile that was always on her lips. Her skin was pale and her eyes were sunken.

What happened? Where did the color go? Her fire?

Her eyes were as black as coal.

Laura felt someone looking at her. She saw no one. She looked to her right and found herself staring into a pair of haunting blue eyes. Laura smiled, waved and kept walking.

Yesterday sucked.

"Thanks for stopping by, have a nice day," Laura said as she handed Mrs. Ling her bag.

"Bye, bye." Mrs. Ling took leave.

Mrs. Ling was a nice Chinese lady who could say only a handful of phrases. She was so old her face looked like a mountain in Sedona. Her eyes were barely there, just slits with lashes. Seeing her always put a smile on Laura's face.

As Mrs. Ling walked out of the store, Laura began putting stacks of paper away, when she heard the bell above the door ring.

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"I'll be with you in just one second," she called out over her shoulder.

"Don't worry. I can wait."

The voice sent chills down her spine. *Why was he here?*

"Hi, Steve." She tried to hide the displeasure in her voice. The last thing she wanted to do was cause a scene at work.

"Can we talk?" he asked.

"Not now." Laura smiled.

"Don't give me that."

"Remember the last time when we tried to talk? Besides, I'm busy. I have work to do and customers."

"Just five minutes."

"I really don't want to do this now." Laura searched the store for someone bigger than him and found no one.

"Fucking talk to me!" Steve yelled, knocking down a shelf of stationary.

Scores of pastel paper fell on the floor in colorful waves. It was beautiful and sad all at once.

All eyes were on Laura.

"You're going to have to get out of here, young man," ordered Jim, the manager, from behind her.

Steve could definitely take Jim if he wanted, but he knew Jim could call the cops and show them the store videotape. Steve wasn't completely stupid. He turned and marched out of the store without saying anything else.

"I'm so sorry," Laura muttered, embarrassed. "I'll clean this all up." She quickly fell to her knees and started to tidy up.

"Laura, I think you should go, too," Jim said.

"Jim . . . please." She couldn't even hold her head up to look at him.

"I'm sorry. But I can't keep cleaning up the mess that jerk leaves behind."

Laura cried all the way home. *Please, God . . . something good. A little bit of luck is all I need.*

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Laura looked into the house once more and saw that the man with the large blue eyes was still standing there.

A smile. That was all he needed. It was the sign he was waiting for. Allen ran outside and caught up to her. He would be late for work, but he didn't care. It was one of those now-or-never moments. He had thirty seconds to come up with something witty to say to her. Something that would make her listen to him.

"What happened?" he asked.

Laura put her hands up, frightened by Allen's sudden appearance. She looked into his eyes and realized that it was the man with the haunting eyes. She put her hands down slowly.

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

"Your red jacket . . ."

"My jacket?" She looked at him, confused.

Her lips mouthed an "Oh" as she realized that he was talking about her favorite red jacket. There was plenty of history in that little bit of cloth. She had it on when she had her first kiss. First job interview. First day at work. It was a jacket she wore on days she knew would be filled with firsts. Every time she wore that blood-red jacket, her world was brighter, filled with possibilities, almost as if anything could happen.

She balanced herself on her heels for a moment and looked at the sky as she gave Allen her response. "It was time to grow up, I guess." She shrugged and put her hands in her pockets.

"No," Allen whispered.

He shook his head.

"It's just a jacket," Laura said.

It became clear to Allen that she didn't see the world as he did. Did she not see the grey that enveloped her?

"What's your name?" she asked.

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“Allen Foster.”

“Nice to meet you, Allen. I’m Laura Reyes,” she said and extended her hand to him.

Allen took her hand and marveled over how well it slipped into his, as if a piece of a puzzle had just been handed to him. He held her hand for a second longer than he should have. Her hand was soft and smooth.

“So, why were you so concerned over my not wearing my red jacket today?”

She studied his face as he thought of an answer. He had a kind face. He wasn’t terribly handsome, but there was something about him that made her feel warm inside. She realized that it was his smile. He had a wide, easy smile.

“Because . . . the thought of this world draining the color out of you was sad,” Allen finally said. “I was ready to mourn the loss of anything interesting ever happening in my life, and then you walked by my house as though nothing could touch you. As though nothing could possibly affect you. Because seeing you in the mornings gave me hope. It made the day . . . bearable. You gave me something to look forward to every morning.”

“I see,” she said.

Lightning danced across the sky. Thunder rolled above them, bringing the promise of rain along with it. Laura looked up and sighed.

Allen admired her long neck. He couldn’t believe he was talking to her. He wanted to touch her. He wanted to reassure himself that she was real. He wanted to take away everything in her that was sad and set it on fire. To watch it burn into a pile of ashes.

Laura looked into Allen’s eyes and said, “The world has moments that make most of us despair over what tomorrow will bring. You just have to learn how to carry bits of color within yourself. Not let others carry them for you.”

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Laura pointed at her feet. Allen looked down to see a pair of tiny pointed shoes peeking through her indigo jean pants. They were red.

Allen chuckled. He knew that from this moment on he wanted to have her with him always.

Laura loved how his sandy-blond hair glinted with help from the little bit of sunlight that managed to break through the clouds, how his blue eyes sparkled. If anything, he was much more colorful than she.

“Would you like to have a cup of coffee with me?” he asked.

“I guess I can risk that much for a handsome stranger.”

Allen offered her his hand, which Laura took and walked away with him.