

## Chapter One

Five years ago

Jack Dalton drove past the familiar Stevens' Farms sign down the dirt path that took him to Ruby's front door.

This wasn't even a date, but that didn't stop his heart from pounding harder than it ever had as he rounded the corner and found Ruby smiling from the porch swing.

He had plans for the perfect night celebrating her seventeenth birthday, and dang if his palms weren't sweating even though the two of them were firmly locked in the friend zone.

For as long as Jack could remember, he'd spent a month of each summer vacation with his grandparents in Sage Hill. This summer, while working as a lifeguard at the city pool, he met Ruby Stevens, and she quickly became the best friend he'd ever had.

Did he want them to be more than friends?

Of course he freaking did.

Ruby was smart, kind, athletic, and so dang pretty he couldn't breathe around her sometimes. But when they met, she also had a boyfriend who was spending the month in Florida with his dad. So Jack never even hinted at more with her while they'd spent pretty much every waking moment together over the last month.

Now he'd be returning home to Nevada with his Mom tomorrow, across the freaking country, for his senior year of high school. He wasn't even sure Ruby had feelings for him beyond their summer BFF status since she'd only broken up with the douchebag boyfriend four days ago.

How would a long-distance relationship where they couldn't see each other until maybe Christmas or Spring Break even work? And that was before they left for different colleges in the fall with at least four more years apart.

He knew the answer even if he hated it.

Jack stepped out of the truck and Ruby immediately threw her arms around his neck. He squeezed her a little tighter, a little longer, so he could memorize just how perfectly she fit there.

Because even if for only tonight, Ruby Stevens was in *his* arms and no one else's.

"Happy Birthday, Ruby Girl." Jack's lips accidentally brushed her ear as he spoke, causing a shiver that showed she wasn't completely unaffected by him.

Slowly he slid her back down until her little gold sandals hit the gravel. Their bodies connected with every inch, and he smiled as he steadied her when she wobbled just slightly. A blush burned her cheeks, and it took every ounce of Jack's self-control not to lean in and kiss those pink lips.

They looked so soft. Would they taste like that strawberry stuff that made them so shiny? She gave a shy smile and climbed in his side of the truck without a word.

Jack winked as he started the engine. "Are you ready for your first birthday surprise?"

"Uh, yeah!" she squealed, bouncing on the bench seat. She glanced behind them and turned back with a huge grin. "You brought the guitar?"

"I did," he said, turning left out of her parents' driveway.

"Is it part of my birthday surprise?"

He shrugged, fought a smile and kept his face impassive. "Maybe."

"What if I said that's all I wanted for my birthday? For you to not just play this time, but sing the words too?"

Jack glanced her way when he stopped at a red light. "You want to give up *all* the birthday surprises I have planned just to hear my horrible voice?"

Her nose scrunched in the most adorable way as she considered it, and he wasn't sure what he'd do if she said yes. Music was something he loved, but he loved it in private. He taught himself to play the guitar, but he'd never done it in front of anyone but his family. At least he hadn't until he met Ruby.

She gave an exaggerated sigh. "I really want my birthday surprises."

He shook his head with a laugh and drove them to the only grocery store in town. He handed her two quarters, and she looked at him, biting the corner of her lip while her brows narrowed in confusion. When her eyes caught the machine in front of them, she smiled and jumped from the truck.

Ruby came back with her new favorite weird juice drink, which only existed in this one grocery store vending machine they'd found completely by accident. It tasted freaking disgusting, like someone mixed every fruit and vegetable imaginable and thought it was the best idea ever.

But Ruby loved it, and he loved anything that made her smile at him like he was her hero.

Ruby sipped her drink, head bobbing to the old school Taylor Swift on the radio.

“Thank you for tonight,” she said.

“The night just started.” Jack laughed, glancing her way but keeping his hands at ten and two on the steering wheel, so he didn’t try to interlock their fingers.

She smiled, shoving his shoulder, and he fought the insistent urge to gently slide her closer on the bench seat of his granddad’s old truck.

“I know, but it’s already perfect,” she whispered.

*Perfect.*

Yeah she definitely was.

A few weeks ago, Jack was dreading his month in Sage Hill. Sure, he loved spending time with his grandparents, but he was about to start his *senior* year. He wanted to spend the last month of summer at home with his friends.

Now Jack couldn’t imagine a better 32 days than the ones he’d shared with Ruby.

He only wished, more than anything, that it didn’t have to end.

If football practice wasn’t starting in two days he’d definitely be begging his mother to stay.

Jack drove them thirty minutes to Ruby’s favorite restaurant. She convinced him to share the chicken tender basket and broccoli rice casserole, which sounded totally disgusting, but the cheesy mess was surprisingly good.

Ruby leaned closer and stole some of his ketchup for her curly fry. “So are you excited about starting football practice next week? Senior year...big man on campus and all that.”

“Two-a-days in the Nevada heat? Excited isn’t exactly the word I’d use.”

Her brow wrinkled in confusion. “What? You’ve been talking about it for weeks. Mr. Football-Superstar-Scoring-All-The-Touchdowns. I believe you said this year would be epic. All the college scouts and pretty girls there to watch every single game...”

Should he be honest? Tell her what he really felt or just keep the conversation light?

Chocolate brown eyes held him captive across the table, and the words were out before he even realized he’d spoken them.

“I’m just...I don’t want to leave.” Jack watched as his thumb brushed over hers where it rested on the table. Tan skin meeting her ivory. He was probably an idiot for torturing himself, but he also couldn’t seem to stop.

Jack raised his gaze to meet hers again. “I really don’t want to leave you, Ruby.”

She bit her lip, eyes focused on the table. “And I wish you didn’t have to go.”

As admissions went, it wasn’t much. She could mean she’d miss his friendship since they’d never even come close to more. But the way she glanced toward their hands, as if waiting for him to touch her again, made Jack think that it had to be something more.

But like he’d been telling himself for the last week, starting something with her now would only hurt them both tomorrow when he left. He’d work out his frustration at crap timing on the punching bag when he got home, but for now, he needed to turn the mood light again and see her beautiful smile.

“I know you’re ready for school to start,” Jack said with a smirk. “If I had to guess, I’d say you’ve already got all those supplies you dragged me out to buy last week labeled by subject and placed strategically in your fancy new backpack even though school doesn’t start for another month.”

Ruby rolled her eyes, but he laughed when she didn’t deny his words.

“I knew it,” he continued. “You’ll be the first one there bright and early to place said items in your perfectly decorated locker.”

She groaned at that and squeezed her eyes shut.

“What? Did we not buy enough tiny crap to decorate your locker?” Jack teased.

Ruby shook her head. “I’d forgotten all about my locker assignment. It’s right next to Adam’s. I wasn’t exactly thinking we’d be broken up when I requested it last year.” She closed her eyes on a sigh. “After our very public, very loud, break up at the pool, seeing him between every class isn’t going to be fun. Everyone will be watching and analyzing our every move. We share all the same friends, and they’ll definitely take sides.”

“You aren’t going back to him, are you?” The sharp words slipped out before Jack could control them. Jealousy burned hot in his veins because the truth was she and Adam Grant had two years of history, and Jack couldn’t do a thing to stop her if she decided to give the jerk another chance.

She’d been silent about the exact reason for their breakup. Jack only heard the two of them arguing across the water of the pool from his lifeguard post and had promptly asked someone to take his spot, so he could forcibly remove the guy. Thankfully, she’d already taken care of business by the time he got to her side of the pool because his temper likely would have gotten him fired.

Jack started to apologize, but Ruby spoke before he could.

“No, we’re done. I think we have been for a while and I…”

Their waitress appeared, cutting off whatever Ruby was about to say. The woman, whose name tag read, Sheila, asked Jack if they were celebrating anything special. He raised his brow at Ruby in silent challenge.

He knew of her extreme hatred for birthday singers, especially singing to her. As Jack was about to decline and let her off the hook, Ruby told the waitress that it was Jack’s birthday, and he was too shy for the singing, but they would love some dessert.

“You think you’re so smart, don’t you,” Jack teased as they shared the giant cookie covered in ice cream and hot fudge.

Ruby scooped up another huge bite, her smile electric and so dang addictive. “That’s because I am, Superstar. Haven’t you learned that by now?”

This girl did not like to lose, and in their battle of wills, she won more often than he cared to admit. Her fierce competitiveness and the way they challenged each other only made him love her more.

Love?

*Crap.*

He didn’t love her.

*Did he?*

He loved being around her. Loved how well they got along. Loved how easy it was to tell her anything. But he wasn’t *in love* with her.

*Right?*

Jack stared across the table at the way the light reflected off her auburn hair, making the red shade a bit brighter.

His heart screamed that *in love* didn’t even scratch the surface of what he felt for this girl.

And yeah…he definitely hadn’t seen that one coming.

Pen shaking in his hand, Jack signed the check then stood and took Ruby’s hand in his, leading them outside.

Friends could totally hold hands.

Because they were friends.

Friend-zone with a capital F.

Jack shook away the L-word revelation still spinning through his brain and moved on to the next stop on *Operation Ruby's Best Birthday Ever*.

The movies.

Ruby, with her intense love for all things horror movie, had been talking for weeks about buying her first rated R movie ticket. Jack gave her the money, and she smiled over at him while she anxiously awaited buying the tickets and showing her proof of age.

She asked to see the new slasher flick, but the kid behind the glass took the twenty and handed her the tickets without a word. She turned a shocked, pouty face Jack's way, still holding the driver's license in her left hand.

Jack couldn't contain his laughter. "Take it as a compliment, beautiful. You clearly look older than your seventeen years."

Beautiful...

He'd never actually called her beautiful before. He'd thought it every single day. Fought the words just like he'd fought his feeling the last four weeks.

Her smile said she'd noticed his compliment, the dimples in both cheeks winking back at him. "We need popcorn, and soda, and—"

"A chocolate, a gummy, and a sour," Jack finished for her.

"One from each candy group." Ruby flashed him a satisfied smile. "I'm so glad you have learned my wonderful ways, young Padawan."

And now he was grinning like an idiot. "A Star Wars reference. Impressed, I am."

Ruby rolled her eyes and laughed. "You made me watch the entire stupid series thing."

"And you and your OCD brain wouldn't let us watch them in the correct order so we'll obviously have to watch them all over again now."

Ruby threw both hands out in the air, almost smacking the people standing behind them in line. "Who starts a movie series in the fourth movie? That's just ridiculous."

"There is so much wrong with that statement." Jack shook his head in mock disgust. "I don't even know where to start. But to get the authentic experience you must start at episode four."

She just rolled her eyes, again, as he stepped up and bought her popcorn, soda and every single candy she wanted before they settled into the middle of a row near the top to watch the movie.

“You just let me know if you get scared and need some big, strong arms to comfort you,” Jack said with a wink.

Ruby smiled, and even though he couldn't see them in the darkness of the theater, he knew her dimples were in full effect.

“Oh, do you see a big, strong man around here?” She gave an exaggerated look around the theater. “Maybe I should go sit with him just in case.”

Jack scowled playfully, and she laughed loud enough that the boys in front of her turned to glare.

She wouldn't need any comfort from the gory horror film she'd chosen. Ruby loved scary movies. The scarier the better.

The problem... Jack hated them.

Like really *really* hated them and had since the first time his friends forced him to watch *Scream* in sixth grade. Unfortunately, he'd failed to admit that to Ruby in the month they'd known each other. Stupid as it sounded, he hadn't wanted to seem less manly.

Halfway through the movie Jack very much regretted that decision. After avoiding the screen by secretly staring into his popcorn for almost two hours, Jack had a crick in his neck, but sighed in relief when the credits rolled.

Ruby turned to him as the light rose in the theater. “That was amazing. Did you love it?”

“So much,” he lied, knowing he'd be sleeping with a night light like a five-year-old for the foreseeable future.

They made their way outside, and Jack turned to Ruby when he climbed in the driver's seat once again.

“One last stop on the best birthday night ever,” Jack said, starting the engine so he didn't grab her hand in his again. “You in?”

She nodded, glancing at him timidly while lacing her fingers with his between them.

Jack's heart kicked into overdrive and just like that, he was completely lost for a girl he couldn't even have.

He couldn't, *wouldn't*, start something with her when they only had six hours left together, and their paths didn't intersect again for at least the next five years.

No matter how much he wanted Ruby Stevens to be his, he wouldn't hurt her like that. Wouldn't force her into a life of waiting for the next text message or phone call instead of living her life.

Jack closed his eyes briefly in defeat, then drove through the cattle guard on the east side of his grandparents' land.

The truck bumped along, pushing through the tall grass to his favorite spot in the entire world. It was one of the highest points in Sage Hill, and with the light of the almost full moon, you could see for miles around while listening to the river rush around you.

With the truck in park, Jack slid out his door afraid if he met Ruby's gaze she'd see every single emotion pouring through him. He pulled out their sleeping bags from behind his seat and dropped them on the tailgate. With a few steadying breaths to get himself together and not ruin this perfect night, he moved to open Ruby's door.

Ruby smiled, interlacing their fingers once again before Jack led her to the tailgate. She sat watching while he spread out their blankets to cover the truck bed. Her sandal covered feet swung over the edge as he moved to sit beside her.

"I love it here," Ruby whispered, staring into the darkness.

"This spot or Sage Hill in general?" Jack asked.

"Both, I guess. I just can't imagine ever wanting to spend my life anywhere else. I want to come home every night and sit on the back porch with the love of my life when the kids are asleep just enjoying the quiet together. That's the life I dream about. The job I've always wanted and a beautiful family just like my parents have. Someone to spend every single day with. All the good and the bad stuff. I know I'm probably too young to be thinking about all that—"

"No," Jack interrupted, using his thumb to tilt her chin and meet his gaze. "Your dreams are yours and they matter, Ruby girl. Never let anyone try to tell you they don't or that you have to make them on some stupid time line."

She nodded. "Thank you for sharing this place with me, Jack."

"Well, consider it on loan to you when I'm gone."

Jack groaned. Why did he have to bring up his leaving?

*Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

Ruby's gaze moved to their joined hands resting on his thigh, then up to meet his again. "I don't want you to go. I know you have to, I just..."

Jack's free hand cupped her cheek, his thumb catching the wetness of a tear. "Me too, Ruby Girl. I...I just..I wish we had more time. I mean if I'm wishing here, then I wish we had *all* the time."

She laughed softly and Jack breathed a sigh of relief that he hadn't let the three little words slip out even though he so desperately wanted to tell her. To let her know just how much he cared about her before he had to leave her. Instead, he pulled out the red velvet box he'd been hiding and placed it in her hands.

"Thank you," Ruby whispered, staring at the little white bow on top.

He quirked an eyebrow and laughed. "You haven't even opened it yet."

With shaking hands, Ruby slowly peeked inside and stared at the delicate bracelet. She ran her fingers over the tiny red beads with a small R charm near the clasp.

"They're little gemstone beads...rubies of course," Jack said with a smile. "I know people probably buy you rubies all the time but I searched forever for something I thought you'd like and this just...fit."

"It's perfect," she whispered. "Thank you."

She glanced back down at the box, pausing when she noticed what he'd scribbled on a piece of paper and placed in the top.

She tackle-hugged him, his back hitting the truck bed, both of them laughing.

"You wrote me a song?" she squealed. "I've been hearing you play that guitar all summer and you...you wrote me a song?"

"It's nothing." Jack waved her off, his face heating. "More like the start of a song...the chorus." He shrugged. "I just...the music, the words, they're easy when I think about you, and I wanted you to have it so..."

"I love it, Jack. So much. Will you play it for me?"

He nodded, slipping off the tailgate to grab his guitar from the truck's back seat. His gut churned with nerves, strumming the opening chords, but he closed his eyes and played her the tune even if he couldn't bring himself to sing the lyrics.

"It's beautiful, Jack," Ruby touched his arm with the last note, her fingers sliding down to where his still held the strings. "Would you sing it for me someday? When it's finished?"

Jack gave a non-committal shrug. The words he could write, but singing them was so much harder. He'd never been able to sing in front of anyone before, but he hoped someday maybe he'd have the courage to finish that song and sing it for her as she sat in front of him.

He shifted back to lay in the truck bed, Ruby's cheek resting against his chest. A sigh fell from his lips as they stared at the twinkling night sky.

"I've never wanted to kiss anyone as much as I want to kiss you right now," Ruby whispered to his neck. "I just can't decide if it will make watching you leave tomorrow easier or harder."

Jack turned on his side to face her, their lips separated by inches. "I've been thinking that for the last four days." He smiled at her, his thumb brushing her bottom lip. "Honestly, I've been thinking about kissing you since the moment I met you, but I don't want to hurt you, Ruby. Never want to hurt you. You're my best friend, but I want you to know how much I wish we could be more. That I could give you everything you ever—"

Ruby leaned into him, cutting off the words with her warm lips, soft against his. The kiss was gentle, slow and tender, as he raised his hand to cup her cheek.

She broke away first, and Jack stared breathless at the most precious thing in his world. She was a treasure, made just for him to cherish and protect. And he had to leave her in five hours.

Her head went back to his shoulder, and he wrapped his arm around her, pulling her in as close as he could.

"I know why we can't start something now," Ruby said into the darkness. "We don't even know when we'll see each other again, but just because it's not our time right now, doesn't mean that maybe someday it couldn't be."

Jack lifted his head to meet her gaze, and the devotion in her brown eyes made a knot form in his throat.

He never wanted her to stop looking at him that way.

"Leave the door open for me, Ruby Girl. I'll find a way back to you."