

# The Waiting

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## **The Waiting**

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## *Dedication*

To Jimmy, my greatest encourager and supporter—  
My One.



*“When I am forced into God’s waiting room to wait for answers to hard questions in silence, He waits with me.”*

*Alice Chapin*

# 1

Katherine Herrington eased her most prized possession—a rainbow stack of spiral notebooks—out of the cardboard moving box and gently placed them on the upper shelf in her old closet. Sandwiched between an outdated combination CD-cassette player and two stacked shoe boxes full of fashion dolls and their twenty-year-old ensembles, those irreplaceable pages contained the last fifteen years of her life.

As the sweet perfume of Mom’s star jasmine drifted in through the gauzy sheers billowing across the open bedroom window, the evening breeze carried the memory of the words she’d heard so often. *Katherine, enjoy the moment. Be spontaneous.* Mom had always thought she was inflexible, too rigid, but that wasn’t true. She was just a planner. While some people kept journals, she made lists. Looking back at all the check-marked entries and seeing what she had accomplished was satisfying.

Besides, had Mom been more like her and a little less spontaneous, she might still be with them.

After all, having your life in order, wanting to know what to expect, was no crime. Organization was

a good thing. In fact, tomorrow she'd go to the store, buy some plastic containers, and whip this closet into shape. She would have done it tonight, except for...The Date.

"Beth?"

Katherine smiled. Cassie was the only one who still called her that.

"Can I come in?" The door cracked open just enough for Katherine to see her sister's blue eyes dancing with excitement.

"Sure, sweetie."

Cassie burst through the door and dove into the middle of the old iron bed with the level of enthusiasm only a thirteen-year-old girl who hadn't yet been on her first date could have. "Aren't you excited?" Sitting cross-legged, she bounced with anticipation.

No. "Cassie, it's just a date. Nothing more." Katherine was long over the tears of frustration she'd shed privately after Dad had told her he and one of the church ladies had set up this date with Crescent Bluff's newest bachelor. Dad was the only person she'd do this for. She was sick of blind dates.

The women at her church in Dallas had meddled in the same way. They meant well but hadn't seemed to understand that, if and when He wanted to, God would bring the man she'd prayed for since middle school into her life. He wouldn't need their help, or anyone else's for that matter. A year ago, she thought He had, but now—maybe not.

Anyway, tonight was the last blind date of her life. "I'm only going because Dad set it up, and I don't want to hurt his feelings. He means well."

"But, Beth. This guy could be The One." Stars filled Cassie's eyes.

Katherine smiled. Who was she to destroy Cassie's fairytale optimism? "You're right. You never know, do you? I imagine he could be." She sat down on the bed and hugged her little sister.

Cassie's head rested on Katherine's shoulder. Her voice was hushed. "I'm glad you lost your job." She bolted up. "I mean, not glad you're not working but glad you could come back home. I miss Mom so much." Her eyes filled with tears.

"I know. Me, too." Katherine eased her sister's head back down onto her shoulder and stroked her flaxen hair. Losing Mom had been heartbreaking, yet Katherine had, at Dad's insistence, returned to Dallas and resumed some semblance of a normal life. But now with no job, she'd had no other choice but to come back home. That is, unless she counted collecting unemployment and living with friends or on the street viable options.

The deep hum of a car engine vibrated the old wood-framed windows. He was here.

Cassie jumped up and peeked between the curtains. "Wow! Awesome car." She turned back and grinned, the tears gone. "Come look."

Katherine moved behind her sister and peered over her shoulder. Some sort of red sports car sat at the top of the circular drive. Impressive to guys maybe, but not to her. Cars were a means of transportation, nothing more. They should be reliable and sensible, not flashy.

As the driver's side door opened, Katherine held her breath. *Here we go.* A man dressed in jeans and a plaid western shirt stepped out. Her heart groaned. Not only was he short, but he was bald. Or maybe his head was shaven, but the only reason a twenty-five or

thirty-something-year-old man shaved his head was because he was either bald or balding. Short and hairless were not on "The List." A knot formed in her stomach. Unfortunately, it was too late to conjure up an illness.

"Oh, he's so cute." Cassie placed her fingertips together and clapped them excitedly.

They couldn't be looking at the same man. Katherine blinked slowly and then refocused her eyes. No, nothing had changed.

Cassie jumped up. "I'll go let him in, but you hurry. Hurry." Twirling out of the room, she closed the door.

Katherine kicked off her heels and placed them on the rack in the closet. Then she slipped on a pair of flat sandals. Hopefully the change in shoes would solve the height problem.

As the doorbell rang, Cassie's footsteps echoed down the hall through the closed bedroom door.

After taking one final look in the mirror, Katherine retouched her lip gloss and ran her fingers through her hair. She sat on the edge of the bed, took a deep breath, and counted slowly to ten—and on to twenty. For Dad, she could stand almost anything for a few hours. Plastering a smile on her face, she opened the door and inched down the hall toward the living room. *Let the fun begin.*

Cassie was curled up on one end of the couch with her feet tucked under her, and the back of The Date's bald head arched above the top of the leather recliner. Wonder how Dad would have reacted if he'd come home and seen a stranger trespassing in his chair. Terms like "PK, dribbling, striker" were flying back and forth between the two. Soccer. Maybe The Date

had more in common with Cassie than with her. If Cassie were only a little older.

"Oh, hi, Beth." Cassie jumped up. Her grin was almost wider than her face.

The Date stood and turned toward her, a large bundle of pink tulips in his hands. He was actually kind of cute...for a short, bald guy. "Hello, there," he said. "I'm Sam. Sam Tucker." His voice was deep, his accent unusual.

Certainly not Texan, not even southern. Midwestern...Northeastern...She couldn't quite place it. "You look lovely this evening. These are for you." He held out the rosy bouquet, and as he smiled, his eyes sparkled like sunlight on ocean waves.

It was like looking into the Caribbean from the deck of a ship. She fought to keep her balance as the deep aquamarine pools pulled at her like an undertow at South Padre.

He cleared his throat as he pushed the bouquet closer. "Perhaps you'd like to place them in some water?"

"Beth?" Cassie stepped forward and took the flowers from him. "Here, I'll do that for you. Thanks, Sam."

"Greatly appreciate it, Cassie."

"You guys have fun." Waltzing into the kitchen, Cassie left them alone.

"So, Beth, is it?" He held out his hand and smiled again.

Oh, great, she'd made a stellar first impression. As she found her breath, her voice followed. "No. Katherine. Katherine Herrington." She grasped his outstretched hand. "Nice to meet you, Sam." The sightline from her eyes to his was an upward angle. He

wasn't short after all. He was definitely taller than she was, just not as tall as Clark. She had changed shoes for no reason.

"Katherine." He cocked his head to the side, raised his eyebrows, and pressed his lips together. "OK. Katherine it is then. Pleased to meet you, as well." He extended his crooked elbow for her to take. "Ready?"

*Or not...* "Ready." She took his arm, and he led her out the door to his car. The clean scent of his cologne was like a fresh summer breeze.

As he held her door open, he spoke. "So, Cassie tells me you like Tex-Mex."

What else could Cassie possibly have told him in those few seconds they were alone? She shouldn't have stalled and let her sister greet him.

"There's an old restaurant on the highway toward Fort Worth," he continued. "The Cantina. I haven't been there in a while, but they used to have live music and the best fajitas around. Or if you're not in the mood for Mexican, we could do sushi in Dallas."

Sam closed the passenger door and walked around to the driver's side. He must not have put much thought into planning their date if he hadn't even decided on a restaurant. But being given a choice was kind of nice, and while she didn't really have a preference, The Cantina was closer and would most likely mean an earlier night and a shorter date. So, Mexican, it was.

After climbing into the car, he buckled his seatbelt and placed the key in the ignition. He turned to face her. "So, what's your preference, Katherine?"

"How about The Cantina? I haven't been there in quite a while, either."

"All right! Tex-Mex it is." As he pushed the

gearshift forward, he smiled and winked at her. "Spoken by a man in a state of great relief. Not much of a sushi fan, I must say."

She stared out the windshield. He'd set himself up, and she wouldn't pass up the opportunity to take advantage of his admission. "Of course, I've always heard it's a woman's prerogative to change her mind." Glancing left out of the corner of her eye, she continued, "And I do love sushi." As his face reddened, she sighed for effect. "Let me think. You know, on second thought, sushi actually sounds wonderful." The redness now covered his entire head. He was quite cute when he was embarrassed. "Dallas is farther away, but it's early. Maybe I would like sushi, after all."

As they reached the stop sign at the intersection of the highways, he turned toward her, one arm resting on the seat back, the other on the door. "Decision time. Which is it? Left toward Fort Worth or right toward Dallas? You decide."

"Let's see...such a hard choice." As the pick-up behind them honked, she jumped. "Left."

His eyes laughed. "Only if you're sure. I certainly wouldn't want to make you do anything you wouldn't enjoy."

They needed to go. "Yes, I'm sure. Left. Go left."

He made no effort to grasp the steering wheel. "I mean, if you really want sushi, I'd be happy to oblige."

The truck honked again. "Sam! Left, left."

His forehead wrinkled in thought. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe I should give sushi another try. I might learn to like it, you know."

The driver behind them laid on the horn. "Sam, left, please. Left. Now."

A smug look covered his face. "Only because you insist, Katherine. Only because you insist." The car burst out onto the highway.

Sam shifted quickly through the gears until the car flew up the road toward Fort Worth.

Probably trying to impress her. She sank back into the quilted, black leather seat that felt more like a wingback chair in a den than a car seat. OK, she'd humor him. "Nice car."

He smiled. "Thanks. It's my new work car."

Certainly not the typical company car, at least not like any she'd seen before. "So, tell me, what exactly do you do?"

As he shifted one more time, she gripped the arm rest and ignored the inner voice demanding she look at the speedometer.

"Nothing at the moment. I'm on medical leave, and I've come to my aunt's to recuperate for a few months."

"Medical leave?" The lack of hair...oh no, chemo. She'd been so judgmental, so insensitive earlier. But she couldn't possibly have known. Other than the bald head he looked so healthy.

"Yeah, knee surgery. Blew it out playing football."

So, knee surgery wasn't exactly life-threatening, but the ride to the restaurant might be. Her heart raced while fence posts, highway signs, mesquite trees, all whizzed past her window as one continuous green-brown-gray blur. They were going way too fast.

"But to answer your question, I'm currently in PR—Public Relations, that is—for an athletic organization."

"I know what PR means." He must think she'd been living under a rock somewhere. "I have a

business degree.”

“Me, too. An MBA. That is—”

“I know what that means, too.” Even though he tried to cover his mouth, she saw his grin. He was baiting her.

“So, how about you, Katherine? What do you do?”

As she grabbed the console, she finally obeyed the voice of self-preservation. The needle reached to almost one hundred on a dial that ended at two hundred. “Please tell me the numbers on the speedometer are in kilometers.”

The revving of the engine eased as he looked down toward the dashboard and downshifted. “Whoops. Sorry. I’ve only had the car a few days, and I’m still getting used to the feel. Had no idea we were going that fast. Didn’t mean to scare you.”

She relaxed her grip and took a deep breath. “Oh, no. I wasn’t scared. I just don’t want you to get a ticket. The highway patrol routinely has a speed trap set a few miles up the road.”

The smirk on his face told her he wasn’t buying her explanation. “Thanks for your concern.” The speedometer now hovered at seventy. “So, what do you do?”

“At the moment, I guess you could say I’m on leave, too. Not medical, though. Economical. About nine months ago, I went to work for an auditing company in Dallas, and when the economy tanked, so did my job. Last to be added, first to be subtracted.” That was more than enough information for a first—and only—date.

“Well, that’s a good reason to move back home. You plan to look for a job here?”

The sun had slipped behind the horizon setting the

few stray clouds on fire. She couldn't see sunsets like this among the skyscrapers in Dallas. "No. My boss—ex-boss—said he'd call me when things picked back up. Plus, my dad needs my help right now. He has to go overseas for a few weeks, so I'll take care of Cassie. Then we'll see what happens."

The car slowed slightly. "My aunt told me about your mom. I'm terribly sorry."

Despite her will, tears filled her eyes, and she turned to look out the window at some pretend point of interest. "Thank you." She couldn't say any more. She wanted to go home. She wasn't ready to do this, after all. The pain was still too raw to share something so intimate with a stranger. But then again, she couldn't let Dad down.

He had only arranged this date because he loved her, and no matter how uncomfortable the next few hours would be, she would not disappoint him.

## 2

Sam ate the last bite of fajitas. When she'd been so quiet in her house, he hadn't been sure. But, no—she didn't remember him, and that was definitely a good thing.

Finding Beth...Katherine...had been too easy. She was the real reason he'd come back to Crescent Bluff. Rehab was only an excuse. When he'd casually asked about her last week, Aunt Ginny's eyes had sparkled with understanding. She'd set up the blind date, passed the ball to him, and now it was his job to get it in the goal.

Her hair was shorter, more contemporary, and her eyes an even richer brown. Other than that, she hadn't changed much at all. Except that she was even more beautiful now than she'd been in ninth grade, and she'd been gorgeous then. The beginning of high school...what a weird time of life when most girls had become women and most guys were still boys. She'd always been about a head taller than any of the guys in school, but he'd definitely surpassed her.

He had come back to Crescent Bluff searching. These last few years, the world would say he'd made it. Yet really, all he'd done was make a mess of it. He could have bought almost anything he wanted—and pretty much had. Yet it hadn't been enough. Despite all

the stuff, all the renown he'd accumulated, something was missing. And he'd come back to the place where life had first begun to see if he could find that meaning again.

The band struck up a new song as couples filled the dance floor.

Their conversation had been polite, shallow, since he'd made that comment in the car. He hadn't intended to upset her. But ignoring her mother's death would have been worse, like that proverbial elephant in the room that everyone pretended didn't exist.

She looked up from her plate and smiled. "Just as delicious as I remembered. Thanks for the suggestion, Sam."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it. But I'm somewhat disappointed that I didn't get to try sushi again. Maybe next time." He smiled.

First her eyebrows raised, and then her forehead wrinkled in response. "Maybe." She turned to watch the couples moving around the old concrete floor. Her sable eyes warmed as a slight smile rested on her face. "Wow, that couple in the straw hats is really good."

*Ah-ha!* He stood and moved in front of her. "Would you like to dance?" he asked, holding out his right hand.

Her eyes opened wide. "Oh, I couldn't. I don't know how."

He left his hand extended. "I don't believe that was the question. Would you like to dance?"

She shook her head in response. "I mean, I might like to if I knew how, but I don't. So I can't."

Maybe dancing would break the ice. The date had been going downhill anyway. What did he have to lose? "Give me your hand. Let's just go watch."

She bit her lip. "I don't think so, Sam."

"OK, we'll watch from here." He sat back down. "They're doing the Texas Two Step. I'm not the best dancer, but the basics are really pretty easy. Just ignore all those fancy turns and stuff. The couples move in a counter-clockwise direction around the floor, the man facing forward and the woman moving backward. Can you see?"

She nodded.

"Now the steps. The guy begins by stepping forward on his left foot while his partner steps back on her right. There are four steps, like this. Quick, quick, slow...slow. Quick, quick, slow...slow. Got it?" He repeated the sequence of steps while the couple in the hats continued and she watched. Her head nodded in time with his words.

She turned toward him and smiled. "I see. It's easier than I thought. All those other moves distracted me."

"Don't get me wrong. Some of the steps can get pretty complicated. But the basics? They're easy." He stood up and faced her again. "So, Katherine, would you like to dance?" The music stopped as the band retuned for the next song. "Perfect timing."

"But what about your knee?" Her eyes opened wide as she bit her bottom lip again.

His heart pounded. *Nice!* "My physical therapist will be extremely pleased."

"I don't know. I hadn't planned on dancing tonight." Her face turned bright red.

"Neither had I. Didn't know we'd have the chance. Last time I was here, a Mariachi band played. Now trying to dance to that might hurt the knee." As he moved his hand closer, she sighed.

"I, uh, guess so." She stood without giving him her hand. "Lead on."

When they reached the dance floor, he led her to the outer perimeter, turned, and held out both hands. "We can start by holding hands instead of in the traditional dance position. That way you can see your feet if you need to."

As she faced him, he grasped her hands. They were clammy. He squeezed them and then gently shook them up and down. "Relax. It'll be fun. Just remember to start by stepping back with your right foot."

As the music began, he moved her hands in time to the cadence of the steps. "Quick, quick, slow...slow. Quick, quick, slow...slow."

As she repeated his words, she looked into his eyes, and he saw fear. "Quick, quick, slow...slow. Quick, quick, slow...slow."

"OK, here we go." As he stepped forward, she stepped back, and they began moving around the floor. Her brow wrinkled as she continued to repeat the cadence under her breath.

He remained quiet so he wouldn't interrupt her concentration.

About halfway through the song, her face relaxed as she looked into his eyes and smiled. "I think I got it," she said. "You were right. It's really pretty easy."

He winked. "Told you. I wouldn't steer you wrong." She was ready, so he let go of her left hand, placed his right hand high on her back, and gently pulled her into a more traditional Two Step posture. When she widened her eyes, he leaned close to speak into her ear. She smelled great. Even better than that night in high school. Hard to believe he still

remembered. "Now, no one will think I'm a beginner."

She rolled her eyes. Her movements were more wooden than when they'd been holding hands earlier. Plus, she was pulling him. He moved his right hand from her back and grasped her left hand. "Let's go back to this. I think it's better."

After a few more passes around the dance floor, the band transitioned into a slower song and the dancers moved into slow-dance position. She stepped away, but he held her hand tight. "How about one more? Nothing complicated about a slow dance."

"Thanks, but I need to pass. I'm kind of tired. In fact, I think I'm getting a headache." She looked down at her watch and then back up into his face. "It's later than I thought. I probably should be getting home soon. I've got an early day tomorrow." She looked away.

Although it had rarely happened, he knew a brush-off when he got one. He'd definitely broken the ice—and gotten sucked all the way down to the bottom in the process. Yep, he was drowning in frigid water. "Sure. Me, too. You're probably right. We should head home."

~\*~

Katherine waited while Sam opened her car door. Her breathing quickened as she stepped onto the driveway and he followed her to the kitchen steps. Time for the awkward good night. He'd better not try to kiss her. Turning to face him, she took a deep breath. "I had a nice time, Sam. Thanks so much for dinner...and the Two Step lesson."

Only his thumbs showed as he jammed his hands into his front pockets and smiled. "Sure. I needed the practice. It's been awhile. You did great, by the way." The porch light reflected off his bald head. "Oh, and thanks for choosing Tex-Mex instead of sushi."

She climbed the first step and then turned back to look at him. "You're welcome. Good night, Sam. Thanks again."

He hadn't moved. "Good night, Katherine."

She moved up one more step. "Bye. I, uh, guess I'll see you around."

He nodded. "I would imagine so. Crescent Bluff's a small town." He still didn't move.

She smiled, but he remained motionless. "Is there something you need?"

"Only for you to go inside. Can't leave a lady on the doorstep." He crossed his arms over his chest and grinned.

Her face and neck burned. "Oh, sure. Of course. Good night. Again." He probably thought she was some sort of socially inept idiot.

As Katherine stepped into the kitchen and closed the door, the rich aroma of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies greeted her. She looked toward the overstuffed, blue toile chair in the family room where Mom should have been sitting, but it was empty. The cookies had to be slice and bake.

A deep-throated hum signaled Sam's departure, and Dad walked into the kitchen from the dining room. "Hi, sweetie."

She moved close, pulled him into a hug, and placed her head on his chest. "Daddy, you didn't have to make cookies." A lump formed in her throat as she looked up into his face.

His eyes reddened. He was trying so hard to soften the blow of their loss. Breathing deeply, he kissed her on the top of her head. His words were whispered. "Your mother loved the postdate recap. No way am I breaking the tradition." He pulled out a stool and sat at the island.

"I'll get the milk." She couldn't remember a time when she'd come in from a date that Mom hadn't met her with freshly baked cookies and cold milk. One of the few areas of life in which she'd been consistent.

The summer after her freshman year in college, Katherine had finally figured out that the after-date cookies were Mom's way of snooping. And it had always worked. If it hadn't been for chocolate chips, she'd have gone straight to bed, and by the morning, the excitement would have waned, and the shared facts would have been edited down.

Mom had been a smart woman.

Katherine set the glasses of milk down and perched on the stool next to Dad.

He popped a cookie into his mouth. "So how was the evening with James?" He smiled.

"What? Dad, his name is—"

"Bond...James Bond." He raised his eyebrows and cocked his head to the side.

Sam looked absolutely nothing like James Bond—any of them.

He slowly shook his head. "The car, Katherine, the car. He's driving the same kind of car 007 drives. Nice set of wheels." His eyes suddenly widened. "I wasn't spying or anything. I, uh, just had to look out the window when I heard the sound of that engine." He'd always liked expensive, exotic, foreign cars, although he'd never owned one.