



MAMMOTH SECRETS

ASHLEY ELIZABETH LUDWIG

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Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

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Dedication

To my grandparents, Bob and Vivian Bryan, who've gone to their heavenly home—thank you for the moonlit Spring River, southern summer nights, and providing the home of my heart.

To my Aunt Anna Lou "Boo" Weathers, who believed in my stories long before I believed in them myself.

Praise

Ashley Ludwig's snappy, contemporary voice meets nostalgic, small-town romance in *Mammoth Secrets*, where the only thing as sweet as the memories saved are those being made. ~ Joanne Bischof, Christy Award Nominated Author of "Be Still My Soul"

1

And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. ~John 8:32

Lilah Dale mulled her newest menu idea for the family diner, shortcutting through Cherokee Springs Park across the footbridge. "Too spicy. Too exotic. No one'll even try it."

Water rushed over the falls beneath her feet in an endless curtain, where the river curled south through Arkansas.

She passed the red-handled cooler from one hand to the other and glanced at the sun, just rising over the hills.

Eden was opening, and her polar-opposite sister was never late.

If Lilah hurried, she'd make it to town in time to prep before the breakfast crowd arrived. Mentally, she ticked through the same old, same old, day in, day out.

Mr. Hackleberry would want toast and poached eggs. Because it was Saturday, the Emerson clan would be there for mountains of pancakes. Scrambled eggs and sausage for Mr. Steadman, who'd sit at the counter by Papaw like it was his job.

Lord, what I'd give for a little bit of change... Passing the visitor center, she cast a longing gaze heavenward, all but tasted the cilantro she'd chopped up yesterday. Her latest kitchen triumph was perfecting chipotle

sauce. Change today looked like grilled trout smothered in the stuff. Totally crave-able. Too bad no one would order it.

The lonely truck in the empty lot gave her pause, parked just to the left of a posted "No Camping" sign.

California plates, windows steamed with a night-full of breath, and it didn't look like the driver could afford the two-hundred-dollar ticket.

Taking a mental coin toss between where she needed to go and what she ought to do, Lilah crossed the parking lot to the driver's window, and saw him through the foggy glass. Like an old motor, her heart kicked over.

His jaw hinged open in a snore. A crop of overgrown, red-gold hair obscured his face in shadow, his movie star features looked a day or two past shaving. Handsome in a gut-check way, though she had no right to look and admire. Not now, and maybe not ever again.

Lilah set down her gear and knuckle-rapped on the window, quick-stepping back when the drifter's eyes flew open in a gasp.

"Wha—? Where?" He blinked, sluggish, and a hand scrubbed his stubbled face.

"You lost?" She nodded toward the crumpled map at his side.

The now-awake stranger seemed more rugged. Raw. And utterly male.

"N-no." He cranked the window down and wiped his eyes. "Road weary. Pulled over last night to wait for morning. Guess the falls put me to sleep."

"You can't camp here. They'll ticket you, for sure." She thumbed at the sign. "Park gets more cash that way than from tourists, believe me."

“I’m not—”

“There’s a motel across the river, or if you’re tight, the campground. It has showers, facilities.” She picked up rod and cooler, elbow-pointing the direction. “Good thing I got here first or Rita might’ve called the cops.”

~*~

Across the river, the fierce wail of an approaching train caught their mutual attention.

Jake watched the engine heave its bulk around the curve, *rat-a-tattting* across the tracks. Its rusty cars and cargo stuttered through the trees like a loose movie reel.

He turned for a better look at the girl who’d woken him.

Tall and willowy, with blonde curls that framed her suntanned face, a dusting of freckles on her nose, and an obvious distrust of strangers, by the way she stayed well out of arm’s reach from his open window.

He did his best to cast a friendly, non-ax-murderer smile. “Catch anything?”

“Rainbow.” She revealed the ample stack of filleted trout. “Good morning for it.”

“As delicious as that looks, is there a fast food restaurant or something nearby?”

“In Thayer, just across the state line.” She flicked her gaze to the little wooden cross dangling from the rearview mirror, then back to him and grinned. “You could do a lot better than fast food, you know. Try Earl’s Kitchen, in town. Good for the soul.” Her brows jogged in good humor, and Jake watched her ponytail swish as she disappeared under the bridge.

He should have offered her a ride, said something,

but she hadn't really given him a chance to mention that he wasn't passing through. But waking to the sight of the natural beauty with a cooler full of fish had scrambled his thoughts.

Dragging the crumpled state map from where it bookmarked last night's reading from Exodus, he spied his location. Mammoth was a dot, just on the Arkansas side of Missouri's boot heel. He'd made it after all, though he thought he'd missed it altogether. Blink and you'd drive right by. *Now what, Lord?*

Would Margaret have ever come to a place like this? With no mall, no fancy restaurants? Not a chance. Because his hair blocked his view, he blew through his shaggy bangs. "That's not the haircut of a pastor," her voice scolded in his memory.

Great way to make a good first impression with his new congregation. Accordioning the map, he tossed it to the dash. Wifeless. Homeless, except for the lodgings the Women's Auxiliary League provided for him.

His parent church hadn't given him much background on his new home, just that they needed a fresh start as much as he did—that's why Dad allowed him to abbreviate his name, arrive incognito. Jake Gibson would be known as Jake Gibb until he'd found himself—decided which path to take. Accept his place as heir to his father's mega ministry, or to leave the pulpit all together, with no one the wiser.

"It's better for you, better for everyone until you get back on your feet."

Memory of his father's calm, mega-church pastor's assurance followed him as he drove east, and still churned his gut. A good son, he'd try it Dad's way. For now.

Maybe this was what he needed. He'd deleted himself from all social media, as if he'd never existed, with no old friends, and nothing to fall back on but his teaching and the Lord's good graces. And a town of under one thousand souls? To Margaret and her friends, it probably looked like punishment, hidden away from everything and anyone he'd ever known. And right now? That was fine with him.

Jake opened the driver's door, cringing at the long creak. He hopped out, turned this way and that to stretch his back and to catch the mid-April breeze. The glassy pool of Cherokee Spring beckoned, a broad, flat lake rounded by rocky slopes and patches of grass. Its edges grew thick with sucker plants. But the water! With shades ranging from clear at the shore to midnight blue at the depth, it struck him as a mini Lake Tahoe. No tourists, though, and no one fishing on this brisk spring morning. Just a sad-looking dock with paddleboats tied up on one side, while crumbled cement pilings jutted off on the other like a bridge to nowhere.

No one was fishing up there.

He thrilled briefly, thinking about the mysterious blonde with the cooler full of trout. When his ragged-edged heart healed, he'd only date girls not afraid of baiting a hook.

He jammed hands into his jeans pockets. Since a path wound around the spring, he decided to walk it, take in his new surroundings, and pray the weight of guilt off his shoulders. He wished he'd taken the time to search the internet for the church and the town, instead of trekking across the country like Moses with a map. A church like this was basically a blank slate. But then again, so was he.

Turning away from the stream and lake, Jake hoofed it toward the now-open structure. Inside, a heavysset ranger sat behind her desk, paperback tight in her hand. She greeted him without glancing up. "Welcome to Cherokee Springs State Park," she said in a drawl. "Bathroom's down the exhibit hall and to the right."

"Thanks, but that's not why I'm here." Jake stood in front of her and grinned. "The lake. It's fascinating."

Her romance novel dropped a few degrees as surprise brightened her gray eyes. "The aquifer feeds the whole Ozark river system, but I like the Cherokee legend—says the chief's son died here, looking for water after a long drought. The spring came up right where they buried him. Been bubbling ever since."

"In my experience, most legends come from some slice of truth."

He gathered a map and brochure from the Plexiglas stands and studied a picture of a clear blue aquifer, young weeping willow trees at its edge. "You been here long?"

"I started with the parks service right out of high school. Only job I've ever had." She straightened her name badge, eyeing the wall frame congratulating her for thirty years of service. "Used to be beautiful." She shook her straight, granite-colored locks, giving him the feeling she meant more than just the park.

"It still is." Jake looked out the window, trying to see it through her eyes. "The bones of the place are good. Thanks for the map, Ms. Hollister."

"Call me Rita. Everyone does." Her grin erased ten years from her dour appearance. Turning the swivel chair toward the sidewalk, lined with scrub-grass and bare earth, she sighed. "Just wait until the wildflowers

come out in a couple weeks. But, you're just passin' through. Maybe when you'll be headed back the other way?"

"I'm here to stay, I'm afraid." He held a hand out in greeting. "Name's Jacob-Jake Gibb. I'm—"

"Pastor Gibb?" She gave his hand a hearty pump. "As in Cherokee Springs' new pastor?"

"That's right."

Her gaze went deer-in-the-headlights, caught. "Not to be disrespectful..."

"Believe me." He leaned in, voice lowering into a conspiratorial whisper. "I'm as surprised as you."

They shared a laugh as she hopped off the stool. "Let me be the first to welcome you to Mammoth, Pastor Gibb." She circled around the counter to walk him to the door, standing all of five feet tall, hands parked on her hips. "We've certainly been waiting for you!"

"Sorry it took me so long to get here." He frowned, knowing that he should have arrived in the middle of last week. "I had some business to attend to in California before I came out..."

"Ah, yes, about that, Pastor." She cleared her throat with a noisy rattle.

His stomach dropped a notch or two. Here goes, lowering the boom. The church leaders had decided they didn't want a divorced man leading them. Mouth dry, he flicked a glance to the packed truck, his homelessness spearing deep. "Is there a problem?"

She frowned, a flush rising to her cheeks. "Just some friendly advice. Be careful with too much California talk. Folks 'round here think anyone from west of the Rockies can't be trusted. Not me, a'course." She hooted a laugh.

"I'll take that under advisement." A sudden rumble from his midsection and he palmed his empty stomach. "Sorry. I haven't eaten anything but chips and a soda since last night."

"That's easy enough to fix." She pointed out directions. "Under the bridge, and left on Main Street. Earl's Kitchen's on the right, across from the pharmacy. I'll phone the auxiliary, an' all. Let 'em know you're coming."

"I'd appreciate that." His smile betrayed thoughts of the freckle-faced young woman with the cooler of fish. Brochures in hand, he paused at the door. "Where's that diner?"

She jotted quick directions on a pad and then handed it over. "Earl's is kind of Mammoth's meeting place, especially since our old pastor...well—" Her voice went grave. "Since—"

"Right." He nodded, as if that explained everything.

"Hot Springs Ministries didn't have much of a bio on you. And the ladies league didn't find you on that Facebook."

"Yeah, I try to stay away from social sites." Jake dragged a hand over the back of his neck, sighing. *Should have been ready for this, Lord. I should have—*

"I'm with you, Pastor. If I'm gonna make friends with someone, it's over a cup of coffee."

"No need to worry about me. I, um, my wife..." The words lodged in his throat. *How do I say this?* "Uh, she, she's no longer—"

"Oh, Pastor!" Impossible not to notice the wash of sadness over her pale blue eyes, the tinge of pink at her cheeks—her obvious embarrassment for asking such a personal question.

He cringed. “Actually—” *Just say it, Jake.*

A crackling radio interrupted before he could explain. The rapid firing of code numbers snapped Rita into action. With a squelch, she grabbed her walkie-talkie.

“Duty calls!” She walked him out to the parking lot and waved goodbye as she hefted herself into the little electric golf cart with the spring’s logo. “Under the bridge, hang a left to get to that diner.”

“Well, then.” He backpedaled and climbed in behind the wheel. “Thanks for the directions. And the welcome.”

“We should be thanking you!” she called out and buzzed off.

With a final wave, Jake headed to the scatter of buildings that made up the blip of Mammoth, Arkansas.

His new home.

2

Lilah stowed her morning's work in the walk-in fridge and punched her card just a few minutes later than planned.

Hallelujah pop filtered through the built-in speakers and spoke of her sister's, holier-than-thou mood.

Through the window that separated the kitchen from the floor, Eden wiped down the last of the booths with her vinegar cleanser. Even the prep table's stainless steel gleamed.

Lilah dragged a fresh apron from the stack and called a hello across the empty restaurant.

"You're late." Eden popped a piece of gum and went to the register. Change rattled into the drawer as she hip-shut it with a bang.

"Sorry." Lilah hustled to the counter and grabbed her whiteboard. With a frown, she wiped off the unordered special from yesterday. Strike that. Plenty of people had ordered the French dip. Just not with the layer of melting Swiss or caramelized Vidalia onion. With swoosh and flourish, she scrawled her description of succulent, pico de gallo-covered fish sandwiches with tangy chipotle sauce.

Raymond slunk through the back door, blue bandana tied over his overgrowth of black, curling hair. With a yawn and stretch, he tied a white half-apron over his jeans.

"You're late, too," Eden scolded, adjusted her

name badge over a square of lace handkerchief. She changed "Closed" to "Open" with a flip. "I made the coffee."

"Better drink it before the customers come in and complain about too much chicory."

"I know how to make coffee, Lilah." Eden snapped.

Lilah propped the board up over the soda fountain for all to see. And ignore.

Raymond ambled to review her handiwork.

"Don't matter how you word it, Lilah." He spoke in a slow, resonant drawl. "They're gonna order what they always do." He was eighteen now and not a bit the boy she once babysat.

"Can't blame a girl for trying."

The bell announced the breakfast rush.

Eden shot to hostess mode and greeted morning regulars by name with hugs and chatter, until booths and tables filled to capacity. The phone rang, and Eden answered, "Earl's Kitchen! How can we make your day?"

Low, lyrical voices buzzed as one by one Lilah plated orders from the wheel. The rhythm of the work, the repetition, the monotony as coffee sloshed into mugs, bacon sizzled and popped on the griddle, and home fries crisped under the broiler. Just another day.

Save for the drifter.

Those eyes. That smile. No ring on his hand. With an idle rub to her own free finger, she gathered the toast and tossed a few jelly packets on the plate. Looks could deceive.

She slammed the order bell a bit too hard. Scrambled eggs with well-done sausage plated for Mr. Steadman. Ray emptied the industrial washer at Lilah's

back. A quick scan of the tables showed no new faces. Maybe he'd gone to that fast food joint across state line after all. Just the same old, same old, at her grandfather's diner. Then the door chimed.

~*~

Jake steered toward the flickering neon orange sign that declared Earl's Kitchen. He parked in between a huge, old sedan and a bevy of trucks. Engine off, he pulled out the key. Studied it, solitary in his palm. So, this was what starting over felt like. Eyes closed, Jake prayed that this time he'd do it right. No compromise. No settling. No running away. No one to know who he was or compare his sermons to his father's mega-ministry. He stepped out into the noonday air to meet his congregation. The door jangled.

Heads swiveled to view his arrival.

Senses greeted with the siren song of roasting coffee and frying bacon. Silverware scraped plates as the masses devoured breakfast. He palmed his midsection with the notion of real food and scanned the jam-packed dining room. Kitchen in back, cook busy flipping flapjacks. A bleached-blond waitress in orange walking shorts and crisp white blouse shot soda into glasses from the huge dispenser. Above, a propped whiteboard with handwritten daily specials and artfully drawn trout declared "Papaw's Catch of the Day!"

The booths, barstools, and tables were filled with all manner of folks dressed in megastore five-dollar button shirts and rock-bottom bargain jeans. The only seat in the house was a lone bar stool between two

men—a heavy-set, sun burnished construction type, and a thin, elderly man with a spray of white hair and smudged glasses.

“You must be Pastor Gibb,” a resonant country twang from the half-circle booth halted his progress.

Parishioners before yourself, his father’s voice reminded through the hunger. *Here goes*. Jake changed course, parked his pastor’s smile, shook hands with the man, and nodded to his pregnant wife, doing his best to remember the rattling of names. Scott Thompson. Emma. Kids. He nodded to their stair-stepped, blonde-headed children ranging in age from a bored-looking high school girl to kindergarten twins. “Nice to meet you. Thanks for the welcome.”

Their toddler stopped fiddling with fish crackers from his highchair perch and reached toward Jake’s belt.

“Here, Dewey.” The mother, Emma, filled the tyke’s hand with an orange bite and looked up with a smile. “You stumbled into the local meetin’ place. Everybody’s here, most days. My Scottie’s one of your newest deacons.” She gave her husband’s lanky arm a pat.

Scott scanned the packed room, then his full table with a slight shoulder jog. “We could pull up another chair—”

“Dad!” The girl shot a mortified look at her father, then to Jake, finally ducking her attention low, over a mobile.

“Oops!” A splash of white as one of the twins’ milk toppled.

Emma sopped the reaching splash with a fistful of napkins. “He don’t want to sit with us, Scottie. Let the man eat a meal in peace.”