



Almost
HOME

Carla Rossi



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“Okay, then. How old are you? You look like a kid in that get-up.”

“I’m twenty five. Would you like to see my ID?”

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“Get in,” he grumbled and reached for her bag.

She jumped in the cab and secured his thermos between her feet on the floor while he checked the side mirrors and started the engine.

He put the truck in reverse and placed his arm across the back of the seat.

She pulled her hat off and shook her hair loose, and then brushed away the last tear. She turned to him and smiled. Really smiled. Smiled in such a way that it rivaled the first sun of the morning now creeping into the eastern sky.

“Thanks for the ride.”

With one click of the seatbelt, Detective Justin Hatcher knew he was in for the most complicated ride of his life—and he didn’t even know her name.

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by

Carla Rossi

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

To John

Chapter One
December Nineteenth
5:36 a.m.

Detective Justin Hatcher pushed through the glass doors of the Raleigh, North Carolina diner and stepped into the predawn gloom. The turned-up collar of his leather jacket did little to cut the mid-December chill as he headed for his truck. He tightened the lid on his thermos and walked around his new black Dodge to check the tires one more time. *I'll take my time. I'll drive steady, think things through. And when I get to Tulsa...*

"Wait! Please wait!" The female voice came from somewhere behind him. Probably just someone who missed her bus as it pulled from the station adjacent to the diner. He placed one booted foot in the truck and set his thermos on the passenger seat.

"Give me a break here. Can you just hang on a minute?"

He stepped back out of the truck and turned to find the source of his delay standing breathless near his rear bumper. "Can I help you with something?"

She thumped her chest as though it would slow her panting. "Are you heading west?"

He hung his arm over the door and watched as she attempted to drag an overstuffed duffle bag around in front of her. She clutched a tightly rolled sleeping bag under her left arm and stood at an awkward angle to keep her heavy handbag from sliding off the opposite shoulder. A huge gray hooded sweatshirt swallowed her small frame, and her hair was stuffed so far under an Atlanta Braves baseball

cap, he couldn't even see what color it was.

"Please, I need to know," she begged. "Are you heading west?" She gave up and let the handbag fall. The sleeping bag came loose a second later and rolled to a stop a few feet away. Her shoulders sagged with despair.

"Who wants to know?"

"Please, I've just missed my bus, and I need to get to Oklahoma City as soon as possible. I was hoping I could ride along with you at least to the next major city."

She stepped into a ray of light from the streetlamp above and tilted her head. A strand of red gold hair fell from her cap and across her tear-dampened face.

"Wait a minute, don't you work in the diner?"

"I did. My last shift just ended. I tried to close out and say goodbye to everyone and get out of there, but everything went haywire and I missed the bus..." She took a deep breath. "I have to get out of town today. Are you going west or not?"

Say no. Get in your truck and drive away. Point her to the bench in front of the bus station and go find your son.

"Look, I know what you're thinking, but I usually don't ask strange men for rides. It's just that I know you're not dangerous, and I have to get out of town."

"What makes you think I'm not dangerous?" He'd been told he was the scariest cop in his department. A perpetual frown, they said. "Really, I want to know," he continued, "what makes you think I'm not a moral degenerate or some kind of serial killer?"

"Oh please." She snorted.

He crossed his arms to let her know they'd reached a complete standstill in transportation negotiations until she explained herself.

"Oh, all right. First of all, I recognize you from

my brother's softball team. Secondly, I saw you through the plate glass windows of the diner as you filled up with gas across the street. *And,*" she added with an index finger pointed upward, "you used a credit card. Next, you spent forty minutes in the diner having a good breakfast and loading up on caffeine. You even filled your thermos because you plan to drive a lot today. You pulled out your map and studied it a while, then you talked politely to all the regulars who tried to engage you in conversation, even though it was clear you wanted to get on your way. *And,*" pointing the finger again, "you used your credit card to pay for breakfast. Believe me, if you were dangerous and out to harm innocent women this morning, you wouldn't have left a trail a mile wide that any idiot cop could follow."

Idiot cop?

He raised an eyebrow. "Is that so?" he growled. "Well, if you know so much, why don't you catch the next bus north to FBI headquarters in DC and let them know you're there to single-handedly sniff out their entire ten most wanted list."

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Cameron McAlister turned her head toward the window and started to pray. She whispered softly against the cold glass and hoped he didn’t hear. It wouldn’t do for her new acquaintance to think she was loony toons or a religious freak.

“Thank you, Lord,” she whispered, “for providing this ride and helping me to get to Oklahoma. Keep us safe on the road and help me to know what to do next.”

“Did you say something?”

She wouldn’t lie. “Just praying for a safe journey.”

He set his jaw and stared straight ahead.

In the shadowed golden pink light of the breaking dawn, she studied his profile in quick, furtive glances. She remembered thinking he was cute at the ballpark. His black wavy hair was accompanied by warm brown eyes, shamefully long lashes, and perfect bone structure. Passing car headlights illuminated his face, revealing a long

narrow scar that ran from the edge of his hairline above his temple to the bottom of his ear. On anyone else, it would have detracted from their appearance. On him, it added to the allure of a tall dark stranger in a black leather jacket.

But she wasn't in the market for romance. Nor was she on the market, near the market, or in any way interested in anything about the market. She wouldn't even recognize the market if she stumbled into it.

She turned back toward the window with a sigh and wiped away the condensation to peer outside. Just two days ago she'd heard the news that Roger was coming home.

Of all the mistakes she could have made, marrying Roger Blackmore was the biggest. One year of marriage. One year to get a divorce, and eighteen months for Roger to remain incarcerated in a North Carolina state prison for a crime spree with his friends.

The band of drunken geniuses had stolen a car, attempted the armed robbery of a convenience store, and then led the police on a real live high-speed car chase complete with news helicopters and every cop in town. With no priors and a halfway decent attorney, Roger managed to plead down to charges as an accessory since he never actually left the car. That one night of intoxicated stupidity turned out to be another in a long line of embarrassing and dangerous situations for her to try to live down. She shivered at the thought. Good thing God is good and His mercy endures forever.

Now Roger was coming home. And while he would probably head to Fayetteville to be with his father, it would only be a matter of time before he tracked her down in Raleigh.

It wasn't that he loved her, but he did care an awful lot that she'd left him and filed for divorce on their first anniversary. He couldn't quite get it

through his head it was over. It didn't help that the divorce became final as he sat in jail.

While Roger served time, Cameron served breakfast at the all night diner and saved every dime she made. It's cheap to live when you work nonstop and rent a room in the cook's mother's house. When she'd heard the news, she'd prepared to do the next logical thing—take her savings and start over somewhere else. Anywhere else.

She dropped her head against the window and closed her eyes. The gentle hum of the engine and the swish of the highway were an enticing lullaby. She drifted into a twilight haze, lulled by the motion and the even jostle of her head against the glass.

"I can't seem to stay awake," she told him. "I worked all night and I..." A huge and certainly unattractive yawn escaped her and she was powerless to stop it.

"Go ahead and sleep. I'm going to keep moving as long as I can."

She yawned again. "As my grandma used to say 'no use me and Jesus both stayin' awake.'"

He answered with a grunt.

She blinked again and began to drift off. New day, new city, new life. She mentally thanked God for all His blessings, regardless of where she was at this moment in time. Things would get better. They had to—she'd left it all in the Lord's hands.

The scent of new leather and of the driver's cologne wafted to her nose. She inhaled deeply and realized that even with a stranger just inches away, she felt the safest she had in months—and she didn't even know his name.

Chapter Two

Cameron became aware of the sound of a diesel engine rumbling beside her. The odor of exhaust assaulted her nose. She opened her eyes to find herself inside a large black pickup sitting at an intersection between an eighteen-wheeler and a dump truck.

She snapped awake. "Where are we?"

"Asheville."

"Asheville?" She sat up straight and looked around. "How long have I been asleep?"

"More than four hours."

"Why didn't you wake me up, uh...whoever you are. What is your name, anyway?"

"I don't think we'll be together long enough to need to know each other's names."

She grabbed for her purse and dug out a piece of gum. "But what if there's a fiery crash and they ask me who you were and I can't even say who I was in the truck with?" She popped the peppermint gum in her mouth and offered him the pack.

"No thanks."

"Well?"

"Well what?" he asked as he maneuvered in the traffic.

"What is your name?"

"For the sake of the big fiery crash, which by the way is a real downer to mention on a road trip, you can call me Hatch."

She pulled down the visor to look at her sleep ravaged face and whipped out a compact. "You mean like 'to hatch an egg' or an 'escape hatch?'"

"Yes."

"Don't your parents like you?"

He shot her a quick glare before returning his attention to the road. "My last name is Hatcher. So everyone calls me Hatch."

"Not everyone," she argued.

"What would you know about it?"

"I'm sure your parents and family don't call you Hatch."

"Why not?"

"Because your parents and brothers and sisters are probably named Hatcher as well. And that's probably what their friends would call them too." She dabbed some powder around her eyes, flipped the compact closed, and pulled out a brush. "So following that rule, your house would be full of people named Hatch. Obviously, you wouldn't want to call each other the same thing. Dinner would be like 'Hey Hatch, pass the potatoes' then someone would answer 'Sure Hatch, and would you send the salt back this way?' then your mom would say 'Hatch! Stop hitting your little sister Hatch! Then—"

"Okay, stop," he held up his hand and finally chuckled. "I get it. My first name is Justin. I'm Detective Justin Hatcher."

"You're a cop in Raleigh?" Great. Someone who probably knew all about Roger's Raleigh-Durham Reign of Terror.

He puffed out his chest. "Yeah, a detective."

Oh *whatever*. "Aren't you a little young to be a detective?"

No answer.

"I mean really," she persisted, "you can't be more than twenty-eight or twenty-nine years-old."

"Let's just say I was in the right place at the right time and the mayor loves me."

She snapped her mouth closed.

“About that big fiery crash,” he continued, “what if I get to survive and have to explain who *you* are?”

“Aw, you can just dig my driver’s license out of the ashes.”

So there.

He growled.

She adjusted her giant sweatshirt and looked down and around her feet. “What happened to your thermos?”

“I emptied it about an hour ago while you were still asleep.”

“I can’t believe you haven’t had to stop and go to the bathroom after all the coffee you’ve put away.”

“I did. Twice.”

“And I slept through it?”

“Yeah, and you snored through the whole thing both times.”

“I do not snore.”

“Like a freight train. And you’re not changing the subject. What’s your name?”

“Cameron McAlister. And yes, I’m a Scot, but I’ve never been to Scotland. Yes, I know Cameron is kind of a guy’s name, but my grandfather had a prize bull named Cameron and somehow, I’m named after him—the bull, not my grandfather. Yes, I know what my family’s plaid looks like and yes, I’ve seen Braveheart more than once and no, it’s not as historically accurate as it could have been. Yes, my father and brothers wear kilts, but only to weddings and funerals. Oh, and no I’m not a Highland dancer. It’s a lot harder than it looks.”

“Wow. You didn’t even take a breath.”

“I know. Freaky, isn’t it? It’s amazing how many times I’ve been asked the same exact series of questions.”

She put her brush away and pulled her legs up under her which earned her a warning glance from Justin. “I promise I won’t get the seat dirty. It’s a

beautiful truck. I can tell it's new."

"Early Christmas present to myself."

"You should be very proud. You've accomplished a lot."

They fell into silence as Justin continued to drive along the frontage road. Within moments, he whipped into a parking lot. "I need to eat."

"Oh. I thought maybe you'd spotted a bus station."

"No, not yet, but I did spot this restaurant with a giant revolving bowl of spaghetti on top, and I can't seem to drive past it."

Justin paced in front of the restaurant while Cameron pulled a couple items out of the duffle bag and stuffed them in her enormous purse. He pressed his back against a stone pillar and stretched. A giant lasagna-eating Santa Claus smiled down at him from the painted front window of the eatery. Crystal white snow had been carefully sprayed on glass to create a winter wonderland for the jolly old Italian elf, and Rudolph munched happily on a cannoli. Justin's heart sank as he thought of the Christmases he'd simply survived rather than celebrated. Now, there was a possibility he had a son. If he had it his way, this year they would be together.

He got a table while Cameron headed for the ladies' room. "I'll be back in a minute."

He wasn't prepared for her return. The weepy mess he'd found on the parking lot was gone. In her place was a classic beauty in a dark pink sweater with tiny pearls and sequins sprinkled across the front. Her green eyes, now bright and clear since her nap, conveyed hope and promise. Not the tears and despair he'd seen earlier.

She smoothed her auburn eyebrows with her fingertips then flipped the menu over to the lunch specials. "See anything you like?" She smiled. "Or have you already sent the waiter to the roof for that

bowl of spaghetti?"

He chuckled into his glass of water. Funny. Funny *and* beautiful. "I'll have the special."

Cameron asked for a slice of lemon to go with her water and ordered a tossed salad.

"Aren't you hungry?"

"Not really," she said and propped their menus behind the napkin holder. "Besides, I'm on a tight budget 'til I start my new job. I have to be careful."

"Is that why you were taking the bus instead of flying?"

"Mostly. Plus I didn't find out I was leaving until the day before yesterday, and the fares on that short notice are out of sight this close to Christmas."

"True."

"What about you? Why aren't you flying and saving the wear and tear on that great new truck?"

He drummed his fingers on the table, and then toyed with the plastic Christmas tree that served as a centerpiece.

"Are you afraid to fly, Justin?"

Okay, she was funny, beautiful and blunt.

"I don't like to fly," he said simply.

She arched one elegant brow. "Okay."

"Really, I don't like to."

She sat back with a smirk and ran her fingers through her hair. "Okay," she repeated and shrugged. "Whatever."

Justin grumbled at his own transparency and added smug to funny, beautiful and blunt. He didn't like that one. Didn't like that she nailed him so quickly.

The waitress placed their food on the table.

"Where are you going anyway?" She squeezed the lemon into her water.

He dropped his gaze and rearranged his utensils. "Tulsa. I'm going to Tulsa to see my son." There. He'd said it. For the first time he'd said the words out loud. *My son.*

“Is he there with his mother? Are you going to meet them?”

“Uh...no. I’m not with his mother.”

“How old is he?” She picked up a roll and a knife and got busy. “Do you have pictures?”

He let out a long slow sigh and suddenly the emotional roller coaster he’d been on the last three weeks, lurched and flew off the tracks. He had no idea the anger and frustration he’d held in for five years was going to bubble to the surface in a restaurant in Asheville in the presence of a strange woman. He couldn’t even catch a decent breath. “We’ve been apart. I have no pictures, no information, no address.”

“I don’t understand,” she said softly. “How do you expect to find him?”

“I have an idea where to start.”

A small hand crept across the table. Her touch was cool as she placed it over his tightly laced fingers. She caught his gaze in hers, and he was powerless to look away.

“I don’t know you that well, but if I had to guess right now, I would say you’d make a really great father.” She straightened in her seat. “Now. Eat this roll. I know you’re starving.”

And just like that, she yanked him out of his most embarrassing moment in recent history. Having sensed his complete and total unexpected meltdown, she jumped in there as any good friend would have and saved him.

And he didn’t like it.

Didn’t like that she saw his fears, and she somehow knew things. Like a moth pinned to a block of Styrofoam in seventh grade science, he was exposed before her and had no idea how it happened. How had he lost control? He was a man on a mission to find his son and confront the family who’d betrayed him. What did she know about anything? She was an intruder.

He cleared his throat and scooted his plate away. "There's still a lot of daylight. I'd like to make it to Nashville tonight."

"That's putting six hundred miles behind you today. That's a lot of driving."

"I know there's a bus station in Nashville, but if you want to keep going, I don't mind. I'll get as far as Little Rock tomorrow and probably Fort Smith."

"I really have to get to Oklahoma." She wadded up a straw wrapper and pinched it between her fingers. "If getting on a bus tonight in Nashville means I can ride all night to Oklahoma City then I should do it. I don't want to spend money on hotels anyway."

"Suit yourself." He threw a twenty on the table. "I'm going to the men's room, then I'll be outside."

Justin tightened the cap on the gas tank and tapped on Cameron's window. "Do you want something to drink?"

"No, thanks."

Without another word, he got in the truck and shifted into drive.

The spectacular mountains of western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee rose and fell on the horizon and provided a striking distraction from the uneasiness in his heart. He glanced at the scenery as often as was possible while he drove, and tried to plan what he would do when he reached Tulsa.

For the first week after he'd found the letter, he'd remained numb. The second week he relived all the pain of five years ago when he lost his fiancée, to his brother, Michael. The third week was spent planning the trip to Tulsa.

When he returned to work in January, he hoped it would be with pictures of his son to decorate his desk.

He winced as he remembered coming home for Christmas his senior year in college. How stupid