

Lost or Found?



Rida
Allen



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Draumr Publishing, LLC
Maryland

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Cover art by A. K. * Geneva * Brown

There is no ISBN associated with the electronic version of this book.

PUBLISHED BY DRAUMR PUBLISHING, LLC

www.draumrpublishing.com

Columbia, Maryland

Printed in the United States of America

Dedication

To my brother, Bill, who is always willing to lend a hand.
Thank you.

To my parents, who continue to support me in so many ways. Thanks for always being there, and thanks for spending time.

To my husband, Robert. You continue to support me, to take care of me, and to love me. I thank you for all of that and for all that you do on a daily basis.

To my friend and fellow author, Misty Simon, who is always ready to share a laugh, even at her own expense. Thanks for the critique help, and for all your suggestions.

And to our sweet pup, Bailey, who is with me all day, every day, and listens to me mutter and curse.
Thanks for not snitching on me.
Hugs and kisses to you, my furry friend!

Chapter One



J.D. Parker shuffled his way along the alley in a particularly rough part of Capitol Heights, Maryland, his usual haunt for an early Sunday morning. This area was so close to the border of southeast D.C. that he could almost walk five minutes and be in Washington, D.C., the nation's capital. The air was stale and a dank smell seemed to reverberate off the walls of the buildings that lined the narrow back street. He wrinkled his nose, thinking that if public works would come through here once in a while and clean up the trash, the rotting smell might abate just a tad. But the trash wasn't his objective, nor his focus. Though he hated to make this walk, he felt compelled to keep an eye out for the kids he knew might be in trouble. It wouldn't be the first time he found one of them here after a late Saturday night, sometimes drunk, occasionally stoned, and even once in a while, beaten up and dumped by the wayside. So far this morning he had found no one, which was happening more often than not these days. That thought alone made him feel a bit better; it meant he was making a difference, even if it was only a little.

Further down the alley, his dog was snuffling through some trash. "Bear, get away from that," he called out. The brown and white canine looked up at him briefly before going back to his

explorations. With a grunt, J.D. continued his stroll, his shoulders hunched over in his leather jacket, his eyes hooded, but alert and watchful.

Bear began pawing at something and then let out a low *woof!* “Get out of there!” J.D. yelled at the big dog. The last thing he needed was for Bear to dig some drunk homeless guy out of a trash heap. They were extremely cranky when they were awakened from their stupor.

But Bear persisted, digging at the trash and nosing something on the ground.

J.D. frowned. Normally Bear shied away from homeless people because of his sensitive nose, but now he was getting agitated with the pile of trash. Sighing, he approached the dog and saw a denim-clad leg sticking out of the mess on the ground. “Oh, hell.” He prayed silently that there was a body attached to that leg. With Bear’s help he began clearing away the mound of trash. Slowly, the back side of a body appeared. He couldn’t tell much about the still form except that the clothing wasn’t as filthy as he would have expected from a homeless person. The denim jeans were dirty but not long-term dingy, and the black sweatshirt was completely in-tact from this angle.

He hesitated momentarily before grasping the body and rolling it over. “Oh, hell,” he repeated. It was a woman—a young woman—her face ashen and her dark, straight hair was filled with street dirt and trash. There was a bruise blooming around her eye and on her cheek, and a rising goose-egg on her forehead stretching up under her hairline. With trembling hands, he grasped her wrist and checked for a pulse. It was there, but thready.

Bear barked again, the sound low and almost mournful.

“She’s alive, buddy, but what the hell happened to her?” On her back, he could now see that her sweatshirt was ripped at the neckline and the knees of her jeans were torn away. “What’s a pretty thing like you doing in a place like this?” he murmured, knowing he wouldn’t get an answer from the unconscious woman. Although she was older than the teenagers he was accustomed to seeing in these alleys, he guessed she couldn’t be more than twenty-two or twenty-three.

Without prompting, Bear picked his way through the trash

and settled himself along the free side of the woman's body, across from where J.D. was kneeling. The long-haired dog pushed himself close to the still form and rested his head on her thigh. Then he turned woeful eyes on his master.

"What am I supposed to do?" he asked the dog. The woman was still as death, her eyes closed to the world, her red lips slightly parted. She *was* pretty, he admitted to himself, his eyes taking in her battered body. She was thick from thighs to hips to breasts to shoulders, her body ripe with womanly curves. Most women he came across were thin and malnourished, generally a sign of their lives on the streets, but not this one. "Who are you?"

Her eyelids fluttered at his question.

"That's right, wake up...c'mon." He rubbed her cold hand between his.

Her eyelids opened, then slammed shut before a moan erupted from her throat. She licked her cracked lips and tried to open her eyes again.

He watched her pink tongue intently before refocusing on her face. "You're safe now, you can wake up."

Her eyes followed the sound of his voice until they found his face.

J.D. looked her over, noting that those brown eyes were full of confusion, but not fear. "Are you all right?"

She studied him for a moment, searching his face, then blurted, "Who...who are you?"

"My name is J.D."

A low *woof* made her flinch, and her gaze moved to the source of the noise. "What is that?" she whispered.

"That's my dog, Bear," he answered, keeping his voice calm so she wouldn't panic.

"Dog?" She said the word as if it meant nothing to her. "What is he doing?"

"Keeping you warm."

She shrank away from the animal. "Where am I?"

"In an alley. What's your name?"

She opened her mouth to answer, then her eyes flew to his. "My name?"

"Yeah, your name," he repeated.

Panic swept across her face and she sat up, then groaned.

He reached for her arm. "Hey, careful!"

She tried to turn away from him, one hand going to her head, the other slapping over her mouth. "I'm going to be sick."

"You have a pretty nasty lump on your head so try not to move so fast," he warned.

Letting her head drop down, she saw her legs stretched out in front of her and she examined them as if they were not attached to her body. They were full and heavy, not what she would have expected to see. Following the line of her body, she saw her wide hips and large breasts, and furrowed her brow. Was this really what she looked like or was it a trick of her muddled brain? "What happened to me?"

"I was hoping you could tell me."

"I don't know..." She clutched at her head, pain spiking behind her eyes. "I don't know!"

"Okay," he said, his voice low and soothing. "Obviously you hit your head pretty hard, so don't push yourself to remember."

Staring at him, she noted that his face was full of angles, his jaw hard and his nose long on his harsh face. His eyes were set widely apart and his eyebrows were dark slashes across his forehead. Even his mouth was more angles than curves. Dark hair fell across his forehead and she wondered absently why the inky strands seemed to disappear behind his head instead of fall naturally over his ears.

Bear whined and shifted to lick her hand.

The low sound gave her a start, and she began to cry softly.

"I know you're scared and upset," he murmured. "But I won't hurt you."

Her voice was thick with tears. "I don't know my own name. I don't even recognize my own body! What am I going to do?"

"We're going to get you to a hospital so someone can check you out." He got to his feet and leaned over to grasp her by the waist to help her up.

She moaned again, then prayed that she didn't lose the contents of her stomach, whatever they might be. On her feet now, she leaned against the stranger's hard chest, his arms wrapped firmly

around her.

“Easy,” he said in a low voice. “My car is at the end of the alley.”

Peering through the early morning light, she tried to see the end of the putrid-smelling alleyway. Her knees wobbled and her eyes fluttered closed.

“Okay, hang on.” With a soft grunt, he scooped her up against his chest. With Bear following at a trot, he took long strides until they reached the end of the alley. And there across the street was a beat-up blue conversion van. He struggled for a moment with the door, then yanked it open and set her gently on the seat.

While J.D. loaded up his dog, she took a quick look at the interior of the van. It was old and well-worn, but clean. Who was this man who found her in an alley, unconscious and surrounded by trash?

“Okay, here we go,” he told her, starting the van. “We’ll be at the hospital in no time.”

The dog–Bear–plopped his rear end down between the two front captain’s chairs and laid his head on the her leg.

She lay on the gurney, her head throbbing and her heart pounding wildly. They hadn’t found any identification on her and she still didn’t know her name. Who was she? What had she been doing in that alley? She didn’t even know what state she was in. And this body, surely it didn’t belong to her, surely she hadn’t lived her life like this?

The doctor came back into the cubicle where she was waiting, her dark-haired rescuer trailing the white-coated man. “Based on your injuries, it looks like you’ve had a severe beating. There are signs of blunt trauma, which could have been made by an object or by fist.” He paused to look over his eyeglasses at J.D., his face creased with wariness. “We want to keep you overnight,” the doctor announced.

“Overnight? Why?” she squeaked.

“Well, you suffered a pretty severe concussion, lost consciousness for an unknown amount of time, and are unable to recall memories from before this morning. We want you here where we can keep an eye on your vitals as well as treat your

bruised ribs.”

Licking her dry lips, she flinched as she found a cut on the inside of her upper lip. “I don’t want to stay in the hospital.” She watched in fascination as *he* approached her.

“You need to stay, to let them take care of you,” he told her.

“I’m scared.”

“We’re going to move you to a room, get you settled in, and give you something to help you rest,” the doctor informed her, writing some notes on her chart.

“See, they’re going to take good care of you.” He rested his hand on top of hers.

“Don’t leave me,” she pleaded, clutching at his hand. “I can’t remember anything, including my own name. You’re the only thing that’s familiar to me.”

He grimaced but squeezed her hand in return. “I’ll stay with you until you’re settled.”

“Your name, sir?” the doctor asked. “So I can leave it with the nurse’s station on her floor.”

“J.D.,” he said curtly.

She focused on his name for the first time, thinking there was something familiar about it, and at that precise moment pain spiked through her head and into her eyes. She moaned and dropped her head back onto the pillow.

The doctor frowned at her. “I’m going to send the nurse in now with some sleeping pills. By the time you’re settled upstairs, you’ll be good and sleepy.”

“You’ll stay?” she asked J.D.

“Yes,” he repeated reluctantly, his hand still clasped in hers.

She allowed the nurse to fuss over her briefly before obediently swallowing two small pills. It was only a few minutes later when an orderly came to move her to a room and she released J.D.’s hand as they swung her into the hallway toward the elevator. Since arriving at the hospital they’d poked and prodded her, taken x-rays of her face and chest, as well as a CAT scan of her head. They’d drawn blood, looked into her eyes and ears, and asked her no less than two dozen questions, none of which she could answer. Now they were doping her up and sending her off to some secluded room where she would have to lay alone and wonder...who was

she? Where did she come from? Why had she been face down in a pile of trash?

Three floors up, they rolled her off the elevator, down a hall, and into a room, where she looked around frantically for J.D.

“I’m still here.” He stepped into view and waited, arms crossed over his chest, as the orderly carefully transferred her and her IVs to the bed in the room.

Sighing, she sagged back onto the pillow and winced as the nurse came in to check her chart and IV line.

“You should be getting tired soon, hon.” The nurse patted her hand. “If you need someone in the night, press this button,” she directed. “We’ll be waking you every few hours to check on you due to your concussion.”

She nodded at the nurse, her eyelids already feeling heavy. “Can he stay?”

A frown pinched the older woman’s face momentarily. “Visiting hours end in about thirty minutes,” the nurse said briskly before leaving the room without looking at J.D.

She turned to look at J.D., her mind already fuzzy around the edges. “You’ll stay?” she slurred.

Stepping up to the bed, J.D. grasped her hand and leaned over to stare into her puffy face. “I’ll stay until you fall asleep.” As he stroked a bent finger across her unmarred cheek, she whispered something that made him freeze. After a moment’s consideration, he realized that she had just slurred his initials as the sleeping pills dragged her under. He stayed a while longer, in case she woke up, but when she didn’t stir, he pulled his hand away and straightened. How would she feel in the morning? Would she remember her name, her background? Or would she be frightened and alone? Grimacing, he shrugged off his leather jacket and tucked it next to her, up against the rail of the bed. Out in the hallway, he found the nurse waiting with a plastic bag, her eyes narrowed.

Her face tight, her shoulders stiff, she held the bag out to him. “Her clothes,” she said, her voice pitched low. “They’re kind of dirty, but at least she’ll have something to wear tomorrow when she leaves.”

“Uh, yeah, thanks.” He accepted the bag, his eyes not quite

meeting hers, while his mind raced forward. If she didn't regain her memory by morning, where would she go?

"Is there a number where we can call you overnight?" the nurse asked.

"No, but I'll call in," he muttered before brushing past her.

A few minutes later, he strode from the hospital out to his van where Bear waited patiently for him. He'd been in the hospital almost all day with the woman and had only been able to check on Bear twice, so the dog was more than happy to see him. Tossing the bag of clothes onto the floor of the van, he let Bear out of the vehicle and took him for a brief walk. Back in the van, he sighed and started for home. On auto-pilot, he didn't really notice the traffic or the change in scenery around him.

Parking the van in his driveway, he hopped out and around the truck to let Bear out. The dog emerged, a black cloth clutched in his jaws. "What are you doing, dog?" He reached for the cloth but drew back when Bear gave him a low warning growl. "Where did you get that?" When he leaned into the van, he spotted the bag of clothes and saw it had been torn open. "You stole her shirt?"

Bear merely gave him a haughty look and loped toward the front door of the house.

"Great, now I have to find something else for her to wear." He'd taken the clothes expecting to wash them overnight so they would be clean for her tomorrow. He hoped he could find something suitable in his closet for her. She would need something roomy to accommodate her larger than average breasts and the tape that would be binding her ribs. Grabbing the torn bag off the floor, he locked up the van and went into the house.

Bear scooted past him, the black sweatshirt hanging from his mouth.

"Weird dog," he muttered, dumping the clothes in his washing machine, unmindful of the white underclothes mixed in with the blue jeans. He added detergent and started the cycle before going into the kitchen to make dinner for himself as well as his thieving dog.

She blinked once, then twice, before opening her eyes fully. The room was still semi-dark but she knew where she was; the

darn nurses had reminded her several times through the night. She'd been so groggy that she had barely opened her eyes to speak to them, but now she was wide awake. The room she was in had space for two people, separated by a curtain, but the second bed was empty. She hadn't noticed before, because of the pain medication they gave her, she assumed, but across from her was a t.v., mounted high on the wall. Had she been in a hospital room before? The smell, the odd muted hush around her, were they things she'd smelled and heard before?

Moving her arm, she brushed something stiff and cool to the touch. Mindful of her aching head, she rolled it carefully on the pillow to see what she had touched. It took her a moment to recognize the leather jacket that was tucked up against the bed rail. Without hesitation she knew it was there to reassure her that J.D. would be back.

Thinking of him brought a warmth to her insides and she tried to smile. The cut in her mouth and the bruise on her cheek stopped it from spreading wider than a slight quirk of the lips. She wanted to pull the jacket to her nose, inhale the smell of him that was sure to linger in the leather, but she didn't. She wanted to giggle like a school girl and slip on his jacket as if to announce to the world that she belonged to this particular boy, but she didn't. She didn't inhale his scent, she didn't put on his jacket, she didn't belong to him. She wasn't even sure if she belonged to *anyone*.

She looked up at a noise and saw him standing in the doorway holding a paper bag.

"You're awake," he said unnecessarily.

"Yes."

Nodding, he entered the room and dropped the bag on a chair. "How did you sleep?"

"All right considering I had visitors every few hours." With a shy smile, she picked up his jacket and held it out for him. "Thank you."

"No problem," he responded curtly, taking the jacket and dropping it next to the bag. "I, uh, took your clothes home last night and washed them."

She was surprised by his announcement. "Oh, thank you!"

"Well, don't thank me yet," he muttered. "There was an

incident with Bear.”

Wrinkling her nose, she said, “You mean that big, smelly, furry thing from the alley yesterday?”

“Uh, you may not have liked the way he smelled but evidently he liked the way *you* smelled,” he said, giving her half an eye roll.

“Pardon me?”

“Bear, uh, stole your shirt and refused to give it back, even when I asked nicely,” he explained. “And considering how well I know my dog, I didn’t bother to try to fight him for it.”

“My shirt?”

“Yeah, he snatched it out of the bag and ran off with it. I tried to find you something from my closet to wear, I hope it’s to your liking.”

“Well, you’re in luck,” there was false cheer in her voice, “I wouldn’t know if it *weren’t* to my liking.”

“You haven’t remembered anything?”

“I remembered you,” she told him, her mouth quirking upward again. “And I remember your dog...Bear.”

“That doesn’t exactly count. Nothing else? Name, age, rank?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“Any dreams last night?”

Blushing, she looked away. “Nothing of any significance.”

“What does that mean?”

“I didn’t dream of my past,” she said, smoothing the sheet over her legs.

“Maybe your dream had some other meaning that wouldn’t occur to you. Why don’t you tell me about it,” he suggested.

Images from her dream assaulted her, most of them vivid pictures of J.D. in various states of undress. “No, I’m sure it was nothing.” When he frowned and turned his head to acknowledge the nurse who knocked lightly on the door frame, she finally caught a glimpse of his profile. Not only did he have an overwhelming physical presence, but he had features cut from sharp stone. She also had her first look at his long hair, currently tied back by a leather thong. So that’s why his hair had looked so odd around his face yesterday.

“Good morning!” the morning nurse called, her voice perky. “I need to give you a quick once over before the doctor sees you.” She turned to J.D. and asked him to give them some privacy.

He shot her a dark look before striding out of the room.

The nurse pulled the privacy curtain around the bed before beginning the exam. “He’s quite an interesting man...”

“What?” She refocused her gaze on the woman in white.

“The nurse who took care of you overnight said he checked on you last night, quite frequently,” she murmured, taking her pulse.

“He...did?”

“Yup, almost every hour.” She clucked her tongue before picking up the chart. “You sure you don’t know him?”

“I have no clue.”

“Too bad I’m not into the dangerous type,” the nurse said teasingly as she stepped away.

“Dangerous?” she squeaked.

“Oh sure, long hair, dark smoldering eyes, and that yummy leather jacket.” She fanned herself with her hand before pulling back the curtain. “The doctor should be in to see you shortly.”

“Uh, thanks.”

J.D. reappeared silently, eyeing her as if she were under a microscope.

“What?”

“Do I look dangerous to you?” he asked, eyebrows drawn down low over his forehead, looking like two dark slashes over his eyes.

