

A NOVEL BY
VICTORIA MICHAELS



TRUST IN ADVERTISING

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OMNIFIC PUBLISHING
DALLAS

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TO BOBBY...

· PROLOGUE ·

Lexi sat quietly in the second row of metal folding chairs, looking out from the stage at the audience before her. The auditorium was filled with the smiling, happy faces of parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and siblings. Today was not only about endings but also about new beginnings. Flashbulbs went off constantly, hands waved in the crowd, and tears of pride were shed.

She peered out and saw her dad, Harry, sitting proudly down in front, his eyes glancing up at Lexi, full of respect and a touch of sadness at realizing that his little girl was growing up. Uncomfortably dressed in a shirt and tie, Harry fidgeted with his collar, then fanned himself with his program to provide some relief from the increasing temperature in the small room. He winked at her when she looked his way, and Lexi couldn't help but smile.

Life hadn't been easy for Lexi and her father since her mother, Marie, suddenly died six years ago. They held on tightly to each other and together made it through the darkest moments, coming out on the other side, a piece of them missing, but able to embrace life again. Two years ago, with no other family left, Harry moved them from Tampa to Riverdale, a town a few hours outside San Francisco where he had lived when he was a boy. Many of his old friends had moved from the area, but for Harry, it was still a comfort to get away from the memories of Tampa and go back to his hometown.

The voice of Michelle Fulton, the class valedictorian, rang loudly from the podium, breaking Lexi from her thoughts. "And so, my fellow classmates, I

encourage you to leave this place and find yourselves. Become the person you are destined to be. Find that which truly makes you happy and have the courage to go after it, fight for it, and attain it. Let nothing stop you, because each one of us is special, and we have something unique to offer the world. Never forget to be true to yourself and go after your dreams, for dreams really do come true. Congratulations to the class of '98!"

Thunderous applause rose from the crowd and filled the auditorium. Mr. Barnes, the principal, came up onto the stage and stood next to the tall stack of diplomas on the table near the podium. He slipped the top one from the pile as the vice-principal took her place behind the microphone and began calling names.

On cue, the front row of students stood up from their chairs and began heading toward the podium, lining up for their big walk across the stage. Their movement allowed Lexi an unobstructed view of her classmates.

"Martin Alexander." A tall boy with red hair sprang across the stage, gave a triumphant bow to the crowd, and held his diploma high over his head before returning to his seat.

Lexi tried her best to focus on the audience and keep her promise to herself to let it go, but she couldn't. Her eyes briefly darted to her left, and she caught a glimpse of messy dark brown hair. She forced herself to immediately look away.

"Denise Banks." The six-foot tall basketball star lumbered across the stage and shook the principal's hand before walking past Lexi to return to her seat.

Lexi took a deep breath and lowered her head, knowing it would be over soon.

"Benton Claymore." Lexi glanced a few seats over at Michelle, who clapped furiously as her boyfriend, Ben, strode across the stage and accepted his diploma. Michelle and Ben had been dating for two years and were voted cutest couple by the senior class.

"Anna Drake."

Lexi smiled and stole a peek at Anna, the one girl who had always been kind to her and even attempted to get her to come out of her shell a little. The two had been in various classes and clubs together, but a real friendship never quite took root because of how awkward Lexi was with people. And then there was the issue of Anna's twin brother ...

"Vincent Drake."

Lexi's heart pounded in her chest, but she refused to look up. Laughter erupted from the crowd seconds later, and she knew he'd probably done some-

thing funny or dashing because that's just the kind of guy he was. Most popular, most likely to succeed, best body, nicest eyes, you name it, Vincent had been voted it by the graduating class. She could even hear his girlfriend, Jennifer Stanton, clapping loudly for him. Lexi's eyes stayed firmly planted on her hands, which she had clutched together in her lap. Her long nails dug into her skin as she fought the urge to look up at him. She smelled his cologne as he walked past her to return to his seat in the front row.

"Michael Fitch."

From her first day at Riverdale High two years ago, she'd had a crush on Vincent Drake. In a school this size, it was easy to get lost in the crowd, and that was exactly what Lexi had done. Vincent probably didn't even know her name. The closest interaction they ever had was when he would cheat off of her in Government during their senior year. Unless it was test day, he probably wouldn't have noticed if the ground had opened up and swallowed her whole.

Vincent and Jennifer had been dating for almost a year, and they were the face of Riverdale High. They were invited to every party, and for every event at school, one of them was on the planning committee. He was the star football player, she the head cheerleader. They lived up to every high school stereotype of the perfect couple.

Lexi tried her best to ignore Vincent, tried to date other guys, but the only time her heart did that crazy flip-flop thing was when she saw him. Every day, when Lexi went to her locker, he'd be standing there, leaning against the locker right next to hers, waiting for Jennifer. He never uttered a single word to Lexi except the occasional "sorry" if he was in her way.

As Tommy Jameson strutted across the stage, it was time for the students in her row to rise from their seats and make their way over to the front of the stage to receive their diplomas. Lexi stood up and smoothed her graduation gown, taking careful steps, not wanting to trip on her big day. A few deep breaths later, Jennifer Stanton stepped forward and eagerly took her diploma, hugging the principal and creating a spectacle, as usual. Lexi saw her dad with his camera poised and ready to catch her big moment on film, and a small smile crept across her face.

"Alexandra White."

Her name hung in the air as she forced her numb feet to move across the stage. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the flash from Harry's camera and heard his loud cheers of encouragement. Before long, she was settling herself

back into her metal chair, clutching the large, leather-bound folder that held her diploma, or her parole document as she liked to think of it, from the prison of Riverdale High.

Her fingers ran over the cool leather surface as she heard the vice-principal say, "I present you with the graduating class!"

Hats flew into the air as the graduates cheered, their high school days officially completed. Lexi looked around to see friends hugging, hands shaking, and kisses being exchanged all around her. She quickly grabbed her cap and diploma and stepped off the stage into Harry's awaiting arms.

"Congratulations, Lexi! I am so proud of you, honey... and you know Mom is too." He swept her into his arms and squeezed her tightly against his chest.

"Thanks, Dad." Lexi smiled and held back the tears that threatened to spill from her eyes for a multitude of reasons. "Can we go?" she asked Harry, anxious to close this pathetic chapter of her life as soon as humanly possible.

"Did you get a chance to say goodbye to all your friends? Some of these people you might never see again, Lex." Harry scanned the crowd and saw a friend of his. "I'm going to go say hello to Mr. Marpay. Say your goodbyes and meet me by the car, okay?" He gave her a quick peck on the head, and then made his way through the crowd.

Lexi stood alone in the sea of people, glancing at all the familiar and unfamiliar faces around her. Students posed for pictures with teachers and the principal. Parents handed gifts to the graduates, and groups of friends huddled together for even more farewell pictures. Distracted by the things going on around her, Lexi's graduation cap slipped from her hand and fell onto the floor. She scooped it up and spun toward the door to make a swift exit from all the reverie, when someone crashed into her shoulder, nearly knocking her down.

A strong arm stretched out from nowhere and saved her from a nasty fall. "I'm so sorry. I wasn't looking," a deep voice apologized in her ear.

Lexi didn't need to open her eyes or look up to know who it was. She'd know that voice anywhere. Vincent Drake.

"Are you all right?" He leaned his head even closer to her, making sure she could hear his question over all the noise around them.

Lexi's heart fluttered when she realized he was still holding her arm. She could smell the spice of his cologne and feel the heat coming off his body. The crowd around them shifted, so he pulled her against his chest so she wouldn't be swept away. Her head started to swim when he gave her arm a gentle squeeze

because she wasn't answering his question. Determined to leave the place with one iota of her dignity intact, she opened her eyes, raised her chin confidently, and said, "Yes, I'm fine. Thank you, Vincent." As his name passed through her lips, Lexi's stomach flipped one last time. "Congratulations."

Before he could say anything, before she saw him try and remember who she was, before he pretended to know her name, she simply collected herself and walked away from him without another word. Her heart, however, thundered in her chest.

Lexi made her way through the slowly dispersing crowd and mentally wished her classmates well. Then she walked out of the auditorium, her head held high, and never once looked back at any of them. "Goodbye," she whispered as she stepped out of the doors of the school and into the bright June sunshine.

Lexi opened the door to her apartment. In her arms she carried two overflowing grocery bags. She balanced the precarious load, and then set it all down on the counter, kicking the door shut behind her. As Lexi emptied the groceries into their proper places, she turned on the radio, filling the apartment with flowery pop music as she went about the job at hand.

Dancing her way around the kitchen, she made quick work of the bags. When everything was finally put away, she grabbed a large frying pan from underneath the cook top and started browning the ground beef for her dinner. As the taco seasoning hit the meat, the savory smell of chili powder filled the apartment. Next to the frying pan on the stovetop, Lexi warmed a can of refried beans and began the messy job of chopping the lettuce, tomatoes, and onions. Just as the last bit of onion was diced and scooped into a bowl, there was a sharp knock on the door.

Lexi put down the knife and with a knowing smile on her face, opened the door wide. “Hi, Hope. Hungry?” She smirked at the curvaceous brunette standing in the hallway wearing baggy, grease-smearing, navy blue coveralls.

“Tacos? You know they’re my favorite. I could smell them across the hall. Don’t worry, I didn’t come empty handed.” From behind her back Hope pulled out a bottle of tequila and margarita mix. “I brought the drinks.” She grinned and strode into the apartment, setting the bottles down on the counter. “You have no idea how glad I am you moved in across the hall. You’re a great friend,

don't get me wrong, but you're an even more amazing cook." Hope laughed as she unzipped her blue jumper and stepped out of the greasy mess, revealing her shapely form in basic jeans and a white T-shirt. She made herself comfortable on one of the stools at the counter and watched Lexi put the finishing touches on dinner.

Lexi had moved to San Francisco five months ago, just after her father died. She left Riverdale following her graduation from high school to attend NYU on a full scholarship. Opening her acceptance letter had been the proudest moment of her life. She may not have finished first in her graduating class, but second apparently wasn't too shabby in the eyes of NYU. Unfortunately, mid-way through her sophomore year, she received the phone call that changed everything and put her life on hold for the next eight years.

Lexi remembered every word of the conversation that day when one of her father's friends had called and told her that over the previous two months, her father had become more and more confused. He couldn't remember phone numbers or codes he had used for years. Someone had even found him standing next to his car one day, unsure of how to open the door. Her father's friend had rattled on about other incidents, but Lexi stopped listening. She hung up the phone and booked the next flight back to Riverdale. Two weeks after she arrived home, Harry was diagnosed with the early stages of Alzheimer's disease. She still remembered the look on his face when she told him she was dropping out of school so she could stay in Riverdale and help him. Her father was devastated and begged her to go back to school, but Lexi refused. They had no other family; it was just the two of them, as it had been since Marie died all those years earlier.

So, instead of living the life of a college student and spreading her wings, Lexi was pulled back to Riverdale to take care of her father. Instead of nights spent out with friends at clubs or parties or pulling all nighters studying for an exam, her nights were spent making her father dinner, bathing him, and calling the doctor. The only books she cracked were in leisure. She read books on everything from molecular biology to American literature, trying to emulate courses she would have taken at NYU. She even bought herself a boxed set of language courses on tape and acquired a decent understanding of both Spanish and Italian in the many months she spent at Harry's bedside.

When she wasn't at Harry's side, she was working at a local diner, trying to make enough money to cover whatever Harry's disability insurance couldn't. It

wasn't the inspiring college experience she'd been expecting in her early twenties, but it was the right thing to do, and Lexi never regretted her decision to leave NYU and care for Harry.

"Lexi?" Hope's voice broke her from her gloomy trip down memory lane. The knowing look on her friend's face told Lexi that she understood completely. Hope's parents had passed away a couple years earlier, and it was one of the things that bonded them together. They really understood each other in a way most people couldn't. "Today's your dad's birthday, isn't it?" Hope's hand reached out to meet Lexi's and gave a comforting squeeze.

A single tear rolled down Lexi's cheek. "Yep, he would have been sixty-three years old today." She brushed the tear from her face. "But he's spending this birthday with my mom, so that makes me feel better. He missed her so much after she died." Lexi took a deep breath and raised the margarita that Hope had poured her. "Happy birthday, Dad."

"Happy birthday, Harry!" With a sad smile, Hope raised her glass as well, tapping it against the side of Lexi's.

Hungry, Lexi heaped jalapeños onto her taco, making Hope's eyes nearly bulge out of her head.

"You aren't going to eat those, are you?" She shook her head in disbelief. "You'll burn the tonsils right out of your mouth!"

Lexi laughed out loud. "One of these days I'm going to get you to come to that Thai restaurant on High Street with me, Hope. Then you'll have a whole new appreciation for spicy foods." Lexi crammed two more peppers onto the taco before taking a huge bite out of it. "So, how was work?" she mumbled, her mouth full of food.

Hope owned one of the busiest custom body shops in the bay area, Crowbar. The shop was known in all the car circles, and did everything from restorations to custom paint jobs, interiors, and body work. Hope had eight male employees, and every single one of the burly guys that worked at Crowbar was scared to death of her. Hope's dad, Big Al, had taught his only daughter at a very early age not to take crap from anyone, and Hope learned that lesson to a T. She had inherited the shop from him when he passed away.

"It wasn't too bad. This guy came in and wanted this custom, two-tone paint job with these intricate freehand flames painted down the length of the car. The jerk had the nerve to get pissed when I told him how much it would cost. He actually accused me of ripping him off and made some rude comment

about women having no business working on cars, so I had Max show him the door.” Hope shook her head in disgust. “I mean, come on. Just because I’m a woman they think they can push me around so I’ll change my mind or back down? Please. And I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be cocky, but no one in town but me can do what he’s asking. Mark my words; he’ll be back, and soon.”

“How can you be so sure?” Lexi asked as she wiped the sour cream from the corner of her mouth.

“Because he’s one of those street racers, and he wants that car to be all badass for his next race. Of course when he comes back,” Hope confidently flipped her dark hair over her shoulder and leaned back in her chair, “I’m jacking the price up another five hundred dollars, and I think I’ll make him beg me to do it in front of all the guys. That should teach the little prick some manners.”

“Will these guys ever learn to not mess with you, Hope?” Lexi shook her head, laughing.

“If they’re smart, they will.” Hope followed Lexi into the kitchen with her empty plate and began rinsing it off in the sink. “So, how was your day? Any luck on the job hunt?” She bent over and placed her plate in the dishwasher, then she began gathering up the bowls and putting the leftovers into Tupperware.

For the last couple of months, Lexi had been working as a cashier in a vintage record store. She was able to chat with customers and listen to all kinds of music during the day, but it was hardly a career. She was twenty-eight years old, and it was time to start thinking about what she wanted to do with the rest of her life, a life that was now hers to lead without anything holding her back.

“I went and interviewed at this law firm for the secretarial position they were advertising, but it wasn’t for me. All those years of just Harry and me, it’s hard to get used to having people barking orders all the time. I’m used to doing things on my schedule, not theirs.” Lexi snapped the lid back onto the sour cream. “Maybe moving to San Francisco wasn’t the smartest move. But I had to get out of Riverdale before I was smothered to death.”

Hope wiped down the counter, tossed the towel into the sink, and lead Lexi by the hand into the family room. She snatched the newspaper off the coffee table and sat on the couch, patting the soft leather until Lexi reluctantly sat down beside her.

“You did the right thing coming here. Don’t let yourself get overwhelmed by everything. Let’s take baby steps and work on the new job thing. I want to

start at the beginning. Before you left school, wasn't your major marketing?" Hope flipped through the paper looking for the classified section and handed it to Lexi, then scooped up Lexi's laptop and waited for it to startup.

"Technically, I was studying business. I wanted to go into advertising, and probably would have minored in graphic art. My dream job would have been to work for an ad firm and work on print ads and presentations, but that was a lifetime ago. Now I'd probably be best at a job in home health care, nursing, or housekeeping since that's what I've been doing for the last eight years. Look and see if there's a job for adult babysitter; I'd be good at that," Lexi said with a defeated sigh.

Hope looked up from the computer where she was searching the web for job listings in the area. "Lexi, you have to move on now, decide what *you* want to do. What do you want to be when you grow up?" she asked with a cheeky smile, trying to lighten the mood.

"Fine, my dream job would be in advertising. However, I don't think my year and a half of college credits will be enough to even get my foot in the door these days. Nor will my resume with 'home healthcare provider' listed as my primary job for the last eight years. I have nothing to offer them—no experience, no portfolio stuffed with projects I've worked on. Chances are they'd just laugh in my face and send me on my merry way." Lexi's shoulders sagged as she tossed her head back onto the leather cushion of her couch. "Just find me a waitressing job or something."

"Who cares if you don't have a fancy degree or a thick portfolio? You have ideas, tons and tons of creative ideas, Lexi. Look at how much business I've gotten since I started advertising in the local car trades and automotive magazines. You basically designed that ad. You even took the picture. It was all you. So don't tell me you don't know what you're doing. You're a natural. I can see that, and if these people have half a brain, they'll see your potential, too. Now, let me look and see what I can find on-line. You dig through the paper, and between the two of us, we'll find something good."

They spent the next two hours scouring the paper and the internet for something in advertising. There were plenty of jobs that Lexi was totally unqualified for—marketing director, project manager, client relations—which required post-graduate degrees and at least five to seven years of prior work experience. They discovered that if Lexi wanted to go into the world of exotic dancing, there were opportunities a-plenty, but in the hard-nosed world of advertising,

there was nothing she was remotely qualified for. She found two leads: one was a personal assistant job, and one was a secretarial position. Neither of them was her dream job, but both would be a way to get back into the swing of things and see what was new in the world of advertising.

“This one looks good, Lexi. It’s with an ad company downtown. They need a personal assistant to the human resources manager. I know it’s not exactly what you were looking for, but I checked them out and they’re notorious for hiring from within. It might be a good place to get your foot in the door, watch, learn, and keep an eye out for a chance to jump on something opening up. Human resources will know about any job openings in that company first. What do you think?” Hope wore an encouraging smile. “It’s worth a shot. Just three interviews and you’ll be done. Who knows, you might be surprised.” Hope gave a nod toward the paper in Lexi’s hand. “If not, you could always try your hand at dancing.”

Lexi mulled it over, and unable to come up with a real reason to say no, she grabbed a pen and paper and jotted down the companies she needed to contact in the morning. “I think I’ll go with Option A, please. I don’t think my boobs are big enough for me to make a decent living in the world of exotic dancing,” Lexi laughed lightheartedly.

Her decision made, Lexi was finally ready to get back out there and be a part of the real world once again. Reid Inc., Parketti Associates, and Hunter Advertising wouldn’t know what hit them once Lexi White walked through their doors.



Three days later, Lexi paced around her room, trying to calm her nerves. She took a deep breath, then stepped out of her bedroom to find Hope’s smiling face waiting for her on the couch.

“Today’s the day! You’re going to knock them dead, Lexi,” Hope said proudly. “I love those shoes, by the way. They really pull the outfit together nicely.”

Lexi shrugged uncomfortably. “I just hope I don’t break my neck. Do you have any idea how long it’s been since I’ve been in heels? I think it was probably on a date back in college, and before that, prom. Are you sure I can’t wear my flip flops?” She strode across the room to the couch, her heels softly clicking on the wood floor as she concentrated on each tiny step.

“Oh, stop it. You’ll be fine.” Hope glanced at her watch. “I have to go, but are we still on for tonight?” They had plans to meet at Olive, a new Italian place downtown.

“Sure, I’ll meet you at a little after six; does that sound good?” Lexi stood up and straightened out her gray pencil skirt.

“Perfect! And the drinks are on me.” Hope grabbed her purse and keys and headed for the door. “Good luck, Lexi. If one of these firms doesn’t hire you, they’re idiots.” She gave a quick wave. “Love ya.”

“Thanks, Hope. Keep your fingers crossed.” Lexi watched her door close as Hope left for work.

Lexi went back into the bathroom, flipped on the light, and took one last look at herself in the mirror. The sides of her hair were pulled back into a clip behind her head, leaving the rest of her light brown waves flowing freely over her shoulders. With her hair out of her face, Lexi’s big green eyes sparkled. For good luck, she wore a beautiful pair of delicate, pearl earrings that had been Marie’s. The black, cashmere V-neck sweater hugged her body, and while it wasn’t her first choice, Hope assured her it looked very professional when paired with her pencil skirt. The outfit was topped off with a brand spanking new pair of black, peep-toe heels that she and Hope had bought the day before.

“Here goes nothing,” she told her reflection just before she turned off the light and walked out the door.

As she walked down the hallway, a line from Michelle Fulton’s graduation speech flitted into her head. *Never forget to be true to yourself and go after your dreams, for dreams really do come true.*

Lexi stepped onto the sidewalk and whispered to herself, “Let’s see if she knew what she was talking about.”