

GOING
THE
Distance



JULIANNA KEYES

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BY JULIANNA KEYES

Olivia Clarke's fall from pretty, perfect and popular happened in an instant. With her life in tatters, she impulsively accepts a teaching job in the small city of Lazhou, China. Three months in, she's ready to admit she made a huge mistake. She doesn't speak Mandarin, the teachers at her school refuse to include her in anything, and she spends her nights watching counterfeit DVDs in her twin bed. Alone.

Jarek McLean is a loner. He's not looking for friends, and he's definitely not looking for love. The former army interrogator works as a carpenter for a small construction company rebuilding a travel office in Lazhou. When he meets Olivia he knows immediately she's too wholesome to be his type, but when he discovers the pretty kindergarten teacher is hiding a secret, his inquisitive side rears its nosy head and demands answers.

Olivia isn't interested in a one-sided interrogation, and makes her position clear: if Jarek wants to ask questions, he'll have to answer some, too. Jarek's never let anyone in—not into his apartment, not into his life, certainly not into his heart. But the closer he gets to Olivia, the more he falls for her, and suddenly the man who doesn't do relationships finds himself in a most unexpected one. When he reluctantly admits that this could be love, he's faced with the most terrifying question of all: What the hell does he do now?

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Thanks for reading!

Julianna Keyes

Chapter One

Olivia had spent enough time in the company of casually dangerous men to know one when he walked in. She kept up her pace on the treadmill and looked past her reflection in the mirror to watch the stranger approach Dale and Ritchie at the weight bench. She couldn't hear their brief conversation over the thud of her feet hitting the spinning rubber mat, but she could look.

She'd never seen him before, which was saying something. At present there couldn't be more than a dozen foreigners in the rural Chinese town of Lazhou (pronounced La-Joe, she'd been informed when she mispronounced it upon her arrival), and in her time there, she'd pretty much encountered them all. This one was tall, with close cropped curly brown hair and a sharp, intimidating jaw line. He looked like the kind of man who rarely smiled, the kind you'd see lingering by the side of an Irish mob boss, maybe, waiting for the signal to take someone out back to be kneecapped. Or maybe Olivia had been spending too much time alone, and her imagination was taking itself to new heights.

He finished his brief conversation with Dale and Ritchie, then stripped off his heavy green jacket before approaching the empty treadmill on Olivia's right. She returned his curt nod of greeting, then, with his attention fixed on the buttons on the machine, she studied him some more. He was several inches taller than her, probably six feet, with broad shoulders and slim hips like a swimmer. He wore an old white T-shirt and black track pants, and set his speed to a full mile faster than hers.

Olivia shifted her gaze to the wall of mirrors, watching her feet fall in a rhythmic pattern. When she next looked up she found him staring at her reflection, waiting. "You the teacher?" he asked when he had her attention. He had an unnerving way of looking at people—or her, at least—and Olivia got the impression he not only knew the answer to that particular question, but several others. He wasn't doing anything outwardly menacing or unkind, but he didn't seem friendly, either.

"Yes," she said, pushing a strand of sweaty blond hair off her cheek. Her long ponytail swung between her shoulder blades like a pendulum, and she had the fleeting wish that she could use it to cover her chest as it bounced beneath her fitted tank top. His

eyes hadn't dropped below her chin, but he still made her feel self-conscious. When he didn't say anything else, she gathered her breath and added, "I work at the kindergarten down the street. Are you working for Brant?"

He nodded. "Yeah. About a month now."

"I haven't seen you."

Another nod. "Jarek McLean."

It took her a second to realize he was introducing himself. "Jarek?" she echoed.

A faint smile. He probably got that all the time. "Polish mother. Irish father."

"Olivia Clarke. Both parents American."

The tiniest increase in the smile. "How far are you going?" His eyes finally left her face, glancing down at the display panel on the dated treadmill. She'd covered just over two miles, almost halfway to her goal.

"Five."

He nodded, then increased the speed on his machine. "Well then. Let's see if I can't catch you."

Thirty minutes later, Olivia stepped off the treadmill as Jarek did the same. They were both shiny with sweat, but he wasn't breathing nearly as hard despite having caught up to her as promised, even with the two-mile head start.

Olivia collected the towel from the bag she'd deposited next to the machine and mopped her forehead and the back of her neck. Jarek retrieved one from his coat pocket and copied her, though this time she couldn't help but notice his gaze flicker to her chest as she raised her arms. They hadn't spoken for the rest of the run, but he'd made occasional eye contact, silently taunting her as he gained invisible ground.

"You always run indoors?" he asked eventually.

"Um," Olivia said. The simple question actually had a semi-complicated answer, but she wasn't about to get into it. "Yes."

His eyes lingered on hers for a second, then shifted to the door where Ritchie and Dale put on their coats, workout finished. "You okay, Ritchie?" Jarek asked when the smaller of the two men, and the only one Olivia particularly liked, winced as he put pressure on his right foot.

“Fine,” Ritchie replied. “Just twisted it.”

“We’ve got ice in the other trailer,” Dale said, opening the door and letting the cold night air wash in. “Wrap it up, it’ll be fine.”

“Yeah,” Ritchie said, unconvinced. “Do you mind walking Olivia home, Jarek? It’s just fifteen min—”

“Oh, that’s okay,” Olivia interrupted quickly. She dabbed at her throat with the towel in order to keep her chest covered; the cold air was having an undesirable effect, entirely obvious through her green tank top. “It’s not far. I can go alone.”

“I’ll take her,” Jarek said, looking down at her, amused. “Don’t worry about it.”

She was vaguely annoyed to be discussed as though she were a child and not a twenty-seven-year-old woman, but she wasn’t going to stand there arguing.

“Good night,” Ritchie said. Dale echoed the sentiment as they stepped outside and finally closed the door.

Jarek followed Olivia to the small stretching area set up in the middle of the trailer and arranged a mat next to hers. They didn’t speak as they stretched, and she got the distinct impression that he was just waiting to walk her home. “It’s not necessary,” she said. “Walking me back. It’s a straight line. It’s not that late, and there are lots of people out.”

“It’s fine,” he answered. “I could use the exercise.”

Olivia started to protest, then realized he was mocking her. As though outpacing her on the treadmill had required no effort at all. She shot him a peeved look, which he studiously ignored, and finished stretching. They wiped down the mats in silence, then put on their jackets and stepped outside, shutting off the lights and locking the door.

Brant Construction had set up a temporary headquarters near the site of their current job rebuilding a travel office that catered to foreigners interested in touring the lesser known parts of China. A year prior a flash flood had washed through the small city, destroying everything on its north side, and the restoration was still underway. The workers on the project were a mix of American and Chinese, and they had a small series of trailers that housed everything from a kitchen and lounge area to the small gym and work spaces. The workers lived in a newly constructed apartment building a five minute walk in the opposite direction of Olivia’s decidedly less new building.

They wove through the trailers to the busy street that edged the north side of the town, where small shops and businesses had slowly emerged from the detritus that littered the area post-flood. Both street and sidewalk were clogged with cars and bicycles, motorcycles and pedestrians, and scents of fried food and other, less identifiable things filled the air.

They barely spoke, but Olivia paused when Jarek stopped in front of a small handmade noodle shop, half-full at eight o'clock at night. She watched him through the icy puffs of breath hovering between them, mingling with the steam from the restaurant.

"You eat yet?" he asked.

Her stomach rumbled in response to the smells wafting out the open door. "No," she said. "I could eat."

Olivia had been in the restaurant before, a small, unadorned space with square tables topped with napkin holders, hot sauce and containers of disposable chopsticks. The open kitchen allowed diners to watch chefs in white jackets stretch and cut noodles, flinging massive lengths of stretchy dough back and forth between hands.

Jarek trailed Olivia to the counter where she ordered clumsily in Mandarin; the cashier recognized her regular, mangled order, and when Jarek said, "I'll have the same," Olivia shrugged and held up two fingers. They snagged lukewarm bottles of Sprite from the fridge on the counter, then Jarek waved away Olivia's money and paid before leading her to a seat in the corner, his back to the wall. She shivered slightly as she sat down. The air inside was almost as cold as outside; they didn't have central heat in this part of the country, and jackets indoors were the norm.

"So," he said, twisting the caps off both glass bottles and sliding one her way.

She took a long drink and watched him watch her. "So."

"Talk."

"I beg your pardon?" She raised a fine blond eyebrow, bemused.

"Make conversation."

"You first."

"I paid for dinner."

She rolled her eyes. "I'll give you your fifty cents tomorrow."

Jarek laughed and looked away, downing half his drink. “How long have you been here?”

Olivia figured he already knew the answer, but told him anyway. “Three months.”

“You like it?”

“Sometimes. You?”

He shrugged and shifted back as the server arrived to drop two steaming plates of fried noodles in front of them. Olivia plucked a set of chopsticks from the canister, slid them from their paper wrapper, and rubbed them together to remove slivers.

“I’m starving,” she said, when it became obvious he considered his shrug an actual reply.

Jarek said nothing as he dug into his own dish. They ate in silence for a minute, then he studied her. “Why’d you come?”

She licked sauce from the corner of her mouth. “Because you asked me.”

“To China.”

“Oh.” Olivia shifted her gaze to the tiny window that looked onto the street, motorbikes and foot traffic still whizzing past. She lifted a shoulder. “For a change.”

“From what?”

She smiled, a faintly wistful twist of the lips as she recalled her parents’ shocked stares when she’d announced she was moving to China with little warning. Or perhaps there’d been an entire year of warning, and they’d just never credited her with the courage to step out on her own. “The usual,” she said finally. “I wanted things to be different.”

Outside, a taxi driver laid on the horn, a cyclist furiously rang a bell, and shrill, angry voices cut through the cold night air. “This is different,” Jarek said. “Isn’t it?”

“Yep.”

“What are you running from?”

Olivia stilled in her chair. His posture was unaffected; anyone peering in would see only a semi-bored-looking man and a startled blond woman. It didn’t really matter, since she was hardly a criminal, but still she asked, “Are you a cop?” as she plucked a large piece of green pepper from the noodles and set it aside. She put an unduly large amount of food into her mouth and stared back at him.

“No,” he answered.

She eventually swallowed the noodles. “Were you? At any point?”

“No.”

“Hmm.” She strummed her fingers on the table and looked at him thoughtfully.

“Something sociable, I see. Politician? Wedding planner?”

A ghost of a smile. “You got me.”

She took another bite of food and chewed slowly.

He squinted at her. “You gonna answer?”

“No.”

“Left at the altar.”

Olivia blinked at the abrupt guess. “No.”

“No?” He glanced pointedly at her left hand, the faint pale line that lingered at the base of her ring finger.

She kept her voice level, unconcerned. She was telling the truth, anyway. “No.”

“Came home early one day to find him in bed with your sister.”

“I don’t have a sister.”

“Brother?”

“Only child.”

“Neighbor, then. An older woman.”

“No affairs.”

“Huh.” Jarek polished off his drink and eyed her pile of castaway peppers.

“What’s wrong with green peppers?”

She scowled. She positively loathed them. “Everything. Don’t get me started.”

He took one and ate it. “Were you a teacher before? Back at home?”

She nodded. “Kindergarten.”

“Where?”

“Michigan. Where are you from?”

He shrugged. “Hard to say anymore.”

“Say it anyway.” She worked with children for a living; he might enjoy asking questions, but she knew how to get answers, too.

He watched her as he chewed. “My brother’s in Virginia. That’s where I go when I’m not...elsewhere.”

“Elsewhere where you’re not a cop.”

“That’s right. So where’s the ring?”

Olivia smiled thinly and pushed away her half-empty plate. She was full, and the reminder of the ring wasn’t doing much to increase her appetite. “At the bottom of a lake somewhere. I’m done.”

He gestured at the peppers with his chopsticks and transferred them to his own clean plate. “This is wasteful.”

She watched him eat, then looked at her watch. Almost nine o’clock. “I should go.”

Jarek finished the peppers and zipped up his jacket. “After you.”

Olivia waved good night to the cashier and stepped into the busy street. There wasn’t a lot of room to walk side by side but they did it anyway, Jarek’s bicep bumping against hers, transferring his body heat.

“Why kindergarten?” he asked after a couple blocks.

She glanced up at him, then narrowly missed being run down by an older woman on a scooter. “I thought it seemed nice,” she admitted. “Songs and games and crafts all day. And my mother was a teacher.”

“You must like it, if you traveled halfway around the world to keep doing it.”

“I do like it. But ‘nice’ isn’t the word.”

“No?”

“You should try teaching a class some time. Stand in front of thirty six-year-olds and try to hold their attention.”

“I’ll pass.”

“What is it you do, exactly, Jarek? Construction?”

“Whatever they want,” he said. He put a hand on her shoulder to steer her out of the way of a bicycle towing a large wagon full of garbage before stuffing his hands back into his pockets. “Some construction. Some electric. But...carpentry, mostly.”

Olivia was surprised to get an actual answer from him. “What kind of carpenter lives ‘elsewhere’ and asks so many questions?” She stopped when they reached the front

of her unimpressive apartment building. The five-story gray concrete façade radiated cold, and the large green door was ajar, eliminating the need for the keys she held in her palm.

“What kind of kindergarten teacher throws her ring in a lake?” Jarek leaned in and Olivia had the fleeting impression he might kiss her, then an equally fleeting and curious sense of disappointment when he reached past to tug open the door.

“One whose fiancé moved in with her parents,” she replied, stepping over the ledge into the building. She gripped the edge of the door to tug it closed. “Thanks for walking me home.”

Jarek held the door a second longer. “What are you doing tomorrow night?”

She looked at him, but it was hard to discern intent in the darkness. She could see little more than the slant of his cheekbones and the hard slash of his unsmiling mouth. He was intimidating; cold. Not handsome, but sexy, maybe. If you liked ruthless.

“Why?”

“I’ll meet you here at seven. Let’s run outside. Get out of that fucking trailer.”

Olivia’s brows lifted in surprise, but she was happy to be invited somewhere. Anywhere. “Okay.”

Jarek let go of the door. “Okay. See you.”

“Good night.”

He didn’t say anything else as he turned and walked away, hands stuffed into his pockets. Olivia was tempted to watch him go, trying to puzzle through his motives and intentions—assuming he had any—but didn’t. Without him beside her the cold crept in, and she hustled up four flights of dark stairs to her apartment, grateful for the detour that ate up an hour of her four-hundred-and-fifty-ninth lonely night.

Jarek was in no rush to get home. He kept his head down, ignored the abundant stares, and made his way through the cold night, thinking about Olivia. It went against everything in him not to pry when he knew someone was holding something back, but he knew equally well that there was a time and place for demanding answers, and tonight hadn’t been it.

Before today he'd glimpsed her from afar on a couple of occasions, just the glint of that long blond hair as she came or went from the gym trailer, and of course he'd heard the men at the site talking about her. There weren't many female foreigners in town, not slim blondes in their twenties with legs that went on for miles and breasts he'd struggled not to ogle as she'd run on that damn treadmill for far too long. She was prettier than Dale's lewd descriptions had implied; he'd gotten the impression she was the kind of blonde you saw in a men's magazine, but in reality she was more of the fitness model-type. Tan skin, big blue eyes, no makeup.

Jarek had spent much of his adult life working overseas; he'd been to more places than he could count, certainly more than he'd care to remember. Unlike the Dales of the world, he didn't take advantage of being a white male in a second or third world country; he didn't take advantage of young women desperate for a chance to marry into a better life. It made things difficult, on a personal level, especially when he was abroad for months or years at a time, or when he spent half an hour running next to someone whose hair smelled like apples every time her ponytail swung his way.

Despite the fact that she was American and of age, Olivia wasn't Jarek's type. She was too...wholesome. She'd no doubt grown up surrounded by cornfields, with a family that had a flagpole in the front yard and said grace before every meal. He preferred his women a little more jaded, the kind he met in dark bars and took home to dark rooms, the kind who didn't expect him to be there in the morning, the kind he didn't disappoint. He didn't do second dates; hell, he didn't do first dates. They got everything they needed in the span of a few hours, and then everybody moved on. That was how he liked it.

If it hadn't been for that faint white line on her finger and the strange sadness in her smile, he wouldn't have asked her to meet him tomorrow night. He may have left his old line of work behind, but he couldn't shake it completely. If someone had a secret, he needed to know what it was. And Olivia Clarke had a secret.

“Back already?”

Jarek turned at the sound of Dale's faintly southern drawl. Pushing forty, he was a beefy guy with a dutiful wife and a couple of children back at home, family he promptly put out of his mind when he was out of the country. Jarek hadn't known him long, but he didn't like him. He'd already assessed that the guy was harmless, but he was an

asshole—the kind of guy who used his hands instead of his words to describe women. He'd given Olivia an hourglass shape with heavy emphasis on the curves.

“Yeah.”

They walked the remaining minute to the apartment building that housed the workers, a new construction that still smelled like paint and metal. They each had their own apartment, and Jarek lived across the hall from Dale. They stepped into the elevator and Dale looked over meaningfully. “Thought you'd be gone longer,” he remarked, prying.

Jarek shook his head. “Nope.”

“Not your type?”

“Not interested.”

“Bullshit.”

Jarek glanced at him as the doors opened on the fifth floor. “She your type?”

Dale laughed, cheeks red from the beer he'd chugged as soon as he finished working out. “I already tried, man.”

“No luck?”

“Just takes some work, I guess.”

Jarek reached his apartment and stepped inside. “See you tomorrow.”

“Night.”

He closed and locked the door, then kicked off his sneakers and dropped his coat on a chair before walking into the bathroom to strip out of his sticky clothes. He turned on the hot water and climbed into the shower, doing his best to keep Olivia out of his thoughts. He'd only been in China four weeks; prior to that he'd stayed with his brother in Virginia for two months. He'd hooked up twice while he was there, and this certainly wasn't the first time he'd gone more than a month without sex. But standing here now, with the hot water sluicing down his chest, he could only see Olivia on the treadmill, sweat trickling between her slightly bouncing breasts.

He washed his hair and willed away the image, but then imaginary Olivia smiled at him, and he saw her nipples harden when Dale opened the trailer door, the ones she'd tried to hide behind her towel. He smelled her hair and the faint tang of her sweat, then he gave up the fight and reached between his legs, determined to get her out of his head.