

true calling series ~ book one

LOVE'S TRUE
Calling

LORI DEJONG



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For Eric, who gave me the room to dream, and Michaela, who made me believe it could come true. I love you both with all my heart.

CHAPTER ONE



Harper had never felt so ... old.

She fidgeted in her second-row seat as her classmates gathered in groups around the room—the proverbial square peg. The last time she sat in a college classroom, most of these kids were in middle school. Of course, starting her sophomore year of college nine years after her freshman hadn't been the original plan, but then, well ... life. There was no way to see what lay around that next curve.

And hers had seen plenty of curves in her scant twenty-eight years.

She glanced at her watch. Class should have begun five minutes ago. Odd for a professor to be late the first day, especially one with as stellar a reputation as Dr. Marjorie Vance.

A man strode into the room and closed the door behind him. "Okay, everybody, please take your seats, and we'll get things rolling."

Harper froze. She hardly recognized the man, but that voice she knew. The voice she'd witnessed transition from boy to adolescent crackle on the way to its present smooth, deep

timbre. The voice she last heard the night she broke his heart. The night he took hers with him when he walked away.

“Wow.” The petite blonde next to her stared wide-eyed at their surprise professor. “Who is *that*?”

Harper’s heart kicked into an erratic rhythm. Her skin chilled as if the air conditioning had been lowered to arctic temperatures. Was she in the wrong classroom? Or was this a crazy dream from which she’d wake any minute now?

She leaned toward the other girl. “This is Dr. Vance’s General P̄sych class, isn’t it?”

The girl kept her eyes trained on the man up front. “I hope so. Although if I’m in the wrong class, I’m stayin’.”

Harper’s gaze remained focused on the professor digging through the backpack now lying on the desk. Her pulse throbbed in her throat. She hadn’t laid eyes on him since he was a boy of eighteen. A bespectacled, lanky boy with a haphazard shock of red hair, whose clothes always appeared a size too large.

But this was no boy. This was a full-grown, filled-out-in-all-the-best-ways man. The eyeglasses were gone, and that curly mop of hair was now more auburn than red, worn short and neat. His physique had caught up to his six-foot-two-inch height, as evidenced by the pullover shirt and jeans that fit as if made for him alone.

He pulled an electronic tablet from his bag and leaned against the whiteboard spanning the front of the room. His brow furrowed much like she remembered from all those years ago as he scrolled through pages on the tablet.

How could this be happening? After all these years? That, of all places, they’d end up in the same classroom at this small Christian university.

How?

He gave the screen a tap. “Let’s take a quick roll so I can put names with faces. Anderson, Kathryn.”

A girl in the first row and four seats over raised her hand. "Kate."

"Kate." He grinned, then tapped on the screen. "Got it. Barrett, Cody."

Harper's pulse accelerated as he neared the *TJ*. Had he already seen her name on the roster before coming to class? Was he more prepared for this unexpected reunion than she was?

"Townsend." He brought the device closer to his face, his jaw falling slack.

Nope. Clearly no time to prepare.

He looked up to scan the room, and when he found her, her breath caught. She didn't know whether it was contacts that made his eyes even bluer than she remembered or his aqua polo shirt with the Dallas Heritage University logo. But that azure gaze communicated with no doubt she was more shock than awe.

"Harper." His eyes locked on hers but with no hint of the grin he'd offered the others.

"Here." A completely unnecessary answer. The silence stretched into awkwardness before he looked back down at the tablet and cleared his throat. "Trent, Shannon."

"Present!" The light-haired girl next to her sang out, and the tightness in Harper's chest reminded her to breathe.

His gaze slid from Shannon back to Harper, then he quickly looked down and rubbed his forehead with his fingers. Another flash from the past raced through her mind. A memory from that night, rubbing his brow with his fingers mere seconds before she shut the door on him, cutting him out of her life forever.

But forever had only lasted eleven years, because here he was. Plain as day. Right in front of her.

Shannon leaned in. "I think our hunky professor might be crushing on you!"

Harper shook her head. "Definitely not crushing." Not now, at least.

Her face heated as her hands squeezed together on the desktop. She thought she'd left all of those memories behind. All of that pain. Yet here she sat, face to face with one of her biggest regrets.

He set the tablet on the lectern. "Let's get started." He squared his shoulders, standing at the front with his hands braced on his hips, looking everywhere but at her. "I'm Dr. Wyatt McCowan, Adolescent Psychologist and adjunct professor. I was Dr. Vance's assistant while getting my doctorate here at DHU. Dr. Vance's husband was involved in a serious car accident early this morning, so she asked me to step in for the time being. He's in surgery now, and there will probably be a period of rehabilitation. But, while you're stuck with me for the foreseeable future, you'll likely finish your semester with Dr. Vance, which I know you would all prefer."

"Not all of us," Shannon said under her breath, throwing a grin and a wink at Harper.

Harper tried to smile, but her nerves practically hummed with tension, like static along an electric cable. Looked like he could be their instructor for a while.

She could drop the class, but her parents, who owned and operated the prestigious Townsend Drug and Alcohol Treatment Centers, would think she'd lost her mind. She'd been thrilled to finally have their approval, at least on some level, when she decided to go back to school. To drop the class now —

"Before we go over the syllabus, let's get this semester started right and open in prayer."

He bowed his head and she followed suit. Praying herself still felt awkward, but she loved listening to folks who knew what they were doing. In that regard, Wyatt always had, even as a little boy, praying with his hands folded at the table the many times she'd eaten at his house.

After prayer, they went over the class syllabus, then he pulled a stack of papers out of his bag and handed them to the girl seated at the other end of the first row.

"I'm sure you're all familiar with the Brackett internship. It's one of DHU's most prestigious internships offered to psych students. An amazing opportunity I know from my own experience."

He leaned back against the dry-erase board, crossed his arms over his middle and one ankle over the other, clearly in his element. If she didn't know better, she'd assume he'd always played the part of Big Man on Campus.

"The internship would take place the first semester of your senior year. Competition is fierce and expectations high, so decide now how seriously you take your studies, because that will be a big factor in determining who's awarded the placement. Beginning with this class and your final essay. Take a flyer if you're interested, but it would behoove all of you to think hard about the opportunity. Any questions before we head into the first chapter?"

When the dwindling stack made its way to Harper, she took one and scanned over the contents while Wyatt—that is, *Dr. McCowan*—answered questions. She shook her head. Interning at The Brackett Institute, one of the country's premier mental health research facilities, would be a huge boost to her professional future. And maybe her parents would at last have some hope in her.

Dropping the class now wasn't an option if she wanted to make an impression on Dr. Vance. No, she'd have to stick it out. And pray her hunky professor had let go of the past better than she had.