

A woman with long, wavy blonde hair is seen from behind, wearing a light blue sleeveless dress. She is looking out over a vast, green, hilly landscape under a bright, hazy sky. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

Loving Mr. Daniels

"I need you to invite me
into your heart and
allow me to stay the night."

Brittainy C. Cherry

by Brittainy C. Cherry

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Dedication



To all of the Tonys of the world.

I *see* you.

I *hear* you.

I *feel* you.

I *love* you.

And you are not alone.

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Prologue

Daniel

~ Twenty Months Ago ~

I don't know what to tell you,

I don't know what to say.

I only know that caring for you brings on more pain.

~ Romeo's Quest



Absorbed in a stream of murky thoughts and annoyance, I parked the Jeep near the alley. I'd never been to this part of town. I hardly knew it existed. The night's sky was drunk on darkness, the late winter chill affecting my level of irritation. My eyes shifted to the car's dashboard.

Five thirty a.m.

I'd promised myself I wouldn't show up for him again. His actions had created a vast crater between our relationship, destroying all that we used to be. But I knew I couldn't keep that promise of staying away. He was my brother. Even when he fucked up—which he did often—he was still my brother.

It was at least fifteen minutes before I saw Jace come limping out of the alleyway and holding his side tight. I sat up in my seat, my eyes locking with his.

“Dammit, Jace,” I muttered, hopping out of my car and slamming the door closed. I moved in closer, allowing a streetlight to shine down on his face. His left eye was swollen shut, his bottom lip sliced open. His white shirt was stained red with his own blood. “What the hell happened?” I screamed in a whisper, helping him to the Jeep.

He groaned.

He tried to smile.

He groaned again.

I slammed his door shut and hurried back into the driver’s seat.

“They fucking stabbed me.” He wiped his fingers against his face, only spreading more blood across it. He laughed once, but his appearance showcased the significance of the situation. “I told Red I would have his money by next week—”—he cringed—“and he sent his guys to handle me.”

“Jesus, Jace,” I sighed, pulling away from the curb. Dawn had broken, yet it somehow seemed darker than before. “I thought you were done selling.”

He sat up, and his one opened eye found me. “I am, Danny. I promise.” He began to cry. “I swear to God, I’m done.” It was clear that he wasn’t only selling, but he was back to using, too. *Shit*. “They were going to kill me, Danny. I just know it. They were sent to—”

“*Shut up!*” I screamed, feeling the idea of my kid brother dying sink into my head. I grew haunted with a chill and an unearthly fear of the unknown. “You’re not going to die, Jace. Just shut the hell up.”

He sobbed and whined from the pain, a deep sound of lost and confusion filling his tears. “I’m sorry... I didn’t mean to drag you back into this.”

I eyed him and sighed heavily. My hand landed on his back. “It’s okay,” I lied.

I’d gotten away from his trouble. I’d focused on my music. I’d focused on school. I was in college, one year out of making something of myself. Yet instead of preparing for my exam in a few hours, I would be bandaging up Jace. Perfect.

He fiddled with his fingers, looking down to the floor. “I don’t want to mess with this stuff anymore, Danny. And I’ve been thinking.” He looked up to me before his gaze faltered and fell again. “Maybe I can get back in the band.”

“Jace,” I warned.

“I know, I know. I’ve screwed up—”

“Fucked up,” I corrected.

“Yeah, right. But you know. The only time I’d been happy after Sarah...” He flinched at his own words. His troubled spirit shifted in the seat. I frowned. “The only time I’d been happy since that day was when I was on stage with you guys.”

My stomach flipped, and I didn’t reply to his comment. I changed the topic. “We should get you to the hospital.”

His eye widened and he shook his head back and forth. “No. No hospitals,” he said.

“Why?”

He paused and shrugged. “The cops might get ahold of me...”

I arched an eyebrow. “Are the cops after you, Jace?”

He nodded.

I cursed.

So he wasn’t only running from people on the streets, but he was also running from those who locked up the people on the streets. I wished this would’ve surprised me.

“What did you do?” I asked, annoyed.

“It doesn’t matter.” I gave him a cold look and he sighed. “It wasn’t my fault, Danny. I swear it wasn’t. Look. A few weeks ago, Red wanted me to move a car. I didn’t know what the fuck was in it.”

“You moved drugs?”

“I didn’t know! I swear to God I didn’t know!”

What the hell was he talking about? Had he thought he was moving fucking candy canes?

He continued. “Anyway, the cops got ahold of the vehicle when I pulled into a gas station to fill up. By the time I walked out of the station, the car was surrounded. One cop saw me walking quickly away from the car and yelled at me to stop, but I didn’t. I ran. Turned out us running track in high school paid off.” He snickered.

“Oh this is funny? You think it’s funny?” I asked, my blood boiling. “Because I am having a fucking ball here, Jace!” He lowered his head. I sighed. “Where am I taking you?”

“Take me to Mom and Dad’s,” he said.

“You’re kidding, right? Mom hasn’t seen you in a year and the first place you want to go is there? Beat up and bloody? Are you trying to kill her? And you know Dad’s health is bad...”

“Please, Danny,” he whined.

“Mom takes her morning walks by the dock around this time...” I warned.

He sniffled and ran his fingers under his nose. “I’ll just wait in the boat shed and get cleaned up.” He paused and turned to the passenger’s side window. “I’ll get cleaned up,” he whispered again.

Like I hadn’t heard that before.



It took us twenty minutes to get to our parents’ house. They lived on a lake a few miles out of Edgewood, Wisconsin. Dad had promised Mom a lake house some day, and it had only been a few years ago that he was able to buy her this place. It was a fixer-upper, but it was their fixer-upper.

I parked the car behind the shed. Dad’s boat rested inside, waiting for winter to pass. Jace sighed and thanked me for bringing him. We headed inside the shed, the morning light shining through the windows.

I moved over to the boat and climbed inside, grabbing some towels from below deck. When I came back up, I saw Jace sitting and looking down at his cut.

“It isn’t too deep,” he said, pressing the palm of his hand on it. I pulled out a pocket knife, ripped one of the towels, and pressed it against his

wound. Jace glanced at the blade and closed his eyes. “Dad gave you his knife?”

I stared at the metal in my grip and closed it, sliding it back into my pocket. “Borrowed it.”

“Dad wouldn’t let me touch the thing.”

My eyes fell to his cut. “I wonder why.”

Before he could reply, a shriek was heard from near the dock. “What the hell...” I muttered before rushing outside with a limping Jace following close behind. “Mom!” I shouted, seeing her being pulled by a stranger in a red hoodie with a gun pointed toward her back.

“How did they find us?” Jace muttered to himself.

I looked back to my brother, confused. “You know him?!” I asked, disgusted.

And pissed off.

And scared.

Mostly scared.

The stranger glared up to see Jace and me, and I could’ve sworn he smirked.

He smirked before the gun was fired.

And he ran as Mom fell down.

Jace’s voice rocketed through the sky. His sounds were thick, filled with anger and fear as he charged to Mom’s side, but I beat him there.

“Mom, mom. You’re okay.” I turned to my brother and shoved him hard. “Call 911.”

He stood over us, tears streaming down his face from his bloodshot eyes. “Danny, she’s not... She’s not...” His words were fumbling, and I hated him for thinking exactly what I was thinking.

I reached into my pocket, pulled out my cell phone, and shoved it into his hands. “Call!” I ordered, holding Mom in my arms.

I looked up toward the house and saw Dad’s face the moment he realized what had happened. The moment he realized that he had, in fact,

heard a gun and that his wife was, in fact, lying motionless. His body was pretty broken down from his health, but he was running our way.

“Yes, hi. Our mom... *She’s been shot!*” Just hearing the words fly from Jace’s lips made my own tears shed.

My fingers ran through Mom’s hair and I hugged her body as Dad rushed over to us. “No...no...no...” he muttered, falling to the ground.

I held on tighter. Holding on to both him and her. She looked at me with her blue eyes, begging for answers to the unknown questions. “You’re okay. You’re okay,” I whispered against Mom’s ear.

I was lying to her, and I was lying to myself. I knew that she wasn’t going to make it. Something inside me kept telling me that it was too late and there was no hope. Yet I couldn’t stop saying it, I couldn’t stop thinking it. And I couldn’t stop crying.

You’re okay.

Chapter 1

Ashlyn

~ Present Day ~

Death isn't frightening, it isn't a curse.

I just fucking wish that it would've taken me first.

~ Romeo's Quest

I sat on the pew in the far back. I hated funerals, but then again, I believed it would be weird if I loved them. I wondered if there were people who did love those kinds of things. People who showed up just to breathe in all of the sadness as a sick form of entertainment. You know what they say—you can't spell funeral without fun.

I'm okay.

Whenever people walked by me, they took that breath of hesitation, thinking that they were, in fact, staring at Gabby. "I'm not her," I whispered to them before they would frown and keep moving. "I'm not her," I muttered to myself, shifting around on the wooden pew.

I was sick when I was younger, in and out of the hospital from ages four to six. I guess there was a hole in my heart. After too many surgeries and too many prayers, I was able to go on to live a normal life. Mom had thought I was going to die back then, and I couldn't help but think that she was disappointed that Gabby was the one gone now, not me.

She'd started drinking again after she found out Gabby was sick. She had done her best to hide it, but one time I'd checked on her in her bedroom. She was crying and shaking in her bed. When I climbed next to her to hold her, I smelled the whiskey on her breath.

Mom had never been good with hard situations, and alcohol was always the way she dealt with her issues. It hadn't made for the best outcome when Gabby and I had to go stay with our grandpa during her rehab visits. After her last one, she'd promised to put the bottle down forever.

Mom sat in the front row with her boyfriend, Jeremy—the only person who was able to make sure she was getting dressed every day. We hadn't spoken much since Gabby went all selfish—dying and stuff. She'd always liked Gabby more. It wasn't a secret. Gabby had been into the things Mom was into, like makeup and reality television. They'd always laughed with each other and would have a ton of fun while I sat in the room on the couch reading my books.

I knew parents always said they didn't have favorites, but how could they not? Sometimes they got a kid who was so much like them that they swore God had made them in his own image. That's what Gabby had been to mom. But other times, you got a kid who read the dictionary for fun because, "Words are cool."

Guess who that was?

She loved me enough, but she sure as hell didn't like me. I was okay with it, because I loved her enough for both of us.

Jeremy was a decent man, and I secretly wondered if he would ever be able to bring back the mom I had before Gabby had been ill. The mom who used to smile. The mom who could stomach to look my way. The mom who loved me but didn't very much like me. I really missed that mom.

Chipping away at the black nail polish on my fingers, I sighed. The priest kept talking about Gabby as if he'd known her. He hadn't known her. We'd never gone to church, so the fact that we were in one right now was a bit dramatic. Mom always said that the church was inside us and that you could find God through anything, so there was no reason to go to a building every Sunday. I thought that was just her way of saying, "I'm sleeping in on Sundays."

There was no way I could stay inside the church for a second longer. For a place of prayer and faith, it sure held a feeling of suffocation.

I turned my head to the church doors as my ears were hit with another hymn. *Ohmygosh. How many hymns are there?!* Pushing myself up from the pew, I walked outside, feeling the summer heat slap my skin. It was hotter than the previous years. A few specks of sweat started rolling from my forehead before I even reached the steps. Tugging on the black dress I was obligated to wear, I tried not to teeter around on the unfamiliar height of my heels.

Some people would probably think it was weird that I was wearing the dress that my dead sister had picked out. But that was Gabby. She'd always been a bit morbid like that, talking about her death before it had even arrived, before she had even been sick, and wishing me to look my best at her funeral. The dress was a little too small for me around the waistline, yet I didn't complain. Who was there to complain to anyway?

Sitting on the top step of the church, I rested my elbows against the sides of my body, tucking them in so I could feel a slight bit of pain from the pressure I was applying. Funerals were boring. I watched an ant scatter across the top step, looking to be dazed and confused, running back and forth, left and right, up and down.

"Well, it appears you and I have a lot in common, Mr. Ant."

I shielded my eyes from the sun and looked up to the blue sky. Stupid blue skies, all happy and stuff. Even though I covered my eyes, the sun burned down onto me, heating me up with remorse and guilt.

My head lowered as I studied the cement steps, circling the tip of my heels in a redundant pattern. I wasn't sure of it, but I was almost certain that loneliness was a disease. An infectious, disgusting illness that was slow to creep into your system and overtake you, even though you tried to fight it off the best you could.

"Am I interrupting?" a voice said from behind me. *Bentley's voice.*

Turning around, I saw him standing there with a treasure box of sorts in his hands. He smiled my way, but he looked so sad in the eyes. I patted the spot on the steps next to me, and he was quick to accept my unspoken invitation. Gabby had dressed him, too. In a blue blazer covering his worn-

and-torn Beatles t-shirt. People inside were probably giving him weird looks for his outfit of choice, but Bentley didn't care what others thought. He only cared about one girl and her wants and needs.

"How are you doing?" I asked, resting my hand on his knee.

His blue eyes found my greens, and he chuckled at first. Yet we both knew it was a chuckle of suffering. My lips turned down. Poor guy. It wasn't long before he placed the box next to him and his shoulders slumped down. His hands found his face, and he huddled up into a tight ball on the steps. I gasped lightly, almost feeling his heart breaking into pieces. I'd only seen Bentley cry once before, and that was when he'd scored tickets to see Paul McCartney. These were very different types of tears.

Watching him break down made me feel so helpless, and all I wanted to do was soak up all of his pain and send it into outer space so he would never have to feel that way again.

"I'm so sorry, Bentley," I softly stated, wrapping my arms around him.

He continued to sob for a few more moments before he wiped his eyes. "I'm some kind of idiot for breaking down like that in front of you. The last thing you need to see is someone falling apart. I'm sorry, Ashlyn," he sighed. He was the nicest guy I'd ever met. It was a pity that nice guys could hurt, because everyone knew that their hearts hurt the most.

"Never apologize to me." Wrapping my fingers together, I rested my chin on top of my hands.

He tilted his head in my direction and nudged me in the shoulder. "How are *you* doing?" he asked, giving me those same caring eyes he always had. My sister would have been super in love with him for the way he came to check on me. In the world that came after this one, I was sure she had a grin on her face while she hung out with Tupac and Nemo's mom.

A smile crept on my lips and a simple reminder that I wasn't the only one hurting slipped into my mind. Bentley had meant the world to Gabby, but Gabby was Bentley's universe. He was two years older than we were. We'd met him when he was a junior in high school. Gabby was a sophomore and I was a freshman since I had been held back a year due to my health.

Within a few weeks, Bentley would be starting his second year of college, going back up north to study to become a doctor—which was ironic because he was currently suffering from a broken heart that no medicine could ever heal.

“I’m doing okay, Bent.” It was a lie, and he knew it was a lie, but that was okay. He wouldn’t question me about it. “Did you see Henry in there?” I asked, turning back for a moment to glance at the church doors.

“Yeah, I did. We spoke for a little bit. Did you talk to him?”

“No. I haven’t talked to my mom either. Not for days now.” The tremble in my voice was picked up by Bentley, and he wrapped his arm around my waist, pulling me in closer for a comfort hug.

“She’s just grieving. She doesn’t mean any harm. I’m sure of it.”

I ran my fingers against the concrete steps, feeling the rough texture against my smooth skin. “I think she wishes it were me,” I spoke softly. A tear fell down my cheek, and I turned my head toward Bentley, who seemed to be hurting enough for me by my own words. “I don’t think she can even look at me because, well...I’m just the evil twin who lived.”

“No.” He said the word with such order in his tone. “Ashlyn, there’s not an evil bone in your body.”

“How can you know that?”

“Well”—he sat up straight and gave me a goofy smile—“I’m a doctor. In training at least.” I couldn’t help but chuckle at his comment. “And just so you know... During the last conversation Gabby and I had, she just kept repeating how happy she was that it wasn’t you.”

I bit into my bottom lip, trying to hold back the tears that were ready to fall. “Thanks, Bentley.”

“Any time, buddy.” He hugged me one last time before we separated. “Which brings me to the next thing.” After reaching over to the box next to him, he lifted it up and set it in my lap. “It’s from Gabby. I was told to give it to you to open after the funeral tonight. I don’t know what’s in it. She wouldn’t tell me. She just told me it was for you.”

I stared at the wooden box, running my fingers against it. What could’ve been inside? What could’ve made it feel so heavy?

Bentley pushed up from the steps and slid his hands into his pockets. I listened to his footsteps as he walked closer to the church doors and opened one, making the quiet muffle of tears that was heard from inside that much more damaging. I didn't look up, yet I knew he was still there.

He cleared his throat and took a few moments before speaking. "I was going to ask her to marry me, you know."

The wooden box before me pushed against my thighs, and I felt the summer sun piercing my face, spitting its light against my skin. Without turning back toward him, I nodded. "I know."

A heavy sigh fell from his lips as he turned to reenter the chapel. I sat there for a while longer, silently asking the sun to melt me into a pile of nothingness on the steps that afternoon. People wandered by the building, yet no one stopped to stare. They were too busy living their lives to notice that mine had somehow come to a halt.

The church door reopened, only this time it was Henry who came to sit next to me. He didn't say much, but he sat far enough away to avoid making me feel too uncomfortable. Reaching into his suit's pocket, he pulled out a pack of cigarettes and lit one up.

A cloud of smoke blew from his lips, and I watched the hypnotic patterns it made in the air before dissipating away.

"Don't you think it's a bit morose to be smoking on the steps of a church?"

Henry flicked some of the ashes off the end of his cigarette before talking. "Yeah, well, seeing how the world just buried one of my daughters, I think I can have a smoke on these steps and say, 'Fuck you, world.' At least for today."

I laughed, sarcasm filling every inch of my chuckle. "It seems a little bold for you to call us your daughters after eighteen years of only birthday calls and holiday gift cards." Henry's driving down here from Wisconsin was the first time I'd seen him in quite some time.

He hadn't made it his mission in life to have a #1 Dad coffee mug, and I'd learned to be okay with that. But for him to come up here, today of all days, and play the grieving father role seemed a bit dramatic, even for the guy smoking the cigarettes.

He sighed heavily, not replying. We sat and people watched for the longest time. Long enough for me to feel bad for the way I'd snapped at him.

"Sorry," I muttered, glancing his way. "I didn't mean that." I wasn't sure that he even held it against me. I guess sometimes it was easier to be mean than to be hurt.

Before long, Henry dived into his true reason for joining me outside. "I spoke with your mom. She's having a pretty hard time." No comment from me. Of course she was having a hard time! Her favorite daughter was dead! He continued. "We agreed that it might be best if you were to come stay with me. Start and finish your senior year in Wisconsin."

This time, I really laughed. "Yeah, okay, Henry." At least he still had a sense of humor going on. An odd sense of humor, but still funny. Rotating my body toward him, I saw the somber look filling his green eyes—the same shade of green as mine. And Gabby's. My stomach hurt. My eyes gained water. "You're serious? She doesn't want me here anymore?"

"It's not that..." His voice shook, hoping to not offend me.

But it *was* that. She didn't want me anymore. Why else would she want to ship me off to the land of cows, cheese, and beer? I knew we were having a hard time, but that's what families did after deaths. You had hard times. You walked on eggshells. You yelled when you had to and cried during screams. You fell apart—together.

The stomachaches from the past few weeks were back, and I hated myself for feeling faint. *Not in front of Henry. Don't pass out in front of him.*

I pushed myself up from the step, holding the wooden box under my left arm. Dusting off the back of my dress with my right hand, I moved toward the church. "It's fine," I lied, my mind muddled with panicked thoughts of what was to come. "Besides...who wants to be wanted anyway?"



It had been a week since the funeral, and Mom had been staying with Jeremy for most of that week. To be honest, it wasn't exactly how I'd

imagined spending the last few weeks of summer—crying alone in a house all hours of a day. I was officially pathetic.

On the plus side, I hadn't cried for the past ten minutes. So that was a pretty big victory.

After walking down the hallway, I stopped and leaned against the doorframe of what used to be our shared bedroom. There it was, resting on my dresser—her small box of wonders. Gabby's whole life, or at least what she'd dreamed it would someday be, was inside that box—I just knew it. Call it a gut reaction, call it Twin ESP, but I just knew.

It was a simple, small, wooden treasure box, and I'd been instructed to open it the night of the funeral, yet up until now, I'd only stared at it on my dresser.

I lifted the box and found the key taped to the bottom. Ripping the key off, I moved over to the twin-sized bed on the right side of the room, only glancing at the other twin bed on the left. My body melted into the hard mattress, and I placed the key in the locket.

I opened the treasure box at an unhurried speed. The breath I'd been holding released into the small space, and a few tears fell from my eyes. Swiftly, I wiped them again and took a deep inhale.

Two seconds. I hadn't cried for the past two seconds. So that was a pretty small victory.

Inside the box were an absurd amount of envelopes. There were a ton of Gabby's old guitar picks sitting on top of the envelopes. She'd been an amazing musician, and she'd always tried to teach me to play that damn guitar of hers, but all it did was hurt my fingers and waste my time when I could have been working on my uncompleted novel.

I instantly felt bad for not having tried harder to learn to play the guitar, because she'd sure taken the time to help co-write my novel, which I was certain would never be completed now.

Resting in the corner of the box was a ring—the promise ring Bentley had given her. I ran it against my fingers for a while before placing it back into the box. I hoped he was doing all right. He was the closest thing to a brother I had and I wished he would be able to get back to himself, the fun loving guy he always was.

The rest of the things in the wooden box were letters—a ton of letters. There were at least forty envelopes sitting inside, each one numbered and marked with words, each one sealed with a heart. The one on the very top read, ‘Read Me First.’ Placing the box on the mattress, I picked up that envelope and slowly tore the top open.

Little Sister,

My fingers flew to my lips as I gasped at the note from Gabby. I felt conflicted because I wanted to cry from seeing her handwriting yet I wanted to laugh at the sight of her calling me ‘little sister.’ She’d beaten me into the world by fifteen minutes, and she’d never let me live that down—always calling me ‘little sister’ or ‘kid.’ I kept reading, wanting to rush through each and every envelope in the box, wanting to feel her connection to me right then and there.

Let me first say, I love you. You’re my first love and you’re my best love. Yes, I understand that these letters might seem a bit morbid, but carpe diem, right? I asked Bentley to have you open these the night of the funeral therefore I know you have probably waited a day or two.

“Or seven,” I muttered and couldn’t help but smile a little as I read the next line.

Or seven. But I felt like we have so much left unfinished. So much we haven’t been able to do. I’m sorry I won’t be there at your graduation. I’m sorry I won’t be able to get extremely trashed with you when you turn twenty-one. I’m sorry I won’t be able to make it to your first book signing. I’m so, so sorry that I won’t be there to hug you after your next heartbreak or be your maid of honor at your over-the-top wedding.

But I need you to do something for me, Ash. I need you to stop blaming yourself. Right now! Stop it! I need you to at some point start moving on. I’m the one who died, not you. Remember? So, listed on the next page is your bucket list. Yup, I made your bucket list because I knew you never would. Each time you complete an action, I have a letter for you to open—as if I’m right there beside you.

So, get to reading the list. NEVER open a letter until after you’ve completed the task. And for God’s sake, take a shower, brush your hair,

and put on some makeup. You look terrible. Kind of like a hybrid love child of the Devil and Big Bird.

*I'm sorry about all the tears, and I'm sorry you feel so lost and alone.
But trust me...*

You're doing great, kid.

-Gabrielle

I moved to the second piece of paper and stared at my 'bucket list.' I wasn't surprised at how accurate the list was with some of the things we used to talk to each other about doing. Sky diving, read the complete works of Shakespeare, fall in love, publish a novel and have an awesome book signing with cupcakes, have twins, date the wrong guy, get into University of Southern California. Those were just some of the things I'd dreamed of doing. But then other items on the list were a little more Gabby than they were me.

Forgive Henry, cry because you're happy and laugh because you're sad, get drunk and dance on a bar, give Bentley his promise ring back, take care of Mom, recreate the infamous scene from *Titanic*.

The front door of the apartment crept open, and I saw Mom standing in the living room, pacing back and forth. I placed the letters back into the box and closed it. Moving out of the bedroom, I stood before her, and she stared at me for the longest time. Tears filled her eyes, and her mouth parted as if she wanted to say something to me, but nothing came out. Her shoulders rose and fell, leaving nothing but quietness.

She looked so broken, worn out, shattered.

"I'm leaving for Henry's tomorrow," I said, shifting my feet around on the carpeted floor. For a brief moment, Mom began to shiver. I thought about taking the words back and staying put in the apartment. But before I could offer that up, she spoke.

"That's good, Ashlyn. Do you need Jeremy to drive you to the train station?"

My head shook back and forth. My heart pounded against my chest as my fingers formed tight fists. "No. I'll figure it out. And just so you know, I'm not coming back." My voice cracked, but I bit back the tears. "Never. I

hate you for leaving me when I needed you the most. And I'll never forgive you."

She glanced to the floor, her posture falling low. She then looked up at me one more time before moving back toward the front door. "Have a safe trip."

And with that, she left me standing, once again, alone.

Chapter 2

Ashlyn

*Always remember our first glance,
And I'll promise your heart that I'll be enough.*

~ Romeo's Quest

The next day came fast. I was sitting outside of a train station on top of a large suitcase. I'd never been on a train before today, and it had been quite the experience.

Three things I'd learned about trains: One, sometimes strangers sit next to you and snore and slobber, but you had to act like it was normal; two, a can of soda would cost you more than buying a herd of cows; three, the train collectors looked exactly like the guy in the movie *Polar Express*—minus the whole computer-animated character thing.

Trains always seemed cooler in the movies and in books, but really, they were just cars that ran on tracks. Which made sense, seeing how they called each link of a train a 'car.' Well, almost each one. The front one was called the locomotive and the last one was called the caboose.

A smile ran across my face as I thought about the word caboose. Say that five times without giggling.

Caboose.

Caboose.

Caboose.

Caboose.

Gabby.

Oh no. I was laughing out loud and crying at the same time. All roads led back to my sister. The people walking past me probably thought I was crazy because I was laughing so hard by myself. To scale off the crazy looks, I pulled out a book from my purse and opened it up. People could be so judgmental sometimes.

I tossed my purse back on my shoulder and sighed. I hated purses, but Gabby had loved them. She'd loved everything about dressing up and being pretty. She'd been super good at it, too. Me? Not so much, but she'd said that I was beautiful, so that counted for something.

You know what the best thing about purses was? They could carry around books. I was reading *Hamlet* for the fifth time in the past three weeks. Last night, I stopped at the part where Hamlet wrote Ophelia telling her to doubt everything she saw except for his love. But the silly girl still went on to kill herself later in the story. The curse of being in a Shakespearean tragedy.

As I was reading, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a man pulling his luggage out of the train station. He proceeded to lean the luggage against the side of the building. It was strange to call him a man because he wasn't that old. But he was too grown to be called a boy. There needed to be a word for the in-between years. Maybe moy? Ban? Banmoy?

This banmoy had also been in my car—car being our link of the train—and I'd noticed him right away. How could I not? It wasn't often that I found someone beautiful, but he was the top of the line. His hair was long—too long. At least that's what I thought until he ran his fingers through the dark brown hair and it lay perfectly on his head.

Total blushing from me.

On the trip to Wisconsin, he'd sat two seats behind me. When I'd gone to the bathroom, I saw him tapping his fingers against his thighs in a rhythmic pattern, and his head was rocking back and forth. Maybe he was a musician. Gabby had always been tapping her feet and rocking her head.

He was definitely a musician.

He noticed me noticing him, and when he looked up to find my eyes, he smiled pretty wide. Which made me feel pretty small. So I adjusted my

stare to the navy, coffee-stained carpet and hurried on my way. His eyes were so blue and filled with interest. For a second, I thought they were a passageway to a different world.

Beautiful.

Breathtaking.

Brilliant.

Blue eyes.

I sighed.

Maybe they were a passageway to a better world.

On another note, people should never use train bathrooms. They were pretty gross, and I'd stepped in someone's gum.

When I walked back to my seat, my heart tightened in my chest because I knew I would have to walk past Mr. Beautiful Eyes again. My eyes stayed down until I reached my seat. I released a breath, and then my head involuntarily turned toward him. What?! Dang my eyes for wanting another glance his way. He smiled again and nodded toward me. I didn't smile back because I was too nervous. The strange blue eyes made me so flipping nervous.

That was the last time I saw him. Well, until *now*.

Now, I was standing outside the train station. He was standing outside the train station. *We* were standing outside the train station. And I moved my eyes over to him for a moment. Heart putters. Major heart putters.

Trying to play it cool, I twisted my head in his direction to make it seem like I was looking past Mr. Beautiful Eyes to see if Henry was coming. In all reality, I was just trying to get a peek of the banmoy against the train station wall.

My breath picked up. He saw me. Moving my feet against the sidewalk, I hummed to myself, trying to play cool and failing dramatically at it. I held my book upright in front of my face.

“Doubt thou the stars are fire. Doubt that the sun doth move. Doubt truth to be a liar. But never doubt I love,” he quoted.

My book dropped down to my lap. I stared at Mr. Beautiful Eyes with confusion. “Shut up.”

His grin disappeared and a level of apology filled his face. “Oh, I’m sorry. I just saw you were reading—”

“*Hamlet*.”

A finger brushed across his upper lip, and he stepped closer. Putter. Putter. Heart. Heart. “Yeah... *Hamlet*. Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt you,” he apologized, and his voice was very sweet. Almost what I thought honey would sound like if it had a voice. I didn’t really need an apology though. I was just happy to discover that there were other people in the world who were able to quote William.

“No. You didn’t. I-I didn’t mean shut up as in the, ‘close your lips and stop talking,’ type way. I meant it more in the way of, ‘Oh crapballs, shut up! You can quote Shakespeare?!’ It was more *that* style of shut up.”

“Did you just say ‘crapballs’?”

My throat tightened up. I sat up straighter. “No.”

“Um, I think you did.”

He smiled again, and for the first time, I noticed how disgusting the weather was. It was ninety degrees outside. My palms were sweating. My *toes* were sticky. There were even a few specks of sweat dripping from my forehead.

I watched his mouth open and I parted my lips at the same time. Then I shut mine fast, wanting to hear his voice more than my own.

“Visiting or staying?” he asked.

I blinked. “Huh?”

He laughed and nodded once. “Are you visiting town or staying for a while?”

“Oh,” I replied, staring at him for too long without saying anything else. *Talk! Talk!* “I’m moving. Here. I’m moving here. I’m new in town.”

He raised an eyebrow, interested in the small fact. “Oh? Well.” He pulled the handle of his suitcase with his right hand, moving closer to me. A

full-grown grin brushed across his face, and he extended his left hand my way. “Welcome to Edgewood, Wisconsin.”

I looked at his hand and then back up to his face. Pulling my book to my chest, I wrapped my arms around it. I couldn’t touch him with sweaty palms. “Thanks.”

He sighed slightly, yet his grin remained. “All right then. Nice meeting you.” Pulling his hand back to his side, he began walking away toward the taxi that had just arrived at the curb.

I cleared my throat, feeling my heart pounding against Hamlet and Ophelia’s pages, and my mind started to race. My feet demanded that I stand up, so I leaped from the top of my suitcase, knocking it over.

“Are you a musician?!” I screamed toward the banmoy, who was disappearing down the strip. He looked back to me.

“How did you know?”

I took my fingers and tapped them against my novel in the same rhythmic pattern he’d tapped his fingers on the train. “Just wondering.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Do I know you?”

I scrunched up my nose and shook my head back and forth. I wondered if he saw the sweat fly from my forehead. I’d hoped not.

Slowly, his teeth bit down into his bottom lip. I saw his shoulders rise and fall from the small sigh he released. “How old are you?”

“Nineteen.”

He nodded and ran his hand through his hair. “Good. You gotta be eighteen to get in. They’ll make you wear a stamp and they’ll double-check IDs at the bar, but you can listen and stuff. Just don’t try to buy alcohol.” I tilted my head, staring at him. He laughed. *Ohhh, what a beautiful sound that is.* “Joe’s bar, Saturday night.”

“What’s Joe’s bar?” I wondered out loud. I wasn’t sure if I was speaking to him, to myself, or to those damn butterflies ripping my insides to shreds.

“A...bar?” His voice raised an octave before he laughed. “My band and I are performing at ten. You should come. I think you’ll like it.” He

proceeded to give me argumentatively the kindest smile in the world. It was so gentle that it made me cough nervously and choke on air.

He held his hand up to me and smiled as he waved goodbye. With that, he closed his taxi door and he went his own way.

“Bye,” I whispered, watching the car pull off. I didn’t look away until it rounded the corner out of the lot and went far, far away. I looked down to my book clenched in my hands and smiled. I was going to start from the beginning again.

Gabby would have loved this weird, awkward moment.

I just knew it.

Chapter 3

Ashlyn

*I'm not going to look back,
I'm not going to cry.
I'm not going to even ask you why.
~ Romeo's Quest*

The engine in Henry's 1998 yellow, rusted pickup truck roared like it was going to explode as he pulled up to the Amtrak station. The station was packed with families traveling, people hugging and crying and laughing. People were diving into the art of human connection.

It all made me uncomfortable.

I sat on top of my suitcase with Gabby's wooden box in my lap. Running my fingers through my hair, I hoped to avoid the same connections that the rest of the world seemed in search of.

I was melting away in the black thigh-length dress I was wearing, and the night heat of the Wisconsin air crept up unwelcome under my legs. I was burning my butt off in the late night, but I hadn't thought I would actually have to wait over an hour for Henry to pick me up. I should have known better, but alas. Sometimes I wondered if I would ever learn.

I waited for Henry to inch closer to the curb. His front tire rolled over an empty water bottle. I watched as the plastic bottle quivered under the pressure of the wheel and the cap popped off, flying across the sidewalk, landing against my foot. Pushing myself off my vintage floral case Mom

had given me for my sixteenth birthday, I clicked the button and yanked the handle up, rolling the suitcase to the truck.

Ugh, does his car have to be so loud?

Henry hopped out of the car and walked around the front to greet me. His forest-green shirt was halfway tucked into his belted blue jeans. His left shoe was untied, and I could smell the small scent of tobacco resting against his beard, but for the most part, he looked good.

For a split second, he struggled with the idea of hugging me and longing to experience that same human connection the other people surrounding us were undertaking, but he changed his mind after watching me shift around in my heels.

A short chuckle left his lips. “Who wears a dress and high heels on a train?”

“They were Gabby’s favorite.”

The silence grew solid, and the swelling tide of memories started to fill my mind. Henry was probably remembering, too. Different memories of the same extraordinary girl.

“Is that all you have?” he asked, pointing toward my life that lived inside the suitcase. I didn’t reply. What a stupid question. Clearly that was everything. “Let me get that—” He stepped forward to grab for it and I hesitated.

“I got it.”

He sighed, running his hand through his peppered beard. He looked older than he should, but I imagined regret and guilt could do that to a person. “Okay.”

I tossed the suitcase into the back of his truck and walked to the passenger’s seat to climb in. Yanking at the door, I rolled my eyes. I shouldn’t have been surprised that his crap was broken down—Henry was a pro at broken and screwed up.

“Sorry, kiddo. That door has been giving me a bit of trouble. You can climb in from my side.”

My eyes effortlessly revolved again, and I walked to the driver’s seat, climbing in, hoping not to flash the passing cars with my underwear.

We drove in silence, and I imagined that this was what my next few months would be like. Awkward silences. Weird interactions. Odd crossings. Henry might have been the guy on my birth certificate, but when it came to being my father, he wasn't known for his ability to show up.

"Sorry about the heat. The damn air conditioner went out last weekend. I didn't expect this type of heat here. Did you know it's supposed to get close to the hundreds later this week? Damn global warming," Henry stated. I didn't reply, so I guess he took it as an invite to keep talking. It wasn't an invite of any sort. I really wished he wouldn't try for the small talk. I hated small talk. "Gabby said you were working on a book, eh? I was able to get you into advanced English with a great teacher. I know people say that we hire the best of the best, but to be honest, there just happens to be a few dull nuts floating around." He chuckled to himself.

Henry was the assistant principal at Edgewood High School, which would soon enough be my high school after these final days of summer vacation were over. The last one hundred and eighty days of my high school career would be spent with my biological father roaming the hallways. Perfect.

"It doesn't matter, Henry."

I saw him cringe when I called him by his first name, but what else was there to call him? 'Dad' seemed too personal, and 'father' seemed too—preachy. So Henry it was. I cracked my window down a bit, feeling overwhelmed by this new life filling my mind.

Henry glanced my way and cleared his throat. "Your mom mentioned you had bad panic attacks?"

I rolled my eyes as a sign of teenage angst. Truth was I had suffered from bad panic attacks ever since we'd found out that Gabby was sick. But there was no need for Henry to know about that.

He changed the subject...again. "We're really happy that you're coming to stay with us," he said.

My head whipped toward him and my eyes discovered his until he looked back to the road. I remained as still as a tombstone, needing answers. "Who's we?"

"Rebecca..."

Rebecca? Who's Rebecca?

"...and her kids," he muttered, clearing his throat in an unpleasant manner.

My shoulders rolled back and my eyes broadened. "How long have they lived with you?"

"For a little while." His voice was mellifluous, begging me not to question the subject more in depth.

I didn't care what he wanted. Also, I knew whenever his voice was smooth like it was that he was definitely lying.

"I mean, did they live with you before you called us for our birthday this year—three days late?" His silence answered my question. "What about last year? Did they live with you when you forgot to call for our birthday altogether?"

A discomfited mouth replied to me. "*Shit*, Ashlyn. What does it matter anyway? That's in the past."

"Yeah, and now it seems to be in my present." I turned back in my seat, facing forward.

"Just a few months..." he whispered. "I've only lived with them for a few months." After quite a few minutes of silence, he tried again to converse with me. "So what type of things are you into now?"

Feeling tired from the long train ride—and from my current state of life—I sighed, chipping at the tiny amount of black nail polish left from Gabby's funeral. "Henry, we don't have to do this. We don't have to try to make up for lost time. After all, it's lost. Ya know?"

He didn't say much after that.

A loose thread hung from the bottom of my coat. I tugged on it and smiled to myself. Gabby would've told me not to do that to the string, how it would completely ruin the whole coat. Within a second, a poignant wave of grief swept over me. I closed my eyes and took in a deep breath of the hot air.

It'd been almost three weeks since I'd lost her, and there hadn't been a day that I hadn't cried. I'd cried so much I'd been impressed when the tears kept forming.

People always said it would get easier after losing someone. People said that, over time, it would get better. But I couldn't comprehend how that could be true. As each day passed, it just became harder. The world only grew darker. The pain merely deepened.

My head crooked toward my passenger's side window, and when I opened my eyes, I wiped away the single tear that was moisturizing my right cheek. My bottom lip quivered with restrained misery. I didn't want to cry in front of Henry—or anyone at that. I much preferred crying alone in the shadows.

I wished Gabby were still alive.

And I wished I didn't feel so dead.



Henry's truck pulled into the gravel driveway of his home—my temporary place of residence. I was quick to note the two other cars in the driveway, a newer-looking nice black Nissan Altima and an older blue Ford Focus.

The house was huge compared to the two-bedroom apartment I'd lived in all of my life. The front bushes were perfectly trimmed and an American flag waved back and forth in the light breeze.

I kid you not—there was a white picket fence. *A white picket fence!*

There were three windows on the second level of the house, and in one of them, I saw a guy with headphones, peeking through his curtains. When our eyes locked, he disappeared in haste.

Ohmygosh. Henry really *did* live with other people. As he climbed out of the truck, I slid across the driver's seat and stepped out. Before I could smooth out my coat, a woman—Rebecca, I assumed—was standing in front of me. Hugging me.

Why in the hell was this stranger touching me?

“Oh, Ashlyn! We're so glad you're here!” She squeezed me as my arms stayed glued to my sides. “God is good, bringing you to us. This is heaven-sent, I just know it.”

I blinked once and took a step back from her. “Heaven killed my sister so I could come stay with my estranged father's family?”

A painful silence appeared, up until Henry snickered with uncomfortable laughter—which led to Rebecca’s chuckling uneasily.

“Here, honey. Let me grab your bags.” Rebecca moved to the back of the truck and Henry followed after her. They began to speak softly to one another as if I weren’t standing two inches away. “Where’s her luggage, Henry?” she whispered in a heightened sigh.

“This is all she has.”

“One bag? That’s it? Lord, I can only imagine her life in Chicago. We’ll have to get her some things.”

I listened but didn’t react to their words. Strangers. That’s all that the people behind the truck were to me. So for them to judge and try to figure out the life I spent in the past with my mom and Gabby only made their ignorance that much clearer.

Henry walked back toward me, my suitcase in his hand, and Rebecca followed close behind.

“Come on, Ashlyn. Let me show you around inside.”

Stepping into the foyer, I was shocked when I saw a huge framed portrait of their nice little family hanging against the wall. There was a brunette girl, who was a spitting image of Rebecca, blue doe eyes and all.

She looked to be my age but much more uptight based on her sweater-vest and past-the-knees skirt. Beside Henry was the boy I saw staring out the window. There was a forced smile on his mouth and a weird look of confusion in his eyes.

Henry noticed that I was studying the photo, and I watched a lump form in his throat. His mouth opened, but he shut it quickly when words didn’t come to mind.

“You have a lovely family, Henry,” I said dryly, moving on to the living room. The brunette girl from the photograph was sitting on the oversized, fluffy-looking chair reading a book.

She stood from her chair when she heard us enter, and a big, warming smile was sent my way. “Hi. You must be Ashlyn. I’m Hailey. We’ve heard so much about you.” She seemed genuine in her welcome, but I knew I couldn’t return the smile.

“Yeah? I wish I could say the same.”

She didn’t flinch from my rude comment yet kept smiling.

Rebecca moved behind me and placed her hands on my shoulders. I really wished she would stop touching me. “Hailey, can you show Ashlyn to your bedroom?”

“We’re sharing a room?” I asked, hating the idea because I was in dire need of my own space.

“Yeah. I hope that’s all right. Don’t worry. I’m not a slob.” Hailey grinned and grabbed my suitcase from Henry. I reached for it, telling her that I could handle it, but she refused. “It’s fine. Trust me. We’ll probably hate each other soon enough, so we might as well be nice for the time being,” she joked.

Her room was pink. Like, *very* pink. Four pink walls, pink comforters, pink curtains. There was a bookshelf with trophies and ribbons of all kinds. Horseback riding, soccer, spelling bees. It was clear that Hailey and I had grown up in very different lifestyles.

Could you imagine? A bookshelf with not a single book.

“I cleared out the two top drawers for you and the right side of the closet.” Hailey hopped on her bed, which was directly across from mine. I sat down too, running my hands over what appeared to be a homemade blanket. “So Dad said you’re from Chicago?” she asked.

I cringed at her word choice. “You call Henry *dad*?”

She cringed right back at me. “You call dad *Henry*?”

This was all getting to be too much. I wanted to ask her questions about how long she had lived with Henry, about how long she’d called him dad, but I didn’t want to know the answers.

After reaching for my suitcase, I pulled it onto my mattress and crossed my legs. Unzipping it, I sighed as the scent of Gabby’s favorite perfume floated out from inside.

As I dug through the suitcase, I pulled out all of Gabby’s favorite dresses and her favorite comfy clothes. Her CD collection came out next, and I stared at her favorite tunes, which we would blast through the living room on Sunday mornings while eating Cap’n Crunch and marshmallows.

“You two were close?” Hailey asked. Then she rolled her eyes at her question. “That’s a stupid question. Sorry. I mean—sorry for your loss.”

I glanced around at Hailey’s photos on the wall and saw more family photos and pictures of her friends—well, one friend—and a guy with his arms wrapped around her waist.

“That’s Theo, my boyfriend. Well, kind of. We are taking the remainder of summer break to meditate and figure out what it is we want from our relationship. Then when school starts, we’re going to see if our spirits vibe with one another still.”

The blank stare I delivered her way made her chuckle.

“Theo studies Buddhism, and I’ve learned a bit about it. Some of our most powerful interactions consisted of doing yoga together, releasing all the negative energy from our bodies.”

My mom had been very big into yoga for a weekend. She hadn’t stuck with it, but she had said that she’d felt more like herself during that time than she ever had. I didn’t know what to say to Hailey because she was kind of weird. Not weird like me, but weird like her.

I was convinced that everyone in the world had a form a weirdness to them. And the cool thing, at least I hoped so, was the idea that there was someone out there just as quirky as you were. The idea of finding your other weirdo was so attractive to me.

I was still looking for that.

“He wants me to have sex with him,” Hailey blurted out, and I could feel my face redden. *Ohmygosh!* She continued. “I’m waiting. Kind of why we’re on our break.”

I didn’t know what to say to her because her comment was pretty personal and I didn’t even know her last name. Were all people in Edgewood, Wisconsin, as forward as Hailey? Did girls just talk about their sexual encounters and stuff like it wasn’t kind of private?

I fell onto my bed. On the ceiling was a painted mural of a sky with clouds and birds. Hailey lay down on her bed and stared up, too. “Theo helped me with it. He said it helps balance my energy and brings peace into my personal space.”

“Hailey, no offense...but you’re really odd for someone who’s so pretty.”

“I know, but I think that’s where I get my spunk.”

I thought she was right. Being pretty and a snob was so cliché, but being a pretty oddball? Now that was something worth noticing.

The guy who had been staring at me from the window earlier stepped into the room and his head turned directly to Hailey. “Can I use your car?”

“Where are you going?” Hailey asked, her...younger brother? He seemed younger. Not by much.

“Out.”

She reached for her hairbrush on her side table and began running it through her long locks of hair. “Ryan, did you meet Ashlyn?”

Ryan gazed over to me with such a dull look that it would have been insulting if I hadn’t been returning the same bored expression his way. He sighed heavily, turning back to his sister. “Keys, Hails.”

“Did Dad say you could go?”

Ryan pulled out a cardboard box from his jeans pockets, opened it up, and pulled out an invisible cigarette, which he invisibly lit. Great. I was living with the crazy kids.

“He’s not our dad, Hailey. Christ! He’s *her* father.” Ryan’s hand gestured toward me.

“Could have fooled me,” I muttered, unpacking the rest of the things in my bag.

Ryan turned toward me, this time with a look of pleasure on his lips. He blinked and his stare went back to Hailey. “Is that a yes or a no?”

“No.”

“Ugh. You’re ruining my life.” He walked over to her and flopped down on her bed.

“Oh, grow up, Ryan.” Hailey continued brushing her hair and looked up to me. “Don’t mind him. He’s in this weird, stoner, ‘I hate the world’ phase of his teen years.”

Well, at least I could relate to one of the people in this household. Minus the stoner part.

“Don’t listen to her. She’s in this weird, hippie, ‘I love the world’ phase of her teen years.” Ryan smirked, sitting up. “I’m Ryan Turner.”

“Ashlyn.”

“Cool name.”

“My mom liked the names Gabrielle, Ashley, and Lynn and couldn’t choose. So Gabby became Gabrielle and I became Ashlyn.” I looked at the two sitting across from me and narrowed my eyes. “Who’s older?”

“Me,” Hailey smiled.

Ryan rolled his eyes. “By emotional age, maybe. By physical age? I take the crown.”

“I’m a junior. He’s a senior. We’re Irish twins. Nine months apart.” Hailey laughed, shoving her ‘emotional little’ brother in the shoulder.

“Why don’t you have a car, Ryan?”

“Because my mom hates me.”

“She doesn’t hate you,” Hailey argued.

He gave her a sarcastic look, and Hailey frowned as if Ryan were telling the truth. He shrugged. “You’re really not going to let me use your car?”

“Nope.”

“But...I haven’t seen”—Ryan paused and glanced my way—“you-know-who in days.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Who’s ‘you-know-who’?”

Ryan and Hailey exchanged looks, having a complete in-depth conversation with their eyes and a few hand motions. I watched the Irish twins silently interact with one another and felt as if I were watching a Charlie Chaplin movie.

It was a reminder of how Gabby and I used to communicate without words, only with looks. I wondered if Ryan and Hailey knew how lucky they were to be so close. I also wondered if they knew how cursed they were.

Ryan tossed his hands up in the air in frustration at his sister and stood up. "I'm going to bed," he said, ignoring my question. "Nice meeting you, Ashlyn."

"You too." And he was gone. I gave Hailey a confused look.

She shrugged. "He's very selective with who he shares details with." She paused. "He has a lot going on in his life."

"It's kind of nice to know that your family isn't as perfect as your portrait," I said, pulling my messy bun down just to toss it up into a messier bun on top of my head.

"No family's perfect."

I opened my mouth and paused when Henry poked his head into the bedroom. Perfect timing. "You kids all right?"

Hailey nodded. "Yup. Just getting ready for bed."

He smirked and turned my way. "There's pizza in the fridge if you're hungry, Ashlyn. And if you need anything else—"

"I won't," I quickly yapped to get him to leave.

The wrinkles in his forehead deepened as he rubbed his hands against his brows. "Okay. Goodnight."

He left the room, and Hailey let out a long whistle. "You two are the spokespeople for awkward interactions."

"Is it weird with him being the assistant principal at the high school? I mean, I hardly saw him all my life, and now I'm living with him and he's going to be in school with me, too. That's pretty much twenty-four hours of seeing him. It's like Henry overload."

"He's not as bad as you think, once you get to know him. Just give him a chance."

Once I get to know him?

The stranger was giving me advice on my biological father.

What was wrong with that picture?

Chapter 4

Daniel

I didn't think I cared when I shut you out.

But now for days you're all I think about.

~ Romeo's Quest

I pulled up to the lake-house with my fellow band member, Randy, in the passenger's seat. I'd moved into the house after I graduated from college back in May to help take care of Dad. It'd been a rough year since Mom passed away, and it'd only gotten tougher as time moved on and Dad lost the battle to his liver failure.

"You sure it's okay for me to stay here?" Randy asked, pulling out his bag and his acoustic guitar.

I smiled his way and shrugged. Randy was my best friend and had been for years. I'd dated his sister Sarah for over three years when we were younger. I'd probably still be with her today if the accident hadn't happened.

I was supposed to pick up my brother, Jace, from some party he was stuck at, but I'd been at work. I'd texted Randy to see if he could pick Jace up, but he didn't answer. So I called Sarah and she said that she would, and on their way home, a drunk driver slammed them from the side. She died on impact.

I blamed myself for asking her to pick up Jace.

Jace blamed himself for being at the party.

Randy blamed himself for losing his baby sister.

All three of us had dealt with the loss of Sarah differently. I'd drowned myself in my music and my studies. Jace had gone on to use drugs and sell them, trying to stop himself from remembering what it had been like in that car. He'd watched her die but never spoke of it. And Randy...

He had pretty much become a wild guy who would try anything once. I never knew where his mind was or what kinds of weird things he was getting into when we weren't working with the band. He was sort of a floater—picking up random knowledge wherever he went. He'd never blamed Jace or me for what had happened to his sister. He'd never held anger or vengeance in his heart.

I thought back to the question, his asking if I was okay with him staying with me. How could I not be? "Don't be stupid. You needed a place to stay"—I glanced to the house—"and I have a place for you to stay."

"Thanks, man. It means a lot to me. I'd probably only need a few months until I figure out some things." He paused and looked back toward me. "You okay, Dan?"

I gave him a strained smile and nodded. "I got a few beers in the fridge if you want. I'm going to take a run by the lake. The other guys should be here in a few hours to rehearse."

"Danny, I'm worried about you. All of us are." The concern was evident in his tone, drenched in apologies for my life.

"Why?" I asked, stretching my arm across my body to loosen up for my run.

He stared at me as if I'd grown three heads. "Your Dad died last week and you're acting like nothing happened."

"Randy, people die. We both know that."

Randy had lost his mom a while back, and his dad had never been in the picture. All he'd had was Sarah until the day of the accident. So if anyone knew what death was like, it was the two of us.

"Yeah, it's just... After your Mom and the stuff with Jace..." His words faded off. "I just want you to know, we're here for you. If you need us. I know for a while my mind was in dark places with Sarah's death."

Before my mom died, she asked me to look after her and I couldn't. That ate away at me. It still does sometimes." He paused and shifted around. "So yeah, if you want to talk, I'm here."

There were two types of mourning. There was the type when a person opened up his heart to the world, never taking anything for granted, and lived each day to the fullest. Then there was the type of mourning where a person closed off his heart to the world and lived in his own world, unable to connect to others.

I definitely wasn't the first option.

I swallowed hard. "You should practice the chords to *Ever Gone*. It seemed a little off when we played it last time." I glanced at my watch. "I'll be back in a few."

I started toward the boat shed in a slow run, but it didn't take long for me to pick up speed.



After my runs, I always ended up back at the same location—on the dock, staring at the spot where the worst moment of my life happened. I scrubbed my arms so many times. I was surprised my skin hadn't ripped off. Bending my knees, I lowered myself and stared toward the grass.

I wished I could forget.

I wished I could forget.

I wish I could fucking forget!

But instead, I closed my eyes, inhaled deep, and I remembered.



We arrived at the hospital, but Mom was gone before she'd even made it into the ambulance. Jace was bandaged up, his eye was given a few stitches, but he was alive. Bullshit, if you asked me. He'd just had our mom murdered, but all he'd received were a few stitches.

He sat down in the waiting room as Dad spoke with a few police officers. He hadn't stopped crying the whole time. I'd never in my life seen Dad cry, not even after he'd found out about his health condition.

I moved over to Jace and he stood up. We didn't say anything. The back of my throat was dry, scratchy. He pulled me into a hug. "I'm going to find out who did this, Danny. I swear to God, they won't get away with it."

I held him tight in my arms and nodded. "I know, Jace."

"This is my fault. But I promise you, I'll make it right."

My hands wrapped around my kid brother's head, and I placed my forehead against his. "I'm sorry, Jace..." I muttered before he pulled away from me, looking confused.

"What?" he asked before he turned around and saw the cops marching toward him.

One of the police officers took his hands and handcuffed him. I listened to the officer read Jace his rights. It all became a blur as they carried him off for drug dealing—evidence they had collected from me earlier. Jace looked at me with confusion, but then he came to realize what was happening and screamed.

"You ratted me out?! Our mom just died, Danny! Mom is dead!" he screamed, his face turning red. "I'm your brother!" His voice was cracking, but his screams were still high. "You're a rat! Mom is dead and you're having me locked up!"

His voice echoed down the halls.

His voice echoed into my soul.



Memories were scary, how they could break you with simply your own thoughts.

I blinked and turned away from staring at the spot where Mom died. The hot sun was beating down against my skin. Moving to the edge of the dock, I removed my running shoes and my socks. My feet fell into the cool water and I lay back on the wooden, squeaky dock.

I planned to fix up the dock sometime soon. I planned to fix up the whole house, actually. I just didn't know how Dad and Mom would've wanted it.

I hadn't really allowed my brain to deal with Dad's death yet—I was still somewhat in shock by Mom's. No matter what, no matter how many times you'd dealt with it, death never grew easier.

There was no one I could truly talk to about it. My friends wouldn't understand even if I tried to explain. Plus, I didn't want to make them feel as shitty as I felt on a daily basis.

But there had been one moment when I saw someone who might understand, based solely on her eyes. Her eyes were surreal, haunting even. Green, powerful eyes that looked so sad. Broken. Beautiful.

My eyes shut, and I imagined her—the girl from the train. My muscles twitched from my run, and I took deep breaths, trying to remember everything about her. She knew what it was like to be me—lost, alone. I had seen it each time she'd blinked her eyes and her thick, long eyelashes hung low.

I should've asked for her name. I should've sat on top of my luggage beside her. She'd smiled when I'd quoted Shakespeare, but there was still a bit of sadness lingering in the curves of her lips. She was pained by some type of grief, and I had seen it eating her alive—the same way my sadness was tearing me apart. And nothing or nobody could stop it from happening.

A part of me didn't want it to stop. A part of me thought I deserved the suffering. But for the life of me, I couldn't believe that that girl deserved to be so sad. I secretly hoped that someday someone could make her smile without the frown lines.

I hoped someday she would be all right.

Chapter 5

Ashlyn

*Touch me when you're gone.
Leave me when you're near.
Love me with my shattered pieces.
~ Romeo's Quest*

The next few days, I did my best to keep to myself. I didn't talk a lot, but I allowed my mind to keep running on that dang treadmill in my head. It turned out that Henry's family loved to eat dinner together every night, and I thought it was nice of them to invite me to eat with them.

But I knew I didn't fit in with their table for four. Rebecca pulled out a folding chair from their storage room for me to sit on. There was a metal piece on the seat that pushed into my left thigh, but I didn't complain.

Rebecca cooked a lot of food. Enough to feed an army. As we sat down, I went to dig into my food and Rebecca held her hand up. "Sweetie, we pray over the food first." She gave me a kind smile, but I could see a bit of disappointment that I didn't even think of doing so. "Henry, can you lead it again?"

I chuckled and huffed under my breath. "Yeah right." All eyes flowed to me. My eyes went to Henry, confusion filling them. "You pray?"

"You don't?" Rebecca jumped in.

I felt like a sinner from her simple question.

The answer was no.

The awkwardness of the situation set in and I came to a strong resolution. I knew nothing about Henry and this family seemed to know everything.

I knew it was stupid, but a part of me was pretty saddened by that. Why was it that you wanted those who ignored you to love you the most?

Henry said a prayer while everyone closed their eyes and held their hands together. Well, almost everyone. I just sat and stared at them all during that time. Ryan never closed his eyes either.

“Amen,” the group muttered together and opened their eyes. They dove into the steak dinner in front of them.

Hailey didn’t have a steak on her plate. She never had any meat at dinnertime. The other day, she told me that killing and eating harmless animals was a terrible act. She said that it was against the natural order of things, that people weren’t supposed to eat meat. So she stopped.

I assumed that she’d never studied the fact that lions never hesitated to eat a gazelle if they were hungry.

“Oh, Ryan and Hailey...don’t forget. You two are teaching Bible study in the morning.” She might not have noticed, but I watched as her two kids rolled their eyes.

Tomorrow was Sunday, which meant that today was Saturday. I’d almost forgotten about my invite to Joe’s bar to hear Mr. Beautiful Eyes perform. And by ‘almost,’ I meant I’d been thinking about it ever since I saw him. I was mostly excited to learn his name, seeing how I had only been calling him Mr. Beautiful Eyes.

“I think I’m going to head upstairs and get ready to go.”

Henry raised an eyebrow. “Go where?”

I gave him an are-you-seriously-concerned-about-my-whereabouts look and he sighed. Then I gave myself an is-he-seriously-not-concerned-about-my-whereabouts sigh.

“I made you a key. It’s hanging in the front hall,” Henry said as I stood up from the table.

Well, that was thoughtful.



All dressed up and ready to go out, I opened the wooden box and pulled out my bucket list, staring at all of the choices. I knew I needed a note from Gabby. I just had to find an easy way to get to one without breaking her rules of just ripping a letter open.

The clock sitting on the dresser read nine thirty p.m. Hailey walked into the room and smiled my way. “Just arrived a few days ago and you’re already trying to leave?” she laughed.

“No...it’s not that. It’s just...”

“Too much change?” she asked, finishing my thought before I’d even thought it.

I nodded and couldn’t help but smile when she stood up and tossed me her keys.

“Take my car. It’s the Ford Focus. I’m not going to ask where you’re going because I’m a terrible liar. And if I had to rat you out, I would feel bad.”

“Thanks.” I picked up a couple of the CDs from my collection to play in her car and prepared to make my exit without running into Rebecca or Henry.

“Welcome. And Ashlyn?” Her voice heightened as she reached for her bottle of facial lotion and started to apply it to her skin. “It’s not so bad here.”

“Yeah. It’s just that I miss *there*. I’ll be back later.”



In Hailey’s car, I listened to the music blaring from the CD player. I glanced over to the passenger’s seat, and for a split moment, I could have sworn I saw Gabby sitting there singing along with me. Over the past few weeks, it hadn’t been uncommon for me to sit and talk to her as if she really were there, to try and imagine what she would say, how she would comfort me.

“Mom hasn’t called. Whatever... It doesn’t matter. Can you believe that Hailey calls Henry Dad?” I muttered to my invisible sister. “I’m not jealous or anything. It’s just...weird.” I stared at the empty seat and bit my bottom lip.

She didn't reply.

Because when people died, they took their voices with them. I wondered if they knew how much the people left behind would kill for their sounds one last time.

As I drove down Main Street, I saw that there were a bunch of smokers hanging around outside a bar. *Joe's bar*. I pulled over to the curb, put the car in park, and hopped out.

On a chalkboard sign sitting near the door read the words, 'Live Music. Half-priced shots. \$2 beer.' Blue and purple balloons were tied to the sign. I watched as one of the smokers joked with his friends and untied one of the balloons, releasing it into the hot air. It floated up, up, up and away, allowing the wind to guide its patterns of travel.

I pursed my lips together and blew out a small bit of air toward the flying object. Sometimes I wished it were that easy. To just get up and fly, fly away. Glancing at my bucket list, I read the one that I was hoping to accomplish that night.

#14. Dance on a bar.

I could do that—even if I really didn't want to—if it meant a letter from my sister.

The doorman looked at me, checked my ID, and put a big, ugly black stamp on my hand—an instant sign that I was underage and shouldn't be allowed to have a drink or five. I'd expected that, since Mr. Beautiful Eyes had told me from the beginning.

What I hadn't expected were the emotions when I stepped inside. So many memories came rushing back to me from just standing inside the bar. The band was setting up onstage, and I choked on tears that were fighting to pour out. *Where did that come from?* Why did I feel like crying?

"I'm going to do that," Gabby smirked, eyeing the stage as we walked past a bar. "When I get better, the first thing I'm going to do is perform in this bar."

I rolled my eyes, laughing at my sister. "After you get better, the first item on your agenda is to sing in a dirty bar?"

"What can I say? I like to live on the edge."

Within a second, I was standing outside the bar again. Moving to the side of the building, I felt my hands sweating up and my eyes watering over. It was too much—all of the new changes to my life. All of the old things that had been taken away from me. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't even move anymore. I stayed bent over, crying.

Air filled my lungs, but I couldn't exhale fast enough, causing me to hiccup over the tears. I was certain that it would only be a matter of time before my body crashed down to the hot cement. My knees began to prove my thoughts of fainting right, yet before I could fall, I heard a voice coming from around the corner.

"Hey, are you okay?" a deep, masculine voice whispered as he stepped closer to me.

My insides tightened as I heard his footsteps growing closer. I saw his hands reach out toward me and I jumped out of my skin, wanting him not to touch me. He must have noticed my reaction, and he stepped back.

"I'm sorry," he apologized, and I bent my knees, getting closer to the ground.

When I found his face, everything froze. The world went quiet, and I was staring into blue eyes that made the earth's brightest oceans look dull.

Beautiful.

Breathtaking.

Brilliant.

Blue eyes.

He was Mr. Beautiful Eyes, and a small sigh fell from my lips.

"I'm not going to touch you," he promised. "I'm not going to hurt you." There was something so sincere about how he said the words to me that I almost believed him. He made sure to stay a good distance apart from me, but he felt pretty close, too. I liked how close he felt. "Shhh..." His gentle whispers brought me the comfort I needed.

I could smell his cologne and shaving cream from the distance, which tickled my senses, making me want to breathe him in deeper. My hand wiped across my mouth. When I collected my bearings, I returned to a standing position.

My eyes fell to the ground and I watched as he stood up, too. I felt so stupid.

“You’re okay?” he questioned, but the way it had fallen from his mouth made it sound like more of a statement.

I nodded yet still felt the tears falling down my cheeks. “I’m okay.”

He frowned and patted at his pockets. “Sorry. I don’t have any tissue or anything.”

The tears fell harder, probably from embarrassment.

His fingers traveled down to his back pocket, where he pulled out his wallet. He reached in and grabbed a pocketknife and I gasped, taking a step backwards. He saw my reaction and a strong level of guilt took over those blue eyes.

“I’m not going to hurt you, remember?”

There was vulnerability in his voice, a softness that almost made me want to look so deep into his eyes so I could see eternity. This stranger made me feel forever, which was something I’d never known could be felt. *Who are you?*

He took the pocketknife and ripped the sleeve off his white t-shirt. He then put the knife back into his wallet, which went back into his jeans pocket. The sleeve rested in his hands until he reached it out toward me. I stared at him, confused, wondering what he was doing.

“For the tears,” he instructed. I stared at it for the longest time, and he sighed. He placed the edge of the sleeve between his thumb and pointer finger and stretched his arm closer to me. “I won’t touch you.”

Warily taking the sleeve from him, I wiped away my tears and listened to him sigh with relief.

We took in each other’s breaths, and he didn’t move until my breaths slowed down to the speed of his own. “You’re okay...” he repeated as he slid his hands into his jeans pockets. I could *almost* see his muscular build underneath his shirt. I could *almost* embrace his soul, which he was so willingly wearing on his sleeves that night.

Well...on one of his sleeves at least.

“I’m okay...” I replied, still feeling my knees wanting to buckle. I missed Gabby so much it hurt to stand. It hurt to cry. It hurt to be alive. I tried my best to avoid crying anymore, but when he looked at me and tilted his head to the left, narrowing his eyes, I felt a wave of emotion flying back to me.

“But it’s all right if you’re not okay,” he whispered.

I sobbed onto his t-shirt sleeve for quite a few minutes after that, losing myself in the sadness. He didn’t move. He didn’t get tired of my emotional breakdown. He just stood there, and for some reason, I felt a hug he never even delivered to me.

I pulled myself together.

I was okay. For now, at least. I shrugged my shoulders and blew my nose into the sleeve, making a very unattractive sound. He laughed lightly. I just felt silly.

“I have to get back...” he stated, sounding apologetic for having to depart, but I knew it was truly the perfect moment for him to disappear. “I’ll see you inside?” he asked.

He still wanted to see me inside? *After this?!*

One nod was all I could give him, and one nod was all he needed. Without hesitation, he rounded the corner and disappeared back into the bar, never looking back at me. My eyes followed him, silently thanking him for being the distant wall I’d needed to hold me up.



After a few minutes of pulling myself together, I reentered the building, made my way to the bar, and ordered water with lemon. The live music had already started, and from the sounds filling my ears, Mr. Beautiful Eyes hadn’t been wrong. I *was* going to enjoy it.

Glancing down, I saw their CDs resting on the bar counter. Lifting one, I turned to the bartender. “How much are these?”

“Ten bucks.”

I tossed the cash onto the bar and thanked the bartender for the drink and CD. It felt weird, being in a bar when I was under twenty-one. There

was a bit of a rebellious feeling running through me, even with the black ink on my hand.

I turned and ventured toward the stage to watch the band perform, already falling in love with their vibe. Each and every one of the band members sounded at ease, in their comfort zone.

My eyes froze on the lead singer—my distant hug. There, like a freed bird, he sat on a stool and sang. He sang as if he would never sing again, with emotion in each note, feelings in every pause. The bar lights winked above him, and he closed his eyes, holding the microphone close to his lips. His eyes opened again and they had the love and gentleness of the shining stars.

He was beautiful up there. Not in the over-the-top handsome way, but in the quiet, whisper style. He was simple with his white t-shirt, which was semi-soaked with his perspiration—and missing a sleeve. He was wearing dark jeans, and a chain hung through his belt loop, which attached to the wallet that was resting in his back pocket. His arms had no tattoos, but the way he held the microphone so tight showcased his physique.

And those lips. *Ohh those lips.* My cheeks flushed when I stared at his mouth.

The music almost died away, but then it burst like a pent-up flood. The louder it grew, the steamier his voice became. He lived the words he sang, he adopted the rhymes the band crafted as if they were his own children, and he inspired me. His voice was as light as rain, yet I knew it could create a rapid storm if he powered it to.

He gripped the microphone in his large hands and cradled it like it was his lover, and when his eyes looked up into the audience, he found my stare. I didn't look away, I couldn't. He'd hypnotized me, leaving me in a daze. I was secretly one hundred percent okay with being locked away in those eyes.

I'll be your best friend, darlin', if you tell me your name.

I'll be your sunshine when you grow tired of the rain.

The corners of his mouth turned up as he continued to sing. His smile alone made me grin. When was the last time I'd smiled? He nodded once at

me, and as he finished the final words of the song, I felt as if he were giving me a private concert.

You can walk away and I'm sure I'll be all right.

But just so you know, you'll be in my dreams tonight...

My eyes moved away from him, my gaze falling to the ground. The pinkish tint attached to my cheeks caused a heavy amount of embarrassment. My eyes stayed glued to the ground for the next few songs, and I awkwardly tapped my foot along to the beat.

I could hear the smile in his voice as he thanked the audience after the sixth song. "We're gonna take a fifteen-minute break. Thanks for hanging out with us tonight, and remember we have CDs for sale at the bar. Check them out, grab another drink or two, and stick around for the next set. We are Romeo's Quest and we are so fucking stoked that each and every one of you badass, beautiful people are here tonight."

Romeo's Quest. How had they come up with that name? Who'd taught the band members how to play the instruments? How did the drummer make my heart smile with his skills?

And who in the world was the lead singer?

I smiled down to the CD in my hands and wandered to an abandoned booth in the back corner. From the 'thank you' section of the CD, it said that his name was Daniel Daniels, and I couldn't help but smirk even wider at the idea of that.

"Oh God... Don't tell me you actually bought one of those crappy CDs?" I looked up to see Daniel staring at me, and all I could do was stare back. He slid into the booth across from me with a beer in his hand. Like something fashioned in a dream, he smiled at me, and I hiccupped.

Suddenly overawed by a strange, vibrant shyness, I brushed my finger against my left earlobe. "Your name is Daniel Daniels?"

He smiled as easily as the sun shone and rested his arms across his body. "My father wanted to name me Jack, but Mom always worried he had a bad drinking problem. When it comes to my name, well... My mom always had a double problem."

"A double problem?"

He laughed lightly, rubbing the palm of his hand against his jawline. "A double problem is when you have one of something you really love, so you go out and get the same thing, just in case the first one breaks or something. When she married my dad, she was in love with the idea of taking his last name. So I guess it was just fitting that I was the double to the last name she loved."

I was still as a stone as I watched his lips form words, and curiosity rocked my being. I wanted to know more. More about the double problem. More about his parents. More about him. I wanted to know anything and everything about the stranger who played music that had the power to make me feel good for a few moments.

I wanted to know more about the stranger whose lyrics had wrapped me up and yanked me away from sadness. His mysterious approach drew me in, and his friendly nature kept me there and focused on him.

"I'm sorry about your shirt," I said, eyeing the missing sleeve.

"It's just a shirt," he smiled.

Yet I knew it was much more than that.

A silence came again, and my eyes shot down to my water, where I stared at the lemon for the longest time. When I looked up again, he was still smiling, and I racked my brain for anything to say, anything to make me not appear like a nineteen-year old sitting in a bar.

"Where did you get your band's name from?" I questioned.

"Shakespeare. Romeo's quest to find love."

"That play ended pretty tragically."

"Yeah, but I don't know. There is something about the tragic stories of Shakespeare. It's as if we all know how it will end, but the adventure makes it worth it. And the story is complicated, but not as much as the others. Romeo loves Juliet, and she loves him. Life just gets in the way. I like to think that the quest was worth the destination."

"That's depressing," I laughed. My gosh... When was the last time I'd *laughed*? I hadn't laughed in so long that it kind of felt unnatural. And warming. And exciting. And free.

“I’m a musician. Depressing is my middle name.” He leaned back against the padded booth, making himself comfortable. His words, almost a whisper, stumbled off his tongue. “Speaking of names... What’s yours?”

I wanted to impress him for some reason. Sliding my stamped hand under the palm of my other, I smiled. I wanted to take away all doubt from his mind that he was sitting across from a girl who was sitting in a bar only because she had a stamp stating she was a certain age.

Clearing my throat, I prepared to embarrass myself. “*By a name I know not how to tell thee who I am: My name, dear saint, is hateful to myself...*” When in doubt with what to say, go to Shakespeare. He always had a good thing or two to express.

“*Because it is an enemy to thee. Had I it written, I would tear the word,*” he said, finishing my quote. And within a second, I was captivated by this beautiful stranger. His lips turned up. “Jesus. I would be lying if I said it wasn’t sexy as hell hearing a beautiful woman quote Shakespeare.”

“I love Shakespeare,” I replied, somewhat excited about the fact. “Othello was the first one I ever read in the fifth grade.” Daniel looked a tad bit stunned by my statement. “What? What is it?”

He ran his hands through his hair and leaned forward. “Nothing. I just gotta say... It’s not every day I sit in a bar and talk about Shakes. My collection back at home is pretty impressive, but it doesn’t exactly bring me too many dates.”

“Yeah, same here. Most people think it’s weird—my infatuation with Shakespeare. My sister was the only one who really understood it, but no one else. She called it my golden.”

“Your golden?”

“Everyone has a golden. It could be anything—a song, a book, a pet, a person. Anything that makes you so happy your insides cry of pure joy. It feels like you’re on drugs but better because it’s a natural high. Shakespeare is my golden.”

“I like how your brain works.”

My cheeks heated up from his comment. Was he flirting with me? Because if there was ever a time I wanted a person to flirt with me, it was definitely while we were talking about reading. There was nothing sexier

than a smart banmoy, especially when he was able to make my heart do cartwheels.

“Your music made me smile,” I said, sipping at my water. “I haven’t smiled this much in a very long time.”

Daniel laid his forearms on the table and laced his fingers together. He studied my face unvoiced for a moment. The smile he softly used filled the silence like a perfected speech. His eyes pierced my spirit before he tore his gaze away and lifted his beer up for a swallow. “That’s a real shame.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because when the world gives a person a smile like that, it should be the only activity those lips ever partake in.”

My cheeks rose up and I ran my hands through my hair. Talking about my lips made me think about his lips, which made me think about things I shouldn’t have been thinking about. Time to change the subject.

“So do all of your songs deal with different Shakespeare plays, or was I just being an over-the-top hipster while listening to the lyrics?” I asked.

Daniel tilted his head to the side and his mouth parted. A look of amazement stayed on his face. I liked that look. Okay, truth was I liked all of his looks. “You’re the real deal, aren’t you? Most people don’t pick up on it, but yes. Every song is based on some form of Shakes’s works.”

“That’s so nerdy and hot all at once. I’m not sure how to handle it all.”

“What can I say? I’m a nerd-stud.”

I giggled and sipped from my glass. “So there was *Romeo and Juliet* of course. Then there was...” I paused, trying to recite the exact order of his set list. “*Hamlet*, *Richard III*, *The Tempest*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and *Othello*?”

Daniel’s hand flew over his heart and his back slammed against his booth. “Marry me,” he joked. I almost considered it, too. Daniel’s lips parted, and I swore I sighed just from the sight. “So tell me, no-name girl. What do you do for a living?”

“What do I do or what do I want to do? Those are two different things, I think. I’m currently a student hoping to someday call myself an author.”

“No way? Really?” He seemed honestly interested.

“Really, really. Like, *double* really.”

He laughed and I sighed at the sound of his chuckle. The way his smile stretched so far and wide made me think that I was actually charming. “Well, do it. Become an author.”

It was my turn to giggle. “Yeah. Because it’s that easy.”

His head shook back and forth. A somber look overtook him and he held his beer in the air. “I never said it would be easy. I just said do it. Besides, the best things in life aren’t easy. They are tough, they are painful, and they are raw. That makes the arrival to the final destination that much sweeter.”

“Yeah it’s just...” My voice trailed off, yet Daniel appeared to stay invested in the conversation, never tampering off from boredom of my thoughts. “I had a co-writer.”

“Had?” he questioned.

“Yeah, and I can’t imagine finishing the book without her.” When my mouth closed, I began to grind my teeth against each other, trying to fight back the tears.

Daniel took note of the emotion, and his hand moved across the table, taking my hand into his. His touch electrified me, sending waves of heat through my fingertips.

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

Five words. Five words from a stranger and a simple touch gave me a sense of life I hadn’t experienced before. Such raw humanity in his approach was so welcoming that night.

“Thank you.”

He didn’t hold my hand too long, but I missed his touch when he retreated. “Maybe the key is to start writing something else.”

“Maybe. But I can’t really say I’m ready to close the current book.”

His hand found the back of his neck and he rubbed it, laughing. “Then I will respectfully shut the hell up.” He was pretty dang charming, too. “I’m sorry I approached you outside like that. It’s just... When I saw you enter the bar the first time, you looked like...”

“Like what?” I asked eagerly.

He frowned. “Like everything you ever loved was set on fire and you couldn’t walk away until you watched it all burn to ashes. And all I wanted to do was hug you.”

I blankly stared at him. I was coming off as awkward, yet I didn’t know what else to do. Clearing my throat, I nodded once. I kept my glaze on him, unable to look away.

Daniel smiled and turned to see one of his band members walking over to our table. *Our* table? What an interesting thought.

The band member slapped his hands on Daniel’s shoulders and smiled toward me. He had shaggy blond hair that sat right above his eyebrows and the sweetest brown eyes I’d ever seen. A peace symbol hung around his neck, and his long-sleeved forest-green shirt was unbuttoned over his white t-shirt.

“I hope this loser hasn’t been giving you a hard time,” he joked.

“Hardly,” I grinned.

He extended his hand toward me. I accepted his handshake. “Randy Donavon. I’m on acoustic.”

“It’s nice to meet you. You’re amazing up there.”

Daniel sighed heavily. “Don’t give him a bigger head.”

Randy stepped back and placed his hands on his chest. “Big head? Me?! No way. I’m super humble.” He put his hands together in a prayer format and bowed toward me. “Thank you, beautiful.”

I giggled at his antics—and at Daniel, who was rolling his eyes.

“I would hate to steal Danny from you, but we gotta get the next set going...” Randy smiled and slapped Daniel on the back. “Beautiful”—he took my hand in his and kissed it—“it was wonderful meeting you.”

“You too, Randy.”

Randy nudged Daniel in the arm and whispered, “She’s hot,” before he marched back to the stage.

My cheeks heated up.

Daniel laughed at his friend. "Don't mind Randy. He's a little... unique."

"I like unique," I said.

He lifted from his seat and smirked my way. "You're intriguing. I like that about you."

"You know what I like about you so far?" I asked, wiggling my butt around in my seat. He made me feel as if there were nothing more perfect than the booth in the back corner of Joe's bar.

"What's that?"

"Everything." When I said the word, his face lit up and warmed me up from the tips of my toes to the top of my head. "Have fun up there," I said, nodding toward the stage.

"You'll stick around?" he asked with such a soft tone. Like a schoolboy asking a girl to come listen to his garage band for the first time.

"Yup."

"Promise?" His hands slipped into his jeans pockets, and his hips swayed back and forth.

I ran my fingers across my eyebrow and felt as if my cheekbones were going to shatter from all of the grinning they were partaking in tonight. "Promise, promise."

Chapter 6

Ashlyn

Five minutes ago I was lonely.

Five minutes ago I walked alone.

Five minutes later I told you the deepest secrets of my soul

And when you turned away I whispered, 'Please don't go.'

~ Romeo's Quest

The show continued on, and I couldn't take my eyes off Daniel for the remainder of the night. I could tell he loved what he did, and just the idea of that made me happy for him. When the final song finished, I stood with the rest and applauded in complete awe. He was brilliant. The whole band was ecstatic. Gabby would've loved them.

When Daniel looked down to me, I smiled and mouthed the words, "Thank you," and he narrowed his eyes with a look of confusion, which I chose to ignore. I headed outside, knowing I'd stayed out longer than Hailey had thought I would, and she was probably having a panic attack, thinking that I'd stolen her car.

The warm air bustled through my hair. Digging into my pocket, I pulled out Hailey's keys, ready to return to the place I had yet to call home.

"No name!" was shouted behind me, and I turned to see an exhausted-looking lead singer running my way. "What was that? Connect and run? You're bailing without a goodbye?"

I opened my mouth and shrugged. "I said thank you."

He slid his hands into his jeans. I could tell that the small breeze probably felt good against his bare arms after having stood under the hot lights in the bar. He stepped closer to me, and my body tensed up.

“I thought...” He paused and laughed. I thought he was laughing at himself. It was clear that I hadn’t done anything funny. “Never mind. It was nice meeting you.” He held his left hand out toward me and I shook it.

“Nice meeting you, too. Get inside and have a celebratory drink. You did amazing up there.” I chuckled.

He wasn’t smiling with his lips, but his eyes sparkled with care. “Was it your sister? Who you lost?”

I straightened up, taken aback by his words. “How did you know?”

Our hands still connected, he stepped one inch closer. “When you told the story about your golden, you spoke about her in past tense.”

“Oh.” That was all I could say. I didn’t know what else could be said, and just thinking about Gabby standing on that sidewalk was sending my waves of tears back.

“Still a new hurt?”

“Still fresh and ugly.”

“My mom passed a year ago. And last Friday I lost my dad to liver failure.” He stepped another inch closer.

My mouth dropped opened. “You *just* lost your father and you’re performing in a bar?”

“I’m pretty fucked up,” he whispered, tapping his finger against his head. I knew the feeling all too well. “He was an English teacher. The band was his idea, actually—a Shakespeare-themed band. Only Dad could’ve come up with that.” He paused. “People tell you over time it’s suppose to get easier but—”

“It just gets harder,” I said, understanding completely and stepping closer to him.

“And it gets old to everyone around you. People get tired of you bringing it up. People get burdened by your sadness. So you act like it doesn’t hurt anymore. Just so you can stop people from worrying about you. Just so you won’t annoy anyone with your grief.”

“You want to know something that sounds crazy?” I felt a bit insane for talking to a complete stranger about losing a family member, but the truth was that he was the first person who seemed to understand where I was coming from. “When I drove over here, I could have sworn my twin sister was sitting next to me in the car.”

I watched as his eyes filled with such a look of despair. The words ‘twin sister’ had probably run through his mind, giving him that pained expression. I felt bad that I’d made him feel bad. A person like him should always feel good.

“It’s fine,” I whispered, “I’m okay.”

He shifted his feet around. “Sometimes I swear I can smell my dad’s favorite cigar smoke floating around me.”

We silenced our thoughts for a moment and both glanced down to our hands, which were still attached from our ‘goodnight’ handshake. Then a nervous laugh happened. I wasn’t sure if it was his nervous laughter or mine.

I broke the stillness and stepped backwards. Looking up into his blue eyes, I blinked once, hoping to not miss too much of his stare. “Ashlyn,” I said, offering him my name.

He stumbled back a few steps with a wide, toothy smile. “*Ashlyn*,” he sang. “Just when I thought you couldn’t get any more stunning, you pull out a name like that.”

I slipped my hands into my pockets and stared up at the night sky. It all seemed so simple. A bar with music that touched my soul. A boy who knew what it was like to lose a part of his joy. A light breeze that refreshed my entire being. “If there were a God, which I’m not certain that there is, do you think this night would be a form of apology for him taking away the things we loved?”

He released a breath and rubbed his hand across his mouth. “I don’t know. But I think it’s a good start.”

We were silent again. I’d never known that a silence could feel so much like home. He couldn’t stop smiling, yet neither could I. They were intense, cheesy grins that felt nothing but natural.

He broke the stillness and stepped backwards. “Well this has been a really fucking weird night.”

“I can second that.”

“All right then. I will stop bothering you and let you get going.”

“Yeah, of course. It’s just...” My words faded off, and he looked at me with narrowed eyes, waiting for me to finish. “I’m not ready to go yet. Because I know once I leave, all of this will be over. All of the magic of tonight that turned off my mind for a few hours will be gone and I’ll be sad Ashlyn again.”

“Are you asking me to make believe with you for a little while longer?” he asked.

I nodded with hopeful eyes, praying he wouldn’t think I was a total nut job.

He lifted my hand into his and nudged me in my shoulder. “Let’s take a walk,” he offered.



We took lap after lap around the block. I didn’t know why, but we started exchanging stories back and forth about our lives. On lap three, Daniel told me about his father, how they hadn’t been close until his mom died. Then they’d grown really close, and he regretted the years he’d lost due to being distant. He paused on the corner of Humboldt Street and James Avenue and took a deep inhale. Staring out into the night, he laced his fingers behind his neck and closed his eyes. I didn’t say anything because the regret in his body language was saying all that needed to be said.

I learned that he had a brother, but when I asked about him, Daniel’s body tensed up. “We don’t talk.” The words came out colder than anything I’d heard him say before. I didn’t ask more about it.

On lap four, we laughed about how overly tired we both were and how we hadn’t been able to truly sleep. On lap six, I cried. It started out with a few fallen tears but morphed into full-on waterworks, and Daniel didn’t ask me to explain. He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me into his chest, soothing tones leaving his lips.

I tried to choke out the words to tell him that I would be all right, but he warned me against them. He said that it was okay to *not* be okay. He explained that it was fine to be broken for a while, to not feel anything but hurt. We stayed on lap six the longest, him whispering against my hair that someday, somehow, the hurt would be overshadowed by the joy.

Later, I told him about the bucket list Gabby had crafted for me, and he asked to read it. Reaching into my purse, I pulled out the folded piece of paper and handed it to him. He held it with such care, unfolding it slowly. I watched his eyes travel from left to right as he moved his way down the list.

“Hula-hoop in a department store?” he questioned, arching an eyebrow my way.

I chuckled, nodding.

“Sing a Michael Jackson song at a karaoke bar, including dance moves?”

“I know, right? That one was more Gabby than it was me,” I replied.

He smiled at the list before folding it back up and handing it to me. He asked me how many I have checked off so far, making me sigh.

“None yet. I was supposed to dance on the bar tonight...but as you witnessed, I had a minor mental breakdown.”

“So you haven’t read a letter from your sister yet?”

“Not yet. I kind of want to just rip them all open but...”

He laughed as he started to walk around the block again. “But you don’t want to be *that* girl.”

“That girl?” I questioned, standing in place, staring in his direction.

“You know. The girl who deliberately disobeys her dead twin sister.”

I smiled. I knew it was twisted, and some would call it wrong what he said, but I smiled because heck...it was funny. I really missed funny moments in my life. “You’re right. I wouldn’t dare be that girl.”

“Besides...” He turned around toward me and bit into his bottom lip. He walked closer to me and playfully nudged me in the shoulder. “You’re about to complete one of the tasks.” When he said this, my nose wiggled and my eyebrows arched.

He laughed at my somewhat dumbfounded stance. When his face grew closer to mine, I let the air release from my mouth, brushing against his lips. It felt like forever that our mouths were millimeters apart, yet it was only truly a few seconds.

His lips didn't only look soft and kissable—they looked talented as well. Like they could kiss someone even if they were on the other side of the world and make that person melt. It wasn't long before I realized just how talented those lips were.

Our lips connected in a way I'd never been kissed. There needed to be a new word for this type of kissing. Therapeutic. Poignant. Apologetic. Blissful. All of those beautifully diverse feelings—all at once. The overwhelming amount of emotions running through my body electrified the energy that traveled from me to him.

I knew I would never want to kiss another man from the way I kissed him. I never knew that kissing could be so simple yet so complex. He did all of the work with just his lips discovering mine.

He pulled me to the side of the bar and my back found the stone wall, but it wasn't the wall that was holding me up as much as it was his touch. He leaned in closer to me and I felt his tongue part my lips, finding my tongue ready to become well acquainted with his.

When his arms wrapped tighter around me, my leg reached up to find its final placement around his hips. A small gasp fell from me as his strong hands clasped around my bottom and lifted me up even higher, making my selfish want to wrap my legs around him become a desperate need in order to fight gravity.

Like a wandering star, my body fell into the depths of desire, and I began to beg the heavens that this wasn't some depression-drenched fantasy—yet if it were, I hoped to never find reality again.

He moved his mouth away from mine, leaving me with my eyes closed and my heart open. I could feel his heart pounding against his t-shirt, and he placed his hand over my heart. Words were not needed because everything was felt from within, spilling out into each other's fingertips.

One last time, his lips crossed mine, almost not touching, as a closing ceremony. When I opened my eyes, I found his stare, and he smiled toward

me as he began to explain in more depth. “Number twenty-three.”

He slowly lowered me back to the ground. I looked down to the list still resting in my hands and quickly darted my eyes to number twenty-three.

#23. Kiss a stranger.

Well I'll be damned. I kissed a stranger.

My eyes looked up from the list to find Daniel smiling at me. He took three large strides backwards and took a bow. “You’re welcome,” he joked.

I couldn’t contain my glee, and it was useless to try. Spinning around in a circle with my arms flung out, I let the night air wash across my body. I get to open a letter! I felt like crying, but I knew it would only be happy tears.

My feet started to break out into a run in Daniel’s direction, and he was probably thrown off guard when I tossed myself into his arms for a tight, tight hug. He didn’t falter at all—he lifted me into the air and swung me around a few times, hugging me back without question.

“You don’t know what this means to me,” I whispered, secretly wanting to kiss him again and again.

He pulled back a little and stared at me, smiling. “Let’s get you home so you can do a little reading.”

He placed me down, and the two of us walked to the front of the bar. Daniel rubbed his arms up and down my shoulders for a moment. His lips moved in closer to mine, and when they connected to the corner of my mouth, I felt a wave of heat skyrocket through my system.

“Goodnight, Ashlyn,” he said, lightly touching my fingertips before he stepped back, forcing another smile from me.

“Goodnight, Daniel Daniels.” My heart was getting lost in a world of yearning, and I allowed it to travel to the unknown territory. I reached into my purse and pulled out his CD. “Oh, and just so you know...I’m taking you to bed tonight.”

“Well, damn. I’m one lucky bastard.” He winked at me, and I felt my world being rocked. Running his hands through his hair, he smiled big. “I

think this is when we exchange numbers.” He reached his phone out toward me and I gave him mine. After typing in my number, we switched back.

“I probably won’t call you first because I don’t want to look desperate.” I grinned.

“And I won’t call you first because I want you to explore the idea that there might be other girls I’m talking to.”

Ohh how he makes me feel. I hadn’t felt this way in so long. “Well obviously there aren’t other girls. Have you seen yourself? You’re pretty hideous.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Girls don’t like charming smiles, muscular arms, or delicious four-pack—” He quickly took my hands and ran them across his stomach. I sighed lightly, feeling my thighs ache from the touch of his physique. “Six-pack abs.” My cheeks blushed over, but I hoped he didn’t notice.

“So what is it that girls like?” He crossed his arms.

“Ya know, the normal things. A little hair under the nostrils. Some extra chins to kiss. An extra nipple or three. Just the normal things.”

He laughed, and I wanted to snuggle against him to feel the laughter ripple through his body. “I’ll work on those things. I don’t want to be... What word did you use?”

“Hideous.”

“Right. I would hate to be hideous in your eyes.” There was one last round of smiles before he turned away and I began to walk in the other direction.

“Hey, Ashlyn!” he shouted, making me twirl back around in his direction. I waited for his comment, sending him a wondering gaze. “Would you want to have another really weird fucking night with me again sometime? Like, maybe even, Tuesday night?”

Yes! Yes! For all things righteous, YES! “You know what? I think I can pencil you in.”

“You know the library on Harts Road?”

Nope. I didn't. But I'd be searching the internet right when I returned home to find out where it was. "I'll figure it out."

"Good. Figure it out around, say, six p.m."

"It's a date." I realized my words and paused, slamming my hand against my side. My cheeks heated up and my hands curled around my waist. "I mean, it's a... It's... I'll be there. I'll see you then."

He laughed and turned away. "Okay, sounds good. It's a date, date."

He used a double.

And I was officially smitten.



I entered my bedroom to find Hailey stretched out on the floor, lying on top of her yoga mat. There was music playing that sounded like the rainforest bouncing from her speaker system.

She was inhaling deeply and exhaling through her slightly parted mouth. Just seeing her weirdness brought a small grin to my mouth.

"Uh, Hailey?" I muttered, closing the door behind me.

"Shh," she hummed, patting the spare yoga mat that was lying right beside hers.

I took it as a weird invite and accepted. Taking off my heels and tossing my coat and purse onto my bed, I lay down on the yoga mat.

"Close your eyes," Hailey instructed, her eyes already shut. I cocked a brow and looked at her as if she were a nut job and the corner of her mouth turned up. "Don't give me that you're-batshit-crazy look. Just close your freaking eyes."

I closed them and took in a deep breath. There was a cold breeze in the room and my arms instantly received goose bumps. I peeked toward Hailey and watched her still inhaling deeply and exhaling with relief.

"Do you feel the difference from just a few seconds of lying down and connecting back to the world? All of that negative energy exiting through your fingertips and toes?" Hailey asked before going back to her humming.

"Um, no?" I said with confusion in my sounds. I just felt like I was lying on a yoga mat in a dark room, listening to thunder and the jungle from

a CD player.

Hailey's humming paused and she sat up on her elbows. "Hmph. Me either. I'm telling you, I've been giving this meditation thing a try for the longest time, but I just don't *get* it."

I giggled and sat up on the mat, crossing my legs. "Then why do you bother?"

"Theo..." She reminded me of her boyfriend before she laid back down, tossing her hands under her head. "How was your time out?"

My lips turned up. Hailey noticed.

"You met a boy!" she squealed in a whisper.

I turned her way, shocked. "How...?"

"Ashlyn, you left the house pissed off and you came back smiling and blushing. You definitely met a boy."

She was wrong—he was no boy at all. I lay back down on the yoga mat, staring at the painted clouds on the ceiling, listening to the chirping birds and monkeys from the CD player. "I had a very good time out."

We talked for a while longer before my new roommate grew sleepier and sleepier. After a while of lying on the mat, I listened as Hailey began to lightly snore. Standing up, I grabbed a blanket and laid it over her body.

Around two a.m., my phone lit up. A grin ran across me at seeing Daniel's name.

Daniel: He's British. He's addicted to waving his long stick around. He has a superb sweater collection.

Me: Is this some kind of late-night book trivia?

Heart putters and butterflies were back in full force.

Daniel: Duh.

Me: Well, you have to do better than that. Harry Potter. My turn. He ran away from home to miss out on a curse. He gets married. He has mom issues. There may be a small chance that his baby mama is also...his mama.

Daniel: Did you just Oedipus Rex me? Clue: She has a rodent problem. Her infatuation with the three days festival is awkward. Her stepsisters cut off their heels.

Me: Cinderella–Grimm brother style. You’re making this too easy. I thought you weren’t going to call me first?

Daniel: I thought the three days festival was clever. Most people don’t know that. This isn’t calling you. This is texting. My girlfriend is sleeping right next to me. She might wonder if she hears me talking. You’re beautiful.

He made me laugh and swoon at the same time. A true talent.

Me: On a scale of 1 to 10, the festival clue was a 1.5. Yawn. Don’t pretend that Mr. Hideous has a girlfriend. Don’t flatter me with compliments–your clues still stink.

Daniel: You’re beautiful.

Me: You’re dramatic.

Daniel: You’re beautiful, Ashlyn. I don’t just mean your looks. I mean your smarts, your tears, your brokenness. I think that’s beautiful.

Each time he replied, I felt my face flush. He wasn’t playing games; he wasn’t trying to act like he had better things to do at two in the morning. He replied right away, with each text holding so much warmth to his simple words.

Me: Stop it...

Daniel: You’re so ugly it’s painful. You remind me of the scum on the bottom of my shoes. If I could, I would kick you with dirt. Why are you so repulsive?

Me: Romancing–you’re doing it right.

Daniel: Goodnight, Ash.

I sighed as I placed my phone down against my chest.
Goodnight, Daniel Daniels.

I moved to my wooden box and used the light from my cell phone to dig through the envelopes until I found number twenty-three. Sitting back on my mat, I slowly opened the letter.



#23. Kiss a Stranger

Ash,

Oh my gosh. My sister's a slut! Really? You kissed a STRANGER?! Can I say that I'm secretly proud of you? And if this happened to be one of the first few letters that you opened, that means you're probably acting out because you miss me sooo much. That's my girl! So tell me, was it a bad kiss? Did he have donkey breath? Did he use tongue? Oh gosh, there's so much I want to know. Did you like it? Did he make your insides feel like Jell-o? As long as you're not kissing Billy, I'm happy. I guess this number on your bucket list was mainly to show you that you should take chances. Kiss the wrong guy at the right time. Kiss the right guy at the wrong time. Just live each day as if there are no restraints. There's so much I wish I would have done, but I would always overthink things too much. Like, I should have worn polka dots with plaid one day. Or tried sushi. Or lost my virginity at the beach party with Bentley last year when I really wanted to.

Keep diving in.

You're doing great, kid.

-Gab

Chapter 7

Ashlyn

One, can I have your number?

Two, can I have your smile?

Three, will you meet me somewhere?

Four, will you stay awhile?

~ Romeo's Quest

I woke up on the ground as the sunlight from the window flooded the carpet. I looked down to see that the cover I had laid on Hailey was now resting against me. Hailey was standing in front of her full-length mirror, tossing her hair around.

I rubbed my hands over my sleepy eyes and stood up, yawning into the palm of my hand. "Thanks for the blanket."

"Ditto," she smiled, turning my way. "This roommate thing is working out. Right?"

My shoulders shrugged as I fell onto my mattress. I hadn't lived here that long, so it was all still so new to me.

She didn't really take my reply in too much before joining me on the edge of my bed. "Great! So, here's the thing... Theo's having a party in a few weeks when his parents go to Bora Bora and I need you to come with me."

I arched an eyebrow and laughed. "No thanks."

Hailey pouted her lips and crossed her arms. “Come on. Please?! My mom won’t let me go unless I go with friends. My best friend Lia is against Theo for some reason, and seeing how my only other friend is my brother, who is very anti-Theo, Mom is very anti my going out. I need a girl to go with me... I need *you*. And Mom will love the idea because she’ll think we’re bonding. Which, we will be!” She clamped her hands together and started to beg. “Please, Ashlyn?! Please?!”

“I’m not really the party girl.”

“That’s fine! It’s totally fine. But”—she smiled and shut her eyes—“maybe you’ll be able to cross something off of your bucket list!”

My mouth dropped and I straightened my shoulders back. “How do you know about the list?”

“You talk in your sleep.” She opened one of her eyes and looked at me, cringing at the idea that I would be pissed off at her. I was still debating if I was. “Plus, you left your last letter resting on your bed.”

Jumping from my bed, my heart pounding against my chest, I crossed my arms. “You read my letter?! You went through my stuff?!”

Hailey was quick to stand up and widen her eyes with fear. “No! It was just sitting there. And I’m... Okay. Yes, I read the letter. I’m a terrible roommate. Let me make it up to you by inviting you to a party!”

I stared at her for the longest, not blinking, with a look of shock. “I can’t do this right now.” Moving toward the door to leave my crazy new ‘roommate,’ I was stopped when Hailey jumped in front of the door.

“Look, okay! I’m sorry. I was way out of line for reading your stuff and I pinkie promise to never do it again.” She held her pinkie up to me, and I glared at her, not understanding her angle. Her hand slowly fell down to her sides and she sighed. “I don’t have many friends. And I’m *this* close to losing my first boyfriend. I’m not like you, okay? I don’t have boobs for days and the physical features that bring boys knocking. Theo is my only shot at this. And if I don’t have that Saturday to give Theo my flower, then he will leave me. Then I will have this freaking garden *down there* for the rest of my life!” she cried in a whisper, her eyes filling with tears.

I couldn’t help but smile. “Your flower?” I asked, looking at the very over-the-top dramatics of Hailey. The scary part was that she seemed to be

pretty serious. “I thought you weren’t ready to lose your...rose...orchid...Venus flytrap?”

Her lips turned up and her hands landed against her hips. “Oh, you find this funny? Well I’m so glad. I’m so happy that my failing life is entertaining for you.”

“It’s a little entertaining.”

She rolled her eyes and walked over to her bed, flopping down on it. “I’m going to die a virgin.”

My heart skipped, thinking about Gabby’s letter and how she wanted to lose her virginity to Bentley but never was able to. I bit my bottom lip and scrunched my face. “Okay, I’ll go.”

She perked up and looked at me. “You’ll go?!”

“Only if you promise to never go through my stuff again.”

“I promise!” she screamed, jumping up from the bed.

“And we have to find a way to cross an item off my bucket list.” I reached into my purse and pulled out my list. Hailey was quick to snatch it out of my hand and ran her eyes across it.

“Your sister made this? Wow. She sounds awesome.”

“She was.”

Hailey paused and looked up to me to deliver the sad expression I’d grown to hate. She then went back to the list and cleared her throat. “Number twelve. Give to those in need.”

I laughed, rolling my eyes. “I doubt helping a girl lose her virginity is what she meant.”

Her lips pouted and she went back to the list. “Number sixteen?” She passed the piece of paper my way and I smiled.

#16. House Party.

“Well...I guess we’re going to a party sometime soon.” I rolled my shoulders back and yawned. “But as for now, I need to borrow your toothpaste. I ran out.”

“Borrow? By all means, don’t give it back.” Hailey snickered, telling me that it was in the bathroom’s medicine cabinet. “And make sure to hurry

up. Mom hates being late for Bible study.”



Going to church on Sunday with only a few hours of sleep seemed extra painful. Hailey and Ryan had to be there super early to teach Bible study, too. Rebecca said it would be a true blessing if I showed up, but what she really meant was, “You’re going to church.” One thing I’d learned about Rebecca was that she made demands with a smile, making you think they were requests.

Sometimes I watched Henry interact with her and wondered how they had come to be a couple. They appeared so different from each other that it seemed like an oddball connection. I even noticed Henry sitting in his car to smoke to make sure Rebecca didn’t find out.

But then sometimes I saw it. The way he looked at her when she wasn’t looking. The sparkle in his eyes. The way she held his hand as if it were her own hand.

His cell phone went off right before we walked inside the church, and Rebecca arched an eyebrow. “Who’s calling you this early?”

Henry’s eyes fell to his cell phone and he grimaced. “I’ll be right in behind you.”

Rebecca held the door open to the church for us and lectured her kids. “Remember, Hailey, a prayer before and a prayer after for the younger kids. They need to learn.”

“Okay,” Hailey said, rolling her eyes.

“And, Ryan, with the older kids... Don’t worry about that Avery boy interrupting. He’s been pulled out of the class.”

“Why?” Ryan asked, his interest piqued.

Rebecca’s face frowned in disgust. “Let’s just say he did some bothersome things. His family moved to a different church service.”

Ryan arched an eyebrow but didn’t press for more explanation.

“And tuck in your shirt. You look like a slob. Remember, God is watching.” When his mom turned away and walked inside, Ryan pulled out his fake cigarette box. I eyed his strange habit and turned to Hailey.

“What is he doing?” I whispered, moving with her toward the class she taught.

She glanced to her brother for a split second and shrugged. “Coping mechanism.”

Coping from what?

Hailey must have read my mind because she gave me a small grin. “You’re not the only one with daddy issues, Ashlyn.”

Chapter 8

Ashlyn

There's two things I need you to see.

One lives in you and the other in me.

~ Romeo's Quest

Monday marked the first day of classes of senior year. Hailey drove Ryan and me to school, and Henry promised me that he would do his best to not cross my path. When we pulled into the parking lot, Ryan jumped out and tossed his backpack on.

I climbed out, backpack straps on, and held a novel close to my chest. The plan was to always hold a book to my chest. Then maybe the guys wouldn't look at me the way they had at my other school.

It was a lot easier to feel comfortable in my own skin when I had a built-in twin always at my side. Now I only felt lonely.

"Toss me your schedule, Chicago." Ryan nudged me in the side with a smile. I guessed that was my new nickname from him. I handed it his way and he unfolded the paper, his eyes darting back and forth. "Ohh, you have Ms. Gain for first-hour chemistry. Harsh."

Hailey frowned. "Ms. Sweaty. Her classroom smells like a horse's butt."

"And she grades like we are all supposed to be Harvard students." Ryan rolled his eyes. "I'll be lucky to get into community college." It seemed like he was mostly saying that to himself so I didn't comment. "At

least you have third hour with yours truly. AP English with Mr. D. Easy A.” Why did he think he wouldn’t get into college if he was taking AP courses?

“That’s because he’s new. New teachers are always easy A’s.” Hailey smirked before hurrying off to find her locker.

Ryan handed me my schedule back and rushed off to class. I took a deep breath and looked up at the school building. So many people were moving around as if they knew exactly where they were going. Exactly what the next step was.

I moved slowly, searching, exploring, and hoping to get out with as little harm as possible. The first-hour class crawled by, and my new house buddies hadn’t been wrong. Ms. Gain’s room did smell like a horse’s butt.

“All right, students. Welcome to chemistry. I’m glad to see you all appear to be comfortable in your seats. Too bad. Assigned tables starting now. These will be your partners for the rest of the semester. So once you move, I welcome you to get comfortable again.”

The room was in an uproar with moans and annoyance, but I couldn’t care less. I already didn’t know anyone, therefore it wouldn’t matter who she sat me next to.

“Ashlyn Jennings next to Jake Kenn at table five.” I picked up my books, moved over to my table, and watched as a boy sat in the chair next to me. He gave me a friendly smile, but I noticed when his eyes traveled to my chest.

Their eyes always found my chest.

“Hi. Ashley, right?” Jake extended his hand my way and smiled.

“*Ashlyn*,” I corrected. Jake was a good-looking guy, kind of built—as far as high school boys could be built I guess. Blond hair, brown eyes.

“Well it’s nice to meet you, *Ashlyn*.” He put the stress on my name and that got a smile from me.

“You too.”

“So you’re the new girl everyone’s been talking about? The principal’s daughter?”

Everyone’d been talking about me? The thought of that sent a rumble through my stomach and I shrugged. “*Assistant* principal’s daughter.

Everyone's been talking about me? It's the first hour of the first day."

"You'll learn fast... People talk here. That's pretty much all they do." He nodded, his eyes roaming over my body once more. "You look nothing like Mr. Jennings."

"I'll take that as a compliment." I smiled shyly and adjusted my chair a small bit away from him.

He noticed my move and chuckled lightly before he turned to face the teacher. "Trust me, it is."

The class continued on, and afterwards, Jake asked me if I needed help finding my next class, which I declined with a smile. The next hour went by just like the one before—slowly.

Walking in the hallway, I felt trapped. My eyes darted to the clock on the wall. The loud ticks reminded us students that we must hurry along or we might blink and miss out on our lives. Six more hours. Six more long, dreadful hours before I would be able to escape the imprisonment of the building.

While I was walking, I saw Henry standing down the hallway giving me a halfway grin. I sighed and turned the other way, running directly into a person. My books and schedule went flying and I rolled my eyes.

"Watch where you're going, melons."

I looked up just in time to see that I'd managed to run into a guy wearing a letter jacket. A football player, and from how the followers huddled around him, I was sure he was the head of the team. I glanced over and noticed Jake standing amongst them, giving him a wary smile.

He shrugged with an apologetic grin and walked off. *Thanks for the help, chemistry partner.* A few of the guys remained near me as I started picking up my books from the run-in.

"Those aren't just melons. Those are watermelons. I love my watermelons *big* and *juicy*," a boy laughed as he walked past me, mocking the size of my chest.

After I picked up the books, I held them even tighter to my chest. I couldn't even raise my head to look the bullies in the eyes.

One of the downsides to wearing Gabby's dresses was the way they showcased my body. But for some reason, I had to wear them.

"No need to read when you got a rack like that. I can teach you all kinds of things," the head bully said. One of the others called him Brad. I felt his eyes roaming across my body and I shifted myself away from him which made me run into another. Didn't they have better things to do on the first day of school? Like, maybe going to class?

"Just one taste," one of the guys muttered as he moved close to my ear and rubbed his hands against my shoulders before the rough sound of a teacher's voice filled all of our ears.

"All right, all right. That's enough. Get to class." The voice ran through my ears as my head was still down. I watched as all of the feet of the assholes scurried away. A hand came near me and I flinched.

The need for a shower washed over my skin. Violated. The boys' words and rubs had violated me and made me feel as if I'd just been touched all over in the most callous way. I wanted to go crawl back to Chicago, where at least I knew who the bullies were. I wanted to go home.

"You dropped this," the voice said, handing me my schedule. When I looked up, the paper in his hands floated to the ground and he gasped. "Ashlyn."

Beautiful.

Breathtaking.

Brilliant.

Blue eyes.

At first, a weird sense of comfort washed over me from knowing that he was the one who'd dismissed the assholes. But then the facts sank in. He'd *dismissed* the assholes.

"What are you doing here, Daniel?" He looked so...grown up. So different than when I'd seen him at Joe's bar.

His tan pants were attached to a brown belt that matched his shoes. A light-blue button-down shirt covered his toned body, and his hair wasn't free. It was tamed, combed back, held in place.

“*Don’t*,” he hissed. His lips frowned. I watched as he glanced down the hallways and the back of his right hand found his neck. “Don’t call me that, Ashlyn,” he whispered.

A locker slammed nearby, and I jumped out of fright. Everything twisted inside of me, and I fought back the tears that were pushing their way to the fronts of my eyelids.

How could this be?

Daniel cleared his throat and picked up my schedule once again. This time, he studied it, his eyes growing more and more worried. “You’re a student.” His hand formed a fist and he repeatedly tapped it against his mouth. “You’re *my* student.”

My eyes widened in confusion and horror. Mostly horror. The bell rang loudly, the noise rocketing through the hallways.

“And you’re late.”

He placed the schedule in my hands, and I looked up and saw Ryan jogging down the hallway toward us. He smiled. “I’m here, I’m here. Don’t throw a fit, Mr. D. My gym class is all the way across the building and shit.” He paused. “I mean, crap.”

He scooted past Daniel and me as we were both frozen in time and space. Ryan turned around, gave me a wide, toothy grin, and nodded my way. “You coming, Ashlyn?”

My lips tightened together as I looked up to Daniel—Mr. Daniels. I edged my way into the classroom and sighed as I heard the door slam behind me. Ryan smiled to me and tapped the seat directly across from him, and I mouthed, “Thank you,” to him.

When I looked up, I saw a disjointed Daniel trying to pull his thoughts together. He faced the class and I swore he stared each student in the eyes except for me. There was not *one* moment where we locked eyes. All I needed was a look to let me know that this was okay, that we could figure this weird situation out.

Not one look.

I felt nauseated.

He went on teaching the class, pulling out a dry-eraser marker and writing all across the board about what we would be covering in the semester. Flash Fiction. The Odyssey. Macbeth. I didn't care. The air was thick and dirty—filled with misunderstanding. I couldn't breathe.

“Okay, so for tomorrow, I'm looking for a one-to-two-page paper answering these three questions. Three questions that will pretty much shape our semester. We'll be referring to these a ton, so think hard about them.”

The classroom groaned. I blinked my eyes to look up to Daniel's words. He had written three questions on the board that made me even more ill.

1. Who are you today?
2. Where do you see yourself in five years?
3. What do you want to be when you grow up?

My feet wanted to run, and I didn't know how to stop the feeling of wanting to escape from overtaking me. I shot up from my desk and stood still. Daniel's voice froze mid-sentence and all eyes turned to me.

Daniel arched an eyebrow and closed his dry-eraser marker. He gave me a baffled stare. “Yes, Ashlyn?”

“I...” I what? I couldn't think. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't stop wanting him to hold me. *I what?!* “I-I need to use the restroom.”

The bell rang, and I could hear the snickers throughout the classroom at my sudden burst from my chair. Daniel gave me a strained smile and nodded toward the door.

“All right, everyone. That's it for today.”

My eyes shut and I listened to everyone shuffle around me. Only I would declare that I had to use the restroom in front of the whole class exactly before the class ended. My hand ran across my face as I sighed heavily.

Ryan playfully slapped me on my back and grinned. “Rumor has it that people are calling your boobs watermelons.”

My mouth hung open. “How is that even a rumor?! It just happened before class!”

He held his cell phone showing me a picture of me and my chest. “Technology is a bully’s newest bitch. Maybe you shouldn’t wear such sexy dresses every day that show off your chest and legs.”

I frowned at the picture of me frowning. How embarrassing. “The dresses were Gabby’s.”

Ryan grimaced. He shoved me in my shoulder. “Come on... Don’t let them get to you. Besides, it’s a pretty great rack.” He gave me another kind smile and tossed his backpack on. “You’re not a part of Edgewood high school until someone tags you as something you’re not.”

“What were you tagged as?”

“Womanizer who has too much sex,” he said effortlessly.

“And that’s not you?”

“Well no. Not exactly.” He paused. “There’s no such thing as too much sex.”

He was pretty handsome. He was wearing a plain gray t-shirt that lay across his body paired with dark jeans that hung perfectly at his hips. His black Chucks shoes and cross necklace tied his easy-but-sexy look together. I wasn’t surprised that the girls were attracted to him.

Ryan reached into his pocket and pulled out his cardboard box again. What was the deal with this guy? “We eat at the table in the corner by the tennis trophies. Right across from the lunch ladies.”

“You want me to eat with you?” I had already planned to spend my first lunch in the bathroom crying.

He narrowed his eyes. “No. I just tell people where I eat lunch.” Sarcastic. Cute. “Of course you’re eating with us. Don’t ever bring the cafeteria’s meatloaf to the table—it makes Hailey itch and it will probably give you diarrhea. And”—he reached up toward my ponytail and pulled out the band holding it up—“since your hair is so long that, if you wear it down, it brings less attention to your watermelons. See you at lunch.”

“Okay. See you then.”

“Oh, and Ashlyn?” Ryan smiled bright. “Keep wearing the dresses until you don’t want to anymore, okay?”

With that, he disappeared down the hallway off to his next class. I stared at Daniel, who was sitting at his desk, pretending that he hadn't been eavesdropping on my conversation with Ryan.

The last student disappeared from the class. I put on my backpack and lifted my books into my arms. Standing in front of his desk, I gave him a pathetic chuckle. "So I guess this means we're off for tomorrow night?"

Every curve of his facial features seemed to express a fine, harsh intensity. For a moment, I couldn't tell if he was pissed off at me or our situation. Maybe a little of both.

He conversed with a colorless fluency. "That's not funny, Ashlyn."

No. It wasn't.

"You said you were nineteen," he spoke so softly I almost didn't hear him.

"I am! *I am!*" I said it twice, raising my voice an octave. I didn't know if it was to remind him or myself of the sincerity of the fact. I hunched my shoulders. "I was sick..." I paused. "My mom held me back a year." I felt as if I were apologizing for being me. For being born the year I was born. For going to school the year I went to school. No students were wandering into his classroom, so I figured it must have been his free period. "How old are you, anyway?"

"Old enough to know better," he muttered, rubbing his fingers against the back of his neck.

My throat dried out and I coughed lightly. "But young enough not to care?"

A deep-rooted growl left his lips. "No." He formed a fist and slammed it against his desk in irritation. "Just old enough to know better." He paused, his brows frowning. "I'm twenty-two."

It wasn't right, but hearing his age didn't scare me. Not in the least. If the situation and timing were different, we could have given this thing between us a real go. Three years wouldn't be a deal breaker for many relationships. It wasn't the age that was stopping us—it was the occupation.

The tears were on the surface, but I refused to release them. I lowered my voice to a whisper. "Don't you think we should talk...about this?"

His eyes softened a bit and his head gestured toward the door. “If you want me to talk to those guys bothering you, I can.”

Tilting my head toward him, I huffed, annoyed with his offer. If I couldn’t cry in front of him, I would get mad in front of him. “You’ll talk to them?” My head filled with a cloud of anger. “Ohhh! You’ll talk to *them*. Please, *Mr. Daniels*. Please talk to them. That’s *exactly* what I need to make my life one hundred percent better.” I slammed my books on his desk and stared into his eyes. “Because my sister is dead. My mother doesn’t want me. My father is my assistant principal with his own family. I’m already an outcast in school. The guys are already mocking my body. And the cherry on top? My AP English teacher made out with me a few days ago and can’t even look my way now. So yes! Talk to them. That will make everything perfect.”

I saw his face strain and he rubbed the back of his neck. “Ashlyn...” he whispered, care in his tone. Then he looked up with worry. “Wait, Henry is your dad?”

My heart broke at his biggest concern of the moment. “Out of everything I said...that’s what you chose to take in?”

He frowned. “You should get to your next class.”

I didn’t move right away, even though the silence was intolerably irksome. Shifting my weight around, I nervously ran my fingers through my locks of hair. I stared at him for a moment longer before I turned to walk away.

He wasn’t the handsome man who’d awakened my spirits a few nights ago with his romantic vocals. He wasn’t the man who’d made me laugh and allowed me to cry into him. He wasn’t the man who’d reminded me that I was still alive when his lips had triumphantly found mine.

No, he wasn’t Daniel anymore.

He was Mr. Daniels.

And I was his naïve student who he’d frostily dismissed.

Chapter 9

Ashlyn

*And I'll ask you a question,
You can tell me the truth.
Are you thinking of me when I'm fighting for you?
~ Romeo's Quest*

Two more hours passed of hiding out in the bathroom crying, stressing myself out with the idea that Daniel was my teacher.

I also cried due to the bullies attacking me, because what could be more fun than being mean to the assistant principal's daughter?

I cried because I was lonely and sad and I missed my mom so much even though she probably didn't miss me.

I cried because Gabby was dead.

And then I cried because that's all I seemed to know how to do anymore.

I cried so hard I was surprised I still had tears to cry. After blowing my nose for the twentieth time, I wiped my eyes and headed to the cafeteria.

There was a silver lining in the day—I wasn't forced to eat lunch by myself. Hailey was sitting at the back table near the tennis trophies. She smiled my way and waved me over.

"Hey, Ashlyn. I see you found our table." She slapped the spot across from her and told me to drop my tray down. With one swift movement,

Hailey reached for my plate, picked up my chicken patty, and threw it to the ground. “Not real meat.”

My eyes darted to my now dirty chicken patty and I frowned. I was okay with not-real meat when I was this hungry. My stomach rumbled and I reached for one of the fries on my plate, shoving it into my mouth.

“So how’s your first day going?”

“It’s okay. I’m fine.” I really wanted to tell her that I felt like crawling into a ball because high school could be tough at times, I had bullies already, and my teacher was my current crush... But I didn’t want to scare her off.

“I know, it sucks, right? This whole town kind of sucks, but you get used to it.”

“That’s scary. Getting used to sucking.”

“Well, it’s not the sucking that’s scary. It’s the swallowing that’s the real bitch,” Ryan grinned as he walked up to our conversation. “What’s going on, hookers?” He pulled up a chair to our table and took some of my fries.

I turned to see Daniel sitting at the table in the middle of the lunchroom. Of course he would be on lunch duty. I rolled my eyes as my shoulders slumped, and I shoved more fries into my mouth.

“Whoa, slow down, Chicago. Or else you’ll pick up the Wisconsin fifteen,” Ryan said, sliding my tray away from me. He then proceeded to eat more of my fries.

Ryan and Hailey were definitely siblings—their brown wavy hair and blue eyes were a dead giveaway—but they were pretty much the complete opposite of one another. Hailey was quiet and reserved. Ryan was a freaking monkey, in the best possible ways.

“I broke up with Tony.” He pouted for a second, looking truly pained, before turning to the lunch lady a few feet away from us. “Are all the nachos gone?! Rwanda baby! I told you to save me nachos! Geez! It’s so hard to live in a world like this.” His head dramatically slammed against the table, which he followed up with sounds of his fake cries.

“You broke up with Tony? I thought you liked Tony!” Hailey exclaimed, confused by her brother’s sudden change of heart.

I was trying to deal with the sudden fact that Ryan liked boys. Unless Tony was actually Toni—which could be short for Antonia, Catriona, Antonina, Antonietta...

“Oh, I did. I liked him fine. But then the asshole had to go and fuck that up by saying he loved me. I mean, can you believe that? *Loved me*. How over the top and dramatic can one person get? I mean, hell. Lust at seventeen, sure. Sex buddies at eighteen, shit yeah. But love? Love doesn’t enter anyone’s life until you turn forty-two, add fifty pounds to your body, and start complaining about the younger generations. Once someone can put up with your forty-two-year-old annoying ass and nasty farts, you know that’s real love.” He paused. “Hot pockets, Rwanda baby? Anything?” Ryan shouted, and Rwanda looked terrified for letting him down. Ryan’s shoulders sank and he threw a balled-up napkin at the poor worker behind the counter. “Oh, plus, I slept with Tony and for some reason Tony got all weird about that.”

Wait—so there were two Tonys? It was hard to keep up with Ryan’s mind.

Hailey shook her head toward her brother, but I didn’t think she was shocked at all. “Keep it in your pants, Ryan.”

His hand flew to his chest and his eyes narrowed in fright. “Why the hell would I do that when others are so kindly inviting me into theirs? Plus, the idea of collecting spider webs down there like my sissy isn’t very pleasing.”

I giggled at that. I liked how Ryan was so dirty in all the right ways. Hailey’s cheeks turned pink, and she shoved me, “What are you laughing at? I doubt your va-jay-jay is getting any more action than mine.”

I opened my mouth to object, but I shut it quickly. Well, she wasn’t wrong.

Ryan groaned. “Hails, don’t say va-jay-jay. It’s a *vagina*. It’s also where some guys like to put their *penis*—which, for the life of me, I cannot understand, but whatever. We aren’t twelve anymore.”

She blushed even more. “I know that...”

“Prove it. Penis-vagina game, happening right now.” He challenged her, slamming his fist against the table, and she rolled her eyes. I didn’t know why, but I got the idea that this was a normal interaction between the siblings, and I sat back, watching it take place.

Hailey saw her brother pushing her, and she accepted, even though she would probably lose. Ryan explained to me that the penis-vagina game had been played by the pair in many settings. It started at a whisper—Ryan saying penis, Hailey muttering vagina—and it built up until ultimately someone screamed the word or until someone chickened out.

“Penis,” Ryan whispered, his brown eyes stuck on his sister.

“*Vagina*,” Hailey sang sweetly, showing that she could in fact say the word.

“Penis,” he hissed, growing louder.

I watched Hailey’s body tighten up as she glanced around the room, eyeing how many people were here.

“Vagina,” she said a hair louder than the last.

This continued until the next stage was the screaming.

“PENIS PENIS PENIS!” Ryan stood up and screamed, flailing his arms above his head victoriously, because the shade of Hailey’s face told him that there was no way she was going to challenge that.

“*Ryan!*” Daniel shot him a stern look.

Ryan winked in return. He fell back into his chair, pleased by the attention he grabbed. I leaned back in my chair, nervous that Daniel was looking our way.

“You’re such an asshole, Ryan,” Hailey muttered, crossing her arms in a hissy fit.

“You love me, youngin’,” he said, rubbing his hand on the top of her head, giving her a slight reminder that he was older than she was.

I was still confused. “So...you’re gay?”

The two paused and looked my way. I shifted around from the uncomfortable glares they were giving me. Hailey cleared her throat. “We don’t use labels at this table, Ashlyn.”

“Yeah. How would you like it if we called you straight? Or white? Or a bookworm? Or watermelon?” Ryan said, snatching up some more fries.

“I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—” I stuttered, feeling guilty for having said the wrong thing.

“It’s okay. We don’t apologize at this table either. Because we know harm is never the intent.” Hailey smiled, picked up all of her fries from her tray, and placed them on mine.

“So...can I ask another question?” I said warily.

Ryan shoved me in the shoulder. “Go for it.”

“Tony got mad at you because you slept with Tony?”

They both laughed at me, and Ryan snatched up the fries Hailey had given me. *Note to self: Don’t sit next to Ryan.*

“Tony is the name I give to all of the guys I date. Most of them aren’t really comfortable with the world of Edgewood knowing what we do...and I’m not looking to out anyone. Besides, I’m not even out.”

Hailey jumped in to explain. “Our mom is kind of—”

“Close-minded,” Ryan said, finishing her thought. “She comes from a pretty religious background, and being gay? Not really high on her list of family blessings. She doesn’t even know that Hailey—”

“Studies Buddhism.” Hailey smiled, finishing Ryan’s thought now. I wondered how often they did that without even knowing it. “She thinks my painted ceiling is so I can be closer to God.”

“You two are pretty complicated.” I paused. “So you’re not a womanizer.”

“A manizer,” Ryan smirked. “I told you. They tag you as something you’re not. I was tagged as a guy who liked vaginas. Gross, right?”

I chuckled. “So how many Tonys are there?”

“If I tell you, you’ll think I’m a slut.” Ryan grinned.

“If you don’t tell me, I’ll think you’re a bigger slut.” I grabbed some fries from his tray and shoved them into my mouth. He looked at me with narrowed eyes and then turned to his sister.

“I like this girl.”

Hailey smiled and crossed her arms as she leaned back in her chair. “Yeah, me too.”

“Going to get more food. Be back soon.” Ryan stood from his chair. He didn’t go to the lunch line though. He went table to table where people greeted him with hugs and high-fives. From the looks of it, everyone liked Ryan, and I could completely understand why.

Hailey frowned as she watched her brother leave the table. “Don’t let his loud, silly personality fool you. He’s a lot more sensitive than he puts on. And I doubt he cheated on Tony.”

“Why do you say that?”

She shrugged. “Because I’d never seen two people who loved each other so quietly.”

I didn’t know what she meant by that. But I figured over time she would explain it more. “What about you Hailey? What were you tagged as?” I asked.

“Oh, a girl who has a weird infatuation with her brother.” She paused and rolled her eyes. “Two years ago, when I was a freshman, I was super overweight, awkward, and had no friends really. I ate alone in the cafeteria every day. Until Ryan ditched his friends and joined me.”

Well...that was the nicest thing I’d ever heard. Maybe I would start to crush on Ryan—I had a way of going for unavailable men.

“And then I made some new friends, got a boyfriend. But eating with Ryan just felt safe... I don’t know what I’m going to do next year after he graduates.”

When Ryan returned, his entire being was different. His hands formed fists and he slammed them against the table. “Is that Lia over there, Hailey?”

Her lips hardened as she looked across the lunchroom and stared at someone. I followed her stare. Our eyes landed on a guy with shaggy hair who had his hands all over another girl. Kisses on the neck, kisses on the lips—all kinds of public groping.

Hailey nodded, her eyes watering over. “Yes.”

“Who’s Lia?” She looked familiar to me, yet I wasn’t sure how.

“My, um, best friend.” Hailey released one tear and wiped it away fast as we all watched Lia’s head fall backwards from something the guy had whispered against her ear.

“I’m going to kill him,” Ryan muttered, stepping away from the table. The veins in his neck started to pop out the more he came to realize what was happening. I was still trying to catch up. Hailey reached for her brother’s arm and stopped him.

“No, Ryan,” she ordered. “You know he’ll out you.”

“I don’t care,” he said, his anger clouding his judgment.

“Well, I do,” Hailey commanded, making him sit back down.

“Who is that?” I asked.

Hailey sighed. “My boyfriend, Theo. And my best friend, who he cheated on me with.”

That’s how I knew both of them. They were each sitting in framed pictures next to Hailey’s bed. I replayed her words in my mind. *Assholes*. “When did you find out?”

“About...two seconds ago.”

In a flash of revelation, I saw what Lia was—a girl who had no respect for the term ‘friendship.’ There were rules that came with being a friend, right? They were pretty much the same rules that came with being a twin. Like always hate the guy who broke your best friend’s heart. Always back up your friend in public, even if they were wrong. And *never* date your best friend’s boyfriend. Lia wasn’t a best friend—she was a snake waiting to slither her way in between Hailey’s relationship.

I hated her and the boy already.

My eyes traveled over to Daniel, who was staring at me. My heart leaped.

Did I mention how I hated that Daniel was still ignoring me? And I hated how he cared more about Henry being the assistant principal than he did about my feelings? And how he wouldn’t talk to me, but he felt bad for me because I was being bullied?

And did I mention how much I hated being bullied because of my body—which I’d had no choice in creating? I hated watermelons. I hated

that I wasn't invisible to the bullies. I hated the guys who'd added to my tears in the bathroom earlier.

I officially hated boys, banmoys, and Lia.

And Gabby.

I hated her for dying.

Sigh. I didn't hate Gabby. I missed her.

It wasn't right. None of it was. Yet I felt like I could only do something about one of the issues at hand. I stood up from my chair and marched toward Theo. My fist took the form Ryan's had held a moment before.

For a split second, I glanced toward Daniel, who was staring at me with a confused look. Just seeing his perfect eyes made my heart rate increase and my anger rise. Once I reached Theo, I tapped him on the shoulder.

He turned to me, looking ridiculous with his 'hippie' bracelets and necklaces and his dirty hair. "Do I know—"

I took his water bottle and splashed it in his face. The cafeteria gasped as they turned to stare at us. "*That's* for being a manwhore." I picked up his vegan salad and dumped it on his head. "*That's* for lying and cheating on her with her *ex*-best friend in front of her!" Then I picked up Lia's hot grilled cheese and separated it with the intentions of smearing her face in it, but my hands were grabbed.

"Ashlyn! Stop it!" Daniel yelled, standing behind me.

"Let me go!" I screamed as I tried to yank myself from his hold, tears filling my eyes. I threw the grilled cheese in Lia's face. "She's still calling you her best friend, you slut! There are rules. There are rules to being someone's best, and you chose the dirty hippie over a girl who has your picture framed on her dresser! You're not a friend! You're a whore!"

Theo tossed his hands up in uncertainty, a piece of lettuce hanging near his mouth. "Who the hell are you?"

"I'm a girl with feelings, you asshole!" I screamed before getting pulled back by Daniel.

"Ashlyn! Principal's office! *Now!*" Daniel hollered in the now silent lunchroom.

I looked at him with tears rolling down my cheeks. I blinked and I could have sworn I saw Gabby standing behind him giving me a small, sad smile. The tears came faster as I pushed myself from Daniel's grip and marched away toward the office.



"You what?!" Henry screamed as I sat across from him at his desk. He must have snuck outside to his car for a smoke break. I could smell it on his clothing. I sank into the seat and rolled my eyes.

"I thought I was going to be talking to the principal?" I sassed. I hated how sassy I always was with him. But I couldn't make it stop.

"Yeah, well, he's busy not dealing with two-year olds," Henry shot back, pacing his office.

I glanced down to his desk, where he had pictures of Rebecca, Ryan, and Hailey. Henry caught my stare and sighed. He sat down in his chair and clasped his hands together.

"Look, Ashlyn. I get it. You miss your sister. You're dealing with a lot of things being thrown your way with the relocation. You're mourning..." He paused. "Don't you think I miss her, too?"

I found his eyes and they locked in with mine. He didn't know what missing Gabby meant because he hadn't been there to begin with.

I reached into the pocket on my dress and pulled out the bucket list. I laid it down on his desk. "You were number three on her list. Out of everything she wanted to do, she wanted to forgive you the most." I lifted the family photo from his desk and studied it. "I didn't."

He picked up the piece of paper and stared at it. After reading, he placed it back down and rubbed the corners of his eyes. "I get it. You're angry," he sighed, seriousness lurking in the depths of his eyes. "You're pissed off. But don't take it out on the rest of the world."

He didn't see it, did he? My longing to call him Dad.

I did my best to mask my broken heart from seeing that he had no pictures of Gabby or me on his desk. I did my best to mask my broken heart from the fact that I really knew number three on Gabby's bucket list was based on me forgiving Henry, not her. I hated that I was so stubborn and

couldn't just speak to him about it. *Say something!* my mind screamed. *Speak!* it cried. But I doubted we had the type of relationship where words would fix anything.

"Fine. Whatever." I stared at the yellow dandelions swaying left and right outside of his office window. They looked so free based on how they moved, yet I knew their roots were holding them in place, making sure they didn't dance too far away. *He didn't even cry at her funeral.* What kind of father didn't cry at his daughter's funeral? "Are we done?"

He kept a hard stare on me and then blinked. "Yes. We're done. Get back to lunch."

I stood up and walked out of his office. In the hallway, I sighed when I saw Daniel standing outside his classroom. We locked eyes and I turned to go the other way. I heard his footsteps growing closer and I stood still.

"Can I help you?" I questioned inimically. In the history of bad first days of school, I had to hold the record for the worst one ever.

"Theo Robinson is in my first hour. I can already tell he can be a real prick. And he's not the brightest kid." Daniel slid his thumb across the bridge of his nose. He glanced down the hallways to make sure no one was watching and moved an inch away from me—just to be safe. "He thought Macbeth was some kind of new McDonald's sandwich and scolded me for forcing him to study the manslaughter of cows." He snickered to himself, but he looked so sad.

"What are you doing?" I whispered.

He ran his hand over his face and cursed under his breath. Merged in an unutterable sadness and confusion, he shrugged. "I don't know." He frowned perplexedly. "I don't even know what this means."

"And you think I do? You think this is easy for me?"

"Of course not."

"Listen. It's not like anything really happened between us anyway," I lied. "I'll pretend it never happened," I lied again. "Only if you promise not to look past me as if I don't exist. I can deal with the bullies. I can't deal with you ignoring me."

His hand ran across his mouth before he crossed his arms and stepped a few inches closer to me. "Your eyes are puffy. I made you cry."

My skin prickled by his proximity. "Life made me cry." I hugged my books closer to me and closed my eyes. "'When we are born, we cry that we are to come to this great stage of fools,'" I quoted from Shakespeare's King Lear.

"You're the smartest person I've ever met."

I sighed. "You're the smartest person *I*'ve ever met." I paused. "I'm not stupid, Daniel. I know that we...can't be anything. And I would switch out of your class but Henry made sure that I was placed in it."

"Yeah..." he said. "I just wish I didn't like you so much."

I didn't know why, but I felt like crying when he said that. Because I liked him too. We *had* connected on Saturday. At least I had... He'd awakened me after I'd been asleep for so long.

"I would never jeopardize your job," I promised. I didn't know how it happened, but somehow we were closer, so close that I could smell his clean soap from his shower that morning. Did I step forward or did he? Either way, neither of us was going to step back. I closed my eyes and allowed his scents to wash over me, bathing me in fantasy and false hope.

When my eyes reopened, I saw his stare, strong and determined. He took my arm and pulled me around a corner. We went through a door to an empty staircase. He glanced up and down the stairs before he pressed his mouth against mine. My lips instantly separated and my tongue twirled against his.

My fingers ran through his hair, bringing back my 'Joe's bar' Daniel and making Mr. Daniels disappear for a moment in time. His hand gripped around my back. Kissing him in the silent stairwell felt dangerous, but safe. Adventurous, however idiotic. Depressing, yet real.

When he withdrew his mouth from mine and stepped back, we both knew that what we had done couldn't happen again. He bit the corner of his mouth and shook his head. "I'm so sorry, Ashlyn." The bell rang before I could reply, and he went on his way and I went on mine.

The saddest part?

I'd missed him before he'd even left.

Chapter 10

Daniel

*Don't be who you are today.
Be the person I saw yesterday.
~ Romeo's Quest*

I'd felt something pulling me to her the moment I saw her on the train. I'd felt an even bigger pull when I saw her breaking down behind Joe's bar. Yet nothing felt as right as it had when I bumped into her at school. Which I knew was wrong. *All* of this was wrong.

There was no question about it—teachers didn't date students. The ethics behind it were strong, something they'd hammered into us in college. Never in my life would I have ever considered it.

At least I wouldn't have before Ashlyn Jennings showed up.

Now my mind was considering crazy things. She made me think about breaking the rules, finding the loopholes, holding her close to me in the hidden hallways, and reading her Shakespeare in the abandoned aisles of the library.

I spent over an hour after school tracing the building, searching all corners for secret hideouts, for places we could maybe meet, maybe hold each other between the school bells ringing. That was crazy, right? I was crazy. But I looked, I searched, and I was extremely disappointed in myself after the hour passed by.

When I arrived home at the lake house, Randy was sleeping on the sofa. I headed for the kitchen, grabbed a beer from the fridge, and sat down at the kitchen table, staring out the window above the sink counter. The sky was darkening with clouds moving in. The smell of the air pointed to a downpour of rain coming soon.

I sat there for a long time—long enough to witness the first raindrop dance down to the windowsill. Long enough to witness the crack of lightning igniting the sky.

Maybe we could be friends. I sighed at my idiotic thought. Of course we couldn't be friends. She was a student in my class. Besides, after that kiss, there was no part of me that simply wanted to be her friend. Plus, her life was already complicated enough. I couldn't add to her issues.

When we'd bumped into each other outside my classroom, I'd seen the confusion hovering in her gaze. Then, when I'd waited for her to leave Henry's office, I'd seen the sadness implanted there.

"First day of school already got you drinking alone?" Randy joked, walking to the fridge and opening it to pull out two beers. He slid one my way.

"Yeah," I muttered, still staring out the window.

"You need to get laid."

I shot my eyes to Randy, cocking an eyebrow. "I'm good."

"No." He shook his head back and forth. Grabbing a chair from the table, he swung it around and sat. "You need sex. What happened to that chick who came to the concert on Saturday?"

I cringed. "Don't call her a chick." A chick was what you called a girl who you didn't give a crap about. Ashlyn wasn't a chick. She was so far from just a chick.

She was smart.

She was funny.

She was intriguing.

She was so, so far from being a chick.

“I’m telling you though. Your aura is all off.” He waved his hands around my head, and I sighed. Randy was talking his mumble jumble again. “It’s fucking depressing.”

I took a chug of my beer and placed it back on the table. “And to fix this, you suggest...”

“Sex. Lots and lots of sex.” He said it so matter-of-factly that I had to laugh. “Seriously, Dan. When was the last time you got laid? I’m not even sure if you have a dick anymore. I’m telling you, it’s not healthy. I should know. I studied this in college.”

“*One* class, Randy,” I stated. “You took *one* online course on human sexuality and now you’re a professional?”

A loud clap came from his hands and he sat up straight in his seat. “A naked music party!”

“No,” I said, pointing at him.

“What?! Come on! We haven’t had one in years!”

“Exactly.” When we were younger and I had my first apartment on my own, Randy and I would have jam sessions with some beautiful women who...would be naked. After Sarah passed away, I’d been a little lost, and Randy had been positive that the best way of getting my mind off of death was to replace it with sex and music. One of his many different beliefs. It wasn’t my proudest moment of my past. “No naked music parties.”

He laughed. “Fine, fine. Well, I also took a course on aromatherapy and can prescribe you with some essential oils to help ease your stress levels.”

“I’m not stressed,” I argued.

“A little eucalyptus oil, rosemary, and sweet almond oil in a bath would do you wonders. In the bathroom closet, I have jars of different types of flowers that you can float in the bath, too. Each one is labeled with its healing descriptions.”

My mouth hung opened and I narrowed my eyes. “Are you sure *you* have a dick?”

He chuckled and shrugged. “I get laid at least five times a week. I have healthy skin and a calm, peaceful lifestyle. Plus, my sexual performance is

—”

“Shut up. Just...stop talking. Please.”

“Okay okay... What about”—he held his hands up—“massage therapy 101. Straight guy to straight guy—let me loosen up your back muscles.”

“Oookay, on that note...” I leaped from my seat and tossed the beer down on the table. “I’m going for a run.”

“It’s pouring outside!” Randy argued.

“The best runs are in the rain,” I said as I headed toward my room to change into my running gear.

“Oh, right. Of course. Well hey, if you happen to run into a vagina, ask it to invite you in for a little conversation. And by conversation, I mean *sexual intercourse!*”



The rain clouds lifted, leaving puddles that I ran through until I returned back to the property. I stood in front of Dad’s boat shed and opened up the doors. The boat hadn’t been out of the shed since Mom had passed away. I’d thought about selling it a few times. Hell, I’d thought about selling the house altogether, too.

But who would sell their parents’ dream?

The place was already in jeopardy with the taxes and all. My teaching job and my weekend band gigs were the only things that were helping me keep the possibility of holding on to the property. I felt like there were so many times I’d let my parents down—I couldn’t lose their house on top of losing them, too.

It wasn’t an option.

I walked into the dark space. My fingers traced the edge of the landlocked ship and my lips involuntarily frowned. This beauty wasn’t supposed to be locked away, kept from the one place that made it feel free, alive. The water was its home. Yet I kept it locked up, trapped inside a wooden box.

“Sorry, buddy,” I muttered, pounding my hand on the side. “Maybe next summer.”

Maybe.

No promises.

Chapter 11

Ashlyn

*Getting along fine with my here friends,
Don't give a damn if the world decides to end.*

~ Romeo's Quest

"I don't understand why we're still going," I argued to Hailey, who was pulling me toward Theo's house party. He'd been caught cheating on her in the lunchroom, yet she still found the need to drag me to his place two weeks later.

Peeking through the windows, I saw a bunch of people from our high school, drinking, making out, and doing everything one would expect to see at a high school party.

Why didn't anyone ever throw reading parties?

I would be all over that crap.

"I told you. He texted me last night apologizing. I think I just misunderstood." She'd misunderstood his tongue in her ex-best friend's mouth? "Besides, Ryan is here, too."

"I thought he hated Theo?" I asked.

"He does. But he likes Tony. And places like these are the only time he can really hang out with Tony."

I held my purse close to my shoulder as we walked inside. It smelled like someone was burning sage, but I was pretty certain it wasn't sage I smelled.

“Ashlyn!” Jake smiled, walking over to me. He was still putting the stress on my name since we met. “I didn’t know you came to parties!” His eyes danced across my chest but for a shorter period this time.

“I don’t.” I gave him a slight grin. Everything about being inside Theo’s party made me uncomfortable. The noise, the drinking, the surprisingly bad taste in music. Gabby would be ashamed.

Jake laughed and placed his hand on my lower back, guiding me farther into the house. “Well, I will be your tour guide.” He glanced over to Hailey, who was giving him a wary grin. His eyebrows arched. He smelled a little too much like burning sage. “Oh! Ryan’s sister, right?”

She nodded.

“Hailey,” I corrected him, giving her a name—and putting the stress on said name. She deserved more than only being tagged as Ryan’s sister.

He laughed and nudged her. “Right. *Hailey*. I’m glad you’re here. I just smoked a bowl with your brother. If you two are interested, I can get ahold of more. My treat.” He was asking us to get high with him, and for a second, I thought I saw Hailey considering it.

“No thanks, Jake. We aren’t really into that stuff.”

“We could try,” Hailey piped up, her eyes filled with excitement.

I gave her a harsh look then turned back to Jake. “No thanks, Jake. But hey, we’ll find you around later, all right?”

He took me in again, his eyes dancing across my apparent cleavage. He smiled, saying that he would check back in on us later.

Hailey frowned. “What did you do that for?! Jake’s cute. I think he’s into you.”

My eyes effortlessly rolled. “Doubtful. Listen, if we are going to be here, here a few rules.”

“Okay, Mother,” she mocked. “What are the rules?”

“Rule number one, no drugs.”

“Theo said marijuana is herbal. Just like tea.”

“Theo’s an idiot,” I said flatly. “Rule number two, maximum two drinks.” Her mouth hung open and she went to argue but I cut her off. “Rule

number three, no sex.” Her lips pouted out. I pushed them back in. “No sex!”

“You’re such a buzzkill,” she muttered, walking off to find Theo.

I laughed and called after her. “You’re not even buzzed!”

The rooms of the house started to become more packed, filling in as the night went on. I hated the smells, I hated the groping—I hated *everything* about this place.

This was why I was the girl who lived in my books. The parties in the novels always seemed more entertaining.

After moving through the house, I made it to the back door and pushed it open to walk outside onto the back porch for some fresh air. My head was starting to pound from the smells of the weed and vomit mixing together.

There were steps leading to a large backyard. My hand rested against the banister and I lowered myself down to sit. The porch light shone over me dully, blinking in and out, almost ready to die out.

But it would be enough.

Reaching into my purse, I pulled out my current novel. I planned to sit out here until Hailey had had her fair share of heartbreak for one night. Opening the book, my fingers traveled across the pages, feeling their texture against my thumbs. I raised the book to my face and inhaled it, taking in the scent of the words on paper.

There was nothing as romantic as the feel of a book in your hands.

Except Daniel.

He was pretty romantic.

I blinked my eyes and shook my head back and forth. *No*. No thoughts of Daniel.

The only problem with not thinking about Daniel was that my mind went to Gabby next.

Which was even worse.

The words started to blur over on the pages. The paper within the book began to get wet. Surprise, surprise—I was crying again.

“I can’t believe I’m here,” I muttered to myself, to Gabby. My voice dropped a little. “Hailey reminds me of myself when I dated Billy. Which can’t be any good.”

I paused, waiting for the reply that never came.

“Mom still hasn’t called. I thought about calling her...but I didn’t. The other day, I got mad at you for dying. Sorry.” I laughed, feeling a little insane for talking to myself, but it always made me feel a tad bit better.

A girl stumbled out of the house, and I could’ve sworn she’d been bitten by a zombie based off her glazed-over appearance. Her name was Tiffany Snow; she was in my history class. I had to admit that she looked a lot prettier during school hours—the running-mascara look wasn’t doing too much for her. She didn’t notice me.

With a deep inhale of fresh air, Tiffany tried to steady herself, holding her arms out to her sides. She exhaled and giggled, pleased with her ability to calm herself.

Then she ran to the left side of the porch and vomited over the railing. She slid down to the porch, smiling to herself.

Classy.

“Shhh...” was whispered from my left. I turned to look toward the bushes that were currently moving—and talking. “Shut up!”

Zippp!

It was the sound of jeans being zipped up. I blushed and turned back to my book. When I saw Ryan come stumbling out of the bushes, fixing his shirt and buckling his belt, I blushed even more.

“Chicago!” he said, his eyes glassed over and red. He smelled a lot like burning sage, too. “What are you doing here?”

“Hailey,” I said, pointing toward the door.

He grimaced and sat down next to me. “Theo’s an asshole.” He paused. “But he has the best weed.” I smiled at Ryan, and he laid his head on my shoulder, whispering to me, “There’s a boy in the bushes still.”

“I figured that much.”

“He’s not ready to come out yet.”

So much meaning in such few words.

Ryan glanced over to Tiffany, who was passed out on the porch. "Tiffany!" He pounded his fist on the wooden steps, getting her attention. "*Tiffany!* Wakey-wakey eggs and bacony!"

One of her eyes opened and she giggled. "Ryan," she breathed, tossing her hands in the air in excitement, "I soo want to fuck you right now."

She kept laughing, running her hands over her face. I was trying my best to see the pros of partying...but they were making it easy for me to want to keep reading.

Ryan snickered and turned back to me. "I soo don't want to fuck her." I swear there was a split second where his eyes looked so sad.

"There's a lot to you, isn't there?"

"I could say the same about you." He paused. "Sometimes I feel like you're hiding behind your books to avoid reality."

I flinched at the truth to his words. He didn't notice though.

"Can I tell you a secret?" he asked, pulling out his fake cigarette box and 'lighting' one up. "Because I feel like I can since you don't know the people at school or anything. You're an outsider. I need an outsider."

"Of course."

His stare was on the bushes, and a single tear fell down his cheek. "I'm not as happy as I pretend to be."

"Why are you pretending?" I questioned.

He lowered his head, staring at his shoes. "Because pretending to be happy is almost like being happy. Until you remember that you're only pretending. Then you're sad. *Really* sad. Because wearing a mask every day of your life is the hardest thing to do. And after a while, you get a little scared because the mask becomes you."

"Ryan...you're not alone." I pushed him in his shoulder. "And you never have to put the mask on around me."

His lips turned up, and he whispered, "Ditto," against my cheek before giving me a kiss.

Hailey came walking out the back door of the house and sat down on my other side, putting her head on my shoulder. “I hate him,” she whispered so softly. Ryan didn’t even hear her.

It was in that moment right there that I knew I was in the right place. I was lost, but so were they.

There were no maps to be found.

At least I wasn’t walking alone.

Chapter 12

Daniel

*I'll lie to keep you safe,
I'll lie to keep you warm.
I'll lie to keep you away from the ugliest fucking storms.
~ Romeo's Quest*

A few weeks had passed since Ashlyn and I had found out about our situation. When October arrived, I was shocked by how much I still wanted her.

One morning, we walked into the school building at the same time. It was only for a second or two that our eyes connected. It was only a mere moment that we stared at one another, but I saw her hiccup, her nerves resting on the surface. When she turned away, I wanted to follow her.

But that was wrong, right?

What was wrong with me?

I thought without interacting in an intimate setting that my feelings would tail off. But they didn't. They only grew each and every time I saw her step foot into my classroom. Sometimes I would catch her walking in with Ryan and the way she would smile when she spoke to him made me feel as if I were floating. Her smiles were addicting, and I wished they'd been created for me.

I hated that I couldn't tell her how beautiful she looked each and every day. I hated that, when she walked into my classroom, I had to pretend that

she wasn't on my mind. I hated that she wouldn't participate in class discussions, even though I knew she had all the right answers.

I hated how my other students looked at her. How they lusted after her. How they mocked her. How they bullied her. I hated that she mourned her sister's death—by herself. I hated that she felt alone but never really showcased it.

I hated how much I missed her lips. Her laugh. Her smile.

I hated how close we were but how distant we felt.



I loved how beautiful she looked each and every day. I loved that, when she walked into my classroom, she was on my mind. I loved how she wouldn't participate in class discussions, even though I knew she had all the right answers.

I loved how, when I graded her papers, I wasn't biased. She was simply a genius. I loved how, when I went on runs, she joined me in the front of my mind. I loved how sometimes I would catch her in class staring at me with wonderment.

I loved how she ignored the other students' insults. How she didn't let the bullies win. How she didn't falter. I loved how she was effortlessly beautiful. How she always wore dresses that hugged her, even though covering up might have helped shut the assholes up.

I loved that she wore the dresses because they were her twin sister's. I loved how she honored her sister's memory with such simple gestures. I loved how she walked with confidence, even though she was nervous.

I loved how she moved. How she stood. How she sat.

I loved how distant we were but how close we felt.

Chapter 13

Ashlyn

What can I do to show how I feel?

From the beginning to the end, we are real.

~ Romeo's Quest

I was pretty pleased with myself. Even through the guys at school were hitting on me while they mocked my body, I ignored them. I ignored the rumors that started about me sleeping around (quite quickly, might I add.) I smiled at Daniel sometimes to make him realize that we didn't have to be weird about the situation (even though I really wanted to cry, might I add.)

I was doing okay. Instead of drowning in a land of depression, I decided that picking up a library card would be a better choice. Drowning myself in make-believe seemed more promising. I traveled to the library every afternoon, walking in the warm sun right after school and returning home when the moon was high.

One morning before school, Hailey was brushing out her hair and she sat her brush down. "Theo asked me out again."

I turned to her, disgusted for her. She hadn't spoken about him in the weeks since the party. "What an asshole," I muttered.

"Yeah." She paused. "I'm thinking about saying yes."

My eyes widened. "You're kidding?"

She wasn't. I watched her head fall to the ground and her shoulders slump. "I'm not like you, okay? I don't have guys throwing themselves at

me—let alone looking at me. Theo's my only shot at a relationship."

"The people 'throwing' themselves at me are total dicks. Trust me. You don't want that. Plus, you're seventeen, not eighty-three. There will be other guys."

She paused, rolling my comment through her brain. I sighed when I watched her shake her head. "He apologized. For what he did with Lia."

"You can apologize for punching someone, but it doesn't stop the bruising."

"Did you read that from one of your books?" she snickered.

"Hailey..."

She pulled out a small bag with pills in it. "He wants me to try these. He said if we have something in common, then we might work out better."

I stared at her as if she had lost her damn mind. "He wants you to take drugs to be closer to him?"

"Are you a virgin?"

I rubbed my fingers against my temple and shook my head. Her question had come out of left field. It was hardly after six a.m. and we were talking about drugs and sex. I definitely needed a cup of tea.

"No. My last boyfriend used me until he found something new." I paused and thought about Billy and how he'd made me cry.

"Were you scared?" she whispered.

Terrified.

"I was sixteen. When I was younger, I was pretty stupid. Not in an over-the-top way, but in the normal 'I'm a kid and don't know anything about life' type way. I slept with Billy, thinking that meant he loved me. It was scary, painful, and not in the least romantic. So we did it again and again. I hoped I would grow to like it because I loved him..."

"Then, I found out he was doing the same thing with Susie Kenner. My sister Gabby would sit next to me in my bed, playing her guitar while I cried, telling me that Billy was a monstrous prick who probably had a small penis. She was right about his small penis. It was pretty nonexistent."

Hailey laughed lightly. "Then what happened?"

“Billy called me afterwards, telling me that he missed me a lot and that he was interested in working out our problems, but I couldn’t even stop crying through his phone call. I told him I loved him, and he said he liked me well enough to make it work. All I would have to do was let him touch my breasts every now and then and have sex whenever his parents weren’t around. My sister told me that I shouldn’t go back to him, because he really didn’t like me, but he was more interested in the size of my chest than the size of my brain. And Gabby promised me that the size of my brain was worth being interested in.”

The room filled with silence as I stared down at the carpeted floor. “Hailey, the size of your brain is worth being interested in.”

Her sigh was almost soundless. “She sounded like a great person, your sister.”

“The best,” I softly spoke. “Just think about it, all right? With Theo?”

She promised she would. But I saw the look of hope in her eyes when she spoke about him. I had the same hope when I went back to Billy, thinking it would be different. It wasn’t. Mom used to say, “Leave the past behind you so the future can find you.” That was my favorite saying of hers. After Henry cheated on her, she’d struggled to leave her past behind. But she finally had when she found Jeremy.

“How many more things on your bucket list have you checked off?” Hailey asked, changing the subject.

I blinked. “Just two.” And in an instant, Daniel’s lips were running across my mind. *Kiss a stranger*. I blinked again, erasing his memory.

Hailey held her hand out to me. “Let me see the note.”

Moving to my dresser, I picked up the letter and laid it in her hands. She opened it up and read it. “Hmm...” she said to herself, darting her eyes. “Number fourteen has already been checked off. ”

“What is it?” I asked, feeling myself growing a little eager.

“Make a new friend.” She smiled.

“You’re my friend?” I asked quietly, not knowing exactly what to say.

Hailey laughed. “Well, if I’m not, then this is very awkward.” She nodded once. “Of course I’m your friend. The way you stood up for me a

few weeks ago... The way you still hate Theo... I think that's friendship." I smiled wide and she bumped me in the shoulder. "Where's this note?!"

I moved over to the treasure box and quickly thumbed through the envelopes. Upon finding the letter, I read the front and sighed. It said in Gabby's handwriting that this letter wasn't for me—it was for the new friend. How had I not noticed that before? I ran my hands through the other letters, and lo and behold, they weren't all addressed to me. My heart and lips frowned together.

I placed it in Hailey's hands and shrugged. "It's for you."

"Me?" She was taken aback by the idea that I wouldn't be the one to read the words. Yet I trusted Gabby. I knew she had some kind of logic behind her mind. "I can pick another number on the list," Hailey argued. "We aren't really friends anyway," she joked.

I laughed. "Yeah, Hailey. We are."

"Well, stay here. We're going to read it together."



#14. Make a Friend

Dear Friend,

I hope it is alright that I address you in such a manner. I figured if you are a friend of Ashlyn, then you are a friend of mine. I wish we had a chance to meet under better circumstances, but the whole dying thing really puts a damper on my ability to make a great first impression.

So what I want to say is thank you. Thank you for befriending a girl who is probably very broken but at the same time so amazingly perfect. Thank you for befriending a girl who is probably a little different and quotes too many books. Thank you for befriending a girl who doesn't talk about her feelings a lot, but trust me, she feels everything.

Thank you for being there for her.

So now, I promise you that I'll be there for you, too. I don't know how. And I probably shouldn't make those kinds of promises...yet just know that when you see the winds whistling through the flowers, that's me thanking you and hugging you during your darkest days.

Thank you, friend.

You're doing great.

~ Gabrielle

Hailey folded the note up and sighed. "I really like your sister." The way she said 'like' as opposed to 'liked' made me feel as if Gabby were still here. That feeling stayed with me like a warm glow of happiness from knowing that a part of Gabby had never left. With these letters, she'd somehow fought death. Somehow she'd survived.



Hailey drove Ryan and me to school, and we agreed to meet up for lunch as always. On my way to my locker, Jake ran up to me and nudged me in the shoulder.

"Hey, Ashlyn."

I gave him a small smile. "Hi, Jake."

"You look beautiful today," he said, eyeing me up and down.

I looked up to see Daniel staring at the two of us talking, a splash of anger on his face. His jawline was clenched, his eyes almost shooting daggers. I narrowed my eyes, confused. He then looked away. Had I done that to him? Had I made him jealous?

"Thank you, Jake," I muttered, still staring at Daniel.

I wished he weren't so handsome—angry looks and all. It made it hard for me to pretend I wasn't attracted to him. He vanished around the corner in the direction of my locker. I hoped I would get to see him when I rounded said corner. It was complicated. He was the high point of my day even though he was the low point of my day.

How could that be?

Jake kept walking next to me, his stance being a bit too close for comfort. "So, I was thinking..." He moved in even closer. I could smell the overwhelming amount of cologne on his shirt, which made me gag. "I'm having a Halloween party next weekend after the football game. My parents are out of town and you should come. Costumes required."

I cringed yet hoped he didn't notice. "I'm not really the party type of girl. The last one didn't work out so great for me."

"Yeah..." He smirked. "But *carpe dame*, right?" I frowned. I was pretty sure he'd meant *carpe diem*. He kept on. "Come on, Ashlyn. You can't always be the assistant principal's daughter. You gotta start showing people who you really are. Or else they'll keep eating you alive."

"I..." I paused. "I'm not interested, Jake." I saw him frown and instantly felt bad. "Maybe the next party?" I gave him a kind smile and nudged him in the arm.

He perked up and nodded. "Yeah, okay! You'll be the first name on the invite list. I'll see you in class, okay?" He hurried off with a huge smile on his face. I hoped I wasn't leading him on any.

When I turned the corner to get to my locker, I saw Daniel standing in front of it, ripping things off.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

He saw me and started ripping faster. "Damn kids," he muttered. "I'll find out who did it and—"

"Did what?" I moved closer and saw the pictures. Cut-out images of breasts plastered all over the place. My eyes went to water over but I bit my bottom lip when I heard some girls giggling behind me. I wouldn't cry; that was what they wanted me to do. I was so embarrassed that he was the one who had to see this.

"Daniel..." I whispered, watching him bend down and picking up the pictures. He ignored me. "Mr. Daniels!" I said a hair louder, which made the kids giggle even more. I ignored them. "Please stay away from my locker."

His stare was cold. "This...this isn't going to be allowed. Not to anyone in this school. Especially to..." He paused, noticing the crowd surrounding him.

I hiccupped once. "To what?" I asked.

When his eyes found mine, the softness and apologetic glance made everything inside me tighten. *Especially to me.* He shifted his feet around

before he turned and walked away, ordering the students to get to class. I picked up one of the abandoned pictures on the ground and sighed.

My boobs weren't *that* big.



Daniel apologized to me for the way he'd reacted earlier, telling me it had been unprofessional. *I don't want you to be professional.* I shrugged to him and took my seat. He sat on the edge of his desk. The sleeves on his button-down shirt were pushed all the way up to his elbows, and he had the end of a dry-erase marker resting in his hands.

He was so handsome, and my body was going crazy over that fact. Even when I tried to get rid of my crush on him, it seemed to grow even stronger without us communicating. It turned out we communicated best in silence. A few glances here, a few tiny smiles there. Maybe our connection didn't need words or sounds. Maybe it just was.

He was so intelligent, too.

He was so smart that it made me want to crawl into his head and live there. I wasn't falling for Daniel during the school hours. I was falling for Mr. Daniels.

Half the students in class probably never had any idea how intellectual he was. He was just another boring teacher to them. But I was smitten by how his mind found ways to teach us. How he could push us, push me to try new concepts.

We were in our poetry section covering sonnets, haikus, and my personal favorite...

He hopped off his desk and pushed his way to the board, which read: Flash Fiction.

"Come on, ladies and gents! One of you must have some idea of what flash fiction is. Just start tossing things out."

"Fiction about the superhero Flash!" Ryan smirked.

"Close..." Daniel laughed. "But not exactly." My hand flew up for the first time since the school year started. Daniel saw this and gave me a sweet smile. "Yes, Ashlyn?"

“Fiction that happens in a flash...as in short, short stories. They normally tell a complete story within a few sentences, a few words.”

Avery, one of the only football players who *didn't* tease me, snickered. “That’s impossible.” He was the same guy who’d been kicked out of Bible study. I wondered what he had done to get kicked out. You probably had to be pretty ruthless to have God’s people turn on you.

“Not really,” I argued quietly.

Daniel arched an eyebrow and stepped back to the front of his desk. He sat again with his legs extended and crossed at his ankles. “Care to explain, Ms. Jennings?” He used my last name, and for some reason, it made my thighs pulse in excitement.

I wanted to impress him. I wanted him to know how much I knew. The palms of my hands were growing clammy, and I ran them against my legs. My teal sundress lay against my body, yet I felt extremely exposed.

Was it bad that I liked how exposed I felt in front of him?

Daniel turned me on with his music, his voice, his sounds, and his touch. His gentleness and sense of humor. But Mr. Daniels made my thighs quiver in a completely different manner. A forbidden way. A seductive fashion. I daydreamed about class releasing and his holding me back—saying that he had to go over something with me. He would close his classroom door and push me against it as his hand slowly pulled up the hem of my dress. My mouth gaped open at his touch, his caresses.

I imagined his fingers finding my panties and rolling against the fabric, back and forth in a slow motion, making me pant for more. His fingers pushed against the fabric before he found his way inside. “*Mr. Daniels...*” I would whisper against his ear, sucking on his earlobe between moans.

He would kiss me down my neck, licking me slowly. Touching me seductively as he turned me on by breathing against my cleavage. He would scold me, telling me how I’d been a very bad girl. I would moan lightly as he lifted me up against the wall, sliding down my spaghetti straps and cupping my breasts in the palm of his hands. He would claim my chest, my body as his and his only.

Then, in my deep imagination, someone would enter the classroom and I would hide behind his door. My breaths uneven and rushed,

adrenaline coursing through every inch of my body. I wouldn't pull my dress completely down so that when he glanced behind the door he could see my damp, teal panties teasing him, making him that much hungrier.

Oh yes, Mr. Daniels turned me on in an extreme amount. And that was only in my mind. I wondered what he could do if he actually touched me in the classroom.

"Um...Ashlyn?" Ryan poked me in my arm.

I shook myself from my fantasy. The whole class was staring at me and my wide-open mouth. My lips shut. My cheeks reddened.

"Uh—yeah. Yes." Clearing my throat and my thoughts, I continued. "There's a story that's been going around forever. People contribute the story to Ernest Hemingway, yet it's hard to say if it's a fact that it truly happened. Anyway, the rumor is that Hemingway was bet to tell a story using six words."

"Like I said," Avery laughed. "Impossible."

Daniel's eyes were narrowed in on me. He arched an eyebrow and the corner of his mouth turned up in a grin. Did he know that I'd been daydreaming about him? Did he dream about me, too?

"Impossible?" Daniel muttered. "Is it?" he asked, moving again to the board. He wrote, "For sale: baby shoes, never worn." Hemingway's story.

The room went silent. The words on the board even made me shiver, even though I'd already known the story.

Ryan was the first to speak when he said, "Burned by a teacher, Avery!"

The room started cracking up, and I couldn't stop smiling. I wanted to be shocked that Daniel knew the exact story I'd spoke of, but of course he did. He was intelligent beyond measure.

Daniel held his hands up, bringing the roaring class to silence. "All right. Yes. So what I want from you is to take these papers you wrote for me at the beginning of the year about your goals in life—which I've given you all a few notes about"—he lifted a stack of paper and started handing them back to us—"and I want you to sum it up in three different ways. Next week as a sonnet. The week after as a haiku. And three weeks from now as a flash

fiction story. At the end of each week, you'll present your poetry in class. I won't go Hemingway on you, giving you only six words for the flash fiction. You get ten." He placed my paper on my desk and smiled at me. It was that same kind smile I'd taken in way back when at the train station. "Make each word count."

When he handed Ryan his paper, Daniel paused. "This might be the best essay I've ever read, Ryan. Keep it up." Ryan grinned and thanked Daniel.

The bell rang and everyone hurried out of the class. I didn't understand why they were so quick to leave. This was my favorite class to slowly retreat from. Before standing from my desk, I noticed an extra piece of paper attached to my essay. Flipping it over, I read the words Daniel had written to me.

Brilliant. Simply brilliant.

You're going to be an amazing author.

I'll read whatever you write.

I miss you so much it's hard to breathe.

When I looked up, I saw his eyes on me. He looked as if a weight had been lifted off his shoulders as our eyes connected. I felt the weight remove from my body, too. He was still there. Daniel wasn't merely Mr. Daniels—he was still himself. And I was still on his mind, the same way he lived in mine.

Maybe there weren't two different Daniels. Maybe Mr. Daniels was just another part of him. So it wasn't surprising that I had fallen for both sides of the coin. I was crazy about all of him—the good, the bad, and the broken pieces.

I think I liked the broken pieces the most.

I didn't even know what it meant for us—his note, my looking up to him. Yet I didn't care. It was enough for now. I thought the best thing to call it was hope. I really loved the hope in his eyes.

His lips turned up in a half smirk and my lips followed, giving him the other half. We made each other smile without even saying a word.

Those were my favorite smiles.

I stood up from my chair and placed everything inside my backpack except for my current read. I hugged it tight as always, and when I passed Daniel's desk, I heard him say my name. I didn't turn back to him, yet I stood still.

"Were you thinking about what I think you were thinking about during class?" he whispered. My cheeks deepened in color. I heard his light laugh. "I think about it, too."

My head turned to him to find his blues. I smiled. "Really?"

"Really, really."

I turned away, and when I was out of his viewpoint, I smiled even bigger.

I smiled so wide my cheeks started to hurt.

Chapter 14

Ashlyn

*Hey hey, don't you forget
The way I moan your name or
The taste of my lips.
~ Romeo's Quest*

After school, I headed straight to the library and stayed there until late into the evening reading. I found a table that no one ever traveled by in the back corner of the library. It was slowly becoming my personal safe haven.

I didn't always read though. Most of the time, I wrote out reasons why Daniel and I could somehow make it work. Why, if we started as friends, by the time school let out, we could transition into more than friends. There were only about one hundred and twenty-some days left in the school year.

One hundred and twenty-four to be exact.

Not that I was counting.

So mainly I wrote out my dreams. Fantasies I wished would someday come true. I was stuck with only my creative daydreams and hopes of something more.

After picking up a few new books, I headed home. I should've worn a sweater over my teal sundress. I was freezing. It was clear that autumn's warmth of Wisconsin was slowly being taken over by a chilled winter. The streetlights were shining bright, and the sky was slumbering.

While walking past the cemetery on May Street, I paused when I looked through the gated area. First I saw his car parked all alone in the parking lot. Then I saw him. My heart skipped a beat, yet it felt as if it were beating faster, too. Daniel made my once fixed heart do crazy things.

He was standing there alone, staring down at two gravestones.

Still a new kind of hurt.

“Oh...” I whispered to myself, placing my hands on my chest.

He looked like he had just gone for a workout in his shorts, plain black shirt, and running shoes. Was he a runner? I wished I knew. I wished I knew so much more about him.

He bent his knees, lowering himself closer to the stones. His lips were moving, and he brushed a finger across his upper lip before he chuckled. He laughed, yet it looked like he was frowning, too.

Those were the most painful—the sad laughs.

I glanced down the streets to see if anyone else was watching him. They weren't. Of course they weren't. Why would anyone watch someone standing in a cemetery? My hands twitched and I started rubbing them against my new book.

I should've kept walking. I should've pretended I hadn't seen him.

But I *had* seen him.

No one should have to stand in a cemetery alone.

Especially Daniel.

Within a few seconds, I was standing by his side. I wasn't quite sure how I'd even arrived next to him. It felt like floating, my feet gliding me his way. He made me soar.

“Hey,” I whispered, making him turn toward me.

“Ashlyn,” he said, surprise in his tone as he looked up to me. I almost forgot how much I loved how he looked at me.

I blinked and shook my head. “I'm sorry to bother you. I just saw you standing here and thought...” Thought what? “Thought nothing,” I muttered.

“Nobody ever really joins me out here.”

“I’m nobody,” I whispered.

He studied my face for a few seconds before he lowered himself down to the ground and the tiniest smile found his lips. “You look like somebody to me.”

I looked back and forth, noticing the darkness surrounding us. I wasn’t sure if I should stay or go. But my feet were telling me that they had no plans to backtrack.

“Why do they call you watermelons?” Daniel asked.

I smirked when he looked up at me. I took it as an invitation to stay. Lowering myself down, I sat next to him. I glanced down at my chest and laughed. “Is that a serious question?”

The corner of his lips turned up. “No, I get it. I do.” His fingers ran through the blades of grass surrounding us and he picked up a few strands. “Your body is beautiful. That’s not a secret. But how are they compelled to pick up on that small detail of you and not talk about those damn eyes? Or that fucking incredible brain of yours?”

I looked down at his hands, which were rolling the grass through his fingertips, and I didn’t reply.

He continued. “I get so pissed off whenever someone looks at you wrong. Or says the wrong thing to you. Or posts pictures all over your locker. Or if they smile at you. Or call you beautiful. Or...*anything!*” He released a breath and took a deep inhale. “Anything they do to hurt you or make you smile makes me want to attack.” He exhaled. “And that doesn’t really make for great ethics.”

My teeth ran across my bottom lip. I was uncertain of what to say to him.

He noticed the look in my eyes and ran his hands across his face. “I’m sorry, Ashlyn. I shouldn’t verbally say the crap that runs through my mind.”

“I’m working on my friendships,” I said, turning so I was facing him straight on. I reached into the inside of one of my books and pulled out a piece of paper. Placing it in his hand, I smiled. “I did a little research on Wikipedia.”

He unfolded the paper and read it out loud. “Four important foundations to making a friend.” He stopped reading. “You’re such a nerd.”

He wasn’t wrong. “I’m a nerd-stud. What can I say? Keep reading.”

“Number one. Proximity, which means being near enough to see each other or do things together.”

I puckered my lips up and rubbed underneath my chin. “Well, seeing how I sit in your second row during third hour, that’s kind of being in the same proximity, right?”

He narrowed his eyes on me and moved on to step number two “Repeatedly encountering the person informally and without making special plans to see each other.”

“Holy crap. That’s like, I don’t know—running into you behind the bar. Or running into you at school. Or...running into you in a cemetery. It wasn’t planned at all. I have to admit the last one is kind of a downer.”

The way his smile stretched made me think I was somewhat charismatic, even though I just felt silly. “Number three, opportunities to share ideas and personal feelings with each other.”

“Hmph. Well, to be honest, I think we’re still working on that one. What’s the last one?”

“Ashlyn,” he groaned, reading the final step. “Wikipedia said this?” He raised an eyebrow and I nodded. “Promise, promise?”

My smirk reappeared as I bit my bottom lip. “I’ll promise, but no double promises. Come on, just read it.”

Clearing his throat, he sat up straight. “Last but not least, number four. Be named Daniel Daniels and Ashlyn Jennings.” He folded the paper and placed it back inside my book.

“What?! It says that?! Well, crapballs. That’s three out of four steps we have. I think that’s pretty good.”

“But it’s not perfect,” he argued. His fingers ran through his hair, making it a bit messy. He didn’t look like Mr. Daniels anymore. Just Daniel. Just handsome, talented Daniel.

“Humans weren’t made to be perfect, Daniel. We were made to screw up, fuck up, and learn new things. We were made perfectly imperfect.”

He narrowed his eyes and moved in closer to me. His fingers brushed my hair behind my ear. The small touch awakened anything that might have been sleeping within me.

“Why did you have to be my student?”

A smile crept on my face. “Because God has a sick sense of humor.” My eyes moved to the flowers Daniel must have bought for his mom. They were a bouquet of daisies. My favorite flower. “I love those ones, too,” I said, gesturing toward the flowers.

“Mom would have liked you a lot. I just know it. Dad would have thought you were too smart for me.”

I grinned. “He sounded like a wise man.”

I shivered a bit from the chilled breeze and he frowned. “You’re cold.”

“I’m okay.”

He took my hands into his and started rubbing them, warming me up. I wondered if he knew how much his touch meant to me. How much I missed that touch.

“Can I tell you a secret without this getting weird?” I whispered as I watched his chest rise and fall with each breath he took.

“Yes,” he muttered.

His face softened, and when he turned to look at me, I felt my heart set on fire. Those undeniable strong feelings of desire, those evident urges I had... All I wanted to do was kiss him. I wanted to kiss him so much that if it never led to anything else, I would be fine with that. His lips alone had the power to make me live forever. *How could I never be more than your friend?*

“I like holding your hand,” I said. “I *really* like holding your hand. It makes me feel...important.”

“You are important.” His words were so raw that it made me almost shatter into a million pieces.

His thumb started circling the inside of my palm and my brain went into shutdown mode. I felt his hands travel under my legs, and he lifted me, placing me in his lap. My legs wrapped around his waist.

I fit perfectly against him. So perfectly that I was almost certain that we both had been created for one another. He was my missing puzzle piece. Our faces remained so close that I couldn't tell if our lips were connected as one or not. His words made love to the air as he repeated himself.

"You are so fucking important."

I wondered if he knew how he controlled my heartbeats.

A breath released from my lips. I placed my hands on his chest and laid my head against his shoulder, where I lightly kissed his neck. I felt his hands around my back pull me even closer. He rested his chin on the top of my head. His heart beats increased against me. I loved the idea that I made his heart race.

"Tell me about them, friend."

A deep inhale was felt against him. "Mom was a music teacher. Dad was an English professor."

"You're a mix of both."

"I'm a mix of both."

"I know what happened to your father...but what happened to your mom?"

He lowered his shoulders and took a deep inhale. "She was murdered."

I gasped. I looked up and ran my fingers through his hair, and then I stilled myself. "I'm so sorry." I said, not knowing what else could be said.

He gave me a sad smile and shrugged. His blue eyes made love with mine and I placed my mouth against his full lips, giving him a gentle peck.

"I think you're beautiful," I whispered, echoing what he'd said to me in a text message many weeks back. "And I don't mean your looks. I mean your smarts, your protectiveness, your brokenness. I think that's beautiful."

His hand wrapped around my neck and he pulled me closer, his taste covering my lips, his body heat warming every inch of my body. "I don't want to be your friend," he said. We breathed in together and exhaled in harmony. "I want to be yours, I want you to be mine, and I hate that we can't be us. Because I think we were meant to be *us*."

“How is it that we never get to spend time together, but I feel like you know me better than anyone? How is it that I keep falling for you?”

The look of wonder in his eyes was beautiful. It was as if he had been wondering the same thing about me. “I don’t know. Maybe because when hearts are set on fire, no complications can extinguish the flame.”

“It can be a secret,” I softly promised. “Our secret—one hundred percent ours.”

His lips pressed against mine, and everything in the world shut up. Everything in the universe stopped. He brought me to a place of pure emotion, lifting all sadness and replacing it with comfort.

His lips were softer than I remembered yet filled with more passion, more intensity. My hands ran across the hem of his shirt and I slid it up, feeling his tight physique under the cotton material. “Ash,” he muttered. His tongue parted my lips and began to become well acquainted with mine.

My mouth gaped open as my breaths sped up. His mouth traveled to my neck, where he began sucking and running his tongue in a circular motion. I felt my nipples harden under my dress as a breeze brushed across our bodies and he laid his mouth against mine again. His fingers slid to my spaghetti strap and he lowered it off my shoulder, giving me gentle kisses all the way down. I felt his hands cup my breasts through the dress, and I moaned lightly, loving the way he held me, the way he touched me, the way he knew me.

“We shouldn’t,” he warned, but I wasn’t certain if he was warning himself or me.

I covered his lips before he could try to stop it from happening. I’d never been so sure about anything in my life. I couldn’t pinpoint why, but I’d never felt as safe as I did right there in the darkness with someone who was hurting just like me. Whenever I was near him, there was a profound sense of security and comfort. Daniel Daniels felt like home.

Chapter 15

Ashlyn

*So she kissed me with her eyes
And then with those hips.
And good God, could her hips kiss.
~ Romeo's Quest*

The next few weeks were filled with secret excitements. Daniel and I spoke mainly through text messages. In the hallways, we would accidentally bump into each other—which was never accidental. He would ask me to stay back after class sometimes to steal small kisses. I liked the secretive relationship. I felt as if I were a spy trying my best not to get caught.

When I walked into class one Friday, there were three daisies sitting on my desk. Ryan walked into the room and noticed the flowers. “Are the bullies now giving you gifts?”

I grinned and held the daisies up to my nose. Breathing them in, I smiled. “You know bullies—they’re complicated.”

He laughed and slid into his seat. “Aren’t we all? Anyway, Hailey told me about this bucket list of yours.” I wasn’t surprised. He continued. “And from what I found out from snooping through your bedroom while you were in the shower...this Gabrielle girl sounded like a real babe.”

I smirked at his comment.

“I mean, if she were here, I would probably give up Tonys with a Y to have Tonis with an I.”

“You would date my sister,” I frowned jokingly, “but not me?”

“Uh, did you die and leave your twin sister letters for every occasion?”

“No.”

“Then of course I wouldn’t date you. There’s something so sexy about ghosts leaving notes for their loved ones.”

Giggling, I nodded in understanding. “So you only get turned on by ghost girls, not alive girls.”

“Ohhh, I love when you say that. Say it again...”

I cocked an eyebrow. “Say what? Ghost girls?” He shivered with delight, loving the sound of it. I lowered my voice and moved in closer to him. “Ghost girls, ghost girls, ghost girls!” I whispered over and over again.

He closed his eyes and ran his hand up and down his chest as if he were extremely turned on. “Mmm! That’s how I like it.”

“You’re an idiot,” I chuckled.

“You love this idiot.” I did. “But back to the important things. Theo is having another party soon and I...” He grinned widely and reached into his back pocket. A plastic card came out and his smile grew bigger. “Have a fake ID.”

I snatched it from his hands and smiled. “Where the heck did you get this?!”

His eyes shifted back to Avery. “I know people who know people.”

“Burt Summerstone?” I asked, reading his name off the card.

He took it back from me and slid it into his pocket. “It’s not about the name, baby girl. It’s about the date. I am officially a twenty-one-year-old high school student. And we are officially getting drunk and crossing that item off of your bucket list. Bow down, bitches.” He pulled out a fake ID for me and I grinned.

Summer Burtstone. How creative.

“But I hate Theo,” I frowned. He had been the biggest jerk to Hailey.

“Even more reason to show up and give him a big middle finger,” Ryan smirked. “I do it all the time.”

Ryan had a way of always making people smile. It was a natural gift of his. I felt lucky enough to have moved to Wisconsin and be living with Hailey and him. I didn't know if I would've made it if it hadn't been for my built-in housemates.

I remembered back on how mean and harsh I'd been to Henry when I'd first arrived into town. How much I hadn't wanted to be here in the first place. I hadn't called it home since I'd arrived, but lately I'd thought it could be my home. Because maybe home wasn't a location. Maybe it's simply the people who you were surrounded with that made you feel as if you could be whoever you wanted to be.

Maybe home was friendship.



After class ended, I smiled at Mr. Daniels—who was really just Daniel in a suit. My Daniel. My blue-eyed, handsome, loving Daniel. He grinned back at me. The class filed out and I slid all of my books into my backpack. Tossing the bag onto my back, I stood from my desk.

“You’re not wearing one of her dresses?” Daniel asked, moving to sit on the front of his desk. His eyes traveled over my body until he met my stare and I felt warm all over. I loved the way he looked at me. As if each and every part of my being were perfect. As if I were imperfectly perfect for him.

“Nope, not today.” I was dressed in blue jeans and an oversized sweater that hung off my left shoulder. For the first time this school year, my outfit was actually mine...and it felt good to be me.

“This is my favorite look,” he said.

I glanced down at my outfit and grinned. “Mine too.”

“My roommate’s gone tonight.”

I chuckled. “Thanks for the random bit of information.”

“I want to make you dinner.”

Raising an eyebrow, I laughed. “You cook?”

“I cook.” His words were simple yet so dreamy, and I realized I would eat anything he would make. “I do a lot more than cook though...” My eyes

fell to his lips. I loved those lips. I loved so much about him.

I bit my bottom lip and glanced toward the classroom door to make sure no one was walking by. “Are you trying to seduce me, Mr. Daniels?”

His thumb brushed against his bottom lip and he eyed me up and down. “I guess you’ll have to wait to find out, Ms. Jennings.”

“Meet me behind the library after school?” I suggested.

“I’ll be there.”

The way his eyes danced across my body made me feel at ease, comfortable. What I loved the most was that he’d never looked at me the way he had today. Today he’d seen me for who I *really* was, and the way both his lips and eyes smiled toward me made me realize that he liked me the most when I was myself.

I was one hundred percent Ashlyn Jennings.

And I was one hundred percent his.



I’d never been to his house before. I’d never been in his Jeep before either. It was a day filled with firsts. I had to admit that lately my mind had been thinking about other things we had never done together. We’d never gone out on a date. We’d never danced. We’d never had sex. We’d never said ‘I love you.’

I stepped into his Jeep and my breath caught when I saw Daniel. He was wearing a baseball cap, and I blushed alone at my thoughts. *I’d never seen him in a baseball cap until now.* There were so many sides to him, looks to him, characteristics of him, that I hadn’t yet discovered. He smiled my way, took my hand, and kissed my palm. My eyes shifted to the floor mats and I chuckled lightly.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

My head rose and I shook it back and forth. “Nothing. It’s just—there’s so much to look forward to with us, isn’t there?”

“Yeah, I think there is.” He didn’t let go of my hand after he kissed it. He held it as he pulled away from the curb of the library.

“Tell me the boring facts,” I said, growing comfortable in my seat. “Tell me the things that would put most people to sleep.”

He arched an eyebrow. “The boring facts?”

“Your favorite color, your favorite ice cream, your favorite movie. You know, the boring things.”

“Ah, of course. My favorite color is green. Um...” He furrowed his brows, deep in thought. “My favorite ice cream is the one with the waffle cone chunks in it and the chocolate pieces. Don’t ask me if I’ve ever eaten an entire container in one sitting—you don’t want to know the answer. And my favorite movie is a tossup between *Lethal Weapon* and *The Hangover*.”

“I love the waffle cone ice cream, too,” I said breathlessly.

He squeezed my hand. “What else? What else do you love? What’s your favorite animal, your favorite season, your favorite breakfast food?”

“Panda bears. I watched a show on Discovery Channel once, and I guess there’s a place in China where you can pay a crap-ton of money and pet baby pandas. My favorite season is spring. I get some of my best writing done during thunderstorms, I think. And if you were to put a bowl of Cap’n Crunch cereal mixed with marshmallows in front of me, I would probably orgasm from the sight.”

He laughed, and I felt his finger tracing the inside of my palm. “That’s the dirtiest thing I’ve ever heard you say,” he muttered.

“What? Orgasm?” I bit my bottom lip and tugged on it.

His blue eyes shifted over to me. “No. Petting baby pandas.” I pulled my hand away from his and smacked him hard, but I was laughing harder. “Ow!” he huffed dramatically as if I’d really hurt him, but I knew I hadn’t. He held his hand out toward me again, and I took his hold.

We pulled up to his house, which he told me was his parents place, and I gasped at the beauty of the property. The lake house looked as if it had been very much a home to someone, rather than just a house. There was a lot of love put into the property.

The front porch was crafted from earth-toned stones, with pebbled steps. On the porch rested two oak chairs and a matching rocking-bench. Daniel didn’t allow me too much time to study the home. He walked me

around to the backyard and I sighed at the view. The sun glistened off the lake. I walked across the dock and ran my fingers through the chilled water.

“It’s beautiful,” I said, looking out into the distance. I sat down on the edge of the dock and took off my shoes and socks. My toes trailed through the water, making slight ripples.

“Yeah,” Daniel said softly. He sat down by my side. “It is.”

He took off his shoes and socks, rolled up his slacks, and put his feet in the water, too. We both waved our feet back and forth, creating big waves.

“Tell me the awkward facts,” he said. “Your worst date. Your oddest favorite book. Your weirdest turn-on.”

“Hmm...” I inhaled the fresh smells of autumn by the lake. “I haven’t dated a lot, but my last boyfriend took me to the movie theater for our first date. He thought it would be romantic to show me his...” I blushed. I couldn’t believe I was saying this to him. “His penis. And I giggled and asked him for his 3D glasses to magnify it, because it definitely wasn’t coming to life.”

“Ouch,” Daniel whined, grabbing his chest. “You’re brutal!”

“He showed me his penis! On the first date!” I cried.

“Note to self: don’t show Ashlyn my penis tonight.”

I blushed and gave him a coy smile. “We kind of already had our first date at Joe’s bar. You can pretty much show me anything.”

A wide, toothy grin landed on his face. He flicked some of the water toward me. “Continue.”

“My oddest favorite book is a random one about zombies. In the end, the zombies just turned out to be corporate America, and the people they were trying to turn and corrupt were the creative individuals of the world.

“They turned Steven Spielberg into one of them, and he documented his whole transformation before letting the pull of the Zom overtake him. Then they turned Ellen Degeneres, but the joke was on corporate America because she was just as funny being a zombie as she was being a human. And she made the other zombies laugh, too. Sometimes they laughed so hard they would lose their noses and their arms would fall off due to how funny she was. It was actually a beautiful coming-of-age book that explored

the realms of truth, acceptance, and being comfortable in your own skin—even if it was rotting.”

“Wow,” Daniel sighed, listening to my story.

“Yeah. I know right?” I paused. “They all died though.”

He inched closer to me, our legs lying against one another. “*The Neighborhood Zombie*.”

“No way,” I breathed. “You’ve read it?!”

“Junior year of college. Best book ever.” He smiled. I swooned. “Now. Your biggest turn-on?”

“Oh, that’s easy. My biggest turn-on is a boy who reads to me.”

His finger brushed against the side of my face. “I read.”

“You turn me on, I guess.”

His hand wrapped around my waist and he lifted me into his lap. “You guess?” He took my bottom lip between his teeth and lightly tugged on it. My body responded instantly to his touch. My hands fell against his chest, and when he released my lip, I gave him a soft kiss.

“Well, you haven’t read *to* me yet.”

He smirked, and as he lifted both of us up from the dock, my legs wrapped around him. “Let’s go make dinner.”

I shook my head back and forth. “I’m not making dinner. You are.”

His hands wrapped under my ass as he carried me toward the house. I secretly wished that he would never put me down, but when he did, it was on top of the kitchen counter. He went digging through the kitchen, pulling out his ingredients for the ‘dinner of a lifetime,’ as he called it.

I giggled when I saw a box of mac and cheese sitting next to the stove. He pulled a pocketknife out of his back pocket and used it to open the box. “You always use pocketknives to open macaroni and cheese?”

“My dad always did. He carried this knife everywhere, saying you never knew when you might need it. So he pretty much made up excuses to use it. Opening boxes, envelopes, water bottle cases.” He laughed to himself. “I guess when I got the knife, his quirks rubbed off on me.”

He paused for a moment. Remembering his dad.

“Tell me the saddest fact,” I whispered, watching him fill up a pot to boil the water in. He sat the pot down on the stove and turned on the burner.

Moving over toward me, he spread my legs and stepped in between them. “That’s some heavy dinner conversation.”

“We aren’t eating yet.”

The room was silent. Daniel stared at me, and I at him. He moved my hair behind my ear. “March twenty-second of last year.” His eyes moved to the window above the sink and he stared out toward the backyard. His voice cut like a knife. “My mom died in my arms.” My hands moved to his face and I pulled him closer. “And my dad watched it happen.”

My eyes bled with sorrow for him, and his bled out remorse. I kissed him intensely, filling him up with all my apologies for his worst day ever, wishing I could make the pain dissipate.

His brown hair fell to his face and I combed it back for him. When our lips separated, I missed his taste. I imagined that he missed mine, too, based on how he came back to rest his mouth against mine.

“How do you get over something like that?” I asked.

He shifted around and shrugged. “Easy. You don’t.”

“Do you know who did it?”

He shifted again. Not only his body, but his personality. It grew darker as he stepped backward, turning away from me.

“That doesn’t matter. It doesn’t bring her back.” He moved to the kitchen sink and stared out into his backyard.

“But it can bring her justice.”

“No!” His shout sounded like a clap of thunder shaking sparrows from the tree branches. My skin crawled by his sudden outburst. A gasp ran from my lips. When he turned to me, his face was reddening with anger—or was it guilt?

“Come here,” I instructed.

Daniel’s shoulders fell and his eye twitched. “Sorry,” he muttered, walking over to me. “I don’t talk about her. I don’t want to think about who

did it to her. I want to move on.” I didn’t reply, but I pulled him back between my legs. “Can we talk about you instead of me?” he asked quietly.

He never wanted to talk about the accident, which made me sad.

I wanted to know everything.

Yet I didn’t want to scare him off. After I nodded my head, he sighed with relief.

“What is your saddest fact?” he whispered, placing his hands on my hips.

“Leukemia.” It was only one word. But it was a powerful one. One word that had put a time limit on Gabby’s and my relationship. One word that had made me cry each and every night for months. One word that I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemies. A tear rolled down my cheek and he kissed it away. He gave me the same intense kiss I’d delivered him. His kisses tasted like forever soaked in always.

“What is your happiest fact?” he questioned.

I placed my hand in the air and he placed his against mine. “This,” I whispered, staring at our touch.

His other hand went up and I placed mine against it. We laced our fingers together. “This,” he smiled.

I inched my hips closer to him, and he began kissing my neck slowly, lovingly. “Daniel,” I closed my eyes as his kisses trailed down my shoulder.

“Yes?” he muttered against me.

“That feels good,” I sighed as his tongue slowly ran up and down my shoulder.

“I always want you to feel good.” His blue eyes looked up to me and his smile stretched far and wide. His lips landed on my forehead. “I’m crazy about you, Ashlyn Jennings.”

I inhaled deep and released my air. “I’m crazy about you, Daniel Daniels.” We stared at each other, laughing and laughing at the craziness of our situation. Was I dating my English teacher? Was what we were doing truly unethical? Falling in love? Could falling in love ever be wrong? “We’re insane, aren’t we?”

He leaned against me and I wrapped my arms around his neck.
“Fucking insane.”

Fucking insane. That might have been my favorite fact about us both that night.

We were both *so fucking insane*.

Chapter 16

Ashlyn

*If we run away today,
We'll beat the sunsets.
~ Romeo's Quest*

We crossed things off the list together.
We never talked about his past, but I learned much about his present.
We kissed a lot too, because we loved kissing.

Chapter 17

Ashlyn

*If we run away too late,
We'll lose the sunrise.
~ Romeo's Quest*

- ~~#23. Kiss a Stranger~~
- ~~#16. Go to a house party~~
- ~~#14. Make a new friend~~
- ~~#21. Learn to juggle.~~
- ~~#15. Run five miles.~~
- ~~#6. Try to play the guitar.~~
- #1. Fall in love

Chapter 18

Ashlyn

*I've been thinking about something we should do,
We should fall in love around two.
And then when it becomes four,
I'll start loving on you even more.*

~ Romeo's Quest

Our visits became more frequent. Our connection grew stronger, because growth was the only choice we gave it. After school each day, I would wait behind the library with a new book I found to share with him.

He would read to me while we made pots of macaroni. I would read to him while he hung up different paint cards around the house—trying to decide what colors to paint his parents' home. He would lie upside down on his living room chair and read to me while I completed homework. I would recite the novels while he graded papers.

The words sounded so much sweeter, had so much more depth when they traveled from his lips to my ears. His voice heightened with the characters' anger, lowered with their deepest fears.

Today he sat with his back against the coffee table as he read to me and I stared at him for the longest time. I watched his eyes blink, and his lips move. I studied his fingers turning the pages as his feet tapped against the carpet. And I cried. It wasn't due to the words on the pages, but the tears stood for hope. For an actual chance at happiness.

“Daniel,” I whispered, moving closer to him. I placed my hand against the book, bringing his reading to a halt. He looked up to me, a warm grin on his face. I took his hands in mine and moved them to rest over my heart. “You’re doing it.”

“Doing what?”

“Bringing me back to life.”



There were times when we would visit and I wasn’t as strong as I was the day prior. Sometimes memories tried their best to pull at my heart about Gabby being gone, so Daniel would stop reading. He would put one of his ‘hipster’ upbeat CDs into the stereo and started blasting music.

“Dance break,” he instructed, pulling me up from my sadness.

“Daniel,” I whined, but I never declined a dance break. It was a few weeks ago that I told him how much I love dancing.

“Come on. Move it,” he said, shaking his hips and pushing out his lips. He looked like a freaking clown, and I fell for him that much more. I held my hands up in the air and slowly started moving back and forth. He reached for one of my arms and spun me around in a circle, pulling me closer to him. “Tell me her happiest fact.”

I smiled as we danced across the living room together. “Bentley Graves.”

“Tell me her silliest fact,” he said.

I bit my bottom lip in thought. “She loved to eat peanut butter and pickle sandwiches. When we were kids, she set up a business outside trying to sale lemonade and PB&P sandwiches. Needless to say, she didn’t become rich from that venture.”

He scrunched up his nose. “Have you ever tried one?”

“Ew, no. Gabby was the weird one, not me.”

“I beg to differ. You eat cereal with marshmallows. You’re a freak.” His finger brushed against my nose and he disappeared into the kitchen. When he came back, he had pickles, bread, and peanut butter.

“No,” I sternly stated.

He arched an eyebrow. "Bucket list. Try something new."

I sighed, knowing that trying something new was on the list. But did it have to be so disgusting?

We each made a sandwich and took a bite. It was as disgusting as we both figured it would be, but at the same time it was the best sandwich of my life because it was a part of Gabby that I was able to share with Daniel.

"I get what you were doing," I said, putting down my pickle sandwich. "Dancing with me."

He smiled and shrugged. "Sometimes when you miss a person, you can only focus on how sad you feel that they are gone. Other times, it's best to focus on the memories that bring you joy and laughter."

I grinned down to my sandwich and added more peanut butter. "You're a very great teacher."

"You're a very smart student." He wiped his finger in the peanut butter and spread it against my neck.

"Daniel," I whispered as he tongue danced across my skin, licking up the peanut butter. He breathed against me, sending chills throughout my entire being.

"Yes?"

"Teach me some more."

His eyes met mine. I ran my fingers against his mouth. His eyes smirked as he lifted me up into his arms and took me to his bedroom for our next lesson plan.



"Don't...stop..." I breathed heavily, begging as I lay in Daniel's bed, "...reading... Don't stop reading."

My eyes were closed and I'd taken off my oversized sweatshirt, leaving me only in my white tank top and tight jeans. He hovered over me, shirtless. My fingers ran up and down his toned chest, feeling him inhale and exhale each and every time.

His left hand held up his body as his right held an open book. He smirked as he read me the next line from *Much Ado About Nothing*. "'She's

but the sign and semblance of her honor.” His voice was rigid and rough with every word he spoke, sending me into a wave of desire. *“Behold how like a maid she blushes here.”* He gently pecked my ear. *“O, what authority and show of truth”*—he kissed my neck—*“can cunning sin...”* He placed the softest lips to the curves of my breasts. My hips voluntarily arched toward his, wanting nothing more than to feel him against me. He pulled down the straps of my tank top and outlined my bra with his tongue. *“...cover itself withal.”*

My hands moved to the belt loops of his slacks and I pulled him down lower to me, pressing my body against his. I felt him against my jeans, making me well aware that reading was his biggest turn-on, too.

“Daniel,” I softly spoke.

“Yes?” He buried his face into my chest, into me.

My voice was shaky, unsteady from my apparent desires. “Close the book.” It only took a moment for me to hear the book slam shut. When I opened my eyes, his stare was intense; his pupils were dilated and dreamy. I kissed his chin, feeling my heart rate increase. “I want you...” He sat up a bit and moved his hands to the hem of my shirt. Pulling it up slow, he glided his mouth to my belly button, kissing me all over as my thighs longed for more attention. “Please, Daniel...”

“You’re perfect,” he sighed against my skin. “We’ll start slow.” He slid my tank top over my head and tossed it to the side of the room. He placed his hand over my chest and felt my heart beating for him. *Only for him.*

I sat up a little on my elbows and wrapped my hand around his neck, pulling him down to my lips. He pressed his mouth against mine, and I moaned his name softly as he took my breath away. Then he filled me back up, giving me life, giving me meaning, giving me him. I was shocked by his ability to awaken my spirit each and every time we were near one another. He was discovering all of my weaknesses and making them strong.

I slid my hand toward his zipper and unbuttoned his jeans, and as my fingers swept across him, he rewarded me with a soft groan. He wrangled them off completely, and I traced the waist of his boxers. A deep-rooted growl left his throat and I loved the sound. I cherished that I’d done that to him. He unzipped my jeans and helped me wiggle out of them, which wasn’t the easiest task. He laughed at the way they took a while to slide off

me. I laughed because I'd never felt so comfortable unclothed in front of anyone.

"We're not going to have sex, Ashlyn," he warned.

I grimaced at the thought because he worked me up more than anyone ever had. I wanted to feel him against me. I wanted him inside me.

"I'm not scared, Daniel. I promise."

"I know. But I want to take my time with you, with us. Besides..." His fingers glided against the cotton fabric of my panties. *Ohmygosh!* My mouth opened to catch the air he had driven out of my body. "There's so much more we can do besides sex." His head lowered down between my thighs, and I closed my eyes as my stomach filled with nerves.

I'd never had anyone down there before. Billy had never pleased me in any way whatsoever. It had always been about him, his wants, his needs. But Daniel was different in every way possible. He wanted me to feel good. He wanted me to be pleased. He wanted me.

Feeling his hot breaths against my skin was sending me into a different world.

"I'm going to kiss you, Ashlyn," he whispered.

My fingers dug into the sheets surrounding me and his kisses stayed low. I felt his wet lips press against the edge of my panties before his fingers wrapped around them and started lowering them more and more.

"Dan..." I muttered in a low tone, unable to complete his full name. My hips arched in his direction, asking him for more, for so much more. The kisses didn't stop, and my moans didn't cease.

Each inch he lowered my panties, I received a warm kiss, followed by his tongue running up and down, then another kiss, and then a long, hungry lick once he reached my core.

"Daniel," I moaned, louder this time, knowing that everything I'd ever wanted was with me now. He licked me deeper, harder, with more love.

I was on the edge of heaven, about to give him all of me. My body was trembling, my hips rocking against his mouth more and more. He spread my legs wider.

“You’re perfect,” he whispered as I dug my fingers into the sheets. “So perfect.”

I buried my head into a pillow, gasping as his fingers found their way to me, rubbing me, finding a perfect rhyme with his tongue. He inhaled when I did, and I exhaled with him.

As he picked up speed, my breaths became heavier, hungrier for all of him. I ran my fingers in his hair, tugging on it gently. One smaller kiss from Daniel was all it took to carry me over, making my body rocket into space, leaving me panting with him lying against me. I knew now that I’d never experienced pleasure in that form—or any form—before he’d come into my life. Daniel brought me another first. My first ever orgasm.

My panting was heavy, and he moved up to me, kissing my neck. “Thank you,” he sighed against me, wrapping me in his hold. “Thank you for trusting me.”

We lay there for what felt like eternity. I felt hot and tired, but not too tired.

“Daniel,” I whispered, running my fingers up and down his spine.

He bit his mouth against my shoulder, making me sigh. “Hmm?”

“Can you do that again?”

Chapter 19

Daniel

*Don't be jealous, it bleeds out red.
Trust your heart inside of your head.
~ Romeo's Quest*

I knew it was stupid, and I knew it shouldn't bother me, but it did. Jake was coming onto Ashlyn more and more each day at school. Walking past Ashlyn's locker, where Jake was hovering over her, I paused close enough so I could listen in. I felt like such a dumbass, thumbing through my paperwork, acting as if I were busy.

"So I was thinking... The school dance is coming up before Thanksgiving break and I was wondering..." Jake's voice cracked from nerves and he gave Ashlyn a smile. "Maybe we can go together?"

Ashlyn glanced toward me and held her book closer to her chest. She frowned toward Jake and turned him down. The bell rang, and he wore his disappointment on his face, mostly in his eyes.

A couple walked by, laughing and holding hands, and Ashlyn's eyes stayed glued to their hold. A knot formed in my stomach. I knew she thought I didn't notice, but I did. She looked at the couples walking hand in hand at school with such envy. All signs of public displays of affection never went unnoticed by her. She longed to hold my hand in the light, not only in the shadows.

When third hour came and went, I asked her to stay after for a minute so I could talk to her. Her eyes looked hooded; she seemed tired.

“You can go, you know—to the dance with Jake.”

“No, I’m good,” she lied, cradling her books.

“But you love to dance,” I said.

“With *you*. I love to dance with you, Daniel.”

“You’re disappointed.”

Her head dropped and she nodded slowly. “It’s just—your hands are right here. My hands are right here. And we’re not allowed to touch.”

My pinky wrapped around hers and I felt a sigh shake through her body.

“I’m sorry, Ashlyn.”

“Not your fault. Just our lives, I guess.”

My throat tightened. “If you want out, just say it. I promise you it’s fine.”

Her eyes widened and glassed over. “I don’t. I want this, Daniel. I’m just having an off day. That’s all.”

I heard what she was saying, but I knew she had to miss the things normal couples did. Dinner dates. Movies. Weekend getaways.

“Romeo’s Quest is performing at Joe’s bar again soon...” I said, getting lost in her green eyes. “You should come.”

Her smile widened and I saw her eyes light up, too. “You mean, go out somewhere other than the lake house?” She paused and giggled. “Don’t get me wrong. it’s a nice lake house and all, but it’s just—”

I cut her off. My finger was still wrapped around her pinky and I nudged my classroom door closed slightly. Taking her hand fully into mine I pulled her closer and my lips took hers in. I kissed her quick but deep. She nuzzled on my bottom lip and kissed me back harder as the bell rang for fourth hour to start.

“You’re late for class.”

I could feel her smile against my mouth as she spoke softly. “Totally worth the tardy slip.”



We were performing at Joe's bar the weekend before Thanksgiving. Randy set up an agreement with them for people to bring canned goods to be donated to the hunger force. I thought it was such a Randy thing to do—to find a way to give back.

Ashlyn showed up behind the library for me to pick her up holding two cans of corn and a notebook in her other hand. She looked so adorable with her cans and beautiful smile. I pulled up to the curb and she hopped into the car.

"Hey." She leaned over and kissed me on the lips before she buckled her seatbelt. "I'm going to write tonight while I listen."

"You're writing again?" She hadn't mentioned her novel since the first night we'd met at Joe's bar, so I was stoked to hear her mention it.

"Just random things. Nothing major."

"Very major," I said.

We arrived at the bar to have Randy come bouncing up to us. "Hey! You came back to see me," he said to Ashlyn, placing his hand over his heart. "I'm flattered. I really am. But I think my friend Danny here has a small crush on you."

She laughed. "Is that so?"

"Yeah. The other day, I walked into his room. He was talking in his sleep and cuddling his pillow, calling it Ashlyn."

My eyes widened and I turned to Ashlyn. "That's not true."

Randy nodded quickly. "It is."

Ashlyn took my hand into hers and giggled. "It's totally true, isn't it? You're addicted."

I couldn't deny that.

Randy's phone went off and he excused himself to go answer it, leaving me standing with Ashlyn. "I gotta get set up soon. Want anything to drink?"

Ashlyn grabbed my shirt and ran behind me. "Oh my gosh!" she squealed, covering her face.

"Uh, it's not that big of a deal... A simple no would have worked."

“Shit shit shit,” she whispered. It was pretty cute to hear her curse; it made me want to kiss her that much more.

“What’s going on?” I questioned, trying to turn around to look at her.

“Henry,” she breathed into my shirtsleeve as she pointed toward the bar.

My eyes shot up and I saw him sitting there drinking. “Oh shit!” I whispered, pushing her out of the building. We ran to the side of the bar and took in deep breaths. “What is he doing here?! Did he know you were coming?”

“No! No! I didn’t tell anyone.”

“Well where does he think you are tonight?” I asked.

She shrugged. “He never asks. I doubt he cares.” I saw a small tremble in her bottom lip.

“He would be crazy not to care.” I paused. “He can’t know, right? He doesn’t know. He can’t.” My insides were twisting at the idea of her father, my boss, finding out about us.

Ashlyn pushed herself against me, giving me a deep kiss. “I need to go before he sees me. I think I’m going to head home. Just to be safe.”

I kissed her back, loving her taste. I grabbed my keys from my back pocket and tossed them to her. “Take my car and drive home. You can park it down the street from your house. Then you can give me my keys back sometime tomorrow.”

The first snowfall of the season started that night, and I looked up to the sky as a few flakes fell to my face. Then I watched the snowflakes hit her long, beautiful eyelashes.

I kissed the bridge of her nose. “Spend some time writing. I want to read whatever it is you come up with.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” She stood still. “This is kind of fun, isn’t it? The almost-getting-caught thing?” Her nose wiggled and her tongue pushed into the side of her cheek.

“You’re absolutely crazy.” I took her bottom lip with my mouth and sucked on it gently. “*Absolutely crazy.*”

“Only for you, Mr. Daniels. Only for you.”

My hands roamed down over her ass, and I kissed against her neck. “*Good night, good night! Parting is such sweet sorrow...*” I said, quoting *Romeo and Juliet*.

“*That I shall say good night till it be morrow.*” She moaned lightly and giggled. “Mmm...I love when you talk dirty to me.”

Only we would get turned on by William Shakespeare.

“Oh! This is for you.” She handed me a letter from Gabby, started toward the car, and paused, looking back to me. “He looked a little sad, didn’t he?” she asked, frowning toward the bar. “Do you think you can check on him?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Thanks.” With that, she walked away.

I fell even more for her in that small moment. She thought Henry didn’t care about her whereabouts, about her at all, yet she was still concerned about his well-being.



“Henry?” I asked, walking up to the bar.

He looked nothing like he did during school hours. He was wearing a gray polo that was wrinkled, and his hair was all over the place. His green eyes looked up at me, and at first, he looked surprised to see me standing next to him. Slowly, his face relaxed.

“Dan, hey. What are you doing here?”

I slid onto the stool next to him, inviting myself to chat even though he didn’t look like he was in a talking mood. His hands were gripped around a glass of whiskey. His scent was buried in tobacco. For a moment, I inhaled the scent, letting it remind me of my father.

“I’m in the band, Romeo’s Quest. How are you?”

He looked up at me with perplexed eyes and laughed. “Do you want the professional reply or the truth?”

I waved down the bartender and ordered us both another whiskey. When I got them, I slid it to Henry. “Whichever one you want to share.”

He paused and rubbed his thumb on the rim of the glass. "I'm fine," he lied. His eyes were heavy. He looked like he hadn't slept in weeks, months even. "That was the professional answer."

"And the truth?" I questioned, feeling bad for the guy.

"The truth is...I'm falling apart." He took a long swallow from his drink. "My daughter died a few months ago."

I placed my hand on his shoulder. "I'm so sorry."

"I wasn't there for her or Ashlyn all their lives." He looked down at his glass, his head hanging in shame. "After Kim left me to move to Chicago, I mentally checked out. I hadn't checked back in until August. And by that point, it was at my daughter's funeral." He choked on the final words and wiped his hands across his face.

I didn't know what to say, so I didn't say a thing. My hand still rested against his shoulder. I could feel his body shaking from his nerves as he continued speaking. "And now Ashlyn's here. I feel like I have a shot at connecting with her, but I don't try. I hardly know anything about her. Her likes, her dislikes. I don't even know how to start a relationship with my own daughter."

I ran my hands over my mouth before I placed one hand around my glass of whiskey. Bringing it to my lips, I took a swallow. "That's a tough situation."

He turned toward me, his eyes red from emotion, and he laughed. "I should have just told you the professional reply, but it seems that the whiskey is getting the best of me."

"Where's Ashlyn now?" I asked, knowing yet wondering what his reply would be.

"I don't know." His head hung low. "I don't ask her to check in with me, because what right do I have? It would be kind of asshole of me to start playing the father card when I never was a father."

"I think she would want you to though." He arched an eyebrow at my comment. "I lost my father a few months ago. Our relationship wasn't always perfect, but it was good. Yet if I had a chance, I would try more. I should've played the son card a little more. You missed an opportunity to connect with Gabby. Don't miss one with Ashlyn."

He nodded slowly, taking in my words and thoughts. I stood up from my chair and started walking over to the stage.

“Hey, Dan?”

I turned back to him. “Yeah?”

His eyebrows furrowed and he frowned. “How did you know her name? Gabby’s?”

Oh shit.

My heart landed in my throat as I stared at the sad man. My mind went on speed, racing faster and faster, searching for an excuse. “You mentioned it.”

His drunken eyes fell heavy. He was searching his mind for our conversation. “Oh. Right. Of course,” he muttered.

I sighed heavily. “She seems to be really into music, Henry. In class, Ryan and she are always talking about it. And books—she loves books.”

“Books and music.” He gave me a sad grin, “That’s a good starting ground, eh?”

“The best.” I nodded, stuffing my hands into my pockets.

Randy walked over to me and slammed his hands on my shoulders. “Where’s the lady?” he shouted, making my face go pale.

“Oh? Is your girlfriend here?” Henry asked, sitting up and looking around.

“Yes,” Randy replied.

“No!” I shouted. Randy arched an eyebrow at me and I pushed down on his shoulder. “Henry, it was good seeing you. Stick around for the show!” I said as I guided a confused Randy away.

“What the hell was that?” he fussed.

“Ashlyn’s father,” I whispered.

“Already meeting the parents?” he smirked, shoving me in the shoulder.

“No,” I hissed. Randy looked at my sudden shift in character and waited for me to explain. My hand brushed against my temple and I

frowned. “That’s my boss.”

“Ohhh, I see.”

I nodded. “And Ashlyn is my student.” That was the line that made Randy’s jaw drop to the floor. His eyes bugged out and he listened as I explained how we didn’t know beforehand. “I know I should stop but...”

“Holy shit,” Randy sighed, the palm of his hand resting on the back of his neck.

“What?”

“You love her.”

“What?!” I laughed nervously, rubbing my hands together. “That’s ridiculous. I hardly know her and—”

“Dude, don’t give me that ‘I’m a man and can’t express my feelings’ bullshit. You *love* her. I haven’t seen you smile this much over a girl since my sister.”

“I...” I knew he was right. But that scared me. How could I love Ashlyn and not be able to show the world how I loved her? We couldn’t even go out to see my show tonight, and I had a feeling that wouldn’t be becoming any easier.

“Confucius said, ‘*Wherever you go, go with all your heart,*’ Danny.” Randy placed his hand on my shoulder.

“Did you just quote Confucius?”

“I did. And it was awesome.” He smiled my way and shoved me. “Come on. Let’s get set up.”



Arriving back home, I tossed myself into bed, exhausted from the show. Randy had somehow managed to bring two girls home with him, and I could tell they were having a little too much fun in the living room. He had a thing for having his own naked music parties nowadays.

I picked up my cell phone and texted Ashlyn. She was probably sleeping, yet just in case she wasn’t, I didn’t want to miss the opportunity of talking to her.

Me: All clear. Henry has no idea.

Ashlyn: He stumbled into the house a few minutes ago. How was the show?

Me: Good. I missed you in the corner booth.

Ashlyn: Wow, you really are addicted to me. Stop hugging your pillow.

I laughed out loud at her comment, wishing she were lying naked next to me in my bed. I wouldn't even have to do anything with that naked body except hold it. I loved the way she felt against me.

Me: I'll stop once you quit petting baby pandas.

Ashlyn: I thought you liked when I pet your baby panda?

I cringed.

Me: There's nothing baby about this panda.

Ashlyn: I just LOLed. You're such a dork.

Me: Text me something you wrote tonight. Something from your book?

There was a long pause. Either she was typing me an excerpt or she had fallen asleep.

Ashlyn: He never stepped in to fight her battles. Most women might have been turned off by the ungentlemanly action, yet it only turned Julie on that much more. She loved the way he allowed her to be strong for herself. She loved the way he believed she had the strength of all of the Goddesses combined. She loved the way he allowed her to be a hundred percent individual. That is precisely why she wanted to love him for the rest of time.

I read her words over and over again. Taking in each one.

Me: My father would've been right. I'm not good enough for you.

Ashlyn: I think you're just right for me.

Me: Is this the book Gabby and you were working on?

Ashlyn: No. I started something new.

She was finding herself, too. It was the most beautiful thing to watch happen—Ashlyn discovering who she was again all on her own. I felt privileged to be able to witness her growth.

Ashlyn: Henry walked into my room and stared at me for the longest... What did you say to him?

I smiled at the message and rubbed my fingers against my brows.

Me: I asked how he was doing. Maybe you should, too. Goodnight, sweets.

Ashlyn: Goodnight :)

I rolled over and began to read the letter I'd received tonight from Gabby. I knew the letter was supposed to bring me comfort, but for some reason, it only brought on doubts.



#1. Fall in love.

To the boy who's loved by a girl,

I wonder if you know how lucky you are. My little sister here doesn't know it, but she puts up walls. Her heart is locked and chained shut from the world. She hides behind her books, and she doesn't let anyone in. I figure it's because once our dad left, she never wanted to feel that way again—abandoned.

But here you are. Someone who found the key.

Can you do me a few favors?

Show her off to the world. Shout it from the rooftops. Take her out on dates. She loves to dance—even though she's really bad at it. Make other couples jealous.

Be her golden.

Because I promise you that she'll be yours.

You're doing great.

-Gabrielle



Since I read Gabby's note, I'd felt terrible. Ashlyn's sister was right. She deserved to be shown off and she deserved to go out on dates. She deserved to be loved out loud.

And I didn't know how to do that.

Chapter 20

Ashlyn

Don't stop until we're done.

Then run off the tracks.

Never look back, never look back.

~ Romeo's Quest

“Do you always walk around cemeteries alone?” I snickered, seeing Daniel.

He turned to look at me and smiled wide. “Only when I’m waiting to see a pretty girl.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re corny.” He pulled me closer to him and slowly licked my bottom lip before he kissed me. “Mmm,” I muttered against his mouth. I cleared my throat. “Jake from school sent me a text asking me out again,” I whispered, biting my bottom lip.

Daniel arched an eyebrow. “The guy can’t catch a hint, can he?” He paused and lowered his voice. “Do you want to date him?”

I stepped backwards. “What?”

“I mean...he can actually *date* you, Ashlyn. This isn’t right—meeting behind buildings, in cemeteries—”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” My eyes watered up. Why would he say such things? I was happy with him. *We* were happy. The only thing I could think of that could have brought on the change in Daniel was the note I’d given him last night.

I shouldn't have given him the note. I'd come on too strong. I'd been too forward.

He grew grim for a moment, deep in thought. I hated how I couldn't read him. His eyes blinked and he looked up.

My eyes shifted to the ground. "Is it because of what the note said? Because I-I'm sorry if it's too soon but—"

"No, Ash..." His face softened, all evidence of his sudden mood change gone. "It's nothing. Forget about it. Anyway, why did you bring it up? Jake texting you?"

I contemplated asking him about his thoughts, but I feared he would push himself away from me. Breathing deeply, I tried to clear the fog between us. "I know I can't say I'm seeing you...but maybe..." I pulled my hair to the side and held my neck out. "Maybe you can leave a mark saying that I'm yours?"

He snickered. "You want me to give you a hickey?" I nodded. He sighed. "But that's so..."

"High school-ish?" I laughed. "Don't forget, baby. Your girlfriend's still a senior."

"Mmm...girlfriend. I like the sound of that." Daniel moved his mouth to my neck and slowly began to suck on my skin, teasing me. His tongue flicked back and forth slowly and then rapidly, his sucking becoming more intense. I arched my neck in his direction, holding my hands against his hips. When he pulled away, I felt a light kiss on my neck. "I guess that makes you mine."

My head shook back and forth. "I was yours before we ever met."

"That awkward moment when you find people making out in front of your parents' graves."

My heart jumped out of my skin as I heard another voice hovering over us. I was quick to step back from Daniel in fright. His eyes moved to the guy standing near us, and I gasped.

I could've been looking at Daniel if I hadn't known better. The only differences were that this guy had buzzed hair and his blue eyes were a lot colder. A lot more lost.

“What are you doing here?” Daniel asked. His eyes were filled with a look I’d never seen from him. Hate? Love? Could someone hate and love at the same exact time?

“Well, I’m in town and thought I would come say hi to Mom and Dad. I would ask you what you were doing here but...” He stared at me with a smirk, and I curled my arms around my waist. “I think it’s pretty clear.”

Daniel’s eyes moved to me and then back to his...brother? I felt my face flushing over. How long had he been standing there?

“I’m glad you found yourself a girl. She’s cute,” the stranger said. “It probably makes it easier for you to sleep at night, eh?”

“Go home, Ashlyn,” Daniel demanded.

I looked at him, confused. Why was I being sent away? “Wh-what? Wait—”

“Now.” The word was stern and hurtful.

I was instantly worried by the way he’d spoken toward me. He’d never seemed so harsh, so distance—even when he’d found out I was his student. I felt my heart jump, and Daniel’s eyes softened when he stared into my greens.

I stepped toward him to try to comfort his sudden shift in personality, but he only stepped away from me.

That hurt.

I turned to the guy who was sporting a sly smile my way. Gabby was standing behind the two guys, playing her guitar, singing the Beatles *Let It Be*. I frowned at her, silently begging her to help me understand what was happening.

Then she was gone.

Because she’d never really been there.

After an eternity of doubts and indecisions, I left, giving them both a wordless goodbye and feeling empty inside.

I waited until I reached the outside of the cemetery to start crying. I hated how much I cried this past year. I was supposed to be stronger.



I rushed back to Henry's home and darted straight for my bedroom. I tried not to overthink things. He would text me. He would explain. Hailey was in the shower, so I was fine to cry alone in my bed. I pulled out my cell phone and waited for his text.

And waited.

And waited.

Hours passed, I missed dinner, and my mind was wandering into dark thoughts. He still hadn't texted me once.

Me: What was that all about?

My stomach filled with nerves as I waited for the ding of my phone that never came.

Me: Please don't ignore me.

Nothing.

Me: Don't do this...please...

I was begging him to reply. Begging him to answer me.

Me: We'll talk tomorrow?

Nothing. No response. I placed my hands over my face and began sobbing uncontrollably.



"I blame you for making me have to write this damn flash fic—" Ryan came stomping into my bedroom and paused when he saw me bawling on my bed. "Ashlyn, what's wrong?" He moved over to me and I began crying even more from the level of concern in his voice.

I wished I could tell him. I wished I could tell somebody, anybody. But mainly I wished I could talk to Gabby. She would've known what to say. She would've known what to do. She was the logical one, not me.

Ryan slid over my body and lay down next to me, wrapping his arms around me. I pulled him closer sobbing into his shirt. "Jesus, kid...what's going on?" he whispered.

I couldn't respond, and I doubted he was even looking for a response. Before I knew it, I felt two more arms wrap around me and another body covering me in a tight hug. *Hailey*.

We didn't speak. They simply held on to me, making sure to let me know that I wasn't alone. Henry showed up next, peeking into the bedroom. He didn't say anything, but he did come and sit at the end of my bed.

That was the most comfort I'd received from him. Ever.

Chapter 21

Ashlyn

*I like the way you lie
When I ask you to stay.
I like the way you flirt
When I need to go away.
~ Romeo's Quest*

"You might want to put your hair down," Ryan muttered against my ear at breakfast. "If Henry sees the huge hickey on your neck, he might freak out."

I gasped at his comment and reached to pull my messy bun down, covering up my neck.

Ryan snickered. "We're having a very intense conversation in Hailey's car today." He gave me a glare. "Going to the library, my ass."

Hailey stumbled into the kitchen, looking like a zombie. She grabbed a mug, poured some orange juice, and stumbled out.

"She's not a morning person, is she?" I asked.

"Not in the least." Ryan paused. "You okay? Last night you were kind of..."

"A mess?"

"A hot mess," he grinned. He always looked so effortlessly handsome. He was wearing a plain blue polo with his cross necklace and some jeans.

All he had done to his hair was run his hands through it. Yet Ryan made it look as if he'd just come from a GQ magazine photo shoot. Every. Freaking. Day.

“Yeah. I’m fine. Just going through the motions of life.”

He laughed, moving to pour me a cup of tea. “That can be a real bitch sometimes.”

He wasn’t lying. I thanked him for the tea and I hopped off the stool. I headed toward the living room, where I saw Rebecca sitting on the couch, watching the news. My fingers combed my hair down against my neck.

“Oh, hey, Ashlyn.” She smiled brightly as she sipped her coffee. “Come here. I have a question for you.” Her hand patted the spot on the couch next to her.

My butt found the sofa cushions and I sank into them. She placed both of our mugs on the table. Rebecca smiled and moved in closer, taking my hands into hers.

“How are you?”

How was I supposed to answer that?

Good. I hate almost all of the boys at the school.

Good. I love eating lunch with your gay son and Buddhist daughter.

Good. I haven’t heard from my mom, and Henry has no photos of me in his office proving that I exist.

Good. I just made out with my teacher in a cemetery last night in front of his dead parents and have the marks to prove it. Then he pushed me away suddenly with no explanation.

“I’m okay,” I muttered. “I’m good.”

She released a sigh of relief and patted my hands. “God is good, isn’t he?”

I narrowed my eyes on her and slowly nodded. “Sure.” I paused, wondering how understanding Rebecca was when it came to all issues. She never came across as too pushy or close-minded to me. So it made me wonder why Ryan and Hailey had to keep their private truths secret. The way they showed up for me last night made me want to help them, too.

“Hey, Rebecca...what would you say if I told you I liked girls?”

His hands dropped from holding mine and she chuckled a bit. “What?” Then it happened. I saw the shift of her whole personality. She smiled tightly and stood up. “I better make sure Hailey’s up for school.”

“She is. Ryan and I saw her.”

Rebecca turned off the television and moved toward the stairway. “Yes, but just to be sure. You can never be sure about these things.”

She moved in a hurry, rushing upstairs. I tried to grasp at the many different emotions that had been showcased in her eyes. Fear, guilt, anger? There was no doubt that there had been an air of restrained fury in her blues. Yet that wasn’t the main thing I’d noticed.

No, it was sadness that had prevailed amongst her looks.

But why would that have made her sad?

I heard shouting coming from upstairs, echoing throughout the hallways of the house. Rebecca and Henry were having a strong screaming match. Henry stumbled down the stairs—loudly—and was standing in front of me. He brushed his fingers against his peppered beard and sighed.

“Are you a lesbian?”

My mouth hung open at his forward question. “*Henry!*” I harshly whispered.

“Well, are you?” He paused and shifted his weight around. “Because I don’t care. Really, I don’t.” He sniffed through his nose and placed his arms across his body. “And if you don’t feel comfortable here, we’ll find somewhere else to go.”

A silence fell. I tilted my head toward him and stilled my body. His green eyes were filled with so much passion and honesty. “You would move? For me?”

He brushed his fingers against his lips and sighed. “Of course I would, Ashlyn. You’re my...” His words faltered. He cleared his throat. “You’re my daughter. And I could give a rat’s ass who you love. You’ve been through enough this year and—”

“I’m not a lesbian.”

Henry paused and arched his eyebrows. He was struck with a strange surprise. As if he'd already made it up in his mind that we were moving due to my sexuality. "You're not a lesbian?"

"I'm not a lesbian," I repeated.

"*Jesus Christ, Ashlyn!*" He sighed heavily and fell onto the chair. "That's all fine and dandy, but if we could try to avoid such topics to keep away from such fights before seven a.m., that would be great."

I turned away from Henry, who was pretty relieved that we weren't packing our bags. A smile found my lips.

He'd picked me first.

I'd never thought he would pick me first.



The car ride to school was eerily silent after the fight between Rebecca and Henry. The tension was thick. I tried my best to sink into the back seat.

Ryan eyed me through the rearview mirror and sighed. "Listen, I get what you were trying to do, asking my mom that question and all but..." He muttered something under his breath. "I know how she is. Okay? I know how she would react. Just, don't try. For one, she won't approve, and for two, I'm not ready for her disapproval."

My fingers ran across the gray-clothed seats, my heart pounding against my chest. I felt awful for even having brought it up to Rebecca. "I'm sorry, Ryan." I really was. It wasn't my place to even bring up such an issue.

We pulled into the parking lot of the school and the three of us hopped out. I watched Hailey climb out of the car and look toward Theo, who was waving her over. "I'll catch you guys later." She started in his direction and I went to stop her. Ryan placed his hands on my shoulders.

"She has to learn on her own, Chicago," he said. His voice lowered. "I know I did."

"Ryan, I really am sorry. I didn't mean to make a big issue this early in the morning. Or to make an issue at all."

“It’s okay,” he said, wrapping his arm around my shoulders. “Now as long as you tell me where you got that hickey from, we’ll be *really* okay.”

I laughed as I snuggled against him. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.” When I looked up, I saw Daniel walking right next to us into the school building, his eyes locking with mine. There was a small twitch in his lips, and his eyes were the bluest of blue against his shirt.

“Good morning Ryan and Ashlyn,” he said.

“Morning, Mr. D.,” Ryan replied, his arm still around me.

Daniel noticed Ryan’s hold and stared back at me for a split second. I pulled my friend closer to me, giving Daniel a hateful glare.

“Good morning, *Mr. Daniels.*”



English class came and Daniel didn’t look at me once. Not only had he ignored all of my text messages, but he was also ignoring me in class. Wonderful—back to square one.

“Okay, who wants to present their flash fiction first?” Daniel asked.

No one raised their hands. Stupid flash fiction. Stupid teacher for assigning flash fiction. Stupid life.

Daniel frowned, looking around. Then a bright smile came to his face. “All right, Avery. Thanks for volunteering! You’re up.”

Avery groaned. “Come on, Mr. Daniels. I didn’t volunteer,” he huffed and puffed.

“Oh...well okay. Then you were lucky enough to be picked. Get on up here.”

Avery dragged his body up to the front of class as Daniel took a seat in one of the abandoned chairs in the back of the class. Avery was a bigger kid, and the idea of hearing him read flash fiction would have made me smirk last week. But today, my eyes were puffy and I was PMSing and just all around annoyed.

Avery cleared his throat and cursed under his breath, stating how stupid this was. “Boobs, booze, football. This is the life.” The classroom

snickered; his football buddies hooted and hollered. But I noticed Avery frown. Daniel must have noticed it too.

“Try again, Avery,” he said from the back of the class. I didn’t turn around to see him.

Avery gave a sigh, cleared his throat, and read from his paper. “Searching for more, but not smart enough to get there.”

Ryan and I started clapping for him, and the rest of the class laughed. “Loser,” coughed one of his teammates. “Fat loser,” joked another. He rolled his eyes and slugged them as he walked by.

It was always the jokes that hurt the most.

Avery pushed one of his teammates. “Yeah, well, this fat loser gets more girls than you.”

Ryan laughed to himself. “Doubt it.”

Avery shot his eyes over to Ryan. “You got something to say, Turner?” What was it with football players always calling people by their last names? Did Avery even know Ryan’s first name?

Ryan rolled his eyes and leaned back in his chair. “Not a word.”

“Figures. You never really did seem to have much to say.”

Avery made his way back to his desk. The rest of the class all went up to read their flash fiction, but Ryan’s was my favorite.

“Stars exploded and I was born. Please call me Tony.” He said it and no one understood it—except me. Ryan winked my way and I smiled.

That left me to go next. Daniel didn’t even call on me, but I wasn’t surprised. His ignoring skills were on point. I walked up there with no paper in my hands and stared Daniel straight in the eyes.

“Identical twins except with death. Romeo’s quest to find Juliet.”

I saw the struggle happening in his eyes. Not knowing what to say, not knowing how to react.

Ryan asked Daniel to come up with his own flash fiction when he moved to the front of the class.

“Shakespeare, kisses, lists. The vision before reality. Dream once more.”

I hated him because I hiccupped and had tears falling down my cheeks. The class snickered at his flash fiction, but it wasn't funny.

"That doesn't mean anything!" Ryan argued.

The bell rang and Daniel chuckled to himself.

"All right, everyone. Great job today. Make sure to read chapters one through three of *To Kill a Mockingbird* for tomorrow. Rumor has it that there might be a pop quiz."

Ryan groaned as he tossed his backpack on. "It's not a pop quiz if you tell us about it, Mr. D."

"Not all rumors are true, Ryan, but it's best to plan as if they are." Daniel smirked.

I rolled my eyes. I hated his smirks.

Sigh.

I loved his smirks.

Ryan told me that he would see me at lunch. There were only a few more students left in the class. I moved over to my desk and picked up my books. "Mr. Daniels, I have a question on the reading assignment. Do you think you can help me?"

He narrowed his eyes on me. "Yeah, sure. What's up?" That was the most he'd said to me in the past hour. The last student walked out of the room and he sighed. "Ashlyn—"

"Is it because of the letter I gave you? About loving you? Because if it is—"

"Ashlyn, no. That's not it. I swear."

"Then it's simply because you're a jerk?" I waited for the response he never gave me. "I have another letter for you from my sister." He arched an eyebrow.

I placed one down on his desk. On the front it read: #25. Broken Hearts Club. He sighed, reached for it, and opened it. As I watched him pull out a photo of Gabby, I gasped. I almost lost it completely right then and there when I saw her. She was looking straight into the camera, holding up both of her middle fingers. *That's my girl.*

On the back of the picture were the words “Fuck you for hurting her!” in black sharpie.

I wanted to laugh, but I didn’t. I wanted to cry, but I didn’t.

Daniel smiled. “She had your charm.”

He was wrong though. Gabby was a lot more charming than I was. “You told me you wanted me to be yours...” I whispered, moving closer to his desk.

“I know, Ashlyn. And I do... It’s just... It’s complicated.”

I rolled my eyes. “For a very smart guy, you sure are a complete idiot. I’m the definition of complicated, Daniel. What’s the deal? You ignored me all night because of your brother—”

“Are you talking about me?”

There he was again, standing in Daniel’s doorway looking at us. I turned to face him and saw the shock in his eyes from seeing me.

“Oh... Oh wow.”

Oh no.

“This is new, huh? Going for the students, are we?” He moved into the classroom and sat on the edge of Daniel’s desk.

“It’s not what it looks like, Jace...” Daniel said in a low growl.

Jace.

I didn’t know the devil had such a sweet name.

“Really?” He leaned in closer, whispering to Daniel. “Because it looks like you’re fucking your student.”

My mouth dropped wide, shocked by his words. “We haven’t—”

“Ashlyn!” Daniel hissed, slamming his hand against his desk. “Don’t talk to him.”

“Don’t worry. I just dropped by to say hi. Here.” Jace pulled out a piece of paper and slapped it into his brother’s hand. “Call me for a little brotherly bonding later on. I’ll bring the beer. You bring the chicks?” He gave me a full-grown smile and I wanted so much to knock him out. “Just

make sure mine are legal. I already did enough time behind bars.” He disappeared from the classroom, leaving me astonished.

Daniel’s jaw clenched and he lowered his head, rubbing the back of his neck. “I need you to leave, Ash.”

“What does he have on you?” I wondered out loud.

We had been fine until his brother showed up. For a split second, I could’ve sworn we had even been...happy.

He ignored me. I released an uncomfortable laugh and squirmed around in my shoes before I turned to walk away. I’d been so stupid to even think for a second that we were *us*.

I should’ve never stopped by to see Daniel weeks ago when I saw him standing alone in the cemetery.

I should’ve kept walking. I should’ve pretended I hadn’t seen him.

But I *had* seen him.

And for a small moment in time, he’d seen me, too.



Hailey didn’t show up for lunch. I noticed that Theo wasn’t in the cafeteria either. Sitting down at the table, I sighed when I saw Daniel looking my way. He glanced away fast before anyone else could notice.

Ryan came walking over and slammed his tray down. “Okay, I know I said she had to learn on her own about Theo, but I really thought she would have made better choices.”

“She’s smart. She’ll be fine,” I said, taking some fries from his tray.

“If he hurts her again...” His voice was somber as he looked around, waiting for Hailey to walk in. “I’ll kill him.” His hand went into his pocket and he pulled out his fake pack of cigarettes.

“Ryan, what is that exactly?” I asked, curiosity finally pushing me far enough to want to question him about his fake cigarette habit.

He eyed his fingers, which were holding an invisible cigarette. A frown found his lips and he placed his hands on the table. “When I was thirteen, I told my dad I thought I was gay.”

My heart stopped beating at the mention of his dad. I'd never heard him or Hailey ever talk about their father before.

Ryan continued. "I cried and cried because we went to church, ya know? And Mom believed in hell. She still does, of course. She would tell us how sinning was wrong, how bad-doers would go to hell. So I knew how I was feeling wasn't right. *I wasn't right.*"

Oh, Ryan...

"Dad told me it didn't matter. None of it mattered. I was his kid and he loved me. He said he would talk to Mom, and I begged him not to. I begged him to keep it between us. A few nights later, I sat at the top of the staircase in our house and listened to them fight. About me. He told her that he thought I might be gay but never stated it as a fact." Ryan narrowed his eyes, looking at his fingers. "She called him a liar and a bunch of bullshit things. I guess she accused him of cheating on her, too. Which was stupid. He would never..." He paused. "She told him to leave. To never come back. I rushed to my bedroom. From my window, I watched him walk outside to the front of the house. He lit up a cigarette and started smoking it, running his hands through his hair. Then he got into his car and left."

"He didn't come back?" I asked, my gut tangled in knots.

"The headline was, um..." He narrowed his eyes, tracking back into his memory. "Paul Turner, father of two, dies in a horrific car accident on the corner of Jefferson Avenue and Pine Street."

The guilt and blame was strong in Ryan's words. His fingers lifted the invisible cigarette and he rested it between his lips.

"It wasn't your fault, Ryan."

He held his fingers up and stared at them. "The cigarette box is a reminder of why my secret is a secret. All it does is hurt people. I take the box everywhere I go."

Our conversation came to a halt when Hailey came over in a hurry. She slammed her tray down on the table. "Sorry I'm late."

I looked up, saw Theo walking into the lunchroom, and gagged. I still hated him.

“We’re back on.” Hailey smiled brightly. “I apologized for being a controlling girlfriend, and he said our spirits could still travel together.”

“*You* apologized?!” I whined, perplexed.

“You don’t understand, Ashlyn. I love him.”

Love? I was starting to wonder what that word meant. It seemed that people tossed it around to everyone nowadays. Myself included.

Ryan ignored his sister, not pleased with her choices. I had to admit that I was a bit disappointed, too.

He turned back to me. “It was Jake, wasn’t it? Did Jake give you that hickey?” I blushed.

“No.”

“But he wants to give you a hickey?”

“Yes.”

“And...the boy who did give it to you is...”

I frowned. “No longer in the picture.”

Chapter 22

Daniel

Lost.

~ Romeo's Quest

I sat on the edge of the dock, watching the sun shine down on the lake. I felt defeated, tired, drained. It seemed that every time a moment of happiness appeared, the shadows came back to shallow it up. Life wasn't fair, and I felt like a dumbass for thinking that it should be. But I *wanted* it to be. I needed life to be fair, just for a little while. Because I needed her.

Ashlyn was the only thing that fought away the darkness.

The footsteps heard behind me were heavy. I knew it was him before he even spoke. I was the one who'd called him and told him to meet me here.

"It feels weird being back here." I turned to see Jace walking my way. His hands were stuffed in his pockets. He walked over and sat next to me. "I haven't been back since Mom..." His words faded. He placed his fingers in the water, creating ripples from his touch. He infected the water without even knowing it. Because that's what Jace did—destroyed things, people. He never tried to, but he always did. "I saw Randy inside. He's living here, too?" I didn't reply. "He said you guys are at Joe's bar performing twice a month?"

Coughing, I cleared my throat. "What are you doing here? What do you want?" I asked, feeling my body start to heat up from his arrival. Whenever Jace came around, doom wasn't too far away.

He turned my way, wiping his wet hands across his jeans. His eyes were perplexed by my question. “I’m back to find out who killed Mom, Danny. And I’m a little shocked that you haven’t tried to do any damn thing about it after you had me locked up!”

My voice rose rapidly. “*I had you locked up—*” I sighed and took a breath. I’d played our reunion over and over again in my head for months. I had hoped he would have figured out why I’d had him put away, why I’d had no other choice. “I had you locked up because you would’ve been next, Jace. You would have come up with some stupid-ass revenge plan and gotten yourself killed.”

“I’m not stupid,” he hissed. “I could’ve handled—”

“You could’ve handled what?! Tracking down the asshole who killed Mom right over there?!” The palms of my hands pushed into the side of the dock, and I leaped up. Jace stood up almost faster than I did. “Maybe you could have pissed off some more fucking thugs and had them kill Dad and me before they ripped you apart, too!”

“Fuck you, Danny! *You* locked me up. *You* ratted me out. I’m your brother!” he screamed. I could see the resentment in his eyes, his fingers curled into fists.

“*You’re my kid brother!*” I shouted louder, tossing my hands up in irritation. “You’re my kid brother. I’m going to tell you once, Jace. Don’t do this. Don’t go digging back into this mess.” My eyes went to him and I crossed my arms. “I already buried Mom and Dad. Don’t make me pick out another damn plot in the cemetery.”

“I wasn’t even there...to bury my own parents.” He sniffed and ran his finger under it. His hands landed against his waist. “Red trusts me again.”

“Jace—”

“No. It’s good. I had a chance to rat him and his guys out when I went in, but I didn’t. I kept my damn mouth shut, and Red... He trusts me. He’s letting me back in.”

“Don’t you think it’s a little weird how forgiving he’s being to you?”

Jace shrugged. “I didn’t rat his guys out when I was locked up. It’s called loyalty. Something you wouldn’t know about.”

I reached into my back pocket and pulled out my wallet. “Look, Jace...I have two hundred bucks on me. We can go to the bank and I can take out more.” I held the money out toward him. “You can go stay with Grandma down in Chicago for a while. Clear your head.”

“My head is clear, Dan.”

“It’s not.” I walked over to him and wrapped my hands tightly around his head. “It’s not clear if you think for a fucking second that this Red guy trusts you. Get out of town, Jace. Please.”

“I have to find out who did it, Danny,” he whispered, his eyes filling with tears. “I have to find out who killed Mom, and the best way to do it is from the inside.”

“Why? Why can’t you just let it go? She’s gone. She’s not coming back.”

“Because I did it!” he cried, pointing to the spot where Mom died. “I’m the reason she’s...” He placed his fist over his mouth. “Her blood, her death. It’s on me.”

“No.” I shook my head. “It’s on the sick asshole who had the gun.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this, you know,” he spoke softly. “I was supposed to go to college, too. Ya know? Dad thought I would go to college.”

“You still can.”

“I wanted back in. I wanted back into the band. I wanted to get clean. I wanted to stop all of this.”

“Jace...”

He bit his bottom lip and turned away from me. He rested his forearms on the top of his head and clasped his hands together. “Red wants me to pass some of his products to people. It’s easy enough. The clients are easy targets.”

“Clients? What clients?”

He turned back toward me. “Listen, Danny. I just need a little help. There’s a few kids at your school who—”

“You’re selling to kids? You’re selling to *my students*?” My eyes widened in horror. I stepped backwards.

“It’s not me, Danny. It’s Red. He’s testing me. He’s seeing if he can fully trust me. And if I can get these things out to a few of them, he said he’ll let me get my revenge. Mom’s revenge. He’ll tell me the guy’s name who killed her. With you being a teacher at Edgewood, maybe...maybe you can help get me a few names of the kids who use.”

“You’re fucking crazy. Do you hear yourself? He’s using you, Jace! He’s mocking you, dragging you back and forth like some toy. You think he didn’t know that I was a teacher there? You think he didn’t know that it would fuck up my life, too?”

“It won’t!” he promised and lied at the same time.

“It already has.” I paused. “I won’t help. And if I see you anywhere near my school, I will have you locked up again.”

He laughed uncomfortably. “Just like that, huh?”

I said nothing.

“You’ll have me locked up again for trying to find out who murdered *our* mother?” He paused and kicked around invisible rocks. “Okay. I don’t need your help. But if you get in my way, I will put you down.”

“You’re the one trying to sell drugs to students, Jace. Not me.”

“You’re right. You’re absolutely right,” he said, “But you’re the one fucking your students, not me. What was it? Ashlyn?” My fists tightened and I could feel my heart rate increase. He must have noticed too. “Ohh, is that a touchy subject? You’re all red in the face and shit.”

“Jace,” I said coldly, but I couldn’t say any more.

“You were right about one thing, Danny.” He pulled a cigarette and lighter out of his pocket. The cigarette rested between his lips and he lit it. His fingers moved to the side of his head and he tapped it. “I am fucking crazy. So don’t cross me. Or I’ll destroy you and your little student. I wonder what kind of things the other kids would say about her. As we both know, high school can be a real bitch.”

“Jace, if this is about Sarah—” I started to warn him, but he cut me off.

“*Don’t!*” His words grew darker. “Don’t bring her into this. I’m not kidding. I will fucking ruin your girlfriend’s life.”

He started to leave, and I sighed heavily. “What would Mom and Dad think? Of what you’re doing?”

“Well”—he didn’t look back—“I think they would be proud of me for actually following through with something. For bringing Mom’s death to justice.”

And like an infectious disease, Jace was spreading his way back into my life—again. I’d got away from his trouble. I’d focused on my music. I’d focused on teaching.

Yet somehow, somehow, here we were again.



I marched back into the house and heard guitar strings being played. In the living room, Randy was sitting up on the couch, working on some new song lyrics. He looked up at me. “When did Jace get out?” he asked, playing his new tune.

“Don’t know, but he’s here.” I plopped down on the sofa. My hands ran across my face.

“He looked good though. Clean.”

I had to agree with that. I could always tell when Jace was using—he became jittery, nervous. But when I’d seen him at the cemetery and the school, he’d seemed strong. He’d looked like he had before he’d started using.

His hair was buzzed and he stood in business attire—probably something that Red guy had set up. But I *knew* Jace. I knew deep down how emotional he was, how broken he was. So if the temptation of the drugs was there, it wouldn’t be long before he welcomed them back into his life.

“What are ya working on?” I asked, changing the subject.

Randy picked up a book and tossed it to me. “Othello. I was trying to come up with some new material. I thought we could maybe open up with it on Friday for our show at The Upper Level. I know it’s a bit last minute but...”

“Let me see the lyrics.”

He handed me the paper and my eyes darted back and forth. Randy was a brilliant musician and storyteller, so I had no doubt the lyrics would be good. Yet these were better than good. These were mind-blowing.

*Silent whispers of darkened souls.
My human side is now uncontrolled.
I see colors that make no sense,
But in your eyes, I know the truth exists.*

*Kidnapped, deranged, untamed.
Come back to me. Take my hand.
Dance. Dance to forbidden lands.*

“I wanted something a bit darker. A bit grittier. Shakespeare had all kinds of sides, ya know?”

“Pass me the guitar,” I said. My fingers started strumming the guitar, feeling the strings move between my fingertips. I closed my eyes as I played, and like always, there Ashlyn was. The music only brought her closer to me, the sounds bringing my imagination to life.

I couldn’t let Jace ruin her life. And I couldn’t let her think that I didn’t care either. But what could I do?

Chapter 23

Daniel

Air is thick.

My mind is fogged.

Tell me we're not about to lose it all.

~ Romeo's Quest

The next few days of school were tough. I was stuck in a clouded, jaded mood. I'd hardly had any sleep because when I wasn't thinking about Ashlyn, I was worrying about Jace. He could hurt someone. He could hurt himself. He could hurt my students. He could hurt Ashlyn.

After class with Ashlyn never looking up from her desk, I knew I should talk to her. Try to explain the situation. Right before lunch, I saw her walking with that Jake kid. He had been by her side each and every day, trying to ease his way into her heart. Trying to steal my placement. He didn't have to try too hard though. I was merely handing it to him. I wasn't even fighting for her...

She looked my way for a split second before she turned back to him and laughed loudly. Her hand landed on his chest, and he smirked wide. The way she flipped her hair over her shoulder and giggled for him made me sick. The way he moved in close and amused her made me pissed.

He was flirting with her, and she was flirting back.

But I knew her.

She was only flirting to make me jealous.

It was working.

Even though it was only to piss me off, I knew she liked the idea of it. Touching in public. Something I couldn't give her. What kind of man couldn't give his woman the love she longed for, she needed?

My fists balled up and I stepped forward, rage filling my body. I didn't know what I was going to do, but I had to do something. I couldn't just give her up, let him have her. She might not have been mine. She might have rejected the idea of us ever being *us* after I'd fucked up and ignored her in some weird attempt to protect her, but...

I was hers.

Every part of me.

Every inch of my being belonged to Ashlyn Jennings.

And every time she laughed at something Jake said, every time she touched his arm and not mine, a part of me faded away. A part of me vanished.

"Ashlyn!" I called after her. She looked at me as if I were crazy, narrowing her eyes. "Can I speak to you about your paper?"

She told Jake that she would see him in class and came over to me. "What is it?"

I led her into my classroom and closed the door behind me. My fists remained and I leaned in a bit, whispering, "Why are you all over him like that?"

She crossed her arms. "None of your business," she remarked, attitude in her tone.

I growled, running my hands through my hair. "You're doing it to make me jealous."

"I'm not doing anything," she said with a sly smirk, loving the fact that she was getting under my skin.

"Yes *you*—" I took a breath. I lowered my voice. "Ashlyn... Now is not the time to start acting your age."

"Are you calling me childish? Me?! The only one who seems to know that communication makes things work?" Her eyes widened at my

comment and she parted her lips. “Fuck you, Mr. Daniels.”

My hands landed on her shoulders, my eyes pleading for just a moment for us to be *us*. “Ashlyn, it’s me. Daniel. I’m still me.”

I saw her eyes soften. She looked to the ground, and when she looked up, she was on the edge of tears. “I miss you.”

Without thinking, I crashed my mouth against hers, wrapping my hand around her neck. She kissed me back, slamming her hands against my chest. I lifted her up and pinned her against my storage closet. My hands cupped her breasts through her shirt and I heard a moan escape from her and into my mouth as I circled my thumbs over her hardened nipples. My hand wrapped against the edge of her shirt and I slid it up as she dug her fingers into my back, pushing her hips against mine.

I stopped myself when there was a pounding on my classroom door. Without thinking, I opened my storage closet and shoved Ashlyn into it.

My door opened and I saw Henry peeking his head inside. He was smiling my way. My heart landed in my throat. Had he seen me shove his daughter?

Holy shit, I *shoved* Ashlyn into a closet.

“Hey, Dan.”

I gave him a strained smile. “Henry, how are you?”

“Good, good. I was just wondering... Can I see you in my office real fast? About Ashlyn?”

About Ashlyn. Those words echoed in my head. The accelerated beat of my thoughts was terrifying. Everything in my body tightened. *He knows.* I wondered if Jace had told him, if he had really stooped to that level. Clearing my throat, I spoke. “I’m on lunch duty.”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “It will be fast.” A loud noise was heard from the closet and Henry raised an eyebrow. “Did you hear that?”

I started coughing harshly, trying my best to cover up the noise Ashlyn was making. “Hear something? Yeah, one of my lights needs to be changed. It’s been making a weird buzzing noise lately. Anyway, I’ll meet you down in your office in a second.”

He frowned, staring at my ceiling before he thanked me and walked away. My hands ran over my face, trying to shake myself from my own nerves. I opened the closet and Ashlyn stepped out. I slid my hands into my pockets.

“He knows?” she whispered.

I shrugged. “It’s okay.” Her green eyes relaxed a bit. I gave her a sad grin. “We’re okay.”

“No. We’re not. You know, I imagined this before...” She shook her head. “Almost being caught in school. I thought it would be sexy and adventurous. But in all reality, you just shoved me into a closet.”

My mind was racing, trying to figure out a way to explain it to her. “I know. I’m sorry. It’s just—”

“If you were caught in a relationship with a student, there might be trouble,” she muttered. “I’m so stupid.”

“Ashlyn—”

“It’s my fault, really. I live in my books. I romanticized this whole thing. But the truth is, it’s not romantic—being someone’s secret.” Her long eyelashes blinked and she shifted her weight around. “You can’t do this. You can’t pull me into your classroom again.”

“I know!” I shouted a hair too loud, but my heart was pounding aggressively in my chest. I wanted to punch something because I was so damn confused. I hated how I couldn’t be seen with her. I hated how, when we were together, she would look at the other couples holding hands with a twitch of envy in her lips. I hated everything about our situation.

I walked to Henry’s office, where he already was, and I closed the door behind me. He took a seat behind his desk and cleared his throat. The first thing I noticed was the picture of Ryan and his sister sitting on his desk. Ashlyn and Gabby were nowhere to be found.

“Thanks for meeting with me...” He sounded nervous. A lot more nervous than a father would sound if he knew his daughter was involved with a teacher. He didn’t know. Holy shit, he didn’t know. “I wanted to ask you for a favor.”

I arched an eyebrow and sat back in my chair. “What can I do for you?”

“Well, as you know...” He lifted a picture frame that was facing him and stared at it. When he sat it back down, I got a glimpse of it—the twins. They’d been there all along, facing toward Henry. “Ashlyn is my daughter. She’s been going through a lot with the loss of her sister...”

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered and meant it.

He cleared his voice and strained to get his words out. “Thank you. But the thing is, Ashlyn’s mom is dealing with some personal issues and needed space. So Ashlyn came to stay with me. Her mom, Kim, just called me and told me that a letter came from Ashlyn’s dream college in California. They are asking for one more letter of recommendation. She’s just been through so much...”

California.

The word played over and over in my head. It ran across my skin, trampling me with the truth behind it.

I nodded slowly, wanting to rush out of his office to find Ashlyn and hold her. I wanted to tell her that she couldn’t go. That she could stay with me. That after the school year, we could be together. But I couldn’t. Henry continued.

“And I know this may be out of line but...I don’t think she can handle another letdown. It’s too much. I plan to tell her about the letter later this week. But do you think—only if you feel like you can—do you think you could write her a letter of recommendation? Again, you do not have to. I just need her to have more ups than downs.”

I placed my hands on the edge of his desk. Could I write her a letter to help her get into her dream college in California? My throat dried and a sharp sting hit my eyes. I blinked repeatedly, wanting to scream, “No! She can’t go! She can’t leave me!”

My eyes shut again. And when they reopened, I said okay. I agreed to help send Ashlyn away to live her own life.

“It would be my honor.”



When I turned toward Ashlyn's lunch table, she was looking my way. A sigh of relief left her lips as she realized that everything would be fine with Henry. My feet led me to her table, where Ryan and Hailey were eating with her.

"Hey, Mr. D, you joining us for lunch?" Ryan joked.

I smiled and shook my head. "Ah, no. On a scale of one to inappropriate...that would be at the top of the charts." I saw Ashlyn lightly laugh at my comment, which made everything feel right. I missed that sound so fucking much. "Ashlyn, I'm supposed to take you to the assistant principal's office." Hailey asked why. I appeared stumped. "Don't know. He just asked for her."

"Maybe Henry saw the hickey," Ryan smirked.

I watched as Ashlyn's cheeks blushed over and she combed her hair down against her neck. She stood up from her seat, grabbed her backpack, and followed me out of the lunchroom.

"Follow me," I whispered to her.

"What's going on?" she asked.

I turned and saw the confusion in her eyes. A sad inquiry dwelled in her gaze. "Do you trust me?"

She released a breath. Her beautiful full lips turned up.

Yet she didn't follow me.

She walked beside me, our footsteps in perfect sync.

We traveled down a stairway, which led us to another staircase, leading to the basement. The space was completely silent, minus the pipes and storage closet that held all the power switches inside. We walked to a dark corner where a few unhinged doors lay against a gated area.

I lifted the door that was blocking the entrance to the gated area and moved it out of the way. Ashlyn lowered the book that was held to her chest and we stepped into the area.

"What did Henry want?" she wondered out loud.

I hesitated to tell her. I didn't want to say the words, because if I did, that would mean that California was actually a choice.

“You um...” *Shit*. “You applied to a school in California?” I posed as a question.

Her eyes widened and she turned quickly away from me. Jittery, her body shook. “University of Southern California. Gabby made me apply. I didn’t think I would get in.” She whipped back around, her long blond hair flying across her face. “I got in?”

I saw it—the look of pure joy in her face. Her jade eyes smiled so deep.

Gabby might have had Ashlyn apply, but it was her dream.

“They need one more letter of recommendation,” I choked out. Her expression shifted to disappointment. “Ashlyn, that’s amazing. They’re interested!” I wanted her to be happy about it again. I liked it best when she was smiling. “This is huge!”

Her lips turned up. She was unable to hold her joy. “It is huge, isn’t it? So what do you have to do with this?”

“He wants me to write it.”

“And you’ll do that?” she questioned nervously.

“Of course I will.”

“Don’t do it because of...this...” She gestured between her and me. “Don’t do it because of whatever this is. Only do it if you think I deserve it.”

I crossed my arms and shook my head back and forth. “All feelings aside, our situation out of the picture...you deserve it. You work hard, and you’re beyond gifted. You deserve it.”

Her face dropped. “What’s going on with you, Daniel? With us?”

She deserved an answer to that, yet I wasn’t sure I had a good one. “After I found out that you were my student...my mind went crazy.” I sighed. “Then my brother Jace showed up and fucked up my world...and now I see you with other guys and it kills me, Ashlyn. It kills me that you’ve been through so much and I can’t comfort you, can’t hold you. It kills me that there are other people who *can* comfort you and hold you.”

She listened calmly as she placed her backpack and her book on the ground. She walked over to me and took my hands into hers. My arms

wrapped around her small body and I pulled her close, breathing in her smells, her strawberry shampoo, her perfume. *Her.*

“I’m so mad at you,” she whispered against my chest.

I smiled slightly. “I know. I’m mad at me, too.”

Her head rose and she looked up at me, shaking her head. “No, I’m only mad at you because I know you’re trying to protect me from something. But I don’t need your protection.”

“I don’t know what to do, Ash. Everything’s a mess.”

“Talk to me about it. Let me in.”

I sighed, holding her against me. “You deserve so much more than hiding out in high school basements. You don’t deserve to be someone’s secret, Ashlyn. You deserve to be the chorus to a person’s favorite song. You deserve to be the dedication in their favorite book. And right now? Right now, I can’t offer you that. You deserve a shot at a normal senior year. I’m just complicating things.”

She pushed herself away from me, frowning. “Stop it, okay?” She looked up with tears in her eyes. “Stop telling me what I deserve. What’s good for me. What’s right for our situation. I don’t care about that stuff.” The tears rolled down her cheeks. “There’s nothing normal about my life. I have a dead twin. My mother disowned me. Hell, I find Hemingway freaking therapeutic.

“And you—you’re in a freaking band that bases their songs off of Shakespeare! Your mother was murdered and you were playing a concert seven days after your father died. *We. Are. Not. Normal.* I don’t want a normal senior year. *I want you.*

“If I learned anything these past few months, it’s that life sucks, Daniel. *It sucks.* It’s mean, it’s vicious, and it’s unapologetic. It’s dark and cruel. But then, sometimes, it’s so beautiful that it knocks all of that darkness out of your system with the light.

“I was so alone...” She paused and rapidly tapped her fingertips against her bottom lip. “I was so alone before I arrived at Joe’s bar. And then you sat on that stage and sang to me. You brought me the light on my darkest days. But you never open up to me. You never let me in.”

I moved over to her and brushed my thumbs underneath her eyes. “I was traveling back from Chicago when I first saw you. I went to spend a few days with my grandmother, making sure she was okay after my father’s death. I sat on that train, seconds away from falling apart. Then I looked up and saw those green eyes and I knew somehow, someway, things would be okay.” When she tilted her head up toward me, my lips glazed over hers. “You didn’t bring me the light, Ashlyn. You *are* the light.”

She smiled that perfect smile and laughed lightly. “Normal is overrated anyway. Bring on the freaks and weirdos.” She paused. “I don’t have to go to California. I can stay here with you after school is out. I can go to a community college and we can build up your house. We can be together.”

My head fell to the ground. I cleared my throat. *What am I doing?* I knew I was sending out the wrong signals to her, I knew I was confusing her. But I didn’t bring her down to the basement to reunite. My mind thought of the note Gabby had given me and the threats Jace had made. And now she was considering giving up her dream for me.

“We can’t do this anymore, Ashlyn,” I whispered.

Her eyes widened, surprised by my words. “What?”

“I can’t see you anymore.” I wondered if the words burned her as much as they were burning me.

“What are you doing, Daniel?” she questioned, stepping away from me. “You brought me down here to...to break up with me?” Her eyes glassed over, yet she didn’t let the tears fall.

I didn’t reply. I felt if I said the actual words then they would hold more truth than I was interested in succumbing to.

“Say it!” she hollered, moving over to me. She shoved me hard against the chest. “Say it! Say you don’t want to be with me!”

“Ashlyn,” I choked out. I was doing this to her; I was breaking her.

The tears started to pour out from her eyes and her body began to shake. “Say you don’t want me anymore! Say it!” she cried as she pounded against my chest. With every hit, a part of me died. With every punch, a part of her disappeared, too.

I grabbed her wrists and pulled her against me, holding her close.

"I let you in," she sobbed against me, her fists hitting my body. "I let you in and you're leaving me."

"I'm so sorry," I said, holding her in my arms. I tried my best to comfort her, but it felt pointless since I was the one hurting her. "I love you so much."

"No." She pushed herself away from my hold. "You don't get to do that. You don't get to hurt me and hold me, Daniel." She took a deep inhale and wiped away the tears still pouring from her eyes. "That's the first time you even said those words. You can't say you love me and then break my heart. So say what you really need to say. Say it and I'm gone."

I took a breath and looked down to the ground. When my eyes rose, I saw her bloodshot stare. I exhaled. "I'm breaking up with you, Ashlyn."

She let out a small whimper before all the color was drained from her face. Her body shivered for a moment. She turned toward the exit and began to walk away. "Go to hell, Daniel."

Chapter 24

Ashlyn

Don't believe the lies.

~ Romeo's Quest

What kind of asshole broke up with a person after leading them on? I needed a cold shower to calm me down, because my blood hadn't stopped boiling all day. I walked toward the bathroom to wash up and paused when I heard Henry's voice inside.

"I know... No, she doesn't know. Kim, it doesn't matter! She's staying here."

A lump formed in my throat.

Kim.

As in, my mom Kim?

"Okay. Okay. Goodbye." His voice faded away and the doorknob turned open. When he saw me, he stepped back. "Ashlyn. What are you doing?"

"Since when do you use the bathroom upstairs, Henry?"

He walked past me and shrugged. "Rebecca was in the one downstairs."

"Oh." I searched him for any kind of emotion in his body language. Nothing. "Then why were you talking to Mom?"

He rotated back toward me. There was a sudden twitch in his mouth and his eyes darted back and forth. "University of Southern California is

interested in you attending. Mr. Daniels is going to help by writing you a recommendation.”

“Don’t change the subject! And I don’t want his help!” I yapped like a child. I felt it, too. My angst, young instincts hammering my emotions.

Henry must have been thrown off by my response. His face showed bewilderment. “Calm down, Ashlyn.”

I couldn’t. It was as if the world were trying to push me to the edge, and I wanted to jump. How could Mom call Henry but not me? Not one text message my way? “I won’t calm down! I’m tired of everyone trying to help me when I don’t ask for help. You all don’t know what’s best for me. I didn’t want to move here. I didn’t want to go to your stupid high school. I didn’t want anything to do with you. Why can’t anyone just talk to me? I’m nineteen years old, not five! I’m a freaking adult! You’re ruining my life!” I rushed away with tears and slammed my bedroom door.

Hailey was sitting on her bed with Kleenex next to her. She’d been sick for the past few days, and her nose was redder than ever. “Ashlyn, what’s wrong?”

Before I could respond, the bedroom door opened and Henry stepped inside. “Hailey, Ashlyn and I need to talk.”

“I don’t want to talk to you!” I screamed, feeling the burning tears running down my face. I crashed onto my bed and cried against my pillows. “I don’t see why you all won’t just tell me the truth! Someone just let me in!”

“She’s in rehab, Ashlyn.”

His words sounded as if they had been dosed in heavy guilt. I looked up, my eyes red, confused. Hailey picked up her box of Kleenex with widened eyes.

“Oh? What’s that, Ryan?! You need me? I’ll be right there.” She awkwardly made her way around Henry and disappeared.

“What?” I muttered. My stomach was in knots. I held on to the pillow so tight I was almost certain the stuffing was going to fall out from pressure overload. I blinked rapidly, trying to control my thoughts. “What do you mean she’s in rehab?”

Henry's feet sank into the carpeted floor with each step he took closer to me. "She started drinking a lot more after we found out Gabby was sick."

"She had it under control," I whispered.

His head shook. "No. She didn't. At the funeral, she told me she was checking herself into a three-month program. She gets out around Christmas. Ashlyn, your coming here had nothing to do with your mom not wanting you. It was Kim's idea because she wanted to be able to be the parent you deserved."

A tinge of anger ran through me. "So sending me off to a person who doesn't even care about my whereabouts was her choice?! I could have stayed with Jeremy! He's more of a father to me than you ever have been!" I tasted it—the brutal flavor of my words. I hated myself for screaming them at Henry, but he was the only one there. And it had always been so easy to blame him for all of my letdowns in life.

Henry cleared his throat and swallowed hard. "It's funny. You begged for people to talk to you, to let you in because you are an adult. Then when you are let in to the reality of adulthood, you instantly turn into that five-year-old girl you denied being."

I knew he was right, but I hated the idea of him being right. I *was* that five-year-old hurt girl. Every thought flying through my mind was based on the idea of hurting Henry. Because he had hurt me by being right. I didn't want him to be right! I wanted him to be the deadbeat father who'd walked out!

"At least I'm not a cheater!"

His eyes glassed over and he stumbled back, stunned. "You're grounded." His words didn't make sense to me. Could he ground me? Did he reserve that right?

"I'm going out tonight." I crossed my arms across my chest, sitting up straight.

"No. You're not. As long as you live here, you follow my rules. I'm sick of it, Ashlyn!" His voice rose, sending chills through me. "I'm sick of the attitude. I'm sick of the blame. I'm sick of feeling like I can't ask where you're going because you might get pissed. I'm sick of it all. Yes, I wasn't there when you were younger. I wasn't there when you needed me the most."

I fucked up. But right now? Right now, you don't get to talk to me any damn way you want. Right now, I'm in charge."

"But—"

"No buts. For the next week, you go to church, go to school, and come home. Wash, rinse, repeat. End of story. Dinner's in an hour."

"*I'M. NOT. HUNGRY!*"

"*I. DON'T. CARE!*" He left in haste, leaving his footprints in the carpet and slamming the door, making me scream against my pillow in irritation.



I sat at the dinner table while everyone took part in their prayers again. My folding chair was cutting into my thighs still, and I wiggled around in my seat.

Ryan bent over to me. "Switch spots?"

I declined his offer. He asked me almost every time we ate.

"Amen," was muttered.

Henry was sitting across from me, so I made sure not to look his way. I hated the idea of being in the same room with him. I didn't even know why I was. *Stand up! Go! Leave!* My brain was screaming at me to make my dash and say, "Screw you!" to Henry. But my heart was stupid, and currently it was louder than my head.

A part of me was pleased with the jerk for punishing me. He'd never looked more like a father than he had in that moment.

"Ashlyn, I hear you're grounded for a while," Rebecca said flatly, eating her dinner.

My eyes shifted to my peas, which I pushed around. "I guess."

"Well, you'll have a lot of company. Ryan's grounded, too."

Ryan pushed away from the table, shaking it. "What?! What did I do?!"

Rebecca's voice was calm as ever. "What didn't you do, Ryan? Rumor has it you were at a party last weekend."

Ryan's mouth dropped open and he rolled his eyes. "Really? You're grounding me because I was at a party?! I've been at fifty parties this year!"

"No. I'm grounding you because of the drugs I found in the laundry."

My eyes darted to Hailey, who was still from shock. Ryan's confusion was painted across his face. When he turned toward Hailey, he cleared his expression and sighed, knowing for a fact that they were his sister's.

"Fine. I'm grounded. Big deal." He ran his hands through his hair and stayed calm. I didn't know I could love Ryan more until I witnessed him take the blame for his younger sister.

"For the month." Rebecca was coming down on him hard, and I cringed by the detestation in her tone. "Actually, make it two months."

"What the hell is your problem?!" Ryan screamed, pushing himself farther from the table. "Seriously. What the fuck did I ever do to you?!"

"Watch your language." His mom was angry, but it seemed like it had nothing to do with the drugs she'd found.

"Why would I?! Even if I did watch my language and do all of the 'good boy' things that you want me to do, I wouldn't be enough for you. For the love of God, just say it. Say that you blame me for Dad's death and then maybe for one day you can stop acting like such a complete bitch!" The words fly off Ryan's tongue as fast as Rebecca's hand slapped his face.

Henry stood up, stunned, and stepped between the two. "Cool it! Okay? Everyone take a breather!" Rebecca pushed to move around Henry, but he held her back.

"You're an ungrateful boy who doesn't know how much I helped you. I saved you, Ryan!" She had tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Saved me?! You're crazy."

Hailey rocketed from her chair. "They were my drugs."

The room went silent until Rebecca laughed. "Don't cover for your brother, Hailey."

"I'm not." She turned to her mom and her face went pale. "Theo gave them to me. I thought they would help our relationship because I wanted to have sex with him before he went to college. He told me that he would love me if I just tried what he liked."

Rebecca's eyes widened in horror. She ran her hands up and down her sides, pacing back and forth. When her body froze, she shook her head. "This is your fault!" she screamed at Ryan. "Y-you set a bad example for your sister with your devilish ways!"

"Rebecca!" Henry roared, looking at her as if she were a monster.

"It's true! He killed his father and now he's trying to kill his sister!"

"Shut up!" I screamed, unable to contain myself from the hateful words she'd just spit at Ryan.

The room reached its peak for the evening.

Ryan's shoulders fell in a world of dismay at his mother's words. He started to clap slowly, a sad grin on his lips. "And there it is, folks." He took a final bow and walked out of the front door, slamming it shut.

We all stood there, the words of hate echoing off the walls.

"How could you?" Hailey whispered. "Dad's death already destroyed him. He was already terrified that you blamed him."

She followed after Ryan, and I was quick to travel to the front porch, too.

He was sitting there with his fake cigarette box in his hands, tapping it against his knee. "I'm fine, girls."

We each took a seat on the porch next to him, the cold winter air biting at our faces. Hailey's red nose kept sniffing and Ryan wrapped his arms around his little sister, trying to warm her up. But the sniffles weren't from her cold. They were from the tears.

That night, we each lit a fake cigarette. For past hurts and present pains.

Chapter 25

Ashlyn

Never lose sight of the things that make sense.

~ Romeo's Quest

December came with a heavy supply of snowfall. Ryan and Rebecca hadn't spoken a word to one another since the big fight. It'd been weeks since Ryan's been tapping his fake cigarette box against his leg.

Jake was having a party tonight, and I wasn't looking forward to it at all. But I was going for Ryan, who hadn't stopped talking about our fake IDs since we'd gotten them. Plus, he really needed a night out, even though he was technically grounded.

Then there was my big issue that didn't seem so big in the scheme of things, but in my heart, it was gigantic.

I missed Daniel. I hated the fact that I missed him so much, but I did. I cried in the shower sometimes. Other times I cried into my pillow. I also cried because I was certain he wasn't tearing up over me.

Before heading home to meet Hailey and Ryan for the party, I stopped by the library to return my books—and I picked out another one to read in a corner at Jake's house.

As I searched for my next read, I heard my name being called. "Ashlyn?"

I looked up to see a familiar face that made me want to cry even more because it was linked to Daniel. "Hey, Randy. How are you?" I whispered,

hoping not to draw too much attention to the librarian.

He leaned his back against the bookshelf and I watched the novels rock slightly. My throat tightened at the idea of all of the pages and pages of stories crashing to the ground. "I'm good." He held a book up. "Just picking up some song material. I haven't seen you around lately. Did Dan and you get into a fight?"

No. More of a, 'it's not you, it's me' type thing.

"We aren't seeing each other anymore."

Randy looked generally surprised. "What?! He didn't say anything about y'all breaking up."

My heart twisted harshly in my chest.

That hurt.

"Yeah, well..." I gave him a strained grin. A bad taste developed in my mouth as I stood with Randy. I didn't want to talk to him about Daniel. Especially about how Daniel wasn't thinking of me.

Randy crossed his arms and leaned in toward me. "You misunderstood me, I think, Ashlyn. When Dan is hurting, he doesn't talk about things. He closes himself off. And since his parents passed away, you have been the only thing that has been able to open him back up... Is it because of the student-teacher thing?"

My eyes shifted. How did Randy know about that? I thought Daniel didn't want to tell anyone. "I don't think we should talk about this." For the first time since I'd met Randy, I really looked at him. His shaggy hair danced across the top of his eyebrows. His thin lips curved only halfway when he smiled, and his eyes were darker than a cave.

Randy narrowed his cave-colored eyes and pursed his lips together. "Ashlyn, are you all right? You look like you're going to pass out."

My knees almost buckled, but I placed my hand on the bookshelf to keep me steady. "I'm fine."

He hiked his thumb back toward the library exit. "I can give you a ride home if you need it?"

"No, it's fine." I looked around, feeling extreme anxiety. He received another forced grin from me. "I gotta get going."

“Yeah,” he said, holding up his books. “Me too. We have a show tonight. Take care, okay?”

Take care. Yeah right.



Heading back toward Henry’s house around four thirty, I narrowed my eyes when I saw Hailey crying on the steps while Ryan spun around on the front lawn in the snow.

“What’s going on?” I wondered out loud, moving in toward the house.

Ryan laughed when he saw me approaching him. He tossed his hands up into the air with the biggest smirk on his face. “I’m a walking statistic!” he screamed, racing over to me.

I gave him a short grin, not knowing what he was talking about but loving his overreacting nature. “What do you mean?” I asked, watching him jump up and down. He tossed my hands into his and started to spin me around, forcing me to jump up and down. I couldn’t help but laugh. “What the hell is going on, Ryan?!”

His deep chuckles filled the air and he bent over, grabbing his gut with laughter. “My mom went through my phone and found all of my text messages. *From the Tonys!* Holy shit! She cursed me, prayed for me, and then kicked me out. I’m eighteen, gay, and living out of my little sister’s car!” He smiled brightly and turned to Hailey, who was bawling her eyes out. “Thanks again for the keys, Hailey.”

My laughter came to a halt, and his continued on and on. “Oh my gosh, Ryan, that’s not funny...”

He had tears pouring from his eyes and he was shaking his head back and forth, louder laughter following. “I know! I know! But if I stop laughing, I’ll realize just exactly how fucked up everything is. And I’ll realize how much I have this ever-loving need to stop breathing. There have been so many times in the past hour where I just wished to stop. So please...”

His laughter continued, but this time I could hear the fear in every chuckle, the pain in each sparkle of light. A sad smile fell from my lips and I laughed. I laughed with him as he spun me around in a circle. I waved

Hailey over, and her hands were soaked with tears, but she took our hands and spun with us. Laughing, giggling, chuckling. My ribs started hurting after a while, but I wouldn't stop, because if I stopped, I had this feeling that Ryan would instantly fall to the ground and his lungs would just give up.

And I was in desperate need of him to breathe.

Just breathe.



“We are not going to the party,” I ordered as I sat in the driver’s seat of Hailey’s car. Ryan was determined to go drown his problems away, but I had a strong feeling that was the worst thing he could do.

“Oh yes we are,” Ryan argued.

“No, we are not.”

“My mom just kicked me out of her house—I am going to a party tonight.”

Hailey came to the car with a few of Ryan’s things in a suitcase. She tossed it into the back seat and then slid into the car. “I only grabbed a few outfits. Because this is going to blow over.” She paused and looked at Ryan and me. “This is all going to blow over, right?”

Ryan looked at me and then toward the house. “You should go back inside, Hailey,” he sighed.

“What? No way! Mom is acting crazy!” she cried, tossing her hands up in annoyance. “I’m not leaving you.”

Ryan turned around to face his sister and he wrapped his hands around her head. “I’m not leaving you either.” He reached forward and kissed her forehead. “Now go inside because you’re too good for Theo. And too good to ditch Mom tonight.”

“But I hate her,” she frowned.

“Oh, don’t hate her because of her and my issues,” Ryan laughed. “Go tell her you’re a Buddhist, and then you can hate her for her reaction to that.”

Hailey laughed lightly and Ryan wiped away the tears falling from his younger sister's eyes. "When I turn eighteen, I'm running away with you and Ashlyn."

"We'll move to California. You can become a yoga instructor. Ashlyn will be a bestselling author, and I'll be a prostitute on Hollywood Boulevard."

He made his sister laugh again, and I saw a small grin form on his face. Hailey sat up straight. "Go big or go home, right?"

Ryan nudged his sister in the shoulder. "Go home, Hails."

She sighed and nodded. Her door opened and she smiled back to her brother. "I love—"

"You," Ryan finished.

"Promise you'll look after him, Ashlyn?"

I promised.

Henry walked out of the house after Hailey went inside. He looked my way, waving me over. "I'll be right back, Ry."

I climbed out of the car and moved over to Henry, crossing my arms. "What the hell happened?" I whispered, turning my back to Ryan.

Henry's eyes were heavy as he rubbed the back of his neck. "Rebecca... She..." He lowered his head. "How's Ryan doing?"

"As well as possible, I guess."

Henry reached into his pocket and pulled out a wad of cash. "I have three hundred on me. Give it to Ryan for the weekend. I'll look into finding an apartment for him."

I took the cash from Henry and nodded. "She's not going to change her mind, is she?"

"She blames him for their father's death." His fingers traced through his peppered beard. "This had nothing to do with Ryan being gay. It has everything to do with Rebecca never working through her own demons. She would've found a reason to kick him out regardless."

I knew what it felt like to be kicked out when you needed someone the most. I thought back to my mom and the choice she'd made to ship me off

to Henry's. Then I paused, realizing how lucky I was to have somewhere to go. Ryan had no one, nowhere to turn.

"Stay close to him, all right? And check back in with me?" Henry asked.

"Yeah, okay." I turned to move back toward the car and paused. "Thanks, Henry. For helping him."

He gave a halfway smile and headed back inside.

I moved back to the car, climbed in, and put it in drive. "Where to, buddy?"

Ryan smiled and slumped down in his seat, pinning his shoes on the dashboard. His fingers were holding his fake ID. "To the liquor store!"



We walked down the aisles of the liquor store, packing our shopping cart with whatever Ryan wanted. "We don't really need to worry about the fake IDs," Ryan said. "I gave the cashier his first blowjob last year."

I didn't know if I should laugh or cry. So I did neither.

When we rounded the corner toward the wine, he stopped pushing the cart. An older couple stood in front of us and Ryan gasped.

The couple looked up to see him and a wave of shock washed over their faces. "Ryan," the older lady said, giving him a wry smile. She glanced at our cart filled with booze but tried her best to not show her concern. "How are you doing, darling?"

She was beautiful. Shoulder-length blond hair, the sweetest brown eyes. Her small frame was covered up with her peacoat.

Ryan's eyes watered over. "It's good to see you, Mr. and Mrs. Levels."

The older guy smiled the same way his wife had. "Avery mentioned you last week. I was going to call to check up on you—"

Ryan cut in, leaning against the cart. "I'm fine. I'm okay."

The man nodded his head and frowned. "It was good seeing you. If you ever need anything, just give us a call, okay?"

"Okay. Thanks. It was great seeing you both."

Mrs. Levels walked over to Ryan and pulled him into a hug, whispering something into his ear. By the time she pulled away from him, they both had tears falling from their face.

“You too, Mrs. Levels.” Ryan smiled.

The couple turned away, never questioning the alcohol. Never questioning anything, really.

“Who were they?”

“Avery’s parents,” he sighed as he started pushing the cart. His finger brushed under his nose as he sniffled.

We picked up the alcohol and headed back to the car and straight to Jake’s.

Although neither of us was really in a partying mood.

Chapter 26

Ashlyn

Getting better every day.

I say with lies against my taste.

~ Romeo's Quest

“He told me a few months ago that he wanted to come out. That he didn’t care what anyone thought. He said that he loved me and didn’t care who knew.” Ryan snickered and tossed back another shot of vodka as we both sat against a wall.

The bottle resting in his other hand was almost halfway empty, and I had every plan to take it away from him any second now. There was a random couple tonguing about three feet away from us, and the music was blaring throughout the house. This was the last place Ryan and I needed to be.

Avery came around the corner, and when he turned to face Ryan, I saw the broken pieces that formed both of the lost souls. Avery’s bottom lip shook before he turned and walked away. Ryan turned toward me, his eyes watering over, his legs trembling.

“I told him I wasn’t ready for that, to come out. But he wanted to tell his parents anyway. The results were a lot of tears, hugs, and understanding. I fucking hate understanding, hugging, tearful families. Bring on the dysfunctional freaks.” He smiled, but I saw behind it and listened to the pain in his next words.

“He got kicked out of Bible study because a few people in the church found out. His parents found a new church. Then I broke up with him. Because it scared me—loving him—and I didn’t want to lose my mom. I love him so much that every breath I take reminds me of him. So sometimes I hold my breath. I try to make it stop. I try to make myself not be this way.” His sobs grew heavier. His sorrow only deepened. “I want this shit to stop.”

“Ryan...” I cried, feeling completely helpless. Taking the alcohol and shot glass away from him, I handed it to a random person walking by. They took it without question.

Ryan sat up a bit and turned his head toward me. His fingers ran through my hair and his blue eyes keep crying. He moved in closer to me, pressing his lips against mine, wrapping his arms around me. I didn’t pull back. Our lips were covered with our salty tears.

“Make it go away, Ashlyn. Fix me,” he whispered, kissing me again and again.

“I can’t fix you, Ryan.” I said. “You’re not broken.”

Ryan cried for a while longer, shaking uncontrollably. I cried, too, because crying alone always felt so depressingly sad.



“We’re going home,” I whispered into my tired friend’s ear.

Ryan chuckled. “What home?! I live in a car!”

I frowned and kissed his forehead. He nodded against me and drunkenly stood up. “You stay here. I’m going to get our coats.”

I moved toward Jake’s bedroom and opened the door to find more people making out. Surprise, surprise. I started digging through all the coats piled up on the bed, and when I turned to leave with our coats, I bumped right into Jake. His eyes were bloodshot, his hair was a mess, and I was certain that there were more wet spots on his shirt than dry spots from his spilled beer. But somehow, he still looked friendly as ever.

“Hey! I haven’t seen you all night! I thought you skipped out on yet another awesome Jake Kenn party.” He gave me a sweet smile and nudged me in the arm.

I tried my best to look happy. “Yeah. It’s been great! But I gotta get Ryan home...” *What home?* “Thanks for having us.”

“There’s nothing I can do to get you to like me, huh?” Jake blurted out. Terrible timing. He must have seen the look of shock in my eyes. “Sorry. I’m drunk and stoned off of my ass, so I’m a bit forward.”

“Jake, you’re a great friend—” I started, but he laughed.

“But...”

My shoulders rose and fell. “But I kind of loaned my heart out to someone. And he hasn’t really returned it yet.”

He sighed heavily and tossed his hands up in the air. “You can’t help a guy for trying.”

I giggled and kissed him on the cheek. “Goodnight, Jake.”

“He’s not going to give it back, you know. Your heart.” His eyes fell to the floor. “Because when a guy gets a heart like yours, he keeps that shit forever.”

Forever.

What a terrifying word.

I walked out of the bedroom to see someone I’d wished to never see again. “Jace,” I whispered to myself, seeing Daniel’s brother standing with a group of kids, holding out a bag of pills. For every pill he handed out, he took one for himself.

My head grew dizzy. My face was hot.

His head rose in my direction, and our eyes locked. My heart tightened and I turned away, hurrying toward Ryan. I tossed his arms into his coat in a rush. “Time to go. *Now.*”



I might have been crazy, but I didn’t care. Ryan needed a place to stay. We sat in the car outside Daniel’s house. He hadn’t come home yet, but I figured he should have been pulling up soon. His show should’ve ended a while ago.

Ryan lay back in the passenger’s seat. “So, you and Mr. Daniels are...”

“Were.” I sighed.

“And the hickey was from...”

“Him.” I sighed again.

“And he broke up with...”

“Me.”

This time Ryan sighed. “What a fucking crazy asshole. Has he seen your boobs?!”

I smirked at his comment.

Daniel’s Jeep pulled up to the house and his headlights shone on the car. I hopped out to make sure he saw that it was me. His car came to a quick stop and he jumped out, rushing to my side.

“Ashlyn, what...what’s wrong? Are you okay?” He saw my puffy eyes and his fingers touched them. I shivered from his touch. He wrapped his arms around me as if we’d never broken up in the first place. “Are you hurt?”

I shook my head. “I...I need your help.” Ryan climbed out of the passenger’s seat of the car and I felt Daniel’s fear through his hold against me. He swayed in a sudden grip of anger.

“Ashlyn, what did you do?” His voice was low, panic-filled.

Ryan held his hands up in a surrendering stance. “Don’t worry, Mr. D. I mean no harm.” He then began to chuckle. “Holy shit, you’re sleeping with our teacher!”

“Ryan!” I hissed, giving him a stern look. He just kept laughing. I turned to Daniel. “He’s drunk.”

“Yeah, you don’t say? Jesus Christ! Are you trying to get us caught?”

“Oh whatever, Daniel. I told one person! You didn’t have a problem telling Randy! So call it even.”

“What are you talking about? How did you know I told Randy?” He narrowed his eyes on me. Those beautiful blue eyes. No. Wait. *Don’t look into his eyes.* I hated him still.

“It doesn’t matter. It’s not like we’re an *us* anymore anyway.” I paused. “Can Ryan stay here?”

“What?” he asked, confused at my sudden comment.

I had to admit that I almost smiled at his confusion until I remembered why Ryan needed a place to stay. I filled Daniel in on the situation and watched as his puzzlement slowly transformed to utter disbelief.

“What is he going to do?” he whispered, looking toward Ryan, who was now standing on his porch. I shrugged. “This isn’t fair, Ash...” He blinked his eyes, and when his blues looked into my greens, I wanted to cry. “Because you know I’ll do anything for you.”

“Except love me,” I giggled nervously. He opened his mouth to object, but I didn’t give him a chance. “Look, you can say no, okay? I know you can lose your job if you do this.”

“I think I’ll lose even more if I don’t.” Daniel headed for the porch and unlocked his front door. “Ryan, there’s a spare room down the hallway to the left. Go to bed.”

Ryan smiled and slugged Daniel in the arm. “I always liked you, Mr. D. No homo...” He paused and laughed at himself. He held his thumb and pointer finger very close to one another. “Well, maybe a little homo.”

With that, Ryan stumbled into the house. Daniel nodded toward the front door. “Come on. It’s freezing out.”

I didn’t move.

Daniel looked back to me, a perplexed look on his face. I looked up to the snow falling down over us. I took one small step in his direction. “This doesn’t mean I don’t hate you still, because I do. I hate you.”

“I know.”

Another small step. “But I like you a little for taking him in tonight.”

By ‘hate’ I’d meant love. And by ‘a little’ I’d meant a lot.

Chapter 27

Ashlyn

Find a way to be better.

Or find a way to be okay.

Whatever you choose, I'll stay out of your way.

~ Romeo's Quest

Walking into the house, I couldn't help but smile when Daniel and I checked on Ryan. "He went right instead of left," Daniel whispered, staring at Ryan sleeping in his bedroom. "You can take the guest room."

"I'll sleep on the couch," I offered.

Of course he refused. He went to get me a few extra blankets and pillows. I sank into the side of the bed for a moment. My whole body was sore, exhausted. I reached for my cell phone and texted Henry. He had already sent me quite a few messages, but this was the first time I really had a chance to reply.

Me: We're safe. We're sheltered. We're okay.

Henry: Thank God. I'll call you tomorrow. Goodnight, Ash.

Me: Night.

A few minutes later, I looked up to see Daniel reentering the bedroom. He placed the pillows and blankets on the dresser.

“Follow me real fast,” he said, his eyes glowing like blue coals. “I have something for you.”

I narrowed my eyes, but I followed him. He led me down the hallway and we stopped in front of his bathroom. He opened the door and stepped back.

“A bath,” he said, nudging his head inside. “Randy had some weird bubble bath soap in the cabinet. Each week, he tries to draw me a bath with some essential oils to de-stress me.” He snickered but frowned. “I grabbed one of my t-shirts and a pair of my shorts for you to wear to bed. They’re on the sink counter.”

I frowned. “Why are you being so nice to me?”

He didn’t reply right away. His brows lowered as he searched his mind for the right words. “Don’t mistake my distance for my not caring. It’s actually the complete opposite.” He guided me into the bathroom and closed me inside.

My hand rested against the door. My eyes shut. “Still here?” I whispered. A small whimper left my lips when I didn’t hear him.

“Still here.”

I sighed as I stripped out of my clothes. I moved over to the tub to see small daisies floating on top of the bubbles. “Daniel,” I whispered, placing my hand against my chest.

My toes were first to touch the warming water, and then I allowed my whole body to sink down into the bubble bath. It was hot, but not too scorching. Comfortable. Relaxing. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. The water waved back and forth with every small movement I made.

I turned my head toward the bathroom door when I heard the guitar strings being played. My heart jumped into my throat as Daniel’s voice flowed underneath the door.

Forever always scared me because it never came.

I lost all sense of fear when she whispered her name.

The tears didn’t even give me the option of not falling. His voice was so soft, sounding so far away. Yet at the same time, I could feel the words in my heart, my soul.

*The world spins faster,
Yet she slows down time.
I don't know how, but I need her to always be mine.
I lost her due to mistaken roads. I lost her due to secrets untold.
I lost her, and in turn, I lost myself.
So someone please help me on this quest
To find
Finding, finding, finding
My Juliet.*

I laid my head against the back of the tub and my body relaxed completely. He continued to strum his guitar strings. A warming feeling of peace crossed over me as I remembered how Gabby would play her guitar for me whenever I was feeling down and stressed.

I wished she could've played for Ryan. His poor mind was a mess, and I knew it would be a while before he was okay.

My fingers rubbed against one another, turning into raisins after about an hour. Standing up, I watched as the water dripped down my body. The towel sitting on the counter was wrapped around my wet body. Moving over to the mirror I stared at myself.

"I miss you, Gabby," I sighed. I still saw her reflection inside my eyes.

My fingers ran through my locks of hair before I took the wet hair tie from my wrist and wrapped all of my locks up into a bun. Using the towel to dry my body off, I started to get dress. Daniel's shorts were too big for my body, yet at the same time they fit perfectly. When I unfolded the t-shirt, memories rocked my entire being.

I looked at the missing sleeve on the shirt and smiled, remembering that first night when Daniel had cut off the sleeve for me. There were plenty of things he wasn't telling me. So many secrets he was keeping from me.

But at the end of the day, all drama set aside, he was the boy who'd helped a girl out of the dark.

Opening the bathroom door, I saw Daniel standing. His guitar was leaning against the wall, and he gave me a small smile.

“We should talk,” I said.

He nodded and reached into his pocket. He pulled out his father’s knife and walked over to me. I arched an eyebrow, and he kept smiling. Carefully, he began cutting off the other sleeve of my t-shirt.

“We’ll talk. I promise. But right now...” He took the sleeve and placed it in my hands. “Right now, Ryan needs you.”

I looked down the hallway in the direction of the light sobbing that was heard. My stomach flipped. My head lowered. “What do I say to him?”

“You don’t have to say anything. Just be there for him.”

My footsteps were slow, terrified for my friend. When I walked into the room, I saw him falling apart. He was hiding his sobs against his pillow, losing himself beneath the sheets.

I moved over to him and climbed into bed. His red, tired eyes looked at me. I held the sleeve of the shirt out to him and he frowned. He took the sleeve from me and cried into it, deeply, painfully, truthfully. My arms wrapped around him and I pulled his body to me. His tears soaked me as his head lay against my shoulder.

“It’s all right, Ryan,” I lied to him, hoping my lies would someday become true. “You’re okay. You’re okay.”

You’re okay.

Chapter 28

Daniel

*Taking a chance that you'll let me back in.
I'd fucked up so much I would understand,
If you didn't even want to be my friend.*

~ Romeo's Quest

There wasn't a chance in hell I would be falling to sleep any time soon. Ashlyn and Ryan had finally snoozed off around three in the morning. It was now four. I stood over the sink pouring out a bottle of vodka. Sitting on the counter were three more bottles of whiskey, rum, and scotch that were empty.

Everything Ryan had gone through last night was dangerous. Every emotion he had been feeling was deadly. The last thing he needed was to wake up in the middle of the night or something and find a way to try to drown out the noises in his head.

I'd watched Dad drown out his troubles in the same way. The last thing I wanted was for Ryan to go down that same dark road. He was a good kid. Some of the papers he'd written in class had showcased how lost but brave he was. I just hoped he could remain brave.

My head shot up when I heard the back door open. Randy came walking in, followed closely by Jace, who was wearing a backpack. When Randy saw me, his eyes narrowed.

"Dan, what are you still doing up?" He glanced to the empty bottles on the countertop. Next, I received a confused look. "What's going on?"

I sighed. My eyes moved to Jace, whose eyes were bloodshot, his body sweaty. He wasn't even wearing a coat in the cold air. The way he was fidgeting with his fingers and blinking his eyes shut tight made me pissed.

He was using.

Randy noticed my dismay. "I found him walking down the streets in Edgewood. I couldn't just leave him, ya know..."

Jace moved over to the kitchen table and pulled out a chair, slamming his head down on the table.

Randy frowned. He stepped closer to me. "He's been going on and on about some Red person. Danny, you don't think he's dealing again, do you?" I didn't reply. Which was a reply enough. "Shit." Randy furrowed his brows.

"Randy, give me a few minutes with my brother," I said, anger gracing my tone. He nodded and headed out of the room.

Jace's head rose a little and he laughed. "Oh fuck. Not one of the big-brother 'I'm disappointed in you, Jace' speeches. Please spare me." He chuckled again. "By the way, I saw your girlfriend at the party. She's sexy, isn't she?"

My hands formed fists and I tapped them against the sink counter. "How many of my students did you sell to tonight? Or did you just take it all for yourself?"

"Fuck you, Danny," Jace muttered, lowering his head.

Yeah. Fuck me. I moved over to him and reached for his backpack, which made him jerk up.

"Let go!" he hissed, trying his best to keep me from the bag.

I rolled my eyes, knowing that Jace couldn't take me when he was fully healthy, so the idea that he thought he could while he was high was almost comical. I shoved him back down to the chair before he could blink.

I unzipped the backpack to find bags with pills galore. "You're so fucking stupid, Jace!" I screamed, moving over to the sink. He'd been walking down the street, high out of his mind, with a backpack filled with drugs. Clearly he wasn't in his right mind.

“Don’t you fucking dare!” Jace yelled, hastily standing from his chair, knocking it over.

My finger flicked on the garbage disposal and I poured one of the bags of pills into the sink.

“You’re crazy, Danny! Do you know how much that was?!” he cried, moving toward me, grabbing his bag back. “Red is going to kill me! He is going to kill me, Danny! Because of you!”

“No—you did this, Jace. You don’t get to put this on me!” I filled up a glass of water and tossed it in his face. “Wake up, Jace! Wake the hell up!”

He spat at my feet. “Go to hell.”

“Get out of here.”

“It’s my parents’ house, too!” He stumbled but he didn’t fall. “I can stay if I want!”

I grabbed his arm and yanked him to the back door, shoving him outside. “You can stay in the boat shed. But I swear to God...if you bring that shit into Mom and Dad’s house again, I will have you arrested.”

His fingers were fidgeting against him and he shook his head back and forth. “I hope you had fun with your student. Because if I get caught, so do you two.”

I slammed the door shut and a deep scream rose out of me as I kicked over the trash can. “Dammit!” I cursed, running my hands over my face. My eyes opened to see Ashlyn standing in the entrance to the kitchen. Her eyes were filled with worry and fear “Have you met my brother Jace on drugs?” I snickered sarcastically.

She frowned. “I wish I hadn’t.” She rocked back and forth ever so slightly. “He blackmailed you, didn’t he? To stay away from me?”

“He was going to destroy your reputation, Ashlyn...”

She walked my way and ran her hand against my cheek. Then she stood on her tiptoes and kissed me long and deep. I wrapped one of my arms around her back.

“Let’s go to bed,” she suggested.

“Ashlyn,” I started to object. Her fingers landed against my lips.

“No. Not now. We are not going to try to figure things out right now. I’m not going to cry, and you’re not going to overthink everything. I’m not going to worry about Ryan and you’re not going to stress yourself out about Jace. We are going to bed. I am going to put on one of your CDs. You are going to turn off the lights. We will take off each other’s clothing. We will climb under the sheets. And you will make love to every inch of my body, mind, and spirit until the sun rises in a few hours. In the daylight, we’ll figure things out. In the darkness, we’ll just hold on to one another.”

She didn’t know how much I loved her. Words couldn’t express it. So I promised myself that I would use body language to showcase my love to her. I would love her in all fashions, in all styles, in all ways. I would love her on the bed, against the wall, upon the dresser. I would love her slowly, deeply, aggressively. I would love her with laughter, sadness, and joy until sunshine danced against our windowsills.



She moved over to my CD collection, picking out music and placing it into the player. When her finger swept across the play button, I smirked when I heard my band’s music softly playing from the speakers.

“Couldn’t find anything good?” I chuckled.

Her body moved in a hypnotic dance, and I watched as she moved to the beat, moved to the sounds. It wasn’t long before it appeared that the music was a part of Ashlyn. She balled up the bottom of her t-shirt and pulled it up, showing me her perfect skin.

I went to turn off the lights and she shook her head. “Lights on.”

Lights on.

“Shakes game play?” she questioned.

I laughed, my head falling to the ground. “Really? Right now?”

She grinned wide, nodding her head.

I frowned. “Because really I just want to rip off your clothes and make love to you over and over again.”

She smirked at my comment. I could see her considering the idea by the way her eyes sparkled. Her tongue wiped across her bottom lip and she shook her head. “Shakes game play.”

Shakes game play was a game Ashlyn had come up with on her own. It only had a few rules. Rule number one: One person quotes something from a William Shakespeare play. Rule number two: The other person must guess what play it was from. If player two guessed right, player one removed an article of clothing. If they didn't, the clothes stayed on until the next round.

We faced one another, her body still swaying back and forth, a beautiful grin on her full lips. She seductively heightened her shirt, pulling it past her belly button.

“Cowards die many times before their deaths. The valiant never taste of death but once.”

I grinned, rubbing my hand under my chin. *“Julius Caesar.”*

Her shirt heightened, moving across her beautiful breasts and over her head. The shirt landed between us on the floor. Her eyebrow arched in my direction as she stood in her pink bra.

For a moment, I stared at her stunning curves. Ashlyn Jennings was a Goddess. And I was just a man, completely overtaken by my beautiful Goddess. There was no doubt in my mind—my only job in this lifetime was to love her.

“Daniel,” she giggled, blushing at my eyes on her.

“If music be the food of love, play on.”

She ran her hands up and down her sides in thought. I felt my jeans twitch from watching her touch her fingers across her body.

“Twelfth Night,” she said matter-of-factly.

My shirt came off next. I tossed it into the pile. I listened to her moan lightly, staring at me. Her eyes were thirsty, and I promised myself I would fulfill her desire. She bit her bottom lip, and I wanted nothing more than to wrap her body against mine, but I was patient.

“Speak low if you speak of love,” she quoted from *Much Ado About Nothing*.

When I told her the answer, she nodded twice. Her fingers slipped into the sides of her shorts and she wiggled her hips, sliding them down to the ground. She used her toes to kick them to our ever-growing pile of clothing.

“*My bounty is as boundless as the sea. My love as deep; the more I give to thee, the more I have. For both are infinite.*” I said the quote and meant it more than she could ever know. Her eyes watered over and she placed her hands over her heart. “Don’t cry,” I smiled.

She laughed, shrugging as a tear fell down her cheek. “I cry a lot. Just learn to accept that fact about me.” *I accept.* Her lips parted again and she released an exhale. “*Romeo and Juliet.*”

I unbuttoned and unzipped my jeans, and she held a finger up, stopping me. I narrowed my eyes. Her feet tiptoed toward me and her hands moved to my jeans. She slid them down my legs, bending lower and lower with every inch that the jeans fell. Her lips lay against the edge of my boxers and she gave me small kisses.

I felt her hot breaths exhaling against my skin. My body reacted to her small contact. It responded even more when her tongue slipped out of her mouth and she lowered my boxers slightly. Her tongue danced around my hips, running up and down, making my desire for her expand. *Only for her.*

“I do that to you?” she whispered against me, her hand gliding over the fabric of my boxers, her fingers gently touching. I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath. *You do that to me.* She studied my body, sliding her hand inside my boxers.

“Ash...” I muttered, loving how she knew me. I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her up to me. I stared down into her green eyes and moved my lips to hers. My tongue slipped inside of her mouth and her tongue danced with mine.

Taking my hands around her waist, I moved her to the wall. She moaned as I pressed my body to hers. Her panties slightly touched my boxers and she cried out when I pushed my hips against her. Her hips moved back and forth against me, forcing me to groan into her mouth.

“Do you love me?” she exhaled heavily.

“Yes,” I sighed against her neck, my teeth gliding against her skin.

“Show me.” Her hands slid her panties down. Then she removed my boxers, allowing me to step out of them. “Show me how you love me.”

I reached behind her back and unhooked her bra, allowing it to fall to the ground. My hand wrapped under her right thigh, lifting her leg from the

ground. I placed her leg against my waist, and she wrapped her arms around my neck. My hardness pressed against her, and I listened to her cry out in pleasure.

“I love you slowly,” I said, clasping my hands under her thighs. I thrust into her tightness, loving the way she invited me in. Her mouth gaped open and I paused, allowing her to become comfortable with me inside. “I love you deeply.” I lifted her other leg up around my waist, supporting her completely. My mouth moved to her earlobe, and I whispered as I sucked it slowly, “I love you quietly.” My hips rolled against her, my breaths heavy, hungry. “I love you powerfully.” Her head fell against the wall, her breaths mere pants. “I love you unconditionally.”

My lips roamed to her breasts, kissing them, licking them, sucking them. My teeth glazed against her left nipple and then my tongue flicked it over and over again before I sucked it, loving the way she moaned my name. She increased her movements as I pounded into her.

“I love you gently and hard, slow and fast. Before time and after.” My hand moved to the back of her head and I traveled her to the bed, laying her down with me still inside. “I love you because I was born to do so.” Our hips moved in harmony, our bodies becoming one. Her love was breathing life into my entire being.

Before her, I never knew life. After her, I’d never know death.

Our bodies reached true bliss that night over and over again. We made love with our toes curling against the mattress, our hearts pounding against our chests.

Nothing else mattered in the world. All the problems were silenced within the bedroom that one, cold December night. We blocked out all loud noise, all hurts.

I continued loving Ms. Jennings until our eyes faded to rest.

And then I loved her in my dreams.

Chapter 29

Ashlyn

*I'll write to you when you're lonely,
If you'll write to me when I'm scared.
And I'll love you even after the world's left with only its despair.
Our love lives.
Never dies.
Always flies, always flies.
~ Romeo's Quest*

I was depressed by the sun. The daylight stood for facing reality. I wasn't sure if I was ready for that. My naked body slightly moved in the covers and I shut my eyes one last time. I allowed my mind to remember the night before with Daniel. How safe he'd made me feel, how freeing it had been when he'd loved me.

The sound of my cell phone going off from a text message made my eyes reappear. Sitting up in the bed, I rubbed the palms of my hands against my face. My eyes shifted to the spot next to me. *He's still here.* It felt good to know that he was still there sleeping peacefully. For a while I just watched his breaths, the way they rose and fell against the sheets.

Ding. Ding. Ding.

I sat up more in bed at the sound of my phone going off three more times in a row. Reaching to the dresser next to the bed, I gasped.

Ryan's fake cigarette box.

It was sitting next to my phone. I picked it up carefully, as if something terrible would happen if it were to break in my fingers.

I opened it, and inside was a note. The world began to spin. I couldn't bring myself to read it.

My phone dinged again. My throat tightened. "Daniel, wake up." I whispered it too softly and he hardly moved. "*Daniel*," I hissed louder, unable to move. "Wake up!"

Ding.

Daniel turned over to find me shaking with the box in my hands. I knew I should've checked the phone for the incoming messages. But I couldn't. I was afraid. His body shot up when he saw the worry in my eyes.

"What is it?"

"Something's wrong," I muttered. The shaking grew, and the fear deepened.

"Sweets..." He placed his hands on my shoulders. "Talk to me."

"Check my phone," I begged.

He reached across my body, his hand grazing across my stomach, and he grabbed my phone. When he flipped it opened, I saw his eyes studying the words. "They're from Henry and Rebecca."

"Read them to me please."

"Ash, Rebecca wants you both to come home," he said. "'Ash, where are you?'" He paused. "'Ashlyn it's Rebecca. Please, tell Ryan to come home...'" Paused. "'Why are you two not answering? Please. Please. I've called fifteen times. Bring my baby boy home, please...'" Paused. "'Ashlyn, are you two okay? We're worried...'"

The messages went on and on. Rebecca wanted him to come home. She'd slept on it, realizing her mistakes.

But what if she realized them too late?

"He's gone," I cried, the box shaking in my fingers.

Daniel stared at me, lost by my reaction. "Ash...it's okay. They want him to come back." He ran his fingers through my hair and kissed my forehead, but I knew better than to be optimistic.

“No, it’s not.”

I continued sobbing, knowing something was wrong, feeling the same way I’d felt when Gabby...

I blinked hard. I couldn’t think about that.

“We need to get dressed,” Daniel ordered. He left the room and came back with my outfit from the day before. I couldn’t move from the bed. He started to dress me, adding on each article of clothing, one by one. Each time he added a piece, the heavier the situation felt.

We walked across the hall and of course Daniel’s bed was empty. “He’s gone, Daniel, I know he is.” He didn’t reply. When we looked out the front yard and saw that Hailey’s car was gone, I swore I heard him choke on air. He picked up a backpack that was lying open on the front porch.

“Did he have any money?” Daniel hissed.

My mind froze, confused. He repeated himself, this time harsher.

“Henry gave him three hundred dollars—”

“Jace...” he muttered before he ran off to the boat shed.

I hurried right behind him. The doors flew opened and Daniel marched onto the boat, never pausing to breathe. He picked up the money that was sitting on the deck. Three hundred bucks. His brother was laid out sleeping and Daniel began shaking him.

“Jace! I swear to God, if you did this...”

Jace opened his eyes, stirring. “What the hell are you doing?”

“You sold to a kid! *My student*, Jace!” He threw the empty backpack into his brother’s face. My face burned. My legs were numb. My stomach knotted. “Sarah’s accident wasn’t on you. Mom’s death wasn’t your fault. But I swear to God, if anything happens to that boy, it’s on you! It’s on you, Jace!”

Jace sat up, confused about his whereabouts at first. “What the hell are you talking about? Danny, I didn’t do anything—”

“We gotta go,” Daniel said, grabbing my arm to drag me out of the shed. “If he dies, Jace... If he dies, that’s on you! *That’s on you!*”

If he dies?

I started crying again.

Because I knew he was already dead.

Chapter 30

Ashlyn

#56. Let Him Go.

Ashlyn,

Last night I overheard Mr. Daniels fighting with his brother about some drugs. I borrowed some of the guy's pills. Please let him know I left cash.

I wanted to wake you, but you looked happy next to him. He looked happier. Don't let that happiness leave. If there's anyone who deserves it, it's you.

Can you burn the cardboard box for me? I no longer need the reminder.

Please tell Hailey I'm still here.

Always here.

-Ryan

Chapter 31

Ashlyn

Stars exploded and I was born. Please call me Tony.

~ Ryan Turner



The newspaper headline was an echo of his father's.

Ryan Turner, son of Rebecca Turner, dies in a horrific car accident on the corner of Jefferson Avenue and Pine Street.

History sometimes repeated.

Tonight, souls cried both on earth and in heaven.

Chapter 32

Ashlyn

It doesn't matter what you feel.

Just know the feelings are real.

~ Romeo's Quest

The funeral was like all the others. Sad, painful, and wrapped in despair. Rebecca was in the corner speaking with the priest, and Henry stood greeting and thanking the guests who showed up. Which was a lot of guests—most of our senior class came.

I looked over and saw Avery standing with Hailey, tears rolling down his face. Hailey hugged him and didn't dare tell him that everything was going to be okay.

"Hello, everyone. I am Father Evans. If we could all head inside, I believe we are ready to get started with the service."

My hands smoothed over the black dress I'd worn to Gabby's funeral, and I prided myself on my ability of not having cried thus far during the day. There were so many tears that had fallen in the hospital room, in the car, and in the house. So I promised myself to do my best to be the strong one in the church. When others broke down, I would stand strong for them.

The service went on, and many tears were shed from others. I sat in between Hailey and Rebecca in the front pew. Rebecca hadn't said much since the accident, but I sat there squeezing her knee, which was rapidly tapping against the ground. I tried my best to read her emotions. She had to feel guilty for pushing Ryan away. For having isolated him in such a

manner. She had to have wished it had been her in the car and not her baby boy. She had to be dead inside.

Blame wouldn't do anyone any good though.

Not today.

It came time for people to give short speeches about Ryan and the short life he'd lived on this planet, and many stepped up, some cracking jokes, others cracking tears. I turned to Hailey, who'd told me earlier that she'd planned on saying a few words, but her gaze fell to the floor.

"I can't... I can't." She wiped away a tear and stood, walking out of the church.

I didn't know if I should follow her or aid Rebecca, whose shivers were growing more and more in-depth. Her breaths started picking up, and I felt as if a panic attack were about to overtake her.

Edging myself closer to her, I whispered into her ear, "He loved you. He still loves you. It's okay to cry."

The tears rolled down her cheeks and she nodded, her heavy breaths growing softer until she began to breathe like the sea at rest.

I turned to see Jake sitting in one of the pews, his eyes watering over. I frowned toward him. He gave me a simple nod before he walked out to check on Hailey.

Father Evans called for one last speaker, and when I looked up to see Daniel walking forward, my breath caught in my throat. When he reached the podium, he looked directly toward me. His eyes were deep wells of compassionate gloom. He reached into his suit pocket and pulled out a piece of paper, unfolding it before him.

"I wasn't sure that I would be able to stand up here today. Um, I've known Ryan only for a semester, but if you knew Ryan, a day was all you needed to fall in love with the guy. He was a jokester but always such a wise, intelligent kid. It was when he wrote his first paper in my English 12 AP class that I realized how deep and complex the mind of Ryan Turner traveled. We had an assignment at the beginning of the year..." Daniel paused, clearing his throat, fighting back the tears. He shifted his body around a bit to try to fight the emotions, but he was losing the battle.

“Sorry,” he muttered, turning away from the microphone and running his hands over his face.

When he returned, I could see the redness in his eyes that ran deep into his very being. “We had an assignment at the beginning of the year... I asked the students where they saw themselves in five years. Who they wanted to be. And I held on to Ryan’s paper and would like to read it to you.” His shoulders rolled back and he stood tall, holding the paper in his hands. “‘What do I want to be when I grow up? Mr. D, that seems to be a very heavy question for someone my age. Life is hard and adults are always telling us ‘kids’ that it just gets worse as time passes. I’ve been trying my best to understand what keeps people going, what keeps them reaching for something greater in this world. Belief? Hope? Passion?”

“I’m gay, Mr. D. I’ve never said those words to a teacher, but the way you walked into class on the first day with so many nerves made me realize that I can trust you. You’re just as afraid of some secret as I am. So I thought I would share my secret with you. But my sexuality shouldn’t define me, right? There’s so much more to me. I like thunderstorms. I love baseball. I think rock music is the best music. I have blue eyes. I hate peas. My blood bleeds red and my heart cries sometimes, just like yours, I suppose.

“‘You know what I can’t understand? I can’t understand how the people who are meant to love you unconditionally are the ones who turn on you in a heartbeat. Lately, I had to convince myself that it wasn’t me who she turned on, it wasn’t me who she blamed for Dad’s death—she loves me. I know she does. She just can’t comprehend the different ways that love can work. Ways only us teenagers can grasp before the land of adulthood takes away our magic, our wonder. Being a teenager is a curse and a gift. It’s the age where fairytales cease to exist and Santa isn’t real but parts of our hearts want to say ‘What if...’

“‘It’s the time where you feel everything but everyone claims you are just overreacting. You and the guidance office and society throw out strong questions that we teens have no clue how to answer. Who are we? Where do we see ourselves in five years? What do we want to be? The most frightening thing to me is picking a study, choosing a life path to follow at such a young, naïve age. No one knows who they are at our age. No one has

a damn clue where they will be in five years. The last question is my favorite: What do we want to be? That's the easy one.'"

Daniel paused and looked over to me, quoting the last part of Ryan's powerful letter. "Alive. I want to be alive, and I have no idea why, seeing how hideous life is at times. Maybe it's belief, hope, and passion all wrapped into one shape that rests inside my chest. Perhaps my heart is just praying for better tomorrows to replace all of those shitty yesterdays. So to answer your question in a very depressing, teenage-angst manner, I want to be alive when I grow up. So now I ask you, Mr. D. What do you want to be when you grow up? Because growing never stops, and dreaming rarely ceases.'"

The room filled with a silence that even the gods of the earth found unsteady. Daniel folded up the piece of paper and slipped it back into his pocket. He spoke into the microphone and smiled a sad grin. "I don't know what I want to be when I grow up. But if there's anyone I want to be like when I do, it's that young man who wrote those words. I want to be unafraid of the outcome of life. I want to remember to breathe in the laughter and cherish the tears. I want to dive into hope and land in love. I want to be alive when I grow up because...I have never been alive in all of my life. And I think the least we can do, in order to honor Ryan, is to start living today. And forgive ourselves for all of the shitty yesterdays."



On the steps of the church stood Hailey and Jake. The winter breeze was unkind to any bare skin. I watched as Jake whispered something to her and she nodded in understanding.

"Jake." He turned my way at the sound of my voice. I nodded him over to me. He glanced at her and then moved back toward me.

He stepped in close. "She's pretty wrecked, Ashlyn."

"I know."

The sad grin he gave me almost broke my heart. "She blames you."

"I know."

He stared out into the distance, his hands in his pockets. "Pretty much the whole senior class showed up in there for him. Everyone loved the guy."

Did you know he was the king at our junior prom last year?” He took a deep inhale. “How do you get to a point where you feel that alone?”

There wasn’t an answer to that question. I thought that’s what hurt people the most—the unanswered questions.

His thumb and pointer finger pinched the bridge of his nose and he closed his eyes. “Look, Ashlyn. I know this probably isn’t the right time, but...” He sighed. “The guy you gave your heart to... Why isn’t he here?”

My voice cracked. I shifted my eyes. “You’re right, Jake. It’s not the right time.”

“Yeah. Right. But...” His voice shook. “Ryan’s dead. And when people die, you get thinking about the things unsaid. The things you were too afraid to say. And I’m about to go away for Christmas break to visit my grandparents in Chicago, so I’m just going to say it now—”

“Jake—”

“I hate him. Whoever the guy is who isn’t here for you—I hate him for leaving you alone today.” My eyes watered up from his words. He reached for his tie and loosened it. “I know you probably think that I was just into you because of your body. Yes, at first, that was why. You’re gorgeous, Ash. But then each day in chemistry you would show up and you would talk. And then I realized how much I liked the way you spoke.

“And then I realized how much you had to say and how much the world deserved to hear your thoughts. And then I thought about how much I would love you if you ever let me in. Then I thought maybe if I cleaned up my act, maybe if I stopped smoking pot or got into college or got a library card or something, then maybe you would love me, too.”

“I do love you, Jake.”

He laughed. “Don’t give me that friendship bullshit. It’s fine, really. I just... I needed to say it. No regrets, right?”

I leaned in, kissed his cheek, and whispered, “Please hug me now.” His arms wrapped around me. I breathed him in and held on to him tight. “Don’t let go yet, okay?” He pulled me in closer.

After the hug, Jake reentered the church. My footprints landed against the fallen snow as I moved in Hailey’s direction. “Hey, Hails.”

She tightened her arms, which lay across her body. Her lips pressed together. It seemed that her focus was on something across the street.

I continued. "I'm so sorr—"

"You know what I don't understand?" she said, cutting in. "You were supposed to be with him." Her body rotated in my direction in a haunting fashion. "You were supposed to watch over him for one night. *One night!* Where the hell were you, Ashlyn?!"

Words. There were so many different words, different phrases in the world, yet I couldn't develop one.

She puffed a chilled breath. "Exactly."

"Hailey...when Gabby died—" I started.

"No!" she hissed, holding her hand up to me. "Today isn't about Ashlyn's guilt. Today isn't about Gabrielle. Ryan is dead! You promised!" she cried, choking on air, on her own misery. "You promised to watch after him and now he's dead!" Her sobs made her words half broken, mere mutters. "Y-you hurt everyone who y-you c-c-come near," she stuttered. Her gaze fell to the ground. She didn't mean her words. I knew she didn't.

If there was anything I remembered from Gabby's funeral, it was that sometimes it was easier to be mad than to be hurt.

"Who am I supposed to eat lunch with?" her voice whispered. She wrapped her hands over her mouth as a pained cry of sadness left her lips. She continued to sob, her body shuddering. "I'm sorry, Ashlyn. I didn't mean what I said."

My arms wrapped around her and I shook my head back and forth. "We don't do apologies here," I said, quoting her from the first time I sat at their lunch table. "Because we know harm is never the intent."

"Theo's not here," she cried into my shoulder. "It's the worst day of my life and he didn't show up. He said it was against his belief system. Bullcrap if you ask me." She wiped her eyes and pulled away from me. "The sad thing is, I don't believe in this, ya know? In coming to a church to mourn in this way. I know Theo isn't really a Buddhist...but I'm starting to understand the study. I actually love it. And this"—she gestured back to the church—"this doesn't make sense to me."

“I can help.” A deep voice was heard, and we turned to see Randy walking toward us. He’d shown up to make sure Daniel didn’t have to be alone after losing someone else in his life. He approached us slowly, not wanting to interrupt. “I know how it is, how painfully unnecessary death can seem. It just feels like you want to get revenge on the world for taking away the things you love.” His head fell and he rubbed his temple. “I’ve studied Buddhism for many years. And if you are interested, we can say a prayer together.”

Hailey’s eyes welled up with tears. Her shoulders dropped. She was on the verge of breaking down again. “I don’t know any prayers. I didn’t study that far into it.”

Randy rushed over to Hailey and kept her from falling, placing his hands on her shoulders. “It’s okay. It’s okay.” He wiped away her fallen tears. “I’ll walk us through it.”

I stepped to the side, watching the two try to find comfort.

He took her hands and his dark-cave eyes looked into her blues. “This will be from The Dedication Chapter from Shantideva’s Bodhicharyavatara.”

Hailey snickered softly, sniffing. “I have no clue what you just said.”

“It’s okay. Just close your eyes. I’ll walk you through it.”

And he did. I watched two complete strangers find comfort with one another in the worst moment known. They didn’t shutdown from the unknown. They welcomed it together. Hailey’s harsh breaths began to relax as she held on to Randy’s hands.

My favorite blessing that Randy brought up was, “*May all beings have immeasurable life spans. May they always live happily, and may even the word ‘death’ disappear.*”

Sounded good to me.



Everyone headed out of the church to go over to the cemetery. Daniel approached me, not looking to be a lover in front of everyone but just a concerned individual. Yet in my heart I knew he was a concerned lover, and that’s all that mattered.

“How are you?” he whispered. I shrugged. Daniel’s lips turned down, probably seeing my distressed look. “I wish I could hold you and take away all of your hurt.”

I smiled at him and a few tears fell. He moved to wipe them away. “Don’t.” I wiped my own eyes. “Henry,” I muttered.

Daniel frowned and nodded. “I’ll see you later.” He headed for his car.

Turning in the direction to Henry’s truck, I paused when I saw Jace around the side of the church building. He paused, staring at me before he turned and started walking in the opposite direction. I chased after him, calling his name.

“Listen, I get it,” he huffed, turning to face me, “Call the cops. Get me locked up. But I swear to God I didn’t do this! I didn’t give that kid those drugs” He paced back and forth, his forehead spitting out sweat in the cold, cold air. “I didn’t kill that kid!” he screamed in a whisper. I didn’t say anything. I stood staring at him, his blue eyes filled with emotion. His hands ran over his low-cut hair and he bent his knees, lowering himself to the ground. “Oh my God. Did I kill that kid?”

“You have the same eyes,” I said. He looked up, confused. “As Daniel. You both have the same eyes.”

He wiped his hands under his nose and sniffled. “We get them from our dad.” Pulling himself to a standing position, he paused. “Why aren’t you calling the cops?”

“You’re not a child, Jace. If you think you did something wrong, then it should be your responsibility to turn yourself in.” I slightly smirked. “Plus, I’m having a really crappy day, so...”

He laughed and nodded. “I’m sorry. About all of this.” His blue eyes filled with tears. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

“Yeah. Me too.” My mind danced with something I wasn’t sure I should tell him, but I knew he needed to hear it. “There weren’t any drugs”—I shifted my weight from one leg to the other—“in his system. Ryan drove the car into the tree fully aware of what he was doing.”

“It wasn’t my fault?” he breathed out, resting his hands on top of his hair.

I shook my head back and forth.

A strained smile plastered on his face and he started to turn around. I saw one single tear roll down his cheek as he jammed his hands in his jeans pockets. I knew he didn't mean for me to hear his next comment. He was speaking to himself, but I did overhear.

"I'll get clean. I really will this time..." As lightly as the wind blew, his last words left his lips and floated away toward the clouds. "I just wanted back into the band. Maybe he'll let me back in."

If there were a heaven, I hoped Jace's words flew toward its path.

And if there were a God, I hoped he was listening.

Chapter 33

Daniel

Goodbyes hurt most when they're one-sided.

~ Romeo's Quest

It had been a long day.

At the cemetery, I stood next to Ryan's mom, who was breaking down. Henry held her left hand, and I took her right. I knew she didn't know me other than my being the guy who'd taught her son, but she squeezed my hand back.

"Thank you," she whispered.

My eyes moved back to Ashlyn, who had her arms wrapped around Hailey. She gave me a weak smile, and I frowned.

What if I was ruining her life by loving her? What if, somehow, I was putting her in danger? Jace was dangerous, and the people he dealt were even more of a risk.

I knew it was a stupid thought, but death was becoming too common in my life. I wasn't sure how much more I could handle. Especially if something happened to Ashlyn.

Did Jace give Ryan those drugs? Would Ryan have been alive if I'd turned down the offer of letting them stay the night? He would've been alive right now if I weren't dating my student.

Guilt was treacherous.

And it was filling my head with all the reasons why I shouldn't love Ashlyn.



I hadn't seen Ashlyn in four days. It was the longest we'd ever gone without seeing one another. I'd been sitting in my Jeep parked outside the library for the past fifteen minutes. The sky was drunk on blackness, and snow was falling at a steady pace. Under the street lights, I saw her walking toward me, a large paper bag in her arms.

She'd told Henry she would be spending the night at a friend's house, promising to check in with him every hour. Which meant I had her for at least fifteen hours. The way the lights lit her up and the snow danced against her face made me think why someday everything would work out.

Because I needed it to work out with Ashlyn Jennings. After she graduated this coming June, I would love her out loud—the way she deserved to be loved. We would deal with college when college came, but not a day before.

Yeah, guilt was harsh, but hope was just as powerful a weapon.

She opened the passenger's door and climbed in, setting the bag in her lap.

"What do ya got there?" I asked.

Her head shook back and forth. "Kiss first, questions later."

I leaned in, held my mouth against hers, and smirked as her tongue escaped and she ran it against my bottom lip. "What's in the bag?" I repeated.

"My treasure chest with the letters from Gabby. And Jack, Jose, and Morgan," she replied. "We're getting drunk tonight and opening letters."

Laughing at her response, I rolled my eyes. "No, really. What's in the bag?" She arched an eyebrow and tilted it toward me. A shitload of alcohol and letters. "I don't think tonight is the right night for this, sweets." Her eyelids were so heavy from lack of sleep. "Plus, you don't drink."

She smiled. "No, I don't." Her hand slipped into the bag and she pulled out a letter. "But number eight requires it."

“Ashlyn...” I warned, not wanting her to drown herself in alcohol. She hadn’t really dealt with Ryan’s death yet, and I feared that one day she would just snap.

“Daniel. Fun. Remember that? Let’s just have fun tonight, okay?”

I breathed out and nodded. “Okay.” I narrowed my eyes and leaned in her direction. “Come here.”

She inched her body closer to me. My eyes fell to her lips. I placed my hand on her lower back, pulling her closer. She exhaled as I ran my finger *slowly* around her top lip and *slowly* around her bottom lip. She parted her mouth and *slowly* licked my finger before she sucked on it gently. My hand cupped around the back of her neck and I pulled my mouth to hers.

We stared into one another’s eyes, my heart pounding against my chest. “I love you.”

“I love you,” she breathed against me, sending the words into my entire being. Her back arched against my touch, and I tugged on her bottom lip. She sighed, repeating herself. “I love you, I love you, I love you.”



When we pulled up to the lake house, I saw that the living room lights were on. Then I saw two women walking back and forth in their bras. *Shit*. I glanced over to Ashlyn, who of course had noticed the bodies, too. Her face turned to me with a smirk.

“There are naked women in your house.”

I sighed when I saw a shirtless Randy come into view through the window. My fingers rubbed against my forehead. “There are indeed naked women in my house.”

She had a smart-ass smile glued to her face. “Is this a...normal thing that happens at Mr. Daniels’s house?”

I formed a fist and bit the side of my hand. My eyes closed tight. “No! No...it’s just... Well, in the past, Randy used to try to make me feel better by...”

“By...?”

“By having naked music parties.”

Silence. I didn't want to open my eyes to see her reaction. A loud giggle was heard. I peeked my eyes opened to find Ashlyn cracking up in laughter. "*Naked music parties? Oh my gosh! You're a freak!*" She was laughing so hard that tears were streaming down her cheek.

"What?! No! Randy's the freak! I was just a guy...in a room...with naked girls." I put the car in reverse and turned to back away from the house. Ashlyn's hand rested on my arm.

"Don't you dare!" she hissed. "We are going to a naked music party!"

"We are not!" I argued. She set the paper bag on the ground in front of her. Her fingers slowly started unbuttoning her coat. "Ashlyn..." I muttered, watching her movements.

"Put the car in park," she instructed.

"No," I said, but I did the opposite. The car went into park.

Of course the car went into park. Because when a beautiful girl started undressing in your vehicle, you put the damn car in park. I shut up as I watched her remove her coat. Her hands wrapped under the hem of her sweater and she started to pull it over her head.

"*Are you sure that we are awake? It seems to me that yet we sleep, we dream.*" She was quoting A Midsummer Night's Dream as her sweater found its placement in my back seat.

Her fingers started at the top of her neck and she caressed her body as she moved her fingers down her neck, across her cleavage and to her bra. Her eyes closed and I watched as she touched herself in front of me, her mouth parting in excitement.

"You're killing me, Ashlyn," I muttered, watching, feeling myself harden as I watched.

She leaned her seat back, lying backwards. Her hands were still running against her body. I watched her deep inhales and heavy exhales. "*Up and down, up and down. I will lead them up and down...*" she quoted. Her fingers moved down her chest, traveling toward her belly button. She turned her head in my direction and she smiled easily with closed eyes. Her fingers started unbuttoning her jeans. "*I am feared in field in town—*"

A growl rolled through me and my hands landed on top of hers. Her green eyes shot open and her mouth parted at seeing my eyes filled with need. My hands unzipped her jeans and I pulled them down a bit. Slightly teasing the skin above her panties, I listened to her moan.

“*Goblin, lead them up,*” I started to finish her quote. My fingers traced up to her bra, grazing over her hardened nipples. Her hands flew over her head and she gripped the headrest behind her. With quickening breaths, her excitement deepened. Sliding my fingers down her skin, my hand slid into her panties and I listened to her burst with pleasure as I whispered against her ear, “*And down.*”

I had no need to enter my house. If I never saw another woman’s naked body again, I would be fine as long as this one was mine.

So we didn’t enter the house at all that night.

But there was indeed a naked music party for two.



We moved to the boat shed for our drunken activities, not wanting to walk into the house to see Randy with his naked girls. “We’ll head inside after a while. They won’t stay the night,” I said. “Randy never keeps girls overnight.” I pulled out blankets for us and we lay on top of the boat.

The whiskey was opened, and after Ashlyn took her first shot of it, I thought she was going to vomit. But she refused to stop trying it. Each time we took a shot together, she made the cutest ugly face I’d ever seen. And she giggled a lot as a drunken girl.

I loved the sounds of her laugh. I arched an eyebrow and moved the bottles of alcohol *far* away from her. “You’re drunk.”

She sat up straight. The backs of her hands touched her cheeks. “Ohh! Am I?!” She laughed some more. “Okay,” she snickered, reaching into her paper bag and digging around. “I have two letters we can open! Number twenty-seven.” There was a moment she stared down at the letters and sighed. “Sometimes I feel like my life is being driven by these letters”—her voice lowered—“and sometimes I think they are leading me the wrong way.”

Her eyes blinked, and she shook away her thought, but I held on to it. She opened the letter and began to read it, stumbling through the words. “Dear Ash, if you are reading this letter on your twenty-first birthday, then you are very much a loser. Who waits until their twenty-first birthday to drink? If you are reading this before you’re twenty-one, then take another shot for me, you lush! I love you like crazy. I miss you even more. You’re doing great, kid. Gabby.”

She pulled the note to her chest and frowned, but at the same time, her eyes smiled. “I miss her like crazy.”

“She misses you, too.”

“Do you think she’s with Ryan?” She paused. “Do you even believe in heaven? Heck, I don’t know if I do.”

I cleared my throat and rested my elbows on my knees. “I believe in the possibility of something greater than this world. And I believe that the two of them are together, safe, and no longer in pain.”

She released an easy breath. “I bet they’re hanging with Shakes.”

“Well clearly. Why would you hang out with anyone other than Shakes in the land of the dead?”

She smiled. I fell harder. Pouring two more shots, she handed me one. “For Gabrielle Jennings and Ryan Turner. May they be conversing with William Shakespeare on a daily basis.”

To Gabby and Ryan!

Ashlyn’s hand picked up the next envelope from Gabby. “Number twelve... Have sex in a car.” When she said the words, her cheeks blushed over and she buried her face in the palms of her hands. “*Ohmygosh*. We totally had sex in your Jeep!”

I smirked. “Twice.”

She looked up at me, her hair wild, untamed, perfect. She sat with her arms resting against her knees. Leaning in, she bit her bottom lip. “I want to make love to you everywhere twice.”

I kissed her forehead and ran my hands through her hair. She held the letter out to me and I arched an eyebrow.

“You want me to read it?” I asked.

“Of course.”

Opening it, I grinned. “You slut.”

She nodded. “I know, I know. Now what does it say?”

My smile stretched even more as I turned the letter around to her.

#12. Have Sex in a Car.

You Slut.

-G

Ashlyn snatched the note from my fingers and stared at the words on the paper. Her eyes widened with joy and she snickered. “What a bitch.”

I thought that was girl code for ‘my best friend.’

Chapter 34

Ashlyn

Close the door.

Take off your clothes.

Let me see your secrets unfold.

~ -Romeo's Quest

We moved back into Daniel's bedroom and fell asleep in one another's arms. In the morning when I woke up, Daniel was nowhere to be found. But an intense headache was on the forefront. On the pillow next to me a tray. Sitting on it was a water bottle with daisies, a bowl of Cap'n Crunch mixed with marshmallows, a plate with two painkillers, and orange juice.

My smile remained as I watched the morning light seep into the bedroom.

Breakfast in bed. Another first of ours.

I tossed the pills into my mouth and washed them down with some orange juice.

Daniel walked into the room with nothing on but a towel around his waist. The way the cotton hung on his hips made me fully aware of how built he was from top to bottom. There was water dripping down his toned six-pack, and I blushed as I stared. I loved how he still made me blush from time to time. He smirked toward me.

"Good morning." He walked closer and I reached to him, wrapping my arms around him, pulling his wet body down to me. He lay on top of me,

holding me against him. He smelled so fresh, woodsy. I made sure to breathe him all in.

“You got me Cap’n Crunch and added marshmallows?” I asked.

He picked up a piece and placed it between my lips. “It’s your favorite.” He kissed me lightly and I scrunched my face.

“I need to brush my teeth and shower. You’re all fresh and clean. It’s not fair that you’re kissing nasty morning breath.”

“I don’t care,” he laughed at me.

My hands covered my mouth and I turned my head away from him. “I do!”

Daniel stood up and scooped me into his arms, still chuckling. “Then let’s go get you all cleaned up.”

Making love in the shower.

Another first of ours.

Chapter 35

Ashlyn

*Pain isn't something you need to save.
But please, baby, hold on for one more day.
~ Romeo's Quest*

Winter break started the week after Ryan's funeral. I stayed at Henry's for the most of it, making sure Rebecca and Hailey were finding time to eat, to cry, to mourn. I'd lost Gabby in August, but I felt that the worst time to lose someone was during the holidays. Christmas was only a few days away, yet it didn't feel that way at all.

Daniel texted me each day, making sure *I* was finding time to eat, to cry, to mourn. Each text ended the same: I love you.

I'd needed that.

The night before Christmas, I couldn't sleep. I sat in the living room with my notebook, writing away, pouring all of my thoughts into my imaginary characters. I heard footsteps approaching from behind me. I turned to see Henry walking with two coffee mugs.

"Tea?" he asked. "Rebecca had some weird flavor in the cabinet, but I thought I would give it a try." I nodded and moved over on the couch to make room for him. He sat down and handed me a mug. "What are ya working on?"

"My novel."

"What's it about?"

I bit my bottom lip. "I'm not quite sure yet. But I'll let you know when I find out." Closing the notebook, I turned toward him. "Gabby did forgive you," I said. "She never blamed you for leaving."

Henry's eyes locked with mine. "And what about you?"

"Me?" I paused. "I'm working on it."

He nodded. "That's progress."

Next were the tears that streamed down my face and the shaking followed. "I've been so terrible to you."

"I've been even worse, Ashlyn. I wasn't there. I missed so much." His head lowered. "Where do we go from here?"

"I don't know. But let's just get through tonight." I lifted my tea, took a sip, then spit it into the cup. "Oh my gosh! That tastes like reindeer piss!"

Henry laughed and raised an eyebrow. "And you know how reindeer piss tastes because..."

I gestured toward his mug. "Try it. See for yourself."

When the tea hit his lips, he gagged, spitting it back into the cup. "Yup, that's definitely Rudolph's piss."

"Really? I was thinking it was Comet's."

He smiled. I smiled. We smiled. Not an uncomfortable grin, not an estranged father-daughter smile, but a real smile. The first one we'd had in...years.

"I think I'm going to go see her...be with her for the holiday. If it's okay with you, I'll probably go tomorrow."

He grimaced.

"I'll come back, Henry," I promised.

"She'll love that, Ashlyn. She's doing a lot better..." He moved to the Christmas tree in the corner and lifted a gift box. "Here you go."

My fingers ran over the wrapping paper. I saw my name written across it and my heart skipped. "You always give us gift cards," I whispered.

"Yeah, well... I thought I would try something different this year. Open it."

I was slow to unwrap the gift, feeling as if this were some kind of dream I would awake from. I gasped when I saw the CD sitting in my hands. *Romeo's Quest*.

Henry cleared his throat. "I know it might be weird, being your teacher's band and all. But I saw them perform a few weeks ago. They're good, Ashlyn." He paused. His bottom lip twitched. "Dan"—he paused again—"Mr. Daniels was telling me how they based each song off Shakespeare plays. You like Shakespeare, right? But if you hate it, we can get something else. I'll take you shopping—"

A deep sigh rolled through me. My arms wrapped around Henry and I held him close. "Thank you, Henry. It's perfect." When we pulled away, I went back to the tea and took another sip, gagging after the taste.

"Why do you even drink this nasty stuff?" Henry asked, eyeing the tea.

"It's not *all* nasty," I argued. "Plus, Gabby loved tea, she's the reason I started drinking it."

His eyebrows lowered. "Do you think you can tell me more about Gabby?"

My lips turned down and I felt my heartbeat increase at the idea of sharing the wonderful things about my best friend to the guy who should've already known her. "What do you want to know?"

His voice was a whisper, barely making a sound. "Everything."



After spending hours sitting and chatting with Henry about Gabby, I found myself sitting in the bathtub on my phone talking to Daniel. It was around three a.m. and he had no plans of hanging up on me.

"Sorry to call so late," I sighed.

"No worries. I was just lying here, hugging my pillow, thinking of you."

I laughed at his comment. "I'm going to see my mom tomorrow..."

"Yeah? I think that's great."

"I'm nervous... What if it doesn't go over well? What if she doesn't want to see me? What if I get there and I'm still mad at her? Because...I

still feel mad.”

I heard his breathing through the receiver, and that sound alone gave me a hair of comfort. “I’ve had a lot of terrible things happen in my life. And what I’ve come to realize is if you don’t say what you need to say when you have a chance...you’ll regret it. Even if you’re mad, say it. Scream it into the world while you still have a chance to. Because once life passes you by, it’s gone. And so are the words left unspoken.”

My eyes blinked tight and I felt my heart pounding against my ribcage. Say what I needed to say. That idea scared me so much. “I’m sleepy...”

“Go to bed, Ash. You have big day tomorrow.”

I nodded to the phone as if he could see me. “Will you stay on the line with me? Until I fall asleep?”

“Of course.”

I stood up from the tub and moved back toward my bedroom. “Merry Christmas, Daniel.”

“Merry Christmas, angel.”

I lay with my phone to my ear, and he played his guitar through the line until my eyes fell heavy and dreams washed over me.



I climbed onto the train with Gabby’s treasure chest in my lap. I figured opening a few letters with Mom might be good for her. For us. I texted Daniel, thanking him for last night. He only texted back with one word: Always.

Sitting in a window seat on the train back to Chicago brought back the memories of my first train trip to Wisconsin. Where Daniel and I had first crossed paths. So much had changed since then, yet a few things still remained. Those blue eyes, for one.

I placed the treasure box on the seat next to me. My legs tucked against my chest and I sighed. I missed them both so much, Ryan and Gabby. A few tears started falling from my eyes as my head fell to the glass window and the train started moving. Closing my eyes, I took a few deep breaths. *I’m okay.* I told myself that over and over, yet the tears kept coming.

There should be a universal law that said young people shouldn't be allowed to die. Because they'd never really had a chance to live.

My eyes reopened when I heard footsteps near me and I looked up.

Beautiful.

Breathtaking.

Brilliant.

Blue eyes.

More tears fell as Daniel lifted my treasure box and sat down in the seat beside me. "What was his greatest fact?" he asked, pulling me close and kissing away the tears.

I closed my eyes as more emotion kept falling down my cheeks, yet he never stopped his kisses, catching each tear against his lips. "His heart. The way he loved so deep and felt so much," I whispered about Ryan. "The way he loved his sister and his mom. The way he missed his dad..." My eyes reappeared and I placed my hands on the back of his neck, pulling him closer to me. "What was your mom's favorite Christmas fact?"

This time, he closed his eyes. He didn't reply right away. When his blues opened, they were glassed over with water. "I don't talk about her..."

I nodded. "I know."

We rested our foreheads against one another, breathing in each other's existence. "Her double problem showed up every Christmas. I always got two of the same sweaters, just in case I ruined one. She would bake double the amount of cookies. She would make us watch *It's a Wonderful Life* twice. She..." he chuckled, brushing his finger across his forehead. "She added double the vodka to the holiday punch. But that was for Dad mainly."

"What was his craziest fact?" I asked, lightly kissing his lips.

"Hmm, he was a dreamer who made things happen. He bought the boat before he had the lake house. But he was sure the house would come. He dreamed it to life, I think." My fingers knotted his hair in my hands. He kissed the bridge of my nose. "You're never going to have to do these types of things alone, Ashlyn. Never."

Chapter 36

Ashlyn

I want to know who you were before me.

I want to see the world that you see.

~ Romeo's Quest

We made a quick stop before heading to Mom's house. When Daniel drove the rental car up to the curb of the suburban house, I smiled. One of the cars in the driveway had bumper stickers covering it with some of the best bands ever created.

Bentley's car.

I reached into the treasure chest and pulled out Gabby's promise ring and the letter addressed to Bentley. Feeling the ring against my fingers made me sigh. They would've been so happy together.

"I'll wait here," Daniel said, noticing the look in my eyes.

"Please come with me?" I asked, climbing out of the car.

His door opened and he climbed out, too, closing the door quietly. Each footstep I took toward the household felt painful. Each time my winter boots lifted, I felt a sharp knife stabbing me inside my gut.

Holding on to the ring and letter with one hand and Daniel's hand with the other, I climbed the steps up to the front door. My head turned to the porch swing, which was covered in a bit of snow. I blinked and the memories started to resurface.

“I think I love him,” Gabby whispered against my ear as we swung back and forth on Bentley’s porch on a humid summer night. He headed inside to grab us some sodas before we went to the fair.

I snickered at my sister. “You love him.”

She gave me a sly smile and nodded. “I love him.”

Shaking my head back and forth, I snapped myself out of the memory. My finger rose and I held the doorbell down for a second. Right at the sound of the doorbell, though, I wanted to retreat. I wanted to go back the way I’d come and drive back down to Chicago.

Then Daniel tightened his hold on my hand.

I relaxed.

The door opened, and when I saw Bentley through the screen door, I gasped. He looked surprised and a bit sad at first. I wished I didn’t look so much like her. Just seeing me probably broke his heart.

Bentley stepped onto the porch and his eyes widened. “Ashlyn,” he whispered.

My feet started shifting around. My nerves were growing strong.

Daniel let go of my hand, and when I looked at him, he gave me a small grin.

“Hi, Bentley.”

Bentley laughed, his eyes watering over. “‘Hi, Bentley?’ That’s all I get? Come here.” He wrapped me into a hug. I breathed him in, hugging him tighter and tighter as time went by. “You look so good,” he whispered against me.

“You too, Bent.” We pulled away from one another and both wiped at our eyes, laughing. “Oh, Merry Christmas!” I said, scratching at the back of my neck.

He smiled wide. “So who do we have here?”

I turned to Daniel, who was quietly waiting to the side. I blushed. “This is Daniel, my—” I paused, not knowing what we were at the moment.

“Boyfriend,” Daniel smiled, holding his hand out toward Bentley. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Bentley gave me a coy look, “Oh, it’s nice to meet you, too.” He pushed his tongue against the inside of his cheek. “He’s a looker, isn’t he?” I giggled and shoved Bentley in the arm. “Well, don’t just stand out here. Come on inside.”

Hesitation took over me. For some reason, I didn’t feel as if I should step inside without Gabby by my side. “We can’t stay. I just...” My hands rose with the letter and ring. “I wanted to give you this.” The ring landed in his hands and I heard a deep-rooted gasp run through him. “She left it in the treasure box you gave me. And she asked me to give you the letter.”

He held the piece of paper tight in his hand. “This is from Gabrielle?”

I nodded.

As I watched him slowly open the letter, a weird sense of peace washed over me. It felt like a book closing, the final chapter to the love story of Bentley and Gabrielle receiving closure.

He cried as he read her words. Of course he cried. Her letters always made people cry. “She was my favorite.” His voice cracked as he kept reading the words over and over again.

“I know.”

“Sometimes I wonder how I’m supposed to begin again, ya know? How am I supposed to...” He coughed and ran his hand over his water-soaked face. “How am I supposed to ever be happy again?”

“You start slow.” Daniel stepped forward, placing his hand on Bentley’s shoulder. “You allow yourself to feel whatever the hell it is you’re feeling. And when you start to feel happy, don’t feel guilty about it.”

“Start slow,” Bentley repeated to himself. His head fell to the porch. “Wow. He’s a looker and he’s smart. So much better than Billy.”

I laughed at Bentley’s comment and pulled him into a goodbye hug. “Take care of yourself, okay?”

He pulled back and kissed my forehead. “You too, Ash-Ash.” Turning to Daniel, Bentley shook his hand. “Daniel... Take care of my kid sister, okay?”

Daniel held on to Bentley’s hand for second longer and smiled. He then stuffed his hands into his pockets. “I will.”

He would.

Chapter 37

Ashlyn

*Home—what does it mean?
It's your eyes staring back at me.
Just Breathe.
~ Romeo's Quest*

“Mom?” I said as I turned the doorknob, entering the apartment. It was exactly the same. The living room still had the large, ugly floral print frame traveling around the ivory-colored walls. The television was still on crappy reality television. The couch was still the same brown mundane color.

Yet it all felt different.

Daniel walked in behind me, closing the door. “I don’t think she’s here,” I whispered, but I didn’t know why. It felt as if I were trespassing, and if I were to get caught, the world would crash around me.

I stared down the hallway toward what used to be Gabby’s and my bedroom. Every hair on my body stood up. Goose bumps covered my skin. I hadn’t known I would feel so scared yet so angry just by standing in the apartment, but I did. I wanted to scream, but my throat was tight. I wanted to cry, but the tears wouldn’t come.

Walking to my bedroom, I found that the door was closed. My fingers wrapped around the doorknob and I pushed it opened.

Just like the rest of the apartment, everything was the same but somehow different. I hated that.

My side of the bed still had a few of the books I'd left behind sitting on my dresser. The closet was filled with both my clothes and Gabby's.

I moved to my bed, which was perfectly made, and sat down on the edge of it. Patting the spot beside me, I invited Daniel to sit with me.

"It smells like you," he noticed. "I know that sounds weird, but it does."

My eyes moved to my pillow and I picked it up, breathing it in. It had recently been sprayed with my favorite perfume.

"I'm going to tell her how much trouble she caused," I stated, staring up at Gabby's side of the room. Her Beatles posters were still hanging up. Leaned up against her bed frame was her acoustic guitar. Pictures of her and Bentley were still taped all over the wall. Photos of her and me... "She abandoned me when I needed her the most."

I looked to Daniel, who was giving me pained eyes, yet he didn't speak.

"She—she told me to go away!" I stood up, feeling my blood start to boil. Being back here was stirring up my emotions; being back here was pissing me off. "I could have helped her! I could have taken care of her!" I screamed, pacing back and forth.

He kept staring. I kept breaking.

"And then she has the nerve to spray my pillow?! As if she misses me?!" I huffed and puffed, my face heating up. I pounded my hand against my chest. "Gabby was my twin! If anyone should have fallen apart, it should've been me!"

I was both furious and nervous. Furious because Mom had turned to alcohol when she could have turned to me. And nervous because I was afraid to see her broken.

Moving over to Gabby's bed, I started ripping her comforter off, tossing her pillows to the side, tossing her sheets to the ground. "She's not coming home, Mom!" I cried into the air.

Next, I hit Gabby's posters, tearing them down. I reached for the photos and started tearing those to the ground, too. Daniel wrapped his arms around me and pulled me off of the bed.

“Ashlyn, stop,” he ordered.

I couldn’t. My mind had been taken away from me by the sadness, by the memories. *How dare* Mom order me to leave. *How dare* Henry take care of me. *How dare* Gabrielle get cancer. *How dare* Ryan kill himself!

“I gave Ryan a place to stay. We were supposed to sleep it off and figure things out in the morning. Rebecca calmed down. She wanted him to come home. Hailey needed him... What an asshole. He’s an asshole for dying!”

It wasn’t fair. They’d all left me when I would have done anything to stay with them. I would have given them all the love they needed.

Why wasn’t I enough?

He was holding me around my waist, yet I kept kicking and screaming. “*Let me go!*” He held on tighter. I started kicking my legs around, clawing my fingernails into his arms, trying to rip his hold of me away. My howls grew deeper and the pain only intensified. “*Let me go!*”

“No.” He held on and placed me against a wall to control my kicks. My body landed against the cold wall and I cried. “I’m never letting you go, Ashlyn. I’m never letting you go.”

“You will! You will let me go.”

My stomach twisted and I felt like I was going to vomit. He wasn’t trying to, but he was lying to me.

Because everyone always let go.

My vision began to blur over and I felt lightheaded.

“You’re having a panic attack,” Daniel whispered against me as my breathing started to increase. My insides tightened. “Calm down for me, sweets. Steady your breathing.” He turned me around so I was facing him. I yanked on his shirt, pulling him closer to me.

I lost it.

Completely lost it.

But he was still there.



We sat on the couch, facing toward the front door. When I heard keys jingling, my heart pounded against my ribcage. The door opened slowly and I saw Mom walking in with Jeremy behind her.

I stood to my feet and heard Mom gasp. Tears built up in her eyes and her shoulders slumped.

I was supposed to be mad.

I was supposed to hate her.

But all I could do was hug her, pull her to me, and cry into her. I didn't know what to think of the exchange between the two of us.

And maybe tomorrow, I would be mad again.

And maybe when I went back to Wisconsin, I would hate her once more.

But right now? On Christmas afternoon?

Right now, we were just two people made to screw up, fuck up, and learn new things. We were made perfectly imperfect.

Chapter 38

Ashlyn

Snow falls soft.

I love you slowly.

~ Romeo's Quest

Those few days in Chicago, Mom and I didn't figure things out. We didn't work on our issues.

We mourned the first Christmas without Gabby. On New Year's Eve, we cleaned out the bedroom, too. Mom lifted up Gabby's guitar and smiled toward Daniel. "You can have it."

He frowned. "I can't."

"Please," Mom whispered, running her fingers over the guitar strings. "It deserves to be played."

Daniel looked over to me and I smiled, nodding.

"Thank you," he said, taking the guitar into his hands. As Mom and I folded up the last of the clothes to send the Goodwill, Daniel played Gabby's guitar.

"Do you know any Beatles?" I asked him. Mom looked up toward him and smiled, waiting for his answer.

He played *Let It Be*, singing quietly. His voice was smoother than I'd ever heard it before. It gave me the best kinds of chills. Outside the window, snow fell at a tamed speed, falling against the tree branches, falling against every inch of Chicago.

And when the clock struck midnight, everyone cried.



“What do you think?” I asked Daniel as we arrived back at the train station in Edgewood. “Do you think she’ll be able to stop drinking?”

“I don’t know,” he answered. “But I hope she does.”

“Me too.” I looked around and smiled at Daniel. We stood in a hidden corner by the payphones in the Amtrak station. “She wants me to come back to live with her...to work on our relationship.”

He nodded slowly. “I know.”

My voice whispered with the next topic. Mom had given me the letter from the college of my dreams on the way out. “I got into the University of Southern California.”

“I know,” he repeated. “Of course you did.” His head lowered to the ground. “No matter what, no matter how hard we try...why do I feel like I’m going to lose you?”

I felt it, too. But I couldn’t voice it. “Okay, well, Henry is going to pick me up soon. I’ll call you later? Otherwise I’ll see you at school this week.” I stood on my tiptoes and kissed him on his lips, trying to give him ease to his doubt. He lightly tugged on my bottom lip and I sighed against his mouth. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

As I watched him walk toward the door, my heart tightened. After our final exams in a few weeks, there was a whole new semester where Daniel and I would have to pretend to not be in love. Only this time, I wouldn’t be in his class. The idea of going through that again was painful. I wanted to be selfish. I wanted him to quit his job. I wanted him to run away with me, but I knew he couldn’t. He loved teaching. He loved his band. His home was here in Edgewood.

And what about college? I’d gotten into the University of Southern California. My dream school. That would be four years away from Daniel—four more years of separation.

We had gone one semester with being surrounded by each other and it had almost been the end of me. A raw truth was settling into my head as I

studied him outside the building. I'd fallen in love with the right guy at the wrong time.

"Hey, Ashlyn."

Jumping out of my skin, I turned around at the sound of my name. "Jake, you scared me. What are you doing here?"

"Just got back from my grandparents'..." He gave me a grimace look. "Were you just kissing Mr. Daniels?"

My mouth dried up and I coughed. "What?"

"You were just kissing Mr. Daniels." He said it as a fact, but it hit my ears as a question.

I studied him intensely as he rotated his body toward the exit, pointing to Daniel, who was standing outside waiting for a taxi. I could feel the vomit climbing up my throat.

Laughing nervously, I yanked up my suitcase handle and started to roll it away from him. My legs felt like Jell-O. My mind felt like mush. "I gotta meet Henry..." I muttered.

We messed up.

We'd gotten too comfortable. We'd touched too much. We'd slipped.

Footsteps were following me, and I frowned at the sound of them. "Ashlyn! Listen, you're a smart girl. But hooking up with your teach—" Jake's mouth was yapping and yapping.

My hand flew to his lips, shutting him up. "Shut up, Jake! *Shut up!*" I was going to cry. No, correction—I was crying.

"Oh my gosh, it's true," he muttered, stepping back. "He's the guy?! He's the one?! Oh my gosh, Ashlyn!"

He was pacing back and forth. I looked toward the exit and saw Henry's truck parked in the front of the station. My fingers ran across my eyes, and I tried my best to pull my panicked self together.

My entire body shook, my hands trembling.

"Don't say anything..." I whispered.

Jake gave me a harsh look of disbelief.

I walked away, not looking back once. But I could feel his eyes still staring at me. Judging me. Losing all respect for who he thought he could someday love.

Chapter 39

Ashlyn

I'm not afraid of losing you.

I'm more afraid of losing me.

Don't make me choose. Because I'll choose you.

~ Romeo's Quest

First-hour chemistry was something I feared on the first day back to school. I didn't want to come face to face with Jake. I didn't want him to look at me with disappointment glowing in his eyes.

When I stepped into the classroom, I heard everyone whispering. I wasn't sure if it was because Ryan was dead or because I looked like death, but they whispered along. Jake was sitting at our lab table, and when he saw me, I gave him a small smile.

His lips curved up a bit.

Only a small, tiny hair, but it was enough for me right now.

"Hey," I said, taking my seat.

"Hey, *Ashlyn*," he chuckled, stressing my name. "I panicked...when I saw"—he cleared his throat and moved in closer to me—"what I saw. I understand completely though."

My heart pounded aggressively. "You do?"

"Of course, Ash. You lost your sister. Then you lost Ryan. You were an easy target for the asshole."

“He’s not an asshole!” I cried, seeing that Jake definitely didn’t understand.

He took my hand in his and held on to it. I wanted to rip it from his grip, but I didn’t. Jake didn’t know the history of Daniel and me. I couldn’t expect him to understand.

“I’ll make him regret using you though,” he whispered with order in his tone. “He’ll regret hurting you.”

“Jake! No, please. You don’t understand.”

He didn’t reply. His mind was already made up.

And I saw it happening. My life was once again falling apart.

It never even had a chance to fall back together.



I walked down the hallways after chemistry feeling as if my heart were resting underneath my shoe. I wished I’d had Harry Potter’s invisibility cloak, which would make me disappear right then and there. Hailey hadn’t made it back to school yet, and I understood completely.

The looks of pure sadness that were delivered my way were intense and forced my eyes to water every now and then. When I reached my locker, I looked down and saw Daniel standing in his doorway, staring directly at me. His cool eyes held a wicked amount of guilt and hurt, and I tried my best to crack a smile. He must have heard the whispering crowds, too. He stepped forward toward me and I shook my head back and forth.

The only person who could comfort me wasn’t allowed to. The only person I wanted to run his fingers through my hair and hold me against his chest had to stay at a distance.

“I don’t care,” he mouthed, and my heart was breaking into a million useless pieces.

I shrugged my shoulders and the tears started to pour from my eyes. “I do,” I mouthed back to him before I lowered my head. I cried into my locker and gasped for air as the overwhelming memories of death proceeded to surface in my soul.

Why were Gabby and Ryan dead? And why in the hell did I deserve to be alive?

I choked on my tears when a reality set in.

I ruined lives. I was certain I did. I'd ruined Gabby's life. I'd ruined Ryan's. I'd ruined Henry's and Mom's. And I was on the pathway of ruining Daniel's, too.

Before I knew it, two arms were wrapped around me and pulling me closer to their body. I looked up and saw Daniel still standing at his classroom door, tears fighting to escape his eyes, but I was thankful of his choice to keep his distance.

Henry was shushing my tears as I felt his own dripping onto my face. "It's okay, Ash. You're okay. We're okay."

I yanked at his shirt, pulling him closer. "Dad..." I whispered, unable to get any other words to leave my mouth. The undeniable power of pain was devastating. I'd known hearts could hurt, but I'd never known they could bleed out into the realms of nothingness.

Henry held on to me. Students passed and whispered, and some even stood and stared. But I released the breath I'd been holding for the past few months.

And I inhaled the air that lightened my mind.

And I exhaled the air that clogged up my soul.

Breathe in, breathe out. I was desperately in need of performing that task over and over again.

Just. Breathe. Ashlyn.



I was alone at the lunch table. I didn't even pick up a tray to eat. I just sat. Alone. Broken.

Avery glanced over to me at one point as if he were going to join me, but then he looked away, back to his football table. I wondered how much longer he would keep his sexuality a secret. I wondered if he'd tried to convince himself that he was straight just so he wouldn't end up as another statistic.

I hoped he would be all right.

Jake was standing in line getting his food. He nodded toward me as if he were going to come sit with me, but I didn't want to be near him. I hopped up from the table and hurried away. I walked past Avery. I walked past Jake.

But I didn't walk past Ryan.

Because you couldn't walk past the dead.

My eyes fell to Daniel, giving him a few blinks that I wanted him to follow me.

I stepped into the gated area in the basement, and there I stood in the darkened space, waiting. To some, I probably appeared to be pathetic for leaning against a wall next a dirty bucket and a mop, but I didn't care. He would come; I knew he would. If Daniel Daniels loved me the way I knew he did, he would show up.

So I would wait. Even if that meant waiting until the sun fell down and led the world into abyss, I would patiently wait. Knowing that, no matter what, he would do everything in his power to meet me.

I heard his footsteps, and when I looked up, I saw his face. "Sorry I'm late."

The sniffles were coming back, and when I felt his hands wrap around my lower back, I pressed into him, forming our bodies together.

"I'm sad," I said breathily.

He rested his chin on top of my head, soothing me with his loving caresses. "I'm sad, too. So instead of being sad alone, we can be sad together for a little while." His lips connected with my forehead, and I knew there was no one else in the world I wanted to hold. No one else in the world I wanted to have as mine.

But I would hurt him.

I always hurt people because I never took the time to heal myself.

So I had to leave him.

But it felt so hard to pull away.

“I’ve never been in love before,” I whispered, laying my head against his chest.

His fingers traveled through my hair and ran across my cheek, finding my lips. “I thought I’d been in love before, but I was wrong,” he said, circling my mouth with the tip of his thumb. My hot air brushed against his finger as he continued the simple motion that was driving me insane. “Before you, I never truly loved. I’ve never believed in eternity until I found you, Sweets. Ashlyn Jennings, you’re my forever always.”

“No,” I whispered, on the verge of crying. “Daniel, somebody knows.”

His eyes looked down to mine and I felt his worry wash over me. Or maybe it was my own worry. Sometimes our feelings were so in sync it was hard to tell them apart.

“How?”

“The train station yesterday. They saw us.”

His hand brushed over his face and he nodded, taking in the information. “Okay.”

That’s all he said.

I narrowed my eyes. “Daniel, he wants to tell! He wants to get you in trouble!”

His shoulders fell and his sweet blue eyes locked with mine. “I’ve been thinking about quitting, Ashlyn. I can just do my music to make a living. My parents had a little saved up, too. I’ll sell their house. I can find another job or something. That way I can give you everything you need. We can make this work. I can hold you when you need to be held. I can kiss you and not worry about who’s watching. I’ll come to California to be with you.”

“Daniel,” I said nervously. “You can’t sell that house... It’s your home. And you love teaching.”

“No, *I love you*. You are all that matters.”

He was going to give up everything he’d worked for, everything he was, to choose me.

That’s when I knew what I had to do.

My voice cracked. "I'm ruining your life."

The walls felt as if they were closing in. I felt chains wrapping around my heart as I slowly started to un-invite Daniel inside of me.

"No..." his voice choked out. I felt his nerves. He knew where this was going.

"My mom's doing better. But she's alone down there. I should go back, go home."

His fingers wrapped around mine and lay against my chest. "This is home, Ashlyn. We are home."

"I'm so sorry."

"I don't—" His voice shook. "I don't understand. I know things are a mess, but..." Tears burned down his cheeks and he stepped away.

"I don't know who I am right now, Daniel." My voice was shaky, broken. "I went from having a twin, to having you, and there has never been a time for me to learn what it means to be alone. And I need to try. I need to try to be alone for awhile to prove to myself that I can stand on my own."

"I understand that, I really do...but..." He wiped his eyes and turned away from me. His hands landed on his waist, and I watched the deep inhales and heavy exhales he was taking. "How can I fix this? How can I make you stay?" He looked back to me. "I'll give up my world for you, Ash. I'll give it all up."

"Daniel...what if I gave up going to California for school?" I whispered.

He declined that offer, telling me that California was all I ever wanted, it was my dream. I moved over to him and brushed my fingers against his cheeks. My hands wrapped around his neck and I pulled his mouth to mine, kissing him hard, feeling his tears hit my lips.

"I know." I swallowed hard. "Don't ask me to be the reason you give up everything."

"How am I supposed to keep going? Without seeing you every day? Without you?"

My hands landed on his chest. "Start slow," I said. "Maybe we were just meant to get each other through the darkness."

“I don’t believe that,” he argued.

I frowned. “It was Jake Kenn. You’ll have to talk to him. I can’t be the reason you lose everything you worked so hard to get.”

He chuckled nervously. “I’ve lost worse.”

My footsteps away from Daniel were the most painful steps I’d ever taken. The walls were whispering to me, mocking me with the debilitating truths of Daniel’s and my fate. There were so many times I wanted to turn back to him and take back my words. But I knew I’d made the right decision.

Because if it were the wrong decision, my heart wouldn’t hurt this much.

Chapter 40

Ashlyn

Don't say goodbye.

~ Romeo's Quest

Walking back into the cafeteria, I gasped when I saw Hailey sitting with Jake at our table talking. I rushed over and hugged Hailey tightly. “I thought you weren’t coming back this week!”

She smiled. “Gotta start back sometime.”

Daniel returned to the cafeteria and walked over to our table. “Jake, can I talk to you for a minute in my classroom?”

Jake narrowed his eyes on Mr. Daniels and huffed, “No thanks.”

I cringed at his reaction and moved over to Jake. I placed my mouth near his ear and sighed. “Please, Jake? For me?”

He frowned and shook his head back and forth. He didn’t say a word. He just stood up and followed Daniel out of the room.

Hailey and I sat back down at the table. “Remember in the beginning of the year when I said I’d never seen two people love each other so quietly? About Ryan and Avery?” Hailey asked. I nodded. Her eyes moved toward Daniel, who was walking away. “I stand corrected.”

I leaned in toward her. “Jake told you?” She nodded. I started to explain the complete situation but she cut me off.

“You don’t have to explain anything to me, Ashlyn.” Her eyes watered over and she shrugged. “Friends stick together no matter what. And I told

Jake to shut his big mouth and keep it to himself.”

I grimaced. “Yeah, well, I don’t think he has plans to do that.”

“If he cares for you the way Mr. Daniels cares for you, then he’ll shut up.”

It felt like forever since Daniel and Jake had left the cafeteria. And they didn’t return before the lunch period was over. I rushed toward Daniel’s classroom, my heart pounding out of my chest, fear almost eating me up. His door was closed, so I waited across from it as students walked past me, moving on with their lives. But I stayed still.

The door opened and Jake walked out first. I hiccupped when I saw him and rushed to his side. He looked befuddled and walked in a slow pace.

“Jake? Talk to me, please. What happened?”

He looked up to me, his eyes heavy with emotion, and he shrugged. “I think I just fell in love with Mr. Daniels.”

I laughed when I saw him smirk. “Yeah, it has a way of sneaking up on you.”

His brows fell. “You’re really leaving? Going back to Chicago?”

I nodded.

“Look, it’s not because of me saying I would make him pay was it? Because I didn’t know—” He paused. “I didn’t know another human being could care about someone as much as he does you.”

“It’s not because of you, Jake. It’s just life. Life is happening, and I’m allowing myself to happen right along with it.”

“I’ll watch after her,” he promised. “Hailey. I’ll sit with her every day. She won’t eat lunch alone.”

“Thank you, Jake.” I kissed his cheek.

“You’re welcome, *Ashlyn*.” He put the stress on my name. And I kissed his cheek again.

Chapter 41

Daniel

We burned together.

We burned for fun.

We burned in front of everyone.

We were the stars.

~ Romeo's Quest

It was the night before she was heading back to Chicago. After school tomorrow, Ashlyn would be on a train leaving town. I stood near the dock with Gabby's guitar, staring at the frozen water, my hands jammed into my jeans. Randy had been out to check on me a few times, but I'd told him I would be all right. I had to be. She would hate if I was anything but okay.

The gloom of winter dwelled on everything. I could see it in every breath I took. The music and mystery of the lake was silenced by ice. But the music in her delicate voice sang to me.

"Hey," Ashlyn whispered, walking behind me. Henry had let her borrow his car to say goodbye to a few people. She'd said that she was only using it to come see me. Her eyelids were hooded. She hadn't slept a wink last night either.

"Hey," I smiled, turning her way. She had a box in her hands. My eyes shifted to the small bonfire I'd started up at the request of her. I laughed, "Man, you look hideous. *So fucking ugly.*"

She smiled wide. "Romancing—you're doing it right."

“This sucks,” I sighed, rubbing the back of my neck.

“I know...” We walked over to the fire and she opened the box. “Are you ready?”

I wasn’t. But I picked up my guitar and started playing, singing low.

May the winds be our friends, floating us home.

May tomorrows be the beauty where each soul goes.

“Ryan’s fake cigarette box,” she said, holding it up. She tossed it into the flames and we watched the smoke send off into the air.

May the journey be worth the ultimate death.

May the sweet memories of us never be put to rest...

When she held up the letters from Gabby, I cringed. “Ashlyn, are you sure?”

A tear rolled down her cheek and she nodded, placing them in the fire.

Fine lines between here and there.

Bursting flames ignite the air.

Breathe in, breathe out.

Angels, listen closely now.

I finished strumming on Gabby’s guitar and we stood there, watching the smoke move through the calming, chilly winds. Ashlyn reached into the box and pulled out two pieces of paper and two pens.

“What now?” I asked, moving over to her. She handed me a piece of paper and pen.

“In five years, where do you see yourself?” She looked down at the blank piece of paper. “Write it down. And after I go to college, after you start rebuilding this place...we’ll exchange our notes. Right where we started.”

“You’re so fucking dramatic,” I laughed and frowned at once. But I wrote it down and slid it into my pocket. She did the same.

“I better get going. But I’ll see you at school tomorrow?”

“Yeah. See you tomorrow.”

She stood still, staring at me. The pull of my soul brought me to her and I wrapped her in my arms. I looked up to the rosy-hued sky that was widening off in the far distance, and I tried my best to not let her go.

“I understand why you’re leaving. I understand you wanting to find yourself, you deserve that. There’s no one in this world that deserves to find themselves more than you. But if it’s okay with you, I would like to say everything that’s been screaming in my head for the next forty-five seconds. And when I finish, I want you to pull away from me, and walk toward your car.”

“Daniel...” she hesitated.

“Please? Please, Ashlyn.” Her stare found the ground and when she looked back toward me, she nodded. I stepped in closer. My lips met the edge of her left ear and I whispered. “I thought I made you up. I thought that I was living in a world of darkness and I imagined you into existence. That somehow my mind crafted you, placing you on that train months ago. But then I realized I could never dream of something so beautiful.

“You’re the reason people believe in tomorrow. You’re the voice that scares the shadows away. You’re the love that makes me breathe. So for the next few seconds, I’m going to be selfish. I’m going to say things that I don’t want you to listen to.” My hands ran up and down her back as I pulled her closer, feeling her nerves rocking throughout her. I kissed the edge of her ear. “Don’t go. Stay with me forever. Please, Ashlyn. Let me be your everything. Make me your golden. *Don’t. Go.*”

I pulled away from her, and felt guilty for her tears. She gave me a smile and nodded. Her footsteps toward the car were slow, and she turned back to face me. “You’ll be here? When I find myself?”

“Promise, promise.”



I walked into the school building to see Ashlyn laughing at her locker with Jake and Hailey. Walking past it, I saw pictures of watermelons covering it from top to bottom. I laughed right along with her as I watched Jake and Hailey mocking her with the pictures they’d clearly put up.

Ashlyn's green eyes locked with mine and I felt my heart pound harder. She smiled and frowned all within two seconds before I looked away.

"That was the most romantic look I've ever seen in my life," Hailey muttered to Ashlyn. I kept walking.

"No lie," Jake muttered, "I think I just got a hard-on from watching you two."

I laughed at that one, but I didn't turn back. Because I knew if I looked back, I wouldn't be able to let this happen. I would hold her against me and whisper, "Please don't go."

"Dan." Henry walked over to me, a grim look on his face. "Can I see you in my office really fast?"

He was hurting knowing that Ashlyn was heading back to Chicago. It was bleeding out of his eyes. I knew the feeling.

We walked into his office and he closed the door behind me. Before I could sit down in the desk, I felt a hard fist connect with my eye. "Holy shit, Henry! What the hell was that?!"

"You fucking bastard! You used my daughter!" He swung again, slamming me in my gut. I whined in pain as the wind was knocked out of me. I bent over, trying to fight off the pain. "She's my daughter!"

Another punch to the gut.

"My ex-wife called me, making sure everything was in place. Making sure Ashlyn was doing okay. But she was so worried." He swung again, but this time I blocked it. "She was so worried about Ashlyn having to leave her boyfriend. And I thought to myself, 'What boyfriend?' Ashlyn didn't have a fucking boyfriend."

"Henry, let me explain—"

He didn't. "And then Kim recalls his name. She tells me his band's name. Guess what it was?"

The office door opened with me on the ground and I saw Ashlyn's face. Her mouth hung open and she stepped in quickly, closing the door behind her. Her eyes shot to her father and she stood in front of me as I stood up.

“Henry, look at me,” she said, putting her hands up in the air.

“Ashlyn, he used you!” Henry screamed, tossing his arms in the air.

I wiped off the bit of blood dripping from my mouth.

“No. No he didn’t.”

“You’re confused. You’d been through so much,” Henry sighed, running his hands through his hair.

“Dad, look at me,” she whispered, taking his hands into hers. “He saved me. If you have ever loved me, you will let me explain. You will listen to me, and you will *not* get Daniel into any trouble.”

He stood still, thinking of his daughter’s words. Then he turned toward me. “I never want to see you near her again.”

“Henry—” I started.

Ashlyn cut me off. “I’m leaving! I’m leaving, I swear. It’s over.”

Those words cut into me, and I wiped my hand across my brow, agreeing with Ashlyn. “It’s over.”

Chapter 42

Daniel

*No such thing as a second chance,
Only first chances that never end.*

~ Romeo's Quest

She was gone. I didn't know what to think. I didn't know what to feel.

Randy sat with me at the kitchen table and sipped on a beer. He hadn't known what to say to make me feel better, and he didn't try to make me feel better. "I'm sorry, man." He lowered his head and shook it back and forth.

"Yeah. Me too."

The back door to the house opened and Jace walked in. His eyes were bloodshot from tears as he slipped his hands into his jean pockets. There was a clear sign that he'd received a black eye from someone, and my gut twisted from looking at him. His lip was cut open, and he looked way too much like he had when I saw him the day Mom died.

"I asked Red to let me out." His body shook with nerves and he laughed, shrugging his shoulders. "They were never going to tell me who killed Mom, were they?"

My head dropped and I studied my hands, which were resting against the table. "No. They weren't." I listened to his sobs and pushed myself up from my seat.

Walking out of the room, I came back with a cloth. Filling it with ice, I placed it against his darkening eye. He cringed when it made contact with

his skin, but he didn't verbally complain.

I didn't want to scold him anymore. I didn't want to tell him how much his choices affected his life and others' lives. I just wanted my brother back. I'd witnessed too many people lose their siblings, and I was tired of fighting.

Wrapping my arms around my brother, I pulled him into a hug and he sobbed against my shoulder.

"I miss them so much, Danny." His heart was shattering and he was finally allowing himself to feel sadness over our parents' deaths as opposed to revenge. "I don't know what to do now. I don't know what to do..."

I didn't have a reply for him. I hardly knew what I was doing with my life. I pulled out a chair at the table and Jace and I sat down next to Randy. The room filled with silence as the three of us remained still for the longest time.

"Well," Randy smirked, moving over to the refrigerator and pulling out three beers. "We have an opening in Romeo's Quest."

Jace's eyes widened and he shook his head in disbelief. "You would want me back? After everything I've done? Especially with Ashlyn—"

I flinched when I heard him say her name. "Jace...just say okay," I said.

His blue eyes smiled when he looked up to find my stare. "Okay."

Chapter 43

Ashlyn

*This isn't something that I want to fade.
Promise there will be sunshine after this rain.
~ Romeo's Quest*

After I left Edgewood, I went home and finished my senior year at my old school. My old friends tried to connect with me, but I wasn't the girl they'd once known. Mom still struggled every day with dealing with Gabby's death, but she promised me she was doing better with me being home.

She laughed a lot more, too.

Every night I sat on the couch with her—she watched television while I read. Our routine worked for us up until the day I went off to college to find myself. To start over. I made new friends. I grew comfortable being on my own, which was something I'd never been in my entire life. I'd gone from being a twin, always having someone near me, to being in a relationship with Daniel.

I didn't regret either thing, for they'd both made me who I was today. They'd made me stronger.

My imagination used to pretend that we were together after we went our separate ways. I would roll over in my bed each morning and dream of his lips kissing mine, his arms wrapping me up as he pressed me against his warming body, his love breathing life into my entire being. I would imagine him making me a cup of tea while I made his eggs in his favorite fashion

and his coffee extra dark. Then we would make love before the sun fully awakened and smile because we would know that our bodies had been crafted for one another.

Our hearts would always beat for one another. Our souls were destined to burn together in a mystifying flame that lit the universe with hope and passion.

Most people didn't understand. My friends encouraged me to move on, to find someone else. Yet how could I allow someone to give me their all when I knew I couldn't return the same to them? It wouldn't be fair.

I knew I would never fall in love again. It wasn't in my cards. I supposed it was because when I'd first fallen in love, I never stopped falling.

Anyone on this planet would be lucky if they had the chance to love Mr. Daniels.

Yet I was the luckiest. Because for a moment he loved me back.



I wrote each and every day whenever I wasn't doing homework. I created a story I hadn't even known lived inside of me. There wasn't a word written that hadn't been accompanied by his CD playing in my ears. It was as if he were right there with me, cheering me on.

By the end of my sophomore year, I finally wrote the words on the last page. "The End."

I'd done it. I was officially an author.

After I finished my first ever novel, I self-published it. I sold a whopping seven copies.

Two of which were my own purchases.

And then I went back to Edgewood.

Two years early.

I couldn't fight it anymore; I had to see if he was still thinking about me.

Because I'd never stopped for one second thinking of him.



I stood in front of the school building for the longest time, staring straight into his classroom. He was smiling toward his students, sitting on the corner of his desk, probably begging them to interact with him. His hands were waving around the classroom, and he stood from the desk as he began to write on the whiteboard. He'd cut his hair and had facial hair. He looked so...grown up.

My cheeks heated up just as they had the first time my eyes had spotted him. He laughed at something a student had said as he was writing on the board and shook his head back and forth. When the bell rang, I watched the students pack up their backpacks and start heading out of the classroom. The spring breeze picked up, and I held my arms tighter across my body. When I took a step backward, I watched Daniel's body turn toward the window, and when he looked up, our eyes locked. Everything inside of me froze over, and my lips stayed parted.

His dark eyes were confused at first, but then he held up his hand toward me and mouthed, "Hi."

My heart was shattering at the simple word and small gesture. I bit my bottom lip to keep from tearing up, and I held my hand up to him. "Hi," I whispered.

He wiped his hand across his mouth and then rubbed the back of his neck. I stepped forward, and he did too, until we were standing face to face, only a glass window separating us. He rested his hand against the glass, and I placed mine against it. My eyes fell to his fingertips, which were almost resting against mine, and I smiled.

When I looked up to him, I saw the water in his eyes and he smiled back my way. "Tea?" he asked. I nodded my head, a tear rolling down my cheek. He slid his hands into his pockets. "Don't cry."

My shoulders shrugged. I couldn't help it. He'd told me to wait for him, and I couldn't help but chuckle because I would wait for him always.

It wasn't long until he gathered up his things and met me outside of the school building. We stood in front of each other for the longest, just smiling like children. I went to hug him, and he must have had the same thought because we stepped on each other's shoes. A nervous laugh happened and I

felt like that same teenager who was meeting him for the first time at the train station.

When his arms finally made it around me, I breathed in his scents, tugging tightly on his jacket. He didn't dare pull away anytime soon.

"You look so grown up," I whispered into his shoulder and he laughed, rubbing his hand against my back.

"Ditto." He pulled away and stared at me. "You have bangs."

"Your face is hairier." I laughed.

"Yeah," he frowned, rubbing his chin. "I need to shave."

"Don't. I love it." Changing the subject, I ran my finger across my red nose. "I stopped by your place last night, but—"

"I moved." He gestured for us to start walking down the sidewalk and I followed his lead. "I spent some time fixing it up with Jace, and then I sold it."

"But it was—"

"My parents' dream. Not mine. I got a new place not too far from here. A big kid's apartment," he joked.

We stood in silence, but it wasn't uncomfortable at all. "How is Jace?"

He smiled. "Clean. For the first time in a while. He's staying with Randy. He's back in the band."

"Good for him. Good for both of you." Daniel just smiled. "You'll have to show me this big kid's apartment someday."

"I have tea there now. I mean, if you want to see it," he offered.

Of course I agreed. We walked to his apartment and talked about anything and everything.

You know those people you could go years without seeing and when you finally get together it felt like no time had passed? Hold on to those people.

When he placed his key in the lock, he turned to say something to me, but nothing came out of his mouth. Because I placed my lips against his. It was rushed and suddenly imposed, but I had to remember his taste, I had to remember him against me.

He didn't hesitate to kiss me back. His hand wrapped around my lower back, and I sighed against him, drunk on Daniel.

I pulled back and stared into his blue eyes. "Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry." I blushed as I stepped back. "I don't even know if you're seeing anyone! And here I am just slamming my lips against yours as if this is some kind of—"

He shut me up, pushing his mouth against mine again. He separated my lips with his tongue and slowly deepened our kiss.

I sighed again, my eyes closed. "You don't have a girlfriend, right?"

He chuckled. "No. And you don't have a boyfriend?"

I felt his body against mine and was a little surprised at how much it still felt like home.

"Uh, Ashlyn?" he questioned, snapping me out of my mind.

"Oh! No. No boyfriend." I slightly rocked back and forth in my shoes. "But you can tell me, you know. If there was another person in your life. I haven't dated, because...well...how could I after this? But I mean, three years is a long time to wait and I completely understand if you moved on I mean—"

His fingers landed on my lips. "You're rambling."

I nodded. "I'm nervous."

He stepped in close, our noses brushing. His fingers combed through my hair and he stared into my eyes. "There was never another woman, Ashlyn. There can never be another woman." Putter. Putter. Heart. Heart. I watched his eyes smile. "Come inside."

When I stepped into his apartment, I smiled. It was very much Daniel's apartment. He had musical instruments in his living room and bookshelves packed to the corners with books.

I wandered over to the bookshelf, laying my fingers against it, feeling the covers of the books. So many Shakespeare plays. So much history.

"I have green tea and chai tea. And this weird boxed tea that one of my students' Mom gave me for Christmas last year. What can I get you?" he asked, moving to his kitchen.

No words came to mind. Because right between *Hamlet* and *Much Ado About Nothing* was my novel.

To Find Juliet.

Not just one copy, but two.

“Daniel,” I whispered.

He looked up and walked over to me. “It’s brilliant,” he said, crossing his arms across his body. “I mean, the lead hero could be a bit of an asshole sometimes, but everything about it is perfect. I loved it.” He cleared his throat and picked up both copies of it. “I loved it so much that I bought two. Just in case something happened to the first copy.”

A tear fell down my cheek and I nodded in understanding. “A double problem?”

He moved in and kissed my tears away. “We need to set up a signing for them.” He moved over to his living room coffee table and tossed everything onto the floor. Grabbing my arm, he led me to sit down on the couch. I giggled as he placed a pen in my hand and walked up to the table as if he were my biggest fan.

Which he might have been.

He placed the first book down on the table. I opened it and gasped. “Daniel...”

Inside the book cover was the promise ring Bentley had given to Gabby. And the book had already been signed. It read the words, “Will you marry me, Ms. Jennings?” signed by Mr. Daniels himself.

The tears fell down my cheeks and I smiled up at him. He nudged me gently. “You have to write your answer and sign your name.”

Of course I wrote the word yes.

And then I autographed it with who I would be for the rest of my life.

Mrs. Daniels.

Epilogue

Daniel

We love.

~ Romeo's Quest

Ashlyn went back to school, finishing off the last two years of her college degree. We made it our job to visit each other as often as possible, and when she came back to Edgewood, Wisconsin she moved into my big kid's apartment. We spent the next year falling more in love, finding out more facts about one another. She kept writing, only growing stronger at her craft and decided she wanted to get a Master's degree—but she stayed a lot closer to home for that program.

Home.

That's what we were... We were home.

And today I wasn't nervous. My hands were just sweaty and the damn bowtie wouldn't tie. "Breathe, Daniel..." Where the hell was my best man? Wasn't he the one in charge of the damn bowties that wouldn't tie? Of course not. Jace wouldn't know how to do it either.

My hands rubbed against the back of my neck before giving up on the tie and moving to the cuffs on my shirt.

"How are ya doing?"

I looked up to see Henry standing in the doorway, his tuxedo fully put together, his tie perfectly crafted.

There was a slight hesitation when I looked at him, my fingers shaking from some weird feeling—but it wasn't nerves!

Well, maybe it was nerves.

"This damn bowtie is killing me and Jace is nowhere to be found."

"Let me," he said, walking over to me. He began helping me out and I sighed. Now I was extremely nervous. Henry always made me feel that way. "She's something else, isn't she?"

"Yeah, she is."

His hands worked as if he had been a professional bowtie expert in a past life. "If you hurt her, I will kill you and make it look like an accident."

I laughed out loud until I looked into his scary, stern eyes on me. Swallowing hard, I felt him tightening the bowtie. "Henry," I coughed.

"Dan."

"You're choking me."

A sly smile found his lips and he loosened the bowtie. He stepped back and nodded toward me before he held out an envelope to me. "Be good to her, son."

The word son hit my ears and I nodded, taking the letter from him. He turned to walk away and I called after him. When he looked back, I smiled. "Thanks for your help."

"I just tied a bowtie. No big deal."

But we both knew he had done so much more than that.

He left me alone with the envelope and I opened it, finding two letters inside. I pulled out the first one and began reading Ashlyn's words.

Mr. Daniels,

The answer to where I want to be in five years? Simple.

With you.

P.S. I saved a letter from the fire.

Forever Forever,

Ashlyn.

I'd never known it was possible to love someone so much. My hand reached into the envelope and pulled out the second letter, and I pounded my fist against my lips, taking it all in.

To Whom It May Concern,

Hi there. I'm not sure if we have met, but since today is the day you're marrying my sister, I thought I would say hello. Since I can't stand up in front of everyone to give my maid Of honor speech, I'll give it to you.

When Ashlyn and I were seven, she found a spider in our room, and instead of smashing it, she wanted to take it outside so it could live a nice spider life. It later crawled on her and she killed it by mistake.

She cried for three days straight.

When we were fifteen, she dated a total loser, and when he broke up with her, she cried for four days straight.

When she found out I was sick, she cried more days than I could count.

She has the biggest heart in the world, and I know you have seen all sides of it. It takes a strong man to love my sister. And you are a strong man. So here are some twin-tips for you from yours truly:

Read her Shakespeare when she cries.

Take walks in the rain and jump in the puddles with her.

Don't mind her when she calls you an asshole during 'that time of the month'—she's a total bitch at those times.

Buy her flowers because it's Tuesday.

Make her do things that scare her.

Don't be a pushover—we don't like that.

Don't be a dick either—we hate that.

Smile at her when you're mad.

Dance with her in the middle of the day.

Kiss her just because.

Love her forever.

Thank you for loving my best friend, brother.

Keep up the good work.

-Your new sis, Gabby

I stared at the words for the longest time, tears streaming down my cheeks. The door to the room opened and Jace peeked his head inside. My hands brushed against my eyes and I turned to him.

“You ready, Danny? The photographer wants a few shots of the groomsmen before the ceremony,” he said smiling my way.

I walked over to him and wrapped my arm around his shoulder. “I’m ready.”

He smirked my way. “You know how to tie a bowtie?”

I snickered and rolled my eyes. “Of course. Don’t you?”



Ashlyn

“So help me God, if you move, I’ll kick your ass. Don’t. Breathe,” Hailey muttered behind me, my hands resting on my waist. I stood as still as possible, staring out the window at the beautiful landscape. The sun lay golden-soft over the huddle hills.

Hailey pulled the ribbon of my corset tight, cutting off my air supply for a moment.

“Okay, on the count of three, exhale... One...two...three!”

I breathed out, bending forward as much as the gown allowed me to. A robin danced past the window, and I followed it with my finger, watching it fly higher and higher toward the nonexistent clouds of the day. The sky was completely blue in all directions.

Turning around to face Hailey and Mom, I listened to them inhale deep, but a following exhale never came.

“I look fat!” I cried, running my hands across the lace material.

Mom’s eyes watered over as she walked closer to me and placed her hands in mine. “You look like the most beautiful bride.”

My lips turned up. "It's a good day to get married, isn't it?"

Hailey clapped her hands together and poured champagne. "It's a perfect day for a wedding!"

There was a knock at the door, and I moved a curl of hair from my face. "Come in. Unless you're Daniel. Then you stay out."

The door knob turned and two people walked in with boxes in their hands. Jace and Bentley. They were in suits and looked extremely dapper. When they turned to me, I blushed because of how their mouths hung open. I shifted around at the silence, begging them to speak.

"Ashlyn, you look..." Bentley smiled, showing his deep dimples.

"Perfect," Jace finished, his blue eyes brighter than the day. "Um, sorry. We'll leave you to finish getting ready. We just had a few things to give to you."

Bentley walked over to me and opened the first box. "Something old and something new. Gabby's favorite guitar pick placed on a new diamond necklace."

My eyes glossed over as Hailey lifted my hair and Bentley placed the necklace around my neck. I thanked him with a kiss on his cheek.

Jace stepped up next with a smaller box. "And something borrowed and something blue." The box opened and I gasped. "It was our mom's favorite pair of blue diamond earrings. You don't have to wear them. I just thought..."

His worries were taken away because I removed the studs from my ears and quickly replaced them with the beautiful earrings.

Jace wrapped me in a hug and held on tight. "He's one lucky bastard."

"Is he nervous?"

Jace gave me a wicked smile and reached into his back pocket. Pulling out an envelope, he placed it in my hands. "He told me to give it to you."

My fingers traced over the letter and I smiled, knowing that it was his letter he'd written years ago about where he wanted to be in five years. I'd already had Henry deliver my letter to Daniel.

Mom smiled to everyone. “How about we give the bride-to-be a few minutes to read?” Everyone agreed and left the room.

I sat in a chair, opening the letter.

My Sweets,

You asked me where I saw myself in five years, and the only answer I can come up with is with you. We’ll be so deeply in love that the world will envy us. We’ll be so ridiculously happy that the flowers will grow from our laughter. In five years from now, you will be mine, and I will be yours.

If things go the way my heart is begging them to go, you will be my wife. I don’t know if we will have children by that point, but there will be children in our future. I will wake up every morning with your sweet smile and emerald eyes on me. I will fall asleep to your touch, your heat. So on the day we say ‘I do,’ just know how much I do love you. There is no question to the truth of the words, no doubt that fills me inside. From this day forth, the only thing I ever want to do is love you.

Always Always,

Mr. Daniels

His words were embedded into my soul. Daniel Daniels was now a part of me. But truth be told, I thought he’d already been there before I was even born.

After a while, Mom and Henry came back to get me. The sweet, romantic music began to play. The church doors opened slowly. Henry wrapped his arm around mine. All of our loved ones stood up, staring at me.

Yet I couldn’t notice them.

My eyes were glued to the handsome man standing at the end of the aisle. He was grinning, giving me the kindest smile in the universe, and I couldn’t help but smile back as I stared into those eyes of his.

Beautiful.

Breathtaking.

Brilliant.

Blue eyes.

And for the first time in forever, I knew that, no matter what—no matter the obstacles in life, no matter the challenges—we would make it. He was my golden, and I was his.

Forever forever and always always.

We were more than okay.

The End

To the Readers

Thank you for reading Loving Mr. Daniels! It means so much to me! If you have a minute and get the chance to leave a review on Amazon or Barnes and Noble, that would make you a super rockstar!

You can also find me on Facebook at:
www.facebook.com/brittainycherryauthor

Or twitter at: www.twitter.com/brittainycherry

Thanks for all of the love and taking a chance on these characters of mine, and thanks for taking a chance on me! XoXo

Acknowledgments



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To my bad ass ladies. I look up to each of you so much! I love you and am blessed to have you all in my life! Your talent inspires me and your amazing support is unworldly.

To my outstanding PR team at Read and Tell Promotions, beta readers, and amazing formatting fairy godmother Tami—thank you! If it weren't for all of you, my book wouldn't be anything! Seriously, you all are so much a part of this story and I thank you for the time you put into it!

To my friends: Thanks for still loving me even though I disappear for months at a time. I hope you know that your friendships are so important to me!

There's no doubt in my mind, I have the most amazing family standing beside me at all times. They remind me of my strength when I feel weak, they bring me laughter when I'm on the verge of tears. When it comes to family, I win.

To Kristen: For telling me to keep writing and to believe in this story when I wanted to toss it to the side. You're one of my best friends and I'm so happy we found each other on this crazy journey!

Last but not least: To Mickey. Not only are you the most amazing editor, but you have a heart of gold. You go above and beyond to make sure my work is the best it can be. Thank you for not only going above and beyond with your skills, but also for being such a kind, wonderful individual. You're the best!

Look for these other great reads

Word Play

By Amalie Silver

Prologue

Michael Rourke

Jasmine whimpered, gripping my hair and pulling my mouth to her drenched pussy. Her fingernails desperately scratching against my scalp, combined with the heady aroma of coconut and the ocean, held me prisoner in a foggy desire.

She could've asked me to do anything and I would've been happy to oblige. The woman was perfection. Not in the conventional way, but in the exotic and mysterious way that had me coming back to her again and again. These past few weeks in the Caribbean had surely worked me over, as I had been trying to find some way to keep her on this island, keep her here with me.

"Por favor, Armond," she whispered as I traced my tongue along her inner thigh. Knowing that I'd won, my smirk escaped. For weeks I'd coveted this siren, determined to put a smile across those dark, sexy, full lips. I'd imagined what her plea would look like: her legs spread out before me and her long black hair curtaining her pillow, the sheets, one breast, and her arms reaching for me.

"Not yet, Jazzy," I countered. "You've been teasing my cock for weeks. It's time for a little payback."

She huffed and threw her head back to the satin pillow, causing her breasts to ripple with the motion. Her hands flew over her head as she settled into the sheets. Closing her eyes, she grabbed a firm hold of my hair with one hand and began moving her hips.

I swept my tongue over her clit momentarily and buried my nose into the tuft of hair on her pubic bone, taking in her scent. “Oh, sí, sí, mi Armond,” she murmured breathlessly.

I dipped my tongue into her pussy, licking from her entrance to her clit. My tempo quickened as my tongue danced along her lips, sucking and nipping but not giving any satisfaction to any particular area. I sucked her dry, taking in every last drop of moisture she’d given me until I could no longer taste my sweet Jasmine.

Her flavor alone had my cock twitching and heated. I’d jerked off to this very thought a dozen times in the past week that I was surprised I hadn’t blown my load before now. I trailed my tongue from her clit to her navel, pausing only briefly before reaching her nipple.

I checked myself, the throbbing now almost unbearable. Oh, yes. I was ready. Palming my hard cock, I began a rough torture on her dark areolas, causing the peaks to rise and fall in both pain and delight.

Her nipple hardened under my teeth as she cried out. But the satisfied grin on her face urged my will to briefly continue. “You’ve been a bad girl,” I whispered, looking out through my dark lashes.

I thrust my stiffness against her and she gasped. “Sí,” she murmured back.

“I don’t think you should get off that easily.” I scooped my arms around her and quickly flipped her to her stomach. I can only imagine that the slippery sheets were a welcome ease under her swollen and sensitive nipples. Pinning down her wrists, my back in an exaggerated arch, I glided my cock against her backside. Whispering softly into her ear, assuring that I had deep hot breaths between each word, I said, “Jasmine. Tell me to fuck you.” I thrust again, feeling her arousal glide against me. Her legs parted slightly, allowing for me to nestle between them, and I thrust again.

“I want you to fuck me,” she said in her sexy little accent.

I smiled and thrust again, feeling the wetness increase. “I don’t hear the conviction. Say it again.”

“Por favor, Armond. I die here. I die.”

I spread her cheeks, my tongue gliding across the dark pink line from her entrance to her asshole. And I slapped.

“Ow! Mi Armond!”

“Have you enjoyed strutting this ass around, teasing me?”

I slapped again, delighting in the light pink flesh I’d created on her perfectly bronzed backside. She brought her stomach off the bed and leaned back, putting her pussy at my eye level. Two perfect folds of slippery urgency, her entrance constricted, squeezing out another drop for me to taste.

I got to my knees and shoved her hips against me as we both grunted. I slid my dick up and down, allowing for her natural lubricant to coat us. Twisting her hair into a ponytail, I yanked, and her long neck strained backward. The mirrored headboard gave me a perfect view of her entire body, squirming and writhing for my touch. “You’re mine,” I growled.

And she was. If even for only the next hour, I’d fuck that woman until she was weak—so that when she suddenly turned to pick something off the ground tomorrow or went to one of those damn yoga classes, she could still feel the effects of this. I wanted her to feel me days from now.

“Sí. Mi Armond. Take me.”

I released my grip on her hair and crashed into her. The force I had even surprised me, as I’d never needed a woman as desperately as I did Jasmine. Her small tits recoiled with each thrust, and her slick opening constricted, anticipating my next blow. Again and again, I crushed myself to her, hoping I’d reach some sort of voice inside her, helping me convince her that this could be forever. I’d make love to her, fuck her, please her any way she wanted for the rest of her life—if she’d only give me that chance. I’d studied her body to the point of nausea for a month, and I already knew what she needed and how she needed me to give it to her.

“You like my tight little pussy, Armond? Tell me how I feel.”

“Fuck, Jazz. You’re exquisite. I love watching your tits bounce,” I said, reaching one of my hands around her torso to take her nipple between my fingers. Her hand reached down between her legs as she began to pleasure herself. And I fucking lost it.

Back on my knees, I grabbed her hips again, watching her mouth open and close with the overwhelming sensations filling her lustful needs. My cock. Her fingers. Watching it all in the mirror. It was dangerous—sinful—like we were doing something dirty and wrong. And loving every fucking second of it.

It started in my thighs, and weakened my sensibilities. Feeling the orgasm build, I increased my thrusts rapidly. The tip of my cock throbbed, and the feel of Jasmine’s tight pussy—constricting, getting wetter, so close to her own orgasm—left me begging for it. My sack slapped against her, making a glorious sound—one reserved for only this kind of fucking.

She pushed her backside up a little further, changing the feel entirely. Even more snug now, she knew I was ready to explode. The slapping sound increased as I realized she’d adjusted herself so that my balls would slap against her clit. As soon as she braced herself back on all fours, I stared at her deep brown eyes in the reflection of the headboard as a smirk rose to her face.

“Come for me, Armond.”

The words were my undoing. I thrust twenty times, so hard that I thought I’d break her. And I swear I must have come over a gallon. Just as I thought I was done, my cock tensed again, alerting me that I still had another thrust left. And another. “Fuck. Holy, fuck. Jazz. Fuck. Fuck!” And another.

“Don’t stop! Holy shit, mi Armond!” And my last ten thrusts were solely for her. I had the pleasure of seeing the look on her face when I made her come. Her forehead was covered with a fine sheen, and she bit her bottom lip so hard it drew blood. Her dark areolas were shriveled up, her nipples now erect; I felt her canal envelop my cock, milking me for any drop I had left.

I exited her with a gasp from both of us and she lay flat against the sheets, remaining on her stomach. The after effects of her orgasm were still showing as she lay down against a pillow, parting her legs slightly, moving

against it. She continued panting and rubbing against the pillow, whispering my name.

“Mmmm, Armond.”

After catching her breath, she turned to me, her eyes just a little lighter shade of brown than when we began. “Do you always fuck like that?” Fuck if that accent didn’t grab my cock’s attention again.

“If you let me, I can.” I wiped the small drop of blood from her lip, slowly replacing my finger with my lips.

She rose and threw a red satin robe around herself. Once she reached the bathroom, she turned and lifted her hair out from her back. “Promise?” She winked, and I lay back down on the bed with a smile on my face.

The End|

I watched the cursor blink behind the ‘d,’ mocking me. And I privately cursed myself for selling my soul to the devil, no matter how many bestsellers lists that damn manuscript would appear on. Taking another swig from my whiskey, my eyes rolled back into my head and I passed out before my torso hit the floor.

~ ~

I hit the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestsellers lists with Jasmine and Armond. The cover—insisted by my agent—had teal waters surrounding a tropical island with a needful couple embracing in the foreground. Her dark, cascading hair covered his bare chest, and his arms gently wrapped around her waist. The first mockup had a fucking waterfall on it, but I’d made them Photoshop it out.

I didn’t do this by choice; my true passion was for mysteries, crime, and mob stories. I loved coming up with the chase, the hints, and puzzling the reader in their need to continue turning the pages. I’d never suspected I would succumb to the demands of the industry just to get a paycheck.

But after my first two flopped, I didn’t have much of a choice. *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *Twilight* stole the majority of my sales—pretty sure they stole everyone’s sales. Women that once had a passion for the sleuth

characters I was inclined to produce wanted sparkling teenaged vampires and gray-tie-wielding gentle monsters. I had a small following, but it wasn't anywhere near what I needed to pay my rent.

My bank account was running dry and I sure as hell wasn't going to move back in with my parents at age thirty-one. So I began drinking, *logically*. I read both of the aforementioned series within a matter of a week, and sat down to pen my first erotica novel.

I chose the pen name Christoph Strong in a drunken stupor. I don't think I had slept much that night, and my agent was pressing me for a decision on whether or not I wanted to publish under my real name. At the last minute, I hastily decided that Christoph (the surname of the first girl I fell in love with, in middle school) and Strong (the pots of coffee I'd made to get me through my mornings) would do just fine.

Great. So I'd hit the big time. My 'name' was known around the world as I quickly became an international bestseller. I paid my rent on time and was able to keep my electricity from shutting off. Unfortunately, I couldn't share my fame with my friends and family. It should've been a time of celebration; I should've been able to rejoice in my small claim to fame and tiny piece in the history of American literature. But there were only two people on Earth that knew my real name—Michael Rourke—and that was me and my agent.

My plan was to keep it that way—keep my twitchy erotica hand a dirty little secret. I'd insisted that Christoph Strong was going to be a one hit wonder and that any name I'd made for myself through that genre would die once sales did. But within six months, it was time to pay rent again. Sales were still steady, but any intentions I had on quitting before that time were stifled once I realized how much money I could make writing the second book in the Armond series.

I wrote the second and had it in my editor's hands within four weeks. That was three months ago, and sales were presently leveling out at their climax – they were only going to go down from there.

I was running out of options.

Falling Back Together (Crashing #2)

By: Kristen Hope Mazzola

Prologue: Walker

Red Georgia clay turned into gravel of a familiar road as it crunched under the tires of my beat-up Ford pickup. The night air was speckled with stars blanketing the rolling hills of my family's damned homestead. *I never thought I'd come back here.* As I off the gas and gently pressed the brake in, my vehicle came to rest just about a mile away from their double-wide trailer. I started to feel the panic settle into my chest again. I knew that leaving her had been the wrong move, but I'd had no other options. *Fucking chicken-shit.*

Slamming my palms onto the steering wheel, I let out a load, broken scream. My skin burned from the scratches and bites, my eyes burned from the tears, and my throat burned from the pleading. All I wanted was to turn around. Run back. Turn back time. Explain. Love her. The sight of rage on her face was enough to keep me put—staring down the life I never wanted to return to, like a damn loaded gun pressed right down the throat of my sanity. She hated me, and I'd known it right when I saw that journal gripped in her beautiful fingers. I'd crushed her with all the words I'd been too scared to let leave those pages. How else was she supposed to freaking act? This was for the best. Being out of Margret McManus's life for good was something that needed to happen. Not for my sake, but for hers. I'd destroyed her. The one person I truly loved and who truly loved me back... Her pain was completely my fault.

There are only so many lines a guy could cross without tempting fate, and I wasn't the kind of man to play with that kind of fire. Mags was Randy's and I was gonna have to deal with that in my own way. *Here goes nothing. It's time to pull this trigger.*

The last mile down the road was the hardest. Memories flashed of the torture, beatings, name calling, drug binges. *I fucking hate this place.* I pulled up next to my stepdad's and brother's trucks, turned off the engine, and hopped out. It was like ripping off a damn bandage that was twenty years old and the wound was still not healed, oozing and festering with years of hate soiling the edges.

I could hear Mom's screeching and cackling from the front porch and the distinct sound of a shotgun cocking. "It's Walker," I called through the shut door. "Chet, put the freaking gun away. If you shoot me, so help me God, I will kill you."

The trailer door swung open to reveal my fat, graying, toothless mother, who smelled like she had forgotten to bathe again—this time, for weeks. I was just glad to see that the lights were still on. Tears filled her eyes as her face twisted into a semi-smile. I knew that was the best she could do. Her faded pink shirt had the hugest ever-loving pit stains, and damn her for going in for a hug. As I hesitated, I could hear my punk-ass little brother, fresh out of the pen, hissing his awful laugh in the background. After holding in my breath, scared the weeklong stench of sweat and body odor emanating from my deadbeat mother was going to make me pass out, I walked into the double-wide's poor excuse for a living room.

The same faded green carpet lay limp and patchy on the creaking floor, trapped under the old red-blue plaid couch Dad got at Goodwill a few weeks before he'd decided enough was enough. My heart ached for the ten-year-old me, crying in that very spot for him to come back. *Mags has no idea how much we are alike, how much our baggage matches.*

Chet, my miserable, old, shit-for-brains stepfather shoved off from leaning against the entertainment center and made his way over to attempt a handshake. He was so loaded that he missed my hand, jabbing me right in the ribs. His eyes were slits as he slurred, "What the fuck do you want?"

"Nice to see you too, Chet. Thought I'd come home to visit and check on the station. That's all." I rubbed the back of my neck, knowing they could smell the bullshit on my breath. "It's been a while since I made sure everything was all right up this way."

My cell buzzed in my pocket. Digging it out, I saw Buck's goofy-ass grin light up on my screen. I ignored it and turned the damn thing off. There was no way I was ready to face that music yet. Looking around at the six eyes glaring at me, I knew that this was not my smartest of moves.

"So how the hell have y'all been?"

Silas's bloodshot eyes and sweating brow told way too much about the amount of meth pumping through my little brother's system. He hawked his

load of dip out from his lower lip and took a swig of his beer, sneering at me. “Big-time war hero forgets about his roots then stumbles back up the mountain on a whim. Somethin’ ain’t sittin’ right with that, brother, so why don’t you enlighten us as to why you really came on home?”

There was something about my slimeball for a brother that irked me, just like the rest of the people in the room. So I turned on the heels of my boots and made my way for the door. He was right; this shit didn’t add up in my head either. Unfortunately, my wide mother took up the entire doorway. She had her feet planted firmly and her arms crossed over her chest.

“Walker Cameron Eastman, you go sit on the couch next to your daddy and have a visit with yer momma. Don’t mind Silas. He just missed you is all and has a funny way of showin’ it.” She glared at her youngest with laser beams that would kill, given the chance.

My eyes narrowed and my jawline hardened as I spoke through gritted, grinding teeth. “That man ain’t my father just as much as y’all ain’t my family. Blood don’t mean shit when it all hits the fan.” I stood toe-to-toe with the densest person on the planet. I knew she couldn’t understand why I hated her—and the rest of them, for that matter—but I had figured it out a long time ago. She enjoyed getting under my skin. And damn her for being so fucking good at it.

“Go wash up. Supper will be done in a minute. At least have a meal with us.”

I let my head hang as I walked into the back hallway to escape into the bathroom, like I had done countless times in my youth. Being with the scum of my past was awful, but nothing would compare to the feeling of hurting Mags again. I knew that this was my fate and all I deserved for everything I’d put my North through.

As I made my way back into the living room, the sound of Chet’s snoring rang out over the Bulldogs’ announcers blaring through the television speakers. I slumped down in a chair at the dining table, staring blankly as little blurring purple and red dots jetted across the screen.

“Man, y’all need a new TV.”

Silas snickered from the chair next to me as he shoved up. He made his way into the kitchen and dove in the fridge to get another Bud. He raised an eyebrow, asking if I wanted one.

“Yup. I’m here. Might as well.”

Out of Reach
by Missy Johnson.

Out now at all major online retailers. See below for an excerpt.

Synopsis:

My best friend was dying and I was in love with his girl.

Andy and I had been best friends since we were eight-years old.

Watching him slowly fade away, ever closer to his final breath, made me so incredibly angry. I knew there was nothing I could do to change it--I had given in to despair, but Andy had not. He had one last hand to play.

He wasn't going to simply sit back and wait for Death to claim him--not Andy. He was going to live life until he couldn't hold his eyes open any longer.

Andy didn't want to die in some sterile hospital and asked me to take him and Emily to the beach. It would be our last road trip together.

Emily. Emily was a problem for me.

I harbored a secret that would have torn our friendship apart. I was in love with Andy's girl, and had been since she'd walked into our sixth grade class, so many years ago.

So what kind of person am I? My best friend is dying, and it's awful--but my heart still aches for his girl. I hate myself for thinking beyond Andy's death and whether there could ever be a future for Emily and I, but I can't help it.

I'm in love with her.

Excerpt

“Are you warm enough?” I tugged at the blankets covering Andy. I was cold. I wasn’t sure how he couldn’t be. He rolled his eyes and pushed the blankets back down.

“I’m fine, Em. Stop stressing,” he said. He reached up and traced along the side of my cheek. “You’re the one who’s cold. You’re shivering. Maybe you need some Andy loving to warm you up,” he teased. I leaned down to kiss him, forcing myself to smile at his joke.

“No,” I said, putting my hands up to stop him as he tried to push one of the blankets onto me. “Just do what you’re told for once,” I muttered, kissing him on the nose.

“Right, because you always do what I tell you to do,” he laughed.

“That’s different,” I replied smugly, folding his hand into mine. “You’re skin and bones. It’s not like you could stop me.”

“Harsh,” he said, a faint smile on his lips. “Em? Thanks for this. What you and Seth are doing for me means a lot.”

“I know it does.” My voice dropped. The tightness in my chest became more apparent. It was always there; a gnawing feeling, like I was just waiting for something bad to happen. And I guess I was.

I remember the day of his diagnosis like it was yesterday. I remember sitting in that surgery with him and Deb as the doctor explained how the melanoma they’d found between his little toe had spread to his pancreas. The prognosis wasn’t good, but it could have been worse. There was hope.

Until there wasn’t.

Terminal. Even hearing that word, I still clung to hope that a miracle would happen, and somehow the cancer would shrink. I’d lost my parents; surely life couldn’t be this cruel, could it? I felt awful even thinking about myself. I couldn’t imagine how he must have felt. He’d fought so hard for so long, and to be told there was nothing more they could do...how do you process that?

“Em,” Andy said, “Good thoughts, remember?”

I smiled, blinking back tears as I reached inside my jacket pocket and touched the small leather binder. Good thoughts. When it was obvious I wasn’t coping, I’d began writing down a list of memories, forcing myself to only focus on the good. It had been Andy’s idea, a way for me to remember time we’d had together. The time we had left. It was my way of staying strong for him, because the last thing he needed was for me to be a broken mess.

“Good thoughts,” I mumbled, squeezing his hand.

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