

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

ASHLEY POSTON

Bestselling author of *The Dead Romantics*

With
Avery

LUCK

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

**ASHLEY
POSTON**

*With
Any*
LUCK

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Otherwise, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Text copyright © 2024 by Ashley Poston

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

Published by Amazon Original Stories, Seattle

www.apub.com

Amazon, the Amazon logo, and Amazon Original Stories are trademarks of Amazon.com, Inc., or its affiliates.

ISBN-13: 9781662519802 (digital)

Cover design by Caroline Teagle Johnson

Cover image: © Evgenia Vasileva, Vahovska Maria / Getty

To everyone who grew up on rom-coms

My mom always said that the Love family is lucky. Not big luck, mind you, like lottery or sweepstakes winnings, but small luck. Like beating a rainstorm by five minutes every time, sometimes getting upgraded to business class on flights, and scoring close parking spots in crowded superstore lots. We're lucky in the small ways that, in the end, don't really *matter*.

It's a curse, really.

Because you'd think we'd be lucky in our namesake, too.

By all accounts, we should be.

My grandmother was a famous matchmaker, my mother is a renowned romance novelist, my sisters are paragons of advice on relationships—one an advice columnist, the other a sex therapist. When we were younger, my sisters ran a kissing booth that was known town-wide. Kids swore they found their soulmate after a peck from Lila or Rose. But what did thirteen-year-olds know about love? That's what the parents always said, shaking their heads.

It didn't matter; my sisters would open up their booth when summer turned sticky and most mouths tasted like strawberry Popsicles, and they earned enough money to take us out to the movies, with a large popcorn and a drink split among the three of us.

I was never part of the kissing booth. Maybe if I had been, the subsequent history of my first kiss, and second and third and tenth, wouldn't have been quite as shocking. No, "shocking" isn't the right word, but neither is "heartbreaking." I learned, after the third kiss, that the family curse is real. And I am, in fact, lucky in everything except *the one thing* I want:

Love.

Because you see, the Love women excel at matchmaking and romance, just never for ourselves. We are fated, like my grandmother, my mother, my sisters, and me, to be the person *before*. The rebound, the partner at the

beginning of rom-coms who is rarely named because they are always what the main character *doesn't* need. They are the utterly forgettable Before.

“I know it sounds crazy,” I told my soon-to-be best friend the first day we met at college, “but I’m the kiss *before* you find your true love.”

Rhett had taken me out for coffee after a particularly harrowing first day of statistics, and he was so nice and charming I didn’t want him to get the wrong idea. I had to warn him. Besides, we both would’ve bombed that class if we hadn’t sat beside each other and whispered answers we spied from the prospective cum laude graduate seated in front of us.

I still don’t know if he believed me, but he just smiled and shrugged. “I’m not looking for anything, either, unless you’ve got a cheat for the exam on Friday?”

I sucked in a breath between my teeth. “Oof, sorry, can’t do, champ. You just friended the wrong girl. This brain? Full of *Twilight* quotes and omegaverse lore, not math.”

“What’s omegav—shit, I don’t have enough,” he added under his breath, counting the change he’d poured out of his wallet. “Uh, I’ll buy for you. I’ll just get a water.”

“Oh no. Hold on.” I glanced around the floor of the café around us. A sliver of something silver peaked out from beneath the bakery case, and I grabbed the quarter and held it up. “That’s enough, right?”

“You seriously just found that on the ground?”

I shrugged. “It’s a curse.”

He laughed at that. “No, you’re lucky,” he remarked, and I had to bite the inside of my cheek as I grinned.

“Something like that,” I replied.

And that was that.

We don’t see each other romantically. (Which is a good thing, because Rhett goes through partners like a sadistic game of Russian roulette: Which one would end up stealing

his credit card and stabbing him in the thigh *this* week? And I am, as previously stated, a pariah to love.)

We are well and thoroughly best friends.

So when Rhett called me up ten years later and asked me if I wanted to be his best man, how could I say no? Never mind that he only knew Carmilla for six months—and again, his track record with partners is . . . *suspicious*, at best.

But what was I supposed to say? “Hold off, tiger, you’re jumping without a parachute?”

No. If my best friend’s going to jump, I’m at least going to be his spotter.

And *wow*, how I am regretting that decision now. Maybe if I told him to “Pump the brakes, champ, you’re falling too fast,” I wouldn’t be face down on a couch with the most killer headache imaginable from a (hopefully) killer bachelor party that I couldn’t remember, and my best friend wouldn’t be missing.

-Yesterday-

Everything started out just fine, I'll have you know. I mean, as fine as anything *could* be the day before the biggest commitment of his life.

Rhett met me at the airport, and so we took a car together, and almost the entire ride he fidgeted and twisted his engagement ring on his finger, peering out at the wintry, barren landscape of Connecticut in February. He was nervous. His jaw was perpetually clenched, and he didn't point out *every* cow we passed in a pasture, which was the most telling. He loved pointing out random farm animals on road trips.

"You know, we can turn the car around and escape if you'd like," I kinda sorta joked, kinda not. "Just say the safe word, and we're out. I'm pretty sure I have hose in my purse; we can kidnap the driver and—"

He laughed, turning his crooked-toothed smile to me. "I love her, Audie."

He was the only person allowed to call me Audie, and whenever he did, I knew he was being serious. A strange, squirming feeling tightened in my chest. "Then what is it?"

"Everything else, I think."

It would've been *easier* if Carmilla was the problem, but I'd met her in New Orleans a few months ago for Rhett's thirty-first birthday. She was pretty, and down-to-earth for an actress. She always asked you how you're doing, and she sent postcards from wherever she went abroad, and . . . honestly? Trying to hate Carmilla was like trying to hate cotton candy. You *could*, but you'd be one of those people who, like, totally didn't like the *popular* choice. (Besides, why hate on nepo baby Carmilla Marion when you *could* hate on that princess who wanted to be an actress for, like, a hot second?)

She came from a family that had fuck-you money, the kind of rich that own a house on the coast of Connecticut and look like they could play extras in the background of Taylor Swift music videos. Which is exactly where we'd flown to—a small airport in Connecticut that took us to an even *smaller* town on the coast. Periodical, Connecticut, was a peculiar name for a beach town, but, as I quickly realized, it was barely that as we turned onto Main Street. Accomplishing a memorable bachelor party *here* was going to take a miracle, and it was *already* going to be hard since it was the day before Valentine's Day and winter in a beach town. We hit every green light to the bed-and-breakfast where we'd be staying—I always hit green lights. Then again, there was only *one* in Periodical anyway, so it wasn't that big of a feat.

I frowned. “Like . . . everything, as in her career? The fame? Does she want kids? Or is it”—and I said this quieter—“her *family*?”

“No, no, I love her family. Mostly,” he amended. “I mean, like the *wedding*. On *Valentine's Day*? How cliché can you get? Everything is themed, Audie. *Themed!* The parents are going all out. They even ordered little cakes for the rehearsal dinner from Millie's favorite bakery in the Bay Area. As in, they paid someone to fly out to San Francisco yesterday, order the cakes, and then fly *back* with them.”

“You know, Frank Sinatra used to do that with his favorite pizza.”

Rhett went on as if he hadn't heard me. “And not to mention the . . . the guest list is a mile long! I haven't met half the guests on the list. We even invited that princess—you know the one, right? Princess Ilaria of . . . um . . .”

“Monterra?”

“That's the one!”

“Huh.” That surprised me. I didn't expect Carmilla to invite a wild child like Princess Ilaria, especially after all the bad press she got. “Is she coming?”

“No. Had an engagement in Rome or something.” He pulled his fingers through his hair. “And all the thank-you cards. The speech I have to rehearse. The . . . the *everything*. You know me. I just want to—”

“You can’t elope, idiot,” I chastised. “Not after she put on this whole to-do. Besides, I spent way too long looking at Google Maps and scouring Yelp reviews for your bachelor party to quit now. So we’re both going to grin and bear it, capisce?”

“Capisce,” he echoed. “You’re gonna love Carmilla’s maid of honor, though.”

“Yeah? Is she nice?”

“Actually—”

“We’re here,” the driver announced, pulling up to a beautiful white bed-and-breakfast, complete with rosebushes and a seaside view and Rhett’s beaming fiancée on the porch. She didn’t even wait for us to unload the car before she swooped down upon us. Carmilla Marion was as buoyant as Rhett was moody, with bright blonde hair and wide brown eyes. She had a smile that dulled even my sharpest edges the second she fixed her attention on me.

“Audrey!” she cried, clasping my hands. “I’m so happy you’re here. Rhett says you’re the most excited of all of us!”

“He did?” I asked, glancing over to Rhett, and he gave an apologetic smile as she grabbed him by the hand and began to pull him away. Apparently his dad had arrived just a few minutes before us, and her parents were just *dying* to meet him. Like a hurricane, she came and swept my best friend up with her as she left, and I was alone on the curb of the bed-and-breakfast.

“It was hard for us to believe it, too,” a man said behind me, and I glanced over my shoulder. He reached for my suitcase from the trunk of the town car, and I meant to get it myself, but he pulled it out in one swift motion and set it down on the curb. Which felt insulting, since my suitcase had almost killed me when I tried to put it in the overhead

bin just a few hours ago. He was good looking in pressed black trousers and a simple white T-shirt, his ginger hair floppy and boyish, like one of those nineties heartthrob action heroes, and his shoulders were broad enough to give Brendan Fraser in his *Mummy* days a run for his money. He appraised me with soft green eyes. There was a freckle just below his left one—the only one on his otherwise insultingly flawless face.

The funny feeling in my chest turned slithery and horrid. “Oh. You.”

The last person I wanted to see. I spun around and tried to find Rhett for an explanation, but he had already been pulled away by his dad. *Shit*. Because when I met Carmilla in New Orleans, I’d also met her best friend, and I couldn’t think of a worse person to see today. He hadn’t changed at all since that night on Bourbon Street.

He said in that deep, soft rumble of his, “Still superstitious, Audrey?”

“Still an asshole?” I quipped back. And that mouth of his twisted into a grin. That same mouth that I remembered on every inch of my body in that hotel room on Bourbon Street. Every inch *except* my mouth. I wish I could say that it had been a drunken night of bad decisions, but I’d been the cat herder that night, so I couldn’t even use that as an excuse. No, I was just a sucker for good-looking men with sinful mouths who refused to kiss me on my lips because he’d rather tease me about my curse.

“Just in case it’s real, I’d rather not find my person,” he had said, instead using his mouth to explore my breasts. “It’d be such a pain.”

“You said you weren’t superstitious.”

“I’m not, but you are.” He had flashed a catty grin up at me. “And I can tell you want me to kiss you.”

I had. So, so badly. So badly, I kept thinking about what that mouth of his tasted like . . . Did it taste like the drinks

he had, or the spearmint gum in his back pocket? Were his lips as soft as they looked? Did he bite?

I pulled myself out of the memory and averted my eyes to my shoes. “What are you doing here?”

Those green eyes turned playful. “I’m here to kiss you.”

It was so ridiculous, a startled laugh slipped out of my mouth before I could reel myself in. “You’re joking, right? In front of everyone?”

He leaned in toward me. He even smelled like my memories—woody cologne, cedar, and pine nuts. “Let me kiss you, and we’ll see if I find my *one true love* tomorrow. Only way to prove it. And just in time for Valentine’s Day.”

“If I remember, *you* were the one who didn’t want to kiss *me*,” I snapped back.

“What if I lied?”

There were . . . *so* many things I could’ve said in that moment, if I’d been just a smidge wittier, but all I could think of, as I stared at this disastrously handsome man, was . . .

“I don’t have a mint on me.”

He gave a snort, one that sounded like a bit of laughter, and began to open his mouth when Carmilla called from the porch of the bed-and-breakfast, “*Theo!* I hope you’re behaving!”

The broad-shouldered man actually had the gall to look bashful. “Of course, Millie,” he said back. “Whatever else would I be?”

“Yourself,” she deadpanned. And at that moment, I immediately knew what Rhett saw in her. She smiled at me with a wink and said, “Don’t let him give you a hard time. You two need to work *together*, after all!”

Together? Wait, did that mean this guy was—

Suddenly, Carmilla looked behind her, distracted. “Oh, Daddy, stop grilling my fiancé!” she cried and fled into the

bed-and-breakfast, leaving me outside and alone with my sudden and irrevocable mortal enemy.

He rolled my suitcase up to me and stuck out a hand. “I feel like we’ve gotten off on the wrong foot. Let’s try it again? Theo Luck.” He introduced himself. “Carmilla’s maid of honor.”

I looked down at his hand, then back up to his smug, handsome face, and grabbed the handle of my suitcase. Without another word, I turned and rolled it up the sidewalk to the porch steps, where I dragged it to the top and thoroughly tried to ignore him.

Besides, I had a bachelor party to rally together, and a wedding to get through tomorrow. I didn’t have the luxury of hating Theodore Luck.

I just had to survive him.

-Today-

I wake up with the taste of tequila and regret on my tongue.

Maybe the tequila *is* the regret. It sure tastes terrible, whatever it is. My head's pounding, and I can't quite remember how I made it to the couch. In fact, I can't remember how I left Rhett's bachelor party. There was a kitschy bar—Ye-Haute, an Old English / Wild West–infused dive where the bartender wore a cowboy hat and talked like someone out of a Shakespearean novel, and I think I took one too many shots out of Ye Olde Bartender's ample cleavage. As the best man—well, best *maid*, but I refused to be called a maid unless it was for some kinky role-play—I was in charge of making sure the bachelor party went off without a hitch.

I *think* I did.

Meanwhile the maid of honor—mortal enemy, thorn in my side—had been in charge of the bachelorette party back at the bed-and-breakfast. Mani-pedis and champagne and a quiet night in, I assume.

In fact, I assume that right up until a knock on the hotel room door startles me off the couch. The knock comes again, this time harder. It pounds against the side of my hungover skull like an ice pick.

Then—

“Audrey! *Audrey*, I swear to *God* I hope you're in there.”

I groan. Because I know that voice. *Him*. Of course it was *him*. The man who, if I didn't already have a migraine, will give me one instantly upon hearing his voice. Pulling the blanket off the back of the couch, I shuffle over to the front door, catching my reflection in the hall mirror.

I look like someone ran me over with a semitruck and then backed up and did it again just for good measure.

Mascara smudges around my eyes, my lipstick having migrated off to the side of my cheek, one earring missing, last night's dress rumpled, a mysterious stain on my left boob. At least I look how I feel. The blanket is, in fact, just a top sheet I must've raided from the hall closet. Did I even *make* it to bed?

The crick in my back tells me no. I'm too young to be too old for this.

"Audrey!" The man pounds on the door again. "If you're not in there, you better be with—"

I fling it open with aplomb. "*Theodore,*" I greet him, my voice a croak in my throat. "I'm here, I assure you."

I wish I could say that our relationship has *improved* since we met again yesterday, but the few choice moments we chatted yesterday afternoon and during dinner were anything but amicable. I don't know what I saw in him in New Orleans. Probably his good looks. I was a sucker for good looks. My one downfall, apparently, because Theodore Luck is like a cardboard cutout of a man—all sharp edges and paper-thin emotions. If beige were a person, he'd be the premier paint color. Even though he's the living embodiment of vanilla, he still looks good, even in my haze of a hangover. A sharp jawline and a straight nose and soft green eyes. And that insufferable lone freckle beneath his left eye, as if his impeccable frown had scared away all of the others.

And that mouth. I still wonder what he tastes like.

Probably like a tragedy.

He doesn't even give me the pleasantries of a hello before he barrels into my hotel room. It takes a moment for me to register that his clothes are just as crumpled as mine—and that they are still from *last night*—and he's lost his tie somewhere between dinner and now. I guess the mani-pedis really got wild.

"Where is he?" Theo demands.

I follow him into the hotel room. “Well, good morning and happy Valentine’s Day to you, too.”

“I know he’s here.” He storms through the living room, into the bedroom—which is surprisingly untouched. I guess I just crashed right on the couch last night, this morning, *whenever* I stumbled in. Everything after those tequila shots from Ye Olde Bartender’s cleavage is a blur.

“You can’t just come barging in like this,” I call after him.

As he rounds through the bedroom into the bath and back into the living space, he looks a shade paler than he did going in. “Where is he?”

I massage the bridge of my nose. “I can’t read your mind. Who are you talking about?”

“Who else would I be looking for? *Rhett! The groom!*”

“And why would he be *here*?” I snap, because that assumption suddenly and viscerally gets on my last nerve. I’ve had to play this game for ten years. “*No, we aren’t dating. No, he doesn’t like me like that. No, we’re just friends—no, I don’t want us to be more.*”

It’s easy for people to think that I’d be jealous of Carmilla. She’s probably the most beautiful woman on the East Coast, *and* she gets to keep Rhett Song all to herself? I guess if this was some nineties rom-com, I was supposed to be the Julia Roberts character trying to destroy their wedding, but I’m not.

And the assumption that Rhett would be *here* really pisses me off.

“I don’t remember anything from last night. Have you checked *his* room? Uh, Mike’s room? Or the guy—what’s Carmilla’s cousin’s name? Jerry? Jeffrey?”

“Josiah, and yes,” he replies sharply. He clenches and unclenches his fists, and then lets out a long breath. Then he says in a surprisingly patient voice, “He isn’t in any of those rooms *or* his own. That is the first place I looked. Nothing?”

he adds, his tone a little conflicted. “You don’t remember anything from last night?”

My stomach begins to turn sour, and I still have a long day ahead of me. I wave my hand flippantly. “It doesn’t matter. And Rhett’s probably out for breakfast or something.”

His impressively thick eyebrows furrow, crinkling the skin in the middle. Not that it’s cute, because it’s not. Not at all. “What time do you think it is, Audrey?”

“I don’t know,” I say dismissively. I just want two Advil and a vodka tonic. “Too early.”

“It’s four in the afternoon.”

“*Ha,*” I wheeze, and turn to go find that Advil in my suitcase, when he takes me by the forearm and holds it firm.

He repeats, “It’s four in the afternoon.”

“No.”

“Yes, and the wedding is in two hours,” he goes on, his voice still patient, but there is a note of panic at the edges, like he’s walking on a tightrope. “Rhett isn’t in his hotel room. He never made it to the brunch this morning. We can’t find him.”

No, wait, *no*. That can’t be right. Rhett’s never late for anything. He’s infuriatingly early, actually. This isn’t like him.

I pull my arm out of Theo’s grip and turn away so he can’t see the panic creeping across my face, and pace toward the window of the bed-and-breakfast. Outside in the garden, the pergola has already been erected, chairs covered in white satin placed in rows across the green grass. The late-afternoon sun turns everything a lovely shade of gold, the sky without a single cloud. The best possible weather for an outdoor wedding. Carmilla’s parents had insisted on putting us all up in this beautiful and secluded bed-and-breakfast, though I’d never stayed in anything better than a Best Western before in my life. (The best *rooms* at a Best Western, but still.) Everything about Carmilla’s life is so

vastly different from mine, from Rhett's. She's a three-time Emmy-nominated actress, with *Vogue* covers and an entire closet just for her shoes. I have three shoes I rotate between, so I can't imagine having a whole closet full of them. When Rhett first told me about Carmilla, I thought she was just using him as one of her many various flings, and Rhett makes poor choices of relationships (see: the girl who stabbed him and took his credit cards), but then things got serious, and they moved in together, and when he called me up, I knew . . .

It was real.

By then Carmilla wasn't just a pretty detective in a TV show, but a woman who loved a crust of sugar atop her lattes and long walks in the woods and books about whales. She's perfect for Rhett. In almost every way. I'd always be his oldest friend, but she soon—and forever—will become his best.

That's the part that is hard to stomach.

I massage my temples. "Did you try his cell phone?"

"Goes straight to voice mail."

"And all the other guys last night, you followed up with them?"

"They said you two went off and didn't come back."

Shit. I don't remember this escapade last night at all, at least not at first. But the more I think, the more the night comes back to me in bits and pieces, flashes of a puzzle slowly shifting together. We left the bar. And then . . .

Then—

"Oh, fuck," I whisper.

Theo darts his gaze to me. "What?"

Dread coils in my stomach because I did the unthinkable. Drunk, wild card me did the one thing that I wasn't supposed to do—*ever*. The worst thing imaginable.

I remember a kiss.

Normally, I'm sure that would fall under the umbrella of "Bad Things You Should Never Do To A Groom The Night Before His Wedding," but this is worse. Way, way worse. Because, one, that's so gross. I want to peel off my lips and throw them in the sea. Yes, Rhett is gorgeous. He's handsome. He's perfect.

He's also like a brother to me. A long-lost sibling. My right-hand man. My big cheese. My good-time boy. I will kill for Rhett Song, and I'll help him hide a body. And now I have to go and scrub my lips of at least three layers of skin before I can even *think* about him again.

Kissing him is like Luke kissing Leia in *Star Wars*.

And, obviously, it's also bad news because of my curse.

You know, the one Theodore Luck doesn't believe in?

Ever since I could remember, whenever I've kissed someone—on-the-mouth kissed someone with a purpose—the person finds their soulmate, the love of their life, the next day.

I know how it sounds, *really* I do. But how else does it explain that when I was thirteen and kissed Teddy Abercorn behind the gym bleachers, our science teacher paired him with Evelyn Albright the next morning for a frog dissection, and now, fifteen years later, they're happily married with two kids in Albuquerque? Or Quinn Dayton, whom I kissed in the back of the band bus my senior year, and he flew out the next morning on a backpacking trip to Europe and sat beside his future husband, Fitzgerald, on the red-eye to London?

Or Fiona Baylor. Cairo Weitz. Iwan Ashton. Oliver Quick. Phillip Dietz. Wesley McNutty. On and on and on, twelve in total.

And Rhett made thirteen.

Thirteen, and now MIA to his own wedding.

Because I kissed him last night and he realized that he was about to marry the wrong woman and now he's on the run. That's the only explanation, right? Isn't it? Sometime

last night, he met the love of his life and now they're on a fated rom-com-esque adventure together as they fall madly in love—

And it's not with Carmilla.

Oh my God. I just became Julia Roberts in *My Best Friend's Wedding* anyway.

Theo can read my face, because he says, “You remembered something? From last night?”

“What?” I squeak, then clear my throat. I try to put on my best poker face. “No.”

“I know that look.”

Apparently, my poker face is shit.

There has to be some mistake. I refuse to believe that I—even drunk me—would do something as stupid as kiss my best friend. I shake my head and say, “Rhett never leaves things half-finished. He's somewhere in this town, I'm sure. Let's start where we saw him last,” I suggest, grabbing my purse from where drunk-Audrey had thrown it on the entrance table and looping it over my shoulder. “Which is Ye-Haute.”

Theo scrunches his nose. “The cowboy-wench bar?”

“Only God can judge me,” I reply severely. He holds up his hands in surrender. “C'mon. Let's hurry.”

“After you.”

I step around him out of the room and head down the hall, taking the stairs to the first floor two at a time. The bed-and-breakfast is bustling because of the wedding, buzzing with the kind of chaos that makes it easy for us to slip out unquestioned.

At least for now.

“So you really don't know where he is?” Theo asks once he catches up to me on the sidewalk. We're heading toward the center of this tiny, Pinterest-worthy town.

“No,” I admit.

He lets out a breath that seems to verge on panic. “And we’re two hours from the wedding. Great. This can’t end badly at all.”

“With that attitude it might,” I reply. “We’ll find him. Does Carmilla know?”

He shakes his head. “I didn’t want to disturb her. She was already stressed out of her mind because of this wedding yesterday.”

That makes two of them, then. Weddings just seem like awful affairs. I don’t understand why anyone would want to volunteer to go through one. So Carmilla isn’t going to be any help, either. That really *does* leave the two of us to handle it quietly. I’m quite sure we won’t find Rhet at the bar, but I don’t know where else to start, and everything I know about detective novels states that you have to retrace your steps to find the missing person.

I hope they aren’t wrong.

In the storefront windows as we pass them, we look like a pair of misfits in an otherwise quaint and charming little town. People glance at us as we pass—I guess it isn’t every day retired golfers see a woman in a sparkly silver jumpsuit, mascara smudged around her eyes, marching through their town like she’s on a mission from God. It’s not the first time I’ve been seen in public looking like last night’s hell, but Theo? I’m surprised he looks even the littlest bit out of sorts, his lilac button-down rumpled, halfway unbuttoned until he fixes it in the window of a boutique and rakes his fingers through his coppery-red hair to tame it down. It’s thick, and soft, and I remember running my hands through it . . . in New Orleans?

It had to be.

He catches me staring in the reflection, and I quickly look away, a blush rising on my cheeks. I feel him stare at me through our reflection a moment longer, his soft green eyes studying me with a sort of peculiarity that I can’t quite put a finger on.

“I bet you think I’m a mess, huh,” I tell his reflection, and he quickly averts his gaze.

“No . . . Well, *I* didn’t lose my half of the wedding party . . .”

I roll my eyes. “Oh yes, because Theo Luck is perfect; how can I forget? Perfect hair, perfect clothes—well, not right now, but usually—perfect teeth, perfect everything. You probably have a pretty perfect job, too. Women are probably tripping over themselves to date you.”

He barked a laugh. “I assure you, they are not.”

“Why?”

“That’s a rude question.”

“So was asking me to kiss you yesterday,” I reply. The next storefront has painted windows advertising BIGGEST BLOWOUT SALE OF THE SUMMER, and mercifully my reflection disappears.

“I . . . didn’t realize.”

“Ah. And I guess you never realized that maybe you could’ve called me in the last few months, or—I don’t know. Sent me a text? But oh, no, of course not, I was just another one of your one-night stands.”

He catches up with me. “I didn’t know what to say—Audrey, wait. Just wait.” He grabs me by the hand gently, but I quickly slip my fingers out of his grip.

I tell him, my hand tingling from where he touched me, “‘Hello’ would’ve been a nice start, Theo. Even if you don’t like me, we’re going to be in each other’s lives for however long our best friends are going to be married, and I hope that’s a very long time. Forever, probably.”

“Probably,” he agrees. “I just . . .”

“We’re here,” I announce, pointing to the red painted door with a neon cowboy sign hanging from the glass panes, and whatever he was about to say he swallows and follows me inside.

Ye-Haute is a tiny hole-in-the-wall squeezed between two swanky restaurants, both of which are just turning down their chairs and opening for the afternoon. The bell above the bar jingles as we step inside, and the pungent smell of disinfectant and fried dough assaults my senses so viciously my hangover threatens to make me gag.

I must freeze in my tracks, because Theo places a steadying hand on the base of my spine. His hand is warm, his touch gentle yet firm, and it grounds me long enough to realize that he is, in fact, *touching my back*. I quickly lurch forward.

The bartender behind the mahogany bar looks up from prepping glasses for the night, and their face darkens when they see me. “We’re not open yet,” they say severely. “And I’d rather you not come back here anyway.”

I give a start. “Whoa, now. What did I do?”

They scoff, rolling their eyes. Their lip ring flashes in the low purple neon of a YE OLDE BOOTY sign. “What *didn’t* you do? First you come in here, demanding drinks, and then you start a *Legally Blonde* sing-along—”

“Oh yeah. I did, didn’t I?” I feel quite proud of myself for that, actually.

Theo interferes, stepping up beside me. “We’re just looking for a friend of ours. We were wondering if you knew where he went last night?”

“Probably not.”

“Dark hair, a tattoo of a Medusa on his left arm?”

The bartender gives it a thought. Then they say, “Yeah, he left with *her*.” They point at me, and appraise Theo, frowning. “I don’t remember you from last night. You with the bachelor party, too?”

“Bachelorette,” he clarifies.

“Good on you.”

I shake my head, frustrated. In the back of my mind, I began to think that maybe I remembered kissing someone

else and Rhett's disappearance is just a strange coincidence. But if he left *with* me . . .

The smell of the bar makes my stomach flip. Or maybe it's my mounting panic that's making me sick.

I ask, swallowing the knot in my throat, "You didn't catch where we were going?"

"You don't remember?" the bartender asks.

"No, and we've lost him. His wedding is in two hours ___"

"One and a half," Theo corrects.

I shoot him a sharp glare. "And we can't find him."

The bartender gives me the first sympathetic look, because I'm sure I'm not the first best man to have lost their groom, and relents, pulling their hand through their short hair. "All right, yeah. I think I might've heard something about where you were going, but I've got a request first."

I incline my head. "What?"

They take a receipt about a mile long out from beneath the bar and slam it down on the mahogany, and tap their finger on the bill total. "Your bill."

Theo gives a snort that sounds suspiciously like a laugh. My jaw drops as I look at the total and skim up the items. There is so *much*. "I couldn't have drunk *that* much. There's no way. That would kill André the Giant."

"Oh," the bartender replies coolly, "*you* didn't, but you *did* stand up on the bar right there"—they point down the counter a little way—"and declare that the next round was on you. Then you left out the back and never paid."

Theo *tsks* in disappointment. "Audrey Love, did you really drink and dash?"

"I don't *remember* dashing," I hiss, mortified. "I've never not paid before in my entire life!"

The bartender taps their finger on the receipt again, and that's apparently enough to bully me into grabbing my purse

and digging into it for my wallet. Which . . . isn't there. At all. I search again, feeling all the blood rush out of my face. Not only is my wallet missing, but so is my ID and my maxed-out credit cards and the number for that really cute barista back home—

Theo watches me dump the contents of my purse out on the bar and then shuffle through the various tampons and receipts and tubes of half-empty lipstick to . . . still not find my wallet. This can't be happening.

Quietly, he takes his billfold out of his back pocket, flips it open, and puts a worn credit card down on my receipt.

“Oh no, you can't—” I begin to argue.

He interrupts with, “It's fine. We're running out of time, anyway.”

Even if I want to argue, the bartender snaps up the credit card immediately, like Gollum presented with the One Ring, and rushes over to the register to swipe it, as if they think Theo's going to change his mind. When it's returned, he puts it back in his wallet.

“I'll pay you back,” I tell him. “Do you do Venmo? Or Cash App or—”

He puts a hand up to stop me. “Audrey, it's fine.” He signs at the bottom of the receipt without so much as a second glance. “Now, where did Rhett go?”

The bartender tells us that last night, Rhett and I had been complaining about a lack of food at the establishment and wanting hot sugar holes. “So you guys left out the back and didn't come back,” the bartender finishes in a deadpan voice.

I wince, because yeah, that makes sense.

Theo gives me a judgmental look. “Sugar holes?”

“Doughnut holes,” I clarify.

“Doughnut holes.”

“Yes.”

There was a dive bar down by the college we went to, and a Krispy Kreme right beside it, so Rhett and I would get drunk off our asses on Thursday nights and stumble over to get sober on doughnut holes and cheap coffee.

“OK.” He scratches his chin, frowning. “So . . . where are these *doughnut holes*?”

I open my mouth. Close it again. Frown.

The bartender says, “The only place in town is the twenty-four-hour convenience store half a mile down on the left. They sell those little doughnut hole things—”

-Last Night-

The exit sign glowed red above us as I pushed on the door with my back, and it opened into a well-lit alley. Rhett ran after me, laughing that we still had to pay the tab. The patrons were halfway through the *Legally Blonde* album, and I was sure we'd make it back by the "Bend and Snap" number. But first: sugar holes. The sand-speckled sidewalk sparkled in the moonlight, the streetlights bright, the winter night frigid as the eve of Valentine's Day always is.

"I can't believe you're getting married on *V-Day*. I'll never let you live it down," I proclaimed.

"All the better to never forget it," he replied, wrapping his scarf tightly around him. His tawny skin was speckled with darker freckles, black hair thick and eyelashes long, something his mother always said came from their Italian side, while his love for everything spicy came from his Korean grandfather. Over the last ten years, I'd seen women fall over themselves just to get a night with Rhett Song. He was a catch if I'd ever met one. Brilliant and polite, and if the rumors were true, fucking amazing in bed. Carmilla was a lucky girl.

I said as much as we walked to find our sugar holes.

"Yeah, I know. But . . . can I tell you a secret? I don't know if I want this," he lamented, pulling his fingers through his short hair. He'd gotten it cut for the wedding, but I missed it when it was shoulder-length and always pulled back into a bun. "It's all too much. It's scary. And she's perfect. And I feel like she's *settling* for me. She deserves so much more. Someone who gives a shit about this wedding."

That surprised me. "You don't want to get married?"

"Yes! No, I don't know." And he looked up at the sky. "I want to spend the rest of my *life* with her. I don't care about the rest."

Even drunk, with the world spinning around us—*for* us—when no one else in the world mattered, I hesitated in my response. Because even with salt crusting my tongue and my ears ringing from the bar, I knew this was the beginning of goodbye. The kind that, because you loved, you let go.

I said, “I have an idea, I think.”

-Now-

I'm out of Ye-Haute before the bartender finishes speaking, and it's only on the next block that Theo catches up to me in a jog. I'm so nervous, my hands are tightly curled into fists, my chest so tense it hurts. My heels make sharp clicks against the sidewalk as I increase my speed to a jog toward the convenience store. I know I won't find him there, but I hope anyway.

I asked him to kiss me, didn't I? I must have. It was a simple solution to his problem, and I was just drunk enough not to think about the repercussions. It was a surefire way to find out if Carmilla is the love of his life.

The convenience store is fresh out of doughnut holes, and the clerk working today was off the three days prior, so he has no idea who Rhett is or where he's gone. And we only have an hour and some change left before the wedding.

It all feels hopeless, even as I call his phone again. It goes straight to voice mail. I can't remember the last time he sent me straight to voice mail.

Never, perhaps.

We duck into Java Script, a coffee shop down the street, because I need somewhere to sit and let my stomach settle. The last dredges of a hangover have turned me green, or at least that's what I tell Theo.

In reality, it's the panic.

I try to call him again, but nothing. My phone is running on 10 percent battery, and all of my texts come back as **Undelivered**. Worse than meeting the love of his life, what if he's *dead*? I'm kicking myself for not OK'ing his GPS so I could locate him with an app. While it felt creepy yesterday, it would save me a lot of trouble today.

I wonder if Rhett hates me now. I wonder how much Carmilla will.

“You look like you just swallowed a bee,” Theo comments, setting a to-go cup of coffee down in front of me.

Will you hate me, too? I’m not sure I want to know.

I thank him quietly and take a sip. “How much sugar did you put in here?”

“Three and a half scoops and a splash of milk.”

I frown, looking down at the paper cup. “That’s . . . exactly how I like it, actually.”

“I know. You told me,” he replies, sitting down opposite me. He props his head up on his hand, a curtain of red hair flopping into his eyes until he pushes it back with his fingers. He really is handsome, something that is both infuriating and unfair. “So do you have any other ideas?”

“No,” I sigh. Then, “I think it’s all my fault.”

“I doubt it’s your fault.”

“No, I really think it might be.”

“Unless you locked him on a building rooftop or something, I don’t think it is.”

I frown. “Just an hour ago, you were saying the opposite.”

“I was in a panic,” he admits, running his thumb along the plastic lid of his macchiato. “I don’t actually think you caused Rhett to up and disappear. I’m sorry I blamed you. I just . . . I’ve never seen Millie so happy, and I’m terrible at change. It frightens me. You,” he adds, his emerald eyes flicking to me, and a shiver runs down my spine, “frighten me, too.”

“Why do I frighten you?”

“Because you make me wonder what else I’ve been missing, closed off in my studio with my sculptures and my clay. Millie is my constant—*was* my constant,” he corrects himself. “She made sure I was fed and watered; she made sure I had friends—that I *socialized*. People don’t really

interest me. I don't understand their jokes, I'm often too blunt, I come off as crass. So many people have come in and out of my life, but Millie? She stayed. I want her to be happy, but to do that, I have to let her go. Things have to change. And I'm scared of that."

I want to joke with him, because it's not exactly like Carmilla and Rhett are leaving and never coming back, but I understand his sentiment. Rhett is my best friend, and in an hour—if we find him—he'll be someone else's by the nature of it all. I'll always be important, obviously, but I won't be his *one*. I won't be the person he calls when he's drunk, and I won't be the person who will listen to all of his boring engineering jokes, and I have to be OK with that. I will be OK with it.

And I know that, eventually, so will Theo.

I lean forward a little and say in a quiet voice . . . a secret. "I think we have more in common than you think."

"Who knew?" he says.

I laugh, but it quickly turns sour as I catch a look at the watch on his wrist. The lump in my throat won't go away anymore, and we are quickly running out of time. "I think I kissed Rhett last night. I don't—I don't remember when, but it was after the bar and after we got doughnuts. I remember . . ." My voice cracks. Tears pool in my eyes. "Oh God, I'm terrible, aren't I? For kissing my best friend the night before his wedding?"

For a moment, he doesn't say anything, and then he rubs his face with his hand tiredly. "No. No, I don't think you did, Audrey."

"That's very kind of you, but I *did*."

"When?"

"Last night! Keep up!" I cry. I push the palms of my hands across my eyes, smearing my mascara even more. My makeup is a lost cause, anyway. "I'm a terrible person, and I kissed him and ruined everything. Because every time I kiss

someone, they find their soulmate the next day, and now he's missing and . . . and . . .”

Theo watches me quietly, patiently, as if he's just waiting for me to run out of steam.

I throw up my hands. “So *obviously*, Rhett has met the woman of his dreams, and it's all my fault that the wedding is ruined, and I've never seen him happier than with Carmilla, and now I ruined that because I ruin everything and—”

Suddenly, he presses two fingers against my mouth, quieting me. “What makes you think,” he says softly, his green eyes searching my tear-filled ones, “that Millie isn't his true love?”

My mouth drops open. “I . . . um . . .”

“Really bold of you to assume he'd fall in love with anyone else and admit it to Millie's very best friend. What do you expect me to do with that information, Audrey?”

“I . . .” I swallow the knot growing in my throat, curling my fingers tightly into fists, concentrate on the feeling of my nails in my palms. Oh, now *he's* mad at me, too. “I didn't want to lie anymore. Not to anyone, but . . . especially not to you. Not now. Not when all of this is my fault.”

He's quiet for another moment. “All right. Close your eyes,” he says.

Baffled, I stare at him, because now is *not* the time. “Why?”

He leans a little closer over the table. His eyes have turned dark and inky, like my favorite emerald pen. “Just close your eyes, Audrey Love.”

So I do. I'm not sure what happens next—no, that was a lie, I know exactly what happens next, but I'm too stunned to do anything about it. Because he takes my chin in his grip, and tilts it up a little, and then his lips catch mine.

-Last Night-

“Really, *that’s* your idea?” Rhett asked, baffled. We were sitting on the curb, having finished most of the stale doughnut holes, sobering up a little more. “Just run away?”

“If life gets hard, hit the bricks,” I replied, quoting my favorite meme. “Real winners quit.”

“Audrey, I can’t just . . . fuck off. What would Carmilla think? She’d murder me.”

I threw up my hands. “Well, then I don’t know what to tell you. You clearly aren’t happy right now, and it’s the night before your *wedding*.”

“It’s not the wedding that matters,” he said, but he sounded like he was trying to convince himself, too. “Sometimes when you love someone, you both have to do shit you don’t want to.”

“What *you* don’t want to do. She’s getting everything she wants,” I pointed out.

“You really think she wants all of this?”

I started listing everything out, counting on my fingers. “We’ve flown up to *her* childhood home, we’re staying at the bed-and-breakfast owned by *her* parents, and the guest list is filled with *her* friends—”

“I doubt she knows half the people on the list, either—”

The flowers are *her grandmother’s* favorite, the date *her parents* picked,” I went on. “There’s so little of you in any of this, it’s like you aren’t even here.”

“Her parents have been . . . incredibly overbearing,” he muttered. “I just love her. I’ll do anything for her.”

I tilted my head, studying the lines of his face. He looked ten years younger in the streetlight, so much so I could almost pretend that we were back in college, sitting

on the curb outside Krispy Kreme as he told me about his latest date with some girl from some class. He talked about them all the same—he never used their names, he barely noted their hair color or what they wore.

I missed those days. I missed *that* Rhett. The one who was alone with me, instead of together with someone else.

“I know you’ll do anything for her,” I said in the quiet night. My words came out in puffs of frost. “But will she do anything for you?”

He shoved himself to his feet. “I’m done talking. You don’t understand,” he said and left without another word.

I cursed under my breath and buried my face in my knees. *Way to go, Audrey*, I thought to myself. *You should’ve just shut up and eaten your sugar holes.*

It wasn’t that I doubted Carmilla was *the one*, but I wasn’t sure I wanted her to be, because then I’d be alone.

That was frightening, and yet here I was: alone anyway.

At least, until footsteps came up behind me. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean what I said,” I mumbled into my knees, thinking it was Rhett who’d come back to check up on me. Tears brimmed in my eyes, and I couldn’t stop them because I was tired, and when I was tired I felt all washy, and I wasn’t very good at holding in my emotions at two in the morning. “I just—I don’t know what I’ll do after all this. It was just us, you know? And now it’s Carmilla, too, and I like her so much but . . . I won’t be your ride or die anymore. I’ll be alone.”

“So will I,” said the owner of the footsteps behind me.

My breath caught in my throat, and I glanced back and realized with a bolt of surprise that it wasn’t Rhett at all.

It was Theo.

He sat down beside me on the curb and opened his mouth to—I guess—ask what was wrong with me, why I was being so silly, crying on the curb, but I just let out a sob

and dove into his shoulder. And to my surprise, he held me as I cried into his peacoat.

“Hey, hey, you won’t be alone forever. Someone like you? You’re bright and funny and talented,” he said.

I sniffed. “You don’t even know what I do.”

“You’re a copyeditor. You always write in a green pen. Your favorite food is a s’more, and your favorite word is ‘susurrus.’”

In surprise, I sat up from his shoulder and studied his face in the flickering streetlight. The breeze in from the sea, smelling of brine and fish, tousled his hair.

He went on, “Rhett wouldn’t shut up about you when I first met him. You should’ve heard the way he talked about you—like you hung the moon, the sun, and all the stars. I couldn’t wait to meet you in New Orleans, and when I did, I realized he didn’t even tell me the good parts.”

My throat stung as I tried to swallow down my sobs. My mascara had left an impression on his lovely wool coat. “W-what a-are the good parts?”

“That you’re sexy as hell.”

“My mascara’s all over your coat.”

“Minor setback,” he replied, and reached up to tuck my hair behind my ear. “I wasn’t joking yesterday when I asked you to kiss me.”

My bottom lip wobbled. “So you can find your t-true love, too?”

“Fuck *that*,” he growled and took my face in his hands and kissed me. Crushed our mouths together, our breaths intertwining in the cold.

I was surprised at first, but then my shoulders relaxed, and I curled my hand around his wool lapels to bring him closer, and the world went quiet. He nibbled on my bottom lip, his long fingers tracing down the side of my face, fingering into my hair. I sank into him so willingly, like hot butter on a skillet. When we broke apart, his eyes were

bright and feverish, and a blush had taken up permanent residence on my cheeks.

“Room?” I asked, and he pulled me to my feet, and we kissed each other down the sidewalk, tumbling in through the gate of the bed-and-breakfast, giggling as we ascended the stairs to his room—

“Not mine, never mine,” I said.

To which he amusingly asked, “Why?”

“Because it’s bad luck to have sex with the bride’s best friend in the best man’s suite.”

“Hmm. I’ve never heard of that before.”

“Trust me,” I said as he planted a kiss on my neck. “I’m superstitious.”

His room was just as untouched as mine, at least until he picked me up, my thighs wrapped around his middle, and placed me on the bed. My hands couldn’t stop tracing his jaw, traveling the length of his neck to his chest. Our coats dropped to the floor. His hands traced the contours of my jumpsuit, looking for the zipper on the side as he nibbled on the side of my neck. I tugged off his tie, and it slithered away off the bed.

He finally released me from my sparkly jumpsuit, and took off his own lilac shirt. He kissed the side of my neck again, trailing down between my breasts, his teeth grazing my skin like a hungry wolf.

“What made you change your mind?” I asked. “About kissing me?” He felt so hard against my middle, and I hadn’t had anything intimate in so long I wanted it. So, so badly.

“Because it’d be you,” he said. “I knew it’d be you.”

My chest felt tight. He didn’t have to explain what *it* was. *It* was the thing I had been trying to find my entire life. *It* had been the thing that always eluded me. The thing that followed every guy I ever kissed. I was always the girl *before* the happily ever after.

I was the person you stopped at for a little while for shelter. I wasn't the person you stayed with.

I wasn't that person to anyone—

Or at least, I thought.

“You're not just saying that to fuck me?” I asked.

His mouth inched lower and lower, his hands on my thighs, thumbs slowly guiding down my underwear . . . and then he paused and looked back up at me with those stormy emerald eyes. “Audrey Love, I'm not going to fuck you,” he growled, and slowly guided his fingers into me. Two, then three, his thumb rubbing soft circles against my clit. My fingers curled against the sheets, and I fought back a moan. “I'm going to make love to you, Audrey Love,” he said, “and make you scream my name, and tell me just how fucking lucky you are.”

And I did.

-Now-

I sink into his kiss, last night like a flickering projector on my eyelids. There's a burn, a longing, deep in my belly. His lips taste exactly as I imagined, sweet and warm, and they're soft and—*God*—I wish I had remembered this sooner. Because the way he kisses feels like the way I fall in love, sharp and quick and deep. I feel him smile against my mouth.

“Remember now?” he purrs, his rumbly voice laced with last night's memories.

“Yes,” I reply, breathless, pressing my forehead against his. My fingers play with the hair at the nape of his neck. “I do.”

Which means—

I pull away with a gasp. “Oh my God. That means Rhett isn't missing because he found his true love!”

He sighs and sits back. “Yes, because it's Millie, we already know this.”

“But then where is he? What if he—” Now that I'm not spiraling, an idea comes to mind almost instantly. I know Rhett like the back of my hand, and I know he weasels his way out of everything ever, but he isn't going to weasel out of this. Not the things he wants to do. Not the things he cares about. “No one's seen him since last night?”

“It seems that way,” Theo says tiredly.

“And Carmilla?”

“As I said, I didn't want to freak her out—”

“But she *is* in her room, right?” I ask him. “She came to brunch? She did all the wedding things today?”

The silence says it all. He sits up straight. “She wouldn't,” he says, but by the tone of his voice, he doesn't believe it himself. “She *wouldn't*.”

As a matter of fact, she *would* and she *has*.

Theo and I study the bride's immaculate room, her wedding dress hanging on the floor-length mirror as if just waiting for a bride that wouldn't return. And on the bed is a note, written in Carmilla's beautiful handwriting. It's addressed to Theo and me, and it says what we've already figured out.

"They eloped," he deadpans. "Without telling anyone." He drops the letter on the bed and falls down beside it. The mattress creaks under his weight. He looks like the news has deflated him. "Well. That settles that. I'm sending Carmilla my medical bill, because I'm quite sure I had at least three heart attacks in the last few hours."

"And two nervous breakdowns," I agree, and chance another look at him on the bed. I'm not going to bring up the kiss again, but if he kissed me last night and today we're together, and he's yet to meet anyone else . . .

Are you mine?

Maybe.

Or maybe he'll find someone down in the wedding party in fifteen minutes when we go to break the news to the family gathered together on this joyous day. And then I'll eat one of those little cakes from Cook's Bakeshop and find the first flight back to Seattle, alone. But that's for future Audrey. For the moment . . .

As he begins to climb off the bed again, I push him back down. While I remember most of last night, I want more memories. I want ones that last.

And why not start with Valentine's Day?

He barks a laugh. "Someone has to tell the wedding party, sweetheart."

"We have fifteen minutes."

He quirks a quizzical eyebrow and props himself up on his elbows. "To do what, Love?"

“I don’t know,” I reply, a hum in my voice as I climb onto the bed, sliding a knee between his thighs. I bend close to him, using my weight to push him back down into the soft white comforter. “But with any luck, I’m sure we can find out.”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When you think about it, kissing's weird.

Anyway, I'd like to thank everyone who made this short story possible! My impossibly amazing agent, Holly Root, for bringing this opportunity to my doorstep, and my steadfast editors, Maria Gomez, for thinking of me for this project, and Lindsey Faber, who helped knit everything together exceptionally well. I'd also like to thank my copyeditor, Karen Brown, and all the wonderful people who helped design the cover, Caroline Johnson and Kris Beecroft, and all of the other people who made this story possible: Stef Sloma, Chrissy Penido, Angela Elson.

And most importantly, thank you, Amy McFadden, for bringing Audrey Love to life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ashley Poston is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Seven Year Slip*, *The Dead Romantics*, and Marvel's *Hawkeye: Bishop Takes King*. She writes stories about love and friendship and happy ever afters.