

The background of the cover is a stylized illustration of a woman's face and hair. The hair is a vibrant blue, flowing and voluminous. The woman's face is shown in profile, with a light skin tone, a single blue eye, a pink nose, and bright pink lips. The overall style is modern and artistic.

FROM NEWCOMER NOVELIST

Hailey Grace Lisle

THINGS  
SHE  
BORROWED  
*a love story*

# Things She Borrowed

A Novel

By Hailey Lisle

## Acknowledgements

For my husband, Travis. Your unwavering faith in me has been my driving force in finishing this novel. The way you believe in me has made me fall in love with you all over again.

For my parents. Thank you for teaching me that I can do anything. I can be a nurse, a quilt maker, a novelist, and a mother. I can sew dresses, save lives, and cook a mean meatloaf. I can do these things because of the confidence you instilled into me for my whole life.

To my children. Maddux, Brooks, and Ollie. My eyes fill with tears from simply typing your names. You are the air that I breathe. You are the reason I wake up. Thank you for being mine.

A big thank you to the brilliant illustrator, Christie Andrews, for the cover art. Thank you for being my friend and for going above and beyond to bring my vision to vibrant life with your talent.

And I can't thank the people I love without thanking Jesus.  
Because really, it begins and ends with Him.

Prologue

Ryan

December 25

It's been ten years since I found you. Ten years of your laugh. Ten years of knowing what it feels like to love you. Your strawberry blonde hair flows around your shoulders, catching light and illuminating your face. You have no idea how beautiful you are. I'm watching you cook Christmas dinner in the kitchen, grinning and laughing at something someone has said. You turn your head and beam up at me. I smile back, a love swelling inside of me larger than this life I have built around you. Nothing has ever made me happier than seeing your face light up at the sight of me.

Christmas is your favorite thing. You are my favorite thing, so I love it too. The lights, the tree, the food, the magic of it all. Before you, Christmas was just another day. All of my days are better with you. I hear the kids laughing in the living room by the Christmas tree, hanging up ornaments one by one. Red, green, and gold balls strewn everywhere, filling the room with their beauty and color. The lights shine back in their eyes, catching the deep blue of their irises, passed on to each of

them. They are waiting for me to come and tell them their favorite story. The story of how I found you. How fate picked me up and dropped me right in your path. I finish making the hot chocolate for all of us. You love hot chocolate. For years I have watched you add to the warm melted liquid more marshmallows than the cup can hold. My smile widens as I watch you pull a new bag of the mini marshmallows from the cabinet. You rip open the bag and grab a greedy handful, ready to drop them inside of your molten drink. I hear sounds from the living room as I gather the mugs onto a tray that is already filled with your famous gingerbread cookies. The kids are waiting patiently for me. I can hear them giggling, whispering their favorite parts of the story. I enter the room with my tray of goodies. The kids hush their voices and sit close to the Christmas tree, ready for me as I begin a story told many times before.

“Come on guys, gather around. Our story begins on a cold January day, many years ago...”

## Chapter 1

Ryan

January 2023

“Make a wish, Ryan,” Marjorie said, as she passed the single cupcake across the table. I rolled my eyes and blew out the candle with complete lack of interest. It was my fortieth birthday, and the last thing I wanted to do was celebrate. I never much cared for my birthday, and turning forty was not something I had been looking forward to at all. I was mourning the death of my thirties, when I still felt young and life still felt full of possibilities. Forty loomed like a dripping

hourglass, reminding me that my best years were probably behind me. I sighed heavily, continuing my internal pity party. I preferred to pretend my birthday wasn't happening, so I could stay thirty-nine a while longer.

“Can we not do this?” I asked as I yawned and stretched my arms above my head. Majorie rolled her eyes in my direction. She wasn't one to take no for an answer.

“Come on grumpy, cheer up. I turned forty a while back and it's nothing. Forty is the new thirty,” she said, flipping her hair across her narrow shoulders.

“Leave me alone to mourn the death of my youth,” I said dramatically.

“Aw, come on. Eat your cupcake and then we can watch *Die Hard* or something.”

I grumbled in response.

“Plus, you haven't opened your gift yet,” she said flirtatiously.

Marjorie was a physician at Faith Memorial Hospital where I worked as a trauma nurse. We met during one of my shifts in the emergency room. She flirted relentlessly and I found her confidence and intelligence irresistible. She was



loud and bubbly, full of life and always fun to be around. I knew I probably shouldn't be seeing her, but she was smart and interesting and honestly I didn't care enough about my place of employment to bother cutting things off. I loved being a nurse, but I could do that anywhere. Any hospital in any city in any state would be happy to employ a strong, capable male nurse. I was sharp, smart, and truly good at my job. Male nurses were sometimes hard to come by, especially straight ones. Not that being straight made me a better nurse, but it did make me more useful to Marjorie.

Back in my early college days, I had planned to be a doctor. It had been my dream when I was a kid. I could often be found running around with one of my mom's stethoscopes hung across my neck, or my dad's surgical caps on top of my messy brown curls. I came from a long line of physicians, so it was expected of me to follow in those footsteps. I studied pre medicine at the University of Texas before I ended up switching to nursing. I only had myself to blame for being Ryan Anderson RN instead of Ryan Anderson MD. I was certainly smart enough to finish medical school, I just wasn't focused enough. My lack of patience, and other distractions were affecting my grades in the premed program. Overall, I didn't regret it though. I was in the hospital, treating patients. I

liked my career because it was both fulfilling and rewarding. I didn't make as much money as I would have if I had stayed on the path to becoming a doctor, but I never cared that much about money. Nurses made plenty. I didn't have a wife or children, and I had everything else I could possibly need financially. I was content in my choice to be a nurse, but I often felt like I was searching for something. For what? I didn't know.

“You could at least pretend to be happy that I am here, Ryan,” Marjorie said as she sauntered toward my bedroom. “It's not like I forced you to go out and wear a sombrero while a Mexican band serenades you with a happy birthday song. It's just a cupcake and one candle, try to relax a little.”

I took a deep breath and looked out the window across the city. Portland was pretty this time of year. The snow was everywhere, fresh and beautiful. I had a soft spot for snow. Growing up in Texas, I rarely saw snow in the winter. I wrote letters to Santa Claus every year begging him for a white Christmas, but to no avail. The tall trees coated in powdery flakes made my eyes dance around to take it all in. It never got old, looking out across the city at the beautiful landscape. Oregon was breathtaking, and that night was no exception.

January was one of my favorite months in the city. Mostly because the holidays were over, and I loathed the holidays. I didn't have a close relationship with my family, so Christmas seemed to always remind me how alone I was. I enjoyed the holidays when I was a kid, but after college they lost their magic. I had not seen my mom and dad in over five years. I talked to them on the phone on occasion, but it was always awkward and strained. I knew my mom wished I would visit, but I hated the forced conversations and uncomfortable dinners. I have one brother, Jason, but Jason lived in upstate New York and was an investment banker and we had absolutely nothing in common. Jason has two daughters, Lilly and Bella, but I had not met either of them. A fact that sometimes made me feel sad and guilty. Jason had never invited me up to visit, and I had never invited Jason to Oregon, so that was that. I couldn't pinpoint the exact moment that we drifted apart, but it happened, like a Texas tumbleweed gaining momentum as time marched on.

January meant a new year, offering new beginnings. That particular year I was ready for a fresh start. I had a nice life, a good job, lots of friends, and a great apartment right by the hospital. I had Marjorie, who was intoxicating in her own way and provided me with the companionship all humans

needed to survive. I had hobbies I enjoyed, like fishing, and camping with my dog Duke in the warm summer months. But despite all this, I still felt somewhat uninterested in my own life. Like a bystander viewing it all from a distant balcony. I had never really wanted a family of my own, but I also felt like something, or someone, was missing.

A chill crept in from the window pulling me away from my thoughts. I walked to the kitchen to pour myself a rather large glass of whiskey. The liquid warmed me and I closed my eyes, breathing deeply as I felt the alcohol set in.

“Can I show you your birthday present now?”

Marjorie yelled from the bedroom. I made a noncommittal grunting noise as my answer. I tipped up the glass, throwing the last of the drink down my throat. I turned around to see her standing in my bedroom doorway dressed in lace, and nothing else. Marjorie had long blonde curly hair and bright emerald colored eyes the shape of almonds. She was a bombshell of a woman with large breasts which looked shocking on her small frame. Having her standing in front of me dressed in black lingerie was enough to get my attention.

“Happy birthday,” she said as she smiled and turned around, willing me to follow her. I closed my eyes and

wondered why, even with this beautiful woman with me, did I  
feel so alone?

## Chapter 2

Ryan

January 2023

I breathed a sigh of relief when I opened my eyes the next morning and Marjorie was already gone. I didn't have the energy for her perkiness that morning. She presumably wanted to get to the hospital early to finish her rounds at a reasonable hour. She had kept me up most of the night and I was exhausted. Marjorie didn't have an off switch, she could stay awake all night and make it to work on time the next day without even a cup of coffee to assist her. I was not like Marjorie in that way, it was going to take me an entire bucket of coffee to make it through my twelve hour shift in the ER. I drug myself out of bed and made my way to the bathroom. "Forty years old," I said to myself in the mirror. I ran my hands up and down my face, trying to wake myself up. Luckily for me, I did not look as though I had just turned forty the day before. I still had smooth skin, a perfectly proportionate nose, big brown eyes, wavy brown hair, and hardly any white in my five-o-clock shadow. I was no stranger

to heads turning when I walked in a room. The little old ladies who frequented the hospital as patients all loved to flirt with me, all of the nurses did too. My indifference to it all only made me more attractive to them. It also didn't hurt that I looked good in scrubs.

I washed my face, threw on my jacket, and poured myself my first of many cups of coffee. "Hey Duke, I'll be back later buddy," I called to my large chocolate labrador as I grabbed my stethoscope off of the entryway table. He lifted his head in acknowledgement and then returned his attention to the large bone I provided him to keep him company during my shift. Duke was my best friend in the world and I hated leaving him for twelve hours at a time. I rescued him from a kill shelter four years earlier, and we had been inseparable ever since. His big goofy face was my favorite thing to wake up to in the morning. "Hold down the fort for me," I said to him as I left for the day.

Working in an emergency room, I never knew what the day was going to hold. Anything and everything could burst through those emergency room doors. Gunshot wounds, babies crowning, accidental finger amputations, you name it. It was never the same routine at Faith Memorial. The excitement

and quick pace was what made me choose my emergency room specialty. Every single day was something new. There was no monotony in my work life. I hated monotony. Completely loathed it.

My walk to and from the hospital was a bright spot in my day. It was cold outside, but I didn't mind. I took my time breathing in the freezing air and admiring the snow. The homeless man that I had befriended sat in his normal spot outside of my apartment building. I tossed him the muffin I had brought him from my kitchen.

“Hey Tony!” I greeted him, “Stay warm today buddy.”

He gave me a large toothless grin. “Thanks nurse guy, see you after work bud!” Tony always greeted me warmly. I was often taking him food and my old clothes and blankets. I planned to look into getting him a housekeeping job at the hospital, maybe I could help him get a warm place to stay. I mused these thoughts as I made my way to work. I was always looking for ways to save people. I wrapped my scarf tightly around my neck and flexed my fingers back and forth to keep them warm. I forgot my gloves at home again and the wind was so cold my hands felt frozen stiff. I was grateful to burst



through the hospital doors and feel the warm heated air flow onto my freezing frame.

“Ryan, you’re late!” the charge nurse, Karen, said to me as I walked in the door. The name Karen really suited her. She was truly, such a Karen, always on my case about being late. To be fair though, I was almost always sauntering in the door five minutes after my shift started.

“Good morning Karen, where would you like me today?” I asked.

“Well, first of all, I’d like you at 6:45 like the rest of us. But you can start in triage, rooms are already filling up fast,” she said. I could hear the annoyance in her tone of voice.

I set up my coffee at my workstation and prepared to triage my first patient. It was a young mother whose son had a 104 fever. She looked absolutely terrified attending to the sick child, until she laid eyes on me and I saw her face register my attractiveness. People loved a male nurse. I smiled at her, but I wanted to roll my eyes. “When did the fever start ma’am?” I asked the young woman. “Oh please, call me Holly!” she said, a little too upbeat, causing her to blush. I tended to the little boy, and several other patients, before I walked over to the main nurses station to greet the other nurses. I loved working

with women, it was never boring and the gossip was always hilarious to listen to. I did not ever engage in the drama, but I often listened and laughed to myself over it.

“Hello ladies,” I said as I walked toward a group of nurses charting their recent vital signs and doctors orders. I was greeted warmly by them all. I would never admit it to anyone, but I loved being adored by all the nurses I worked with. It made me feel young and wanted, and who didn’t want to feel young and wanted? I was also the only male nurse on the unit, making me all the more interesting to the women that surrounded me.

“Does anyone have anything good today?” I asked.

“Karen has a stab wound in room two,” said Samantha. “She always gets the best patients,” she complained. I spun in my chair as I looked around the unit to see who all I was working with that day. As I locked eyes with Samantha, I noticed she was pulling a tray of cupcakes from under her desk. I had to work hard to stifle a groan. Marjorie promised me she would not tell the staff about my birthday, but clearly someone let the cat out of the bag.

“Did you really think we would let your birthday go by without celebrating?” Kelley, one of the younger nurses on

the unit, gushed as she pulled out balloons and streamers and got to work decorating my desk area.

“Dr. Albright told us that yesterday was your thirty-fifth birthday so we had to throw you a little party!” Kelley said. Dr Albright, AKA Marjorie, couldn’t help herself. I chuckled at the knowledge that Marjorie lied about my age. I couldn’t be mad at her for spilling the beans about my birthday since she made the rest of the staff believe I was still five years away from forty. They clearly believed her. I smiled, feeling thirty-five again.

“Okay, okay. Let’s get this over with. And those cupcakes better be vanilla!” I laughed.

All the nurses gathered around and began to sing happy birthday as loudly as they could belt it out. Before too long, the patients chimed in and soon the entire emergency room was singing along. As much as I hated my birthday, I couldn’t deny the joy I felt at that moment. Maybe my forties wouldn’t be so bad after all.

I enjoyed my very embarrassing vanilla glitter frosted cupcake and took a drink of my coffee. The coffee was already starting to cool, so I headed to the break room to reheat my cup. As I stood at the microwave and waited, I felt a hand slip

into the back pocket of my scrub pants. “Hey gorgeous” I heard Marjorie’s voice in my ear. I turned and saw her dressed to the nines in a black leather dress with her white doctor’s coat over it. Effortlessly chic but way over dressed for a week day at the hospital.

“You look like you didn’t sleep a wink,” she said with a devilish grin on her face.

“I didn’t, but I am not complaining. You look really good, going somewhere after work?” I asked.

“Just out with some girlfriends of mine, so I won’t be coming over tonight,” she replied.

Secretly I was relieved, I really needed a good night’s sleep for once. I wasn’t twenty anymore and Marjorie was a lot to keep up with. She was forty-two but she had the sexual stamina of a teenager. “That’s okay,” I said, “Duke and I will watch some Netflix and get to bed early.” I grabbed my coffee from the microwave and blew on the top.

“You told everyone it was my birthday. They ratted you out,” I told her.

“Who, me?” She smiled her award-worthy smile. She was so cute and infectious it was hard to pretend to be mad at her.

“I just wanted you to have a little fun, Ryan. You will thank me one day.”

“Well actually, I’m going to thank you right now. That was really sweet of you and I enjoyed myself as much as it pains me to admit it,” I said with a sheepish grin.

Her face looked triumphant.

“Good, mission accomplished then.” She took my hand in hers. “You always want to take care of everyone else, but someday you’re going to have to let somebody take care of you,” she said to me as she reached up and kissed my cheek. I squeezed her hand and pushed her toward the break room door.

“Get out of here before someone sees you and we both lose our jobs,” I said.

“They won’t ever fire me Ryan, I am the best doctor they have,” she said with confidence. “But for your sake I will keep the PDA to a minimum.” I stuck my tongue out at her as she left the room, but I couldn’t suppress my smile. Her confidence, and sometimes cockiness, was one of my favorite things about Marjorie.

I went back to the nurses station where most of the nurses were still enjoying their cupcakes. I sat down in my chair to start charting my patient assessments.

“Ryan, you have to come out with us tonight. We’re going dancing!” Kelley said.

“I don’t dance,” I deadpanned.

“I bet you will dance after a few shots of tequila,” she countered.

I laughed, “You could be right about that, all the more reason not to come.”

“Come on! It’ll be so fun. Do you have other plans or something?”

“Plans for a movie with my dog,” I said.

“Don’t be an old man,” she said as she rolled her eyes. Those were the magic words.

“Okay fine, I will come,” I said reluctantly.

She squealed, “Guys he’s going to come with us!”

The other nurses cheered and seemed excited that I was planning to tag along. I refused to act my age, I could go and be just as fun as the other nurses. Nevermind that they

were probably all still in their twenties and that they were all female. I turned back to my charting, sure that I would probably live to regret agreeing to go with Kelley and the others. The next several hours of my shift were spent treating patients and planning my evening with the other nurses. I was treating patients, they were planning.

“We can go to that bar right by the hospital so we can all just walk there.” Kelley said.

“Perfect! That way we are close to the emergency room if Karen drinks too much again.” Samantha giggled.

“What bar?” I asked, “And Karen is coming with us?” I asked with a skeptical eyebrow raised.

“Karen can really let loose outside of work. You would know that if you came out with us more. The bar’s name is Gen Z,” Kelley told me.

“With a name like that, I hope they let me in,” I joked.

“You don’t look thirty-five Ryan, you can easily pass for twenty-eight. You will fit right in,” Kelley said.

Seven hours later I was walking behind the other nurses, tired from work and regretting my decisions. I had to work the next morning too, so I planned to stay only long enough to prove I was still cool, and then I would slip away and be in bed with my dog in no time.

“Come on, Ryan! Your first drink is on me,” Kelley said, grabbing my arm.

We walked into the bar and I was immediately hit with music so loud I got an instant headache. There were people everywhere, bodies squished together grinding to the music. I be-lined to the bar, trying to avoid touching the swaying, sweating bodies on my way.

“What will it be?” the bartender asked. Kelley looked at me. “Tequila,” I said as I looked around, “And make it a double,” I said loudly.

“Bottoms up,” Kelley hit her glass against mine. She leaned a little closer to me. I began to worry she might be flirting with me. I took a sly step backwards to put a little distance between us. The last thing I needed was to break the heart of a twenty year old coworker. I wanted to prove I was young and fun, not old and stupid. I found a tall table and took



a seat. The nurses threw their purses down at the table and went out to the dance floor. They gestured for me to join.

“Y’all go,” I yelled over the music, “I’ll stay here and watch your bags.”

I watched the girls dance while I scrolled through my phone. The bar was not my scene. The crowd was years younger than I was. I tried to appear as if I was enjoying the music. The bass of the song hit so hard I could feel it in my chest. My headache started to grow. The bar reminded me of the type of place I used to frequent in college with its loud music and party scene. The thought of my college years made me smile, remembering the many nights I spent in the middle of a crowded dance floor. The lights, the music, the girls. The girl. There was only ever one girl during my college years. I smiled again at the thought of her, but quickly frowned as a new song started. The forty-year-old version of myself could not seem to appreciate the same things that my twenty year old self could. Forty-year-old Ryan had a headache and a bad attitude.

I noticed Kelley trying to catch my eye as she whispered to the other girls on the dance floor. I avoided her eye contact and went to the bar and ordered another drink. The bartender looked about my age, if it wasn’t so loud in there I

may have struck up a conversation with him. It was too loud to think, let alone talk. I groaned and walked to the girls on the dance floor. I had moves, and I refused to be a bore standing alone at the bar. The girls squealed as I joined them. I moved my hips to the music and they moved around me. I kept a friendly distance to Kelley, maintaining a friend zone demeanor. One hour, I could make it for one hour.

Fifty-seven minutes and three shots of tequila later, I told the girls I had to go let Duke out. He had been cooped up all day and I really did need to get home to him. My sweet neighbor in apartment 4B, Rose, always let Duke out to relieve himself around lunch, but by the time I got home from work he was always more than ready to do so again. I waved goodbye and started my walk home. I was glad I went, but I was even more glad to leave. On my walk, I rubbed my temple, trying to alleviate the pounding in my head. The crisp night air helped me regain my center. I breathed it in deeply, thinking of the events of the day. Work was good, I loved the thrill of the emergency room. I was glad I had gone out with the other nurses, even if only to prove myself. I stretched my arms above my head, allowing myself a moment to appreciate the city. There was movement everywhere. People walking to restaurants, cars on their way to their desired destinations,

lovers arm in arm on the snowy sidewalks. I loved the city, the energy of it, the smell of it, the life of it. Portland was a good place to be alone. The activity of my surroundings was sometimes enough to keep me from feeling lonely. The city was beautiful, but the nature that surrounded Portland was even more so. Duke and I loved to hike the Wildwood Trail or visit Marquam Nature Park, especially in the snow seasons. The views were indescribably, the photos I would take were magazine worthy. The landscape alone was enough to make a grown man cry. Nothing could make me want to leave Oregon.

Reaching my apartment door, I could already hear Duke on the other side. I opened it and he came barreling out, ready to get outside of the apartment. I followed behind him, scrolling through my phone as I waited for him to relieve himself. No messages, a couple of new emails. Nothing to catch my attention. I located my social media accounts and mindlessly scrolled through the faces of people I knew. I yawned, the day wearing on me. We passed by Tony and I placed a couple of dollars in his cup. He gave me his wide grin and nodded in my direction as a thank you. Once we were back inside, I sat on the couch, rubbing my tired feet.

“Should we order a late night pizza?” I asked my dog. He licked my fingers in response and I rubbed his big soft head, glad for his company. My apartment was welcoming, bathed in blues and greens. I had printed and hung several of my photos taken while hiking. It was clearly a man’s apartment, with no signs of a woman’s touch. But it was cozy, and it was mine. My parents had offered to buy me a house in the city, but I didn’t want their money. I wanted self-sufficiency. I had grown up spoiled and wealthy, all I wanted in my adult life was peace. Anything that was provided by my parents was void of peace.

I changed my mind about the pizza, deciding that I needed sleep more than I needed food. Work would come early the next day, and my bed was screaming my name.

“Come on buddy, you can sleep with me tonight,” I told Duke. He followed me gladly, settling his large body on the end of my king sized bed. I was asleep before my head even touched the pillow.

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Only six hours had passed before I was back at work and absolutely miserable. I was resting my head on my desk, willing my shift to pass by quickly. I had yawned no less than fifty times since walking into the doors of work two hours before.

“Ryan, you look like you could use a little hair of the dog,” Kelley said as she approached me at the nurses station.

“Coffee. Must have coffee,” I groaned. I wasn’t hung over, but I was tired all the way down to my bones.

“I will go grab you some,” she laughed.

Kelley walked toward the break room to grab me a cup. She didn’t seem mad at me and I hoped that she didn’t take my distance the night before offensively. I was already involved with one female coworker, I couldn’t handle two.

I prayed it would be a slow day in the emergency room. My body had spent the morning reminding me that I could not stay out late on nights before work anymore. There used to be a time when I could work all day and party all night, but clearly those days were behind me. I yawned and rested my head on the back of my chair.

“Here you go,” Kelley said, setting the cup down in front of me. The scent was intoxicating, it was exactly what I needed. I gave Kelley a warm smile.

“Thanks, I really appreciate it.”

“Don’t mention it. I convinced you to come out last night, it’s the least I can do,” she smiled. There seemed to be

no bad blood between us.

“Keep the coffee coming and all is forgiven,” I joked.

I was enjoying my cup when the emergency room doors flew open and two young paramedics came in with a CPR in progress. Suddenly I didn't need coffee anymore, I was running on the pure adrenaline of saving a life.

Several patients and several cups of coffee later, I ran down to the first floor to take my lunch break. The cafeteria had been quiet ever since Covid closed the cafeteria to outside visitors in 2020. I liked the quiet while I ate my lunch. I noticed through the glass windows that there was a blood drive going on by the day surgery entrance. I had a little time left on my break, so I decided I would go donate blood before I had to get back to the emergency room.

It had been a long time since I had a chance to donate my blood. When I saw a drive going on, I tried to always make it a point to swing by. I knew how important blood products could be in saving the lives of patients. I once had a patient that required seven units of blood after having critically low hemoglobin levels a week after childbirth. She came into the emergency department looking like she was an inch from

death. She was pale, confused, and scared. I was afraid we were going to lose her. I saw her completely transform into a healthy young woman after the life saving blood transfusions. After that day, I donated my blood any chance I could get. That particular instance was only one of the many times that I had to give a transfusion. It was something we regularly did at the hospital. The blood banks were often low on units so I felt it was my duty to help out by giving my donation. I wished more people knew how important it was.

I walked out the front door, greeted by the cold air and white snow. I took my time walking through the snow to the blood drive which was taking place inside a mobile clinic. The hospital looked beautiful against the snowy landscape. The building was made of mostly large windows and people could see the inside activity as they passed by. I loved that hospitals were open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. It made me feel alive, like no matter what was happening in the outside world, the hospital kept moving forward, never asleep. I opened the door and was met with a few nurses, smiling warmly at me. There were very few other people inside the mobile clinic on such a chilly day. “Sit here please and fill out these forms,” the assisting nurse requested.



I took a seat and started filling out the paperwork. I was familiar with the process and answered the questions quickly, but I noticed there was a new form attached to the paperwork. It read, *Enter your Email here if you would like your recipient to have the opportunity to contact you to thank you for your donation.* I had never seen the form before, but I decided that it would be really interesting to hear back from whomever received my blood. I jotted down my email address and turned it into the woman behind the small desk. The nurse called my name and escorted me over to the corner of the mobile clinic that was designated for lab draw. She applied the tourniquet and inserted the needle into my arm, ready to fill the bag with my blood. I closed my eyes and wondered about the person that would receive it. As the blood drained from me I cleared my mind, thinking only of how my blood would help someone out there in the world. I wondered who the person might be and what battle they might be fighting.

“Alright, Mr. Anderson, we’re all done here,” the nurse said, popping the tourniquet off of my bicep. I stood from my seat, rising slowly to ensure I didn’t feel dizzy from the blood loss. I felt the mobile clinic rock slightly from the outside wind, causing me to wrap my jacket tightly around my shoulders, preparing myself for the cold as I opened the metal

door. I ducked my head into the chilled air and walked briskly back to the hospital front doors, thinking again of who my blood might help save.

## Chapter 3

January 2023

Sarah

Mom and I were at the hospital again. It was the last place in the world that I wanted to be, but at least we made it through the holidays. We had thanksgiving with mom's best friend, Maya, who came all the way from Thailand. She had been coming to Texas more and more. Probably to make sure I was okay, which I definitely was. Or maybe that's one of the many lies I told myself. We also had a real Christmas. We got a tree, and we decorated it together, stringing popcorn from every branch. We ate our weight in popcorn while we strung together the decorations. Mom had a really good month in December, she was happy and upbeat and she felt good. Or she pretended she felt good, it's hard to tell the difference between real and make believe when it came to her health. My mom, Allie, was fighting multiple Myeloma. Stage 3, poor prognosis. She didn't know that I knew how bad it really was, but I was in high school and I was smart. Of course I researched the disease. We didn't talk about her cancer much.

We pretended everything was normal, that everything was okay. Mom and I were really good at pretending.

“Sarah, they say it may snow tonight, wouldn’t that be amazing?” Mom said from her hospital bed.

“Don’t hold your breath Mom, it never snows in Austin, like ever.”

I turned my attention back to my sketchbook and avoided looking at her in her hospital bed. She looked sicker this time. She looked so small in that bed, her head on the large white pillow. All of her beautiful strawberry blonde hair was long gone from the effects of chemotherapy. She was still gorgeous though. I inherited her strawberry blonde locks. Before her hair fell out, she wore it long down her back, often in long curls. I wore mine shorter, to my collarbone. I felt guilty that I had this hair that she gave me when she had none of her own. I tried to shave my head in solidarity but mom wouldn’t hear of it. She told me, “Sarah, don’t you let this stupid disease take one more thing from us. Your hair is beautiful and it stays.” The finality of her tone made me realize she didn’t want to discuss it any further.

It felt like I spent almost all my time in the hospital. I stopped going to school the year before when Mom’s cancer

was classified as stage three. She didn't want me to, but I was missing so many days. I started doing online homeschool while I sat in the sterile rooms and watched her waste away in a hospital bed. We didn't have any family in Texas that could help her get me to school and back home. My dad, whom she met in Thailand, died when I was only three. I had no one but her. A shiver of fear rippled through me as I thought about how alone I was in the world. If cancer took my mom from me...I shoved the thought down to my toes and began sketching again.

“What are you working on today, Sarah?” Mom asked. I turned my paper around and showed her the landscape art I was working on.

“You are so talented Sarah Bear.”

“Hey girls!” the nurse said brightly as she walked in. “Allie, how are you feeling?” The nurse spoke quietly to my mom while I tried not to listen to them talk. I twirled my hair around my finger and waited for her to get Mom's vital signs. She was hooked up to her IV, getting yet another transfusion of blood. She'd had many transfusions, chemotherapy, and radiation. The works. She was trying desperately to live; to be

there for me. She was constantly afraid to leave me. I was constantly afraid she was going to leave.

Sometimes it was hard to believe, but there was a time before cancer. I remembered when I was little, before the treatments, before the chemo, before the fear. Sometimes when I would dream, I would remember Thailand. The food, the culture, the language. I would remember my father, Pram, although I could only remember his laugh. There was so much happiness before. Cancer was a happiness killer. On the good days, when my mom was well enough to be at home, it felt like life before. We would go on walks through the UT campus; she would show me the building with her old dormroom and her favorite tree on campus where she loved to sit and read. She would take me to the UT football games and we would yell until our throats were raw and our faces streaked with tears from our laughter. Mom used to tell me that we grew up together, and that's why we were best friends. I looked just like her, acted just like her, and had an attitude just like her. I was the younger version of my mother. Except, of course, I was healthy.

When we were not in the hospital, we had some really good days. The good days were often worth all of the bad

ones. The good days were filled with smiles and chinese take out and movie marathons. I wished I could take those days and save them in a box to open and look at on the bad days. Before cancer my mom was larger than life. With her diagnosis, she was a fragment of her former self. Her skin seemed to hang on for dear life on her bones. Her eyes were sunken into her beautiful face, her lips chapped and pale. Even her smile was weak. Her smile before was brighter than the sun.

I used to have friends. Having friends after my mom's cancer diagnosis seemed to be impossible. I couldn't relate to kids my age. Why would I care what to wear to prom while my mom rots away in a hospital bed? Other kids didn't understand what I was going through. Other kids didn't want to know how much it hurt to watch your mom wither away. I couldn't bother with things like teen romance or current fashions. Cancer was all there was.

Books were my escape. Books and painting. I had a talent for painting. I started when I was only four years old. When I painted, the rest of the world melted away. I could get lost in a painting for hours. Books were the same way. When I read I could pretend I was anywhere, living any life I imagined. Far, far away from hospitals.

I walked over to the hospital bed and gave Mom a little kiss on her forehead. I took the card attached to the blood bag, as I always did, and slipped it in my pocket. I loved emailing the blood donors to thank them for giving their blood. It made me feel like I was taking an active role in her care. I wanted to tether myself to my mom in any way I could, anything to make myself feel like I was not treading water in a deep ocean. An ocean that was waiting to swallow me whole.



## Chapter 4

Ryan

August 2003

It was early August in Texas and hotter than hell as I sprinted across campus trying desperately to make it to my anatomy test on time. I stayed up too late studying and almost slept through the whole damn class. It was the first semester of my sophomore year of college and I still had not mastered the art of making it to an 8 AM class on time. I could see the science building in the distance. My lungs begged for air as I

ran as fast as I could toward the building. I was premed at the University of Texas, and if I wanted to succeed I really needed to get my act together. I pumped my legs harder and willed time to slow down. I had five minutes before my professor locked the doors and the test began. I dipped my head slightly, trying to gain some extra speed. When I lifted my head back up I saw, almost too late, that there was a girl with long strawberry blonde hair kneeling in my path tying her shoe.

“Watch out!” I screamed at the same time that I jumped over her back, trying to avoid completely colliding into her. My shoe made contact with her shoulder as I went over, but not hard enough to knock her down or cause her pain.

“Sorry!!” I screamed as I continued to run full speed toward my class. I briefly saw the shocked look on her face and I couldn’t help notice the deep blue color of her eyes. The briefest glance at her made it obvious to me that she was beautiful. Under normal circumstances I would stop and relentlessly flirt with her, but I had a date with an anatomy test. I made it to the classroom door just as the profession was about to shut it.

“Cutting it quite close, aren’t we Mr Anderson?”

Professor Wright said with disappointment.

“I know, I’m so sorry. I’m going to make an A on this test and you will forget all about this moment.” I smiled my most charming smile and took my seat. I opened the test book and began to read the questions, but I couldn’t get my mind off the beautiful girl with the dark blue eyes as deep and endless as the Pacific ocean.

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“Come on dude, go talk to her. She’s practically drooling every time she looks over here,” Brock said to me as we sat across the bar from a group of giggling sorority girls. “No way man, she looks like a lot of work. High maintenance sorority girls are not my thing,” I said, already bored and ready to get out of there. I loved attending the University of Texas. The girls were beautiful, the classes were interesting, the football team was excellent, and college life was everything I

hoped it would be. But that night I was tired and ready to get back to my apartment. My course load that semester was no joke and the late night studying mixed with late night partying was exhausting.

“Hey guys I actually think I may head out. I’m not feeling it tonight,” I said as I started to stand up. I waved at the bartender alerting him that I was ready to pay my tab. I wasn’t twenty-one yet but I had a really great fake ID that said I was.

“Where’s the fire?” I heard a voice behind me say.

I turned and I was met with blue sparkling eyes. I sucked in a breath. There she was. Right in front of me. The girl I almost tackled on campus was standing right there with her hands on both hips. I had been looking for her every day since I saw her two weeks prior. The UT campus is huge and I was having zero luck. I didn’t know her name, or her major, or really anything about her. I had given up hope that I would ever see her again, but there she was. Her reddish-blonde hair was curled in waves and was flowing all the way to the top of her hips. She had a smirk on her face as she looked me up and down.

“Fire?” I asked.

“Yeah, fire. You always seem to be running for your life. Like when you almost knocked me over in the quad,” she said accusingly.

“Oh yeah, that. I am so sorry about that. I had an anatomy test I was about to miss,” I said loudly over the music, trying to explain myself. She rolled her eyes a little but there was a smile playing on her lips.

“I’m Ryan Anderson,” I said, sticking my hand toward her. She considered me, looking as if she was trying to decide whether to turn away and run or if she should shake my hand.

“Allie Delacruz,” she finally said as she took my hand. My pulse sped up at her touch. She was so beautiful. When she finally smiled at me I felt triumphant. She said something else but I couldn’t hear her over the music.

“What?” I asked loudly, leaning in closer to her ear. She pointed to the exit and I nodded, trying to play it cool. She turned her back to me and I followed her through the crowded room. My eyes fell to her waist and the way her shorts hugged her hips made me dizzy. She was wearing cut off blue jean shorts and I couldn’t help but notice how good she looked in them. The door swung open and we were met with the warm

Texas night air. She turned and looked at me and a shy smile appeared on her face.

“Hi,” she said. It made me smile so big my cheeks hurt.

“Hi,” I said back to her. A moment passed between us, both of us watching the other.

“Do you happen to like ice cream, Allie?” I asked her.

“I love ice cream. I can eat my entire weight in ice cream,” she professed.

“Would you want to go grab some with me?” I asked.

“Now? It’s almost midnight.”

“It’s always a good time for ice cream.”

“Well I can’t argue with that,” she said as she shrugged her shoulders. I laughed and began walking up 6th street.

“So, do you go to UT or do you just hang out on campus during the day trying to make premed students late for class with your very distracting beauty?” I asked her. She threw her head back and laughed the most adorable laugh I had ever heard. It occurred to me that she might be a little

intoxicated considering we just left the bar. She seemed loose and relaxed, and I hoped it was me making her feel that way.

“I do go to UT, I’m studying international education with a minor in Thai language. I want to be a teacher for underprivileged kids in Thailand.”

“Wow,” I said. “That’s very ambitious. It’s also very specific. What made you interested in Thailand?”

“I watched a documentary on it once when I was in junior high. It was so beautiful and the people seemed so kind and welcoming. I decided right then I wanted to live there, and I have always wanted to be a teacher so it just fit. The idea came to me and I knew that’s how I wanted to spend my adult life.”

“That is how I feel about medicine. I want to help people, I want my life to mean something. Also I want to have buckets and buckets of money and buy myself a new boat and my own house on a lake somewhere.” Allie laughed again and I decided it was my life mission to make this girl laugh as much and as often as I could. She was impossibly cute and I had to force myself not to wrap my arms around her right then. I didn’t want to scare her away but damn it, I wanted to kiss her.

“Medicine is noble for sure. My mom passed away from cancer when I was young so I know good health care is really important,” Allie said.

“Oh Allie, I’m really sorry to hear that.”

“No, don’t be,” she said, “I was only four when she passed so I don’t feel sad about it anymore. Except I just wish I had known her. I know it would make her sad to know that I can’t remember her face. I do have one memory of her singing to me before bed, but I can’t make out her features or remember her smile. I don’t remember the song, but I remember her voice and how I felt at that moment.” I took her hand then, she glanced down at it but she didn’t pull away.

“Hey look, I bet they have ice cream in here!” She pointed to a small cafe and began to walk faster toward the door. The cafe was filled with college students stuffing their faces full of greasy food, laughing and talking loudly.

“What flavor are you getting?” I asked her at the counter.

“Chocolate, obviously. You?”

“I’m a vanilla guy. But don’t let that fool you, I am anything but boring,” I said to her while I flashed her my best



smile.

“I don’t know, a doctor who likes vanilla ice cream, that sounds a little boring and nerdy to me,” she said as she slid into the nearest booth.

“Well I’m not a doctor yet. Plus, nerds are the best kissers, ask anyone.”

“Oh yeah? Well, I will take your word on that for now.” She winked at me and I died a little. I was in big trouble. I was only twenty years old, I couldn’t fall in love with this girl. But Allie was the kind of girl you fell in love with.

## Chapter 5

Ryan

February 2023

“Watch this part Duke, the boyfriend is about to show up and cause a scene,” I said, popping popcorn into my mouth.

Duke and Netflix, that's what my nights had become the weeks following my birthday. Marjorie had been busier than usual, and I had spent my days off work wandering the city and hanging out with my dog. It was nice, but I was starting to get cabin fever. I scrolled through my phone mindlessly as I watched the movie. I checked my social media accounts, then my new emails. One particular new email caught my attention.

From: Sarahbear1010@sbcglobal

To:Blood donor 2587898877

Dear Blood donor,

Hello! My name is Sarah. Thank you for donating your O+ blood. Your donation has helped my mother, Alison Delacruz, in her fight with cancer. She always feels so much better after she gets blood, so thank you for putting color back in her cheeks!

Sarah

My heart stopped.

I couldn't breathe.

I choked on some popcorn. Then I REALLY couldn't breathe.

It couldn't be her.

Right?

There was no way it was Allie.

My Allie.

There's probably a thousand women with the name Alison Delacruz in the world, right? Could I email her back or is that unethical? My mind was going a million miles per hour. I typed a reply without thinking.

From: R. Anderson

To: Sarahbear1010@sbcglobal

Hi Sarah! Thank you for your message. I am a nurse in the Portland area. I gave my blood to a traveling mobile clinic. I

was curious how far my blood traveled! What city are you in?

I hope your mom gets better soon!

R Anderson RN

My heart hammered in my chest as I prayed for a response. Suddenly it was as if I had to know if it was Allie. Like my world would stop until I knew. I heard a ding on my phone alerting a new email and I almost fell off my couch trying to check it.

To: R Anderson

From: Sarahbear1010@sbcglobal

Greetings from Austin Texas! Your blood made quite the journey. I better not message you anymore though because you could totally be a murderer and my mom would kill me if I got murdered.

Sarah!

This kid was funny. And she was from Texas. Not just Texas, but Austin. She was definitely, without a doubt, Allie's daughter. Suddenly I could not breathe and I needed to get out of the apartment. I jumped up and grabbed Duke's leash. "Come on buddy, let's go for a walk." He gave me a disinterested look and put his head back on his pillow and yawned. "DUKE THIS IS AN EMERGENCY COME ON!" I said impatiently as he finally got up, stretched, and allowed me to put his leash on his collar.

Outside, I tried to clear my head. All I could think about was Allie. Our history. How we ended things so long ago. What were the odds that she, of all people, would be the one to need my blood? Her daughter said in her email that Allie was fighting cancer. I couldn't process that yet. I was completely overwhelmed, my mind spinning with thoughts and ideas. Should I reach out to her? Was that weird? Was the universe trying to bring her back into my life? It was just too bizarre. She had a daughter, meaning the odds of her being married were pretty high. But the email had said Alison Delacruz, her maiden name. I told myself it didn't matter if she was married, what did I care? But I did. I cared. I wanted her to be single. I wanted to see her.

I turned down a crowded street. The buzz of the city helped to calm my nerves. The January air was still chilled, but there was no wind that night and I was comfortable in my jacket. Portland nightlife was alive and people piled into restaurants and bars all around me. The city was so beautiful. It was why I chose to move to Oregon all those years ago. I went there for a weekend trip and decided to never leave. I sat on a bench and held on to Duke's leash and pet his big, soft head.

“What do I do buddy?”

I looked up and was surprised to see Marjorie walking arm in arm with a tall, handsome man. She was laughing and snuggled intimately close to him. Her long hair was blowing in the cool night breeze and she looked relaxed and comfortable on the arm of the mystery man. She was laughing at something he said when she made eye contact with me from down the street. She gave me a look that I couldn't quite read. I was not mad, we had never talked about being exclusive, but I was surprised. I smiled at her so she knew she didn't need to feel bad. I gave her a small wave and a nod of understanding. I then stood and led Duke away from the busy street and back toward my apartment. I felt at that moment that I was

receiving another sign, a bright flashing sign that said, GO  
FIND ALLIE! There's nothing here for you Ryan.

## Chapter 6

Allie

August 2003

I couldn't get the smile off my face when I parted ways with Ryan. He was the most handsome boy I had ever seen. He wanted to be a doctor, and I could tell he was passionate about medicine. The way he made me feel was something I had yet to experience in my twenty-one years of life. I was giddy, drunk on alcohol and drunk on lust. But not just lust, more than that. I wanted to KNOW this boy. I *needed* to know him. I gave him my number when we parted ways earlier that night and I prayed to the Lord above that he would call me soon.

“Um, are you sick?” my roommate asked as I walked into our shared apartment.



“No, why? Do I look sick?” I felt panicked at the question. If she thought I looked sick I must have looked horrible. And considering I had just met the man of my dreams, I was praying I looked at least half-way decent. I ran towards the mirror to examine myself. My face was flushed, my eyes alert and wild. My hair was wind blown with strawberry pieces framing my face. I looked young and happy and excited, like I maybe just met the love of my life. I turned back toward her, a questioning look on my face.

“You just have this crazy grin on your face, I thought maybe it was gas or something,” Fin, my roommate, said. I laughed and shoved her playfully.

“Oh Fin, I just met THE GUY,” I said as I threw myself dramatically onto the couch in our living room. She hurried over to sit next to me to indulge in my recap of the evening. I told her every detail, starting with when he almost ran me over on campus a few weeks prior.

“Do you think he will call?” Fin asked.

“I think he was feeling me as much as I was feeling him. He will call,” I said with confidence.

“Well I am sure he will, and if he doesn’t he’s a fool. You are beautiful and smart and you have an absolute killer

rack,” she said. I threw a throw pillow at her, she ducked and it hit the lamp knocking it to the floor. We exploded into a fit of giggles. On that night, I was fully alive. wrapped in glee and possibilities.

He called me that night. And the next night. And the next.

Chapter 7

October 2003

## Ryan

“Should we do a couples costume for Brad’s Halloween party?” I asked Allie as we studied together in the library. We had been completely inseparable for the two months following our first date. I could not get enough of her. My premed classes were getting more difficult so we had been having the majority of our dates in the library. We were taking things slow physically. She had never been intimate with anyone before. This girl was special and I was not about to ruin it by pressuring her to do something she wasn’t ready to do.

“A couples costume? Are we a couple?” Allie asked.

“Well, I was hoping so. I was hoping we might make it official,” I said.

“Are you sure you want that?”

“Of course,” I said.

“I do, too,” she said, smiling across the table at me.

“So, couple costumes then? You in?” I said, unable to hide the smile on my face. I was exuberant. The coolest, most beautiful woman I had ever known was officially my girl.

“Salt and pepper?”

“Peanut butter and jelly?” Allie suggested.

“Romeo and Juliet?” I countered.

“No,” she said, “they both die at the end.”

“Right. Bad idea. Sonny and Cher?”

“Yes! That’s it. I love it. I even had a long black wig I could wear,” she said excitedly.

“Well in that case, we can’t do that, it would be criminal to hide your hair under a wig,” I said as I twirled her hair between my fingers. I brought a strand up to my face and smelled her scent before kissing the strawberry blonde lock.

“We cannot cover this up. Sorry, new idea.”

“Mario and Princess Peach?” Allie suggested.

It was the perfect idea.

“Hell yes. Your hair with a crown on top and a pink dress. You were born to play Princess Peach.” I pulled her onto my chair with me and curled her into my lap. I was the luckiest damn guy to ever live. I kissed her right there in the library. My anatomy and chemistry textbooks could wait. I had all the anatomy and chemistry I needed touching my lips.

## Chapter 8

Ryan

January 2023

As I loaded up my car I started to panic. I was absolutely crazy. Heading to Texas without a plan was borderline stupid. It would take me almost two full days of driving to get to Austin, but I couldn't leave Duke behind in order to fly. I wasn't sure how long I would stay or even where I would stay. What if she wasn't in the hospital anymore? And which hospital? Austin is a big city. I decided I would just

have to research the best cancer facility in the area. Allie would choose the best. If she was already discharged from the hospital, I would never find her. I had already tried and failed to look her up on social media. I had been typing her name into search bars for years. I took several deep breaths to calm myself. I loved a good road trip, so whatever happened, I would make the best of it. It was easy to get the time off of work. I didn't take time off very often, and I had worked Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Years day that holiday season, so they owed me a break.

My cell phone started to ring and Marjorie's name lit up on my screen. I hesitated, unsure if I wanted to have a conversation with her, but then I picked up the call.

"Hello?" I answered.

"Hey Ryan," she said, sounding nervous, "I heard you were taking some time off of work. I wanted to see if you were okay. I am sorry about the other night, I should have told you I was seeing someone else. I hope that's not why you're leaving town."

"No, no, please don't apologize for that. I'm taking some personal time to go back home to Texas. I promise this has nothing to do with the other night."

“Oh wow, you’re going to see your family? That’s so great Ryan, I thought you guys were estranged,” she said, sounding much more like herself.

“Well, I’m not really going to visit them. We aren’t exactly speaking much right now. I just want to visit the UT campus and see some old friends. I may catch a basketball game or something while I’m there.”

“Oh okay,” she said, sounding disappointed. “Well, I hope you’re safe while you travel.”

I started to say bye and hang up, but then I heard her say, “Ryan, I wouldn’t be dating someone else if I thought you were serious about me. But I know what this is for you and it’s starting to hurt me. I need to move on since I know there’s something holding you back from me. I really hope you find whatever it is you are looking for in Austin,” she said and hung up the phone.

“Me too Marjorie,” I replied to the emptiness of the dead line.

“Come on Duke, we have a lot of road ahead of us,” I said to my dog as he jumped in to ride shotgun. I looked out my truck window as we drove through the snow.

“Bye bye winter wonderland, we’re off to visit the surface of the sun,” I joked out loud. Texas weather was bipolar, I had to bring every type of clothing imaginable. It could be raining, sunny, cold or hot. Often it would be all of those things in one 24 hour day. It was best to be prepared for anything. The long journey ahead would give me way too much time to think, and I considered turning around a hundred times. What was I doing? I was absolutely out of my mind for going to find Allie. But no matter how many times I wondered if I should turn around, something kept me going toward home.



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Allie

January 2023

I was so sick of looking out of the window, waiting for my life to either end or to begin again. Sarah sat in the chair in the corner of the hospital room, sketching something brilliant in her drawing pad. My heart squeezed in my chest. I hated what my illness was doing to her. She was always so brave, but I knew inside she was just a scared little girl. She was my exact twin, with her strawberry blonde hair and blue eyes.

Looking at her was like looking into the face of my younger self. How I wished I could go back to that time, I would change so many things. If I could shelter her from my disease I would, but I couldn't do that. I was all she had. When I discovered that I had cancer, we left Thailand to return to America, the land of better health care. We left every friend we had in the world back in Thailand. My parents were gone and I only had a few acquaintances left in Austin. But at least the city was familiar. The town I so loved. The place where I fell in love for the first time.

“Sarah, did you finish your math for today?” I asked her.

“Yeah Mom, all done.”

“Spanish homework?”

“Si, estoy terminada,” she smiled.

“Chemistry?”

“It's all done Mom, no more homework today,” Sarah said patiently.

“Okay, okay sorry. That's what moms do. Annoy our children to death.”

She stuck her tongue out in my direction.

“Hello! How are my favorite girls today?” Joey, our beloved nurse, came into my hospital room. Joey was tall and handsome in a boyish sort of way. His scrubs were always slightly wrinkled and he was often sporting a coffee stain or two around the collar, but his wide smile and green eyes sparkled in a way that felt like home. His entire demeanor was calming and inviting. Every time I saw him, I felt my entire body relax. He was more than my nurse, he was my friend.

“I come bearing nausea medicine for you and chocolate for mini you,” he said.

“Joey, you never fail me,” Sarah said as she jumped from her perch to collect her snack.

“Me either, Joey, it’s like you know what we need before we even ask,” I said as he injected the Zofran into my IV line.

“What’s the verdict? You think we’re getting out of here tomorrow?” I asked him.

He eyed Sarah before answering me. “Lets see what the doctor thinks, but I think we’re three days out at least. Maybe if we can get you off the IV medications we can start thinking about discharging you. Don’t get in a rush, you know

as well as I do that if you go home before you're ready you will end up right back in here," Joey said.

I settled back into my pillow. I knew he was right, but it made me angry. The cancer made me feel so much bitterness. I had to constantly force myself not to scream out loud. I wanted to sling up my arms and kick like a toddler in the throws of a tantrum, but I had to hold it together for Sarah. Tears started to form in the corners of my eyes. Joey noticed right away.

"Hey Sarah, I was going to walk across the street and grab some hot wings, you in?" Joey asked. She was out of her chair in an instant. "Wings, duh. I'm in. That okay mom?" she asked.

"Yes, go have fun. Bring me a Sprite when you're back please."

I gave Joey a knowing look, silently thanking him for allowing me a moment to myself to throw a private pity-party. As soon as they were out of earshot I grabbed my pillow, covered my face, and yelled as loud as I could. I couldn't bear the hospital room for one more second, let alone three or four more days.

After I had myself a good cry, I took out my journal and grabbed a pen. I wrote down all of the things I was feeling and

all of the fears I was facing. My tears soaked through the paper as I poured my heart out to the pages. What if I died? What would happen to Sarah? I had a plan in place in case of the worst case scenario, but it wasn't ideal. It wasn't her and I together. I needed to keep fighting, to beat this thing for her. I knew first hand what it was like to lose a mother to cancer, and I didn't want that to happen to her. I took several calming breaths. I had to knock it off before she came back. The last thing I wanted was for her to see me upset. There were a few occasions when we would let the grief slip in. In these moments, we would allow ourselves to feel the pain of our reality. But if we did it all the time, it would consume us.

I flipped on the TV and tried to find a comedy to mindlessly watch. I needed something that would change my mood. I knew I was probably depressed, it was something I needed to bring up with the doctor most likely. But I didn't want to take another pill, I already had to swallow about twenty a day. I sighed deeply. Therapy was out of the question too. I didn't need a psychiatrist to tell me why I was sad. I knew why I was sad. I wanted my life back. I wanted out of this hospital. I wanted out of the hospital gown. I wanted to put on a real dress and take Sarah out to a fancy dinner and buy her lobster and laugh hysterically at ourselves over our

fake British accents we liked to use when we fine dined. I was about to grab my pillow again for another good scream when the doctor walked in.

“Mrs. Delacruz, how are we today?”

“Peachy,” I deadpanned.

“Well your numbers are looking decent. I think we can look at discharging you on Friday.” I sat up straighter, his words immediately improving my mood.

“Doc, you have no idea how badly I needed to hear you say that. You sure it can’t be tomorrow though?” I begged.

“I just want to make sure your hemoglobin holds. Friday. I wanted to keep you all weekend so just take Friday as a personal favor from me.” He squeezed my hand. Dr. Harrison had been my oncologist for five years and I trusted him completely.

“Okay, Friday it is.” I shifted in my bed.

“Have you heard it might snow tonight? Snow, especially snow in Austin, is said to bring miracles,” the doctor said as he snapped my chart closed.

“I could use one of those,” I said, my voice barely a whisper. He gave me a warm smile.

“Don’t lose hope, Allie.” Dr. Harrison left the room, his white coat swishing as he moved on. I stared at his back, praying for the hope he suggested. Hope. What a beautiful word. I whispered it out loud, trying to conjure it. It tasted foreign on my lips. My gaze drifted to the window. The sky was gray and the wind whipped the tree branches angrily, as if the sky was mirroring my mood. It looked chilly outside and the clouds hinted at the aforementioned possibility of a winter storm. My attention was pulled back into the room as Sarah reappeared in the doorway with a sprite in hand.

“Mom, it’s pretty cold out there! What if it actually does snow? If so, we will have a pretty epic view out of these beautiful windows. A much better view than from our apartment. So maybe it’s not so bad to be here tonight,” she said encouragingly.

“You’re exactly right Sarah Bear.” My daughter was truly an angel. She crawled next to me in the small bed and wrapped her arms around me.

“You know, you don’t have to hide it from me when you’re having a bad day, Mom.” Her words ripped me apart and I had to swallow down the tears before I responded.

“I know bug, but that’s my job. You’re the kid, I’m the mom. I’m supposed to be the strong one.”

“I’m strong, too,” she said softly.

“You, my darling, are right. You are the strongest little girl in the world.”

“I’m not a little girl anymore. You can lean on me.”

“That’s just how it works, you’ll always be my little girl.” I hugged her tight, causing a spasm of pain to run up my spine. My thin body and weak bones made everything hurt. Another bitter reminder of the many things I hated about cancer. Sarah must have noticed me wince because she quickly released me and returned to her chair to resume her drawing.

“Did you know that Joey sings a prayer before every meal? Loudly. I almost died of embarrassment,” Sarah told me. I grabbed my belly and laughed hard.

“Oh my gosh, thank you for telling me that. He is so crazy. I love him so much for it.”

“You will have to tell him to belt you a few ballads of *Pray For Your Veggies* next time he brings you your dinner tray,” she said. I laughed even louder. Sarah always knew how



to pull me out of my dark places. I hoped I did the same for her.

“Thanks for bringing me a drink. What would I do without you Sarah Bear?”

“You couldn’t make it one day without me,” she said.

“You’re right, I couldn’t. Not one single day.” I smiled at her.

“Want to watch *Stepbrothers*?” I asked.

“Yup!” she said as she turned her chair toward the TV.

Maybe the snow would come after all. And maybe with it, a miracle.

Chapter 9

January

Ryan 2004

“No peeking!” Allie said as she led me blindfolded up a flight of stairs.

“Are you trying to get me killed? I can’t go up stairs without seeing where I am going!” I cried.

“I won’t let you fall,” she said.

“I trust you. Maybe. Are we almost there?”

“A few more steps. Focus, I really actually probably couldn’t catch you if you fell. You’re huge. I’m tiny,” she said.

“Oh, I feel so confident in my safety right now,” I deadpanned.

“Just keep going!” I took a few more steps up, trying to steady myself with one hand on the wall and one hand laced with Allie’s. It was my twenty-first birthday and Allie had planned the entire evening. I didn’t care much for my birthday, but she was so excited and it was infectious. We stepped through a door and she finally released the blindfold.

“Surprise!” she exclaimed. I looked around as my eyes adjusted to the light. We were on a rooftop somewhere in the city. Allie had set up a blanket with an ice bucket filled with beers and several rolls of sushi. She had strung twinkling

lights and layed out pillows. It was a perfect set up and emotion began to build up inside of my chest.

“Al, did you do all of this yourself?” I smiled down at her.

“It was nothing, really. My roommate’s family owns the building so don’t worry, we’re not trespassing. And we shouldn’t have to worry about being interrupted, no one comes up here. Plus, I locked the door behind us,” she said with a mischievous grin. Allie took me by the hand and let me toward the rooftop picnic. She handed me a cold beer from the ice bucket.

“Your first legal drink,” she said as she grabbed a bottle of her own.

“This is great, Allie. Thank you so much.”

“I had fun setting it up for you.” Her smile was luminous. “Here, try this sushi roll, it’s my favorite one.” She stuffed a roll in my mouth while she finished her sentence.

“Oh wow that *is* good,” I told her, my cheeks still filled with rice and salmon. She laughed at my garbled speech before focusing her attention on her own plate. We sat in comfortable silence for a few minutes while we ate. Austin

was cold in January, but not unbearably, so we were comfortable with our blankets and warm clothing. I felt so content with her beside me. I was way too young to be falling in love, but I was doing it anyway. Allie stuffed a huge piece of sushi in her mouth, leaving a trail of soy sauce down her chin. I loved how she was so unapologetically herself. She was never embarrassed or self-conscious. She looked beautiful, even with her cheeks full of sushi and sauce on her face. I wiped her chin with the sleeve of my sweater.

“Does tonight make it into your top ten birthdays?” she asked.

“Oh, best one yet. Hands down,” I said.

“Oh whatever. Aren’t both of your parents surgeons? You probably grew up getting ponies for your birthday,” she said.

“My parents never had time for me growing up. They were always working. I think I probably spent most of my birthdays with my nanny,” I told her.

“Ryan, I’m sorry that was a jerk thing for me to say.” She blushed from embarrassment.

“No, don’t feel bad. You’re right, I definitely did get a pony for my sixth birthday. Then I was forced to take horseback riding lessons until I was ten years old. I honestly didn’t particularly enjoy the lessons. They always gave me extravagant gifts. Probably because they felt guilty being away so much. But they loved me, they still love me, they just don’t make time for me. And they were never very good at showing their love,” I explained. She smiled sadly at me and nodded her understanding.

“This birthday is the best. I have you, and this view, and that’s better than a pony any day. It’s also better than the year I got a pool.” I smiled at her.

“They gave you a pool? Like, an inground pool? For a birthday present?”

“With a slide and diving board,” I told her, a smirk painted on my face. She laughed hard.

“Wow, you are a spoiled rich boy,” she joked. We continued to eat our sushi, and we had made a decent dent in the bucket of beers. We laughed and talked more about our childhoods. She told me about her life after her mom died. She was close with her dad. Her entire face lit up when she talked about him. I hung on her every word, watching her mouth as

she talked. Her lips were so pink and I was itching to reach over and touch them. I forced my eyes to lock into hers while the rest of my body screamed to be near her. I wanted to watch the rise and fall of her chest. It took gallant effort to keep my gaze from drifting down to her shoulder as her sweatshirt slipped down slightly as she used her arms to lift her bottle.

“Your dad must be an incredible man, to raise you on his own. And for you to turn out the way you have, he must be the best,” I said as I attempted to be present in the conversation. The way she looked made it difficult. I loved Allie’s mind, and our conversations were some of my favorite moments, but that night my body was starved for her.

“He really is the best.” She smiled, obviously thinking lovingly of the man that raised her. The lights of the city were reflexing in the deep blue of her eyes. She was so damn beautiful, no one had ever looked that beautiful before. She had the type of beauty that could inspire a painter. Even her movements were a work of art. Her tiny hands were so dainty she could have made Michelangelo cry. Despite the chill, I was warm all over with thoughts of her. She lit me on fire and I was dying to touch her, dying to reach under her sweater,

dying to know if she wanted my hands on her. We listened to some music and finished off the last of the beers.

“Thank you for doing this. It’s perfect,” I said, with my hand lingering on her cheek.

She brought her hand up to mine and held it there. The energy between us was magnetic. Her eyes grabbed mine, their ocean depth threatening to drown me. I could see her desire, and I could feel my own. It was palpable. Something that could be held, cherished, saved.

“So, you said we’re all alone up here? No chance of being interrupted...” I said softly, allowing my voice to trail off.

“I did say that,” her voice shook a little.

I wrapped my arms around her and she put her head in the crook of my neck. I could feel her heart racing against my chest. I pulled her back to look fully at her.

“Hey, you okay? You know I was just messing around, Allie cat. You don’t need to be nervous around me. We don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do,” I said reassuringly. I meant it, too. No matter how badly I wanted her, I would have waited forever for her. She snuggled back close to me



again, still seemingly nervous. Her heartbeat was a drum up on that roof. A soundtrack of our desire.

“What if I do want to?” she asked, the words muffled into my shirt.

“I won’t tell you no,” I said jokingly.

“What if I’m bad at it?” she asked quietly.

I looked her up and down, drinking in the sight of her.

“That’s impossible.” I felt my adams apple bob up and down as I tried to swallow down my intense need for her. She hooked her fingers inside my sweater and pulled it over my head. It was the first time I had ever seen her look unsure of herself.

“Allie, really, we don’t have to do anything. This has been perfect, this is enough,” I said, kissing her lightly. It was more than enough. It was everything.

“I want to, Ryan. I’m just nervous. I’ve never... and you have. But I want you,” she said, sounding more confident. I kissed her long and deep, getting dizzy from the effect of her mouth. She was so damn beautiful. I pulled her sweater over her head and allowed myself a greedy look at her exposed skin. Her body was perfect, smooth as softened butter. She had

light brown freckles covering her abdomen that I had never noticed before, but in that moment I could not tear my eyes away from them. I took my time gazing over her, memorizing the curve of her hip. I'm ashamed to admit that I had been with my fair share of women, but the feelings I had with her were entirely new. I had the sudden and terrifying feeling that I was in love with her. She stepped out of her jeans, standing in front of me in only her bra and underwear. What she wore was soft pink and girly, innocent and sexy. I noticed chill bumps breaking out over her skin.

“Come here, let's warm you up,” I said. She stepped into my arms. I lowered her onto the blankets that she had placed out for us and I took my time making love to her.

I swore to myself there would never be anyone else.  
Only Allie.

## Chapter 10

Allie

January 2023

Thursday

“Mom, wake up! Wake up! Look, it’s snowing!” Sarah screamed into my ear, waking me from my sleep. I rubbed my eyes and yawned. The sun was peeking through the window, so it must have been morning.

“What? What’s going on?” I asked groggily.

“Look out the windows!” she squealed. I lifted myself upright in bed, wiping the sleep from my eyes. I squinted as I looked through the glass, my vision focusing on the fluffy white flakes.

“Well I’ll be,” I whispered, a huge smile breaking across my face.

“Snow!” Sarah exclaimed.

“I can’t believe it. Snow. Not a lot, but still,” I said in wonder. Sarah was practically vibrating with excitement. Her obvious joy made me smile so large that my dry lips cracked a

little at the corners. The treatments and medications had given my lips and skin a chapped and pale quality that no amount of lotion or chap-stick could cure. Make-up was also a luxury of the past. I didn't see a reason to put it on, unconvinced it would help. I relied on beautifully printed head scarfs to make me feel like I was still a woman. Looking into a mirror was shocking, something to be avoided at all cost.

“Go outside Sarah, go check it out,” I said.

“Oh no, I don't want to leave you. Let's watch it together,” she said, with her face pressed against the window.

“Go play in the snow! Be a kid! Catch some flakes on your tongue. Do it for the both of us,” I practically begged her. I hadn't even finished my sentence before she was pulling on her shoes and jacket.

“Okay, I will go. But just for a minute,” she said excitedly. She wrapped her scarf around her neck and looked around the room for her gloves.

“I'll sit over there. Go to the front of the hospital where I can see you from the window and wave up at me,” I told her. She ran from the room, leaving a trail of happiness in her wake. I got up from the bed and made my way slowly over to a spot where I would be able to see Sarah waving up at me.

The cold made the ache in my bones worse than it usually was. The happiness it brought my daughter was well worth it. I wrapped the blanket tightly around my shoulders and sat in the chair by the window, waiting to see Sarah.

“You’re awake,” Joey said as he entered the room. His blonde hair looked wind blown and wild on top of his head. He was wearing a thick blue sweater on top of his scrubs, clinging on to it like it was a life-line. I looked at him, the joy on my face evident.

“And you saw the snow,” he said brightly, “I brought you a cup of hot coffee.” He walked toward me with a mug in hand. I grabbed it greedily. I laughed when I noticed he still had his gloves on. He apparently did not enjoy the cold.

“Oh my gosh you are my favorite, have I told you that?” I asked, savoring the coffee, which he had made exactly the way I liked it.

“Daily, but I never tire of hearing it.”

He took a seat next to me in the opposite chair and we both gazed out the window. I sipped the hot liquid, feeling happy and content, a feeling I had desperately missed.

“It’s beautiful out there,” Joey said.

“It really is,” I mused.

“Do you think it will stick?” I wondered out loud.

“It probably won’t snow enough to stick to the grass, but it sure is pretty to watch it fall,” Joey said. We silently sat together, watching the small flakes float, almost as if they were dancing. Joey was a great guy, he was an exceptional nurse and had become a great friend to me. He had two daughters of his own at home, so he understood how badly I needed to stay alive for Sarah. Joey was a single dad. His daughters were four and six and he spoke of them constantly. His oldest daughter, Clara, loved ballet and had a recital in the spring. He told me how she had been practicing every evening on the hardwood of their kitchen floor. I knew his youngest daughter, Sammy, was wild and mischievous. She loved to play pranks on her dad and big sister. Sammy was both funny and courageous. I had the pleasure of getting to know his sweet girls during my fight with cancer, so I guess everything has a silver lining. Joey’s daughters relied on him in the same way Sarah relied on me. His children, and my own child, did not have the luxury of a second parent at home. Luckily for Joey though, he didn’t have cancer.

“How are you feeling today?” he asked. He was my nurse after all, so it was his job to check in on me. I would have preferred to sit together like old friends, but instead I sighed and updated him on how I was doing.

“I’m good today. This is the best I have felt in years if I am being honest. I don’t really mean physically, and I know that’s what you’re asking me, but mentally today is a great day.” I smiled my best smile in his direction.

“I can see it on your face. You look really happy.”

I looked out the window in time to see Sarah waving up at us. I stood up and waved back, practically jumping up and down with my excitement. Everything good and right that I had ever done in my life was wrapped up in that little girl. She was growing into such a beautiful young woman. I felt myself mourn her childhood as I watched her in the snow, but at that moment she seemed so young again. The snow transformed her from a mildly moody teenager to a vibrant wide-eyed girl. I could see her jumping around outside, her red scarf bouncing around her. The color of the scarf made her hair luminous. She was so full of life. I could imagine her as a grown woman, as someone’s first love, as someone’s mother.

The idea of it all made me feel warm and I wrapped the thoughts of her around me like a favorite sweater.

“I am happy. Really happy,” I said, as I watched my daughter spin around outside. Her mouth was wide open, catching the flakes as they fell. She looked like an angel.

“I still can’t believe it’s snowing,” Joey mused.

“Now I just need the miracle,” I said.

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Ryan

January 2023

Thursday

“Do not have a panic attack, Ryan,” I said out loud to myself after I had finally arrived in Texas. I had not been back to Austin in so many years, but the streets were still as familiar as my own hands. I took in my surroundings, realizing Austin hadn’t changed much. The city was known for its quirky residents, the entire town was weird so to speak. There were signs everywhere that read KEEP AUSTIN WEIRD in big bold letters. And weird it was. As soon as I drove into the city limits, I saw a woman with hot pink hair and matching



sweatshirt walking a dyed hot pink bunny rabbit on a leash. I laughed to myself, I was definitely home. Austin had a huge homeless population, one of the many reasons I was always kind to the homeless. I had grown up seeing them everywhere. After getting my driver's license at age 16, I made a habit of driving around Austin with my windows down so I could hand over any food or extra cash I had when I encountered a homeless person. It was one of the many ways I tried to compensate for the wealth I was born into.

I was raised in Austin for my entire childhood. I couldn't help but smile at the millions of memories that flooded my mind from all the familiar landmarks. Surrounded by the places of my past, I couldn't help but think about my parents. My history was woven into the town like the very fabric of my sweater. Some memories involving my family I would happily keep in a sealed proverbial box forever, but I pushed those thoughts aside and focused on the things I loved about the city. I could see the tower, lit up orange from the Longhorns' most recent win. I usually avoided home at all costs, but I was still an avid UT sports fan, following the football and basketball teams closely. I considered briefly calling my mom and telling her I was in town, but then I cringed at the thought of seeing my parents, I wasn't ready for

that. I told myself that I would call them before I returned to Oregon. I could meet them for a quick coffee or lunch, but not before I found Allie. They would not like the idea that I was there to see her, and the last thing I needed was my mom talking me out of finding her. The idea was ludicrous already and I didn't need to add gasoline to the fire.

My parents were both brilliant surgeons, excellent at their crafts, still working well into their sixties. Dad's specialty was bones. He was a world renowned orthopedic surgeon, often performing surgery on famous athletes who sought out his talents. He had once operated on me when I broke my leg playing football in the seventh grade. My father also taught interns at one of the local teaching hospitals. I admired him professionally, but as a father he was lackluster. My mom's specialty was hearts. She had spent the last thirty-five years mending the hearts of strangers. Ironically, she had spent the last forty years breaking mine.

"Duke, we are finally here," I told my dog.

Duke looked out the window, I could tell he was ready to get out of the car. It had been a long journey from Portland and he needed to stretch his legs. We were close to the UT campus, so I decided to turn onto the street that led to the

college. I would let Duke run around the quad while I researched the best cancer hospital in downtown Austin.

We hopped out of the truck and the both of us stretched out our limbs. There were college students everywhere, returned from their holiday seasons for the start of their spring semesters. I felt out of place next to their youth. They all seemed to exude endless possibilities. I allowed myself to remember when I was their age, back when my own future was filled with countless hopes and dreams. I felt the sting of regret when the thoughts of my college life drifted to Allie. The way it ended had left my heart wide open, leaving a scar that had taken up permanent residence deep in my chest.

The Texas air was crisp, colder than I had expected. I almost dropped dead from shock when I realized there was some snow on the ground. Just a tiny blanket, barely sticking to the grass, but snow nonetheless. Duke marched through the courtyard, chasing a few birds flying by. I found a bench to sit on while I did my research on local hospitals specializing in oncology. Austin is a huge city, there were more hospitals than you could count on your fingers. Thank goodness she wouldn't be at the surgical center where both of my parents

were employed. It would be a nightmare to run into one of them before they even knew I was in town.

It didn't take me long to come across Saint Katherine Cancer Research Hospital, new to the area but known to have the best oncologist in Texas. I was sure that was where Allie had to be. I had a million butterflies in my stomach as I wondered again what the heck I was doing. I was nervous, but I had made it all the way across the country and I was determined to find her. I let Duke play around the courtyard for an hour while I worked on my courage. We walked through campus, each building bringing with it a memory. I walked by the spot where I saw Allie for the first time. The day I almost knocked her over trying to make it to a test. I smiled at the memory. I saw my old dorm and the library where I studied with Allie on so many sleepless nights. Every moment I spent at university was intertwined with her. She was everywhere. Austin made me, but Austin had also broken me. I walked through memory lane, smiling more times than I could count. I couldn't believe it took me so long to go back. It felt good to remember.

“Okay buddy it's time. Let's go see the girl,” I said, taking another step, and with that step a huge leap of faith.

I decided to wear my scrubs. Some hospitals still had Covid restrictions so I wanted to blend in while I looked for Allie. I left the windows of my truck slightly cracked and told Duke I would return shortly. I took a big breath and walked into the large building. Was I crazy? I felt crazy, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I was exactly where I was supposed to be. I admired the building from the outside. It was huge, with big windows covering the front. It reminded me a little of Faith Memorial back home. The courtyard had a large fountain, so I searched my pocket for a penny to toss in. When I was a kid, my mom taught me that if I threw a penny into a fountain I could make a wish and it would come true. I

frowned as I realized my pockets were empty. I looked down and found a penny on the ground, face up.

“Find a penny, pick it up, all day long you’ll have good luck,” I said to myself as I smiled at my good fortune. I tossed the penny inside while I silently recited my wish in my head. Obviously, my wish was to find Allie.

I kept my head down as I entered the building and passed by security. No one seemed to notice me, or care that I was there, so I made my way to the main lobby. There were not many people around, and my nerves made their way to my stomach and turned into butterflies. I took several deep breaths and walked toward the elevators. I looked through the directory of the units. Oncology was located on the fifth floor. I wasn’t ready to start there. It was too real, too close, too scary. I turned around and went back the opposite way. I noticed the cafeteria. That was a safe choice. I slipped my jacket off and into my hands. I could use a bite to eat anyway.

The cafeteria was nice, much nicer than the one at Faith Memorial. There were so many choices, but I decided to start with coffee. I ordered an Americana and found a table to sit at while it cooled. I wished my nerves would cool down

also. There was a newspaper at the table, left behind by someone else. I picked it up and sipped my coffee.

“What’s been going on in Austin while I’ve been away?” I wondered out loud as I flipped through the pages. There were several articles about the University of Texas. The newspaper was filled with scores of sports games, upcoming university events, and a long article about a student and his senior project focused on green energy. It was nice to catch up on my home town events, it had been so long since I had been home. I stretched my arms and looked around the cafeteria. My eyes landed on a young girl and my heart stopped beating.

“Allie?” I whispered under my breath.

No, it couldn’t be her. The girl standing before me was too young. She looked to be maybe fourteen or fifteen years old. I had to remind myself that Allie would be forty-one now. It was impossible to imagine her as anything but a lively twenty-something girl, lighting up the room with her smile. I rubbed my eyes and looked again. She wasn’t Allie, but she looked exactly how I remembered Allie from so many years ago. Then it dawned on me, she had to be Allie’s daughter. The one who sent me the email that set this entire crazy plan into motion. My heart rate increased at the realization that

Allie was there, in the hospital. I had really found her. I couldn't approach this young girl in the cafeteria, she would probably call the police. I would scare her to death and she would likely think I was some sort of stalker. I groaned as I realized that maybe I WAS some sort of crazy stalker. I jumped from my seat and walked straight to the elevator. I got inside and pressed the 5 to access the fifth floor. It was right then, or never. If I didn't go see her at that precise moment, I would never go. I was losing my nerve. The two elevator doors closed in front of me.

“Here goes nothing.”



## Chapter 11

Allie

June 2004

“Fin, have you seen my black one-piece swimsuit?” I yelled down the hall to my roommate.

“You can check my room! I wore it to that frat party last week.”

I ran into her room, frantically looking for my suit to add to my overnight bag. Her room was a disaster and my OCD itched to clean it for her, but there was no time for that. I

was packing for a weekend away at Ryan's parents lake cabin on Lake Travis. I was so nervous. We had spent so much time together over the past several months, but that weekend was the first overnight trip we would take together. I was falling in love with him. I hadn't told him yet, but in my heart I knew. I spotted a black string underneath Fin's pillow.

"Aha!" I said as I pulled my bathing suit from her bed.

"Found it!" I yelled. The suit smelled faintly of beer and bad decisions. I ran to the laundry room to throw it in the washer, checking my watch to see if I had time for it to cycle. Two hours. I could make that work. I walked back to my room, looking inside my suitcase to determine what else I should pack. I added an extra set of pajamas and a beach towel. I smiled, daydreaming about the coming weekend. Ryan was so excited to take me to his favorite place. He said he would take me out on the boat and he would teach me how to fish. I was absolutely giddy with anticipation. I turned and looked at myself in the full length mirror. I decided on a black tank top and white shorts, both of which showed off my bronzed tan that had quickly appeared after finals. The summer had been filled with pool parties and nights with Ryan. I was drunk on sunshine and high on him. Neither of us

were taking classes that summer and the fall semester felt like a lifetime away. We had so many plans for the warm months before classes started back and we became busy again. I ran my hands through my long hair and turned on my curling iron, deciding that I had time to add a little curl to my hair while I waited for my swimsuit to wash. Fin came into my room and sat down on my bed.

“Does Ryan have any cute friends? You need to set me up,” she said.

“Oh yes, good idea. Then next time we can do a double date lake weekend,” I replied.

“I am so jealous. Ryan is crazy about you.”

“You think so?” I asked

“You should see the way he looks at you. The dude has it bad,” she said.

I smiled and continued adding curls to frame my face. I couldn't keep the grin away if I tried.

“Here hand me that, I will curl the back for you,” Fin offered. I handed her the curling iron and we went over my outfits for the weekend. I added some small gold hoops to my ears and checked my reflection again.

“You look killer,” Fin said. “Here, use my lipstick.” She handed me a tube of pink gloss and I swiped it across my mouth.

“Perfect. He won’t be able to keep his hands off.” She smiled and winked at me, nudging my shoulders playfully. Fin left my room and I finished packing and waited for Ryan. Twenty minutes later he was in my doorway.

“Hey Allie Cat, Fin let me in,” he said, casually leaning against the frame. His biceps flexing as he grabbed the wood had me drooling already. I stood up and walked toward him. His eyes drank me in.

“Wow, you look...wow,” he stammered.

“Wait until you see my swimsuit.” I grinned mischievously. He dramatically dropped to his knees, biting on his knuckles. I giggled as he hugged his arms around my ankles.

“Come on you big goof, let’s go!” I laughed.

An hour later we were pulling up to the lake house. We had spent the car ride blaring Usher’s latest hit song and

competing on who could sing the lyrics the loudest. Ryan made me feel like the only person in the entire world. We had so much fun together, no matter what we were doing, and I wanted to stay in that moment forever. When we finally arrived at the cabin, we got out of the car and Ryan grabbed our bags. My eyes drank in my surroundings.

“It’s so pretty!” I squealed. The front of the cabin was covered in flowers. Some were cascading down the vines surrounding the windows, some were exploding from colorful and ornate flower pots lining the porch. I walked up and touched the petals of a yellow rose bush. Ryan walked up behind me and wrapped his arms around me.

“You’re prettier,” he whispered into my ear. His breath on my skin caused goosebumps to explode onto my neck. He leaned his head into me and breathed me in.

“You smell better too.”

I turned around and kissed him deeply. He was intoxicating. Ryan grabbed my arm and led me inside the cabin. The interior was equally as cute as the porch.

“That’s it. I’m never leaving,” I joked. There was a small white kitchen connected to a large living room decorating in a million shades of blue. It was tasteful and

beachy with a small fireplace in the center of the room. On top of the mantel were several family pictures. I picked them up and admired them one by one.

“Is this you?” I asked, pointing to the dark headed boy with the big smile.

“It is. And that’s my older brother, Jason.”

“What does Jason do?” I asked him, interested in hearing about his family.

“He’s finishing up school in Houston. He plans to work in finance. My parents were pretty mad he didn’t choose medicine,” Ryan told me. We completed our tour of the cabin, each room more beautiful than the last. We ended up in the master bedroom. There was a king size bed with a large white down comforter. The pillows looked fluffy and softer than a bed of clouds. I longed to lay down and feel their comfort. The room was bright white, from the bed to the walls to the dresser. The only color in the room was a large oil painting of a midnight sky covered in stars. Ryan set my bag down on the bed and turned to look at me.

“You can stay in here. I will stay in the guest room right across the hall,” he said, ever the gentleman. In response, I grabbed his bag off his shoulder and set it down on the bed

next to mine, inviting him without words to stay with me. His smile was a mile wide.

“You put on that famous swimsuit of yours and I’ll take you fishing before dinner.” He left the room and gave me privacy. I stripped out of my clothes, my body aware of Ryan standing on the other side of the door. My breathing increased as I imagined him on the large white bed. I swallowed hard as visions of him removing my clothes clouded my mind, making my knees weak with desire. I somehow made it into my swimsuit and gazed at myself in the mirror. My cheeks were pink and my eyes were dilated, showing evidence of my impure thoughts. I cast another look at the white bed. It seemed to hold a promise for later.

Two hours after we had arrived at the cabin, we were on the water. His boat was small, perfect for the two of us. It was close to sunset and the day had been magical. Ryan’s tanned upper body was stretched out long and relaxed. He was barefoot and comfortable on the boat, looking completely natural. I looked down at his feet, realizing I didn’t often see

him without his socks or his shoes on. He had two webbed toes on both of his feet that he was self conscious of, but I found them completely endearing. The view of him in his swimsuit made a tingle run up my spine. I tried hard to listen as he explained how to remove the fish from the hook once it's caught, but I was distracted by his mouth. His lips were full, his teeth white, his tongue tempting me with every word that fell from his lips. His smile was so big and completely infectious. It was obvious by his mood that he was in his element. I loved to watch him cast his fishing pole into the lake and watch his serene expression. My own pole started to jiggle in my hand.

“Ryan, I think I got one!” I said excitedly. He jumped over to help me reel the line in. I squealed when the fish broke through the water, slashing its body back and forth. It was long and silver and when the sunlight hit the scales there were flickers of rainbow hues.

“Look at that! Your first fish and she's a keeper.” Ryan beamed with pride.

I jumped up and down, as much as the small boat would allow. We tried to keep our balance and both laughed out loud as the boat rocked back and forth.



“Oh man, that is fun! I want to catch another, get me some more bait please!” I squealed.

Ryan wrapped me in his arms. I had never seen him look so happy.

“If we catch a few more I can cook them for us tonight for dinner.”

“Let’s do it!” I said, determined to catch another fish. Ryan took both of our poles and added fresh bait. I stretched out on the back of the boat and worked on my tan while I watched him work. His eyes cut to me while I soaked in the sunshine.

“Stop that, I can’t focus.”

“Stop what?” I asked innocently.

“Stop being so cute,” he replied, his eyes burning into me with an intensity I felt to my toes. The heat of his gaze and the heat from the sun suddenly caused the cool water to beckon me. I jumped off the back of the boat, soaking my hair under the waves. I let the water wash over me. It was warm and felt delicious on my skin, so I let myself stay under for a moment before I broke through the surface. I crawled back up the stairs onto the boat and grinned at him.

“Does this work? I’m sure I look like a drowned rat now,” I joked. His throat bobbed up and down as he swallowed hard.

“No, now you look like a sports illustrated model. Check please,” he joked, raising his hand and standing, pretending to pack up his gear. I giggled and pushed my wet hair out of my face. I walked closer to him.

“Ryan, I...I just wanted to say...”

“No,” he said, stopping my words, “don’t you dare say it first. Allie cat, I love you. I love you so much,” he said, grabbing both of my hands into his. My heart stopped and I felt tingles run all the way up my legs and through my body, settling inside my chest where they bloomed and exploded. My ears were ringing and I felt light headed.

“I love you too,” I whispered. I wanted to say more, I wanted to scream it for the entire world to hear, but I was holding myself together only by his hands in mine. We both grinned at each other for a long time, no one speaking, no one moving. Ryan’s fishing pole started to move in its rod holder, breaking us from our trance. He reeled in a huge silver fish, tossing it on the bucket of ice. We both were smiling from ear to ear, my cheeks hurt from the pure joy of it. We rode back to

the cabin before dark, I sat on his knee while he drove the boat up to the dock. He picked me up and carried me inside, tossing me over his shoulder like a bag of potatoes. I laughed hard as he managed to carry me in one arm and the bucket of fish in the other. Dinner that night consisted of our own catch of fish and a beautiful salad that I threw together for us. If I could bottle up the happiness I felt that weekend I could supply the world with enough joy to last forever. Ryan was everything. My life felt like it was colliding with him in a way that could never possibly end. He was imprinting himself into my very soul, and I had fallen so hard I felt I might never get up again.

## Chapter 12

Allie

January 2023

Thursday

There was a soft knock at the door of my hospital room, yet the door remained closed. I found it odd, since the doctors and nurses usually knocked out of respect but then immediately entered the room without waiting for a reply. Sarah was down in the cafeteria grabbing lunch for herself, but she never knocked, so I knew it wasn't her at my door.

"Come in," I called, loudly enough for whomever was behind that door to hear.

The door opened and my breath caught. Ryan Anderson stood in my doorway. Looking exactly the same, yet entirely new. I blinked no less than one hundred times. We just stared at each other, frozen inside the moment between us. Finally, he spoke.

"Hey Allie," he whispered.

"Ryan..." It was all I could say.

“Can I come in?” he asked nervously. I finally came to my senses, realizing what I must look like to him. Sick and frail, my hair he once loved long gone. I felt embarrassment creep through me. I never expected to see Ryan again, especially in my pitiful condition. I adjusted the scarf adorning my bare head.

“Um..sure,” I said, feeling anything but. I noticed his scrubs, and relaxed a little.

“Do you work here?” I asked, looking him up and down.

“May I sit?” he asked, not answering my question. I nodded and swallowed so hard I was sure he must have heard it. He looked over at the chair, but ended up sitting on the bottom edge of the small bed, close enough for my feet to bump into the side of his leg. Electricity shot through me, my body still reacting strongly to his presence. He hadn’t touched me in so long, but every cell inside of my skin remembered him.

“No, I don’t work here, I live in Oregon actually,” he said.

“Oh, just visiting home then?” I asked. I had no idea what to say to him. This was the last thing I needed. My life

was already a complete disaster. Having him here made everything feel unstable. I wanted him to leave. I also desperately wanted him to hold me in his arms again. His features were almost the same. His hair had white laced through it and he had the hint of some wrinkles around his eyes, but he was still Ryan. He looked so good in those scrubs, the material clinging to him in all the best ways. His eyes still held so much brightness, as if years could not age him if they tried. He looked put together, confident, strong, and sexy. As I stared at him, I realized he was taking me in the same way. I looked down and away, embarrassed at what he was seeing in front of him. Where he looked the same, I looked completely different. My shirt hung limply on my frail body. My face had not seen makeup in weeks. I'm sure my eyes were dark and sunken, showing the outside world my inside illness. I suddenly felt a burst of anger. I hated this. I hated what the mirror showed back to me. I hated the version of me he was seeing.

“Just visiting,” he confirmed.

“How did you know I was here?” I had a million questions but this was the easiest one.

He shifted uncomfortably on the bed.

“Now that’s a long and interesting story.” He laughed nervously. I was about to reply when the door swung open and Sarah came charging in the room, arms filled with chips and sodas. She was talking before the door had even closed behind her.

“I got Sprite and Coke, Pringles and Lays. Choose your poison,” Sarah said.

She looked up and almost dropped everything in her arms.

“Oh, sorry Mom, I didn’t know you had company,” she stammered. She was not accustomed to finding strange men sitting on my bed. I took a long and calming breath.

“Ryan, this is Sarah, my daughter,” I managed to say.

“I would know that she was your daughter anywhere.” He smiled. Despite myself, his smile made me relax. It also stirred up something inside of me that I hadn’t felt in years. Longing. He was going to be trouble, I felt it inside my aching bones. He stood and gave Sarah a firm handshake, allowing her first to set down her armload of food. Sarah shot me a wide eyed look. She was clearly wondering who this tall and handsome stranger was.

“Sarah, this is Ryan Anderson. He is an old friend of mine. We dated in college,” I told her. I noticed his features fall as I introduced him. Probably because he was so much more than just someone that I dated. My breathing started to increase. I was drowning in panic. I wondered briefly if maybe I had died. There was no way that him walking into my hospital room was real. There was no way Ryan Anderson was in that room, looking like he stepped out of a dream. I was going to have a panic attack if I didn’t calm down.

“Nice to meet you Ryan, I have never met any of my mom’s college friends. I didn’t even know she had friends other than Maya,” Sarah said. I shot her a look.

“It’s nice to meet you too. Man, you look exactly like your mom,” Ryan said, shaking his head in wonder. He turned his attention to me.

“It’s shocking how much she favors you.”

“Well, not so much anymore. Cancer does that to you.” I shrugged.

“You still look like you, Al,” he said quietly. The air seemed to suck out of the room. I had forgotten how his words could make me feel. I tried to smile at him but I couldn’t. If I moved one muscle I might burst into tears, and I was already



humiliated enough. I looked out of the window and prayed for the reunion to end. My feelings were completely at war. Sarah couldn't stand for the silence to stretch between the three of us. She shifted nervously before filling the silent room with her voice.

“How did you meet my mom?” she politely asked Ryan.

“Now that's a pretty great story,” he said, smiling at me.

“Ryan tried to tackle me on campus. He almost killed me.”

“That's not true! I was late for a test!”

I laughed, some of my nerves fading. “Oh sure, the test. I forgot about that. You better be a damn good doctor since you almost took my life for that test.”

Ryan shifted nervously again. “Actually, I'm a nurse. But I am a damn good nurse if that helps,” he said shyly. I was a little shocked by his revelation. Ryan was supposed to be a doctor. That was always his plan. He never wavered on it.

“We like nurses better than doctors,” Sarah said. And this was true. Nurses were the ones who spent time with us,

got to know us, cared for our small needs with as much importance as the big needs.

“She’s right about that,” I told him. Ryan gave me another one of his smiles. I had missed his smile. That mouth. I shook my head, trying to ban those thoughts from my mind.

“Do you live here in Austin?” Sarah asked him.

“I grew up in Austin, but I haven’t been back here in years. My family still lives in the area.”

“Are you here visiting your parents?” I asked again.

“I plan to see them at some point.” Ryan was picking at his fingernails. Something I remember him doing when he was anxious. I wondered briefly if his parents worked in that hospital. Maybe he was there looking for them? Ryan seemed to sense all of the questions swirling around inside my brain.

“I’m actually here because of an email you sent me,” Ryan said to Sarah.

Sarah looked between the two of us, she looked confused. I definitely was.

“This is going to sound so weird, and trust me when I say it was weird to me too, but I received an email from Sarah

recently because I filled out a thank your donor card. Turns out we must have the same blood type Allie.”

My mouth fell open.

Sarah’s mouth fell open.

“You mean, you’re the guy from Portland?” Sarah asked.

“I am,” Ryan said. I started to laugh. Loud, uncontrollable laughter. The entire situation was ridiculous, impossible, mind blowing. Sarah looked at me like I was losing it. I think I was.

“Sorry,” I said, trying to contain myself. “This is just too much. Ryan, you donated your blood and I just randomly happened to be the one to receive it?” I asked for confirmation.

“I know. Sounds a little like fate, doesn’t it?” He locked eyes with mine and didn’t look away. My body turned warm with his familiar gaze drinking me in, his words cementing into my brain. Fate. Did I still believe in fate?

“Uh, I think I will give you guys some privacy to catch up,” Sarah said, leaving the room. She could surely feel the energy radiating between us. I tried to stop her, to tell her

to stay, that it was Ryan who should go. But instead I just continued to stare into Ryan's eyes, getting lost and found again inside of them. His sudden appearance into my life was not going to end well for me. But he was right, it felt like fate.

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Ryan

January 2023

Thursday

I didn't expect to tell her so quickly about how I had come to find her. I don't really know what I expected to do or say. I didn't have a plan in place. It wouldn't have mattered if I did. When I saw her again, I could barely breathe, let alone think. So much time had passed between us, so many life moments and memories without each other. It had been almost eighteen years since we had been together, but yet it felt like no time at all when our eyes met. I could tell that she was self-conscious for me to see her. She was constantly dipping her head low and avoiding eye contact. The way she kept pulling at her clothes and adjusting her head scarf made it clear to me

that she was uncomfortable by her appearance. To me, she was still beautiful. To me, she was still Allie. To me, she was perfect.

“How long are you staying in town?” Allie asked, bringing me away from my thoughts.

“I haven’t really decided yet. A few days at least. I stopped by campus. It was surreal being back there. It made me feel 100 years old. The students looked like children.” I laughed.

“I know what you mean,” she smiled, “Sarah and I go there a lot.”

“It was nice being back. It felt good, remembering everything.” I tried to make eye contact with her. She was looking down at her hands, a strained look on her face.

“Do you want me to leave Allie?” I asked quietly. She didn’t move or look my way.

“If you do, it’s okay. I know my showing up here was crazy. But when I saw your name in that email I had to come. I had to see if you were okay. It felt impulsive to come, but it felt impossible to ignore it. I couldn’t ignore it.” I knew I was rambling but I couldn’t stop myself.

She sighed heavily but she still didn't respond. I stood up, preparing myself to leave. I wasn't mad, I understood her hesitation. I knew that her life was probably complicated. I knew she should focus on her health, and not an old love affair. I didn't want to further complicate things for her. I had seen her, and maybe that could be enough. I leaned down to give her a kiss on her forehead. She still smelled the same.

"Stay." I heard her whisper. Warmth spread throughout my body. I was so relieved that she wasn't pushing me away.

"Okay, I'll stay," I said. I was inches from her face. It was so damn good to be in her orbit again. I would stay as long as she would let me.

"For a little while. It would be nice to catch up, to see what you've been up to since we saw each other last," Allie said softly.

Remembering the last time we spoke sent a jolt of pain through me. I did not want to think about the last time I spoke to Allie. It was the worst day of my life when she left me. The memory was too painful to relive, so I brushed the thoughts aside. Allie was looking down at her hands again, avoiding my face that was so close to her own.

“Allie, look at me,” I said, willing her eyes upward. She brought her gaze slowly up to mine.

“Stop doing that. You look beautiful,” I reassured her. I rested my forehead on hers, our breaths mixing together. It was intense, too intimate for how long we had been apart. I reluctantly broke away from her. I tried to lighten the vibe in the room.

“So, tell me all about Sarah,” I started.

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Sarah

January 2023

Thursday

I was trying to look into the small window in the hospital door without being caught by my mother. Joey was looking at me with curiosity, his eyebrow furrowed into a question. I saw out of the corner of my eye that he had started to walk toward me. I waved him away, but he kept coming toward the door.

“Go away, I’m trying to spy,” I whisper-yelled in his general direction.

“Move over girl, I’m trying to spy too,” he said, squishing his face next to mine. We both stared into the room, trying to see and hear what was going on in there.

“Who’s the hunk?” Joey asked.



“His name is Ryan. Apparently he and mom dated in college.” We watched as Ryan touched his forehead to my moms. I was shocked to see them look so comfortable together. I couldn’t wait to make Mom spill all the details. I wanted to hear about her past with this guy. He was definitely good looking. I could imagine my mom as a young girl, falling in love with the handsome stranger in her hospital room. I wanted to hear the story, and judging from their body language, there was definitely a story.

“Well, they sure look comfy in there,” Joey said, elbowing me to the side so he could get more space at the window.

“Hey! I was here first!” I said, nudging him back.

“Shhhh, you’re going to get us caught!,” he said, giggling as he continued to try and push me out of the way. Joey was so fun. He made coming to the hospital so much more bearable. We continued our tug-a-war for space at the window until another nurse came up behind us. It was Windy, a small blonde girl who had just started working at the hospital at the end of last year.

“Break it up you two,” she told us. Joey rolled his eyes. He gave me a look that said, “Who does this girl think she is?”

I giggled and gave him one last elbow to the shoulder, just for good measure.

“Come on, let’s give them some privacy. We can go get ice cream from the cafeteria,” he said conspiratorially.

“Dang it, I left my soda and chips in there.”

“I’ll get you more,” Joey said, wrapping his arm around my shoulder. We walked away from the room, but thoughts of my mom and her young love life danced around in my head. It was hard to think of her as anything other than my mom. It was hard to imagine she had a whole life before me. Her past had come to our present, causing so many questions to run rampant in my thoughts. Mom looked excited to see Ryan, she looked alive for the first time in a long time.

“He’s our snow miracle,” I said.

“He’s your what?” Joey asked.

I laughed. “Nothing, come on, race you to the elevator.”

I took off running with Joey behind me, laughing and increasing in stride. The day had taken on a life of its own. There was a feeling in the air, like everything was shifting on its axes. Like everything might change.



## Chapter 13

Allie

August 2004

I checked my watch for the hundredth time, struggling to listen to the professor finish up his lecture. I was in my junior year of college, so my classes were becoming more geared toward my major. My plan was still to live and teach in Thailand, though I would be lying if I said my growing relationship with Ryan didn't make me pause and think of the future I was planning. The international studies classes were so interesting and helped to propel me toward the career I had wanted for so long. To me, Thailand was fascinating. I had visited the beautiful country right after my highschool graduation, solidifying my love for the culture, the food and the language.

I typically enjoyed this particular professor's class, but I was so anxious to get out of there. It was the anniversary of the day Ryan and I had met one year before. I smiled, remembering when he jumped over me in the quad. I wasn't

sure if Ryan recalled that it was the date that we first met, but he had asked me to dinner that evening. He hadn't mentioned the anniversary, but I hoped the dinner was celebratory. I was unsure what to expect. I wouldn't be upset if Ryan didn't remember the date, guys often were not in tune with that sort of thing. I had gotten him a gift though, just in case. It was a stethoscope with his name engraved into the metal head. I was so excited to give it to him that I couldn't focus on one word of the lecture. I knew he was going to love it. The tubing of the stethoscope was the same color as my eyes and the metal was rose gold, the color of my hair.

“Read chapters 4 through 8 before the next class. I will see you all on Monday,” Professor Beck said, releasing the class. I was out of my seat before he finished his sentence. I had three hours before Ryan came to get me for dinner. I was giddy with anticipation. We had been together for a year but he still gave me butterflies. Every time I thought about him a smile stretched across my face. He was smart and kind and so handsome it made my eyes hurt. I couldn't get enough of him.

I grabbed my books and started to speed walk toward my car, already planning my outfit in my head. I had a new red

mini dress that he would go wild for. He loved when I wore red. He said it made my hair look like a crown of flames.

“Allie! Wait up!” I heard a voice call behind me. I turned around to see Fin running toward me, her purse bumping against her side. Her large wire rimmed glasses fell down her nose and her short brown hair was blowing wildly around her head. She was tall and lean, with long legs that moved like a baby deer. She was awkward and quirky and I loved the hell out of her.

“Hey Fin! Want a ride back to the apartment with me?” I asked as she approached.

“Ugh, that’d be great. This heat is killing me,” she whined.

I grabbed her purse and stuffed my books inside. “I’ll carry this,” I told her as I slung the bag over my shoulder. She smiled at me, grateful for the reprieve.

“Want to grab some pizza or something on the way home?” Fin asked.

“Can’t, I have that dinner with Ryan tonight.”

“Oh yeah I forgot! Do you know where he’s taking you?”

“No, he didn’t say. I’m giving him the stethoscope tonight.” I beamed at her.

“He’s going to love it. I wish I could be there to see his face when he opens it,” she said.

“We really need to get him to try to hook you up with another one of his friends.”

Fin made a face. The last guy Ryan tried to hook her up with did not go over well. Ryan’s friends were mostly frat guys, not Fin’s type at all.

“I know the last time didn’t work out, but he’s getting more into his premed classes, maybe we can find you a future doctor,” I said, wagging my eyebrows at her.

“First off, I’m going to law school after my undergrad. I don’t need some doctor on a power trip.” I loved this about Fin. She was outspoken, nerdy, and completely independent. I gave her a wide eyed look after her comment. She held up her hands in defense.

“I’m not referring to Ryan, you know I love Ryan.” She nudged my shoulder.

“He is a lot different than other guys,” I mused.

“Plus, I don’t need Ryan to set me up with anyone anymore,” she said, smiling wide.

“What?! Did you meet someone! Spill!” I said, grabbing her hand as we walked.

“I did! Allie, he is so dreamy. He writes poetry, can you even imagine it? He also cooks. Like real food. Not ramen. He’s an art history major, so you know he will be poor. I can be the powerhouse money maker and he can stay home and cook me three course meals and take care of our future children,” she said. I laughed loudly, throwing my head back as I listened to her day dream.

“Aren’t you getting a little ahead of yourself?” I asked her.

“Hey, when you know you know.” She shrugged.

“Does this poet chef have a name?” I asked.

“Peter,” she sighed, her eyes were practically heart shaped. I was so happy for Fin. I was also slightly relieved she had found someone she liked. I always felt guilty leaving her at home when I was out with Ryan. We always let her tag along, but I know she didn’t enjoy being a third wheel.



“Next time Ryan and I go out, you have to bring him and we can finally double date,” I said, excited about the prospect.

“Oh definitely, not tonight though, not on anniversary night,” Fin said.

“He probably has no idea it’s even the date we met. But yes, next date for sure.” I squeezed her hand and smiled at her. I don’t know how I didn’t notice sooner that she had met someone, she was absolutely glowing. I felt bad that I was unaware of her love life. Maybe I was spending too much time with Ryan.

“Have I been a bad friend to you lately?” I asked her.

“No! Allie, you’re in love. We’re both busy at school. I have a lot of friends, I don’t expect you to spend every minute at home with me. You’re my best friend, but you don’t have to worry about me. We’re good.” She gave me a genuine smile.

We finally made it to my car, a small white Honda Civic that my dad worked over time shifts for over a year to pay for. He was so proud when he gave me that car, and I was so proud to drive it. It had been just me and dad after my mom died. He worked hard to give me everything I needed. He worked for a hardware store and was the handiest man I had

ever known. He was much older than my mom when they married. When they had me, dad was well into his forties. He was sixty-three, still working and still bragging on me to anyone and everyone who would listen.

“It’s a sauna in here,” Fin said. She fanned herself with a graded test she pulled from her bag. Her short hair had started to curl at the ends from the sweat forming at the base of her neck. She reached for the air conditioner and cranked the knob up to high. I banged the top of the dashboard, the quirky car requiring a little manual stimulation to engage the AC. We spent the ride home planning our first double date with our unsuspecting significant others.

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Later that evening I was standing in my room in front of my full length mirror. The red dress was killer. I knew Ryan would appreciate how long and lean my legs looked. I rubbed them down with baby oil for good measure. I chose a large beige purse so I could slip Ryan’s gift inside without him

noticing that I had it. I chose to wear my hair in a long straight ponytail that cascaded down to the top of my waist. The style put my large hoop earrings on full display. I felt sexy and confident and I couldn't wait to have Ryan's arms wrapped around me. I felt a familiar warmth fill my middle as I imagined his lips on me everywhere. His kisses were always hungry and desperate, like he was trying to devour me with his mouth and his hands. I saw my cheeks flush in the mirror thinking of all the ways he touched me, his large hands everywhere. The way he made love to me occupied my mind so many hours of each day, it was almost embarrassing.

“Ryan's here!” I heard Fin yell from the living room. I quickly sprayed my perfume in the crook of my neck, on the exact spot where Ryan liked to kiss me. I met them both in the living room, Ryan making friendly conversation with Fin while he waited. When he saw me, I noticed his breathing stopped. A slow and sexy smile started to form across his face as he walked toward me.

“Good gosh Allie, you're going to kill me with that dress.” He took my hand and kissed my palm. The gesture was so sexy that I shivered. He looked so damn good with form-fitted light colored jeans and a white t-shirt tucked in with a

brown belt and brown boots. He smelled woodsy and manly, I wanted to skip dinner altogether and take him to my bed.

“You kids have fun!” Fin said, leaving us alone in the living room.

“Maybe we should just stay here and you can show me what’s underneath that dress.”

“I was thinking similar thoughts,” I admitted.

“I guess there’s time for that later. Are you ready?” He took my hand in his. He hadn’t mentioned the anniversary, and I felt a little silly bringing it up.

“Where are we going?” I asked, buckling my seatbelt inside Ryan’s truck.

“It’s a surprise,” he said, one hand on the wheel and one hand resting on my thigh. His pinky finger began to trace slow circles on the inside of my leg. I looked up at him, a large flirtatious smile adorned his handsome face.

“You better stop that if you want to take me to dinner,” I said, feeling flushed and breathless. His smile widened.

He began driving through the streets of Austin, turning on to an unfamiliar street. He started to slow, pulling up to a

large building. It didn't look like a restaurant, so I gave him a quizzical look.

“We are here,” he said, removing his seatbelt and turning toward me in his seat.

“And where is here?”

“Come on, I'll show you.” His excitement was palpable, so I opened my door and followed him out of the truck and inside the large glass doors of the building. He led me through a lounge to an elevator. I wanted to ask more questions but I decided to wait and let him explain when he was ready. He pulled me onto the elevator, pressing the second floor. When the elevator door opened he led me to the outside of a door. He pulled a key from his pocket and opened it. I stepped inside, no idea what to expect.

“What do you think?” he asked. He pulled me inside what seemed to be an apartment. It was beautiful with big windows facing an outdoor courtyard. There was no furniture inside, there was only a floor picnic set up with what appeared to be pasta and champagne.

“It's beautiful. Is that spaghetti I smell?” I asked.

“Of course.”

“And champagne?”

“Yes, we’re celebrating.”

“What are we celebrating?” I asked softly.

“You don’t remember what today is?” he asked.

“I do.” I couldn’t hide my smile. He remembered. “I just wasn’t sure if you did.”

“I could never forget the first time I laid eyes on you, Allie.”

I couldn’t wait any longer. I pulled the small package out of my purse.

“I got you a gift.” He took it from me, opening it quickly, like an excited little boy on Christmas morning. He lifted the stethoscope from its box. He didn’t speak right away, he just held it in his hands, studying it.

“Its blue like my-”

“I know,” he said, cutting off my words. His voice was filled with emotion.

“It’s also the same as your hair.” When he looked up at me I was nodding, overwhelmed with emotion at his reaction to my gift.

“I got you something,” he said, handing me a small box with a pink ribbon around it. I slid the silk ribbon off the box, opening it to find a silver key inside. I looked up, confused.

“I want you to move into this apartment with me,” he said. My heart stopped beating at his words.

“You want to move in together?”

“I do,” he said, sounding bold and confident.

“But, what about Fin?” I asked him. I couldn’t help but think of how she would feel if I moved out of our place and moved in with Ryan.

“I asked Fin before I asked you.”

“You asked Fin for her blessing?” I asked him, my heart swelling.

“I knew that would be important to you. I didn’t want to give you a chance to say no.” He was so thoughtful, and the notion that he asked my friend’s blessing before inviting me to live with him overwhelmed me with emotion.

“Let me get this straight. You got us an apartment?” I asked. I looked around the large, beautiful space. It was far bigger than the apartment I lived in with Fin. It was open, with

huge ceilings and tall windows. I was already decorating the space in my mind.

“I did.”

“Wow, rich boy move,” I joked.

“Next I will get you a pony and a pool.” A smile played on his lips.

“And all I got you was a stethoscope.”

“The stethoscope is perfect.” He took me into his arms.  
“Are you saying yes, Allie?”

I squeezed him hard into my body as we hugged. My voice was muffled into his chest as I said, “Yes, I’ll move in here with you. Let’s do it.”



## Chapter 14

Ryan

January 2023

Thursday

She wanted me to stay. The energy in the room was charged with our electricity. I had no idea what was about to

happen between us, but I couldn't wait to find out. I could tell she was unsure about my presence, and I would have left if she had asked me to. But she wanted me there. I wanted to stay up all night and talk to her, find out everything about her life. I wanted to learn about her daughter and her life that she left in Thailand. I wanted to know if she still loved to watch Friends, if she still wore socks to bed, if she still ate cheerios for breakfast every morning. I wanted to know if she still threw her head back when she laughed, if she still tasted like strawberries, if she still hummed when she read. She looked so small in that bed, I wanted to pick her up and help her stand tall again.

Sarah came back into the room with ice cream in hand. A nurse was behind her, checking Allie's IV tubes and getting her vital signs. The nurse had ice cream with him as well. Allie had obviously spent a lot of time in the hospital, they all seemed very comfortable with one another.

"I need to go check on my dog. He's inside the truck and he's probably getting cold," I said, grabbing my jacket and pulling it on.

"Oh my gosh, you have a dog? Can I come too so I can see him?" Sarah asked excitedly.

“Fine with me. Allie, is that okay?”

“Uh, yeah I guess so. Come right back okay?”

“Sure mom. What kind of dog is he?” Sarah asked as she turned her attention to me.

“Labrador. His name is Duke. He’s my best bud.”

“I wish we could get a dog, we’re not really home enough though,” Sarah said.

“Duke loves people. Come on, we will warm the truck up and you can play with him while I look up pet friendly hotels.”

“Why don’t you just stay at our apartment? They allow pets,” Sarah said. I couldn’t help but catch the glare that Allie sent in her direction.

“Sarah, I’m sure Ryan doesn’t want to sleep on our old couch,” Allie said.

“I bet he wouldn’t mind. Right Ryan?” Sarah smiled widely, like she was cupid ready to strike us both down with arrows.

“I don’t mind a couch. But I don’t want to intrude. I’m sure I can find a place for me and Duke to crash,” I told them.

“We aren’t even going to be home tonight. No sense in having to pay for a hotel,” Sarah continued on, insistent in her offer. Allie’s eyes grew wider as she stared in disbelief at her daughter. I couldn’t help myself, I started to chuckle.

“Allie it’s okay, I’ll find somewhere. I never expected an invite to y’alls place. The plan was always to find a hotel or a bed and breakfast,” I assured her. She looked between Sarah and I, her and her daughter seeming to have a silent conversation.

“Sarah is right. We won’t even be home. You should stay there. You probably couldn’t find a hotel in the city anyway. There is some huge Republican convention in town, all of the restaurants and shopping centers have been packed. I’m sure the hotels are all booked, too,” Allie said. I didn’t want to take her up on the offer, but a quick google search of the hotels in the area proved that she was right. There was not a hotel available within a thirty mile radius. I should have checked room availability before I left Oregon.

“Are you sure, Allie?” I asked, reluctancy creeping into my question.

“I’m sure. On one condition. You take Sarah home to sleep in her own bed. She’s been sleeping in that chair for

days,” Allie said. I was shocked that she still trusted me after so many years. To trust me with her daughter spoke a thousand words. I was so touched by her confidence in me, I felt a swell of emotion form in the back of my throat. She seemed to sense my thoughts as she saw the expression on my face.

“You’re the same Ryan, right?” she asked.

“I’m the same.”

“Sarah, are you comfortable with that?” her mom asked her. She was already shoving her drawing notebook and pencils into her bag.

“Definitely. I don’t want to leave you Mom, but my back is killing me from that chair. You’ll be okay here by yourself?” Sarah asked, uncertainty in her voice.

“I’ll be fine,” Allie said, taking her keys out of her purse. She handed them to me.

“Go ahead and go take your dog to our place so he doesn’t get cold. Then you can come back and we can all have some dinner and catch up.”

I smiled brightly at her. She smiled back. She folded her hands across her lap, nervously picking at her sheets.

“I promise, I’ll keep her safe.”

Her eyes locked into mine. There were so many questions inside of them.

“Be back soon, please,” she replied.

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“Hi handsome guy!” Sarah said. She opened my truck and took Duke’s large face into her hands. He greeted her warmly, licking each of her hands to say hello.

“Oh my gosh, I love him!” Sarah cooed.

“Do you drive yet or do you want to be my navigator?” I asked her.

“Oh, I don’t have a license yet. But I can tell you where to go.” She buckled her seat belt and continued to pet Duke, whispering softly to him as I started down the street.

“Turn right on Main,” Sarah told me. We drove through the streets of Austin, both of us quiet at first. Sarah spoke to Duke and he took a quick liking to her, resting his head in her lap.

“So, you like to draw?” I asked her, thinking of the notepad and pencils I saw her with in the hospital room.

“I love to draw. I love to paint even more, but it’s hard to take my paints to the hospital, so I only paint when we’re at home.”

“Anything specific?”

“Landscape mostly.”

“I’d love to see some of your work sometime.”

“Sure, I have a lot of finished canvases hanging around the apartment. I’m sure you’ll see them, but I’ll point them out to you when we get there.” I could hear the pride in her voice.

“Take the next exit, our apartment building is right up here on the left,” she told me. We pulled into the parking lot of a small apartment complex. It was nice and clean with a lot of windows and fresh paint. I grabbed Duke’s leash and my bags and followed Sarah up the stairs to the second story. I handed her the keys so she could let us inside.

“We left the house in a hurry, sorry for the mess,” Sarah said. She opened the door wider so I could enter. Duke immediately went to the couch and made himself at home. I stood in the entryway of the apartment and looked around, trying to hide my shock. The Allie I knew was a clean freak, overly meticulous about her living space. When we lived together, I never saw the carpet without fresh lines from the vacuum cleaner. The apartment before me was messy, with clothes hanging on the back of the couch and an old pizza box on the table. It wasn’t gross or anything like that, but it didn’t look like a place Allie would occupy.

“It’s no problem. Allie used to be completely OCD about a clean house, I’m glad she has relaxed a little,” I said in



response.

“She’s still OCD when she feels good enough to be,” Sarah replied. She started throwing things into the trash.

“Please, don’t clean up on my account. I’m a bachelor, this is my natural habitat.” She smiled at me gratefully.

“In that case, let me show you around.”

I sat my bag down and started to follow her through the small apartment.

“This is obviously the kitchen and living room area. Help yourself to anything in the cabinet. We always have coffee. Over here is Mom’s bedroom and bathroom. You can probably sleep in there tonight since she won’t be home. Clean towels are in that cabinet. My room is over there and the main bathroom is right beside it. That’s about it. If you need to do laundry or anything, it’s on the first floor by where we parked,” she said, going from room to room.

“Great, thank you so much. I’m going to shower and change out of these scrubs. Then maybe we could pick up some dinner for us and your mom and take it to her?”

“Yes definitely. I may shower too, hospital showers never get hot enough.”

I nodded my agreement.

“Hey, is that one of your paintings?” I asked her, noticing a large oil painting hanging above the couch. It was a painting of a cloudy sky above a large body of water. It was breathtakingly beautiful.

“It is. Do you like it?” she asked shyly.

“I love it. It’s incredible. Have you taken professional lessons?”

“Not since we’ve moved to the states. I took lessons from a woman in Thailand when I was much younger. I learn a lot from online videos and from practicing on my own.”

“That’s amazing. It’s so good. Do you have more I can see?” I asked her.

“Mom has hung them in every single room of this apartment, feel free to look around. I’m going to go ahead and hop in the shower,” Sarah said.

I walked to the kitchen and found the next painting. It was a large green field with rows of apple trees scattered across the landscape. There were hundreds of apples in the photo, each with multiple shades of red. It looked like it probably took months to complete, the details intricate and

meticulous. The painting was just as good as the first one she showed me. I went in search of more. In the living room, I found a canvas painted with over twenty large hot air balloons in a big blue sky. The colors were brilliant. I wanted to see them all. As Sarah had told me, there was a painting in every room, and all of them were amazing.

I grabbed my bag and reluctantly walked into Allie's room. It felt wrong to be invading her space, but I did need a shower. The small bedroom was slightly messy, but it looked like Allie. A soft pink comforter adorned the bed with darker pink pillows on top. There was a large white dresser with glass knobs that had a feminine elegance. Above the dresser hung another one of Sarah's paintings. This one was a vine with cascading pink and white roses. For some reason, the painting had almost a sad quality to it, evoking emotions from anyone who viewed it. There was a white chair in the corner with a small bookshelf next to it. I walked closer and noticed it was stuffed full of romance novels. There was a glass table on the other side of the chair with an old cup of coffee left abandoned from seemingly days before. The bathroom was connected to the bedroom and I walked inside. Her bathroom was bright and welcoming. The walls were light gray and the towels were floral. The painting in the bathroom was of a vase of flowers

sitting in a windowsill. The flowers were shades of purple and pink, the leaves a dark green. I was pleased to realize there was no sign of the presence of a man.

I started the water and stepped into its warm stream after removing my clothes. It felt so good to wash the long drive off of my skin. I took my time smelling Allie's shampoo, feeling a little bit like a stalker, but unable to help myself. She didn't use the same soap as she did eighteen years ago, but it still smelled amazing. The shower was almost a spiritual experience, washing away the fear and anxieties of the last twenty-four hours. I tilted my face into the hot water, allowing it to curl down the length of my face and then my body. I closed my eyes and said a prayer, thanking the Lord above for sending me back to Texas.

When I was done in the shower, I threw on a comfortable pair of jeans and a black sweatshirt. Sarah was waiting for me in the living room, sitting next to the couch petting Duke.

"Ready?" I asked.

"Ready."

"Duke, we will see you in a few hours." I patted his large head as we left the apartment.

“What kind of food will your mom want?” I asked Sarah when we were back on the road.

“Probably Italian,” Sarah replied.

“Yeah, that sounds like Allie.” I smiled. “She used to beg me to make her spaghetti every weekend.”

“Were you guys together for a long time?”

“Most of college. She never told you about me?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“Sorry, no, she never has.”

Her confession made me feel a sting of disappointment. I hoped I had made more of an impression on her during the years we were together. But I suppose I didn’t tell my friends about her either. If I had a son or daughter, I think I would have told them about Allie though. She was a huge part of me.

“We were together for a long time, but I’ll let your mom tell you about it if she wants to.” I didn’t want to tell Sarah anything her mom didn’t want her to know. Allie might not appreciate me telling Sarah we lived together when we weren’t married.

“Did you like growing up in Thailand? How old were you when yall moved back?” I asked, changing the subject away from Allie and I.

“I loved Thailand. Mom taught at the same school I went to and we spent a lot of time together. My dad taught there too, but that was before I started school. I was eight when mom found out about the cancer. We moved back shortly after she got the news. She was in remission for a few years, but the cancer came back about a year ago.”

“I hate that it came back. That must be really hard on you.”

“It’s harder on her.”

“You’re a strong girl. Most other kids couldn’t handle this the way you do.”

“I just do what I have to do.” She shrugged.

“Your mom is pretty lucky to have you,” I told her. That comment made her smile. Her smile was identical to Allie’s and it made me smile back at her.

“I’m lucky too. She’s the best mom ever.”

I didn’t doubt that for a second.



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Allie

January 2023

Thursday

Ryan and Sarah came back into the room with bags filled with garlic smelling goodness. I had been nauseated for days, but the amazing scents coming from the take out bags were enough to stir up my appetite.

“Please tell me that’s spaghetti and garlic bread,” I said to them.

“We both know you pretty well,” Sarah said. She smiled at me, a knowing look was on her face.

“Some things never change,” Ryan said. A large grin formed as he talked. Sarah took the food to the small table in my room and began unpacking it. I threw my legs over the side of the bed and stood up, stretching my arms above my



head. It felt good to get up and move my body. I noticed Ryan looking at me as I made my way over to the table of food.

When they left to take Ryan's dog to the apartment, I asked Joey to help me into the shower. I found my scarf that was the same color as my eyes and he helped me tie it in a trendy knot on top of my head. I applied some powder and blush to my face and some mascara to my eyes. Joey helped me into a pair of black sweats, the pants were joggers and made my thin legs look decent. I even had Joey flush my IV port on my chest so I could be unhooked from the machine for a while, making me feel less like a cancer patient.

Ryan looked me up and down appreciatively and I felt my cheeks blush a little. I still had my boobs, though they were smaller. I still had a little bit of butt left, too. I was still a woman.

"What do you guys want to drink? I'll run down and grab us something from the cafeteria," Sarah offered.

"I'll take a soda please," Ryan said.

"A sweet tea for me," I told her. Sarah left the room and Ryan sat down at the table next to me. He handed me a paper plate for my spaghetti. I added a large helping to the plate and took two garlic rolls. Ryan laughed, probably

remembering that I always had a big appetite. He held up his garlic bread and gestured for me to do the same.

“Cheers,” he said, touching his bread to mine. I laughed, remembering that he would cheers with anything. He was so much fun, how could I forget how much fun he was?

“Well, what have you been up to for the last couple decades?” he asked me.

“Oh gosh, where do I even start?”

“Start with Thailand. I want to know all about it.”

“That’s an easy topic. What I miss most, besides all the kids that I taught, is the food. I would kill for some quality green curry or massaman right now. And the seafood over there is out of this world. I also miss the language. Sarah can speak Thai, but we don’t speak it that often at home. I don’t miss the weather though. Texas is hot but it has nothing on Bangkok. There are several beaches and islands near where we lived. On the weekends, Sarah and I would hop over to Krabi and spend the day in the sand.”

“That sounds pretty great. I would love to taste some authentic Thai food,” Ryan said.

“I’ll cook for you sometime. It won’t be as good, but you’ll be able to see why I love it so much.”

“I’m sure I’ll love it,” he said, flashing me a hopeful expression.

“What made you move to Oregon?” I asked, shifting the attention to him.

“Honestly, it was on a whim. I went there on vacation and fell in love with the weather and the views and never came home.”

“Did you ever get married? Or have children?” I asked him.

“No, never really even got close. What about you? Were you married to Sarah’s father?”

“Never married. Sarah is my only child.”

“Your dad, is he still well?” Ryan asked delicately.

“He passed away last year. He was in his eighties and he lived a good life. I’m glad he went before my cancer came back. It would break his heart if he knew.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know he had passed. If I had known you were back in the states I would have looked for you, Allie. I would have been there for you through his death. I would

have been around a lot if I had known you were back here.”

His gaze found mine.

“I’ve thought of looking for you before, but I assumed after how things ended between us that you didn’t want to hear from me.” I twirled my spaghetti around my plate.

“Well, we’re here now. That’s all that matters.” Ryan smiled at me.

“What about your parents? How are they?” I asked him.

“Same as you remember. Busy with their careers, no time for anything else.”

“They are still working?”

“Oh yeah, big time. I don’t think my dad will ever retire. He will be in the operating room until they force him out. Same for my mom.”

Sarah walked back into the room, carrying an armload of drinks. Ryan immediately got up to help her, always the gentlemen. He looked even better in his jeans than he did in his scrubs. I couldn’t help but notice how they hugged him when he walked. Sarah joined the two of us at the small table.

“Sarah showed me some of her paintings at your apartment. I was very impressed,” Ryan said. I noticed Sarah’s face light up at the compliment.

“She’s amazing, I have no idea where all her talent comes from, not from me,” I laughed.

“I’m the first painter in the family,” Sarah said proudly.

“I really loved them all. I especially liked the one with the roses. I hope you don’t mind that I went into your room, Allie. I just needed to use your shower. I promise I didn’t snoop very much.” Ryan grinned at me.

“I told Ryan he could take your bed tonight since you will be here,” Sarah said with a mouth full of spaghetti.

“No, I will sleep on the couch with Duke.” Ryan laughed.

“It’s fine if you want to take my bed tonight. It’s really comfortable, someone should be enjoying it while I’m stuck in here. There are extra sheets in my closet. But tomorrow when I’m back home, you’re back on the couch,” I told him.

“Deal,” Ryan said. He winked at me as he took a drink of his cola. His wink sent a shiver up my spine. Ryan was the

kind of handsome that was almost painful. A wave of unease swept through me. Him staying with us was definitely a really bad idea. I was behaving recklessly, allowing Ryan to slip back into my life. I felt like a snowball rolling down a hill, gathering more flakes as I tumbled down. I only hoped that when I hit the bottom I wouldn't break apart.

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Sarah

January 2023

## Thursday

Ryan drove us back to the apartment for the night. We had spent hours at the hospital, talking about the past. Ryan and Mom had told me stories of their first date and of their friends at college. I learned a lot about my mom that day. I loved hearing about her when she was so young, when cancer was a million moments away from her. It seemed her and Ryan were pretty serious back then, their stories painting a picture of young love.

Ryan pulled up to our apartment complex and parked his large truck. I yawned and stretched my arms upward. It had been a long, fun day and I was tired.

“I’m going to take Duke on a small walk, he probably needs to use the bathroom,” Ryan said to me as we reached our door.

“Can I do it? I love dogs and Duke and I are already buddies,” I asked him, practically begging.

“Sure! Want me to come with you?” Ryan asked, glancing around at the dark evening.

“No, I’ll be fine, plus it’ll give you a chance to unpack,” I offered. Ryan handed me the leash and the sound of the bell attached to it had Duke running to the door.

“I got you, big guy! Let’s go,” I said to the dog, as I hooked his leash onto his collar.

Duke and I walked around the street, staying close to the apartment. I snapped a picture of him and I and made it the background of my cell phone. I texted the photo to my mom and got an instant reply.

*Mom: What a cute pup! Are you outside in the dark alone?*

I rolled my eyes and typed a response.

*Sarah: I’m right outside the apartment, just letting him out to pee. No worries.*

I slipped my phone in the back of my pocket. It was chilly but the cool air felt good on my skin. Duke and I walked around in the grass, me enjoying the night air and him relieving his bladder. I felt so happy, it had been the best week. Between the snow the day before and the arrival of Ryan, I was giddy with the thrill of it all. I heard my cell phone ding in my pocket so I pulled it out again.



*Mom: Give Ryan my number, you know, for emergencies*

I smiled wide as I texted back.

*Sarah: Right, emergencies. Got it ;)*

Her message came back immediately.

*Sarah Kate, it's not like that*

I smiled and shook my head at my phone. It was definitely like that. The two of them still had major chemistry. It was obvious. Ryan was exactly what my mom needed, even if she couldn't realize it.

“Alright Duke, we better head back inside.” I led him back toward the apartment.

When we walked back through the doors, Ryan was busy cleaning the kitchen. The room smelled of bleach and shined like I hadn't seen it in months. I noticed the carpet in the living room was freshly vacuumed and the clothes that had been strewn everywhere were now neatly in a laundry basket. Ryan noticed me and took his headphones out of his ears.

“I hope you don't mind, I don't want your mom having to worry about doing any of this tomorrow when she's back home,” he said sheepishly.

“That’s really nice, Want some help?” I offered.

“No, you get some sleep, I’m happy to do it.”

I yawned and nodded, glad to be off the hook. I would have helped him, but I was exhausted and dying to get into my bed. I hadn’t slept in my own bed in days.

“Thanks for today. It was nice to see my mom smile,” I said to Ryan.

“No, thank you. Thanks for sending me that email. Thanks for letting me hang out with y’all today. It’s been really fun,” he said, smiling at me.

“Oh I almost forgot! My mom wanted you to have her cell phone number. In case of emergencies,” I said the last part with air quotes. Ryan laughed and held out his cell phone to me so that I could type in her number. When I was done, I handed it back to him, noticing the huge smile on his face. They were like teenagers, giddy at the thought of each other. Being around it was fascinating.

“Can Duke sleep in my room?” I asked him.

“Sure, if you don’t mind that he farts in his sleep.” Ryan laughed.

“Ha! I don’t mind. Come on buddy. If you need anything just knock and I’ll be happy to help you,” I said to Ryan as I headed to my bedroom.

“Thank you, Sarah. Get some rest,” he replied. Duke followed me and I shut the door behind us. My room was covered in art supplies, evidence of my love for painting was in every corner. There were partially finished canvases strewn from left to right. If I hadn’t been so tired, I would have picked up my paint brush, the day inspiring me. My eyelids were heavy and my limbs begged to lie down. My brushes would have to wait. I put on my headphones and started my favorite album. With my eyes closed and the music filling my ears, I was completely happy. I hoped Ryan stuck around for a long time. He felt like hope. I hadn’t had hope in a while. It felt good.

## Chapter 15

Ryan

January 2023

Thursday

I was in Allie's bed, her scent surrounding me, lingering on her pillows. Being in Allie's bed was exciting, intoxicating. It would be better if she were there too. I pulled out my phone and found where Sarah had added Allie's number. I held the phone up and took a selfie of me in her bed, laying on her big pink pillows. I sent the photo, nervous at my own boldness. My phone pinged with a response.

*Allie: It's comfy, right?*

I smiled and texted back.

*Ryan: It's amazing. Are these pillows feather?*

Her reply came.

*Allie: Obviously. Sarah okay?*

*Ryan: She's good, she went to bed a while ago. Duke is keeping her company.*

I clicked on Allie's TV, waiting for her to text me back. The three little dots kept appearing and then disappearing, like she was unsure what to say next. The TV came on and the food network came into view. She always had the food channel playing on our apartment television when we lived together. She would curl up on the couch with a blanket and watch for hours, often taking notes on different ideas and recipes. I loved that so many things about her hadn't changed. My phone pinged again.

*Allie: Can I be honest?*

*Ryan: Please do.*

*Allie: I'm scared.*

*Ryan: What are you scared of?*

The three dots appeared again, and disappeared, and then appeared again.

*Allie: It would be easier to say what I'm not scared of. But right now, you being here, I'm scared of that.*

I knew what she meant, she didn't have to explain.

*Ryan: I'm only here until you want me gone, no pressure.*

*Allie: Okay. Thanks. Thank you for understanding my confusion.*

I lifted my head off of the pillow and sat with my legs crossed, becoming more engrossed in the conversation.

Another text came through, this one a picture of her on her pillow in the hospital bed. I groaned and tossed the phone across the pillow. She was a heartbreaker. I remembered right then, Allie was the kind of girl you fell in love with.

Chapter 16

Allie

December 2004

“Allie?” I heard Ryan call my name from our kitchen. *Our* kitchen. I smiled at the notion. We had lived together for a few months, but I still got butterflies at the thought of it. The day we moved in, I spent all day decorating the space, making it ours. I wanted the apartment to feel like a home. I had colorful throw pillows lining our soft couch, pictures of us atop every side table, and mirrors in the hallways casting reflections of my glee when I passed by them.

“I’m in the hall closet!” I yelled back to him. I heard his footsteps walking toward me.

“Why are you in the closet?” he asked, laughing as he came closer.

“I’m looking for one of my boxes. I know I put it in here when we moved in” I said, digging through stacks of unopened boxes. He opened the closet door, smiling down on me as I sat cross legged on the floor.

“What are you looking for? I can help.”

“I had a box of Christmas decorations. I can’t find them.”

He stood tall on his tiptoes, looking in the top of the closet, above where I could see. He grabbed a box and pulled it down, setting it in front of me.

“That’s it!” I said, excitedly opening the top. The smell of my dad’s house leaked out of the open lid, causing a million memories to fill my head. Inside were items from my childhood that my dad let me bring to the new apartment. “To start my life,” he had said. One item was an angel in a white dress, meant to be placed on top of a Christmas tree. I smoothed down her hair and adjusted the halo on top of her head. She had a serene look on her face, a peace that matched my mood. Her blond hair still held her angelic curls after



being cooped up inside a box year after year. Christmas made me emotional, I wiped at my eyes trying to keep my happy-tears from spilling over.

“Look at this.” I handed him a picture frame ornament. Inside the frame was a picture of me when I was around five years old. I was dressed in a red sweater that had a sequined snowman on the front. There was a big green bow on top of my head and a smile that was void of my two front teeth.

“Oh gosh, you were a cutie,” he said, looking at the old and treasured ornament. We went through the rest of the box together, pulling each item out one by one.

“Should we get a tree?” he asked, holding out his hand to help me stand.

“Definitely! Real or fake?” I asked.

“Real. I love the smell of pine trees. We can go pick out one today if you want. I saw a tree farm close to campus,” he suggested. I wrapped my arms around him, holding him close to me. I rested my head on his chest and breathed in his smell, familiar and exciting at the same time. I loved that he wanted to do anything that made me happy. I knew he usually

didn't get into the Christmas spirit, but he was willing to go through all the stops for me.

“Let's go to the living room, we can decide where to put the tree,” he said. He took my hand and I let him lead me to the couch. We both sat down, looking around the room.

“Right next to the fireplace?” I asked him. He smiled and nodded. I looked at the wooden mantle of the fireplace, decorating it in my mind. I could imagine it lined with cinnamon candles and tiny pine trees. I would go pick out stockings for us and hand stitch our names to the front to hang traditionally at the edge of the mantle. I felt butterflies in my stomach, imagining using the same stockings year after year with Ryan by my side, hopefully adding more to the collection as we grew older and had children one day. Ryan closed his eyes and rested the back of his head on the couch.

“You look exhausted,” I said.

“I am. I had chem lab today, it lasted forever. My feet are killing me.”

“Here, hand them to me, I'll rub them.”

Ryan laid back, resting his feet in my lap. I started to remove his socks and he hesitated.

“Stop that, I love your webbed toes,” I told him, exposing his bare foot. He was the most confident man I had ever known, with the exception of his sockless feet. I began to rub his foot and he groaned, his features relaxing as he sunk into my massage.

“Can I invite my dad here for Christmas? I could cook us all a traditional Christmas eve dinner,” I said to Ryan. I had to miss Thanksgiving with my dad that year and I was desperate to see him for the Christmas holiday.

“Absolutely! I would love to meet your dad. That’s a great idea.”

“What about your parents? Should we invite them?”

“No, definitely not,” Ryan said, not elaborating on the why.

“Why not? I’d like to meet them, even if they aren’t the best parents, they are still your parents.”

He sighed heavily and blew out a long and loud breath.

“Look, Christmas is special to you. If we invite my mom and dad, they will ruin it. I know you think I am being dramatic, but I’m not. My mom will constantly compare your

cooking to her chef's, insisting that we should have let him cook instead. My dad will look down on your dad, making comments about how much money he makes and causing your dad to feel uncomfortable. They will turn their noses up at you, at your dad, at us. I can't do it. Not on Christmas. I promise, you will meet them, let's just wait until after the holidays to subject ourselves to that," Ryan said. I let his words sink in. By the sound of it, he was right. We should not invite them. I could take the heat but no way I would allow my dad to be hurt on his favorite holiday.

"Okay then. After the holidays." I nodded.

"After my birthday. I don't want them ruining that either," Ryan said.

"Are you going to keep pushing it until I never meet them?" I joked.

"You'll meet them. As much as I want to protect you from them, they need to meet my future wife," he said. My stomach flipped, his words causing a physical reaction. I turned to his face, our eyes locking together. I knew he was right, we were meant to be together. He would be my husband someday, I felt it inside my soul.



## Chapter 17

Allie

January 2023

Friday

I woke up to the sounds of Joey singing loudly as he entered my room with a breakfast tray. I groaned and threw the hospital covers over my face, wishing he'd hush so I could get a little more sleep. It was barely light outside with dawn creeping into the windows, the sun itself only beginning to wake.

“Aren't you supposed to be off work today?” I grumbled at him, keeping my eyes shut and the blankets over my head.

“I picked up a shift. Nice to see you, too.”

“Sorry, I'm not nice before coffee.”

“Well cheer up buttercup, it's discharge day,” he said, pulling the covers off my face.

That was enough to get me sitting straight up in bed. “You’re sure?” I asked him. I was more than ready to get out of there, I wanted to take a real shower and be surrounded by my own things. I missed my bed. I missed my couch. I missed the crabby neighbor in the next door apartment who gave me the stink eye every time I took out the trash.

“I’m sure. Just spoke with the doc. Your numbers are good, hemoglobin stable. You’ll be home by lunch,” Joey confirmed. I reached up and grabbed his neck, pulling him into a hug. He embraced me warmly, placing a friendly kiss to my forehead.

“And I brought you coffee. Not the patient coffee, but the good stuff from the staff break room.” He handed me the warm cup of liquid. I could smell the peppermint creamer, my favorite.

“Joey, you are a saint. I couldn’t survive all this without you.” My voice cracked on the last word. He waved it away, I could tell he was trying to hold back his own emotions.

“Tell me all about the large hunky man that was here yesterday and we will call it even.” He pulled up a chair with his own coffee in hand, ready for me to tell him all about Ryan. Where could I even begin? How much should I tell?

Certain things about our past were really painful to talk about. Some things in our past needed to stay there. I took a long breath, thinking about all the history between Ryan and I. All of the memories. The good, the bad and the ugly.

“He was my college sweetheart. We were together for years, living together, all of that. I was completely head over heels for him. I really thought he was it, the one, my future husband. But a lot of things ended up getting in our way.”

“Like what?” he asked.

“School for one. His dreams versus my own. Our paths were not compatible at the time. Also, his family. Let’s just say they were not a fan of me.”

“Impossible. How could anyone not love you?”

“They liked me fine, they just didn’t like Ryan being with me. They had big plans for him, plans that I was in the way of. Or at least, that’s how they felt.”

“Are your paths compatible now?” he asked.

I snorted and gestured to myself, sick and pitiful. “I’m not up for it,” I whispered.

He took my face into his hands, “Allie, you have to start living again,” he said, “Get out of this bed and go be



reckless. Kiss him, date him, fall in love with him if you want. Yes, you're sick but you're not dead. Stop acting like it." His words were tough, but not harsh. I knew he was right, but I shook my head back and forth anyway.

"With Ryan it's too risky," I said.

"Why, Allie?"

"He could destroy me. It's happened before."

"If it doesn't have the power to destroy you, is it even worth it?" he asked.

"You don't understand, Joey. The way things ended between us..." I shook my head back and forth again, the movement involuntary.

"What happened, what could possibly be that bad? He found you, he's here, despite whatever it was that drove you guys apart. He obviously cares a lot about you."

I twisted the sheets between my fingers, my anxiety rising. "He doesn't know everything that happened. If he did, he would hate me."

"Impossible," he said.

"I promise you," I said adamantly.

“I’m here if you want to tell me more about it,” he said, resting his hands on mine.

I started to open my mouth to talk, to tell him more about Ryan and the things I had been holding on to for years, when the doctor walked into the room.

“Miss Delacruz, how are we today?” he asked, interrupting the conversation. Joey gave my hand one last squeeze before leaving the room.

“Feeling great,” I said brightly.

“I’ll put in your discharge order. I want you to follow up with me in my office next week, but until then, enjoy your weekend,” he said.

“Deal. Thank you so much,” I was already pulling out my phone to text Sarah and Ryan. I started to type a text to Ryan, then changed my mind and sent one to Sarah.

*Allie: Getting discharged soon. Y’all get up here please!*

While I waited for a response, I grabbed my overnight bag and started to go through the contents, trying to pick a presentable outfit. I had the IV pole in hand, dragging it around the room with me, trying to keep it from tangling up

beneath my feet. I walked back to the hospital bed, pushing the nurse call light. A voice came through the speaker. “Can I help you?”

“Yes, can you please send Joey back in to de-access my port?”

“Of course, one moment,” the voice replied. I sat and waited for him to come untether me from my IV tubes. My phone buzzed, indicating a new text message.

*Sarah: Ryan is still asleep. Should I wake him?*

I typed back a response.

*Allie: Yes, wake him up, I'm ready to get out of here.*

*Sarah: Okay, let me shower first. Be there soon.*

I sat the phone back down, breathing in deep and calming breaths. I was nervous to see him again; nervous to go back to my apartment knowing he would be there. I wondered briefly if I should ask him to leave; if my time should be solely focused on my daughter. Was I being selfish? I was definitely being selfish.

Joey walked in, heparin and saline in hand, ready to flush my port. “Let’s get that needle out, shall we?” he asked. I

nodded vigorously. Joey worked quickly, flushing and removing the needle. All that was left was the bump under my skin, ready for the next time it was needed. I day dreamed and prayed that one day the port would be removed for good.

“I have to go help another patient, but call me back in here if you need me,” Joey said. I nodded and smiled at him as he walked back out into the hallway of the unit. I had plenty of time for a shower, though I would have preferred one at home. I decided I could take a bubble bath later at my apartment. A hospital shower would do just fine. I went back over to my bag and picked out an outfit. I chose a pair of fashionable but comfortable ripped jeans, a lavender sweatshirt, and a floral headscarf. I longed for my hair. I knew it would grow back, it did after the first round of chemo, but it would take months. I prayed it would grow back the same color as before. I had heard stories of other cancer patients losing their hair and it growing back a different color and texture. I didn’t want that to happen to me, as shallow as that sounded.

The shower was luke-warm, but my body appreciated the refreshing feel of the water over my skin. My legs needed to be shaved, but there was no sign of a razor anywhere. I vowed to myself to remember to shave when I took a bath that

night, lying to myself that I wasn't shaving my legs for Ryan. I had lost the hair on my head, but my leg hairs always started to grow back faster. Lucky me.

I got dressed, brushed my teeth, and applied a little makeup to my face again. With the headscarf in place, I felt ready. Ready to see him again. Ready for whatever came next.

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Ryan

January 2023

Friday

The first thing I did when I awoke in Allie's bed was check my phone. No new texts from her. I sat up and stretched, feeling refreshed from a good night of sleep. There was one new text message, from my nursing manager, bringing the reality of home back to the front of my mind. I yawned and rubbed my eyes as I opened up the new message.

*Camile: Call me today when you get a chance*

I picked up my phone and dialed. The ER director, Camile, answered on the second ring.

“Hey Ryan, I just wanted to touch base with you. Trying to get the next schedule worked out, so wanted to see if you knew when you'd be back,” she said. I thought for a minute, trying to decide what my plans should be. Allie and I hadn't discussed how long I would stay, she may ask me to leave as soon as she got home.

“How long could I have off without taking an official leave of absence?” I asked her.

“I could give you until next Saturday,” she said. That would mean I would need to leave on Thursday to account for driving and sleeping. That gave me six days. Six days with Allie.

“Okay, I’ll be back Saturday,” I said.

We said our goodbyes and hung up the phone. I got up out of the comfortable bed and started to get dressed. I slipped on a pair of gray sweatpant joggers and a white UT hoodie. I was putting on my shoes when I heard a knock at the bedroom door.

“Come in,” I called. Sarah walked into the room with Duke right at her side. She was dressed and ready for the day, looking as refreshed as I felt.

“Morning,” she said shyly, “Mom’s been discharged, she’s ready for us to come get her.” Sarah had a cup of coffee and a muffin in hand. She held her arms out, handing them both to me.

“I made this for you. If you take anything in your coffee there is cream and sugar in the kitchen,” she said.

“I like it black. Thank you so much, that was really nice of you.” I took a long drink of the coffee, welcoming the warm liquid. The muffin smelled of cinnamon and pumpkin.

“Let me take Duke out to use the restroom and I’ll be ready to go,” I said.

“I already took him, I hope that’s okay,” she said.

“Yeah, that’s great! I can tell he likes you. Thanks for doing that.” She nodded and patted my dog on his big brown head. He looked up at her, licking her hands and scooting closer to her side.

“I’m ready if you are,” I said, grabbing Allie’s house key and my truck key off of her dresser. We both said bye to Duke, leaving him with a few pieces of cheese to eat while we were gone. I noticed on our way out that Sarah had filled up his water bowl by the front door.

“Thanks for getting Duke more water. You would be a really good dog mom,” I told her. Sarah’s face beamed with pride.

“Tell that to my mom, I’m dying to have a dog,” she said.

“I’ll put in a good word,” I told her conspiratorially.



The air outside was warmer that morning, all signs of snow from earlier in the week long gone. The city of Austin was awake, people rushing to work or off to their daily activities. Sarah and I hit the road, joining the multitude of other cars headed to their destinations. Sarah sipped her coffee and scrolled through her cell phone while I navigated the traffic.

“Talking to your friends?” I asked, trying to make casual conversation.

“I don’t really have friends,” she said nonchalantly. I winced a little at her casual confession. I felt so bad for her. She had to grow up too fast due to her mothers illness. I didn’t know what to say in response to that, so I just continued my drive to the hospital, awkwardly adjusting the radio. I had no idea how to talk to a teenager. I tried again after a moment.

“Do you miss going to school?”

She thought for a moment, adjusting herself in the front seat. “I do,” she finally said, “But don’t tell my mom I said that.”

I thought about her words for a moment. “Allie is strong. You can tell her things like that.”

“She doesn’t need another reason to feel bad about having cancer. I like being with her all the time anyway. She needs me, and I need her,” Sarah said.

I couldn’t help but think about what she said as we pulled up to the hospital. It was none of my business, but my heart hurt for the young girl. I knew Allie was trying her best. I wished she had a better support system. I wished Allie still had her dad. I wished I could be the one to be there for them both, but I was an outsider in their lives.

We rode the elevator up to Allie’s room while Sarah continued to scroll on her phone. She was a sweet kid, strong and sure of herself. She looked so similar to Allie and she shared so many of her mannerisms. Sarah was slightly taller than her mother, her legs longer and shoulders set slightly wider. Her eyes were a little darker blue than her mothers. They almost looked gray in the fluorescent lighting of the building. Sarah’s hair was shorter than Allie used to wear hers, but besides those differences, Sarah looked just like Allie did when I met her. They had the same nose, the same shape to their faces.

All of the hospital staff waved to Sarah as she went by. She waved back, lifting her head from her phone.

Everyone seemed to know her. Allie's mini me. I felt eyes on me too, the staff probably wondering who the hell I was and where I came from. I felt out of place; an intruder. I smiled at a few of the nurses as they watched me walk behind Sarah. As we neared Allie's room, I noticed the same male nurse from yesterday. He waved at us and approached Sarah, wrapping an arm around her shoulder.

“Hey kid, your moms ready for you,” he said.

“Thanks Joey!” she said, swinging the door to Allie's room open for us to enter.

Allie sat on her bed, dressed in a purple sweater. I loved the way purple made her blue eyes look a shade lighter. She stood, embracing her daughter in a hug.

“He didn't murder you, that's a good sign,” Allie joked, looking in my direction.

I laughed, sticking my hands into my pockets. “I'm a great house guest, ask anybody.”

“He cleaned the entire apartment,” Sarah said, rattling me out. I was going to let her take credit for the clean space. Allie raised her eyebrows in surprise. “Ryan cleaned?” Allie asked, feigning shock.

“I clean now. I’ve lived alone for so long, I had to learn,” I said, shrugging my shoulders.

“Here, let me take your bags,” I said to Allie, helping her grab her things.

“My car is downstairs, I guess we will meet you at the apartment?” Allie asked. I could tell from her body language that she felt awkward.

“Let me take this to your car, then I’ll hop in my truck and meet y’all there,” I said.

“What about our post-hospital tradition?” Sarah asked.

“What tradition?” I asked her.

“We always go get ice cream when Mom is discharged from the hospital.”

“Sarah, it’s ten in the morning,” Allie said.

“It’s always a good time for ice cream,” Sarah said. I nodded in agreement.

“Y’all should go get your ice cream. I need to go to the store anyway, I can meet y’all later,” I said.

“You don’t like ice cream?” Sarah asked.

“I love ice cream, but that’s yall’s tradition, I don’t want to impose.”

“You should come,” Allie said, “We go to Crazy Scoops over by the campus.”

I couldn’t help the smile that formed across my face. Allie and I used to go get ice cream at Crazy Scoops all the time.

“Oh man, that place is still open? What a blast from the past,” I said.

“And it still looks exactly the same,” Allie said, her smile wide.

“Well, in that case, I can’t say no,” I said, opening the door for them.

We waved goodbye to the staff as we left the oncology floor. Allie walked quickly, anxious to get out of the hospital as fast as possible. I half expected her old honda to be sitting in the parking lot waiting for her.

“Did Old Betty finally bite the dust?” I asked Allie, using the pet name she gave the car her dad had given her after her high school graduation.

“Old Betty, may she rest in peace,” Allie said, “I had to leave her behind when I moved to Thailand.”

I wanted to remind her what else she left behind when she moved to Thailand, but I swallowed the bitter thought. She seemed to read the expression on my face, her cheeks turning red as she looked down at her hands. I couldn't help but wonder if it were my own blood that filled her cheeks, reminding me how strange it was that my blood flowed inside of her veins.

“I'll meet y'all there, I remember the way,” I said, helping Allie inside her car. Our hands accidentally brushed, sending electricity up my spine. I looked at her, our eyes connecting, crashing together like ocean waves. And I could tell, she felt it too.

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Allie

January 2023

Friday

“Spill the beans,” Sarah said, as soon as Ryan walked away, headed toward his truck. I kept my facial expression neutral as I fumbled with my keys. Trying to hide how frazzled Ryan’s eye contact left me.

“About what?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, missy. I want to hear the entire story.”

“We dated, it was a long time ago,” I said dismissively.

“The heat between the two of you could fry an egg,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“Old feelings die hard,” I said, turning the wheel of the car in the direction of Crazy Scoops.

“So you’re really not going to tell me?”

I sighed in defeat. “What do you want to know?”

“Everything.”

“Well you already heard how we met. Honestly, after that we were pretty much inseparable until I left for Thailand.”

“What’s he like? Why did y’all break up?” she asked, pushing for more information.

“He’s kind, as you can tell. Raised by two surgeons. Grew up rich but isn’t spoiled or pretentious. It’s pretty shocking that he didn’t finish med school, his dad was pretty strict about that. Ryan always said it was his dream to become



a doctor, I have no idea what made him change his mind.” I shrugged.

“And you guys broke up because you moved?” she pressed on.

“Essentially, yes. It was more complicated than that, just messy grownup stuff.”

“Mom, I’m not a baby anymore.”

“You’re my baby.” I smiled at her. She rolled her eyes again. Sensing that she wasn’t getting any more information out of me, she looked down at her phone and scrolled through social media.

“Are you okay with him being here for a few days?” I asked her.

“Yeah, I like him. And Duke can stay forever as far as I’m concerned,” she said. Sarah had asked me for a dog for years. I was glad she was getting some time with Ryan’s dog. She was forced to make countless sacrifices due to my illness. She did it all with a good attitude, no sign of a chip on her shoulder. I reached over and touched her on the arm, giving it a loving squeeze. I didn’t deserve her.

Crazy Scoop's parking lot was empty, being that it was barely past breakfast, but to my surprise the store was open. Sarah hopped out as soon as I stopped the car, standing and stretching her arms above her head. Her red-blond hair blowing around her as a burst of wind blew through the air. She gathered her hair, pulling it into a low ponytail at the base of her neck. She was lovely. It wouldn't be long before I was running boys away left and right. She deserved to meet someone, fall in love for the first time, make mistakes and memories. I looked to the sky, silently praying to God that she would have wonderful adventures. And that I would be around to see them.

Ryan's truck soon pulled up next to us. I could hear his music playing through the shut windows. Bob Dylan, a long time favorite of his. I worked hard at avoiding his eye contact. I didn't want Sarah to see right through me again. He stepped out of his truck and I cut my eyes toward his gray sweatpants. I couldn't help myself. The way the material hugged his body was almost vulgar. I felt desire creep up my legs, warming me on the chilly January day. When my eyes finally met his, I knew I had been caught staring. His lips were strained, as if he was trying desperately not to smile, a knowing look in his expression.

“Shall we?” he said, gesturing toward the front door of the ice cream shop.

“We shall,” Sarah replied, hooking her arm into mine. We walked that way together. Mother and daughter, us against the world, an unstoppable team.

Walking into Crazy Scoops with Ryan was surreal. I could tell by his face that he felt the same. We had so many memories there together. The entire town was filled with what we used to be. I had made millions of new memories in Austin with Sarah, many in the same places I had once been with Ryan. I didn't think of him much anymore when we visited places on campus, places where we fell in love a long time ago. But with him being back in town, it was like stepping foot inside a time machine. All of the memories and feelings came rushing back to me so quickly I was dizzy from the effect.

We walked up to the counter, each ordering our ice cream. Ryan chose vanilla, as he always had before. This time though he added toppings; hot fudge and sprinkles. Sarah and I had our usual chocolate with peanut butter cups. We chose a booth by a window, giving us a nice view of the city while we ate our treats. I snuggled myself tight to my sweater, the ice

cream on the January day causing a chill to reverberate through me.

“You okay?” Ryan asked me, noticing my discomfort.

“Yeah, it’s just cold in here,” I said. He immediately stood up, taking off his hoodie to offer to me. When he pulled the sweater over his head, his shirt underneath rose up, giving me an unintentional peak at his flat stomach. He was toned, his abdominal muscles flexing as he moved his arms upward. He was tan, despite the season, and a trail of hair led down toward the waist of his pants. I tried not to notice. I tried to ignore the acceleration of my heart.

“Take this,” he said.

“No, really I’m okay, I promise.”

“Please,” he said. I reached my hand out. Our fingers brushed. Sarah was right, the heat between us was palpable. The energy lit like a match. Sarah looked back and forth between us, a smile playing on her lips. I blushed so hard that I could feel my pulse in my cheeks.

“I’d like to cook you ladies dinner tonight. To thank you for letting me stay,” Ryan said.

“That would be great,” I said, “What did you have in mind?”

“Homemade pizza? I thought Sarah might have fun helping me.”

“I’d love to,” Sarah said, her mouth filled with chocolate. We made plans to all go to the store together after our ice cream. It would be weird, grocery shopping again with Ryan. We used to go to the store every Sunday, planning together what we would cook in our apartment. Back then, we took turns making dinner for each other. We would eat together on our small kitchen table, discussing our current classes and tests. We would often clean up our dinner mess and then make love on that same table. We were so happy during our time in that apartment. The memory made me both happy and sad.

Sarah stood from the table, taking her trash to throw away. Ryan and I looked up at each other, breaking into matching smiles.

“She’s a great kid,” he said.

“She’s the best kid,” I said as I watched her walk back toward us. A chill ran up my spine and settled there. I tried my best to cling to the warmth of Ryan’s sweatshirt.

## Chapter 18

Ryan

March 2005

“I got it!” I yelled to Allie, making my way to the front door of our apartment. I had been in the kitchen making popcorn when I heard the doorbell ring. Allie was waiting for me on the couch, ready to watch *Rain Man*, her fuzzy socks sticking out of the end of a small UT blanket. I opened our door and my heart stopped for a moment as I took in the guest. My mother. She stood tall in the hallway, her spine rigid straight, her face painted with flawless makeup. She wore a cream coat with a matching pearl necklace. She was perfectly

put together, as she always was. She stared at me, waiting for me to say something. I stared back, wondering if it was too late to shut the door and pretend I wasn't home.

“Hi, Ryan. Are you going to invite me inside?” she asked, already handing me her coat. I took it from her and looked behind me, wondering if Allie could hear us from her spot on the couch.

“Hi Mom, what are you doing here?”

“That's no way to greet a guest, Ryan,” she said, shooting me a disapproving glance.

“Sorry. Hello, nice to see you, you look well. What are you doing here?”

She gave me a warning look, daring me to disrespect her again.

“Well, you refused to come for Christmas, and I didn't see you on your birthday either. I figured if I wanted to see my son, I'd have to come find him,” she huffed.

“Sorry mom, I was-” My words were cut off by Allie walking towards us. I watched my mother look her up and down, disapproval written all over her face. Allie didn't miss the disdain behind her stare, and she crossed her arms across

her body in an attempt to conceal her clothing. She was dressed in one of my tshirts with long fuzzy socks up to her knees. Her hair was in a messy bun on top of her head. She had no makeup on and her glasses were perched on her nose. To me, she was adorable. I knew, however, that my mom did not approve of how Allie was dressed. I was holding my breath, terrified at what was sure to happen next.

“And who is this?” Mom said, her lips in a thin, tight line.

“Mom, this is Allie. My girlfriend,” I said. Allie stuck her arm out to shake my mothers hand. Mom looked at it for a moment, then looked at me, then reluctantly took her hand, giving it a firm shake.

“I wasn’t aware you were dating anyone,” My mom said. My eyes shot to Allie. All of the color had drained from her beautiful face. She was angry, and she had every right to be.

“Mom, this is not a great time. Can I call you later?” I asked, wanting her to leave so I could talk to Allie. To explain why I hadn’t told my parents about her.

“I am paying for this apartment, Ryan. The very least you could do is treat me with more respect.” She pushed past



me into the kitchen and I followed after her. Allie trailed behind us, clearly shaken. I turned and tried to whisper something to Allie but she waved me off.

“Ryan, what is going on here?” Mom gestured around the kitchen. I saw the kitchen through her eyes. Allie’s coffee mugs lined up next to mine, her pink apron hanging next to the oven. Pictures of the two of us were everywhere. There was a very obvious woman’s touch to the decor of the apartment. It was clear that Allie lived there too.

“Does she live here?” Mom asked, pointing her boney finger in Allie’s direction. I covered my face with my hands. Mom wasn’t even trying to be polite to Allie.

“Yes, we live here together. Do you have a problem with that?” I asked her, trying to remain patient. She gave me an incredulous look.

“I believe I have the right to know who lives in the apartment I pay for,” she said, crossing her arms around her chest.

“I paid the downpayment myself, Mom. And Allie and I are sharing the price of the utilities. You aren’t paying for the apartment. We are,” I said.

“Who do you think puts the money in your bank account monthly, Ryan?” she asked.

“You’re welcome to quit doing that. I don’t want your money if you think it gives you the right to come here and be rude to me and my girlfriend,” I said, not backing down from her. Allie finally spoke up.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Anderson. I thought you knew I was living here.” Her hands were knitted together in a show of anxiety. My mother’s icy stare drifted from me to Allie.

“Doctor Anderson,” Mom corrected her. Allie blushed ten shades of red. I protectively stood in front of her, trying to shield her from the ice queen that was my mother.

“No wonder you haven’t come home in months, you’re too busy playing house.” Mom tossed her hair behind her shoulder, the brown curls stubbornly bounced right back in front of her ear.

“That’s enough, Mom. I think you should leave now,” I said, ushering her towards the door. I needed to talk to Allie. I needed her to understand why I hadn’t told my parents about us. Once back in the doorway, my mom turned back to face me.

“Wait until your father hears about this.”

“You go ahead and tell him, Mom. While you’re at it, tell Dad that he forgot to call me on my birthday.” I glared at her, matching her expression. My mother and I looked so much alike, our dark hair and eyes the same texture and color. When we were angry, our faces looked the same, pinched and tense, three thin tension lines creasing our brow. The thought made me calm down and relax my features. I didn’t want to look like her, I didn’t want to be like her. I sighed, taking several deep breaths.

“Mom, call me when you’ve calmed down and we can have a rational adult conversation about this. Until then,” I said, handing her her coat “Have a nice day.” She willingly walked out of the door, mumbling something under her breath as she slammed the door behind her.

I immediately turned around, walking toward Allie with outstretched arms. She took two big steps back, her eyes filling with tears.

“Why didn’t you tell them about us?” she said, her voice breaking as she tried to hold back her tears. I grabbed her, taking her into my arms, needing to hold her. She burst into loud sobbing tears, my shirt becoming wet from her sorrow.

Seeing her that way, knowing that I caused her pain, broke my heart.

“Allie, you saw how she is. She is mean and selfish. She doesn’t care about my happiness, she only cares about my success. The same goes for my dad. I didn’t want to give them the chance to hurt you,” I said, trying desperately to make her understand.

“The only person who hurt me is you, Ryan,” she whispered into my shirt.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, baby. I will make this right. Whatever I have to do, I will make it right,” I said. She pulled away, meeting my eyes, her tears threatening to drown me.

“You told me I could meet them after your birthday. I was being patient, waiting for you to be ready. You met my dad at Christmas and I told you it was important to me that I meet your family too. I want to be in your life, Ryan. Let me be in your life. Even the ugly parts,” she said, working to wipe away her tears.

“I’m sorry. You’re right. I was being a coward. I’ll tell you what, I will call my parents tomorrow and set up a dinner. It will be awful and uncomfortable, but we will do it together.”

She nodded, wrapping her arms back around me. I sunk into her embrace, relieved at her affection. I kissed the top of her head, breathing in the scent of her.

“I’ll call my brother too. Maybe we can drive up to Houston and see him. He is a lot less scary than my mom.”

“Okay, I would like that,” she smiled at me.

“I don’t ever want to make you cry again,” I said to her, holding her tightly to me. We stood like that for a while, the sounds of the abandoned movie playing softly in the background. My eyes drifted to the window as I held Allie in my arms. Outside of our apartment the sun hung low in the sky, illuminating an orange and red glow. Painting the day from a brilliant blue to a darker shade, ready for the black to swallow the sun. The colors representing a change from day to night. A shift from light to dark. Life could be that way, too. It could change in an instant. Bright blue to black, with a glowing red warning in between.

## Chapter 19

Ryan

January 2023

Friday

“The secret to my homemade pizza is the sauce,” I told Sarah as she helped me roll the dough out on the countertop. She was concentrating, her tongue slightly out of her mouth as she kneaded the dough.

“You have to mix the marinara with alfredo. It’s a game changer,” I whispered to her, sharing the secret to my delicious sauce.

“Who taught you how to cook?” Sarah asked me.

“I taught myself, for the most part. I grew up always having other people do things for me. When I became an adult,

I wanted to learn to do things on my own.”

“You were rich?” she asked me, popping a peperoni in her mouth.

I laughed. “Big time. My parents are both surgeons and they came from old money.”

“That must have been nice.”

“Honestly, not really. The old saying about money not buying happiness is very true.”

Allie walked into the room, a white robe wrapped around her small frame. She was fresh faced, no scarf on her head, making her blue eyes pop against her pale skin.

“It smells good in here,” she said, breathing in the kitchen’s aroma.

“It’s Ryan’s secret sauce,” Sarah said.

“Ahh, his alfredo and marinara mix?”

“Shhh,” I whispered conspiratorially, “It’s a secret!”

Both girls giggled, their laughter filling the kitchen. It was a beautiful, infectious sound.

“Allie, this one is ready for toppings. Want to do the honors?” I asked her, handing her the bag of cheese I was

holding. She took it, also grabbing the bag of pepperoni from Sarah.

“Will you get the black olives from the fridge?” she asked Sarah.

Sarah went to the fridge and took out the black olives. She dug around in the back of the fridge and pulled out peppers and mushrooms to add to her pizza. I had three pizza doughs rolled out, one for each of us, with my special sauce on top. We each got to work topping our dough to our likings. Soon they were ready to place in the oven. The smells in the kitchen were amazing, the effect making my stomach growl.

“This was a great idea, Ryan. I haven’t made homemade pizza in years,” Allie told me. Duke sat at my feet, begging for a spare pepperoni. I tossed a few in his direction, watching him jump up and catch them in the air. He munched loudly on his treat, causing Sarah to let out a few more giggles.

“You two set the table and I will make us some sweet tea,” Allie said to Sarah and I. Sarah grabbed the plates while I handled the silverware. We set the table together, talking about how much we both loved pizza. Allie filled tall glasses full of ice while the water boiled for the tea. I cut fresh lemons to add



to the drinks. Soon we were finished, just in time for the oven alarm to chime signaling to us that our pizzas were ready.

Dinner conversation was easy, each of us relaxed and animated. The three of us got along well, chatting like old friends. Of course, Allie and I *were* old friends. I enjoyed being with them. They were quite the duo, Sarah and Allie. Their apartment was cozy and inviting, and the company could not have been better.

“This pizza is incredible. My stomach is about to explode,” Sarah said, rubbing her full belly.

“Definitely beats hospital food,” Allie agreed. I smiled at both of them, enjoying my own pizza.

“Is there anything in particular you want to do while you’re here, Ryan?” Allie asked me.

“I’d love to catch a basketball game, if possible. Maybe visit a couple buddies from college. Mostly, I just want to hang out with you girls.”

“Have you talked to your mom yet?”

“No, I have been avoiding that,” I said with a wry smile.

“You should call her,” Allie said, gently touching my arm. Back when we dated, Allie was always encouraging me

to strengthen my relationship with my parents. I knew it was because she lost her mom at such a young age. She was always telling me that I would regret losing time with them once they were gone.

“I will call them tonight.” I took a long drink of my iced tea, already dreading the conversation with my parents. For Allie, I would do it. For Allie, I would do anything.

“May I be excused?” Sarah asked, “I’m dying to work on my painting.”

“Of course bug, go ahead.” Sarah walked over and kissed her mom on her head before retreating to her room to create another masterpiece. Allie and I sat alone at the kitchen table, silence stretched between us for a few moments. She lifted her eyes and they met mine. The heat from the warm kitchen mixed with the heat between us sent a bead of sweat down my back. I pulled my hoodie over my head and tossed it beside me, no longer needing it for warmth.

“Want me to turn the heater off? I’m cold all the time, being this thin. I don’t mind turning it off for a while,” Allie offered. I shook my head back and forth, indicating I was fine with the temperature.

“I need to get Sarah back on her morning homeschool schedule tomorrow, but after that we could catch a movie or something if that sounds good,” Allie said, sipping on her tea.

“Only if you’re up to it, I’m fine with hanging out here.”

“I think Sarah would enjoy a movie, and I could really go for some movie theater popcorn,” she said.

“Do you still put M&M’s in your popcorn?” I asked her.

“Of course I do. It’s the best.”

“Extra butter?” I asked. She nodded enthusiastically. I noticed her shift uncomfortably in the chair, adjusting the large robe around her small frame.

“We can move to the couch, that chair doesn’t look very comfortable.” She nodded and stood, making her way to the living room. I sat at the end of the couch, allowing room for her at the opposite end. She sat, then laid her head on the arm rest and propped her feet in my lap. I instinctively took one of her tiny feet into my hands and rubbed my fingers into the muscles of her feet. She let out a groan of appreciation.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I don’t mind,” I told her. She grabbed the remote and turned on the tv, flipping through the channels. She stopped

when she saw the opening credits to *Dirty Dancing* playing on the screen.

“Score! It’s just starting. Want to watch it with me?” she asked.

“Definitely. I love Patrick Swayze.”

“Want a glass of wine?” she asked me.

“Sure, red if you have it.” She stood up, making her way to the kitchen to grab us a couple of glasses. I watched her, the sway of her body still so familiar. The robe she was wearing slipped down, revealing her bare shoulder. I looked away, not wanting to be caught gazing at her exposed skin. I felt a blush forming in my cheeks as I wondered what she was wearing underneath her robe. I cleared my throat, uncomfortable with my own thoughts. Allie sat back down next to me, handing me a glass of wine, filled to the very top. I laughed, trying not to spill the red liquid all over me.

“I thought you might could use a double,” she said, a large grin on her face. The movie had started, the sounds of the classic story filling the room. We sat in silence, sipping our drinks and watching together. I couldn’t focus when she was that close to me. I felt on fire from the inside out. The wine didn’t help matters, giving me a boldness I would not have

otherwise possessed. I reached across the couch, touching her knee lightly with my hand. I traced my fingers around in a circle, feeling the smooth texture of her skin. It was a soft touch, innocent, barely a whisper of pressure, but it set me on fire. I didn't dare look at her, keeping my face forward. I felt her gaze on me; she didn't move from my small embrace. I continued to trace my fingers in a circle, my breathing increasing rapidly, attraction making my skin feel alive. No other woman had ever set me ablaze like her.

The door to Sarah's room opened and I quickly pulled my hand back to my lap. At the same time, Allie sat up straighter on the couch. Sarah stopped dead in her tracks, looking back and forth between the two of us. We looked guilty, both of us blushing fiercely. She tried to hide her smile, but it played on her lips anyway.

"Just getting a drink, don't move on my account," she said, trying not to giggle. I felt like a teenager caught sneaking around with a girl. I reminded myself I was only touching her knee. I looked at Allie, she was smiling shyly at me. Sarah walked back by us, a glass of milk in her hands.

"Carry on," she said, winking in our direction.

“Goodnight, Sarah,” Allie said, sticking out her tongue at her daughter. Sarah shut the door to her room, I could hear her muffled giggles.

“Sorry if I embarrassed you,” I whispered.

“You didn’t,” was all she said. She put her legs back into my lap. An invitation to touch her again. I rested my hand on her ankle, tracing the bone with my thumb. We watched the rest of the movie in silence, the air between us thick, dripping with history and longing. The ending credits rolled, I stretched my arms above my head.

“I guess we should call it a night,” I said, but as I looked over to Allie I noticed she had already drifted off to sleep. I stood, gathering her small body into my arms to carry her to her bed. She didn’t stir, she only snuggled into my shirt, her eyes closed, her breathing even. I opened her bedroom door with my foot, trying to make as little noise as possible. Her blankets were already pulled back, ready for her to be placed inside. I laid her down, tucking the sheets and comforter tightly around her. I kissed her soft head, my lips lingering.

“Goodnight Allie Cat,” I whispered. My heart pounded in my chest. Six days wasn’t going to be enough. I tiptoed out of the room, closing the door softly behind me. Making my

way back to the couch, I noticed Duke was nowhere to be seen. I pulled out my phone, locating Sarah's number in my recently added contacts.

*Ryan: Hey Sarah, is Duke in there with you?*

I laid down, covering myself with a small blanket, waiting for her response.

*Sarah: He sure is! He can sleep in here with me if that's okay with you.*

I smiled at my phone. Duke would be spoiled rotten by the time we left Texas.

*Ryan: Yes, that's no problem! If he needs to go out to the bathroom during the night, wake me up and I'll take him out.*  
I texted her.

*Sarah: Sounds good. And Ryan, thanks for being here. Mom needs this.*

She was so mature; so loving of her mother. It was completely endearing. I sent one more text to her.

*Ryan: I would rather be here than anywhere else in the world.*

I meant it.

I started to close my eyes before I remembered the promise I had made to Allie at dinner. I groaned, pulling out my phone. It was a little before ten at night. Mom would probably still be awake. I sighed, finding her name in my contact list. The phone rang twice before a voice came through the line.

“Ryan, is everything ok?” Mom answered, sounding worried.

“Yeah Mom, everything is fine. I just wanted you to know I was in town.”

“You’re in Texas?” she asked.

“I am. I just got here yesterday. Thought you might want to know.”

“Yes, I’m glad you called. Really glad. I missed you at Christmas again.” It was her voice, but she sounded different. Softer. Older. I heard another voice in the background.

“It’s Ryan. He’s in Austin,” Mom said to someone else in the room.

“Ryan, Dad is here. He says hi. We would really like to see you while you’re home,” she said, sounding sincere. This was not the conversation I was expecting. She had not



ridiculed me or said one snappy comment. She seemed to genuinely want to see me.

“Okay, sure. I can meet for lunch Sunday. If that works for you.”

“Are you staying with Allie?”

I coughed, almost choking on my own spit. “How did you know I was here to see Allie?” I asked, unable to hide my shock.

“That girl is the only thing that could bring you back here,” she said, matter-of-factly.

“Did you know she was back in Austin?” I asked, curious.

“I did,” she sighed, “I called you about six months ago, I tried to tell you. You never called me back.”

“I’m sorry, Mom. I appreciate you trying.”

“I wasn’t sure if you two were still in contact after all these years,” she said.

“We weren’t. It’s a long and weird story. I can explain Sunday at lunch. Meet at the country club at noon?” I asked.

“Yes, we can make that work. Dad and I will be there. Ryan, I’ve missed you,” she whispered the last part, sounding emotional. The entire conversation had me completely off guard.

“Miss you too, Mom.”

I hung up the phone, pinched myself, and wondered if the entire weekend was a weird dream.

## Chapter 20

Allie

June 2005

“Don’t be nervous. Mom can smell fear,” I heard Ryan say as we stepped into the doors of the high-end restaurant. The place was lovely, with cloth napkins adorning the large oak table. The entire building dripped with money. The chandeliers were massive, casting a diamond sparkle to every shiny surface in the room. The ceilings were high, making a

grand statement to anyone who entered. I took a huge breath, attempting to calm myself down. We were about to have lunch with Ryan's mom, dad, and brother. The two latter I had not yet met. I wore a simple white sundress, my hair back in a low bun. I had pearl earrings on and simple, fresh makeup. I wanted to look classic and sophisticated. I wanted to impress his mother. Our first meeting, at our apartment, had not gone well. I desperately wanted her to like me. We made our way toward the dining area. Ryan stopped walking and turned toward me.

“No matter what happens at this lunch, remember that I love you.”

“Ryan, you're making me nervous,” I said.

“I don't want you to be nervous, but I do want you to be prepared. They will be cold, cruel, and judgemental. It's just who they are and it has no reflection whatsoever on you.”

I nodded, my teeth chattering from my increasing nerves.

“You got this,” he said.

“We've got this,” I replied. We walked hand in hand toward a round table by a large french window. The sunshine coming through into the beautiful dining room couldn't even

calm my nerves. I noticed his mother first, dressed in all black. Black during the Texas summer was not a popular choice. Summers in Texas could easily reach temperatures over 110 degrees. Black would be hot and miserable in the humid outdoors. Black was a statement. It was as if she was preparing to attend a funeral. Probably my funeral, after she killed me dead with her steely gaze. My pulse increased, my hands began to sweat. Ryan's father stood, shaking Ryan's hand. Then Ryan's brother did the same. Suddenly everyone's eyes were on me. Waiting for me to speak. Waiting for me to fail.

“It's nice to meet all of you. Thank you for inviting us to lunch,” I said, forcing my voice to remain even and calm.

His mother scoffed. “Ryan insisted,” she said with a roll of her eyes.

“Now Caroline, play nice,” Ryan's father said.

“Nice to see you again Doctor Anderson,” I said, trying to sound calm and cool. She nodded once. Ryan and I took our seats at the table as an awkward silence fell around us. Jason cleared his throat, taking a sip of his iced water.

“So, you guys have been dating a while now?” Jason asked, attempting conversation.

“Yes, it’s been almost two years since we met,” Ryan replied.

“It’s serious?” Ryan’s dad chimed in.

“Very,” Ryan said, making deliberate eye contact with his father.

“Are you focusing on school? Your future is important, Ryan,” his dad replied.

“Allie is my future.” He took my hand under the table. Ryan’s mom made a small noise in her throat that sounded like a wounded animal.

“Stop with the dramatics, Mom. I will still be a doctor. Allie supports me. We support each other.”

“And what is Allie’s plan?” Caroline asked.

“I want to teach children. In Thailand. I’m studying international education,” I said confidently, holding my head high.

“How will that work? Ryan, you can’t attend medical school in Thailand, that’s crazy. Allie, why cant you be a teacher here in Texas?” His mother was rambling, spitting out question after question. Not allowing us time to respond.

“We haven’t figured it all out yet. We are still in undergrad. We’re young, we aren’t planning a wedding or anything. But we love each other and I wanted you all to get to know Allie. Could you at least give her a chance? Do we have to give you our ten year plan today or could we maybe just have lunch?” Ryan was trying to be calm, but his ears were turning red.

“Yes, lunch sounds great. Right, Mom? Dad?” Jason asked, looking back and forth between their parents. They remained silent, looking down at their menus. I took their lack of response as confirmation of their willingness to drop the conversation topic. Ryan squeezed my hand under the table. I took a deep breath, glad for a moment of silence while we all looked over our menus. Caroline’s questions ran through my head. What if she was right to be concerned? We hadn’t talked about our long term future together. How would it work? Would we be a long distance couple? Would Ryan eventually join me in Thailand to be a physician overseas? Would I be willing to give up my dreams to stay here to allow him to pursue his? The questions swirled around in my head, taking on a life of their own.

Jason turned toward me, a warm encouraging smile on his face. I could tell I would like him, that he was warmer than his parents. I relaxed a little, knowing I had another ally.

“So, in the spirit of getting to know you, tell us a little about yourself,” Jason said.

“Well, I grew up in a small town in north Texas. It was just me and my dad. My mom passed away when I was very young. I always wanted to come to Austin for school. My dad and I used to watch UT football games together, he always had me in a burnt orange t-shirt. I love to read. I watch a lot of professional basketball...” I trailed off, not knowing what else to say. The look on his mother’s face was less than impressed.

“What does your father do for work?” Dan, Ryan’s father, asked. I swallowed a long drink of my water before responding.

“He’s a handyman. We never had much money, but I’ve never wanted for anything. He was a strong provider for me.” The look on my face dared them to judge my father. I would not stand for one bad word to be spoken against the man who raised me. The waiter arrived, asking for our lunch orders. I was saved from having to hear their responses; their thoughts on my humble upbringing. I was not ashamed of my life, or of

my father, but I was relieved to be spared hearing the opinions of the Anderson family.

Ryan and his brother began to talk about their summer plans, but I couldn't focus on the conversation. Caroline had planted a seed of doubt in my mind about the future for Ryan and I, and it was starting to grow into a thorny vine, squeezing a vice around my heavily beating heart.



## Chapter 21

Sarah

January 2023

Saturday

I tried to be quiet as I opened my bedroom door on Saturday morning. Ryan was snoring softly on the couch, still blissfully asleep. He looked kind of adorable, his tall build curled up on the small couch. I smiled, happy he was with us for a little while. He made it easier to pretend that our lives were somewhat normal. Duke started to walk toward Ryan, I took him by the collar, hoping to allow Ryan a little longer to sleep.

After taking Duke out to use the restroom, I tiptoed into the kitchen, starting the coffee pot. I knew mom would want

some as soon as she woke up. I pulled my hair up into a messy bun on top of my head and stretched. The apartment was quiet and I figured it was a good time to start on my homeschool work. Grabbing my laptop, I logged in to my online school account and started on one of my math assignments. Math was my least favorite subject, so it was best to get that out of the way first. I remembered my math class at my old school. There was a boy who sat in front of me, Mason, who had the most delicious short curly blonde hair. Sometimes I would catch myself lost in his curls, staring at the back of his head, forgetting to listen to the lecture. Mason was probably the reason I was behind in math. He always smelled like fresh peppermint. He was popular, with big brown eyes and a wide smile. He never noticed me, giving me free reign to stare at him with him none the wiser. Boys didn't tend to notice me at my old school. I would wear large clothes, hiding my cute frame. I didn't wear a lot of makeup like the other girls. I was shy when it came to boys and I sometimes tried to avoid catching their attention.

I heard Ryan start to stir on the couch, pulling me away from my thoughts. He sat up and rubbed his eyes at the light coming in through the window.

“Morning, sunshine,” I joked.

“Hey there, kiddo. Good morning.”

“Want some coffee?” I asked, standing up from my laptop.

“Definitely,” he said eagerly. He stood, grabbing his hoodie and pulling it overhead. He walked toward the kitchen table while I grabbed his hot cup of coffee. I sat it down in front of him. He took a sip after blowing at the top.

“Is your mom still sleeping?” he asked.

“Yeah, I haven’t seen her yet.”

“What’s that you’re working on?” he asked me, pointing at my computer.

“Oh, that’s my math homework. I am a little behind after being at the hospital all week, so I’m just trying to get caught up.”

“Gross. I hate math,” he said.

“Me too. It’s my least favorite.”

“I’d offer to help you but I’m hopeless.”

“Mom’s pretty good at it. She can help me later if she feels up to it.”

“Now if you have any science or history homework, I’m your guy.”

I laughed, closing the lid to my laptop. “I will keep that in mind, thank you.” Ryan continued to sip his coffee next to me while we sat in comfortable silence. My stomach groaned loudly, signaling that I needed to eat some breakfast. Ryan looked at me with a large smile on his face.

“Want to make some pancakes with me?” he asked.

“Sure. Let me make sure we have syrup, we should have everything else.” I rummaged through the cabinets, looking for flour, sugar, and syrup. I gave him a thumbs up, letting him know we had everything we needed.

“You get the pan ready, I will mix up the ingredients. I have to add my secret ingredient,” he said, looking through the spice cabinet. I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Do you have a secret ingredient for everything you cook?” I asked him.

“You bet I do,” he replied, bumping my shoulder with his. I could see what drew my mom to Ryan. He was so much fun. He made the simplest things seem like an adventure.

“It smells amazing in here,” Mom said, walking into the kitchen.

“Morning, Mom. Here, let me grab you some coffee.” I walked over to her, giving her an enveloping good morning hug.

“Good morning, Allie,” Ryan said affectionately. I noticed mom blush ever so slightly.

“Good morning to you both. What’s that I smell?”

“My famous pancakes, of course.”

“Nutmeg and powdered sugar?” Mom asked.

“Shhhhh! You’re telling Sarah all my secrets,” Ryan said. I laughed, flicking some flour in his direction.

“I’ll take it to the grave,” I promised, my hands in a prayer.

“Do you guys want me to make up some bacon to go with that?” Mom asked. Ryan and I both nodded enthusiastically. Mom got to work on the bacon while Ryan and I mixed and flipped pancake after pancake. When we finally sat down to enjoy our feast, the entire kitchen smelled of coffee, bacon, and nutmeg.

“I hate to say it but you’re right, Ryan. These pancakes are incredible,” I said approvingly, my mouth full of carbs and syrup. He laughed, nodding his head up and down in agreement. Ryan tossed Duke a piece of bacon and he caught it easily in the air.

“Sarah, what assignments do we need to do this morning?” Mom asked me, setting down her fork and wiping her mouth.

“I just finished most of my math. I may need you to check a question or two. Then I have one Spanish assignment left and I have to finish writing that English paper over Roosevelt.”

“Okay, I will help you with that and then we can all catch an afternoon movie,” Mom said.

“Sounds great! We haven’t been to a movie in forever!” I was excited to get out of the house and go somewhere that wasn’t the hospital. Mom smiled warmly at my obvious excitement.

“Get to work then and we will go when you’re done,” she promised. I put my dishes away and started cleaning up the large mess Ryan and I had created with breakfast.

“I got that, Sarah. You go ahead with your school work,” Ryan said, taking the soap and sponge out of my hands. I retrieved my laptop, opening back up my school website. Mom walked over to Ryan, drying the dishes as he washed them. They had whispered conversations loaded with smiles and giggles. They were cute together, their rhythms clicking so easily. I knew Ryan was only visiting for a short time, but for a moment I allowed myself to wonder what it would be like if he were with us all of the time. I didn’t hate the thought. In the past, I had always prayed it would always be just mom and I. But seeing her so happy and youthful looking, I understood that I had been praying for the wrong thing. I should have been praying for the good Lord to bring us a man like Ryan.

## Chapter 22

Ryan

September 2005

As I walked to my afternoon chemistry lecture, I reached my hand deep into the pocket of my jeans and cupped my hand around the small, blue velvet box. I had been keeping the ring in my pocket for a few months, waiting for the right time to ask Allie to be my wife. We had been together for over two years and I knew she was the only girl I wanted. I almost proposed to her in June on her birthday, but the moment didn't seem right. We had spent the night out on the town with Fin and her boyfriend. We were drunk and happy, but we didn't have any time alone that night. And by the time we got home, Allie had too much wine for the proposal to feel right. I wanted the moment to be intimate. There had been a few nights at the apartment, when we were together on the couch, or after a quiet dinner together, that I almost got down on one



knee. I didn't, however, and I had begun carrying the ring with me everywhere. Waiting for *the* moment.

We had some things to talk about, some things we needed to figure out about our future. I knew Allie was concerned. She wondered if our future plans could fit together. I wasn't as worried as she was about the details. I loved her. What more could there be? The future would figure itself out. She was the realist, I, the dreamer. She needed plans, schedules, and answers. I only needed her. I would be willing to consider giving up medical school to be with her. I wondered if she would also be willing to alter her plans for me, if it came to that.

I loved everything about Allie. She was like sunshine. I was almost addicted to her, spending every spare moment of my time wrapped up with her. We made each other laugh. We had a million inside jokes. So many, in fact, that our friends hated being around us. They could never understand us, our private jokes like our own secret language. Her and me. Me and her. Us. She was it. I just had to figure out how to tell her. How to ask her to be mine forever.

I reached the lecture hall, found my seat, and unloaded my text books. The professor began his lecture on chemical

bonds, his booming voice filling the large room. The students around me began taking notes vigorously. I took my notebook out of my bag and arranged my pens and highlighters on my desk. I attempted to listen to him explain the complicated process of the attraction of atoms that allows the formation of both molecules and crystals, but my mind kept wandering. I found myself jotting down proposal ideas instead of chem notes. I could almost hear my mother in the back of my mind, almost see her disappointment in my lack of focus. I wondered if she would disown me if I didn't make my grades that semester. I was barely hanging on, making the minimum scores to keep me enrolled in the premed program. At the rate I was going, I would be hard pressed to find a medical school that would accept me. I wanted to be a doctor. I wanted to help people. I shifted my focus back to the lecture, my thoughts of my lackluster grades bringing me back to attention.

An hour later, I was walking back through campus, feeling a renewed vigor about my academic goals. The lecture was interesting, the knowledge coming to me easily. I had a skip in my step. If I worked hard and focused, I could have the career and the girl. I made plans to spend more time at the library after classes, more time with my books opened at home. I could ask Allie to help me study. After all, she was

great at helping me with my anatomy homework. A smile formed on my face. I was ready to be more serious, with Allie and with school. I stopped, turned around, and began walking toward the library. I would start right away. I could study for a few hours before I headed back to the apartment. I had two tests later in the week, getting some unplanned studying in would help me improve my grades in those classes.

The library was packed full of students but the room was calming and quiet. I found myself wondering why I didn't study there more often. It was welcoming, the air inside not too cool, but not warm either. I found a small empty table deep in the back behind the computers and began unloading my books. Fully committed, I buried myself in my work, only pausing to take drinks of water every so often. After a while, I had no idea how long, I noticed out of the corner of my eye someone taking a seat across from me. I looked up to see a familiar looking guy unloading his books.

“Hey man, mind if I study here?” he asked me.

“Sure, no problem,” I said, moving my bag over to give him more space.

“I'm Aaron,” he said, reaching out his hand to shake mine.

“Ryan Anderson.”

I noticed that Aaron had many of the same textbooks as I did, which is likely why he looked so familiar to me.

“Pre med?” I asked, gesturing toward his books.

“Yeah, you too?” he asked.

“Sure am. I think we may have chemistry lab together.”

“I thought I recognized you. I haven’t seen you around the library much though. I feel like I spend every second of my free time here.” Aaron said.

“I’m trying to do better. My grades aren’t so hot right now,” I admitted to the friendly stranger.

“It’s not easy work, that’s for sure. If you ever need some help, or someone to study with, I’m here all the time.” he offered.

“Yeah that’d be really good, thank you. I don’t know many people in the program. It would be good to have someone help keep me on track.”

My new friend and I looked over our notes together, bouncing information back and forth. We had a nice study rhythm going, and hours passed before I started packing up my things to head home. It was dark outside; Allie might be

worried about me. I dug my cell phone out of the bottom of my bag to give her a call, but the battery was dead. I picked up my pace, rushing to make it to my car so I could get back to my apartment.

As soon as I walked in the door I knew I was in trouble. Allie sat on the couch, fully dressed in a cute blue mini dress, arms and legs crossed. She looked pissed. Really pissed.

“Hey babe, er, everything okay?” I asked nervously.

“It’s ten PM Ryan,” was her only response.

“I’m so sorry, I was at the library. I found a guy in my class that is going to help me study.”

“Well, that’s all fine and good, but we had dinner plans. Four hours ago,” she said. I felt all the color drain from my face. How could I forget that I was supposed to meet her after classes for dinner? I felt even worse when I remembered that her dad was meeting us as well.

“Oh my gosh, your dad!”

“Yup. My dad,” she said, crossing her arms tighter across her chest.

“Allie, I am so sorry. I will call him and apologize. I feel so terrible.”

“When you didn’t show up and then you didn’t answer your phone I got really worried, Ryan. I was about thirty minutes away from calling the police.”

I ran my hands through my wavy hair, blowing out a long breath of air. I hated letting her down. Time with her dad was so important to her, I was so angry at myself for messing up the dinner. I walked toward her, taking her into my arms. She was stiff, not allowing me to hold her close. Her body language was distant, her arms remaining crossed as I attempted to hug her. I let her go, holding her at arm length.

“Look, I know I messed up. I understand that I let you down, and that I let your dad down. I haven’t been honest with you about how school is going for me. My grades aren’t good. I’m at risk for getting kicked out. Hell, the only reason I haven’t been kicked out yet is probably because of who my parents are.”

Allie sat down on the couch, taking in everything I had just told her. She scooted her bottom slightly to the left, silently invited me to sit next to her. I sat, turning my body

towards her. She didn't say anything, so I took a deep breath, preparing myself to explain further.

“Today I made a decision to recommit to my studies. I didn't mean to lose track of time at the library, I just felt focused for the first time this semester. It felt good to study with someone and to get all my work done early. I am so sorry that I forgot about dinner. I got focused on my work and everything else took a backseat. I won't let you down again.”

Allie listened, nodding her head slowly. She no longer looked mad, she looked sad. Sad was worse. I laced my fingers into her, relieved when she allowed me to hold her hand.

“I think we should talk about our future together,” she said.

“Okay, uh, sure,” I said, taken aback a little. I wasn't sure where she was going with the conversation.

“What are our plans, long term?” she asked.

“What do you mean? We're together. We will be together. I'm not going anywhere.”

“Yeah, but I might be. Thailand, remember? My entire plan for my adult life? I'm graduating at the end of next

semester. I'm applying for internships overseas. What's going to happen to us, Ryan?"

I hesitated. I didn't know how to answer her question.

"I don't know the answer to that, Allie. But I know I want to be with you. I don't know how that looks long term, but do we have to know right now?" I asked.

"We do, Ryan. We need to make a plan. We have avoided it long enough. Where are you applying to medical school next year? Would we have to do a long term relationship while you're in med school? Would you ever have time to fly to Thailand to visit me?" Her questions were delivered rapid fire.

"Woah, Allie, slow down. You're throwing a lot at me."

"I've been trying to get you to talk to me about this for months!" she exclaimed, her voice rising.

"I don't have the answers, Allie. I don't know how it will work. I just know that it *will* work. I love you. We love each other."

She threw her hands up dramatically and stomped off to our bedroom. I followed along beside her like a puppy with



my tail between my legs. I stood in the doorway of our room watching her pull off her dress and shoes and change into a pair of sweats. I walked in and sat on the bed. Allie was angrily pulling her long hair into a bun on top of her head.

“What can I say to make this better?” I asked, my voice low and miserable.

“I don’t know, Ryan. I don’t know.”

“Are you sure about Thailand? Is that the only place you want to teach?” As soon as the words left my mouth I knew I had said the wrong thing. Her face turned red and her hands turned to fists at her side.

“How dare you ask me that,” she said. There was smoke practically billowing from her ears.

“I’m sorry, you’re right. I’m sorry,” I blubbered like the idiot I was.

“My dad said you would try to talk me out of my goals,” she said softly. Her words felt like a punch to the gut. My head snapped up at attention, my mouth falling wide open.

“That’s not fair. I would never ask you to give your dreams up for me, unless it was something you wanted. There has to be a compromise here.”

“When you think of it, you let me know.” She walked into the bathroom and slammed the door behind her. I sat down on the bed, placing my head into my hands. We had never fought like that before. Never even raised our voices at one another. And there we were, slamming doors and yelling. I sat there, waiting for her to come out of the bathroom so we could finish talking. When she finally emerged, I opened my mouth to talk and was silenced by her palm in the air. She grabbed a pillow and a throw blanket and stomped off toward the living room. Instinct told me not to follow her. I stood up and started shedding my clothes, preparing myself for bed. As I slipped off my jeans I heard a thud as the ring box hit the floor. I sighed and took out the box from inside my pocket. I felt the soft blue fabric with my thumb before placing the box inside my sock drawer. The timing was nowhere close to right. All of the feelings of excitement I had from earlier in the day evaporated. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I couldn’t have it all.

## Chapter 23

Allie

January 2023

Saturday

“Three popcorns, three M&M’s and three sodas please,” Sarah said as she ordered our refreshments at the theater counter. The place was packed, everyone was excited to see the new thriller that was premiering that day. I loved the smell of the movie theater, the intoxicating aroma of melted butter making the air thick with its rich scent. Sarah was giddy, practically bouncing with excitement. I loved how she was able to enjoy the small things. The little moments in life were like small packaged gifts and she was eager to open every one of them. My little girl. She was absolutely radiant.

While we waited at the counter for our refreshments, I noticed Sarah looking around at other kids standing in small groups. Most of the kids were around her age, some were older. She had a look of longing in her eyes as she watched them talk and horse around with each other. She needed a social life. She needed some friends.

“You don’t have to sit with Ryan and I if you recognize any of them, Sarah.”

“No, I don’t know them. Plus, I want to sit with y’all.”

“Okay, I just wanted to make sure, honey,” I said, resting a hand on her shoulder.

“That is, unless you and Ryan want to be alone,” she teased. I cut my gaze to Ryan who had a wide grin on his face. He pretended to punch Sarah on her arm and tousled her hair. I could feel my cheeks turn a healthy shade of red.

“Sarah, my gosh, could you keep one or two of your thoughts to yourself?” I asked, embarrassed.

“What would be the fun in that?” she asked, a sly grin on her face.

“Come on, girls. We need to get seats before they are all taken,” Ryan said, trying to hide his apparent enjoyment of Sarah’s playful teasing.

Ryan and I had been to this same theater together on many occasions in the past. We would always sit close to the back, as far away from other people as possible. We liked to discuss the movie and talk through the plots together. We sat secluded from other people so we wouldn’t disturb them.

Sarah, on the other hand, liked complete silence while she watched. And she liked to sit in the exact middle of the movie theater, she claimed that's where the room had the best acoustics. We walked in, ready to pick out our seats. Ryan went straight to a row in the back while Sarah booked it to the middle. I laughed, following behind Sarah. I gestured to Ryan to follow me. He looked confused, but got up from his seat and started in our direction. I could hear him behind me, then I felt his breath as he leaned in close by my ear.

“We always sit in the back,” he said.

“That was almost twenty years ago, Ryan. We sit in the middle now.”

“How will we figure out who the killer is if we can't talk?” he asked.

“We can't talk, Sarah will have our heads.” I explained. He looked at me incredulously. I laughed and patted his knee. “You'll get used to it,” I said. The lights began to dim and we settled in our seats. Almost immediately, Ryan leaned over and started asking questions about the characters.

“Shh!” Sarah hissed, shooting a look in his direction. Ryan straightened and snapped his mouth shut. I covered my face with my hands to keep from laughing. I didn't make eye

contact with him, knowing that I would burst into giggles if our eyes met. Ryan tried his best, but he couldn't help his chatter as the movie plot progressed. He often leaned in, whispering his thoughts and ideas to me. Before long I was leaning over, whispering my own questions about the film.

“That’s it, you two are done. Go sit in the back like bad little children,” Sarah scolded and pointed to the back row of the theater. We both stood, giggling like school kids as we made our way to the back. The only other people sitting on the last row were a few teenagers, their tongues down each other’s throats. I doubted they would mind our chatter, considering they weren’t paying much attention to the movie. We squeezed past them, finding two empty seats.

“It has to be the neighbor, right?” Ryan asked, diving right into his theories about the film.

“No way. It’s the boyfriend. It’s always the boyfriend,” I countered.

“What? No way! He was so sad when she died!”

“That’s what he wants you to think,” I said, popping more popcorn in my mouth. I leaned over, stealing a drink from his soda, mine long empty. The close proximity to him had my body on high alert. When I leaned in to share his

drink, the feeling only intensified. My hands were sweating, my every nerve ending vibrating with anticipation. I felt like a girl on a first date. It was stupid and childish, but also exciting. I didn't realize it, but I must have been staring at him because all of a sudden my eyes were locked with his. He smiled a slow, sexy smile so hot that I swear the rest of my M&M's melted in my palm. He moved his hand to his knee. I noticed it lying there, an invitation. I moved my hand to my side, sliding it to the edge of my seat, a plea. His fingers slipped into my open palm. It was as innocent as a middle school slow dance but it felt like a million jolts of lightning through my body. I wondered if he felt it too. He moved slow circles around the top of my hands and I died a little. Being back in his embrace, even something so small as touching palms, was giving me back tiny pieces of myself. It was something I hadn't felt in years.

“Told ya,” his voice said, interrupting my thoughts. “The neighbor.” I turned my face back to the screen. The movie was ending, I had missed the big reveal. I had gotten lost in Ryan.

“I should have known. You always have been able to figure out the ending.” The lights began to come back on and I

reluctantly pulled my hand away from his. We stood, waiting for Sarah to join us at the back of the theater. I saw her coming so I lifted my arm in a wave to get her attention.

“I liked it! I never expected the neighbor was the killer,” Sarah said, joining us as we filed out of the crowd of people.

“Ryan called it,” I deadpanned. His smile was triumphant.

“That’s why you have to talk during the movie, helps to figure out the mystery.” I rolled my eyes at him playfully. Once outside, we all got into Ryan’s truck. Sarah and Ryan were still babbling non stop about the movie. I wasn’t listening. I could still feel where Ryan’s hand had rubbed circles on mine, and the feeling was distracting. I felt an awakening inside of me. I tried to forget about the reality of my situation, but it loomed in the back of my mind at all times. I needed to have an honest conversation with Ryan. I knew what was eventually coming, and it scared me to death.



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Ryan

January 2023

Saturday

It had been an amazing day of hanging out with Sarah and Allie. They were quite the pair, constantly making me laugh with their banter. The movie was good, but I had a hard

time paying attention to the screen. There was so much energy between Allie and I, but I needed to take everything slow with her. I would be lying if I said I didn't want her. I wanted her with a desperation I didn't know I possessed. But there was so much history between us. Allie's sickness made things complicated and we still hadn't talked about her cancer much at all. I knew very little, and what I did know made me nervous. I didn't want to ask her about it because I didn't want to make her explain such a painful part of her life. But it was a conversation that needed to happen. Eventually.

After the movie, we walked around campus for an hour showing Sarah some of the places Allie and I used to hang out. Sarah soaked in every story we told, her eyes dreamy as she listened intently at the details of our college romance. Then we went back to the apartment to check on Duke and to plan what to have for dinner. We decided on the leftover pizza we had made the previous evening. By the time we were done eating and had the kitchen cleaned up, I could tell Allie was exhausted. It had been a long day for her and I didn't want her to feel like she had to entertain me.

Sarah walked from the kitchen toward her bedroom, stretching her arms above her head. "I think I'm going to go

paint for a little while and then hit the sack,” she said. She blew a kiss towards her mom. “Goodnight, Mom. Text me if you need me for anything.”

“How about you text me if *you* need anything. I’m the mom, remember?” Allie said with a sad smile. Sarah nodded before closing her bedroom door softly.

Allie rubbed her eyes, exhaustion written all over her face. She yawned and looked in my direction. “Want to watch a movie or something?” she asked.

“Why don’t you go take a bath and let yourself relax. I know it’s a lot, me being here, and you don’t have to keep me entertained. I am truly having a blast being here with you. I’m meeting my parents for lunch tomorrow, so I will be out of your hair for a few hours.”

“You’re not in my hair Ry, it’s nice having you here.” She blushed a little at her admission. The use of her old nickname for me almost brought me to my knees.

“I think I may go out for a bit tonight anyway, grab a beer, maybe call an old buddy to meet me,” I told her. I had no desire to go out or to call old classmates, but I wanted her to get some rest and I knew she wouldn’t go to bed if she knew I was in the apartment awake.

“I’m glad you’re seeing your parents tomorrow,” Allie said.

“I talked to my mom on the phone yesterday and she seemed different. She was kind and, dare I say, loving. It was unnerving.”

“Age and time changes everything,” she said.

“Not everything,” I said, holding her gaze. The air around us began to buzz, thick with words we wouldn’t say. I knew she could feel what I was feeling, I could see it in her eyes, in her body language. The way she took a slight step closer to me as if pulled by magnetic energy. I remembered how she felt beneath me. We had made love so many times before, but I craved the feeling of her skin against mine. A shiver ran through me, the memory of our bodies together causing a physical reaction. We stood there for a long time, both drinking each other in. Finally, Allie broke eye contact. She looked down at her bare feet. I took a step back, remembering my promise to myself to take things slow with her.

“Well, I think I will go take that warm bath now,” she said.

“Right. And I’ll go out for a bit. See you tomorrow?”

“Yeah, tomorrow.”

I almost took her in my arms to hug her goodbye, but I knew if I did I wouldn't be able to stop there. If I took her in my arms I would need more. I would kiss her until her lips were plump and sore. I had to physically shake my head to keep from moving in her direction. I grabbed my keys from the entryway table, turning back one more time. She was walking toward her bedroom, her hand pausing on her doorknob. She turned, shying looking at me, smiling when she saw that I too was sneaking another glance.

“Goodnight, Ryan.”

“Goodnight, Allie Cat.”

Duke lifted his head as he saw me making my way to the door, but he didn't get up to follow. He was already so comfortable in Texas. We were all getting a little too comfortable. I grabbed my ball cap, threw it on my head, and slipped on a light jacket. Texas winter had nothing on Portland, it wouldn't take much to keep me warm. I decided to go to one of my old favorites, Kerbey Lane Cafe, and get some late night pancakes. I sat in my truck letting the engine warm and scrolled through my phone looking at my contacts. I still kept in touch with a few of my friends from UT, but there was

no one that I felt like seeing. Only Allie. I started the truck, driving the short distance to the familiar restaurant.

Kerbey Lane Cafe smelled of bacon and maple syrup, a scent I couldn't get enough of. I slid into a booth, not even bothering to open up a menu. I knew what I wanted. I wanted pancakes and bacon. And I wanted Allie. I couldn't get her out of my head. I tried to focus my mind on other things. On home, on my job, on seeing my parents tomorrow. Nothing could erase her face from my thoughts.

"Hey hon, what'll it be?" The waitress asked, walking up to my booth. She stood with her hands on her hips, popping her bubble gum as she waited for my response. She was clearly an Austin native, with lime green hair and at least ten piercings on her face.

"A short stack of pancakes and a side of bacon. Oh, and a beer please." She wrote down my order, walking away with a dramatic swing of her hips. I shook my head with a smile, I loved Austin and all of the quirky residents. I looked around, people-watching while I waited for my food to arrive. There was a fair amount of college students crammed in booths,

soaking up their alcohol-filled bellies with sugary carbs. I had done the same thing many times back in my day. Watching them took me right back to my own time in college, sitting in the same booths with a clutter of my friends. The town was a time machine. Ausin brought so many memories to the front of my mind; so many feelings back into my chest.

“Here you go,” the waitress said. She set my plate down in front of me. I wasted no time digging in, savoring the richness of the maple syrup. I moaned, the flavors so delicious I couldn’t keep it in. The noise caught the attention of a woman nearby. She shot me a look, her eyes widening before she broke into a large grin. I quickly looked down into my food, not wanting to attract the attention of a stranger. I lifted my finger to the waitress, signaling that I’d like another beer. She nodded in acknowledgment, heading towards the beers they kept on tap. I was anxious to get back to Allie’s apartment, but I didn’t want to seem too eager. So I forced myself to drink the cold beverages. I scrolled through my phone, my food long gone, checking through emails and text messages. A new message came in, my mom’s name attached to it.

*Mom: Looking forward to lunch tomorrow. Please be there.*

Mom never said please. I sent a message back.



*Ryan: I'll be there*

I slipped my phone back into my pocket and downed my second beer. I ordered another by raising my glass and giving my waitress a smile, indicating that I would like a refill. I decided I would drink the next one slowly, giving Allie plenty of time to fall asleep, and then I would return to her orbit. The only place I really wanted to be.

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Allie

January 2023

Saturday

I heard the front door to the apartment open and my eyes snapped to attention. I had tried to fall asleep, I truly did, but I couldn't do it. I told myself I wasn't waiting for Ryan to come back, but I was delusional. I sat straight up in bed, touching my bare head as if to smooth down my hair. Old habits die hard. I touched the smooth skin where my hair used to be, missing it desperately. I slipped out from under the covers, walking to my full length mirror. I took in my appearance, black silk pajamas against my pale skin. I told myself I didn't

put on the pajamas for Ryan, but again, I was delusional. I sprayed some perfume on the bareness of my neck. Just in case, I told myself. I put gloss on my lips and blush on my cheeks.

Taking a deep breath I walked to my bedroom door, resting my forehead on the wood. I stood like that for a while, listening to the sounds of Ryan. I heard his shoes hit the floor as he removed them one by one. I heard his keys being placed on the side table. I heard the sound of the bathroom door being opened and then closed quietly as he tried not to disturb anyone else. I sighed, returning to my bed. I was acting crazy. I needed to keep my distance from him. This was dangerous territory. I needed to think straight, to plan my next move. It was impossible to think straight with him so close.

I heard the water running in the far bathroom. He was taking a shower. I tried not to, but I imagined him standing under the stream of water. I imagined his shoulders, water dripping down his large muscles. My imagination ran wild, wondering if his body still felt the same. Did he still moan when touched on his upper thigh? Did he still nibble when he kissed? I wanted to know. I needed to know. The water stopped, which caught my attention, ending my inappropriate

thoughts of his naked body. I got up from bed again, walking the short distance back to my door. I leaned against the wood again, listening. I heard the bathroom door open, but I couldn't hear his footsteps against the softness of the carpet. I imagined he was probably lying down on the couch, getting ready for sleep. I touched the doorknob then pulled my hand back. I turned, ready to walk back to my bed, then changed my mind again. I wanted to see him. I was acting silly. I was a grown woman and I could control myself. I would just open the door and go see if he wanted to hang out a little bit. Again, I was delusional.

Placing my hand on the door, I opened it. I almost fell backwards, startled to find Ryan standing on the other side of the door, right in front of me. I had no time to react before his mouth consumed me. His tongue slipped between my lips. The kiss was frantic, all consuming, life altering. All thoughts of reason fell away and all that was left was his lips and mine. The effect was dizzying. His hands traveled up the back of my silk nightgown, his touch making me groan into his mouth. My groan was his undoing, the kiss deepening with an urgency we both felt. With one hand on each shoulder blade he further deepened the kiss and my knees gave out with the pleasure of it. He held me up with ease. A warmth of desire pulsed

through every cell of my being. His hands moved around to the front of my chest and I felt his hands move across the skin where my port lay underneath. I jerked backwards, not wanting him to feel the physical evidence of my disease.

“Oh my gosh, I’m sorry Allie. I am so sorry.” He was taking my sudden departure from the kiss the wrong way, but I was too stunned by the heat of the kiss to correct him with words. My hands moved up to my lips, both of them trembling. He looked at me, his breathing was fast, his hair was adorably wet from his shower and tousled from our kiss.

“I’ll leave. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that. I couldn’t help it, it happened so fast,” he rambled on.

“Ryan, stop. It’s all I’ve thought about all day,” I managed to say breathlessly.

“Yeah?” he asked, his face filling with hope.

“Yeah. I wanted it. I don’t want you to go. But we can’t...” I looked towards Sarah’s door as my thoughts trailed off.

“I know. You’re right. I had a few beers and I forgot myself. I can control myself, I promise,” he said, holding his

hand up like a boy scout. I wasn't sure I could say the same. My lips were still tingling. My entire body screamed for more.

“Goodnight Ryan,” I said. Slowly and very reluctantly, I started to close my door. He caught it, opening it wide.

“Wait. One thing. I wanted to ask you something,” he said nervously. I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, waiting for the question to come.

“Will you go on a date with me?”

“A date?” I asked. That was not the question I was expecting. I thought he was going to ask about my cancer, or about my infusion port. I was sure he felt it, protruding from my skin like an unwanted parasite.

“I would like to buy you dinner. And kiss you like that again.” His words caused a buzzing in my ears.

“Okay, yeah. I would like that. Dinner.” His smile grew wider at my words.

“Tomorrow night. Sarah wont mind?” Ryan asked, ever the gentleman.

“Sarah will be ecstatic,” I said. The mention of my daughter brought reality back to the forefront of my mind. This was getting messy and unease swept through me.

“Goodnight Allie,” Ryan said, closing the door softly, leaving me with only my budding desire and my budding fear.

## Chapter 24

Ryan

October 2005

It had been three weeks since our big fight, and nothing had been resolved. We had made up, but things were different between us. I had placed the ring in the safe, knowing that

things were not right for a proposal. I didn't want her to think I was proposing to her just to pressure her to change her plans, to stay in Texas with me. I didn't know what to do next, how to show her I wanted to be with her forever. It felt like one of us would have to give up our dreams, placing us firmly between a rock and a hard place.

School wasn't any better. My issues with Allie were bleeding over into my studies. I couldn't focus in class, I couldn't relax at home. I was almost to a breaking point. The holidays would be fast approaching; I needed to make a plan to fix things with Allie and fix things at school before the end of the semester. I wanted to be back on track with the proposal before Christmas. Allie loved Christmas, it would be a perfect time to ask her to be my wife.

I pondered the idea as I walked through campus, finished with my classes for the day. The hot Texas air was finally cooling off for the season, making my long walk from the science building to the parking lot more bearable. My phone alerted with an incoming message. I pulled it from my pocket, seeing a message from my mother.

*Mom: Ryan, I received a call from the Dean about your grades. Call me.*

I groaned loudly. I was definitely not going to call her. I reached my truck, unlocked it and got in. I could hear protestors at the Scientology church across from campus. There were always people all over the church lawn chanting some complaint or another. I closed the door to my truck, drowning out the noise. I rested my head on the steering wheel, beat down from the day. I didn't want to call my mom. I didn't want to go home and awkwardly hang around Allie. I didn't want to study. I was frozen.

After several minutes, I put the truck in reverse and slowly made my way through traffic towards my apartment. I needed to hold Allie; I needed to feel her in my arms. I needed it to be like it used to be.

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Upon entering our apartment, I looked around for Allie, hoping she was home. I craved her soft hair in my hands, her lips on my mouth. I needed to connect with her. I felt like I was going out of mind, the stress of everything weighing me



down completely. I walked into the kitchen area, but didn't see her at the table or anywhere in the living room. Her purse sat on the counter, I let out a long breath, relieved to see that she must be home.

“Allie, are you here?” I called out, making my way towards our bedroom. I peeked my head inside but didn't see her. The bathroom door was closed but I could see light under the door. I knocked softly but there was no reply. I tried the knob, it wasn't locked so I let myself inside. Allie was laying in the bath, the tub was filled to the brim with bubbles. Her eyes were closed and she had headphones on her head, which explained why she didn't reply when I knocked. She looked completely serene sitting in the tub, her hair piled on top of her head in a messy bun. The top of her breast peeking out from the bubbles. Her lips were plump and they moved with the words of the song she was listening to. I stood there and took in the sight of her. She was a vision; the way she looked in that moment completely slayed me. I started to shed my clothes, dying to soak next to her in the bathtub. Her eyes opened and she startled for a moment before relaxing into my gaze. She removed her headphones from her ears and smiled at me.

“Ry, you scared me.”

“Sorry, I was trying to call your name but you didn’t hear me. May I?” I asked, gesturing towards her bath. I already had my socks, shoes and shirt off. She giggled and nodded. Making room for me in the large tub. I let myself gently into the warm water, the heat relaxed my body as her smooth legs brushed up against me. The day was looking up.

“This is exactly what I needed. It’s been a long day.”

“I’m sorry, Ry. Anything I can help with?”

“I got a text from my mom. The dean called her about my grades.”

“Oh wow. I didn’t realize they were that close,” Allie said, grabbing one of my feet into her lap to rub.

“My parents give a ton of money to the school. It’s probably the only reason I haven’t been kicked out yet.”

“That can’t be true. You’re so smart babe.”

“Well, my grades aren’t showing it,” I sighed. Allie continued to rub my feet, but she looked like she had a lot on her mind.

“How about you? How was your day?” I asked. I could see the hesitation on her face. She bit her lower lip, a tell that she was nervous.

“Hey, what’s up Al? You can talk to me.”

She took a long deep breath and let it out slowly. She shifted in the bath, causing a small wave of water to hit my upper chest. I could see her gather her thoughts, trying to make them into words.

“I got some news today,” she said finally.

“Okay. Good news or bad news?” I asked.

“I’m not sure yet,” she said.

“Well, tell me the news and we can decide together.”

“I got the internship,” she whispered.

“What internship? The one in Thailand?” I asked, a huge lump forming in my throat.

She nodded and bit her lower lip. It felt like the future of our entire relationship rested on my reaction to her news. I wanted to throw a fit, scream and beg her not to go. But I knew if I did, I would lose her forever.

“That’s amazing, Allie. I am so proud of you,” I said simply. And it was true, I was proud of her. The internship in Thailand was what she had been working toward for years. But I couldn’t help the sorrow I felt at her news. I didn’t want to be thousands of miles away from her.

“Are you sure?” she asked, looking nervously across the bath at me.

“I’m sure. You have to do this. For you. We will figure the rest out together. You go to the internship and I will stay and finish school. We will figure out the rest as we go,” I told her.

I saw her entire body relax, a huge smile breaking across her face. She wanted the internship, and she wanted my approval just as badly.

“We can do this, Ryan. I know we can,” she said with confidence. I wished that I felt as confident as she did. I felt like my world was falling out from underneath me. She took my hand and led me out of the bath. We made love on our bed covered in soap suds. All I could think about was the ring sitting in the safe three feet away from us. At that moment, I wondered if it would ever end up on her hand.

## Chapter 25

Sarah

January 2023

Sunday

Sunday morning Mom and I sat in church, listening to the preacher talk about the book of Job. The Bible story got me thinking of my own life and everything Mom and I had been through. The message he was giving really put my own life in perspective. I looked over at Mom, squeezed her hand and smiled at her. She looked over at me, a big smile on her beautiful face. She looked different, the events of the past few days had changed her. She looked flushed and I wondered absently if she and Ryan had hung out more after I went to sleep. I knew he was the reason she looked so full of life that Sunday.

Ryan had not come to church with us. He had plans to meet up with his parents for brunch. He seemed nervous when we left the apartment, fidgeting a lot and changing his clothes five different times. Mom said it was because he hadn't seen his parents in a long time and he was anxious about it. I couldn't imagine going years without seeing my mom. As if she could read my thoughts, Mom put her arm around me and squeezed me in close. We listened as the preacher gave his final prayer, dismissing services for the day.

We filed out of the sanctuary, following the crowd towards the parking lot. It was a gorgeous day, just cold enough for a light jacket. We always went out to eat after church. It was something I always missed when we were stuck in the hospital during Mom's treatments.

"Where do you want to go for lunch?" Mom asked, reading my thoughts again.

"Let's do Mexican food today," I said, my stomach growling at the thought.

"Excellent idea," Mom said. She hooked my arm into hers and we skipped to the car. On the drive to the restaurant, Mom looked distracted.

"Something on your mind, Mom?"

She took a deep breath, considering her words. I could see indecision in her features.

“Ryan asked me on a date tonight,” she finally said. I squealed and clapped my hands together, bouncing up and down in the seat of the car.

“I take it you’re okay with that?” Mom asked, shooting me a side eye.

“I am MORE than okay with it. Oh my gosh we need to go plan your outfit. Okay, I have a brilliant idea. Let’s go buy you a wig! So don’t get me wrong, you are so beautiful as a bald boss lady, BUT I think you’d be more comfortable if you had a high end wig for the date.” I could feel myself rambling, but I was so excited for her.

“Woah, woah, woah. Slow down. I don’t need a wig,” she protested.

“Pllllllllllease,” I begged. “For me? It would be so fun, Mom.” She sighed, completely unable to tell me no when I said please. I smiled wide in victory.

“Fine. But you have to find the place, and if there isn’t a wig shop locally then the deal is off.” I already had my phone out, scrolling through google, looking for a place in Austin

that sold high quality wigs. I squealed again, my delight peaking as I found what I was looking for.

“Found one! And it’s pretty close to where we are eating lunch. We can go right after,” I said, clapping my hands together in excitement. Mom groaned and rubbed one hand across her smooth head.

“If I look ridiculous then you can forget it,” she muttered.

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Two hours later, we walked into Bangs and Braids. I was excited, but Mom was dragging her feet. The store was glamorous with white walls and multiple hanging chandeliers. The entire place seemed to sparkle. Every inch of the store was lined in white lights, illuminating the furniture and the mannequin heads that displayed the wigs. I felt as if we had stepped inside of a movie set and we were the actresses preparing to transform into our roles. Mom was offered a glass of champagne as soon as we walked into the doors, and she sipped nervously on the tall pale glass. There were five salon



style chairs in front of the large lit mirrors. To the right of the mirrors were walls and walls of different wigs. All colors, cuts, styles and lengths that you could ever dream about. I walked straight to the red, looking for the rose gold color of mine and Mom's hair. Mom shuffled behind me, her head ducked in embarrassment.

“Hi ladies, how can we help you today?” A woman asked as she approached us. She was tall, thin, and rocking a bright blue chin length wig.

“My mom has a hot date tonight. We need her to look fierce,” I said, pointing directly at Mom. She blushed ten shades of red.

“We can definitely help with that. Although, you do look like a bombshell bald if you don't mind me saying,” the woman gushed. I loved her immediately. Even Mom cracked a smile.

“Her hair was the same color as mine before the chemotherapy. Do you have anything close to this color? The guy she's going out with is a former boyfriend. I want her to look like she did back in college,” I explained.

“We might need a time machine then, not a wig,” Mom joked.

“Well, my name is Cathy and I am here to help with all your needs. I think we can definitely find you the perfect strawberry blonde,” Cathy said as she walked towards the rows of wigs. She pulled one off of the mannequin and examined it, making a humming sound.

“Follow me to a chair, let’s try this one first,” Cathy said. She sat Mom down in front of a lit mirror and placed the hair on top of Mom’s head while she smoothed the edges out. The wig was shoulder length and a slightly darker red than mine. Mom transformed from a cancer patient to a confident woman right before our eyes. She looked beautiful, but it wasn’t the one.

“Mom, you look amazing, but I think we need to go longer and lighter,” I mused.

“I agree. We’re close, but not there yet,” Cathy said, pulling the wig off of Mom’s head. She went back to the shelves, her finger resting on the side of her mouth in deep thought. Cathy had large lips with bright purple lipstick, which looked great with her blue wig. She swished side to side, deciding which wig to pull next. I hopped up from my chair, deciding to look over the shelves of wigs myself. I grabbed a hot pink one and placed it on my own head, giggling at my

reflection in the mirror. All of the wigs were luxurious, a stark contrast to the costume wigs I always saw at the store during halloween. These were expensive, high end, and would be worth every penny.

“Come see what you think,” I heard Cathy call from across the room. I set down the jet black wig I was trying on and walked back over to Mom. My breath caught in my throat when I saw her. The wig was perfect; she looked exactly like she did before she got sick. The color was spot on and the length cascaded to her lower back. Even more perfect was her facial expression. Her smile was as wide as the Texas sky.

“Oh Mom, that’s the one,” I said, wiping unexpected tears from my cheek.

“You think so?” she asked, nervously touching her head.

“It’s perfect. You look like you.”

“Ryan won’t think it’s weird that I’m wearing a wig?” she wondered out loud.

“Ryan is going to fall over dead when he sees you, Mom,” I assured her. I leaned down and hugged her tightly around her neck, emotion overwhelming me. I fought back tears, trying hard to keep it together. Mom deserved to go out

on a date. She deserved to feel beautiful and wanted. She deserved the world, and I prayed Ryan would give it to her.

“I’ll take it,” she said to Cathy.

“Perfect. You’re going to look like a knockout. Where are y’all going on your date?” Cathy asked Mom as she began packing up the wig in a beautiful white box with pink tissue paper.

“I’m not really sure, he hasn’t told me yet.”

“We need to plan a killer outfit, I’m thinking red,” I said.

“Oh yes, definitely red. Dress or top? Maybe a red long sleeve top with leather skinny pants,” Cathy said, snapping her fingers.

“Yes, girl! And red lips. With the wig tied in a low ponytail with statement earrings,” I said while Cathy nodded in approval.

“Woah you two, slow down. No one is wearing leather,” Mom said, her hands up in protest.

“You would look so good in leather, Mom. But fine, we will think of something perfect.”

Mom sighed, an anxious look appearing on her face.

“Don’t be nervous. You’re going to have the best time,” I said to her, grabbing her hands to ground her. “Ryan is very obviously crazy about you. It won’t matter what you wear or how you look. He just likes you, Mom. I can tell,” I told her reassuringly.

“Thanks Sarah bear. Want to go and help me pick out a new outfit? And maybe some new makeup?”

“Now you’re talking!” I said, pumping my fists into the air.

“I’ll ring you up over here ladies,” Cathy said, as she walked to the checkout counter. I almost choked when she told us the amount, but Mom handed over her card easily. From what I understood, when grandpa died he left her quite a large sum of money. He was a penny pincher all his life and died with almost a million dollars saved; to me and my moms complete surprise. The money helped us tremendously considering Mom couldn’t work during cancer treatments. He always took care of Mom, in life and in death.

“Where to next? I’m so excited to shop with you,” I told her.

“Let’s hit up some boutiques downtown. Then we can grab ice cream when we’re done.”

“Shopping and ice cream, you are really speaking my language, lady,” I said, grabbing the wig box and snaking my arm into hers.

“Bye hun, good luck on your date!” Cathy said, sending us away with a wave of her hand. We waved goodbye and strolled out of the boutique. Mom was so happy. I was so happy. Everything had been so good since the day Ryan arrived. He was magic, breathing life back into us both. I held my breath, wondering if the feeling could last. I held her hand, praying it would.

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Ryan

January 2023

I felt my leg bouncing under the chair, but I couldn't seem to stop. It had been years since I had seen my parents, and I was admittedly nervous. I arrived early, wanting to be seated before they arrived to have the upper hand. I ordered a bloody mary to calm my nerves, but it wasn't even taking the edge off. I remembered that Allie liked a good, strong bloody mary. I shook my head and smiled down into my lap. How easily my brain drifted to thoughts of her. She agreed to go on a date with me and the hours until then would drag on, the slowly ticking clock my enemy. Allie and Sarah were at church and I was wishing I was there with them. Instead, I was waiting on my parents for brunch.

“Another drink, honey?” The waitress asked as she walked up to my table.

“Yes, please,” I said, forcing the bouncing of my leg to cease. My parents' country club hadn't changed one bit. The people were still stiff and snooty, the drinks still strong yet smooth. Even the children in the restaurant had their noses turned up. Everyone was dressed in crisp linen, most in winter blues or khakis. I looked down at my own wardrobe, light

jeans with a navy button-up. I wondered absently if my mom would approve. She would probably be annoyed at my casual jean pants. I let out a long breath, already preparing myself for her scrutiny.

“Ryan,” I heard a voice say. I looked up to see my parents standing by the table. I stood, extending my hand to my fathers to shake it. Before my dad had a chance to return my handshake, my mom enveloped me into a hug. I was shocked, Mom had never been one for affection. I wrapped my arms around her, surprised by how small she felt in my embrace. My mother was a powerhouse of a woman, feeling her frail older body was like ice cold water to my brain.

“It’s so good to see you, son,” Mom said, her words cracked with emotion. I wasn’t sure what to say to her. The raw emotion in her voice was unsettling coming from the woman who raised me. I shook out of her embrace and straightened my shirt.

“Hey Mom. Dad. It’s good to see you both. Do you want to sit?”

Dad reached over, giving me the handshake I originally offered. He had a warm smile on his face.



“It really is good to see you, Ryan. It’s been far too long,” Dad said. I nodded, the feeling of unease spreading. My parents seemed different from my memories of them, and it was hard to wrap my brain around their behavior. They finally sat, which allowed me a moment to collect my thoughts.

“Tell us how you are. How you’ve been. How long are you staying in Austin? Do you need a place to stay?” Mom asked, barely taking a breath between her rapid fire questions.

“Slow down, Caroline. Let the boy speak,” Dad said with a chuckle. His laugh was foreign to me. I tried to memorize the sound.

“I’m good. Life is good. I love Portland, but it has been nice to be back in Texas. I have a dog, Duke. Work is good, I enjoy my job and I have a great boss. I don’t really know how long I will be in town. I’m playing it day to day. I guess there’s not really much else to tell,” I said nervously.

“Anyone special in your life?” Mom asked. I took a long drink of water and considered how to answer that. I went with a version of the truth.

“Not really,” I said, shifting on my chair.

“I know this is a little awkward,” Mom said, her voice low, “But I am really glad you agreed to meet with us. We have been wanting to sit and talk with you for a long time, Ryan. We have a lot to say to you.”

“Oh?” I asked. It was really all I could manage to articulate. I felt odd and uncomfortable with both of them sitting across from me. I picked at my fingernails and tried not to fidget.

“I guess I may as well dive right into it,” she started, “I know I have never been easy on you. I know I never treated you like a mother should. But I want you to know something. Your father and I have changed in the past few years. In our older age, we see that our parenting style pushed you away. We just wanted you to excel in life, to be the best. We let our dreams for you overshadow the important things, like being present in your life. We see now that we were wrong in the way we handled things. I am so sorry, Ryan,” Mom said, sounding genuine.

“We started therapy a few years ago and we still go to this day. She has helped us understand our past mistakes. We also started taking yoga classes. We go to meditation and yoga

retreats several times a year. We've had an awakening, so to speak," Dad said.

"I've been wanting to meet up with you, to show you that we have changed. But you don't return my calls, and I don't blame you. I've never given you a reason to want a relationship with me. We've done a poor job being your parents, but we'd like to make it right. If you'll give us the chance," Mom said, her eyes filling with tears. I was stunned into silence. I struggled to find words, but none came. All I could do was look at them both, seeing how the years had changed their features. They both looked relaxed, softer, less intimidating. Maybe they really had changed, it certainly seemed like they had. I was unsure if I trusted them. I had been burned by my parents so many times.

"Would that be okay, Ryan? Can we work on mending our family?" Dad asked as he broke the silence. I gathered myself and slowly began to nod. I had prayed for this moment when I was a little boy, desperately seeking their love and acceptance. I had flashes of memories of sitting in my parents' large office, trying to get their attention with a game or a drawing I had done. It never worked; their love and affection was always too far out of reach. Was it possible that the time

had finally come for them to open their arms to me? The possibility helped to thaw the ice I had formed around my heart. I wanted to protect myself from getting hurt by them again, but more than that I wanted to take the risk, to have them love me the way I had always wanted to be loved.

“I think I would really like that,” I said quietly. Mom’s smile grew wide, causing her face to wrinkle around her eyes and mouth. Seeing her as an older woman was startling. Her fragility was endearing, she no longer seemed larger than life. I relaxed into the feeling. I wanted to embrace her, to feel the warmth of the love I had wanted from her for so long. I sat on my hands to keep from jumping from my seat, needing to guard my feelings where they were concerned. I would let them into my life, but I was still afraid of the possibility of getting disappointed. Had they truly changed?

“Thank you. Thank you for meeting us, for giving us a chance,” Mom said. She wiped tears from her face.

“What about Jason? Have y’all seen him recently?” I asked.

“Oh yes, we fly up to New York every chance we get to see our grandkids. The girls are so sweet, you really need to

meet them,” Dad gushed. Mom took out her phone and started showing me picture after picture.

“This was all of us at Christmas this year. Lilly is a hoot, she loves to play dress up and she forced your dad to dress up like an elf. And Bella can play the violin so beautifully it could make you cry,” Mom said while I looked through the photos. It made me sad to think of my absence from their lives. I made a mental note to call my brother. We used to be close, maybe we could be again.

“You should call your brother,” Mom said softly. I was as if she had read my thoughts. I nodded to her and handed her phone back.

“I’m glad you’re here. How is Allie? How did y’all reconnect?” Mom asked. She took a sip of her water and waited for my reply.

“Now that’s a story you might not believe.” I took a deep breath and told them the whole story of how I donated blood and Allie happened to receive it. Both of my parents had a wide eyed, mouth opened, shocked expressions painted on their aging faces.

“You’re kidding me. That seems impossible. It’s almost like it’s...” she trailed off.

“Fate?” I asked.

“Fate,” she said, her eyes wider than before.

“I know. As soon as I saw her name in the email I knew I had to come here. As if God himself was dragging me by the arm.”

“So is she feeling better? Why did she need blood?” Dad asked. I thought for a moment before answering his question. I didn’t know much about Allie’s cancer, and I didn’t feel like it was my business to share details about her private life without her permission.

“I’m not sure. We haven’t had conversations about her health yet. I’ve only been here a couple of days and I am trying to take it slow with her. I don’t want to scare her off. She has a daughter, there’s not much room for error,” I explained. Mom gave me an understanding look.

“I’m glad you’ve found her. I’ve never seen you happier than the years you were together. I am truly sorry if I played any part in the reason you both parted ways,” Mom said. I was going to protest, to tell her that none of that was her fault, but that wasn’t entirely true. I felt so much pressure from them to become a doctor. So much so that I didn’t offer to follow Allie to Thailand the second she knew she was

accepted for the internship. My life's greatest regret. So instead of protesting, I simply nodded.

“Maybe this is your second chance with her. Maybe this is a second chance for all of us,” Dad said. He took my mother's hand in his. They looked so happy.

“How is work for you both?” I asked, changing the subject to something lighter.

“We are planning to retire at the end of next year,” Mom said. Her words made me spit some of my drink out onto the table.

“Retire? You? Dad? No way.”

“I told you, Ryan. Our priorities have changed. We have plenty of money to live the rest of our lives comfortably. We want to spend more time with Jason, and hopefully with you. We want to travel around the country, go to retreats, and see places we have never seen. Life is too short to work until you're dead,” Mom said. Her words shocked me. I thought she would literally work until she killed over.

“Good for y'all. I am really happy to hear that. Once you guys retire, maybe I can come up to visit more often,” I said, extending my own olive branch.

“When do you go back to Portland?” Mom asked.

“I will make the long drive back on Thursday. I couldn’t fly because I wanted to bring my dog,” I explained. My dad nodded and took a sip of his drink. A small awkward silence followed. I had not spoken to my parents in so long and I was trying to navigate through all of my feelings. Mom was fingering her drink, swirling around the liquid before she looked up at me.

“I love you, Ryan. I have never said that to you enough and I am starting today. I love you. I loved you when you were a tiny boy with that mop of curls on your head and I love you now. I love you,” she said, becoming emotional again.

“I love you too, son. So very much. You are a good man and I am proud to be your father,” Dad said. His words hit me straight in the chest. I didn’t know I needed to hear those words until they were spoken aloud.

“I love y’all, too,” I said, still feeling rather uncomfortable. “I’m sorry it has taken me this long to come around. We will all do better. I’ll be here next Christmas, that’s a promise,” I said, meaning it.



“I would love it if we could do weekly phone calls,” Mom requested.

“You got it,” I said laughing. We spent the rest of brunch catching up, learning about one another. It was refreshing. There was so much happiness forming in my chest. I couldn’t wait to get back to Allie and tell her about it. She would be so excited about how well the brunch had gone. I remembered that it was her idea for me to call my parents. I was so grateful to her. Without her pushing me, I may never have seen this side of them. Allie was magic, and being around her was changing my life. Being around her was filling in the blanks. I never wanted to leave her orbit. I didn’t know what was next for us, our future seeming uncertain as it always had, but I wouldn’t let her go again without a fight. I would hang on for dear life.

Chapter 26

Allie

January 2006

“How will I contact you over there?” Fin asked me as we folded clothes on the floor of my apartment bedroom.

“My phone won’t work in Bangkok, so once I get settled I will set up my email, that will be easiest at first,” I said. I could feel myself biting my lower lip; the nerves were setting in.

“I can’t believe you’re going to Thailand! By yourself. It’s so brave and so exciting,” Fin said dreamily. She was right, I was going by myself. Without Ryan. The thought made my stomach ill, even though that had been the plan all along. In the months following my acceptance to the internship, things had been tense at home. Ryan had been distant, as if he was preparing his heart for my absence. I tried my best to keep a brave face, but my own heart was already breaking. I knew if I turned down the internship I would regret it for the rest of my life. I didn’t want to live with regrets, though I knew my decision to leave might lead to just that. I prayed I didn’t regret leaving Ryan behind so that I could pursue my own dreams. I had to believe that going was the right path for me. I didn’t want to give up my spot for the internship when I had worked so hard to accomplish my goal. My dad was so proud

of me when I told him that they had offered me the position overseas. I knew he would be disappointed if I changed my plans to stay behind for a boy. Even if that boy was Ryan. So I forged on, hoping against all odds Ryan and I would make it through the coming years apart.

“Where’s Ryan today?” Fin asked, reading into my thoughts.

“Class, I think.”

“Are things okay between the two of you?”

“I don’t know, Fin. He is distant. I know he’s hurting. He doesn’t want me to go, but he knows I don’t want him to ask me to stay. It isn’t fair. There isn’t a good solution,” I said, my eyes filling up with tears.

“It will work out if it’s supposed to,” she said, squeezing my hand.

“That’s just it. It’s starting to feel like it’s *not* supposed to work out. He is already pushing me away. How can we maintain a long distant relationship when we can barely keep one together under the same roof?” I couldn’t stop the tears from falling, the reality of my situation was hitting me square in the chest.

“He loves you, it’s obvious he does.” Fin said, trying to make me feel better.

“I know he does. I love him too, more than anything. But maybe that’s not enough. We both would have to sacrifice something monumental to be together. We would have to change our dreams. It appears neither of us are willing to do that.” I wiped snot from my nose, my tears falling freely.

“I wish I had some great advice for you, Al. But you’re right, it’s a hard situation. There’s no obvious or easy solution.”

“I know. I’ve been over it a million times in my head. We either make it long distance, or we don’t make it at all,” I said.

“How many days until you leave?” Fin asked.

“A week from tomorrow.”

“Well then there’s still time for you guys to have some honest conversations,” Fin said.

“Maybe so, but he’s never home lately. Ryan avoids things that hurt him. I’m currently a thing that’s hurting him,” I explained.

“But you’re hurting too, Al,” Fin said sadly.

“Don’t I know it,” I said, my voice a broken whisper.

“You know what will make you feel better? A good to-do list.” I laughed through my tears. Fin absolutely loved to make to-do lists.

“I’m serious! Let’s make a list of things you have left to do, it will take your mind off your relationship troubles for a bit.”

“Okay, okay. Fine. We can make a to-do list,” I said. I stood up from the floor to fetch a pen and paper. I opened my desk drawer, finding a pink fuzzy notebook with a matching pen, a gift I had received from Fin that year for Christmas. I hadn’t used it yet, and the spine cracked as I opened it up to the first page. I sat back down next to Fin, legs crossed and pen ready.

“Okay, step one. Finish packing,” Fin said.

“Okay, got it down. What else?” I asked.

“Step two. Make a travel bag. You’re going to be on a super long flight so we need to stock up on trashy magazines and candy.”

“Oh I like that step. Can we get some for tonight, too?” I asked. My spirits were already lifting.

“Duh, girl. Write it down.”

“Trashy magazines and candy, got it,” I said, pen in the air.

“Go ahead and add some wine to that grocery list,” Fin said. “We may need some tonight while we finish all this packing.”

“Way ahead of you,” I said. I had already written wine down on the notepad.

“Okay, step three. Make sure you have your ID and passport handy. You don’t want to be rushing around on the morning you leave looking for your passport. Been there, done that.”

“Definitely. I haven’t used it in forever. I think Ryan put it in the safe actually,” I said. I stood from my spot on the floor and walked over to the large safe Ryan kept in our room. He insisted we get the ugly steel safe when we moved in. I didn’t have many items that would be considered valuable to someone else, but Ryan had said we needed it, his wealthy upbringing shining through.

“I don’t know the code,” I said.

“Call him and ask.”

“No, I don’t want to bother him while he’s in class.”

“I bet you anything the code is your birthday,” Fin said. I typed the numbers of my birthday into the keypad, but the lock didn’t budge.

“Nope, not my birthday,” I said, slightly disappointed.

“Try the date y’all met.” I bit on my lower lip, shifting from foot to foot. I had been biting my lower lip a lot since finding out about Thailand, and I had formed a tiny blister from the bad habit. I typed in the date we first met; the day he almost trampled me on campus. I smiled at the memory as the door to the safe swung open easily.

“See, told you he loves you,” Fin said matter-of-factly.

“Love has never been the issue,” I told her. I reached into the safe, moving items around that I didn’t need. There were a few rolls of cash inside, and some family heirlooms given to Ryan by his mother. I also noticed some sentimental items from the life of our relationship. Concert tickets, photos, gifts I had given him. I felt a sharp pain in my chest. I reached in the back, looking for my passport, and my hand landed on a small box. I pulled it out and my heart stopped beating. Fin practically jumped from off of the floor and was at my side in less than a second.

“What the hell is that?” she squealed. I couldn’t form words. I could only stare at the box; my mouth was wide open.

“Is that an engagement ring?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. I shoved the box back into the safe with trembling hands.

“What are you? Nuts? Get that out, let’s look at it!” Fin screamed.

“I can’t, I shouldn’t. It’s probably not,” I stammered.

“You definitely should and it definitely is,” Fin said. Her eyes were wide and wild.

“Maybe just one little peek,” I said. Fin started jumping up and down in excitement. I pulled the box back from the safe; my hands were shaking so hard I almost dropped it. The box was blue velvet and it screamed luxury. Whatever was inside was expensive, that much was clear. I slowly opened the box, scared of what lay inside.

“Oh my heaven,” Fin breathed as the top lifted open. My vision blurred as I took in the content of the box. The ring was a thick rose gold band with a large pillow cut diamond in the center. On both sides of the diamond were two sapphires, the deep blue color of my eyes. There was no mistaking it, the



ring was meant for me. I slammed the box shut and shoved it back into the safe. I made sure to put everything back exactly how I had found it and I shut and locked the door.

“What are you doing? You didn’t get your passport,” Fin said.

“I don’t want him to know I saw the ring,” I breathed out.

“Oh, good call. Is he going to ask you to marry him?”

“I- I don’t know,” I stammered.

“What will you do if he does?” Fin asked. I threw myself onto my bed and buried myself into my pillow. “I don’t know, Fin. Marriage doesn’t fix any of our issues.”

“Don’t think about that. Just answer this question. If Ryan asks you to marry him, all other issues aside, do you want to say yes?” she asked. I considered her question for half of a second before easily finding my answer.

“Of course. Of course I’d say yes,” I whispered. And I knew it was true. If Ryan asked me to be his, I could never say no to him. If he asked me to be his wife, I would say yes in a heartbeat.

Ryan

January 2023

Sunday

I was still reeling from my lunch with my parents when I received a text from Allie. Her name popping up on my cell phone screen caused a goofy grin to appear on my face. It was crazy the amount of butterflies I felt by just seeing her name in print. The amount of feelings I felt for her was overwhelming. The enormity of them was life-altering and absolutely terrifying. I found myself wondering how I spent so many years of my life without her. The memory of her was likely the reason I had never been able to get close with anyone else. It was as if my heart had been waiting for her. I wondered if her heart had been waiting for me too. I read the text, feeling like a smitten teenage boy with hormones driving my every action.

*Allie: Getting ready for our date. What should I wear?*

The text turned my grin into a full blown smile.

*Ryan: Wear anything you want, you're beautiful*

I knew that text would annoy her but I couldn't help myself.

*Allie: Thank you, but you know what I am asking.*

*Casual or dressy?*

I laughed at her response, knowing that was exactly what she would say.

*Ryan: Casual. Just a quiet dinner out on the town, if that's okay.*

*Allie: Casual sounds great. Pick me up at 7?*

*Ryan: Yes, I will walk from the couch to your bedroom door at 6:55 sharp*

*Allie: No peeking, stay out of my room*

*Ryan: Yes ma'am*

I stuffed my phone back into my pocket, my smile never left my face. I looked at my watch, it was three in the afternoon so I had a few hours to kill. An idea sparked and I pulled my phone back out to text Allie again.

*Ryan: Could I take Sarah to do something fun while you get ready?*

I noticed the three dots appear and then disappear. I waited, but no response immediately came. Again, the three text dots appeared and disappeared, as if Allie was unsure of what she wanted to reply.

*Ryan: No pressure if you aren't comfortable with that*

I waited again, hoping my request had not made Allie feel uncomfortable. I only wanted to get to know Sarah a little better, considering I was planning to date her mother.

*Allie: Okay, that's fine. Where are you going to take her?*

I relaxed a little as her text came through, showing me that she trusted me with her daughter. I wanted Allie to know I was worth trusting.

*Ryan: There's a local artist doing a pop up show by campus. I think she would like it.*

I saw a poster for the show in the lobby of the country club. I immediately thought of Sarah, thinking that she might enjoy seeing the work of a local and successful painter.

*Allie: Yeah, she would probably love that. I'll tell her to get ready.*

*Ryan: Okay, I will be there in ten minutes to pick her up.*

I felt both excited and slightly nervous to get to know Sarah better. It was important to me that she liked me. I was already feeling more invested in Allie than I even wanted to admit to myself. I looked down at my outfit, hoping that my jeans, white shirt, and tan jacket were appropriate for an art show. I then remembered I was in Austin, where no one would bat an eye at what I was wearing. I had never been to an art show before, but I thought Sarah would like it, so I was excited to take her. It didn't seem to me like Sarah got to be a kid very often. It wasn't Allie's fault, but it made me sad for Sarah. She was forced to grow up so fast, and she did it with such grace. I admired her for all she had been through in her life up to that point. I was sitting in my truck, looking at the text conversation between Allie and I, when I suddenly became nervous. What if Allie didn't feel as strongly as I did? What if I was in over my head? I took a deep breath as I put my keys into the ignition. Allie had the power to break me, it had happened before. I prayed it wouldn't happen again. I wasn't sure I could bear it.

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Twenty minutes later Sarah was getting into my truck, a huge smile plastered on her face. I could tell she was excited and it made me feel good that I could do something to bring some fun into her day. She was dressed in a cream sweater and jeans, looking so much like her mother that it was jarring. I wondered briefly what her father must have looked like before he died. There seemed to be no traces of him in her features. She was her mother, through and through. The only notable difference in her physical appearance was that her nose took a slight turn upward and there was the height difference.

“Thanks for bringing me here, Ryan. I have never seen a real art show,” Sarah said excitedly.

“Me either. I think it will be fun.”

“What kind of art is it?” she asked.

“I think the flier said oil paint.”

“Oils are my absolute favorite,” Sarah said, clapping her hands together. She was bouncing in the seat, unable to contain her excitement.

“I know nothing about art so you will have to tell me what you think,” I told her as we drove the busy streets. Before long, we were pulling up to a small studio space near

campus. There were several people lined up to enter the show and I took that as a good sign. I did not appear to be underdressed, which made me slightly more relaxed to be there. We both got out of the truck and Sarah took off toward the door of the studio before I even had it locked. I joined her in line, our tickets I had purchased online were pulled up on the screen of my phone.

“Enjoy the show,” the doorman said as he scanned my tickets. Sarah’s eyes grew wide with wonder as we stepped into the space. I looked around the gallery, taking in the large painting hanging brilliantly on the white walls.

“Oh it’s so beautiful,” she said breathlessly. And it was. The artist used bright colors, bold reds and blues popping from the canvases. The pieces were edgy and resembled street art with a sophisticated twist. Sarah walked to the first piece and held her hand up like she might touch it, but it just hovered there a few inches from the paint. I noticed a slight tremor to her hand. She turned to face me, her smile so wide it was blinding.

“Can you believe this?” she asked. I walked over and joined her in front of the piece she was admiring. It was truly a masterpiece. The painting showed a small African American



boy with wide blue eyes holding a large bowl of what appeared to be sea glass. The colors of the glass were shining brightly hues of green, blue and yellow. It was entrancing the way the colors were reflecting into his eyes. I understood why she loved it.

“It is incredible,” I agreed.

“I want to make art this beautiful,” she said.

“I’ve seen your work, Sarah, and there is no doubt in my mind that you will fill a gallery one day.”

“You really think so?”

“I know so,” I said to her. I believed my words. She grabbed my hand and pulled me to the next piece. She stood in front of it, her head tilted to the side. She looked radiantly happy, so I snapped a picture of her and texted it to Allie. More people began to trickle into the studio, voices were hushed and the room vibrated with energy. It felt as if there was an understanding between everyone that we were all among greatness. The art pieces were fantastic, and I was enjoying myself more than I expected.

“Sarah, look, there’s food!” I said as I pointed to the table filled with appetizers and drinks. We made our way over

and loaded our hands with snacks. Sarah popped a shrimp into her mouth and scanned the room with her eyes. I noticed her gaze fall upon some college kids grouped together. She seemed to look at them longingly, like she was desperate for a group of friends.

“I think you should sign up for an art class. You don’t need the help, but it might be cool to meet some other kids your age who are interested in art,” I suggested. It was none of my business, but I couldn’t help myself.

“I’ve thought about it, but there just hasn’t been a lot of time. Cancer is a full time job. Mom can’t usually drive me around to things like that,” Sarah admitted.

“Maybe once you’re driving on your own?” I asked.

“I wish. I haven’t had time to practice at all. I will probably never get my license.”

“What if I helped you? I’m an excellent driver,” I offered.

“You’d do that for me?” she asked.

“Of course. We could have our first lesson today. That is, if it’s okay with your mom.”

“Okay! Yeah! That would be awesome. I’ll call her,” Sarah said. She took out her phone and dialed her mom’s number.

“I want verbal confirmation myself if she says yes,” I said. I focused on my snacks while Sarah called and ran the idea by Allie. Before long, she handed the phone over to me, but I could tell by her facial expression that her mom had said yes. She was bouncing up and down again, excitement overtaking her.

“Hello?” I said into the phone.

“Are you trying to become her favorite person?” was Allie’s response. I laughed loudly before saying, “No, I’m trying to become yours.” I could almost hear her smile through the phone. “No highways, Ryan. Take her to a neighborhood and show her the basics,” Allie said.

“You got it, Al.” We said our goodbyes and I handed Sarah’s phone back to her.

“Come on, let’s look at the rest of the paintings before we go,” Sarah said, pulling me back onto the art room floor. I followed willingly, ready to see what else the artist had created. Several snacks and several paintings later, we were

leaving the studio and headed out for Sarah's first driving lesson.

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“Okay, press down the brake and put the car into drive,” I said to Sarah as she adjusted her hands on the wheel of the car. Ten and two, just as I had taught her minutes before. Her tongue was slightly out of her mouth in concentration.

“Good, now take your foot off the brake and slowly press down on the gas.”

“Okay, like this?” she asked nervously.

“Perfect, you're doing great. Don't be nervous, relax your shoulders and muscles.” She did as I said and eased onto the calm neighborhood street.

“Check your mirrors. Can you see behind you?” I asked. She looked, then nodded.

“We’re going to take a right up here, push up on your blinker when you get close.” Sarah continued to do as I said, learning quickly.

“Good job. The secret to being a great driver is confidence and calmness. You are doing really well for your first lesson,” I told her. She continued to drive around the block, working on her left and right hand turns. I turned on some music, enjoying the views outside and Sarah’s easy company.

“You think I will be ready to take the test by my birthday in the fall?”

“That gives you plenty of time to get ready. I will help you anytime I’m around. Which I am hoping will be a lot,” I told her.

“You really like my mom, don’t you?” she asked.

“I do. I always have, if I am being honest.”

“I can tell she likes you, too. She doesn’t date. Ever.”

“Good to know,” I told her. Her openness with me made me smile. “Pull over up here, it’s getting close to dinner time. I wouldn’t want to be late for my date,” I said.

“No, we definitely can’t have you late for your big date,” she agreed, pulling the car gently to the side of the shoulder. We switched places in the truck, me taking over as driver. Sarah turned up the music and a Britney Spears classic blared through the speakers. We laughed and sang loudly together; the song was familiar to us both.

“Ryan, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship,” Sarah joked as the song winded down.

“Me too, kid. Me too.”

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Sarah

January 2023

Sunday

When we got to the apartment, Mom was locked in her room, getting ready I was sure. There was soft country music playing on the stereo, which was what Mom always played when she was nervous. The soft country twangs of the singer's voices helped to calm and center her. The look on Ryan's face told me that he also knew this about my mom. He walked over to the stereo and turned the music up louder for good measure.

“Can I use your bathroom to get ready?” Ryan asked me.

“Of course, it’s all yours,” I said to him. Ryan walked to his bag to grab fresh clothes.

“Hey Ryan,” I said, just as he was about to walk into the bathroom. He paused and turned around. “Thank you for today. This may have been the best day of my life,” I said to him. He smiled at me and nodded his head.

“It was a great day,” he agreed.

“And it’s not over yet,” I said, looking toward my mom’s bedroom door.

“It’s not over yet,” he agreed, his goofy grin completely infectious.

“Ya’ll dont leave without saying bye,” I told him.

“You got it, kid.”

I wouldn’t normally like an adult calling me kid, but I liked it when Ryan said it. Maybe just because I liked Ryan. He was fun. He brought life to the apartment. He brought life to us. Ryan turned around and shut the bathroom door behind him. I grabbed a soda from the refrigerator and went to my mom’s bedroom door and knocked.



“Mom, it’s me. Can I come in?” The door flew open as Mom grabbed my arm and pulled me inside. There were clothes and shoes everywhere, thrown all about the room.

“I have no idea what to wear. And now I’m worried about the wig. What if he thinks it’s stupid? None of these pants fit right. Is a dress too much? Should I wear those cream boots?” she rambled on and on.

“Woah, Mom. Slow down. I got this.” I walked over to her bed where she had every shirt she had ever bought laying out. I looked through them all, tapping my finger to the side of my face as I examined each item. We hadn’t found a new outfit while shopping. Mom didn’t like how anything fit her. We did, however, find some pretty makeup that she liked. My eyes landed on a black silk blouse that came up high in the front but dipped low in the back. I tossed it to her. “Put this on,” I instructed. I walked over to her chair, where all of her pants were piled high. I grabbed a pair of stylish high waisted dark jeans that hit at the ankle. “And these,” I said, tossing them over. She pulled them on and turned and looked into the mirror.

“Tuck the shirt into the pants,” I said. She did and the look started to come together. I handed over her slim black

Chanel belt and she slipped it through the belt loops.

“Perfect. Now for shoes. Let’s do simple black ballet flats.” Mom went to her closet and looked around until she found them. She looked sleek and stylish.

“Come sit,” I told her, pulling a small stool in front of her mirror.

“I can’t wear this shirt without a bra,” Mom said as she sat down.

“Sure you can, you look hot.” I grabbed the wig from her dresser and started to arrange it on her head.

“I don’t know about the wig,” Mom said nervously.

“Would you just trust me for a second?” I asked impatiently. I brushed down the wig in the back and pulled it into a low ponytail. I pulled some pieces out around her face to frame her features. I walked over to her jewelry box and picked out a diamond tennis bracelet and a simple pair of diamond stud earrings. Mom could not keep the smile from forming on her face. She looked sleek, slim, stylish, and perfect.

“You look like a supermodel, and I mean it,” I told her.

“Okay, fine. You were right about the wig,” she said.

“And the outfit,” I pointed out.

“And the outfit,” she confirmed. She gave me a hug and we both turned and looked into the mirror together.

“What would I do without you?” Mom asked. She said that phrase to me often.

“Add some pink lipstick and you’ll be ready to roll,” I said, as I handed her over a leopard print clutch purse. She grabbed it just as we heard a knock at the door. I walked over and opened the door, gesturing with my arms open wide.

“Come on in, she’s ready.”

Ryan’s eyes landed on my mom and I saw his adam’s apple bob up and down as he swallowed hard. His breathing stopped as they stared at each other.

“You look...wow,” he said.

“Thank you,” Mom said shyly. They stared at each other some more, no one moving.

“That’s my cue to go. You crazy kids have fun,” I said, interrupting the thick silence. My voice broke my mom from her spell.

“You’ll be okay, Sarah?” Mom asked, her tone unsure.

“I will be fine. Don’t worry about me. You guys go have fun. I will lock the door behind you. I’m just going to paint and watch movies.”

“I left twenty bucks on the table for you to order take-out. And I told Mrs. Reynolds in the apartment next door that you would be here alone and she said you could call her with any concerns,” Mom said. I rolled my eyes at her.

“Mom, I am not a kid anymore,” I said.

“You are most certainly still a kid, miss thing,” Mom replied. I gave her a playful shove on the shoulder. “Go, I am fine,” I said again. “I love you. Ryan, take good care of her,” I said.

“You got it, kid. I took Duke out already so he should be good until we get back,” Ryan said. He took Mom’s hand into his. “Ready?” he asked. He made eye contact with her that could melt steel. Mom nodded and I waved goodbye.

After they left, I made my way to my bedroom where Duke was already perched on the end of my bed. “Duke, I think you and I may end up being brother and sister when all this is said and done,” I joked to the dog. My mom looked

absolutely smitten with Ryan. There was so much electricity between them it was almost uncomfortable to be near it.

Whatever was blossoming felt real and long lasting. I sat down at my computer desk and opened up my laptop. The day with Ryan had been inspiring. I was itching to paint, but I was also itching to do research into some local art classes. I was a teenager, and I needed friends. Especially if Mom was going to start dating Ryan. I didn't want her to feel guilty about spending time with him. If I had someone to hang out with, it would help.

“Okay, Duke. Let's find some friends,” I said absently to the dog as I typed *Austin art classes for high school students* into my computer's search bar. Several promising class options popped up. I clicked on a few different ones, reading through the class times and costs. I frowned, finding most of them to be relatively expensive. I knew Mom didn't have a lot of spare money. Grandpa's money kept us afloat, but I wasn't sure we could swing the price of one of these classes. I looked for ones that might offer scholarships, adding that to the search bar. Three different options appeared. One class was for clay media, one for sketching, and one for mixed media. I clicked on the mixed media, hoping some painting would be involved.

“Welcome young Austin artists! Our class is offered on Monday and Wednesday nights from 6 pm to 8 pm. We teach mixed media including, but not limited to, acrylic painting, free hand sketch, portrait drawing and clay. Send samples of your work to the email below to apply for a scholarship for our classes.”

The article supplied an email address at the bottom, and I quickly uploaded and sent some of my favorite pieces. I was giddy with excitement and anticipation. I kicked my feet around in the chair and let out a squeal, causing Duke to lift his head off of my bed and look at me sideways.

“Sorry boy, I’m just happy. Really happy,” I said. I walked over and took his big head in my hands. I kissed the top of his nose and earned myself a lick on the face. I giggled and nuzzled close to him.

“What should we order? Pizza or Chinese?” I asked Duke. He gave me a bored look.

“I was thinking pizza, too,” I said. I dialed the number to my favorite pizza joint. I placed my order, and decided to get back on the computer while I waited for my delivery. I searched online for a driver’s education packet. One that I could fill out and complete at home instead of taking a class

with an instructor. I was banking on Ryan giving me more lessons. I craved the freedom and the ability to help out Mom more by being able to drive her places or pick up groceries. I found what I was looking for and ordered the packet. It was scheduled to arrive in a little over a week. I was giddy, on cloud nine from everything that had happened that day. I twirled around my room, Duke's eyes on me with his head tilted in a question. I laughed and flopped down backwards on my bed.

“Things are looking up, Duke. Things are looking up.”

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Allie

January 2023

Sunday

“Remember that time we went to that little Italian restaurant off Main street? And you spilled red wine all over my white dress after you got sloppy drunk with Dean at that sorority party?” I asked Ryan after we sat down for dinner on

our date. He snorted out a laugh, his head thrown back and his eyes bright and stunning.

“Oh my gosh, I had forgotten about that. What made you think of it?” he asked, his laughter turned into an amused grin.

“This place, it reminds me of that restaurant,” I said, the past memory still running through my mind. The cream tablecloths and loud Italian music were a mirror of the restaurant from our past. It wasn’t the same one, but it was so similar.

“It does look the same, doesn’t it?” he asked. He looked around the dining room.

“Let’s order white wine this time,” I joked.

“But you’re not wearing white so we’re safe.” He popped the menu open and shot me a wink. I felt myself warm under his gaze.

“What will you both be having to drink this evening?” the waiter asked as he approached our table. He wore a black suit and had a starched white napkin folded across his arm.

“Red wine, please. The house blend,” Ryan said, sending yet another wink my way. I was going to be a melted puddle of lust by the end of the dinner if he kept winking at me like that.



I nodded my agreement to the server and he left us alone at the table again.

“You’re taking my breath away over there, Allie,” Ryan said quietly.

“It’s not weird that I’m wearing this?” I asked as I nervously touched the wig.

“You look beautiful. The color is spot on. But you didn’t have to do that for me. I thought you looked beautiful before, too.”

“Honestly, I got it for me. I wanted to feel like myself again. I wanted to look pretty,” I admitted.

“Mission accomplished,” he said. He took a sip from the water that was waiting for us on the table. I blushed at his attention, the feeling of desire so foreign to me.

“Do you miss work? And your friends?” I asked him as we started to fall into easy conversation.

“Not even a little bit. I am exactly where I want to be.”

“I’m dying to hear about how lunch with your parents went, but I didn’t want to pry right away,” I told him. Before he could answer, the waiter came and set down our wine. The

red liquid looked rich and delicious and I grabbed my glass greedily.

“An appetizer?” the waiter asked. He flipped open his small notebook ready to take our order.

“Stuffed mushrooms?” I asked, and Ryan nodded approvingly. The waiter was off again, and Ryan’s eyes shifted eagerly to me, devouring me with an intensity that I felt all the way to my toes. He cleared his throat and took a sip of ice water, as if to cool off his thoughts. I wondered if his thoughts about me were as impure as my thoughts about him. I stared at him as he sipped his wine, memorizing the new wrinkles on his face. I wanted to imprint each freckle into my mind, each line into my soul. I wanted to live inside that moment, letting the rest of my life sit on pause for a while. He was so beautiful; so handsome it made my brain hurt. I wondered how on earth he was still single, and I debated on whether I should ask him. I swirled my wine around in my glass, feeling it warm the inside of my belly. The night felt wide open with possibilities. I sat back in my chair, letting the wine and the company fill my tired soul. Ryan sat his wine back down, ready to tell me about his meal with his parents.

“I have been dying to tell you about lunch, too. It was honestly great. This is going to be so hard for you to believe, but it seems like maybe they have changed. They want to get to know me again and be a part of my life. They do yoga now. They go to retreats and everything. And they want to retire. Can you believe that? My parents. Retire. It’s mind blowing. I didn’t believe it at first, but they seemed sincere,” Ryan said.

“I love that, Ryan. I have always hoped that you and your parents would mend your relationship. I am so happy it went well,” I said, truly overjoyed for him.

“I know. I really had given up hope that we would ever be close. But it feels possible now. I guess we will see what happens, but either way I am really glad I went to lunch to see them. I also told them I was here to visit you,” Ryan said.

“Oh man, how did that go over? Your parents were never a fan of mine.”

“Mom was never a fan of anyone. It had nothing to do with you and the amazing person you are. I really don’t care what they think though. I’ve always wanted to be where you are,” he said. I blushed deeply at his comment.

“When your face gets pink like that it’s impossible to not want to kiss you,” Ryan whispered, heat penetrating his words.

I shifted in my chair, letting his words roll over me. Flashes of our past played like a slideshow in my mind. His hands gripping my hips. His tongue sliding down my stomach. His teeth biting me teasingly on the tops of my breasts. I cleared my throat and took a long sip of wine.

“Something on your mind?” Ryan asked, a knowing look on his face. I blushed deeper and he bit his lower lip.

“Stop that or I won’t make it through dinner,” he said. I cleared my throat again. I was so flustered that I almost dropped my wine glass when the waiter walked behind me and asked for our dinner order. The red wine sloshed onto the white tablecloth, causing Ryan to roar with laughter. We ordered as I tried to talk myself down from the thoughts coursing through my head.

“Did you and Sarah have fun today? She looked pretty happy in that picture you sent me,” I said, trying to change the subject. My knees were shaking and I felt a drop of sweat drip down my back. I needed to get my mind off of his lips.

“It was a blast. I don’t consider myself an art enthusiast, but it was impossible not to notice how amazing the painter was. I wish you had been with us. The colors were so vibrant. I think you would have liked it. Plus, the snacks were really

good. Free food is the way to my heart. Thank you for letting me take her,” he said.

“No, thank you. She doesn’t get to do things like that very often. And I haven’t been able to start her drivers ed either, so thanks for that too.”

“She is a natural. I will have her cruising the streets of Austin in no time.”

“I can’t help but want to keep her a little girl for longer. It is so weird watching her grow into an adult,” I said, a lump forming in my throat.

“You’re doing a great job. She’s an excellent kid,” he said, taking a sip of his wine. I felt my hands fidget in my lap.

“She really is the best kid. Her artistic talent truly amazes me. And she is really smart, she barely needs my help at all with her home-school work. I hope with my chemo round being complete I can get her back into school. She needs a life of her own. She needs kids her age that she can connect with,” I said. Ryan looked like he wanted to say something, like he was deciding whether he was going to speak or not. I had a feeling I knew what he was going to ask me. I had brought up my chemotherapy treatments, leaving the door open for him to ask questions about my health. I took a

deep breath, preparing myself for what was to come next.

Maybe I had done it on purpose, maybe I was ready to get that conversation out of the way.

“Can I ask about your illness? Is that something you’re comfortable talking about?” Ryan asked. He looked nervous. His hands were shaking slightly and he cupped them together trying to force them still.

“We can talk about it. What do you want to know?” I asked. I fiddled with my napkin to keep my hands busy.

“Whatever you want to tell me.”

I took a deep breath before diving right in. “Where do I even start? I started feeling off when Sarah and I were still living in Thailand. I knew it was cancer before they told me. I can’t explain it, but I knew. Maybe after everything with my mom I always feared I would get sick the way she did. It isn’t the same cancer as hers, but it’s cancer, nonetheless. It was a no-brainer to move back to Austin when I found out, even though I don’t have family that ties me here. I knew the health care here in America would give me the best chance, and I didn’t want to leave Sarah without a mother, like I was at her age. The first round of treatments were fine. I mean they sucked, but it worked. At least for a little while. When I was in

remission I felt like I was standing on the edge of a cliff, waiting for someone to push me over the edge. I never thought it was over. Something in my bones told me it was only the beginning. When they told me it was back, I wasn't surprised at all. And now here we are," I said it all in one breath. I wanted it out on the table and I didn't want to talk about it anymore. Ryan took a slow breath in and out. I could see his mind working, trying to gauge how to respond to my word vomit.

"You want to know my prognosis." I said it as a statement, not a question. Ryan nodded slowly, his eyes locked into mine.

"Fifty-fifty," I said. Letting the reality of my words slowly roll over him. I shrugged as if to say, it is what it is. He swallowed and took a long sip of wine before returning his gaze to me. He was a nurse, I knew he knew how poor my prognosis sounded. The odds were definitely less than desirable. But I was a fighter, and I would fight like hell to be on the surviving side of the coin flip. After everything I had been through, I still felt strong as hell. A mighty queen warrior, my head high with dreams of triumph and defeat.

"Okay," he said simply.

“Okay,” I returned. We stared at each other in silence for a few moments, the weight of my confession threatening to drown us both. The waiter approached with our food, breaking through our intense moment like a sledgehammer. I picked up my fork and poked around my plate. My appetite was long gone.

“I’m sorry I brought it up, I didn’t want to upset you, but it doesn’t scare me off,” Ryan finally said. I looked at him, my head tilted slightly to the side.

“It should,” I said simply. He shrugged and smiled widely.

“I don’t scare easily,” he said. “Not anymore anyway.” His eyes spoke a thousand words. Words that had not yet been said between us. Words I had waited almost two decades to hear. An explanation for the last time we saw each other, when our love exploded into a million tiny fragments. I wanted to know everything, but I didn’t want the night to go down that path right when I was feeling so many things between us. I wanted the heat, the passion that was vibrating between us, I didn’t want anything to ruin that when I hadn’t felt it in so long.



“Allie, about that last day,” he started. I held my hands up, stopping him short.

“I’m not ready to discuss it yet, Ryan. I don’t want to go there right now. I just want to be on a date with you. I want to feel like a woman. I want to forget about the ugly parts of our past and I want to forget about cancer and I want to kiss you again,” I said breathlessly.

“I can do that,” he said, nodding emphatically. “I can do all of that. Especially the kissing part,” he said. His words made me laugh and I relaxed back into my chair. There were so many things we left unfinished. There were a million conversations we needed to have. Our past was messy, the ending painful and raw. My mind wandered to the last time I saw Ryan. The memory stabbed like a knife right to the gut. No matter how much time passed, the ending of our relationship never hurt less.

“But we can talk about it eventually?” he asked. I nodded, resigned to the fact that we would eventually have to have some hard conversations. Our past could not sit waiting forever.

I thought about the flight to Thailand all of those years ago, about how I cried the entire trip. The poor woman

unfortunate enough to sit next to me on the plane handed me tissue after tissue and patted my back as I sobbed into my travel pillow. I thought my tears might eventually dry up on the long flight, but they were persistent, flowing in a constant stream of sorrow down my red and swollen face. I couldn't fathom that Ryan and I would ever end, but it happened in dramatic fashion. I also thought of everything that came after our breakup. The first year without him was the hardest. The way we broke up was so abrupt and final it left an open wound that never healed. I felt it every single day that we were apart. The pain got easier over time, but it never left me.

And then, of course, there was everything else. Everything else that Ryan didn't know. I shook the thoughts out of my head as I watched Ryan eat his pasta. I didn't want to think about it on our date. I wanted to just live in the moment with him, even if I knew hard conversations were coming. We had six days together, and I planned to make them count.

## Chapter 28

Allie

January 2006

“He will be here,” Fin said for the hundredth time. My eyes filled with tears as I shook my head and checked my watch again. My plane left in two hours. I needed to get to the airport. Ryan was supposed to drive me, we were supposed to go to the airport together, but he wasn’t there. I felt so alone. Something I supposed I would have to get accustomed to.

“Try to call him again,” Fin said. She bounced from one foot to the other trying to stay warm. It was an especially chilly January day in Texas. The cold days in Austin were rare, but when they hit they hit hard. Both Fin and I were wrapped up in our coats, the air that was slapping my face caused my lips to chap. It was wild to think that I would soon be standing on the hot beaches of Thailand; the cold would be a distant memory.

We were standing outside of my apartment waiting for Ryan. It was too painful to be inside, to see the apartment void

of all of my things. I knew that I wouldn't ever share this apartment with Ryan again, knew I would never walk in the door and see him lying on the couch with his brown hair leaving its evidence of his presence on the crisp white pillows. I knew we would never cook spaghetti in our kitchen together, never see our matching coffee mugs sitting beside the stove. My heart broke as I wondered if I was doing the right thing. Why did choosing my dream have to mean losing the love of my life? Was this going to be the end of Ryan and I forever? The apartment was filled with too many memories, I couldn't be inside or I would lose the nerve to leave. I suspected that is also why Ryan hadn't been home much lately. He was in pain and he was trying to avoid me. I sighed, trying with extreme force to keep the tears from exploding onto my face. I stood in the cold, refusing to look behind me at our home. I stared straight down, refusing to look forward at the road ahead. I was at a crossroad.

“It's no use, Fin. He's not coming,” I said, knowing that it was true. His absence already felt like a giant black hole filling me from the inside, pulling my very soul into its dark blackness.

“He will be here,” she said yet again, but each time she said it, her voice had less conviction. She cut her gaze toward me and it looked like her eyes were filled with tears. Like her heart was breaking for me.

“We can’t wait any longer. You’re going to have to take me to the airport,” I said, my voice cracked on the words.

“Okay. Of course I will take you. Let’s load all of this in my car,” she said, looking toward my bags. We made quick work of putting all my chosen possessions into her vehicle. I couldn’t bring everything, I had to take some things to storage earlier in the week. Something else that I did without Ryan. He was everywhere and nowhere. Fin started her car as I allowed myself to look back only once at the apartment. Tears began to flow freely down my face. Silent, painful tears. I wondered if they would ever stop flowing. I didn’t even bother wiping them away.

“Oh Allie. What can I do?” Fin asked helplessly. I only shook my head back and forth, unable to answer with words. We rode the rest of the way to the airport with only the sounds of my heart breaking.

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I sat near my terminal, waiting for my flight to be called. I had made it on time and was able to grab a latte at the airport coffee shop and sit for a moment. Fin had stayed with me while I checked my bags, but I sent her off with a hug and a promise to keep in touch always. I willed myself to think of anything other than Ryan. I sipped at the hot latte and did a little people watching while I waited to board. Every tall brunette male that walked in my vicinity caught my attention. I kept expecting Ryan to come charging in with apologies. Surely he would show up, I kept telling myself. A young girl and her mother sat down next to me and I noticed that the small girl had her eyes on me. I turned slightly and gave her a small smile.

“You’re pretty,” the little girl said, which caused me to smile and laugh.

“Sorry, she says whatever comes into her brain,” the girl’s mother said.

“That’s because I have a big brain, Mommy,” the girl said proudly.

“I bet you do! You look like a smart girl,” I told her.

“Are you crying?” the girl asked.

“Issabel, leave the poor woman alone,” her mother said, horrified at the girl’s questions.

“No, she’s fine, I don’t mind. And yes, I have been crying a little today. Something made me sad and so crying helped me feel a little better,” I told Issabel.

“I cry when I’m sad, too. What made you feel sad?” Issabel asked. Her mother shot her an exasperated look. I smiled and gave the mom a little wink.

“It was a boy. My heart got a little broken today,” I admitted.

“Boys are soooo gross,” she said, as she stuck her finger into her mouth like she was disgusted. I laughed and nodded emphatically.

“They are gross, you are so right. This boy was special to me, though. He let me down, but I am going to be okay,” I said. I sat up a little straighter.

“I hope your heart doesn’t stay broken too long,” Issabel said. She patted my knee with her tiny hand. The sweet gesture brought the tears back into the corners of my eyes.

“Flight 10012 to Thailand is ready to board,” the announcer called overhead.

“That’s me,” I said. I grabbed my bag and stood. I looked around one last time, hoping to see Ryan running towards me. He wasn’t there.

“I hope you have a big adventure!” Issabell said, “And stay away from boys!” I laughed, the effort causing a few tears to slip down.

“Thank you, Issabel. I hope you have lots of big adventures too.” I waved to the girl and her mother and made my way to the airplane. No turning back, for better or worse I was headed to the next chapter of my life. A thought slipped into my mind as I stood outside of the terminal doors. He never asked me to marry him. He never gave me the ring. The ring I knew he had bought for me. When I chose the internship, he changed his mind about us. He decided for us both, he didn’t give me the chance to say yes. I knew at that moment, it was over. The tears didn’t stop after that.



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Ryan

January 2006

“Dude, wake up,” I heard a voice say as my eyes blinked open. I stared at the person shaking my arm. I rubbed my eyes and looked around the mostly empty library.

“You’ve been asleep right there for a while. I thought I better see if you were okay,” the stranger said as he took a step back from me. He looked at me with unease and swept his blonde hair out of his face. I must have looked like an absolute wreck for him to be looking at me that way. I felt like I had not slept since the day Allie told me she was leaving Austin. I got my bearings and wiped the drool from the side of my mouth. I had been studying in the library all morning and I guess I had fallen asleep. I looked around as I became aware of my mistake.

“What time is it?” I asked him, panic rising inside of me. Today was departure day. I fell asleep on the biggest day of my life, the day I was going to propose to Allie at the airport. The day I was going to tell her I would come with her if she would let me. The day I was going to put everything on the line for her. She was it. She was more important than my parent’s opinion of me. She was more important than medical school. I couldn’t lose her.

“It’s after four,” the guy said as he turned his back to walk away from my study desk.

“No. No no no no. That’s impossible,” I said. I scrambled upright. I started stuffing my books and papers into my bookbag, bile making its way to the back of my throat.

“Shit!” I screamed, making the eyes of every student in the library glare upon me. I felt my heart rate galloping in my chest, a panic attack creeping its way up my spine and into my chest. I rushed out of the library and ran at my full speed to my truck, but I already knew it was too late. I grabbed my phone and tried to dial Allie’s number. It went straight to voicemail. I unlocked my vehicle and climbed inside.

“Damn it!” I screamed as I pounded my steering wheel. I had never hated myself more than I did at that moment. I dialed Fin’s number, hoping with desperation that she might be with Allie. I prayed for a delayed flight or a flat tire, anything at all that might stall her. It rang three times before I heard Fin’s voice.

“Hello?”

“Fin. Thank God. Please tell me you’re with her,” I begged.

“You messed up, Ryan. You messed up badly,” she said quietly.

“I know it. I know. I am such an idiot. I fell asleep in the library. I haven’t been sleeping lately. I am an absolute wreck. Please tell me she’s not on the airplane,” I said.

“I took her to the airport two hours ago. I don’t know if she’s boarded yet.”

“Okay, I am on my way there now. It can’t be too late. It can’t. I have to get to her,” I said rambling.

“Breath, Ryan. You won’t do yourself any favors if you get into a wreck or get pulled over. Call me back and let me know if you find her.”

“Yeah, okay. You’re right, and I will. I will call you. Thanks, Fin,” I said, hanging up the phone. I drove like a bat out of hell towards the airport, ignoring Fin’s warning to avoid getting pulled over. All that mattered was getting to Allie. I couldn’t believe what was happening. How did I make such a huge mistake? I pulled up to a red light and continued to bang on my steering wheel in frustration. I’m sure I looked manic, like a desperate man about to lose everything. Because that’s what I was. Traffic moved again and I sent up prayer after prayer.

“Please, God. Let me make it to the airport on time. Please,” I begged out loud. After the longest car ride of my existence, I finally made it to the south gates of the airport. I didn’t even bother to lock my truck as I ran inside to find the gate that Allie would hopefully be waiting at.

“Please be there baby, wait for me,” I said. I ran faster than I had ever ran in my life, my lungs burned and my heart beat wildly as I finally made it to the right gate. I looked around, standing on chairs and looking around corners, desperate to find her. I was calling her name out loud, not caring how crazy I must have looked. I stopped finally, my head in my hands. I needed to go find someone to ask if her flight had left, but I didn’t want to hear it. I knew. She was gone.

“Hey, mister,” I heard a little voice say. I looked down to see a little girl standing nearby. I pointed to myself and she nodded.

“Are you looking for a really pretty girl with long pink hair?” she asked.

“Reddish-blond? Beautiful blue eyes?” I asked.

“Yup, that’s the one,” she said. Her mom grabbed her hand and tried to drag her away from where I was standing,

“Mom, stop! This is the heartbreak guy!” the little girl said loudly.

“The pretty girl said you broke her heart. Now she’s going to type land,” the little girl said. She gave me a death stare that indicated I was not her favorite person.

“Thailand?” I asked and she nodded her head up and down.

“Issabel, you cannot talk to strangers,” her mom said, throwing her hands into the air.

“She said you broke her heart,” Issabel told me, her little chubby hands on her hips.

“Is she gone?” I swallowed hard.

“Yep. She got on the airplane. She was crying, too.”

“Issable, I mean it. Let’s go. I am so sorry about her,” the mom said, dragging her daughter away. Issabel made fierce eye contact with me and pointed two of her fingers at her eyes, and then pointed the same fingers back at me. If I wasn’t so miserable I would have laughed. She was the cutest kid I had ever met, even if she clearly wasn’t a fan of me.

Issabel had said Allie was crying. I felt like I might throw up. What had I done? She was gone and I had no way to

contact her, to tell her it was all a big misunderstanding. To tell her I loved her. I was so upset about her move to Thailand that I hadn't asked her many details. I didn't know where exactly in Thailand she would be staying. I didn't know where she would be living or who I could call. I was completely helpless. All I could do was go home and sit by the phone and wait for her to call or email. I took a deep breath and walked slowly out of the airport. I plucked my phone from my pocket and called Fin back.

“Hello?” she answered on the first ring.

“She's gone,” I said, a single tear slipped slowly down my cheek and landing between my lips.

“I'm sorry, Ryan. I really am,” she said.

“Will you call me if she calls you, Fin?” I asked. I could hear her deep sigh on the other line.

“I don't know, Ryan. I am her friend first. If she doesn't want me to tell you, I won't betray her.” I nodded in understanding, even though Fin couldn't see me.

“Okay, I can respect that. But will you tell her something for me? I mean, if she calls you first?” I asked.

“Sure, I can do that,” she said.

“Just tell her I love her. Tell her I fell asleep at the library and I would have never let her go to the airport alone on purpose. Tell her I am sorry.”

“Okay, I will. I hate that this happened, Ryan. She was so torn up.”

“I know. I hate that she’s hurting right now and I can’t talk to her. I will never forgive myself.”

“Hang in there. Call me if you hear from her,” Fin said. I thanked her and hung up the phone. I felt a sharp ache in my chest as I left the airport. I worried that the loss of her might consume me. I knew I wasn’t going to be able to get through it alone, I needed someone to help pull me from the trenches of my all-consuming grief. I dialed a familiar number and waited for the answer on the other line.

“Jason, it’s me. I need you to come to Austin.”



## Chapter 29

Ryan

January 2023

Sunday

“Should we get back to Sarah or do we have a little longer?” I asked Allie. We had left the restaurant and dinner had been exactly what I expected; wonderful, uncomfortable, fun, tense, hot, sexy, sad. Every emotion wrapped up in one life-altering meal. When Allie opened the door to her room

before the date my mouth had almost salivated. She was so sexy, so beautiful that it made my chest hurt. The cancer made her thinner than her usual build, and it was clear the changes to her body made her uncomfortable. I wished she saw herself the way I did. To me, she was perfect no matter what her size. I didn't even notice the wig she was wearing at first because it looked exactly like her real hair had always looked, sending me right into a fit of hormonal longing that I had not felt since I was a teenager. I needed my hands on her. I needed to feel her skin on my own. The desire to touch her again was so intense that it was almost embarrassing.

“I think we have some time, it's still early enough,” she said. She tucked the reddish blonde flyaway hairs away from her face.

“Want to go to our old makeout tree on campus?” I asked playfully, wagging my eyebrows up and down. My comment had the desired effect, causing Allie to laugh and playfully punch the side of my arm.

“Hey, don't assault the driver?” I said, smiling as I kept my eyes on the road.

“Aren't we a little old to be making out on a college campus?” she asked.

“You’re only as old as you feel. And you, Allie, make me feel like a school boy.”

She blushed, causing a wave of blood to rush to my center. When that woman blushed I was done for. I couldn’t help myself, I moved my hand over to her upper thigh and squeezed, hoping that I had the same effect on her. By the look on her face when I touched her, I think I did.

“So...campus?” I asked.

“Let’s do it. I bet that old tree misses us,” Allie said. I turned on the nearest street, heading us in the right direction. I couldn’t wait to get my lips on hers again. I tightened my grip on her thigh and I heard her clear her throat. A shiver ran through me as I wondered what the rest of the night would bring. The streets of Austin were busy, as they always were, but we made our way towards campus. Cars flashed by in rapid moving flashes of lights as our fingers found their way woven between each other’s hands. It felt so right to be there with her. The vibe between us was heavy; so heavy I almost had to roll the window down for air. I stole as many glances in her direction that I could safely get away with. She was so damn beautiful with the lights from traffic reflecting off of her

porcelain skin. She looked towards me, catching me drinking in the sight of her.

“Hi,” I said, my voice low and gravelly. I cut my eyes back to the busy street.

“Hi,” she whispered. Her voice seemed strained, like she had a million things on her mind. I wanted her to open up to me, to tell me all of the fears and uncertainties that were written on her face. I knew Allie, even after all of the time we had been apart from each other, I knew her. I knew not to pry, to let her come to me when she was ready.

“There she is,” Allie said as our tree came into view.

“Hello old friend,” I said.

We got out of my truck, our hands finding each other again as soon as we had our feet on the pavement. Her hands were so small, so soft, so perfect inside of my palm. The wind blew causing Allie's silk top to cling to her body. I couldn't help where my eyes went, seeing the dimple in the fabric by her belly button. I wanted my tongue there, exploring her middle as I had done so many times before. I let go of her hand so I could lay down on my back under the tree. I looked up at what little stars I could find in the city sky. When I didn't immediately feel her next to me I raised my head slightly.

“Are you coming?”

She laughed; the sound was intoxicating. She laid down beside me and cuddled in close, shielding herself from the cool wind.

“Is this your go-to move?” she asked.

“Nah, I have zero moves.”

“I guess when you look like you belong on the cover of Hot Male Nurse Magazine you don't need moves.”

“Is that a real magazine?” I asked as I laughed freely at her comment.

“I don’t know, but if it is your a shoe-in,” she joked. We sat in silence for a moment, both looking upwards to the sky, lost in our own thoughts.

“Are you seeing anyone currently?” Allie asked after a few moments.

“I was. I called it off when I decided to come here. It wasn’t serious.”

“Why did you call it off when you came here?” she asked.

“I think you know why,” I said, rolling my body towards her so that my lips brushed the side of her face. She turned her head slightly and our mouths met, like old lovers who had spent too many nights apart. The kisses were sweet at first, both of us testing the water, tasting each other, feeling each other out. They quickly became urgent, our hands roaming, my mind swirling. Her tiny moans were threatening to send me to an early grave. I untucked her shirt and slipped my hand inside, needing to feel the skin underneath. I felt upward, skimming over her breasts and resting near her collar bone. I felt her body tighten as my hands skimmed over her port. I pulled back and removed my hand, searching her face.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable,” I said. I was still breathless from our kiss. She didn’t respond so I pressed on. “I know that’s access for your chemo and medications, it doesn’t freak me out,” I told her.

“I know, it just makes me uncomfortable. Plus it just reminds me of why it’s there when you touch it,” she said.

“Does it hurt when I touch it?” I asked. She shook her head back and forth.

“I know it sucks that you’re fighting this illness, but I am going to look on the bright side tonight. And for me, the bright side is, without it I would have never found you again,” I said, hoping my comment didn’t offend her. I hated her cancer. I hated the things that it had taken from her and from Sarah. I didn’t want her to take my comment the wrong way, but in that moment I was so thankful to be with her. To have her wrapped in my arms again. She nodded into my chest, as if acknowledging that she knew what I meant.

“I’ve looked for you for years. I’ve typed your name into social media search bars a million times, hoping your face would pop up on my screen. I’ve looked for you in every red head walking down the street, every tiny woman that crossed my path. And now, here you are. Finally, I feel like I’ve taken

my first really deep breath in almost twenty years. When I couldn't get a hold of you after you left for Thailand, it killed me. I got kicked out of med school because I couldn't go to class. I couldn't eat, sleep or breath without you, Al. It was hell. I know I messed up, but I have to know, why didn't you call?" I hadn't meant to unload on her like that, but I had waited so many years to ask her and the words fell out of me in one breath.

"Ryan..." she started.

"I know, I know. You don't want to talk about it. Answer that one question and I promise I won't ask anymore," I told her. She sighed heavily and rolled back onto her back, head pointed to the sky.

"I called. Once," she said softly.

"You did?" I asked. Her words caused me to sit straight up.

"Yeah, about a month or so after I left."

"Why only once? Why didn't you leave a message?" I asked.

"That's three additional questions," she said.



I slapped my hands down on both knees and lowered my head to my lap.

“Fine. I will drop it for now. Consider it pinned for later,” I said, my mind reeled from her confession. She had called. All those years I thought she had just got on that airplane and ghosted me forever. I didn’t even know if she was safe until I forced Fin to tell me if she had heard from her. When Fin had confirmed that she was alive and well, it both relieved and killed me. I felt as if she ran away and never looked back.

“We should get back,” Allie said, breaking me away from my racing thoughts. I was unable to speak, so I nodded and stood, taking her hand to help her off of the soft grass. I let the knowledge of her phone call wash over me like a warm shower. She had called me. Maybe it wasn’t over back then. Maybe it still wasn’t over. Maybe it was just beginning.

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Allie

January 2023

Sunday

“Shhhh, I don’t want to wake Sarah,” I said to Ryan as we entered the apartment after our date. I wasn’t sure how I felt about our night together. The food had been great, and the kissing had been transformative. The conversation, however, had gone back and forth from comfortable to uncomfortable. Ryan wanted to talk about the past, to bust it wide open and learn all of the things I was holding close to my chest. I, on the other hand, wanted to kiss him and touch him and forget everything else.

“Want to have a glass of wine in my room?” I asked, locking him into a heated gaze.

“Uh, yeah. Yeah, definitely yes,” he said eagerly, which caused a smile to appear on my face. I grabbed a fresh bottle and two wine glasses. I knew I had already had more than my doctor would approve of, but I pushed that thought away as I walked into my bedroom. Ryan was waiting for me, sitting on my bed, his jacket was removed and tossed next to him. I poured us both a glass and sat mine down on my dresser.

“Mind if I get a little more comfortable?” I asked him.

“Not at all, I actually may do the same.” He stood and left my room to grab a change of clothes out of his luggage. I rummaged through my drawers as I looked for something comfortable but also attractive. I settled on a pair of thin cream joggers with matching top. I went braless, well aware that the top may show through a little. I removed my wig and put on a black beanie in its place. My makeup still looked flawless and I was pleased with my comfortable yet sexy outfit. Ryan walked back into my room wearing gray sweatpants and a black t-shirt. What was it about men in gray sweatpants? It might as well be lingerie. The way they hugged his muscles

made my insides turn into pudding. He sat down on my bed and grabbed his wine glass, taking a long sip of it.

“Want to watch a horror movie?” he asked. He glanced in the direction of my television.

“Sure. Saw 3?” I asked, not missing a beat.

“Let’s do it,” he said with a sly grin on his face. I turned on the tv and scrolled through my streamed movies until I found the one I was looking for. In the past, Ryan and I would always watch horror movies together, me using it as an excuse to cling to every inch of him. I suspected he remembered how I would hold on to him during the films, and wondered if that was why he was asking me to watch with him.

“May I?” he asked, gesturing toward the head of my bed where the pillows lay flat. I hesitated a little, knowing what all of it could lead to. I looked into Ryan’s face, it was so open and vulnerable. He was a good man, a great man even. My chest ached, the hole he left inside of me long ago begging to be filled, even if it could only be temporary. I was so attracted to him, but it was so much more than that. I wanted to talk to him, to learn all the new things about him that I had missed. I wanted to consume him, mind, body, and soul. What I was doing was stupid. I was going to get hurt. He was going to get

hurt. But I couldn't stop it from happening. It was too late for that. I would let myself have the week to drink in every moment I was given with Ryan.

“Sure,” I said. I shrugged my shoulders, attempting to look indifferent.

“Am I allowed to drink wine in your bed?” he asked.

“Oh, yes. Wine is often consumed in my bed.”

“All of your gentleman callers like to have drinks in bed?”

“Usually I am drinking alone, thank you very much,” I replied, shoving him playfully. I crawled under the covers, waiting for Ryan to join me. I would be lying if I said I wasn't giddy at the notion of Ryan Anderson getting into my bed. The movie started and we snuggled in, legs brushing ever so slightly. Ryan looked over at me, his eyes soft and kind.

“I won't try anything, Allie. You are safe with me,” he said softly. I nodded at the same time my heart flipped. He was truly a gentleman, even when I didn't want him to be. We both turned our attention to the movie, but I was only pretending to watch. The only thing I could focus on was the rise and fall of Ryan's chest and the slow rhythmic sound of his breathing.

My heart thundered inside my chest at being so close to him.

His gaze wandered over to me and I didn't look away.

“Hi,” he said. I smiled at him. I love when he said hi into the silence like that, and he did it so often. I could feel his breath on my face, the warmth sending shivers up my spine.

“Enjoying the movie?” I asked him.

“Who knows, I haven't seen a minute of it. I only see you,” he replied. With that, my lips were on his. Our hands were everywhere. Our kisses were not sweet as they had been earlier. They were urgent, hungry, desperate. I didn't hesitate when his hands traced across my port implanted deep in my chest. I didn't hesitate when he roamed under my shirt, leaving my soul bare and vulnerable. I watched his eyes take me in. There was no hint of pity in his gaze. He consumed me like I was oxygen. I didn't hesitate when our mouths fell into a rhythm that was both old and new. Each time our lips met I felt my resolve slip. I didn't hesitate as I felt my heart both heal and break underneath him.

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Sarah

January 2023

Sunday

I woke up to the sounds of rummaging in the kitchen. I rubbed my eyes and looked at the clock on my bedside table. It was almost midnight. Duke didn't lift his head, so I knew it had to be Mom or Ryan, anyone else would cause him to stand

at attention. It was late and I didn't want to disturb them, but I also really needed to use the restroom. I laid in bed, trying to go back to sleep, but in the end my bladder won and I got out from underneath my covers. I went to my bedroom and cracked the door enough to peek out. I didn't see Ryan sleeping on the couch, so I assumed it must be him in the kitchen. I opened the door the rest of the way and tip-toed to the bathroom. I tried to be quiet so I didn't disturb Ryan and Mom if their date was still ongoing.

After finishing up in the bathroom, I walked back toward my bedroom when I heard a startled voice.

"Oh my gosh, Sarah. You scared the crap out of me," Mom said, clutching her chest.

"Sorry, I was trying to be incognito," I stage whispered.

"What are you doing awake?" she asked.

"I could ask you the same question," I said, my eyes taking in her appearance. Mom's lips were swollen and red, her cheeks flushed pink. She looked disheveled and I think her sweatshirt was on backwards. I gave her a knowing smile.

"Where's Ryan? I didn't see him on the couch," I said innocently.



“We were just watching a movie in my room so we didn’t disturb you,” she said quickly, adjusting the sleeves of her shirt as she talked.

“Uh huh, right. What are you doing out here then?” I asked her playfully.

“I just needed a little water,” Mom said, her voice cracking at the end of her sentence. I noticed her wobble a little and her eyes became unfocused.

“Hey, Mom. Are you okay?” I asked, taking a step toward her. Before I could reach her, her eyes rolled to the back of her head and she fell to the floor with a loud thud.

“Ryan!” I screamed. I knelt down by Mom’s side. Her eyes had already started to flutter open and my entire body flooded with relief. Mom’s bedroom door flew open and Ryan took in the scene. As soon as he saw her on the floor, he ran to his overnight bag and started rummaging through his things.

“Hold on, go slow,” I said to Mom as she began to try to sit up. Ryan was there in an instant, a stethoscope and blood pressure cuff in hand. I saw Mom’s eyes refocus, her gaze landing on the blue stethoscope Ryan had in his hands. The stethoscope was well used and looked like it had seen about a million shifts in the hospital. The metal of the stethoscope was

a beautiful rose gold. Mom's eyes filled immediately with tears.

"You still have that?" she asked Ryan. He gave her a sheepish look.

"I could never bring myself to buy a new one."

I looked between the two of them, having absolutely no idea what was going on. They both had large goofy grins on their faces making them look like love-struck puppies.

"Could we focus here. Mom, you just passed out," I reminded them both.

"It was just the wine. I am okay, I promise. I'm not supposed to have more than one glass of wine when I am on my medication," she admitted.

"Then why did you have more than one? And why did you let her?" I said. I directed my second question at Ryan. He immediately threw his hands up in front of him. A gesture to show his innocence.

"I didn't know, I swear. If I had, I would have been watching her. Allie, you should have told me you could only have a little," Ryan said as he looked back and forth between me and Mom. She waved him off and rolled her eyes at us.

“I am fine. I feel totally normal now. I just need to drink a little water and get back in bed,” Mom said.

“Should I call your doctor?” I asked. Mom began shaking her head back and forth.

“No. I am fine,” Mom said, with a finality that had me nodding.

“Let’s all just go to sleep,” Mom said.

“Sure. Ryan, you might want to grab your wine from my mom’s room,” I said. I gave him a megawatt smile. Mom’s face turned ten shades of red and she shot me a look of daggers. Ryan chuckled good naturedly and went to grab his things from Mom’s bedroom.

“You behave yourself young lady,” Mom said.

“Same to you,” I giggled. Mom rolled her eyes and spit water out toward me playfully. I giggled and ran toward my bedroom door. As I closed the door I saw Ryan crawl onto the couch and get underneath his throw blanket.

“Goodnight, Ryan!” I sing-songed.

“Goodnight, kid,” he said laughing.

I shut the door to my bedroom causing Duke to lift his head from the blanket.

“Don’t worry, buddy. It was just my mom and your dad making all that noise,” I said. I rubbed his big head. As I drifted back into a deep sleep I began to dream about the future. In my dreams we were all there. All four of us. Me and Mom, Duke and Ryan. Together.

Chapter 30

Ryan

February 2006

“Dude, Mom is going to kill you,” Jason said as he barged into my room. I threw down my Playstation controller and stared at him through hazy eyes. I was drunk. Really drunk. I had been drunk since she left.

“Let her. It would be a nice reprieve,” I deadpanned.

“Enough, Ryan. I have already missed enough classes for your dumbass and I am not going back to Houston until you pull yourself out of this funk,” Jason yelled at me.

“It’s called depression, Jason. I learned that much at least in my short time being premed,” I spat back at him. Jason put his head in both hands and shook it back and forth.

“Do Mom and Dad know yet?” he asked.

“Know what? That Allie left for Thailand and never called? Or that I got kicked out of school?” I asked him. It had been over two weeks since Allie left, and I hadn’t gone to one class since. I received the official word that I no longer qualified for the premed program at UT. My grades already sucked before she left, and after she was gone, I was flunking every single class.

“They will not care about Allie leaving, no offense. They will, however, care that you just threw away your entire career path. A career you have been planning since you could walk,” Jason said.

“I was going to ask her to marry me,” I said quietly. He was silent for a moment as he let my words sink in.

“Shit, man. That’s heavy...” Jason said, changing his tone of voice. He sat down next to me on the floor.

“I’m worried about you, dude,” he said. He sniffed in my general direction. “Are you wasted right now?”

“Why yes, Jason. I am wasted. I have been drunk since I fell asleep at the library and forgot to drive my almost fiance to the airport,” I said.

“I am going to give you some tough love here, buddy. She is gone. She is not coming back. She obviously does not want to talk to you or be in your life or she would be calling you. It. Is. Over. Pick yourself up and stop acting like a fool. I will not let you throw away your life over this girl. Listen to me. It is over. All the way over, Ry,” he said to me. Each word was a twisted knife.

“I know. I know, Jason,” I said quietly.

“Look. I think being in this apartment is killing you. You are not going to be able to get over her here surrounded by all the memories you have together. Come to Houston with me. There is nothing left for you here in Austin. You need a fresh start,” Jason said. I ran a hand through my dirty hair. I hadn’t showered in days. Jason was right, I needed to get out of the apartment. For good.

“Yeah. Yeah, maybe I will,” I said. I was warming up to the idea.

“Good. You can apply to school somewhere in Houston. Surely some program will take you. First, you need to call Mom and Dad. And take a shower,” he said. I nodded as he left the room. I picked back up my video game controller and began mindlessly playing. Jason was right about everything he said, but it still hurt to hear it. It was impossible to believe that it was over. I felt as if I was mourning her death. The loss felt so final, especially since I had no way to contact her. The reality was that she was gone and she did not want to talk to me. She washed her hands of us and I needed to do the same or the loss of her was going to drown me. I decided at that moment to take care of myself. I would pick myself up off of

the floor both literally and figuratively. It was the end of us, but it didn't have to be the end of me.

I stood, set my controller down on the bed, and started to pack my things, little by little. Each item placed in my suitcase felt like a load off my chest. I needed a new start, and I was going to take one. For the first time in months, I felt hopeful.

After a long hot shower and several self pep talks, I walked to my kitchen to find Jason sitting at our kitchen table. My kitchen table. There was no longer an ours or an us.

“You look better,” Jason said as he looked me up and down.

“I feel better. I should probably eat something,” I said. I pushed my wet hair from my face.

“Already on it. Pizza is on its way,” he said.

“Pizza is exactly what I need. Thank you, Jason. I know I haven't been easy to deal with these past couple weeks. I would be even worse off if you weren't here.”

“I am always here for you, man. I'm your brother.”

I nodded, trying to keep back my emotions. “I'm going to go with you. Back to Houston. If you're sure that's okay,” I told him.



“Of course. I have the space, and I think it would be really good for you. Plus, we need to get you far away from Mom. Once she hears about you getting let go from your program...”

“I know, I need to call them. Rip off the bandaid,” I sighed.

“Eat first. You’re going to need your strength for that conversation,” he said, his eyes wide.

I went to the fridge and started to grab a beer. I changed my mind and went for a soda instead.

“Want one?” I asked Jason. He nodded and I grabbed two cans. I pulled two paper plates from the cabinet, noticing as I did that Allie left behind the coffee mug I had given her for her birthday. The mug said, *Ryan’s Girl* in hot pink letters. I couldn’t believe she left it. I grabbed the mug and took it over to the trash, letting it shatter as I threw it to the bottom. It felt good to break it, to listen to the porcelain shatter as it hit the bottom. I slammed the lid back onto the trash can and then kicked it for good measure.

“You good, bro?” Jason asked. He eyed me nervously.

“Not yet. But someday.”

The doorbell rang and Jason hopped up from his seat. “Pizza’s here.” I waited at the table while Jason opened the door, but then he quickly retreated toward the spare bedroom. As he passed by me he stage whispered, “Not pizza, dude. It’s Mom and she looks pissed.” Before I had a chance to hide, my terrifying mother stood before me. Her eyes were blazing and her face was red. She knew, it was clear. She knew I had been let go from my program.

“What the hell, Ryan,” she spat her words at me.

“Hello to you too, Mom.”

“Do not start with me. Kicked out of school? Why, Ryan? This better not be because of that girl. What a joke.”

“It doesn’t matter why. It’s done. I don’t want to talk about this with you.”

“Maybe I can call someone. I can donate some money and make this all go away,” she said. She had already started pulling out her phone.

“Stop it, Mom. Do not make any phone calls. I don’t want you to throw money at this. I want to take care of things myself from now on. This is my mess so I will clean it up,” I said, my booming voice filled up the room. Mom’s face

looked shocked, I usually did not speak to her that way. I usually did not stick up for myself. Her mouth opened, then closed, then opened again. The effect making her look like a goldfish.

“So you are going to ruin your life, and then not let me help you put it back together?” she asked.

“My life is not ruined, Mother. I am young and I am capable. I will figure it out on my own. I don’t need your help or your money,” I said. I could feel my anger building. She scoffed loudly and crossed her arms across her chest.

“You think you can make it without money? You realize I pay for everything, right? This apartment, your car, your education. All of it. You wouldn’t make it one day if I stopped putting money into your account.”

“Try me. I don’t want one more cent of your money. I don’t want the vehicle that you pay for, and I sure as hell don’t want this apartment anymore. Take it all, Mom. Just know this, you no longer have any say in my life. From this moment on I am on my own,” I said as I stared at her in the face.

“You will be begging for me to add money to your account within days, Ryan. You have been spoon fed your whole life. You don’t know how to make it alone,” she said.

My anger and hatred toward her exploded like a fire in my chest. She didn't care about me, she only cared how my expulsion would look to her country club friends.

“You haven't asked me once if I am okay. You haven't asked me why I flunked out. Allie left and I have been a mess. You have not checked on me or cared enough to ask me how I am.”

“Grow up, Ryan. She was a waste of your time. She was never good enough to be with you. I'm glad she is gone.” Her words felt like acid poured down my skin.

“I bought a ring. I was going to marry her.”

“It would have been a mistake,” she spat. I slapped my hand down on the table so hard that it shook beneath me.

“Enough! Get out, Mom. I am done. We are done,” I screamed. I walked over to the entryway table and grabbed my keys and my wallet. I stormed back over to where she stood and handed her my keys. “Take it,” I said. I started going through my wallet, grabbing all of my credit cards and I flung each one at her. Her face was shocked, but she did not speak.

“Get out of here. Go!” I screamed. She gave me one last look, one that I couldn't quite read, and headed to the door. As

she opened it, the pizza guy stood on the other side, his eyes wide as if he had heard every word of our fight. My mom handed him a fifty dollar bill as she walked past him. I knew she only did it to piss me off one last time.

“Here you go, honey. He has no money,” she said to him. She gave me a cold smile over her shoulder. The pizza guy took the money and looked at me uneasily. I grabbed the box from him and slammed the door. For a moment I waited to feel upset, to feel the rage that I felt towards her only moments before, but I no longer felt angry. I no longer felt her hold over me. I no longer felt any emotions toward the woman who raised me. I felt free.

Jason peeked around the door and looked around. “Is she gone?” he asked before emerging from the bedroom. I nodded and walked the pizza over to the table .

“You good?” he asked me.

“I’m great, actually.”

“Good. Let’s eat and get you packed up. I would like to get on the road as soon as possible. I really have missed a lot of classes,” Jason said.

“I know. You’ve been really great, Jason. Thank you. And thank you for the wake up call and the tough love. I needed it.” He nodded and we started eating.

“Oh, and you will have to let me ride with you to Houston. I gave Mom my keys,” I told him. He shook his head but had a smile on his face.

“I hope once we get there you learn to love public transportation,” he joked.

“I’m going to look for a job in Houston, and I think I have enough saved cash to buy something drivable.”

“I’m proud of you, Ryan. It takes a lot of guts to stand up to Mom. It takes even more guts to walk away from financial security. It won’t be easy though,” he said.

“I’m done with easy. I want to make it on my own. Well, on my own with your help. Thanks for letting me crash with you. I promise it won’t be forever.”

“Stay as long as you need. I mean it,” he said. I had never felt closer to my brother. I felt emotions rising, so I swallowed hard and gave him a nod. At that moment, I felt like everything might be okay. Like maybe I could survive the loss of her.

## Chapter 31

Allie

January 2023

Monday

The morning after my date with Ryan had my head swimming with confusing thoughts. Ryan's lips pushed against mine felt like an awakening, like being reborn after years tucked away in a dark tomb. Like being pulled directly from

the depths of hell and placed inside an icy cold shower. I knew we were getting too comfortable, and that it was going to make his leaving even harder to swallow. I pushed the thoughts from my mind, reminding myself to live it the moment. I had four more days with him, and I didn't plan to waste a second of our time together. I sat up in my bed and stretched. I looked over to the side of the bed where Ryan had been the night before. I pressed my face into the pillow where his head had been. It smelled like him. I breathed in his scent deeply, the aroma was more electrifying and awakening than an entire pot of coffee. It felt impossible that he could smell the same after so many years, but he did. I peeled myself away from my bed, checked myself in the mirror, and made my way to the kitchen.

It was quiet in the apartment. There were two bowls filled with cereal-sweetened milk still perched on the table side by side. Two coffee mugs sat close by them, their contents long gone.

“Ryan? Sarah?” I called without answer. I noticed a piece of notebook paper hanging on the fridge, so I walked closer to investigate.



*Mom, Ryan took me for an early driving lesson. Be back soon. Sarah*

I read the note as I shifted nervously back and forth on my feet. Thoughts of Sarah behind the wheel of a vehicle always made my nerves spike. It was something else too, a worry that Sarah was going to get attached to Ryan. Nausea rose in my throat, I wondered if it was caused by my unease or my morning medications. I decided I should probably try to eat something, so I popped some bread into the toaster. Buttered toast always helped with the chemo nausea.

As I stood at the counter, waiting for my bread to toast, I tried to calm all of the worries and thoughts swirling in my brain. I thought of the previous day, when Ryan pulled the stethoscope I had bought him all of those years ago out from his bag. I couldn't believe he still had it. Seeing it again made me sad and thrilled me at the same time. Ryan was such a good man. I wondered briefly if I should open up to him. Maybe he could understand all the things I was afraid to say out loud. Tears filled my eyes, I wiped them away. I wouldn't understand if the tables were turned, so maybe it was best to leave it all in the past. The longer he was there, the more I wanted to tell him everything.

My thoughts were interrupted by the front door opening. Sarah came bouncing into the room, her smile was extraordinary. Ryan came in behind her, his hands in his pockets. My heart sped up the closer his proximity. I was completely out of control around him. I cleared my throat and smiled.

“Mom, Ryan says I’m getting better,” Sarah said excitedly.

“She will be driving by herself in no time,” he confirmed.

“Will you fill out my paperwork and sign off that you’re helping me? The packet will be here next week, I could email it to you,” Sarah said.

“Of course I will,” he smiled back at her.

“Speaking of paperwork,” I said, “Sarah, we really need to do some homeschool today.” Sarah groaned loudly. “Geez, Mom, you really know how to kill a good time.” I laughed and lightly shoved her shoulder.

“Go get your books and meet me at the kitchen table,” I told her. Sarah turned to go to her room and I focused my

attention on Ryan. He was already staring at me when my eyes met his.

“Hi,” he said, his face filled with a megawatt smile. I swooned so hard that I had to lock my knees together tightly to hold myself upright.

“Hi,” I said back to him. “We’re working on statistics today. Really thrilling stuff. You’re welcome to join us.”

“As tempting as that sounds, I was going to run to the store to grab some groceries. I wanted to take you and Sarah somewhere later,” Ryan said.

“Oh yeah? What did you have in mind?” I asked as Sarah re-entered the kitchen with her books in hand.

“I was thinking of having a picnic at Lake Travis. I haven’t been there in so long, I would love to see it again. I want y’all to come with me. I know Sarah needs to work on her school work, so maybe an early dinner? It’s fairly warm out today, we should be comfortable if we bundle up,” he said.

“You had me at picnic,” I told him.

“I’m in too,” Sarah said.

I knew how much the lake meant to Ryan, and memories of our time there together filled my mind. I was

excited for the day, already planning my outfit in my mind. I remembered the weekend Ryan and I stayed at the cabin alone together. The weekend we first told each other that we loved one another. The weekend he ruined me, making me his, mind, body and soul. I knew that weekend that I would never be able to shake the way Ryan had made me feel. And I never had. I had not been with Ryan in half of a lifetime, but I had never stopped loving him. In my darkest moments in life, I found myself hating him. Hating him for making me love him so much that I could never seem to let him go.

Sarah was my saving grace. When I became her mother, I channeled all of the love I had into her. My life had a greater meaning again. I was happy again. I could live again. But his love was still there, coursing through my veins. I had the thought that after receiving that transfusion, that Ryan's own blood ran through my veins. It should feel right at home.

"Any requests for picnic food?" Ryan asked. His words pulled me away from my thoughts.

"Gummy bears," Sarah said. "We will need soda. Oh, and those little blocks of cheese. And definitely chips. Potato and tortilla, maybe the ones with sour cream? Or some dip. Like spinach or ranch."

“Geez, Sarah. Take a breath,” I said laughing.

“Let me write all that down,” Ryan said, joining me with his own laughter.

“No need,” Sarah said, “I’m texting it all to you right now.” Her phone was in hand, her fingers wildly texting her many requests.

“Peanut butter sandwiches,” I added.

“Definitely peanut butter sandwiches,” Ryan said, nodding. “If you girls think of anything else you want, just text me,” Ryan said, stuffing his wallet into his pocket and grabbing his keys.

“Oh, don’t worry, we will,” Sarah joked. Ryan was laughing and shaking his head as he left the apartment. I tried (and failed) to not watch him walk away. My mouth watered at the sight of his butt in his pants.

“Shall we?” Sarah asked. She gestured toward her books. I nodded and tried to focus on statistics, all the while replaying the night before over and over again in my head. My mind was clearly and firmly in the gutter.

“Start on chapter thirteen and I will brew some fresh coffee,” I said to Sarah. I stood, wobbling a little as I got to my

feet. Sarah noticed and gave me a look of concern.

“I am fine,” I said firmly. I was fine. I was more than fine. I knew the past two days had affected my body, but it was in a good way. I had more energy than normal, but I needed to take it easier and remember that I was, in fact, sick with cancer. I needed to take care of myself even when I felt healthier than I had in years. I grabbed the coffee pot and filled it with fresh water and I loaded the coffee grounds into the machine. While the coffee brewed, I let my mind wander again to the previous night. Ryan’s hands on me, his mouth consuming me like he was a starving man. Our lips remembering each other, exploring each other, finding each other. I wanted to kiss him again. I wanted him to hold me again.

“Mom, your phone’s going off,” Sarah said from the kitchen table. I felt the weight of my cell phone in the front pocket of my robe.

“Must be yours, my phone’s right here,” I told her.

“Nope, it’s not mine. Dang it, it’s Ryan’s. He must have forgotten it. He better remember all my food requests,” Sarah complained. I walked over to the table. Sure enough, Ryan had left his phone behind. I hadn’t meant to snoop, but the screen

was still lit and the name *Marjorie* appeared on the screen. Someone named Marjorie had sent him a text message. I also hadn't meant to read it, but the words were there, staring me in the face. I didn't even need to touch the phone to see that it said, *I miss you, Ryan.*

I quickly averted my eyes away, wishing I had not seen the text message. *I miss you, Ryan.* The words were not even spoken aloud, but they rang through my ears anyway. *I miss you, Ryan.* It stung my eyes, filling them with tears that I would not let fall. *I miss you, Ryan.* It hurt more than it should.

*I miss you, Ryan.*

Someone missed him.

Of course they did.

Being away from Ryan was torture. I knew that all too well.

I missed you too, Ryan. I had missed him for more than six thousand days.

"You okay?" Sarah asked, reading my face and the change in my mood. I forced myself to smile at her.

"I'm great. How's the reading going?"

"Mind-numbing," she said, "Statistics is so boring."

“I know, but it is important,” I told her.

“Is it? Even if I end up going to art school?”

“Yes, it is. Keep reading,” I told her, giving her my most stern teacher voice. She sighed and put her head back into her book. I heard the door open and turned to look, seeing Ryan standing in the doorway.

“I forgot my phone,” he said, “I was terrified I might forget one of Sarah’s demands.”

“Requests,” she said, smiling at him, “It’s over here on the table.” Sarah grabbed the phone and held it up for him to grab. I watched his face as he saw the message on the screen. He looked up at me, reading my face immediately.

“Can I talk to you in your room?” he asked.

“No, it’s fine, Ryan. I didn’t mean to see-” I started to say, but he cut me off.

“You’re room, please,” he said softly. I nodded and led the way to my bedroom door. I could feel Sarah’s eyes on my back. Ryan was close behind me, and he shut the door when we were both inside the room.

“I didn’t mean to see it,” I said.



“I don’t care about that. I wanted to talk to you because I wanted you to know that Marjorie is not important in my life,” he said firmly. Her name from his lips caused a jolt of pain to shoot through my chest.

“It is none of my business, Ryan,” I said, breaking my eyes from his.

“It is your business, Allie. There is no one back home. There is no one else. Honestly, there has never been anyone else,” he said the last part in a whisper.

“Dont, Ryan. It’s too much,” I said. I was fighting back tears. All of the emotions I was feeling were pulling me under, drowning me, sucking me down deeper and deeper. He took me into his arms, I wanted to push him away but I couldn’t do it.

“Okay, okay. We don’t have to talk about it. Please just know, that text meant nothing to me. I’m sorry if it hurt you to see it, but it is nothing. I’m here, my entire focus is here,” he said. I pulled away and looked at him, studying his face.

“Maybe this is not a good idea,” I said. I knew it wasn’t. It was a bad idea, a really stupid and bad idea. I was internally hitting myself for letting it start. I was too invested, we had too much history. There were too many things unsaid between us.

“No. Stop it. We are going to the lake and we are going to have a great day and we are not letting this ruin it,” he said. I could hear the emotion filling his voice. I should have ended it right then. I should have told him to leave and let him walk away, but I couldn’t do it. Not yet. I needed more. I was a selfish, horrible person. I was desperate for more. So I didn’t tell him to leave, I didn’t end it, I didn’t walk away. Instead, I leaned back into him and nodded.

“Okay,” I whispered.

“Okay,” he said, his entire body relaxed into me with evident relief. I breathed deeply, letting his scent fill my lungs.

Thursday. We had until Thursday.

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Ryan

January 2023

Monday

Leaving my phone behind had been a mistake. Allie had already been guarded before the text from Marjorie, and I was terrified how she would act after. Everything between us felt so fragile. She had let me into her life, but there was still a wall between us. I knew Allie so well, and she was keeping me at arm's length. I was determined to win her over. Determined to make her mine. The thought scared me a little

and I considered my own feelings. Was I ready to fully commit to her? The answer came to me immediately. Yes. Yes, of course I was. I would marry her right then if the opportunity was mine. I would stay in Austin, quit my job, uproot my life. I would not repeat my past mistakes, I would choose nothing but her. But she had to want that too. I had to keep showing her how good we were together. There were so many things working against us. Our past mistakes, her cancer, the miles between us, her fears over how this may affect her daughter. None of that mattered to me; I would make it work if it killed me.

I had finished my shopping for our picnic items and was loading the groceries into my truck when I heard my name called behind me. I turned and saw my father standing in the parking lot with a shopping bag in his hand.

“Hey, Dad,” I said, somewhat awkwardly, as he approached.

“Hi, I’m so glad to run into you, Ryan. Your mother is going to invite you over for dinner tomorrow. No pressure, but she really wants you to come,” he said.

“Oh, okay. Yeah. I may be able to do dinner,” I said. I tried to adjust my brain to his new behavior. He seemed kind,

not a hint of the man he used to be.

“She is trying to convince your brother to fly down. She is desperate to get the entire family together while you’re in town,” he said.

“I hope to be visiting Austin a lot more frequently,” I told him. He smiled warmly at me.

“I am really glad to hear that, son,” he said, his voice cracking. He cleared his throat and ran a hand through his thinning hair.

“I will let Mom call and invite you herself, but I really hope you can make it.” I nodded at him and continued to add grocery bags to the back of my truck.

“Big plans today?” he asked. He eyed the picnic items that I was loading into my truck.

“I’m going to the lake, actually,” I told him.

“You always did love the water,” he said.

“Do you guys still have the cabin out there?” I asked. I found myself praying that he would say yes.

“Of course. Your mother will never sell that thing. We don’t get out there much anymore, but I think she keeps it

because she knows how much it means to you,” he admitted. I doubted that was the reason, but I smiled at him anyway.

“I may have a key to the place in my truck, do you want to go out there?” he asked. I shook my head, touched by the gesture, but not wanting to be a bother.

“No, that’s okay, we are just going to have a picnic down by the water. We won’t be out there long,” I said.

“We?” he asked.

“Me and Allie and her daughter, Sarah.”

“Oh yes, Allie. I really am glad you reconnected with her, Ryan. She was always special to you, I remember,” he said. I nodded again. There was an awkward moment where we stood staring at each other, our hands in our respective pockets, before he spoke again.

“I hope you’ll come to the house tomorrow for dinner. Good to see you, son.” He reached out and gave me a hug. The gesture took me aback, but I immediately let myself melt into the hug. It occurred to me that I couldn’t remember if my dad had ever hugged me before. It felt good to be hugged by him. I let the moment fill me up. I had been desperate for his love all of my life, and there he was, giving it to me freely.

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Sarah

January 2023

Monday

The day of school work had been brutal, but the anticipation of a picnic at the lake with Mom and Ryan had kept me going strong. By the time I finished all my chapters for the day, I was bouncing up and down from excitement. I was going through my closet, trying to find my warmest outfit to wear to Lake Travis. Ryan had warned me that even though it was in the high forties outside, it would feel colder with the wind blowing off of the water. I found my fleece lined leggings and an oversized black sweatshirt. I slipped them on and added some ankle length boots and a bright pink jacket. I

was checking my reflection in the mirror when I heard my computer alert an incoming email.

From: Young Artists of Austin

To: Sarahbear1010@sbcglobal

Sarah Delacruz,

Congratulations! You were chosen as a scholarship winner to participate in our mixed media course. We were very impressed with your submitted work and would like for you to join our class beginning on February 1, 2023. Please see attachment for enrollment paperwork and further information on our art program. We look forward to meeting you and helping you to continue to grow your talent.

Sincerely, Mark A. Lowe with Young Artists of Austin

I squealed so loud that the walls of the apartment shook in response. I grabbed Duke's large paws and started dancing in a circle. "I got in! I got in! I got in!" I screamed again as I let the joy escape from my lips. My door swung open and Mom and Ryan stood staring at me, their eyes wide.



“What is wrong? Why are you screaming?” Mom said breathlessly.

“I applied for a scholarship to a local art class and I was accepted!” I screamed. I continued to jump up and down, Duke was barking in response.

“What? That’s amazing, Sarah!” Ryan said as he matched my excitement.

“When did you apply? Why didn’t you tell me? When is the class?” Mom asked, firing questions at me.

“I just sent them some of my pieces when you guys were on your date. I had no idea they would get back to me so soon. The class starts next month, on the first. I can do it, right Mom?” I begged.

“Well of course you can do it! I am so proud of you. We will work out the details, whatever they may be. I am really happy you did this, Sarah bear.”

I beamed up at my mom and took her into a large hug. She squeezed me back, feeling less frail than the last time I hugged her, as if Ryan’s strength was slowly seeping into her.

“This is cause for celebration. Let’s grab a glass of champagne to take on our picnic. She can have one glass, right

Allie? That's okay if it's just one glass?" Ryan asked.

"I guess one glass would be okay, since she is with us," Mom replied.

"Only one glass for you too, missy," I said to Mom. She rolled her eyes at me, and then for good measure she rolled them at Ryan, too.

"Come on, let's get on the road, we want to be at the lake before sunset," Mom said, walking towards the apartment door. Ryan and I followed after her. Ryan hooked his arms around my shoulder and leaned in close. "I'm proud of you, kid," he whispered. I beamed up at him, and for the second time that week I wondered if it might be the best day of my life.

## Chapter 32

Allie

February 2006

Thailand

The culture shock had started to wear off, but the pain from the breakup with Ryan was still bitter and fresh. I had been in Thailand for eleven days, and every day still brought with it many firsts. My first time eating the local green curry, my first time seeing the temples in Bangkok, my first time visiting a hot pot restaurant. The food was my favorite part. Every single thing was delicious. The seafood was unlike anything you could get in the states. I was eating my way through my feelings, and Thai food was up to the challenge. The little shops on every corner were so inviting, it was as if I

had to taste everything I saw. I had not had anything that I didn't love. The food was so savory, I didn't think I could ever tire of the cuisine. It was everything I had dreamed of, but the pain in my chest was a constant reminder of the things I had left behind. The person I had left behind.

The weather was shocking in Bangkok, the heat so intense it put the Texas sun to shame. Even in the winter months, there was hardly a breeze to be found. The heat was worth it once I laid my eyes upon the local beaches. The clear waters surrounding the cities were a site to behold. On my first weekend in Thailand, I visited a resort town off the coast of Andaman called Krabi. The water there was so blue that it made me cry. I stood on the sand for hours, making the beautiful place a permanent part of my memory. I could look right down into the water and see brightly colored fish swimming together. There was life in Thailand. So much beautiful life. I had never seen a more breathtaking place. Lifting from the water were beautiful rock formations, each one covered in bright green colors. They seemed to stretch up and down, like a ballerina on stage, with her hands arching high above head and pointed feet stretching down to the floor. Each way I looked, from all around, the beauty sucked me in. The views helped to distract me from the overwhelming loss I

felt from being away from home. Away from my dad. Away from Fin. Away from Ryan.

When I arrived at my new apartment in the city, I discovered I had three roommates. Two Americans, and one Thai. They were all also interns at one of the local elementary schools. We would all be assistant teachers, helping different classes to learn to speak English. The two Americans were both females, Rachel and Kylee, and they formed a fast friendship with one another. They were friendly to me, but it was as if they knew my heart was broken. I didn't have to say it, it radiated out of me. My sadness made me unapproachable. The other American girls were giddy with excitement, and my vibe would have definitely brought them down. I didn't take it personally when they became good friends, leaving me out of the equation most of the time. My Thai roommate was male, close to my age, and spoke very good English. He was raised in Bangkok and had always wanted to be a teacher at the local schools. His name was Pram. He was tall and handsome, and I could tell we were going to be friends. He was patient with me, allowing me to feel sad when I needed to without pushing me to talk about it.

“Ryan would have liked this place,” I said to Pram one night as we sat on the balcony of our apartment. It was the first time I said his name out loud in the almost two weeks I had been in Thailand. The night was warm, we had been drinking wine with dinner, the alcohol had given me courage to talk about my life back home in Texas.

“Ryan is the reason you are sad.” He said it as a statement, not a question. I nodded and took a deep breath.

“I had to choose. Ryan or Thailand,” I said, shrugging my shoulders. The air was humid, my shirt stuck to my body as sweat seeped through my pores. I didn’t mind, though. I enjoyed the balcony. I enjoyed Prams company.

“He was a fool to make you choose,” Pram replied.

“It wasn’t that simple. I wish it had been that simple.”

“Love rarely is,” he agreed.

“I hope it will be worth it. I had to come. I had to show myself that I could do it. I had to make my dad proud. I owed it to myself, and to him. He raised me by himself after my mom died. He would be so disappointed if I didn’t come to pursue my dream,” I rambled. Pram was so easy to talk to. He listened with such intensity. I found myself wanting to tell him

my entire life story, secrets and all. He had this way of making me feel like he held all of the answers.

“I am sure your dad would be proud of you, even if you had chosen love instead,” he said, “But selfishly I am glad you are here with me.”

“I don’t know about that. My dad is not much of a romantic anymore. He would have been upset if I had stayed behind and let this opportunity go by.”

“Do you regret coming?” he asked.

“I don’t know yet,” I admitted. “I love it here. Thailand is everything I dreamed of. The food, the beaches, the townspeople. It’s everything that I imagined it would be, and more. What I had with Ryan, though, I fear might be once in a lifetime.”

“Your first love?” he asked. I nodded, forcing the tears to stay put, not allowing them to drip down my sunburned face.

“It has been said that we all have three great loves in our lives,” Pram said, leaning forward and resting his elbows on the balcony railing. “That means you have two great loves waiting for you in your future,” he said.

“I hope you’re right, Pram.” I took a sip from the ice water I was holding. In that moment I felt hope. Maybe I could have love again. Maybe Ryan was my first love, but not the only love I would ever know. I knew getting over him was going to take an act of congress, but that moment on the balcony with Pram, it felt possible. Maybe someday I would heal. Maybe someday I could fall in love again.

“Pram, if you don’t make it as a school teacher, you could make a killing as a therapist,” I told him. He laughed and squeezed my hand. I told him goodnight and we both headed to our bedrooms. I could hear Kylee and Rachel laughing through the thin walls. The apartment was three bedrooms, the two of them chose to share, and Pram and I had the two single rooms. My tiny room had one twin bed and one dresser. My personal items were in place, with my old bedspread from college placed on top of the small mattress. I pulled out my laptop and started to type an email to Ryan.

To: RyanA80@yahoo

From: Alliecat1@yahoo

I’m here. I’m safe. I miss you.



I stared at the email for a long time, erasing and rewriting a million different things. I couldn't bring myself to send it. I couldn't help but feeling like opening the lines of communication would only make it worse. He assumed I couldn't receive emails, so I decided reaching out to him would only make it hurt more. Maybe a clean break was the only way to heal. I decided instead to email my dad.

To: daddydelacruz@yahoo

From: Alliecat1@yahoo

Hello from Thailand! I received your last email, glad we are able to talk! I miss you so much, Dad. It is so beautiful here. Maybe you can come down this summer and we can visit one of the islands together. Start saving for a ticket! I am adjusting well, I have made good friends with one of my roommates. His name is Pram. He's a local. You would really like him, Dad. He is such a good listener and he gives really good advice, almost as good as you. I am still struggling from my breakup with Ryan, but everyday gets a little bit easier. Tomorrow I start my job at the school. I know once I am busy with teaching I will feel even better. I don't want you to worry

about me at all. Bangkok is keeping me well fed and I will be just fine. Take care of yourself. Please email me back as often as you can.

With love, Allie

I pressed send on the email, feeling better having written down some of my thoughts for my dad to read. I decided to also send one to Fin, to let her know I was doing a little better. The first email I had sent to her was far from upbeat.

To: Finfofin1@hotmail

From: Alliecat1@yahoo

Hello dear friend. I am happy to report that I am feeling better lately. I have made a good friend, which has greatly helped me in my pursuit of happiness. His name is Pram, you would absolutely love him. He listens really well so he is helping me talk through my complicated feelings about leaving Ryan (and the rest of you) back in Texas. He is a local, so he knows all of the best beaches and food spots. The food here is to die for. You have never eaten seafood until you've eaten it this close to the water. Seriously, they have shrimp the

size of my hand. You absolutely have to come visit during your summer break. Pram can show us the best way to party it up this summer. I mean it, you better come. I start my job tomorrow. I am nervous but excited. Don't judge me for asking, but has Ryan asked about me? I just wonder if he is okay. Don't tell him I asked, and don't tell him I emailed you. If he asks, it's okay to tell him that I am safe. I think it is best that he and I don't talk to one another though. I owe it to myself to have this adventure, don't you think? Am I doing the right thing?

Love, Allie

I sent the email and set my laptop to the side. I got up from my bed and walked over to my closet to pick an outfit for my first day of work. What does one wear to teach a bunch of young children in a foreign country? I didn't even know where to start. I decided to walk to Rachel and Kylee's room to see what they were planning to wear. I padded down the hallway and knocked on their door.

"Come in," I heard one of the girls say. I opened the door and they both smiled at me waving me inside.

“Hey girl, come in!” Kylee said, scooting over on the bed to make room for me. My heart swelled at her kindness, so I made my way over and sat down beside her.

“We were just talking about tomorrow. Are you excited?” Kylee asked me. Kylee was tall, with dark skin and dark eyes. She rocked a beautiful braided weave and was absolutely stunning.

“I am, I have no idea what to wear though. That’s what I wanted to ask y’all,” I told them. Rachel giggled at my Texas slang. That had happened a lot since I arrived in Thailand. Kylee was from Chicago and Rachel was from Boston. I was the only southerner I had met in my new country. Where Kylee was tall with dark skin, Rachel was tiny and blonde with huge green eyes behind long painted eyelashes.

“Sorry, I can’t seem to get used to saying ‘you guys’, I have been saying y’all my whole life,” I explained.

“Don’t apologize, we love it,” Rachel said brightly.

“Yes, don’t stop. We love your accent!” Kylee agreed, nodding her head. I gave them a thankful smile.

“I think I will wear a cotton dress. It is too hot for pants,” Rachel said.

“Way too hot! Is it this hot in Texas?” Kylee asked me.

“Nope. It is definitely hot in Texas, but not in February,”  
I told them.

“Cotton dresses, then?” Kylee asked Rachel and I. We  
nodded in agreement. I had plenty of cotton dresses I could  
wear, and I agreed that wearing pants seemed like a poor  
decision.

“Do you guys think the schools are air conditioned?”  
Kylee asked.

“If not, I’m on a plane back to Boston,” Rachel joked.  
We all laughed. There was a knock on the door. “Come in!”  
Kylee called. Pram walked in, his tall frame filling the  
doorway.

“You girls want some wine?” he asked, coming into the  
room with a bottle. Rachel started clapping and reaching  
towards the bottle.

“None for me, thanks,” I said. I smiled at Pram.

“I’ll have her glass,” Kylee said.

“I don’t want to ruin girl time, I just wanted to share the  
wine,” Pram said.

“Awww come on, Pram. Stay and chat with us!” Rachel said in a whiney voice.

“I need my sleep before work tomorrow. Us men are not as mentally strong as you young ladies,” he said, stepping back out of the room.

“Goodnight, Pram!” Kylee called to his back. I heard him laugh as he shut the door.

“Pram likes you, you know,” Rachel said to me. She hugged her pillow to her stomach.

“He’s been a good friend,” I said.

“No he *likes* you,” she reiterated. I shook my head adamantly. “No it’s not like that with us, we’re just friends.”

“I know boys, Allie, and that boy has it bad for you,” Kylee said. I groaned and threw my head back on her pillow. I couldn’t handle that information. I needed Pram as a friend, I didn’t want to feel awkward around him.

“Don’t worry about it. Pram is a total gentleman. Plus, it’s pretty clear that you aren’t even close to moving on from your last relationship. Forget we said anything,” Rachel said. I took a deep breath and decided that is exactly what I would do.

I would forget they said anything about Pram. He was becoming my best friend, and a best friend is what I needed.

“I just need a friend right now. My last relationship was extremely serious. He had a ring, I think he was going to propose. He didn’t because I decided to come here. Our futures didn’t line up anymore,” I said, unwanted tears were streaming down my face.

“Oh, Allie. That’s tough. We figured it was a bad breakup, but an almost proposal is really serious. I can understand why you’ve been so upset,” Kylee said as Rachel nodded in agreement.

“Thanks, it has been really hard. I promise I will get out of my funk at some point. It’s just really fresh, and there wasn’t much closure,” I told them.

“Do you think you would feel better if you called him? Got some closure?” Rachel asked.

I shook my head. I could feel my tears drying to my cheeks.

“No, I don’t think so. Clean breaks heal the quickest, right?” I asked. They both looked unsure but they nodded anyway.

“I better get to sleep, we have a big day tomorrow. Thank y’all for your help. With the outfit idea, and with everything else.” I left them in their room and went back to my own to crawl in bed. I felt like for the first time since I had been in Thailand I would be able to fall asleep without crying. I went to move my laptop from my comforter and noticed I had a new email. I was surprised to see that Fin had already messaged me back. I eagerly opened her reply, desperate for comforting words from home.

From: Finfunfin1@hotmail

To: Alliecat1@yahoo

Oh my gosh Al, it is so good to hear from you! I am so glad you are doing better, I was really worried about you. All is well here, but of course I miss you like crazy. I started working in a coffee shop, I met a few new friends but none of them are you. With my newfound income I will for sure start saving for a ticket, I would love to come visit this summer. Pram sounds awesome, can’t wait to meet him. As for Ryan, of course he has called. He is miserable, just like you. Just so you know, he didn’t blow you off on purpose the day you left.



He fell asleep. It's a lame excuse but maybe it is the truth. To answer your question, YES you are doing the right thing. If you and Ryan are meant to be, it will happen. You are young and you have always wanted to be in Thailand. You are surrounded by beautiful beaches and delicious food and you're creating a life for yourself. You will not regret this, I really believe that. You were picked from thousands of applicants to be where you are. Enjoy it. Have fun. Meet people. Grow. You deserve this so much. Do not let anything back home take away from this experience. Promise me you won't. I love you, Al. Be safe. Good luck tomorrow.

Fin

I read over her email about ten times. She was right, I owed myself this adventure. I was creating a future for myself, a future I had dreamt of for years. I wasn't surprised about what she had said about Ryan, I knew he had some sort of excuse for not being there, but that didn't change the fact that he didn't show up for me. He hadn't shown up for me, or for us, since the day I told him I was leaving. It was time to let him go, time to start showing up for myself. Time to allow my

heart to heal, so it might possibly be able to love again someday.

I thought briefly about what the other girls had said about Pram. He was tall and handsome and kind, but my heart was shattered. I was nowhere near ready for anything new. As I drifted off to sleep I remembered what Pram said, about having two more great loves waiting for me in my life. I fell into sleep, dreaming of love and loss, wondering if another love might kill me. Or if it might save me.

## Chapter 33

Ryan

January 2023

Monday

“Here you go, gummy bears and all the chips in all the flavors,” I said. I passed the snacks over to Sarah and she grabbed them greedily. She popped open the sour cream and onion chips first. Allie was laying out a blanket over one of the picnic tables, looking beautiful in a pair of light jeans and UT sweatshirt. I always loved when she was dressed casually, she wore a pair of bluejeans like it was her job. I tried not to stare, but she made it difficult. As if reading my mind, her eyes cut to me, catching me looking her up and down. She winked at

me, causing the tempo of my pulse to triple in speed. I wondered if she would invite me to hang out in her room later that evening, the thought sent blood rushing through me. We hadn't taken things too far, I wanted to respect her, and I knew she wanted to set a good example for Sarah. But I wanted her, I would be lying if I said otherwise.

“You were right about it being colder by the water,” Sarah said with her mouth full of chips. She wrapped her coat tighter around her shoulders.

“You want my jacket?” I offered her.

“No thanks, I'll be okay. We can make some hot chocolate when we get back home to warm us up,” Sarah said.

“Great idea,” Allie agreed.

“All ya'll do is eat,” I said. I laughed at both of them.

“Why yes, that is all we do. We are really good at it,” Sarah said.

“Here you go,” I said. I passed out the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches from the picnic basket. We ate in silence for a while, all three of us enjoying the serene sounds of the water.

“Do your parents still have the cabin out here?” Allie asked after we finished eating. Sarah had gone down to the

water to skip rocks, so the two of us sat close together watching her. Each time she threw a rock into the water, Duke barked and ran after it, getting his paws soaked with cold water. He shook his fur, causing Sarah to shriek as cold droplets hit her clothes and hair.

“Funny you should ask. I ran into my dad today at the grocery store. We talked a little about the lake and the cabin. They still have it, which I was really happy to hear. He also said I should be expecting a call from my mom, she wants to invite me to dinner tomorrow.”

“Do you want to go to dinner at their house? Is that something you would be comfortable doing? I know you have a lot of hard memories at your childhood home,” Allie said.

“I’m not sure, I guess I will decide when she calls. I probably will, Dad said she was trying to get Jason to come down too. I haven’t seen Jason since he moved to New York, it would be really nice to see him. You know, I lived with him in Houston after you moved to Thailand,” I said as I sipped my soda.

“I know. I kept tabs on you through Fin,” Allie confessed.

“You did? I didn’t know that. What ever happened to Fin? Did you guys stay in touch after you graduated?” I asked.

“We did for a while. She got married and has four kids, so time and distance just caused us to drift apart I guess,” Allie said.

“Four kids? Wow, That’s actually really surprising to me. She seemed like someone who would never have children. I called her a lot after you left, trying to get information out of her, but she was an iron vault. It’s a shame that you two lost touch, you guys were really close.”

“I know. We kept in touch through email during those first two years I was doing my internship, before I was offered a full-time job in Bangkok. Once it was clear that I was staying in Thailand, it was difficult to maintain friendships in the states,” Allie explained.

“Yeah, I can understand how that would be hard,” I said. I couldn’t help but think about how the distance had also ruined our relationship, before she was even gone. But that was entirely fair, I was just as much to blame as she was.

“I made a lot of new friends in Bangkok. Some really great ones,” she said.

“And that’s where you met Sarah’s father, right? What’s his name?” I asked, feeling brave enough to bring up the sensitive subject. Sarah had walked back up to the table where we were talking.

“His name was Pram. He was Mom’s roommate turned boyfriend,” Sarah said, inserting herself into the conversation.

“Pram? He’s Thai?” I asked surprised.

“Born and raised. I know, obviously I am a clone of my mom and got none of the great tan skin from my father,” Sarah complained.

“You are the luckiest girl alive to look like your mom. Plus, you are definitely a little darker complected than her,” I told Sarah as I gestured toward Allie.

“Hey, don’t hate on my pale skin,” Allie said. She threw a gummy bear at me.

“My dad’s mother was from France so he was technically only half Thai, though he was raised in Bangkok. He was fluent in five languages. He had tan skin, but not dark. He had brown hair and light brown eyes,” Sarah explained. I couldn’t help but feel extremely jealous over hearing how amazing Pram sounded. He was cultured and smart and had

clearly won over Allie while we were apart. He sounded tall and handsome and I didn't really want to hear anymore. I did notice that Sarah seemed to talk about him like he was no longer around.

"I couldn't help but notice that you said his name *was* Pram. As in past tense..." I said. My voice trailed off.

"He died. When I was three," Sarah said. I felt terrible, over being so jealous of a dead man. A man who sounded like he was probably an amazing guy.

"Oh, I am really sorry to hear that," I flashed a look toward Allie. My heart hurt for her, to know she lost someone that had to have meant so much to her. Why did it feel like some people had to endure so much more tragedy in their lives than others? Allie was no stranger to tragedy.

"Can we talk about literally anything else?" Allie asked.

"Mom doesn't like to talk about my dad. It is a painful subject for her," Sarah whispered to me. I nodded and changed the subject.

"Shall we pull out the champagne and toast to the artist?" I asked. Sarah jumped up and down, she did that a lot, and clapped her hands.



“Now that is definitely what we should be talking about,” Allie said as I handed her a plastic champagne flute.

“To my wildly talented daughter,” Allie said as she raised her glass toward the beautiful sky. The sun was setting around the water, and while it was chilly, it was also the perfect night. I was so happy. Austin felt right; it felt like home. I was thinking more and more that I should move back to Texas. There wasn’t much left for me in Oregon. If I was honest with myself, I knew I was using Oregon as a place to hide from my family, from my past life. I didn’t want to do that anymore. I wanted to be closer to things that mattered to me, and the thing that mattered to me most was sitting right beside me on the bench by the water. I couldn’t tell Allie what was on my mind; not yet. I didn’t want to scare her away. I knew it was way too soon to be talking about moving to be close to her. I had to play my cards close to my chest. Allie was like a cat, easily scared and predisposed to run. My Allie cat.

“We should start packing this stuff up, it’s going to be dark soon,” Allie said. She started to gather up the trash. I nodded and began helping her load up the picnic basket. We

didn't have much food left over, Sarah and Allie had made sure of that.

"How do two tiny girls consume so much food?" I asked them. I chuckled at the sight of the empty chip bags.

"It's a life skill," Sarah said. She finished off her very small glass of champagne.

"Next time I come down to visit, I will take you to see my parents' cabin. You will love it. There are some pretty great art pieces there that my mom has collected. That is, if it is still decorated the same. I haven't been out there in years," I told Sarah.

"Next time you visit?" Sarah asked teasingly, "You plan to be here often?"

"If she will have me," I said. I gestured toward Allie, who was out of ear shot throwing away all of our trash.

"She's stubborn, I'll give you that, but I can tell she cares about you. She never dates, like literally never. So the fact that she is letting you around at all speaks volumes. Be patient with her," Sarah said.

"You are a smart kid, you know that?" I asked.

“Well, both of my parents were school teachers, remember?” she reminded me.

“That’s true, of course you have a big brain filled with knowledge,” I agreed.

“ Khop khun ,” she replied.

“What was that?” I asked, impressed.

“That was ‘thank you’ in Thai. Thai was all we spoke when we lived in Bangkok. I don’t get to use the language much anymore,” she said sadly.

“Do you miss it?” I asked.

“I do, I loved living in Thailand. It is the most beautiful place, and I had tons of friends when we lived there. I miss everything about it,” she said. I squeezed her shoulder and Allie walked up to join us.

“Are you guys ready to go?” Allie asked.

“Yup,” I said. I finished loading the blanket and the basket. The girls piled in the truck, both whispering and giggling to each other like a couple of school girls. Duke hopped in the backseat with Sarah, his tongue out, panting with delight. I couldn’t remember the last time I was that happy. I got into the truck and gripped the steering wheel hard.

Maybe if I held on tight enough, everything could remain in my grasp. Maybe this time I could keep the girl.

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Allie

January 2023

Monday

“Shall we end this epic evening with a movie?” I asked Ryan and Sarah once we were back at the apartment.

The lake was beautiful and I needed the fresh air. I felt so good, so alive, so much healthier than I had felt just one week prior. Maybe it was Ryan, maybe it was his blood that freshly flowed through my veins, maybe it was the physical awakening I had experienced from his mouth on mine. Or maybe it was watching Sarah grow and blossom over the past week. She was learning to drive, and doing very well at it. She was applying to art classes and coming out of her shell. Most likely, it was a combination of it all. Ryan was changing us both. The thought was both thrilling and terrifying. I was so afraid of what would happen next. Where did we go after Thursday? How could I let him go? How could I tell him everything? How could I not?

“I’ll make the popcorn!” Sarah yelled from the kitchen.

“How could she possibly eat again?” Ryan laughed.

“Make it two bags!” I yelled back to her, causing Ryan to explode with more laughter.

“How are you both not four hundred pounds?” he asked. He poked me in the stomach and I shrugged my shoulders and winked at him. I couldn’t help but notice that the wink lit a fire behind his eyes. His reaction to me fueled

my own feelings as it sent a shot of warmth straight to my middle. He kept eye contact with me, his expression filled with heat, as if he could read my mind. Maybe he could, he always had been able to know exactly what I was thinking and feeling, like someone handed him an Alison Delacruz manual book.

“Sarah, you pick the movie,” I said. Sarah joined us on the couch which forced me to pull my thoughts away from Ryan’s arms and hands and all the things they could do to me.

“On it,” she said. She grabbed the remote and started flipping through Netflix, heading straight for the chick flicks. Ryan groaned at her selection.

“You two are insufferable,” he joked.

“Why, thank you kind sir,” Sarah said back. She stuck out her tongue in his general direction. Ryan’s phone started to ring in his pocket, he pulled it out, and I saw his mom’s name on the screen. He looked over to me and I nodded in encouragement. Ryan walked toward the kitchen to have some privacy on his phone call. I tried not to eavesdrop, but I was curious what his mother had to say. I turned my attention to Sarah, drowning out Ryan’s murmurs from the other room.

“I really am so proud of you about the art class,” I told her.

“I know you are. I am really excited about it. Maybe I can finally meet some new friends in Texas, some other kids who are interested in the same things as I am.” I nodded and popped some popcorn into my mouth.

“It will be so great for you. I’m glad you put yourself out there, that’s not an easy thing to do,” I said. I squeezed her hand, overcome with love and adoration for my daughter . She smiled up at me, giving me the same look she used to give me when she was a young girl. A look that said I was the most important thing in her entire world. I couldn’t help myself, I pulled her into a hug, causing her to groan slightly. I released her from my embrace at the same time Ryan joined us back on the couch.

“How did it go?” I asked. He sat down beside me, his weight shifted me slightly on the cushion.

“She invited us all over for dinner tomorrow,” Ryan said.

“She wants Sarah and I to come too?” I asked, baffled by his words.

“Yup, it was her idea, not mine,” he told me. I looked at Ryan, unsure.

“Caroline Anderson, Doctor Caroline Anderson, invited me to her home?” I asked again. Ryan couldn’t help but laugh at the look on my face, which was surely a mix of fear, delight and confusion.

“You heard me right. We will be walking right into the lion’s den. Strangely though, I think you might be pleasantly surprised. We should go on curiosity alone. You need to see for yourself how different they seem.”

“I’m there. You in, Sarah?” I asked.

“Free food? Duh,” she said, which caused all three of us to laugh.

“Then it’s settled. Tomorrow evening at six we will be heading to dinner at the Andersons’. What could go wrong, right?” I joked.

“Was she able to get Jason to come?” I asked, briefly thinking about the last time I spoke to Jason. I knew Ryan didn’t know about that conversation I had with Jason after we broke up. If he did, it would have definitely been a topic of



conversation already. That phone call with Ryan's brother changed the entire course of my life.

"No, he couldn't come on such short notice," Ryan said. I could tell he was disappointed.

"Mom thinks he will come to Texas during his daughter's summer break from school. If he does, I am going to come back to see them. And you," he said, trying to hold my eye contact as I broke it away from him. He cleared his throat, somewhat uncomfortably, probably reading my thoughts again.

"Shall we start?" Sarah asked.

"Go for it," Ryan said. Duke jumped into Sarah's lap and she absently rubbed his big brown head. She was already attached to Duke, and she would surely be begging me for a dog of her own once Ryan and Duke went back home to Oregon. Maybe I would let her get one, she had proven she was capable of taking care of a pet. She had fed Duke every day and taken him outside for most of his potty outings. She was growing up, and I thought maybe she was ready for some responsibility. Plus, she desperately needed a friend.

My phone buzzed, I picked it up and looked at the text. It was from Ryan. I glanced over at him and noticed he

had his phone in his hands. His eyes remained on the screen, so I looked down and opened up the text he had sent.

*Ryan: Hi*

I smiled, his simple “hi” greeting always got to me for some reason.

*Allie: Hi there. Can't talk right now. Watching a movie with a hot guy.*

I stole a glance back at him and he was smiling into his phone.

*Ryan: Hot guy, huh? What a lucky bastard.*

*Allie: Very lucky. I'm thinking I might invite him into my room later, but do you think that is too forward of me?*

*Ryan: Oh no, definitely not. You should absolutely, definitely, without a doubt invite him into your room.*

*Allie: Hmmm, maybe I will. I guess that all depends.*

*Ryan: On what?*

*Allie: Well, if he rubs my feet during this movie, that would be some major points in his favor.*

Ryan read my text before setting his phone down and grabbing one of my feet into his lap. He began to rub with his

thumbs, causing a small moan to escape my lips. The sound made him stiffen, and again I enjoyed the effect I had on him. It was good to know I wasn't alone, that he wanted me as much as I wanted him.

Sarah laughed at something happening in the movie which pulled my attention from Ryan to the screen. I looked at Sarah, she looked so content. I loved seeing her happy. The three of us enjoyed the rest of the movie, Sarah and I ate popcorn and laughed, Ryan shook his head at us as he pretended to watch the film. I felt his gaze on me the entire movie. Once it was over and enough time had passed, I opened the door to my bedroom. I peeked at Ryan where he lay on the couch. He bolted upright and had me in his arms, swept completely off of my feet, in less than ten seconds. The rest of the night we spent in conversation, with our lips and our words and our souls. We went to sleep wrapped up in each other, both literally and figuratively.

It felt good.

It felt right.

It felt overwhelming.

It felt terrifying.

## Chapter 34

Ryan

February 2006

It was mid-morning, and I had been packing non stop since sunrise trying to get ready for the move to Houston. I was eager to get out of Austin, away from my parents and away from the memories of my ended relationship. Giving my truck back to my parents had made things more difficult, but I was still confident in my decision to distance myself from them, both physically and financially. I folded the last of my t-shirts into my large rolling suitcase and stood up to stretch. We were leaving for Houston the next morning so that Jason could help to settle me in over the weekend before his Monday classes at school. I felt confident that I was ready. Ready for both the move and a new beginning. I only had a few more loose ends to tie up before we left. I needed to get my transcripts from the school, something I was dreading. It was embarrassing to go to the college offices and admit my failures out loud. I also needed to clean out the safe and sell some of my belongings that I didn't plan to take with me.

I walked over to the safe and typed in the code. I needed to gauge how much cash I had tucked away in the safe. I had

been saving cash from every birthday my entire life, somehow knowing one day I would need it. I reached inside and started pulling out items. I decided to sell the safe, hoping to make at least a hundred dollars off of it, so everything inside needed to be sorted. My hands landed on a small velvet box and my heart dropped into my stomach. The ring. Allie's ring. The ring could only ever be Allie's, I had it made for her. I wondered briefly if I should sell it. It was worth a large chunk of money, but I knew I couldn't do it. I took out the box and looked over the ring, admiring its beautiful sapphires. The rose gold of the band made me long to touch Allie's hair, to rake my fingers through her soft, long strands. The thoughts of her made me feel physically ill, so I pushed her from my mind. I was stronger than the pain, I was stronger than the loss. I could survive it. I took the box and tucked it inside of my suitcase.

I went back over to the safe and found what I was looking for. There were four rolls of cash, held together by large, tan rubber bands. I had no idea how much it was, but I was hoping it would be enough to buy a cheap truck and then have some left over to buy food and necessities until I could find a job in Houston. I removed all of the rubber bands and began to count the bills. I was pleased to find I had almost nine thousand dollars. I could easily find a decent truck and

have some left over to not feel like I was leeching off of my brother. I let out a huge sigh of relief, feeling excited about looking for a vehicle I could buy on my own. I would also need to get car insurance, I realized. These were things that had always been taken care of for me. My parents would give me a new truck every few years, and insurance and gas were always taken care of. That reminded me, I needed to give my gas card back to my dad. I didn't think I could face him, so I decided I would put it in an envelope and mail it to their house.

I grabbed my laptop and started looking for numbers for local used car dealerships. I found one close by and decided to swing over there later that day to see what they had. I felt excited to take care of things on my own, without anyone holding my hand or doing it for me. I switched my search from cars to schools. I knew I needed to find a job, but I also wanted to enroll in college somewhere in Houston. Without my parents' connections, I wasn't sure if I would be able to get acceptance into a premed program, but I knew I wanted to work in healthcare. I started looking up options at community colleges in and around Houston.

“Hey, you hungry? Can we go get an early lunch?” Jason asked as he entered my room. I sat my laptop down and popped my fingers, turning my attention to my brother.

“Yeah, I could eat. I need to take a break from this anyway.”

“Woah, what’s all this?” Jason asked, gesturing to the large amount of cash spread out on my mattress.

“Proof that I won’t be mooching off of you,” I joked.

“Seriously though, where did you get all of that cash?” he asked.

“I have been saving practically my entire life. I knew it would come in handy someday,” I explained, shrugging my shoulders.

“Wow, that’s impressive, Ryan.” I gave him a small smile, happy that he was no longer upset with me. I knew that he didn’t have to be there with me, and he didn’t have to come to my rescue when I was so lost and depressed. But he had, and he made all of the difference in the world. He picked me up when I was low and he gave me the opportunity to start over.



“Let’s go out and get something, my treat,” I said. I grabbed one of the larger bills off my bed. Jason grabbed the bill and threw it back onto the stack on my bed.

“I have a better idea. Let’s go to the most expensive steak house we can find and I will charge it to Mom’s card. We can order lobster and get the biggest, most expensive bottle of champagne. It will piss her off so bad,” Jason said, a teasing gleam in his eyes.

“That is the total opposite of what I am trying to do. I want away from her money,” I said.

“She will never know it’s you, she will assume it’s me since it’s my card. Come on, it’ll be fun. One last delicious meal before you’re stuck eating Raman noodles and cheap takeout for the rest of your life,” he said. He ruffled my hair like he used to do when we were kids.

“Mom will assume I am trying to impress a date. Come on, Ry, live a little,” he teased.

“Okay, fine. Let’s do it. While we’re out, mind if we swing by this used car lot? I am going to buy something inexpensive to drive.”

“Sure,” Jason said, “Sounds fun. Lobster and used car shopping, count me in.” He wrapped his arm around my shoulder and we made our way out of the apartment.

Once we were in Jason’s car, I decided to get his opinion on where I should apply for school. After all, he had lived in Houston for a few years and he knew the area pretty well.

“I was looking at some community colleges today,” I started.

“Community colleges?” He said the words like he was describing a venereal disease.

“Yes, you snob, a community college. I am going to have to pay for my classes out of pocket. I’m poor now, remember?”

“Oh yeah, I keep forgetting,” he replied. It was easy to do, I had been forgetting too. When you grew up with a silver spoon in your mouth, you rarely thought about what things cost and if you would have enough money to pay for basic life necessities. There was always money in my accounts. I never thought twice about buying the things I wanted or needed. My parents were successful surgeons, and they both came from money. They had trust funds and fat wallets. I had turned my

back on all of that, but I didn't regret it one bit, and I doubted I ever would. It was a small price to pay for my freedom.

"I won't be able to afford medical school, and I doubt I have the grades to get in, but I want to work in health care," I said.

"I am a little surprised you want to work in healthcare. I figured you only went to med school to make Mom happy."

"When have I ever done anything to make our mother happy?" I joked, and we both broke into laughter.

"What about nursing school?" Jason asked. I thought about it for a moment, letting the idea marinate in my mind. It felt a little odd, did I want to become a male nurse? But the more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea. Patient care, that is what I was passionate about, and nurses were sometimes more hands-on with patients than doctors were.

"You know what, that is a great idea. I would be done pretty quickly, considering I have a ton of credits already. I bet it would only take a year or two. I will definitely look into that," I said, already itching to do research on nursing programs in Houston.

“Stick with your big bro. I am full of good ideas,” he said. He gave me a cocky smile.

“Really though, Jason. You have been a God-send this week. Thank you..” I trailed off, not wanting to get too emotional and ruin the mood of the day. We were having fun together, laughing and joking, and I did not want to bring down the room.

“Don’t sweat it, little bro. I’ve got your back. Always,” he said. He turned the car into a parking lot and I looked up to see the restaurant he had driven us to. It was clearly a five star place, with most of the people coming and going in ties and suits. I laughed and shoved his shoulder.

“Mom is going to be so pissed,” I grinned.

“Honestly, she probably won’t even notice,” he said.

“Let’s pay for lunch for the entire restaurant. That will get her attention,” I said, a devilish smile on my lips. At that, Jason laughed so hard his face turned a bright cherry red.

“Oh my gosh, you evil genius,” he said as he got out of the car. It was the most fun I had in weeks. We went into the restaurant, both of us still bent over in laughter.

“Lunch is on us!” Jason yelled into the room as we entered. The hostess shot us a look of disdain, but we continued to laugh together. She looked like she might kick us out before Jason pulled out his platinum credit card.

“We will be purchasing the meals of everyone in this establishment today. That includes you too, beautiful,” Jason said. He winked at the young girl standing at the hostess stand. She smiled wide, grabbed the fancy leather menus, and led us to the best seat in the house.

“You sure you want to give all this up?” Jason asked, laughter was still evident on his face.

“I’m sure,” I told him. “But I am having a great time.”

“Here’s to your last lobster lunch. Go big or go home,” he said. He raised his glass in celebration. I clinked my glass to his. I leaned back into the comfortable seat, watching Jason as he perused the menu. My big brother had always saved me from my parents, and that week was no different. I was so grateful to him, and I wondered how I would ever repay him. I didn’t know what was still to come. If I had, I may not have been so ready to thank him.

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Allie

February 2006

“Hey, Allie, wait for me.” I heard a voice call behind me. The voice was soft, Thai people never raised their voices, especially in public places. I turned to see Pram coming towards me, his work bag flopping at his side. I smiled, and

slowed my stride, waiting for him to catch up to me. It was the end of our third day of working at the school, I was tired and overwhelmed, but also filled up with adrenaline and excitement. He greeted me with a wai, the traditional Thai greeting, with his palms pressed against mine.

“Quite the day, right?” he asked as he walked next to me.

“I wish I had the energy of those kids!” I told him.

“Me, too. They make me tired,” he agreed as he nodded his head. During my first year of college, I had done some student teaching at a local elementary school in Austin. I loved the kids, but I was often met with sour attitudes and bad behavior. Thai children were easier, often making my job less stressful and more enjoyable. Thai culture puts much emphasis on respect. Everyone respects everyone else, especially students towards their teachers. The children were very well behaved and willing to work hard.

“The kids are so good, shockingly so,” I said to Pram.

“That is our culture,” he said proudly, “That’s one of the many reasons they call Thailand The Land of Smiles.”

“That’s one of the reasons I fell in love with this place,” I said, “The people are so happy all of the time, it is infectious.”

“Sometimes we are happy, sometimes we are faking it,” Pram explained with a sly smile on his face. His expression and confession made me giggle and I shoved him slightly on the shoulder. He stopped walking as we came upon a small street shop. He grabbed a single flower and paid the frail Thai woman running the shop. He thanked her and bowed his head in respect.

“Mai pen rai,” she replied. The phrase was a common Thai phrase, meaning ‘no worries’. He handed me the flower. “For the pretty American girl,” he said. I took the flower and smelled the pedals. It was lovely, as was everything in Thailand. We began walking again, the warm sun beating down on our backs. I had grown used to the warmth, but it was only February and I knew the coming spring and summer heat would be a new thing entirely. It was a good thing I grew up in Texas, I would be much more prepared than my American friends.

“You seem to be adjusting quite well to our new work schedule. You look great,” Pram said. He was a very confident



young man with his multi-cultural background that made him so interesting. I loved being around him. Having Pram made the adjustment to the new Country with its vastly different culture much easier for me. He was also a good distraction from the breakup with Ryan.

“It’s been good. I feel really good. Being in a routine has helped me. Keeping busy makes me forget to be sad,” I admitted to Pram.

“Good. I don’t want you to be sad. I will buy you as many flowers as it takes to keep a smile on your face.”

“The flower is beautiful, but what I need more is your friendship. So just keep being you and I promise I will keep smiling.”

“I can do that,” he said, “I will be the best friend you’ve ever had.” I smiled at him gratefully. I studied his face, the way he looked at me with such intensity, such longing and fondness. I had begun to suspect that my other roommates might have been right, that Pram might have romantic feelings for me, but he was respecting that what I needed from him was friendship.

“I think this weekend when we are off work we should go to Koh Lan. The beach has such clear water and there is a

lot of nice shopping and restaurants we could check out. We can invite the other girls if you'd like. There are also little monkeys that are sometimes near the beach. I know how you Americans like to see the monkeys," he said smiling.

"Monkeys and food? Count me in," I said excitedly. There was so much to explore in Thailand, so many things to do and experience. I couldn't wait to take it all in, to see and taste everything I could. At that moment, I decided that I did not regret moving to Thailand. It was the right thing to do; I felt it in my gut. I was where I was meant to be. I never wanted to leave the people and the kids and the beaches. I wanted to live there forever. Leaving Ryan was the worst thing to ever happen to me, but living in Thailand was the best thing to ever happen to me. I never wanted to return to Texas, Thailand would be my new home. I couldn't picture Ryan in Bangkok, so maybe what happened between us was fated. I couldn't have both, and I was ready to accept my choice. I chose me.

"You are lost in thought," Pram said. He said it as a statement, not a question.

"I was just thinking how happy I am here. I may stay here forever," I told him. My revelation made his face

brighten.

“I hope you do,” his face was soft and sincere.

“What about you? Do you plan to stay in Thailand forever?” I asked him.

“I believe so. I may want to travel to France more often. I have many family members there. My mother is Perisian,” he said. This explained his features, he was fairer in skin than most other Thai I had met. He was also taller and had lighter eyes.

“I have always wanted to go to Paris,” I mused dreamily. In my childhood home, I had a large poster of the Eiffel Tower above my bed. I used to read books about Paris romances and dream that I was the leading lady in the novel. I had visions of chocolate croissants and strawberry macarons. Of small coffee shops with European accents and hushed conversations. My dad never had the money to take us on international vacations. We usually spent our Summer breaks driving to near-by states to hotels with indoor pools and small lakes. It was always fun, but I dreamt of traveling to the places in my novels.”

“We must go then, maybe this Summer?”

“You would take me to Paris?” I asked, shocked at his suggestion.

“Of course, everyone should go to Paris at least once.”

“You are really good at this whole ‘making me feel better’ thing,” I told him. He laughed and switched his bag to his other shoulder.

“You make me feel better too,” he said. His words made me feel warm inside. I glanced at his lips and then immediately felt guilty. I couldn’t lead Pram on, I was not ready to throw myself into a new relationship, I was not even close. But Pram made it feel possible. Pram made me believe that maybe one day I could move on. Pram made me think that I might love again one day, that maybe my heart wouldn’t always be broken.

## Chapter 35

Ryan

February 2023

Tuesday

“Should we bring a bottle of wine?” Allie asked when I came into the kitchen before we left for dinner at my parents house.

“It’s a nice gesture, but they have an entire wine cellar. Maybe flowers or a dessert instead?” I suggested.

“I don’t have time to make a dessert!” Allie exclaimed. She sounded flustered. I knew she was terrified of my mother and I tried not to smile at the wild look of panic on her beautiful face.

“We can stop by a bakery on the way. There is one close to the street they live on that I know my mom used to love, I’m sure it is still there.” She nodded wildly and adjusted her wig on top of her head.

“Is what I’m wearing okay?” She pulled nervously at her sleeves. She had on a light gray sweater with a pearl detail and a nice pair of jeans. She looked amazing.

“You look perfect,” I said. I walked over and wrapped her into a hug. She accepted my embrace and leaned into me. We had spent the morning in a comfortable rhythm. Sarah had done school work while Allie sat beside her teaching and helping. I sat opposite them checking emails and paying bills online. We would all take breaks to eat and watch television and just hang out and talk. We laughed and joked all day. It felt so comfortable. I loved being there. Allie and Sarah were quickly becoming my two favorite people to be with. We all

stayed in our pajamas until it had been time to get ready to go to my parents.

“Stop being nervous. It’s going to be fine. I promise.”

She nodded into my chest and seemed to relax a little. We separated as Sarah walked through the front door with Duke.

“He did his business,” she reported, “I’ll feed him before we leave.”

“Thanks, Sarah. I think he is starting to like you more than he likes me,” I joked. On cue, Duke snuggled up to Sarah’s side, his large tail wagging so intensely that it knocked into the side of the kitchen table making a loud *thud thud thud* sound.

“Mom, you look really pale, are you okay?” Sarah asked as she eyed Allie.

“I’m fine,” she said. She waved her off.

“Did you take your medications today?” I asked. She shot me an annoyed look.

“I am fine, Ryan. It’s the idea of coming face to face with Caroline Anderson that has all the blood running straight to my heart to hide,” she said. I laughed and threw up my

hands in mock exasperation. “She is not that bad anymore! Just trust me,” I said.

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” she said uneasily.

“Is your mom Cruella or something?” Sarah asked. She looked between Allie and I.

“Pretty much,” I said, shrugging my shoulders, “Except she likes dogs.” Duke’s ears perked up at my comment.

“Maybe I will stay here,” Sarah said nervously.

“Over my dead body. I am not going if she doesn’t go,” Allie said as she turned to face me.

“Girls, come on. It will be fine! I will take you to ice cream afterwards and make it worth your while.” They both looked at each other as if they were having a silent conversation I was not a part of. Sarah gave a curt nod and Allie turned towards me.

“Two scoops each and you’re paying,” she said. She held her hand out to shake mine.

“Deal,” I said. I took her hand in mine and shook it firmly.

“Can we bring Duke?” Sarah asked, “You said she likes dogs.”



“Lets not over do it,” I said as I chuckled at her comment.

“Well, I tried Duke,” Sarah said. She rubbed Duke on his big brown head. She walked over to his food bowl and filled it with his dog food. Duke followed closely behind her, his tail wagging all the way.

“Duke may refuse to go back to Portland with me Thursday,” I laughed, but then my face fell as I thought about leaving them.

Thursday. The word hung in the air heavy between us. We had not talked much about our plans after I left and went back home to my apartment. To my life in Oregon. To my lonely existence. I didn't miss my job or even my friends. I was exactly where I wanted to be. I needed to have a conversation with Allie. To ask her to be mine. We could do long distance for a while, but I was also more than willing to move to Texas to be near her. I was trying so hard not to scare her away, when all I really wanted to do was get closer to her in any way that she would allow.

“Are we going to talk about what's next for us at any point?” I asked her quietly. She slowly nodded her head up and down.

“Thursday, I promise,” she said. I kissed her forehead, drinking in her scent as I did. Thursday. That word again. A promise and a curse. A word filled with both hope and dread.

“I’m ready,” Sarah said as she walked up to us. I let go of Allie and grabbed my keys.

“Let’s go. We don’t want to keep the doctor Anderson’s waiting,” I said, smirking at the girls. They followed behind me as I made my way to the truck. I remembered the last time Allie and my mother were in the same room together and nerves filled my stomach.

“Here goes nothing,” I muttered to myself.

One hour later we were sitting in my parents’ large dining room, the wine and conversation were flowing. The night was going well, and Allie had finally started to relax.

The initial greetings were awkward, but I could tell my parents were trying hard to make the girls feel comfortable. Being in my childhood home was slightly unnerving. I had both wonderful and terrible memories there. I grew up with everything my heart desired. Everything except the attention I craved from my parents. I wanted their love, instead I got their money. I know now that they were trying to show their love by buying me the things that I wanted, and they tried to provide me with a life they felt I deserved. I wish I had known it back then, when I felt so alone.

“So Allie, what do you do for a living?” my mom asked. I shifted awkwardly in my chair, I should have updated mom on Allie’s situation and saved Allie from having to answer this line of questioning.

“Well, I am a teacher. I taught in Thailand for many years. I came back to the US when I got the cancer diagnosis,” she said matter-of-factly. My mom’s eyes grew wide over her wine glass. She cut her gaze to me questioningly before returning it to Allie. With her wig on, there were no outward signs of her disease. My mom looked completely thrown off guard. I continued to feel guilty for not filling her in.

“I did not realize you had cancer, are you in remission now?” Mom asked. Now it was Allie’s turn to look uncomfortable.

“I was for a while, but not currently. I have multiple myeloma. Stage three,” she said. My moms eyes grew wider still. She looked over at Sarah, who appeared unaffected by the conversation.

“I am very sorry to hear that, Allie,” Mom said. She shot daggers at me for leaving her in the dark before bringing Allie here. I gave her an apologetic look.

“I am sure Allie has the best doctors available, and if not you get with me and I will make that happen,” Dad said as he gave Allie a big smile.

“Thank you, Dr. Anderson. I do have the best oncologist, but I really appreciate that,” Allie said warmly.

“Please, call me Dan,” Dad said, “Ryan, give Allie my number in case she needs anything medically. I know all of the doctors in this town.”

“Thank you, Dan,” Allie said kindly.

“Sarah, what do you like to do, what are your interests?” Mom asked as she seemingly tried to change the subject.

“Sarah is a talented artist,” I said to my mother. Sarah’s face lit up at my comment.

“Thank you, Ryan. I do love to paint and sketch. Really anything artistic. I want to be an artist, but I know that’s not really a smart career choice, so it’s probably something I will always do on the side. I enjoy school also, so maybe I will go to nursing school. I am not sure yet.”

“You should pursue your dreams, no matter what they are,” my dad said. I tried not to smirk. If I had told him when I was fifteen that I wanted to be an artist he would have died on the spot.

“I will. I can be an artist, but also have a job that actually pays money. Plus, I would rather my art always be something I love. I am afraid if I do it to try to pay my bills, then I won’t enjoy it anymore,” Sarah explained.

“You’re a very practical young woman,” Mom said. High praise coming from her.

“Thank you Dr. Anderson,” Sarah replied.

“Please, call me Caroline,” Mom said. She looked at Sarah for a long moment, her gaze taking her in quizzically.

Everyone else continued to eat, but I watched Mom look back and forth between Sarah and Allie.

“You are almost an exact replica of your mother,” Mom said quietly, “It’s a little like looking back in time.”

“It’s wild, isn’t it?” I agreed. Sarah looked at Allie and smiled brightly.

“Lucky girl, your mom has always been so beautiful. It’s no wonder Ryan was such a fool for her back then,” Dad laughed.

“I didn’t love her because she was beautiful. There were a million other reasons, her looks were just a bonus,” I said, a little too defensively. My tone was sharp and annoyed. Dad raised his hands up, trying to stop the direction of the conversation.

“That’s not what I meant. I didn’t mean to upset you, Ryan. I only meant to compliment Allie, my apologies.”

“It’s okay, I’m sorry I snapped.” I picked up my fork and shoveled a bite into my mouth. I looked over at Allie, she had a tale-tale redness creeping up her neck.

“Thank you, Dan. And yes, Sarah is my spitting image. Except I believe she is even more beautiful than I was at her

age. The boys don't have a chance," Allie said. Her words changed the tense mood. Dad laughed and raised his glass of wine as if in agreement.

"The boys will love her for her mind and her talent more than her beauty," I said.

"Geez, Ryan. Dad is just trying to give the girl a compliment. Why are you being so defensive?" Mom asked softly, as if she was trying not to anger me. I wasn't trying to pick a fight with them. I knew they were just trying to be nice and make conversation. Old habits die hard, and usually in the past I was always on the defensive when it came to my parents. I had to be.

"I'm sorry," I said again. I let out a long breath, "I'm trying." Mom nodded sadly.

"Thank you, I appreciate the compliments," Sarah said. Her big smile directed at us all broke right through the tension in the room.

"What kind of things do you paint?" Dad asked.

"Mostly landscape," Sarah replied.

"Here," I said. I handed my dad my cell phone, "I took pictures of some of her work that they have hanging in their

apartment.”

“You took pictures of her paintings?” Allie asked.

“Yes, is that okay? I won’t post them or anything like that. I just like to look at them,” I told her. I felt a little embarrassed.

“It’s definitely okay. That’s really sweet Ryan,” Sarah said to me.

“Wow, these are very good,” Dad said as he scrolled through the pictures of her artwork. “Look at these Caroline,” he said. He passed the phone over to my mom.

“Exceptional,” Mom confirmed. She nodded in delight with each new picture.

“Have you sold any pieces?” my mom asked as she passed Sarah back her phone.

“No ma’am, I just do it for fun,” Sarah said. She shrugged her shoulders.

“I have been looking for a new piece of artwork for my study. Would you be willing to sell me one of yours? I would pay a fair price,” Mom said. I smiled at her, grateful for her kindness towards Sarah.



“Absolutely! I could paint you anything you’d like. What did you have in mind?” Sarah asked, excitedly.

“I would actually love to buy that one with the blues and greens,” Mom said, referring to one of the ones we had shown her on my cell phone.

“How does one thousand dollars sound?” Mom asked. She pulled out her checkbook. Allie’s jaw dropped open at the same time that Sarah choked on her water.

“One thousand American dollars?” Sarah asked, her eyes wide. My mom laughed out loud.

“Yes, is that a fair price?” Mom asked. Sarah nodded her head up and down at a rapid pace.

“That is way too much Caroline,” Allie said.

“Please. I insist. I know real art when I see it, and I want to be the first to own an original Sarah...” her voice trailed off at the end, unsure of Sarah’s last name.

“Delacruz, like Mom. She wasn’t married when she had me, so she gave me her last name,” Sarah said. My mom turned her attention to Allie.

“Only if that’s okay with you, Allie,” Mom said.

“If you’re sure, then yes. I know Sarah has worked very hard on her paintings and we will put it directly into her college savings account,” Allie said. My mom took out her pen and started to write Sarah a check.

“Well then I want one for my office too,” Dad interjected. “I will take the one with the red flowers. Caroline, make that two thousand total.” Sarah tried to hide her excitement but I could see her bouncing up and down in her chair. I was so happy for Sarah and so excited for her that she was being recognized for her talents by my parents. I was also jealous that I wouldn’t be the first to buy one of her pieces.

“Y’all have made her day,” Allie said with a smile.

“Well you have made ours too. Thank you all for coming over to have dinner with us. I only wish Jason could have come. Will you join us when he comes to town for summer break? Ryan has said he might come and we would love for you girls to join us,” Mom said. I was officially beaming. The dinner was going better than I ever dreamed possible. I looked at Allie, her hands were in her lap and she was gripping them together tightly. She looked uncomfortable, which made me uneasy.

“Maybe, we will see how things go. Thank you for the invitation,” she said politely.

“Shall we have dessert?” my dad asked, “Allie, it was so kind of you to bring cookies from Caroline’s favorite bakery.”

“Yes to dessert,” Sarah said. I took a cookie from the box and handed one to Allie. I then held it up in the air. “Cheers,” I said to her with a mischievous grin.

“Cheers,” Allie said as she touched her cookie to mine. Her smile was infectious. I took a bite of the rich cookie and Mom’s gaze found mine and held it. I couldn’t read the expression on her face. I gave her a quizzical look but she tore her eyes from mine and grabbed a cookie for herself.

“Oh gosh I had forgotten how good these were,” Mom all but moaned as she took a bite.

“Lets remember to take these to our next yoga class Caroline,” Dad said. Mom nodded in agreement.

“Oh I almost forgot,” Mom said, her mouth was half full of cookies, “Your dad and I have something we want to give you. Mom got up from her seat and left the room. I looked at my dad who had a huge smile plastered across his face. He looked excited and I was officially curious. Mom returned to

the dining room with a small box in her hand. I took it and held it for a moment, almost afraid to open it.

“This is a late birthday present. I can’t believe you’re forty,” Mom said. I opened the box, to find a set of keys inside on a fish shaped key chain.

“It is the key to the lake house. It’s yours,” she said. I started to shake my head and tried to hand the box back to her.

“No, Ryan. Take it please,” Mom said. Her eyes filled with tears. “The day you handed me your truck keys and let go of all your accounts should have been a wake up call for me. You don’t need our money, I completely understand that. You have grown into a fine man all on your own. I am so proud of you for that, for how fearlessly you did everything by yourself. You are strong, so much stronger than I have ever been. I am not trying to buy your love anymore. I want to give you the lake house because I know how much you love it. Dad wanted to sell it years ago but I have held onto it with the hopes that one day I could give it to you. Take the keys,” she begged as she pushed the box back towards me.

“You’re sure?” I asked. My voice quivered with emotion. I needed to hear those words from her. She was

proud of me. She thought I was a good man. She noticed how much the lake house meant to me. She wanted me to have it.

“We are both sure. We love you. Please, take the lake house. You can move in there permanently or keep it for weekend getaways. Whatever you want to do, it’s yours. We can keep paying for the utilities or you can take that over, it is totally up to you,” Dad said. I stood up and walked over to him and he stood too. I grabbed him and pulled him to me. He began to sob into my arms and I could not stop my own tears. I felt my mom wrap around us both, the three of us hugged together in a circle of arms. I noticed out of the corner of my blurry, tear-filled eyes that Sarah and Allie were sneaking out of the room, giving us privacy during the emotional moment. We finally broke apart, all three of us wiping tears off of our faces.

“Thank you both. Not just for the lake house. For all of it. For being different,” I said softly, “All I ever wanted was to feel loved by you both.”

“I have loved you from the second you were born, we both have. We were just terrible at showing it. Not anymore. You will never doubt my love again because I will make sure you know. I love you, Ryan,” Mom said. I nodded and smiled

and continued to wipe the tears away. We all collected ourselves and returned to our chairs at the dinner table.

“It’s safe to come back in,” My dad yelled into the other room. Allie and Sarah peaked their heads around the corner and came back into view.

“Sorry about that,” I said to the girls.

“Don’t be sorry,” Allie said, her eyes also filled with tears. She knew how much the reunion with my parents meant to me. I took her hand and squeezed it, needing to physically feel her support.

“I think this calls for another champagne toast. Our second of this week,” I said.

“Perfect idea, I will grab a bottle from the cellar,” Dad said. He stood from the table. I took Allie’s hand again and held it in mine, keeping her close. She didn’t pull away. Dad returned with five glasses, one with only a sip for Sarah.

“To new artists, new friends, new beginnings, and forgiveness,” Dad said, glass raised.

“New beginnings,” I agreed as I squeezed Allie’s hand.

Allie

March 2006

“The mom cooks noodles in the kitchen,” the little Thai girl said as she carefully enunciated each word.

“Wonderful job, Kanlaya!” I said as I clapped my hands. The girl beamed at me and my heart soared. I had been at my job for almost a full month and I was completely smitten. With the kids, with the work, and with Thailand. I missed Ryan deeply, but each day that passed got easier, and with each day I felt solid in my decision to stay in Thailand for good. I was getting really good at speaking the language, and I was getting even better at teaching the children to speak English.

Everything felt so good, so right. I was exactly where I was meant to be. I couldn't keep myself from thinking about him though. How was he? I longed to look at his gorgeous face and hear his laugh. I had thought about contacting him several times, but I knew it wasn't a good idea. I was staying in Bangkok; there was no future for us.

The spring weather was officially scorching and I was spending every one of my spare minutes on the multiple beaches within driving distance of Bangkok. Pram had made it

his mission to show me every single beautiful thing that Thailand had to offer. He was my best friend, my confidant, and the closer I got to him the further I felt from my life back home. Thailand was becoming my home. The kids were all bustling around me, playing tag between their lessons. I loved the school and I was falling in love with each and every student. The happiness I felt in my job and my adventures was starting to overshadow my grief. I was applying to master's programs in Thailand so that I could finish my degree while keeping my job. I was putting down roots.

“Return to your places kids, *kawp koon*, hurry hurry,” I said. I clapped my hands once to get their attention. They each bowed their heads in respect and immediately returned to their seats. Let's be honest, teaching Thai children was quite easy. They were all so well mannered. I had twelve small faces smiling back at me as I continued my lesson. My heart soared. A movement in the hallway of the school caught my attention and I glanced up to see Pram wave from the doorway as he walked by with his own class. I waved back, smiling at the sight of him. His tall frame was quite swoony and his smile was infectious. I shook that thought away and continued my lesson.



A couple hours later, Pram, Rachel and Kylee joined me in the staff break room for our lunch hour. It was so hot in the school and I was pulling my dress away from my sweaty body attempting to create a breeze. My hair was piled on my head and tiny curls were forming around the base of my neck from the sweat beads permanently camped there.

“I think God built Thailand on the surface of the sun,” Rachel complained, fanning her face with her clipboard.

“There is absolutely no breeze today,” Kylee said. She gulped down a glass of cold water. Pram laughed and patted her on the back. “You poor girls will never survive through the summer,” he joked.

“Sure we will, because I plan to spend the entire summer in a bikini in the water on every single beach I can find,” Rachel said.

“We’re going to be in Paris this summer, right Allie?” Pram said as he smiled down at me.

“We are? Did you speak to your family about us staying there for a little bit?” I asked excitedly.

“I did, we’re all set,” Pram said. He smiled widely at my enthusiastic reaction to his news.

“What?! I want to go!” Kylee squealed.

“Uh, yeah me too,” Rachel said, her eyes wide and excited.

“You girls can come with us, it won’t be a problem with my family,” Pram said. I felt slightly disappointed at the thought of the other girls coming with us. I liked when it was just Pram and I. Not because I had romantic feelings, that wasn’t it, I was just more comfortable when it was just us.

“Oh my gosh, I am so excited. I will have to beg my dad for travel money, but I bet he will cave. I have to start planning outfits immediately,” Rachel gushed. The two girls walked over to their lockers, both of them talking excitedly about France.

“Now look what you’ve done,” I joked, gesturing toward our excited roommates.

“I aim to please,” he said. He smirked down at me.

“We won’t hear the end of it for months,” I laughed.

“I guess we should start working on your French, *mon tres cher ami*,” Pram said.

“What does that mean?”

“My dearest friend,” he said. He smiled at me, his face open and warm. I beamed back at him.

“You are my dearest friend too,” I told him. Rachel and Kylee rejoined us with their food in hand. We all sat around the small table and opened our lunch packs.

“Let’s go to the mall after work,” Rachel said, fanning her brow. The malls had the best air conditioners, so we often went after work to walk around in the cool air.

“Absolutely,” Kylee agreed. Pram and I also nodded in agreement as I felt a drop of sweat drip down my back. We all ate the rest of our food while we discussed our plans for the summer. We decided on three weeks in Paris and then spending the rest of our time off on the many beaches of Thailand. I was so excited, so ready for all of the adventures awaiting me, but Ryan was in the back of my mind. He had a permanent spot there.

“You okay, Alison?” Pram asked as he noticed the far away look in my eyes. I shook my head to clear away my thoughts. I liked when he called me Alison. No one else called me Alison.

“I’m good,” I said. I grabbed my trash and tossed it. The other girls did the same.

“We’re going to head back. Meet us at the front doors when class lets out and we can all go to the mall together,” Kylee said.

“Okay, now tell me, what’s up?” Pram said after the girls had left the room. I laughed and shook my head. He already knew me too well.

“I was just thinking about Ryan,” I admitted.

“Do you want to go home to him?” he asked.

“Actually, no. Not at all. I love it here. Thailand feels like my home, like I belong here, and I can’t envision Ryan here at all. He doesn’t fit. I can’t have the two things that I love because they don’t work together. I’ve accepted it, but I also feel as if I will never move on if I don’t get closure,” I explained.

“Maybe you should call him,” Pram suggested.

“I don’t have a phone here yet,” I shrugged.

“Let’s watch a film tonight at home, drink a little wine to loosen up your nerves, and then you can call on my phone,” Pram said.

“You would be okay with me making an international call on your personal phone?”

“Of course,” he said. I often wondered if Pram came from money. He dressed so well, he was sophisticated, and he was well-traveled. He never spoke much about his family and I wasn’t sure what was culturally appropriate to ask. Thai people seemed to be private about personal matters.

“I don’t know...maybe reaching out to him is a bad idea. I can’t decide if it’s going to make me feel better or worse.”

“I think you should do it. I am a big fan of you moving on,” Pram said, his unique accent coming through. It was a mix of European, Asian, and American. He blushed slightly at his words. I ignored the meaning of his comment and shrugged my shoulders.

“I probably do need to talk to him, to get closure from the relationship. I will definitely need some liquid courage though,” I said.

“So does that mean we are on for tonight?” he asked.

“Let’s do it. I get to pick the movie though,” I said.

“Deal,” he replied. He wrapped one arm around me and gave me a small squeeze.

“We better get back to class,” I said. We walked together towards the door. I was anxious about the evening, the thought

of speaking to Ryan made my entire body shake in nervous anticipation. I found myself distracted the rest of the day, constantly cutting my eyes toward the clock, waiting for the end of my work day. I tried to focus on my kids and my lessons, but my mind kept wandering back to Ryan. Would he answer? How would I feel after hearing his voice? Would it heal me or break me? My hands were shaking when the bell finally rang indicating the end of my work day.

“I will see you all at our next class, *lah gorn*,” I said to the children as I stuffed all of my papers in my bag. I piled out of my room at record pace to meet up with my friends at the front of the school. Rachel and Kylee were close behind me, laughing and talking about their day. We all waited for Pram, his tall frame hovering high above the small students filling the hallways.

“Hurry Pram, I *need* air conditioning,” Kylee wined. He fell into step beside us, then opened the door and allowed us to pass through before him.

“Arggg,” Rachel said as the hot sun hit her face, “It is so hot today!” I laughed, not as bothered as my fellow American friends. Texas had me better prepared to deal with the scalding

temperatures. I was quickly becoming acclimated to the Thai weather.

“I need ice cream. I’m going to call Ryan tonight,” I told the girls.

“Oh, wow. We are going to need something stronger than ice cream,” Rachel said.

“Please don’t tell me you’re thinking of going back to America,” Kylee said, her eyes wide.

“No, I’m here for good,” I said as I hooked my arm between hers. She gave my elbow a squeeze and I couldn’t help my eyes from filling with tears.

“We need to get some of those little mopeds so we can get around easier,” Kylee said.

“Oh yes that would be so fun! I wonder if we could find some for cheap. It will be nice when our teaching jobs actually start to pay us,” I said.

“I know someone who can get them to us for a low cost,” Pram said. Rachel clapped her hands and did a little dance of excitement.

“They are not fun to ride in the rainy season though,” Pram warned us. We all linked our arms together to make our

way to the bus stop. We all sat and chatted about our days, each of us telling funny stories about our students. Happiness swarmed around me, but my plan for the phone call to Ryan was at the forefront of my mind. I forced myself to be in the moment with my friends. I smiled and laughed at their stories, forcing my brain to leave the worry for later. The evening would come soon enough.



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Later that night, Pram and I sat together in our living room. The day had been fun, we walked through the mall, ate ice cream, and finally came home to watch a movie. Rachel and Kylee had decided to go out with some new friends they had met through the school, so it was only Pram and I at the apartment. We had gone through an entire bottle of wine together. I was pretty buzzed, but still clear headed. I had tried to watch the movie and be present with Pram, but it was difficult. Ryan. My sweet Ryan. What was he doing at that very moment? Did he want to hear my voice as much as I longed to hear his? I imagined him sitting on the couch in our apartment, his hair slightly curly and perfectly messy. His big brown eyes focused on his textbooks. I thought about his smile, the way his top lip curved up slightly higher on the left

side. I missed his smile, his laugh, his strong body holding me tightly against him. I even missed his webbed toes. Actually, I may have missed his cute toes most of all.

“Are you ready,” Pram asked as he eyed me questioningly.

“I don’t know,” I said. I swished my wine around in its glass.

“What time is it there?” he asked. I looked at my watch and tilted my head to the side. We had been drinking for longer than I thought. It was well into the early morning hours.

“It’s three AM here, so it will be late afternoon in Texas. It’s a twelve hour time difference.”

“Won’t he be at class or something?” Pram asked.

“No, it’s already Friday in Austin so he should be at home. He doesn’t have classes on Fridays,” I told him. Ryan and I used to spend all of our Fridays together, curled up on the couch studying and discussing our school week. Ryan would cook for us and we sometimes made love on the table after dinner. I shifted my weight around on the couch, the memories making me uncomfortable.

“There’s no time like the present,” Pram said. He handed me his phone. I took a deep breath and took the phone from his hands.

“Here goes nothing,” I said. Pram gave me a questioning look.

“It’s an American phrase,” I said. I smiled at him as I dialed Ryan’s cell phone. My hands shook as I tried to type in the familiar number. It went straight to an automated recording. The line had been disconnected.

“That’s weird,” I whispered.

“What happened?” he asked.

“The line was disconnected. It’s not a working number,” I said.

“Are you sure you dialed the right number?” he asked. I looked down at the recent call log and confirmed it was correct. I knew that number by heart.

“I dialed it correctly. He must have changed his cell phone number.” The thought made me sick to my stomach. Was he trying to keep me from being able to contact him?

“I could call the main line to our apartment,” I said. We didn’t use it much, but we did have a landline that his

parents and telemarketers would sometimes call.

“Try it,” he said as he shrugged his shoulders. I steeled myself and typed in the number. It started to connect.

“It’s ringing,” I whispered, my eyes wide. My hands were violently shaking. It rang once, twice, three times. After five rings I almost gave up. Then I heard a voice on the other line.

“Hello?” a male voice said. It wasn’t Ryan. My heart dropped.

“Hi, um, may I ask who this is?” I asked, my voice sounded small.

“This is Jason Anderson, who is this?” My pulse started to slow, it was his brother.

“It’s Allie.”

“Shit, Allie. Why are you calling this number?” he asked, his voice dropped to a whisper. His response threw me off guard.

“I wanted to talk to Ryan...” I said.

“Are you in Thailand?” he asked.

“Yes...”

“Are you coming back to Texas?”

“No...”

“Then I’m afraid I cannot let you talk to Ryan,” he said firmly.

“What? Why? I just need to talk to him, Jason. I need some closure.”

“Oh, YOU, need some closure? You are so selfish, Allie. Can you hear yourself? You leave to go to another freaking country to live and YOU need closure? He was completely broken, do you know that? Like he wouldn’t eat or shower or go to class. He got kicked out of school because of you,” he yelled into the phone.

“What?” I asked. My brain could not process his words. My head was spinning with questions. I felt myself go completely cold.

“He is finally, FINALLY, doing better, and you have the nerve to call here and mess all of that up? Well guess what? I won’t let you. You are not going to ruin him again. If you have no plans to come back, LEAVE HIM ALONE. I mean it, Allie. He got rid of his cell phone and he is moving in with me. Away from Austin. Away from any memory of you. He hates

you, don't you understand? We hate you. Don't call here again. Ever. Don't you dare try to call him or me or anyone in my family ever again. You are not welcome in our lives. GOODBYE," he screamed as he slammed down the phone. The line went dead. The tears came next.

He hates me.

They all hate me.

His parents, his brother. They hate me.

Ryan hates me.

I felt my face screw up in pain. I felt the tear drops falling onto the phone, down my hands, into my lap. Covering me, soaking me, drowning me. I couldn't get a breath, the air was coming in gulps. I was choking. I started clawing at my throat, desperate to breathe. All at once, Pram scooped me into his arms and off of the couch. He cradled me, allowing me to cry, but holding me tightly to center me. I sobbed, buried my face into his shirt, and let him comfort me.

"Oh, Alison," he whispered. My sobs grew louder, the pain ripped through me. He hated me. Ryan hated me. I would never see or talk to Ryan again. I was having a panic attack, I knew, but I couldn't stop myself from breaking into a million

pieces. It was closure, but not the kind I was hoping for. Nevertheless, the door was closed and we were done. Pram carried me to my room when my breathing had slowed. I was curled into him and I could feel that his shirt was soaked through with my tears. He sat me on my bed and took my face in his hands.

“It is going to be okay, you can get through this. I will help you get through this.” He gently kissed my forehead.

“He hates me, Pram. His brother told me to never call again,” I sobbed.

“That’s okay, you don’t need him, you are strong. You left everything behind to bravely pursue a life you want,” he said.

“Yeah, because I am selfish,” I said, Jason’s words coming back to me.

“No Alison, you are not selfish. There is nothing selfish about fighting for the things you want, for knowing your own worth. He could have come, he chose not to. You are not selfish,” he said firmly. I nodded and wiped at my tears. My breathing was normal, my pulse rate slowed. I took a deep breath in and let it out slowly.

“You are quite beautiful when you cry. Your blue eyes stun me,” he said. I gave him a sad smile.

“I’m broken, Pram. My heart, it’s broken. I can’t give it to anyone because it’s not here, it’s in America,” I said as I acknowledged his feelings for me for the first time.

“Shh, don’t worry about that. Someday your heart will heal, Alison. Maybe you will want me to love you, maybe you won’t. But if you do decide to love again, know that I will be in line, at the very front. But I am your friend, forever. I am here, not because you are the most wonderful and beautiful woman I have ever seen, but because I am your friend who cares about you. I am here to love you as your friend. I know that’s all you have to offer me right now, and that is okay,” he said. He brushed my hair from my face.

“Even if that is all you ever have to give me, your friendship, it is enough,” he said. I let out a huge breath of relief. I needed him. I wanted him in my life desperately. I knew all I had to offer him at that time was friendship. I was so glad he was willing to give me that. I threw my arms around his neck and began to cry again, but this time they were happy tears. With Pram by my side, I knew I was going to be okay. I was going to survive.



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Ryan

March 2006

“Who was that?” I asked Jason. I had just walked back into my apartment, its bare walls and empty rooms were all that was left of my life in Austin. My belongings were all packed and Jason and I were getting ready to head to Houston. Jason’s face was red and he had just slammed the phone down on its base. He looked angry and flustered.

“Freaking telemarketers,” Jason said. He unplugged the phone from the wall and threw the cord down to the floor. His reaction to the phone call seemed a little dramatic, but I let it go.

“I’ve got Old Red loaded up, I think we’re all done,” I said to Jason.

“You’ve already given your truck a name?” he asked. We had found the perfect used truck the day before. It was a 98 chevy with bright red paint and worn seats. It was used, old, and I loved it. I was able to snag a great deal and still had plenty of cash to get me through a few months until I found a job. I could have waited until I got to Houston to find a new vehicle, but I wanted to drive into my new life with my own wheels. I was high on the feeling of independence. I had canceled my cell phone and tossed it, completely cutting myself off from my parents’ money. I sold everything I couldn’t bring with me, adding some extra cash to my savings. Not the ring, though. I couldn’t part with it. It was in the bottom of my bag in its perfect velvet box. I would decide what to do with it when the pain of her absence dulled.

“Of course I gave her a name. She’s my baby,” I said. Jason rolled his eyes at me. He still seemed a little flustered from his phone call. His back was ramrod straight, his face tight.

“Are you ready?” he asked me. I looked around the empty apartment, my heart squeezed in my chest. I laid my

hand on the countertop, giving the space a silent goodbye.

“As I’ll ever be,” I said. I patted the cool, white granite.

“Let’s do this, then.” He put his arm around me and we walked out the door together. I stood in the elevator, taking deep breaths, in and out. Starting a new chapter was never easy. Starting a new chapter without financial security was even harder. Starting a new chapter without Allie was the hardest of all.

“You’re good, right? I mean, you’re going to be okay without her?” Jason asked. His voice sounded weird as he asked the question. I studied his face, he looked somber and concerned, his eyes filled with worry.

“Yeah, bro. I’m good,” I said. I threw my arm around his shoulder. I ruffled his hair as the door to the elevator opened. Out in the parking lot, Jason’s big expensive black truck sat beside my old red chevy. The sight made me smile, the two vehicles looked worlds apart.

“I’ll lead the way, you follow behind me,” he said. We got in our trucks and backed out of the parking lot for the last time.

“Goodbye, Allie,” I whispered as I drove away. I knew she would not be able to easily find me with my cell phone gone and the fact that I was moving away from the apartment, but she had weeks to contact me, and she hadn’t. It was truly over. I gripped the steering wheel and let out a long breath. I felt the engine sputter as the truck jerked slightly.

“It’s okay, Old Red. We’re going to be alright.”

## Chapter 37

Sarah

February 2023

Wednesday

“Oh good, you’re awake,” I said to Ryan when I walked into the living room Wednesday morning. I was up and dressed and I hoped he would take me for another driving lesson. I knew he was leaving the next day, and I was unsure Mom would be up to the challenge of helping me learn after Ryan was back in Portland.

“Hey, kid. Good morning,” he said to me. He was smiling over his steaming cup of coffee. I grinned at the mug he was using that said *Cancer Chose the Wrong Witch*. Underneath the words was a picture of a witch riding on a

broomstick with her middle finger in the air. I had given the mug to my mom on her last birthday and every time I saw it, it made me laugh.

“Is my mom still sleeping?” I asked him. He nodded and continued to sip the coffee.

“Can we go driving?” I asked as I gave him a hopeful grin.

“Of course, let me grab my hoodie. Let’s bring Duke with us. You can drive us to a park and let him run around.

“Could I drive out to your lake house? I really want to see it,” I asked. I knew it was a long shot.

“It’s about forty minutes from here, I think your mom might kill me if I let you drive that far,” he laughed. I loved his face when he laughed. I was going to miss him and Duke so much.

“It was worth a try,” I told him. I grabbed my jacket and took his keys off the counter and stuffed them in my pockets.

“Come on, let’s go before she wakes up. It won’t be any fun if she comes, she worries too much,” I said.

“We need to leave her a note,” Ryan said.

“Hello, it’s the twenty-first century. We can send her a text from the car,” I rolled my eyes at him in a playful way. I grabbed his arm and all but dragged him to the parking lot with Duke hot on our heels.

“You’re going to make me spill my coffee,” Ryan grumbled at me. I laughed at the look on his face, a mixture of sleepy and amused.

“I’ll buy you more.”

“You better, I’m worthless without coffee,” he yawned. We buckled up and I started the truck engine. Duke sat right behind me and he gave me a quick lick on the side of my face, as if to encourage me along. I was getting more comfortable behind the wheel, and I had Ryan to thank for that. We pulled onto the busy street and I made my way towards a local park area.

“I have been studying for the written portion of my driving test at night. I think I will be ready soon,” I said.

“That’s awesome. You are learning really fast. I encourage you to also take a defensive driving course. I had to take one once after I got a speeding ticket and it actually taught me a lot about how to respond to other drivers on the road.”

“Okay, I will check one out. Thanks. And thanks for taking the time to teach me. I’m sure you have a million other things you’d rather do,” I said to him.

“Merge here, take that right exit,” he said, “And no, actually, there is nowhere I would rather be. I really like being here with you and your mom.”

I took the exit and tried not to let my eyes fill with tears. I needed to be able to see clearly when I was behind the wheel, but his words made me emotional. I considered him a friend after spending so much time with him, and I was starting to feel sad about him leaving.

“Will you come back and see us?”

“Of course, as much as your mom wants me around. I don’t want to intrude on her life, and on your life, but I would never leave if she asked me to stay.”

“I know she’s a little reserved, but don’t give up on her,” I told him.

“I won’t, I promise. I’m considering moving to the lake house permanently. I know I could easily get a job here, and I love the lake house. And if I am being honest, I want to be near your mom. I love her,” he said softly.



“You love her?” I asked, surprised at his bold claim.

“Of course I love her. I never once stopped loving her. I have never loved another woman,” he said.

“Wow. Have you told her?”

“No, I don’t think she is ready to hear it yet. I don’t want to scare her away.”

“That’s big,” I said. I wasn’t sure what else to say, I had no idea how it felt to be in love.

“Is it okay that I am talking to you about this? Maybe I shouldn’t,” he mused.

“Nah, it’s fine, your secret is safe with me.”

“Are you okay with us dating? If it comes to that? If she lets me date her properly?”

“I am. I really like you, Ryan. And you’re good for Mom. She’s alive when you’re here. But obviously if you hurt her I will have to kill you,” I warned him. He laughed and took a big drink of his coffee. “Good girl, I expect nothing less.”

We made it to the park without a hiccup. I felt good about how I drove, feeling more confident with each lesson. We sat at a bench and watched Duke run around and chase birds.

“Has Mom texted?” I asked Ryan as he looked down at his phone.

“Yeah, she’s making us pancakes and more coffee.”

“Oh good, I’m starving. Her pancakes aren’t as good as yours, but they will do,” I said. Ryan laughed and nudged my shoulder.

“What do you want to do today? You leave tomorrow, right?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m not looking forward to that drive,” he groaned.

“I bet you miss your job and your friends though.”

“Not really,” he shrugged, “I like my job and I enjoy the people but I don’t really miss them. I have a feeling though that I am going to miss you girls quite a bit. I was thinking about what you said about going out to the lake house and I think that maybe I want to go see it. I haven’t been out there in years and I guess since it’s mine now I should go check on it and see if there is any work to be done.”

“I would love to see it! I bet Mom would be good with that idea too. We could get food and then spend most of the day out there,” I suggested.

“Excellent idea. We should also load up your art pieces that my parents bought and take them over to their house,” Ryan said.

“Very true. I can’t believe they paid so much money for them.”

“I can. Your work is incredible. You better believe the minute I can afford to buy one myself, I will,” he said.

“I will give you one as a thank you for helping me learn to drive,” I told him.

“Absolutely not. I know how much time you have likely spent on each piece and they deserve to be bought. Once I am able to move into the lake house and out of my expensive city apartment I will have a lot of extra cash. Paying for an apartment in downtown Portland isn’t cheap.” Ryan stood and brushed off his pants. “Come on, let’s go get some pancakes.” He wrapped his arm around my shoulder and we walked back to the truck.

“Come on, boy,” Ryan yelled to Duke, and he came running up behind us. We piled into the truck, me behind the wheel.

“I want you to take an alternate route home, as a way of practicing driving through different areas of Austin,” Ryan instructed. I nodded and pulled onto the road. Each moment with him there with us felt like an adventure.

“Hang on to your hats,” I said, rolling down our windows to feel the cold breeze on our faces.

“Uh oh, Duke. She’s getting cocky,” Ryan joked.

“Not cocky, confident,” I said, smiling over at him. We laughed as we pulled out onto the open road together, our next adventure awaiting.

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Allie

February 2023

Wednesday

“Oh wow, it looks exactly the same,” I said. We had just pulled up to the lake house and it was as beautiful as I remembered. There were still flowers everywhere, exploding with colors and delightful aromas. It looked as if someone had been tending to the place. I was surprised to see the plants alive and healthy, considering the time of year.

“I wasn’t expecting it to be in such great condition,” Ryan said. He seemed pleased with what he was seeing. Ryan grabbed the cooler and groceries from the truck before walking up to the front door. We had gone to the store before

leaving downtown Austin and had grabbed hot dogs and smores, deciding to do an old fashioned Texas cookout when the sun went down. Sarah came tumbling out of the truck, her eyes wide and excited. Duke was close behind her, sniffing at his new surroundings.

“Oh my gosh. Thank goodness I brought my sketch pad. I need to draw this place immediately. It’s so beautiful,” she said wistfully.

“It really is something,” I mused. Ryan started to unlock the front door, I could tell by his movements that he was excited. He had a boyish quality, his face glowing as he threw the front door open.

“Come in ladies, let me show you around,” he said excitedly.

“I remember it well. I could never forget this place,” I said as I held his gaze.

“Let’s see if it’s everything we remember, shall we?” he asked. He gestured for us all to come inside. The living room and kitchen had hardly changed at all. I recognized almost everything, from the art to the furniture. I was secretly grateful that Caroline had never changed or updated the cabin. It was perfect, exactly how I remembered it. I noticed some

new pictures on the wall of two young girls. I walked over to get a closer look. Ryan did the same, moving to stand close beside me.

“These are my nieces,” Ryan explained, “My mother is quite smitten with them it appears.” He was right, there were photos of them everywhere.

“Do you think Jason is going to be upset that they gave you the cabin?” I asked. He shook his head. “Nah, knowing my mom and dad I am sure they spoke with him about it first. They are planners, they didn’t make this decision without considering every angle.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you’re right. I wonder if Jason brings his family out here much,” I said,

“I’m really not sure. I haven’t really been around for several years. I’ll make sure he knows they are welcome to come anytime they want,” Ryan said.

“Do you guys keep in touch?”

“Not recently. We got really close after I left UT. I moved in with him for about a year. I left Austin and really left everything behind. My money, my car, my phone. I didn’t

want to be reliant on my parents anymore. I wanted to make my own way, and I did. I'm still really proud of that."

"I didn't know that. I mean, I knew you left UT but I didn't know you cut yourself off financially from your parents. That's huge. You should definitely be proud of that," I told him.

"Wait, how did you know I left UT?" Ryan asked me.

"I'm pretty sure you told me," I said as I tried to shrug it off.

"No, I definitely didn't. Did Fin notice I was gone?" he asked. I looked at his face and realized I didn't want to lie to him. I sighed heavily, and let one of the secrets I had held slip from my lips. "Actually, remember when I said I tried to call you once? Well, Jason answered. He told me you were leaving Austin and that you had gotten kicked out of school."

"What?" he sputtered. His eyes were blazing with red hot anger.

"You had no idea I called, did you?" I whispered. He shook his head back and forth, a million feelings running across his face.



“If I had known you had called...” his words drifted off.

“That is exactly why Jason didn’t tell you. Don’t be mad at him. It was a lifetime ago. He asked me that day if I had any plans of coming back home. I told him no. He told me to stay away if I wasn’t planning to come back. He knew how you were hurting and he was trying to protect you. And he was right, I wasn’t coming back. Us talking wouldn’t have changed anything,” I said.

“It would have changed everything, Allie,” he said, his eyes filling with angry tears.

“How so?” I asked.

“If I had known you wanted to see me, if I had known there was any hope for us, I would have been on the next flight to Thailand,” he said with firm conviction. My heart dropped to my stomach. I wanted to cry, to scream, to break something. He would have come to me. The air between us crackled with white hot energy.

“Mom, come look at the back porch!” Sarah called. Her words brought us from our trance. It was clear Ryan had more to say, but he turned and walked toward the back door.

“Don’t hate him, Ryan. He’s your brother. He was just trying to protect you.” I said it with little conviction, because at that moment I was hating Jason a little bit myself. That one phone call arguably changed the entire course of our lives. But then again, maybe the outcome would have been the same. We would never know. My steps felt heavy as I followed after Ryan and joined him and Sarah on the back porch. Duke was already down by the water, barking at birds and bugs.

“Mom, the water is literally right there! That dock is so cute. I love it here.” Sarah rambled on and on about how much she loved the lake house. It was hard not to love. It was small and quaint and perfect.

“Come on Sarah, let me show you around inside,” Ryan said. I saw him wipe a single tear from his cheek and it completely broke me. It was clear our conversation about our past mistakes was causing him pain. I followed behind him, my own eyes threatening tears.

“This is the living room, obviously, and you saw the kitchen when we came in. There are games and movies over in that cupboard by the fireplace,” Ryan said as he switched to tour guide mode.

“Can we make a fire tonight and play monopoly?”

Sarah asked.

“I don’t see why not,” he said as he smiled at her.

“I will kick both of your butts at monopoly,” she proclaimed.

“Don’t be so sure of that, kid. I’m somewhat of a cardboard real estate mogul myself,” Ryan said.

“The master bedroom and bathroom are this way,” Ryan said as he led the way down the hall. We walked inside and I had to force myself not to gasp. The same white bed, the same white dresser, the same painting of the night sky. I locked eyes with Ryan and I could tell he was having the same memories run through his head. He cleared his throat and walked back into the hallway. I saw a flush of color run up his neck.

“Down the hall is another bathroom and bedroom,” Ryan said. He opened another door to reveal the other bedroom.

“Oh look, there’s two beds in here now,” he said as we took in the spacious spare room.

“I have a brilliant idea. Let’s all stay out here tonight,” Sarah suggested. She was holding her hands folded in a prayer and giving us a puppy dog face.

“Sarah, you cannot invite yourself to stay at other peoples lake houses,” I said, horrified at her outburst.

“It’s not other people, it’s Ryan,” she pointed out. I rolled my eyes at her.

“Ryan, I am sorry about my very rude daughter,” I said. Ryan started to laugh, his face turning into a wide grin. He walked over to Sarah and wrapped one arm around her shoulder.

“I think it’s a great idea. We’re already having dinner out here, and we will probably be up late beating Sarah in monopoly. I agree, we should just stay here. You girls can have the spare room. I really need to check around the cabin and see what all is working and what not anyway,” Ryan said.

“But we don’t have any clothes here,” I said.

“There’s probably extra t-shirts in the linen closet that we can sleep in. We don’t need more than that,” Ryan said.

“Please, Mom? I love it here and I want to wake up early tomorrow and sketch the front porch while the lighting is

good,” Sarah begged. I was really bad at telling Sarah no and I felt my resolve slipping. I shook my head and tried to keep the smile off of my face.

“Okay, okay. But after Ryan leaves tomorrow you *have* to catch up on school work,” I told her. She nodded enthusiastically.

“I will work all day without complaint, I swear,” she said. “Yay, Duke we get to stay at the lake!” Sarah walked over and sat down next to Duke on the couch. She flipped on the television and after realizing there was no cable, she started picking through the DVD collection.

“We should probably talk more about what you said earlier,” Ryan said. He took my hand into his. It felt so natural to have our fingers intertwined.

“Later,” I said. I looked over toward Sarah. Ryan shook his head sadly.

“Why is it always later, Allie? Why not now?” he asked, his words took on a double meaning. I knew I was holding back from him, and I knew why. He didn’t know why, and the thought of that made my stomach hurt.

“What do you want me to say?” I whispered.

“I don’t know. I want you to say how you feel. How do you feel about how it ended almost two decades ago? How do you feel right now? Do you want to be with me? Am I allowed to want you the way that I do?” Ryan asked. He searched my face to find the answers he needed. I gestured toward the back porch, not wanting Sarah to hear our conversation. He followed me outside and we sat down on the chairs surrounding an outdoor dining table. I wrapped my sweater around my shoulders, the cool air sent chill bumps up my arms. I took a deep breath and tried to voice my feelings to Ryan.

“I don’t know, Ryan. When I left, I didn’t regret it, and I’m sorry if that’s hard to hear. Thailand was everything I ever wanted and more. I found friends and job fulfillment and true happiness,” I started.

“And Pram,” he said sadly, “Did you love him?” he asked. I nodded my head slowly, seeing the pain across his beautiful face.

“I did love him. It was not the same as us though. He wasn’t you, but I did learn to love him in a different way. But then, he died. Leaving me alone again. I’m bad luck,” I whispered as tears came to my eyes. He stood up and took me into his arms, comforting me.

“What about now? Is there any chance that we can make it work now?” he asked. His voice sounded scared, barely above a whisper.

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly, “My life is complicated. This, whatever this is between us, it’s complicated,” I said.

“Why?” he asked as he searched my face again.

“Well, first, I have cancer. I am sick. I need to focus on my health and getting better. And then there is Sarah, she needs me. I have to be present for her. I don’t know if I have time to focus on a relationship when I am already giving everything I have to my illness and my daughter. I already feel like a complete failure as a mother. And then there is our history, the pain, the memories. It’s a lot...” I said, the words were falling from my lips.

“I know you’re sick, and I want to be there for you. I want to support you through it. I want to help you get better. I want to be with you, Allie. I love you, I never stopped,” he said. He held my hands in his. He loved me. The words broke me.

“And Sarah is the best kid ever. If she doesn’t mind sharing you with me, I want to make it work. If I move here

and get a job, I won't smother you. I will only be around when y'all want me," Ryan said.

"Move here? Wait, slow down." I took my hands from his and buried my head in them. Everything he was saying was completely overwhelming.

"I'm sorry, forget I said that. We can start smaller. I can come visit a few times this year. I can stay at the lake house and take you on a few dates and we can see where it goes. I don't have to move here right away. But I will, Allie. I want to be where you are," Ryan said. My breathing started to increase, I was on the verge of a panic attack. I took a deep breath and tried to speak.

"I need you to do something for me. When you leave tomorrow, give me some space to think about it. Let me reach out to you when I'm ready. I need to think it over, to decide what is best for me and Sarah," I said as I took his hand back into mine.

"You don't want me to call you?" he asked. He sounded hurt. I shook my head, his pained expression was breaking my heart.

"Is it that hard to love me?" he asked, his voice low and soft. I took his face in my hands and kissed him hard.



“It’s impossible not to love you, Ryan. I just need to figure out what I need at this stage of my life, and as soon as I am sure, I will call,” I promised him, “Can we just enjoy today? Sarah is really excited to be here, and I am too. I want to be here with you, I just don’t know what all I have to offer after this. Can that be okay?” I asked, my voice sounded like a plea. Ryan nodded and adjusted in his chair.

“Tell me about Pram,” he said. His request caught me off guard.

“You don’t want to know about Pram.”

“Yes I do. I want to know about the other man you loved. He must have been incredible to deserve your affections,” he said. I could feel the sad smile that started on my lips as images of Pram filled my mind. Sweet Pram, who saved my life, and whose own life was gone too soon.

“He really was. When I moved to Thailand, I was heartbroken. Not only that, I was scared and alone. He saved me, really. He was the only solid thing in my life during that time. He was half Thai, half French and completely fascinating. He spoke five languages and was very cultured and traveled. But more than that, he listened to me. We were friends for a long time before it ever turned romantic. I loved

him, but more like a best friend than a lover. He was my family,” I said. Tears filled my eyes. I missed Pram so much, sometimes it was still shocking to me that he was gone. I remember when I received that call that Pram had been in an accident. I remember the suffocating grief that enveloped me like a wave rolling over and pulling me under. He was the best man I could have ever asked to meet in the worst time of my life, and he died tragically and far too soon.

“He sounds amazing. No wonder you never came home,” Ryan said. I caught a hint of jealousy in his tone.

“He was. He really was. He died in a car accident on the way home from the airport. He had gone to visit his family in Paris. I didn’t go because Sarah was so young and honestly his family was not a big fan of our relationship. They wanted him to be with a woman from his own culture and background. If I had been with him in Paris things might have been different. Maybe the accident would never have happened, but I don’t know. I loved him, but I could never bring myself to marry him. He asked me many times, but I couldn’t do it. We were lovers, I won’t deny that, but my heart was always yours, Ry. Pram knew he only had a small fraction of me, it was all I had

to give. But Pram was such a good man, he was kind and had the biggest heart. You would have loved him,” I said.

“I’m really glad you had him. I mean, I’m absolutely and completely jealous, but I’m glad you weren’t alone,” Ryan said. “What about friends, did you make a lot of friends there?” I loved how interested he was in learning about my past. I couldn’t bring myself to ask about Marjorie or any other woman he might have been with during our years apart. I didn’t want to know.

“Pram and I had two other roommates, Kylee and Rachel. They were amazing and we were really good friends my first three or so years in Bangkok. They both moved to Europe to teach after our internship, they wanted to travel and teach and learn more languages.”

“You didn’t want to travel to other places?” Ryan asked.

“I had Sarah already by that time,” I said.

“Oh that’s right, sorry, I wasn’t considering that. That must have been really hard, finishing your degree and having a baby to take care of. Did you get paid for your internship? How did you make ends meet?” he asked, his eyes were intently focused on my words.

“Pram. He had money. He took care of us.”

“Did you get any financial support after his death?”

Ryan asked. I shook my head.

“His family didn’t want anything to do with us after Pram died.”

“Wow. What about your dad? Was he involved?” he asked. I smiled at the mention of my dad. It was a sad smile. I missed him so much and a sharp pain went straight to my heart at the mention of him.

“Dad came to Bangkok often to help me and to see Sarah. He had some pretty great frequent flier points stacked up by the time we moved back to the states. Financially, I was okay. By the time Pram was gone I was finished with the internship and getting paid to work at the school as a teacher. We didn’t need much, and we were happy. I met my best friend, Mya, the year after Pram died. We became really close, I miss her a lot.”

“Are you guys still close?” he asked.

“We are, she comes to visit pretty often, she has family in the states.”

“I would love to meet her someday, if we, you know... continue this...” he said softly and gestured between the two of us. We held each other’s eyes, communicating without speaking. The door to the back porch swung open and Sarah came outside with a huge bag of chips in hand. Duke trailed behind her, collecting her crumbs off the ground as they walked towards us.

“Your parents have a really good movie collection. Can we watch *Shawshank Redemption* tonight after monopoly?” Sarah asked, her mouth was filled with salty potato chips.

“Heck yeah, that is my all time favorite movie,” Ryan said. He held his hand up to give Sarah a high five. She slapped his hand and plopped down in the chair across from me.

“What are you two talking about?” Sarah asked me as she reached for another chip.

“Oh, just a little about our time in Thailand.”

“*Chob mak mak prathet Thai,*” Sarah replied.

“*Chan khidthung man,*” I said. Ryan looked back and forth between the two of us.

“Hey, no fair, y’all can’t talk in Thai. For all I know, you guys are talking smack about me,” Ryan pouted.

“We were only saying how much we miss Thailand,” Sarah said. I sat back in my chair and closed my eyes, smiling as I listened to Sarah and Ryan banter back and forth. Happiness was flowing through me and around me. It felt so good to be there with them. The lake house was so homie and it felt as if the three of us were in our own little bubble. I never wanted the night to end. Even with the hard conversations, it was perfect. Even the weather was cooperating. The wind was cool, but the sky was clear and we were able to sit outside comfortably in our warm clothes. I replayed Ryan’s words as I sat with my eyes closed. He still loved me. I let the words warm me and I couldn’t hide the smile on my face.

“What are you thinking about over there?” Ryan asked, pulling me out of my thoughts. I smiled at him before blushing and looking down in my lap. “Oh nothing, just having a really good day,” I replied.

“Me, too,” Ryan said.

“Me, three,” Sarah chimed in.

“Should I light up the fire pit? It will be getting dark soon. Are you ladies hungry?” Ryan asked. We both looked at

him deadpan.

“Right, duh, I’m talking to the foodie twins,” he joked, “I’ll go get the food and the matches.” Ryan stood and walked inside, leaving me alone with Sarah. She looked over at me, giving me a strange look.

“What?” I asked.

“You just seem really happy. Can we keep him?” she joked. I laughed, it felt so good to laugh.

“Really though, Mom. Don’t let Ryan go, okay? I really like him.”

“You let me worry about that. Let’s just have fun tonight, okay? He has to go back home tomorrow. We will figure out the rest as we go.”

“He loves you,” she said, matter of factly.

“How would you know if he loves me?” I asked my bold daughter.

“Well, for one, he told me. Also, it’s super obvious,” she said as she rolled her eyes.

“He told you that he loves me?”

“Oops. I don’t think I was supposed to tell you that. He’s trying really hard to not scare you away. I don’t think I was supposed to tell you that either,” Sarah said.

“I should have warned Ryan how terrible you are at keeping secrets.”

“You really should have,” she said, beaming across the table at me with a goofy grin. Ryan came back outside, hands full of food, drinks and supplies. He sat down a bottle of wine and two glasses.

“Yes please!” I said as I grabbed the bottle.

“You get one glass only, missy,” he said. He gave me a warning look.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said, rolling my eyes, “You’re as bad as Dr. Harrison.” I poured two glasses and handed one to Ryan. I then handed a soda to Sarah, who took it gratefully.

“How many hotdogs do you want?” Ryan asked Sarah.

“Three,” she replied, “Actually, make it four to be safe.” He eyed her small frame.

“There is absolutely no way you can eat four hot dogs,” he said.



“Watch me,” she said, her eyebrows raised in jest. Ryan laughed loudly and shook his head.

“How many for you?” he asked me.

“Three for me.”

“Where do y’all put all this food?!”

“We have high metabolisms,” I said as I laughed with him.

“Okay so that’s four for Sarah, three for Allie, two for me, and one for Duke.”

“Sounds good to me. I will also need at least three smores,” Sarah said.

“Okay, now you’re just messing with me,” Ryan said.

“Nope, I am an endless pit,” she said. She popped another chip into her mouth.

“How do you afford to feed this girl?” Ryan asked me.

“Teenagers,” I said as I shrugged my shoulders. We all laughed together, even Duke was in a good mood as he ran around the yard, a skip in his steps.

“Sarah, grab a hot dog and come help me roast,” Ryan said as he handed her a long stick to put her meat on.

“Give me one of those,” I said. I stood so I could join them around the firepit. The sun was setting and the fire was combating the cooling night air. I knew it was a night I would remember forever. The three of us, laughing and sitting fireside. For a moment, I could forget about the hard conversations Ryan and I still needed to have. For a moment I could pretend everything was going to be okay.

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Ryan

February 2023

Wednesday

“You’re cheating!” Sarah squealed. She grabbed the dice and threw it across the board at me. I ducked to avoid getting hit by the dice flying through the air.

“Sore loser!” I screamed. I picked up the dice and tossed back her way. I collected my monopoly money and counted it one by one. “Sorry ladies, looks like I won. Told you I was a

real estate genius,” I said. Sarah rolled her eyes and stood up from the floor.

“I still think you cheated,” she huffed as she joined Duke on the couch. Allie yawned and stood and stretched her arms high above her head.

“Are you girls ready for Shawshank?” I asked. I walked over toward the television and turned on the DVD player.

“You think we could start a fire in the fireplace and get into some more comfortable clothes first?” Allie asked.

“Of course,” I said. I grabbed the remote to start the fire. The flames immediately came to life and warmed the room. The fire cast a perfect glow on Allie’s beautiful face. “Let me go find the linen closet and see what we have.”

“I’ll help you,” Allie said as she followed behind me. “Sarah, get the movie up and running, will you?” We walked down the hall toward the bedrooms, in search of t-shirts and throw blankets. As soon as we were out of sight, Allie pushed me against the wall and pressed her body into mine. I felt the heat of her, causing a fire of my own to start and quickly spread. Our lips met and our kiss took on a life of its own. She pulled away breathless, her lips swollen and red.

“Hi,” I said. I took her into my arms and placed another soft kiss on her mouth.

“Hey,” she said, her smile wide and brilliant.

“Sorry, I couldn’t wait another minute to kiss you,” she said, her cheeks blushed.

“I’m glad you didn’t,” I told her. I took her hands and pulled her toward the linen closet.

“Come here,” I said. I pulled her inside the dark closet, “Let me feel you up in the dark,” I joked as I grabbed her around the waist and kissed her neck. She giggled and pulled away from me.

“Sarah’s right out there,” she scolded me, but her smile gave her away. I switched on the light and turned my back to her. “Okay, fine, you’re no fun,” I said. I looked around and found what I was searching for. There were several soft throw blankets and spare pajamas for all of us. My mom had stocked the closet with linen pants and shirts in a variety of sizes. I pulled some down for me and turned my attention to Allie.

“Pick some out for you and Sarah, I don’t know anything about what fits tiny girls who can out eat grown

men,” I told her. She laughed again and punched me on the arm.

“Oww,” I complained. I rubbed the spot that she hit. She laughed again, then reached up and grabbed two pairs of white and baby pink striped pajamas. They were pants with long sleeved shirts that buttoned up the middle.

“I am going to look so hot in these,” she said as she continued to giggle uncontrollably. We left the closet and took Sarah her pair of pajamas and a throw blanket.

“This blanket is cashmere,” Sarah said as she hugged it close. It was clear she loved it. I made a mental note to give it to her when we left the cabin. We all went to our rooms to change into our comfortable clothes to settle in with the movie. I slipped into my pair of pj’s, they were baggy but comfortable. I opened the door to the master bedroom at the same time that Allie and Sarah were entering the hallway from the spare room. When we all laid eyes on each other, we burst out laughing.

“We look insane,” Sarah said between giggles.

“I think we look fancy,” Allie said through her own laughter.

“We HAVE to get a photo,” Sarah said as she fished her phone out of the front pocket of her linen top. “Come on, by the fireplace,” she said. She pulled Allie behind her. Once at the fireplace, I grabbed the phone to take the picture.

“What are you doing?” Sarah asked, “You have to be in the photo with us, obviously.” My heart swelled at her words. “Here, set a timer and put the phone on the coffee table.” I did as she told me, and went to sit by them. Duke came over by us, not wanting to be left out.

“Cheese!” Sarah said, as the phone timer ticked down. We laughed some more as we looked at our photo. My face had started to hurt from all the times I had laughed that day.

“This needs to be on our Christmas card next year, it’s perfect,” Sarah said as she admired our picture. I picked up the remote and plopped down on the couch and pressed play. The opening credits started and I snuggled in next to Alle to watch the film.

“Uh, hello, you forgot to make us popcorn,” Sarah said. She gave me the side eye.

“I didn’t bring popcorn, I didn’t know we would be staying the night when we went to the store,” I told her apologetically.

“A movie without popcorn? How will I survive!?” she joked.

“I know you’re an artist, but are you sure you’re not an actress, too? You have the drama thing down to an art,” I replied. She threw a throw pillow at me, hitting me square in the face. I stuck my tongue out at her and she did the same back.

“Hush you guys, it’s starting,” Allie said, scolding us. Allie laid her head down on the arm of the couch and put her legs into my lap as we all focused our attention on the screen. My phone lit up with a notification from my social media account. I picked it up and opened the screen. It was a follow request from SARAHDELACRUZART. I smiled and clicked accept, and requested a follow back. Sarah accepted immediately. I went to her page and emotion swelled inside of me as I looked at her most recent post. She had added the photo of the three of us with the caption, *Fun at the lake with mom and Ryan! #teamryan*. I immediately clicked the ‘like’ button on the photo and then shared it to my own account. I really liked this kid.

Halfway through the movie I looked over and noticed that Allie had pulled out her journal. She was often writing



things down, something I remember her also doing all of those years ago when we were together. I couldn't help but wonder how many times she mentioned me in all of her journaling throughout her life.

“I'm going to grab some water. Does anybody need anything?” I asked. I moved Allie's legs over and stood to walk to the kitchen. They both shook their heads no so I made my way over to the sink to get a glass for myself. As I passed by Allie, I leaned down to kiss her cheek. When I did, an entry from her journal caught my eye. I was not trying to read it, nor did I intend to invade her privacy, but the sentences drew my attention and stopped me cold in my tracks.

*When I tell Ryan the whole truth, he will hate me. But I know now that I have no choice. When I tell him, I will lose him.*

## Chapter 38

Allie

March 2006

I ran into the apartment full speed, looking around the living space frantically. Rachel and Kylee sat at the table, startled at my abrupt entrance.

“Have you guys seen Pram?” I asked, out of breath from running from the bus stop.

“I think he’s in his room,” Rachel said. She gestured toward his bedroom door.

“Thanks!” I called behind me. I ran toward his room and knocked loudly on the frame. He opened the door and I threw my arms around his neck as soon as he came into view.

“Well hello,” he laughed, “What a greeting!”

“Can I come in?” I asked.

“Of course,” he said. He stepped out of the way so I could enter his room. As always, it was spotlessly clean and smelled like Pram. It was my second favorite smell in the whole world and my first favorite smell in Thailand.

“I was accepted into my masters program!” I yelled, unable to contain my excitement any longer. I showed him my acceptance papers and he took them to look them over. I had applied to a masters program in international studies and had been accepted at the local university. I could continue my dream, just as I had originally planned.

“Oh Allie, that is wonderful! Congratulations!” He picked me up and twirled me around the room. I was so happy and proud of myself, I couldn’t wipe the smile from my face.

“Can I use your phone to call my dad later and tell him?”

“Of course! And we must celebrate! Shall we go out or stay in?” he asked.

“Let’s go out! I need to dance or something, I have all this pent up energy.”

“Then tonight, we dance!” he said. He twirled me around in his room. I don’t know if it was the happiness I was feeling or the comfort I felt with Pram, but something in that moment compelled me to grab his face and hold it in mine. Our eyes met, and I could see that he wanted me to kiss him. In my right mind, I wouldn’t have done it, but the thrill of the day had me drunk on life, so I leaned in and let him kiss me. It

wasn't the fireworks I had with Ryan, not even close, but it was sweet and it made me feel good. A voice in my head told me I wasn't being fair to Pram, but I shook the feeling off and let myself live in the moment.

“That was very nice,” Pram said softly, his neck turning red.

“I'm sorry, I got excited, I shouldn't have done that,” I said feeling embarrassed.

“Please, don't be sorry. I'm not. You can kiss me anytime you want, Alison,” he said. He pulled my ponytail playfully. I let out a small sigh of relief that he wasn't mad, and also that he didn't seem to be taking my kiss experiment too seriously. I didn't want to change our friendship, but it felt good to feel something new, even if it wasn't the same connection I had with Ryan. I had hope that I was healing. It felt good to be happy, and I felt happy at that moment. I had every intention of holding onto that happiness as strongly as I could. I smiled brightly at Pram and boldly kissed him again on the cheek. We both flushed, then laughed at ourselves. He wrapped a single arm around me, and all felt right in my world. Or if not right, bearable at the very least.

“Should we invite the girls to come dance with us tonight?” Pram asked. He had always called our other roommates “the girls”. I nodded, then grabbed his arm and pulled him into the kitchen with me to tell the girls my good news. I felt alive, it felt so good.

*Mai Pen Rai.*

It's all good. And it was, it was all good.

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Ryan

March 2006

“Jason, are you in there?” I asked. I knocked softly on his bedroom door as I bounced back and forth on my feet, excited to tell him my news.

“Yeah man, come in,” he said through the door. I went into his bedroom and found him sitting at his desk doing school work. His books were piled high, and I felt guilty, I knew I was the reason he was so behind on his school work. We had been in Houston for two weeks and he was still behind on all of the work he missed while he was rescuing me in Austin. I was trying to be the perfect roommate, cleaning up after myself and cooking us both dinner most nights. I was doing Jason’s laundry and sucking up to him whenever possible.

“I got into a nursing program,” I said. I walked over to show him my acceptance letter. For whatever reason, getting into the small community college nursing program felt even better than when I got my acceptance letter to the state

university. Probably because my acceptance to state school was engineered by my parents, but the nursing school application process I had done all on my own. I was beaming with pride and felt like I could take on the world.

“Bro! I am so excited for you!” Jason said. He stood from his seat and walking over to wrap me in a bear hug. He ruffled my hair and gave me the most genuine smile.

“Lets celebrate,” he said. He closed his text book and grabbed his wallet.

“Nah, that’s okay Jason, I know you have a lot of work to catch up on.” I wanted to celebrate with him, but I felt guilty asking him to leave his studies for me.

“I need a break anyway, my brain hurts,” he said, “Let’s take you to a bar, it’s time you get back on that horse.” I was in no way ready to get back on the horse, but I was ready to meet some new people and make some new friends in Houston.

“How about a restaurant instead?” I asked.

“Bar and grill? That’s my final offer.” I laughed and nodded. I was excited to grab some food and beers with my brother. Jason and I had been pretty close growing up, but the

past few weeks had solidified our bond. He was stepping up in ways I could never repay. After leaving my parents in Austin, it felt like he was the only family I could count on. I hadn't heard from my mom or dad once since moving to Houston. Their silence spoke a thousand words.

I went to my bedroom to grab my shoes and wallet before leaving the apartment with Jason. I liked my new room, it was fairly spacious and had its own small bathroom. I had put up some personal items, such as my old football trophies from high school, to make the place feel like my own. I would never admit it, but I missed the feminine touches that Allie had brought to our old apartment. Jason's place was void of any nice smelling candles or soaps, and there was not a fluffy towel to be found. I still thought about Allie every single day, but my sadness was often replaced with anger toward her. I didn't want to be angry, so I made a conscious effort to focus on the good memories. After all, our demise was not her fault, it was the fault of us both.

I had opened a new bank account in Houston and put all my cash in it for safekeeping. I was settling in, and becoming familiar with my new city. It was a lot like Austin in some ways, it was fast paced and full of activity, but I missed the



weirdness of my home town. Austin was one of a kind in a million ways. I had a truck, a place to live, and now a plan. Nursing school. I was excited to get started and relieved I had all of my prerequisite classes out of the way. I had found out earlier that day that all of my credits at UT had easily transferred over to count towards my new major. It would take me only four semesters before I could work in a hospital. I was eager and excited to get started. The only thing left that I needed was a job. I made a mental plan to start applying to places that evening.

“Ready?” Jason asked as he poked his head inside my door.

“Yep, let’s take Old Red,” I said. I grabbed my truck keys. Jason groaned loudly and rolled his eyes. “We are never going to pick up girls driving around that hunk of junk.”

“I’m not trying to pick up girls yet, Jason.”

“Well, I am,” he said as he laughed.

“Don’t hate on my baby,” I said, “She’s a good reliable truck.”

“Sorry, dude. We can take Old Red. We can walk for all I care, I’m just dying for a beer.”

“Same, let’s go,” I said. We left the apartment together, joking and laughing, and I felt more like myself than I had in a long time. Starting over is exactly what I needed. I told myself I would never let someone that close to my heart again. I would never allow someone the opportunity to hurt me the way Allie did. It was time to focus on myself, to be selfish and driven, to follow my own path. Ryan Anderson against the world.

## Chapter 39

Sarah

February 2023

I woke up with the birds that morning, the sound of my alarm pulling me from my sleep. Mom turned over in the bed next to mine, but she didn't wake. I was relieved that my alarm didn't disturb her. It had been the most amazing night ever with Ryan and Mom at the lake house. We laughed and ate until both our souls and our bellies were full. I set my alarm for sunrise. I was anxious to get up early and sketch the view of the front porch. The lakehouse was so beautiful, the flowers and the water had me itching to draw. I wished that I

had my paints with me, but my sketch pencils would have to do.

I snuck out of the surprisingly comfortable bed and made my way to the bathroom to wash my face and change my clothes. I then tip-toed into the kitchen and was startled to see Ryan sitting at the table drinking coffee. I jumped a little, I wasn't expecting anyone else to be up that early.

"Sorry, did I scare you?" he asked as he set down his mug of coffee.

"A little, I just didn't think you would be awake yet," I said. I gripped my chest to slow my heart rate.

"I couldn't sleep," he said. His face looked strained, he looked like he hadn't slept at all. It seemed like something was really bothering him, but I didn't want to pry.

"I slept like a baby," I said as I stretched my arms above my head, "That bed was super comfortable, and these baggy pajamas were actually quite nice." He laughed and looked down at his own linen pajamas.

"They actually *are* pretty comfortable," he agreed.

"What are you doing up this early?"

"I'm dying to sketch the front porch," I told him.

“Can I watch you while you work?” he asked. I was really touched that he wanted to see me draw. He was such a kind man. I got a lump in my throat as I remembered that it was his last day with us. On cue, Duke trotted up to us and sat down right at my feet. His presence, and the thought of his impending absence, made the emotion in my belly turn into full on tears. Ryan’s face filled with concern as he watched me cry in front of him.

“Oh, Sarah, it’s okay if you don’t want me to watch,” he said gently. I shook my head adamantly. “That’s not it,” I said, “I’m just going to miss you and Duke.” He stood and enveloped me in a hug.

“I know, I’m going to miss you guys, too. I won’t be gone forever though, I have this place to look after now, and we need to finish your driving lessons before your birthday. It’s only a temporary goodbye. No matter what happens with your mom and I, you have my number and you can call me any time,” he said. I nodded my head into his chest.

“If you make me a cup of that coffee you can come watch me sketch,” I said. I pulled away from his hug to smile at him.

“Deal. I need another cup too,” he said. I found myself again wanting to ask him why he looked so distraught.

“Your bed must not have been as comfortable as mine. You look like you didn’t sleep at all.”

“It was fine. I just have a lot on my mind today,” he said. He went to the cupboard and pulled out another coffee mug. He poured me a cup, black like I always drank it, with one sugar. He handed over the steaming cup and gave me a sad smile. “Let’s go find a good spot for you to work,” he said. I grabbed my sketch pad and colored pencils and headed for the porch. As I had suspected, the light hitting the front of the house at sunrise was breathtaking. I imagined how it must look during the spring and summer when all of the flowers were in bloom, because even the winter flowers were taking my breath away.

“Wow,” was all I could say.

“It really is beautiful,” Ryan mused. I nodded and grabbed a chair from the porch, setting up my work area. Ryan grabbed a chair and set it next to mine. I began to work and we sat in comfortable silence for a while. His eyes stayed glued to my page, watching my hands as I created art from a blank sheet.

“I could never do that,” he said. He was seemingly mesmerized by the finished sketch outline.

“It will probably take me a few hours, but I have to finish the colors before we leave. I don’t want to finish from a photo, it’s so much better to capture the image live,” I told him.

“I have a while before I need to head south. Take your time,” he said. I focused my attention back to my sketch, he did the same as he finished drinking his coffee. After an hour or so, he stood and stretched and took his chair back to the side of the porch.

“I’m going to take all of the trash to the outside dumpster and start gathering up our things,” he said. I watched him go into the house as a sadness fell over me. I didn’t want him to leave. Things had been shockingly better with Ryan staying with us. It was like watching my mother be reborn. I shook my head and went back to my sketch, forcing the sadness away. I decided to focus on all of the good things developing in my life. I was starting art classes soon, I had sold some of my paintings and made a nice chunk of money, I was learning to drive and would be able to be more

independent. Things were going to be better, even if Ryan wasn't there to see it.

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Allie

February 2023

I had been watching Sarah and Ryan through the window. He was sitting so contently, watching her as her colored pencils worked diligently on her sketch pad. I sipped



my coffee and stared at them. How quickly they had become comfortable with each other. It was the day Ryan was to head back to his life and I was full of confusing feelings. What was next for us? Could Ryan fit into our lives? Was he good for me? Was he good for Sarah? Could I allow him a place in my future? Did I even have a future? The questions swirled around in my brain, filling me with anxious energy. I wrapped the cashmere throw blanket tight around my small frame. It was a chilly morning, I had no idea how Sarah could stand to sit out in the cold in only her linen pajamas. I saw Ryan stand and walk toward the door. I couldn't stop a smile from forming on my lips at the sight of him. The door opened and he stepped through, our eyes locked immediately.

“Good morning,” I said. I held my coffee mug up in a mock wave. He held my eyes and studied me, but he didn't say anything for a long time. Ryan could be so intense sometimes, and that morning was one of those occasions. He took me in so long that I began to become uncomfortable, causing me to touch my bare head. Maybe I should have thrown on a beanie when I woke up. My embarrassed gesture broke him from his spell, and he finally opened his mouth to speak.

“Good morning, Allie,” he said. His words were clipped, he sounded almost angry with me. I tilted my head to the side in silent question. He shook his head and stormed out of the room, leaving me baffled by his behavior. What was that? I was so confused by him, because the previous night had been absolute magic. The cabin was my new favorite place in all of the world. The evening had been perfect, but Ryan went to sleep before the movie was over, and when I tried to sneak into his room late in the night the door was locked. I decided he was probably just tired, or maybe he was worried we would keep Sarah up. I didn’t really think much of it at the time, but with his morning behavior I was worried maybe there was more to it. I decided to follow him, even though I normally rejected confrontation at all cost. I needed to know if he was okay.

“Ry?” I asked. I found him bent down in the bathroom gathering up the trash bag from the small can. He looked up, his face blank. “Um..you alright?” I asked nervously. He studied me again.

“Yeah. I’m good,” he said. He stood up, the bag of trash in his hand. He started to walk past me, but I grabbed his wrist to slow him down. He looked down at his feet, avoiding my

eye contact. I tilted my head to the side, trying to read his mood.

“Hey, what’s going on?” I asked softly.

“Nothing. Just trying to get ready to go. I don’t want to leave trash here, it will be a couple months before I can get back to the cabin,” he said.

“That’s not what I mean, you’re acting strange.”

“Am I?” he asked, his eyes finally lifted to meet mine. I tried to read his expression, but his face was blank. Chills ran up my arms.

“Yes, you are,” I said, not backing down.

“I don’t know, Allie. Maybe I just want some answers from you.”

“Answers to what? I told you that I will reach out when I decide what I want. What I need. When I know what’s best for me and my daughter. I’m just asking for some time.”

He looked at me incredulous. He shook his head and started to storm off. He paused, turning back around to face me. We stood there, staring at each other, my heart pounding rapid beats in my frail chest.

“Is that all, Allie?”

“What else is there?” I asked.

“You tell me.” His eyes bore into mine, making me break out in a sweat. I had never seen Ryan like that, it made bile rise into the back of my throat, his coldness causing an anxious nausea to run around my stomach.

“I don’t know what you want to hear, Ryan.”

“Just the truth.”

When I did not respond, he let out a long sigh. His face began to soften and his body relaxed around the shoulders.

“Look, forget I said anything. I don’t want to end this week on a sour note and I don’t want to upset Sarah if she hears us arguing. We can talk when you’re ready. I will be back here in the spring, to check on the cabin and visit my parents. I hope by then you will want to see me again, but the ball is in your court now. I won’t beg you to love me, Allie.”

“Ryan, I...” my voice trailed off. I was truly at a loss for words. Maybe it was time to tell him everything; I needed to tell him everything. My heart was pounding like a hammer in my chest. I wondered if he could hear the beat of it through my skin.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

I could hear the whooshing of my heart in my ears, my palms became damp and I clasped my hands together in a prayer.

“There is something...” I started. I took a big breath to calm my nerves.

“Hey, are we headed back to town soon? I’m starving,” Sarah said as she appeared in the hallway where Ryan and I stood.

“Yeah we better get back to the apartment, I know Ryan needs to get on the road soon,” I said. I was using Sarah’s appearance as an out. I am well aware that I was a coward.

“Allie, I think we should finish our conversation before we head back into the city,” Ryan said, his eyes intense.

“We will, Ryan. Later,” I said. I walked past him as I headed toward the spare room to put on my clothes. My heart slowed, my breathing turned back to normal. I could feel Sarah following behind me.

“What was that about?” she asked as she slipped her arm through mine.

“Nothing, I guess everyone is just a little stressed about Ryan leaving today.”

“Yeah, it’s been a pretty great week,” Sarah said softly.

“I know, but Ryan needs to get back to his life now and we need to get back to ours. We have not been doing a great job keeping up with your school work this week and I have like fifty loads of laundry to do. Plus, I have doctors appointments coming up this week. Life must go on.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Sarah said. She sounded so sad that my heart ached.

“Want to drive on the way back to the apartment?” I asked. I was hoping to cheer her up.

“I don’t know,” she replied, “You’re not very fun to drive with. You get so nervous and jumpy. I laughed and pulled on my pants. “I promise not to say one word, I will let Ryan do all the coaching.” She smiled big and wrapped me in a hug.

“We’re going to be okay, Sarah. Even once Ryan goes back home. Okay?” I assured her. I pulled back so I could look her in the face. She nodded, but I saw the tears in her eyes that were trying not to fall. My poor girl, having to grow up so fast

and pretend to be brave every day. I pulled her back into the hug, trying to transfer all of my own strength into her. Not that she needed it, she was the strongest person I knew.

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Ryan

February 2023

“Well, that’s the last of it,” I said. I closed up the bed of my truck. I had eaten brunch with Allie and Sarah, filled up my truck with gas, stocked up on snacks and drinks for the very long drive ahead, and put on my most comfortable pair of driving sweatpants. I was prepared to leave Texas, but I wasn’t *ready* to leave Texas. I was fairly certain that regardless of what happened between Allie and I that I was going to move to the lake house permanently. I wanted to repair my

relationship with my parents, and Portland no longer felt like home. Texas was home. Austin was home. Allie was home. With or without her though, I wanted to leave my old life and start over with the people who meant the most to me.

“I don’t want y’all to leave,” Sarah said sadly, her arms were wrapped around Duke’s neck. Even Duke seemed sad, his floppy ears hung low down his neck. It was pretty clear that Allie and I were not going to be able to finish our private conversation from that morning, because Sarah would not leave my side. We had gotten pretty close, and I was going to miss her too.

“I won’t be gone forever, I promise. I will be back in no time. I’m already planning to be back in May to visit my parents again and check on the cabin. That’s about three months from now.”

“Will you come and see us too?” Sarah asked. I glanced at Allie, who was looking down and avoiding my eye contact.

“Of course, kiddo. As long as that is okay with your mom,” I replied. I was leaving the ball in Allie’s court, just as she had asked me to.

“You’ll bring Duke with you?” she asked.



“Of course, I don’t go anywhere without Duke,” I said. I pulled Sarah into a hug and ruffled her hair. “I’ll miss you kid.”

“I’ll miss you too. Be sure and text us and tell us you made it back safe,” Sarah said. Allie didn’t want me to text her, but I nodded anyway. It was killing me, not knowing what Allie was about to tell me. I knew in my soul that it had something to do with what I accidentally read in her journal the night before. What was she hiding from me? I wanted to grab her in my arms and tell her nothing could change the way I felt about her, but I didn’t want her to know that I read her private thoughts, unintentionally as it was. I kept telling myself to have faith. Fate brought us back together. It all had to be for a reason, our story would not end when I got in my truck and drove across the country back to my apartment and my life. I walked over to Allie and lifted her chin, forcing her eyes to meet mine.

“Hi,” I said. She finally smiled.

“Hi,” she said.

“You’ll call when you’re ready, right? Last time we parted, I was crying in an airport being scolded by a little girl,”

I said. I smiled at the thought of the sassy young lady who yelled at me at the departure gate.

“What little girl?” Allie asked, her face was filled with confusion.

“I have no idea. Some tiny girl yelled at me and told me off for how I treated you,” I said as I shrugged my shoulders. Allie broke out into hysterical laughter.

“Oh my gosh, I remember that girl! We talked about what a jerk you were for not taking me to my flight,” she said. “Wow you must have barely missed me then.”

“Pretty crazy, I know,” I mused. How differently our lives might have turned out if I had made it there sooner. Allie shook her head in disbelief.

“I can’t believe she yelled at you, that is so funny,” she laughed.

“It wasn’t funny at the time, let me tell you,” I said, a smile found my lips. We had so much history together, we could probably spend hours unpacking it all. But we didn’t have hours, we only had goodbye.

“I’ll be waiting by the phone,” I said. She nodded, and I saw the tears forming in her eyes. Tears that I knew she would

not let fall.

“Goodbye, Ryan.”

“Goodbye, Allie.”

At least I was able to tell her goodbye.

Three Months Later

Chapter 40

Ryan

May 2023

“You’re really leaving us?” Kelley asked. She sat down next to me at the nurses station and patted my knee with her hand. It was my last day of work at Faith Memorial Hospital. I had put in my notice as soon as I arrived back in Portland three months before, but I told my manager I would work until I left to return to Texas in May. I knew it would take time to box up all of my things and get everything in order for my cross-country move. I would say I was sad about leaving my job and my friends, but honestly I wasn’t. I was ready.

“Afraid so,” I replied, “Thanks for not making a big deal about it. The last thing I want is a big going away party.”

“Well, in that case, you better plan on sneaking out of here early,” she said, giving me a small smile. I sighed and shook my head, trying to be a good sport.

“As long as there are cupcakes and ice cream,” I said.

“Obviously,” she said. I would hang around just long enough to not be rude, then I would go and spend the last night in my empty apartment. Most of my belongings were already set up at the lake house. My parents sent a moving van last week, I loaded it up and sent it back to Texas. Everything would be waiting for me. I had spoken to my mom and dad on the phone every single night since returning to Portland. We

were becoming really close, it was everything I had always wanted. I could not say the same about Allie, though. It had been three months of radio silence.

Three months.

Silence.

Not one call or text.

On cue, my phone dinged with an incoming text message. The emergency room was slow, so I pulled out my cell and checked. Sarah. Thank God for Sarah. Where Allie was silent, Sarah was texting me almost daily, keeping me in the loop of their lives.

*Sarah: I was chosen to have my art displayed at the student gallery next month! Please say you will be there.*

*Ryan: Sarah, that is amazing! I told you! You're a star! Of course I will come. Just tell your mom, ok? That way she will know I'll be there. I don't want to show up and her not know, could be awkward for her.*

Sarah: *I guess that means she still hasn't called you.*

Ryan: *Don't you worry about that. She will come around.*

Sarah: *She's miserable without you, it's pretty obvious. You leave tomorrow, right?*

Ryan: *Bright and early. I'll be there in a few days, may stop some along the way to sleep, it's a brutal drive.*

Sarah: *Be safe! Tell Duke I said Hi!*

I slipped my phone back into my scrub top. Sweet Sarah, making me feel connected to Allie even when we were apart. I was dying to hear from Allie, but I was trying so hard to keep the distance that I promised her. I knew Sarah was also telling Allie about me, playing the middleman both ways.

Sarah was doing extremely well in her new art class, making friends and coming out of her shell. Her social media

accounts now had pictures of her out with her friends and many photos of her new art projects. With the guidance of her teachers, she was becoming more and more talented. She was going to be a famous artist one day, I knew it in my bones. I smiled every single time I checked her page, loving that she was finding her place in this world. Earlier that week, she had posted a picture of her with Allie. I looked at it for hours, noting that Allie's hair had begun to grow in a cute pixie style. She looked like Tinkerbell with her short locks and big blue eyes. I always had a crush on Tinkerbell when I was a kid.

“Hey, Ry,” a voice said. I looked up to see Marjorie standing in front of me. I had tried to avoid her since returning to work, for the most part it was working for me.

“Hello doc, need me to triage?” I clicked my computer screen on, ready to chart my next patient.

“No, I just wanted to say goodbye, I heard it was your last day,” she said.

“It is, this is my last shift. I'm moving back to Texas tomorrow.”

“Yes, I heard that. I guess that means you found what you were looking for,” she said. I shifted in my chair, the



conversation made me feel more than a little awkward. I picked at my hands and met her eyes.

“I did. I also mended things with my parents,” I told her. She smiled and took a sip from her coffee mug. When she lifted her hand, I noticed a large ring on her left hand. My eyes widened and she looked down at the ring.

“I just got engaged,” she said shyly. The news shocked me for a moment, but then I smiled and stood to hug her.

“That is so great, I am really happy for you. I guess we both found what we were looking for,” I said. She nodded, a beaming smile across her face.

“I know it’s really sudden, we’ve been together only two and a half months, but when you know you know,” she said.

“I know exactly what you mean,” I told her. I had been feeling guilty for the way Marjorie and I had left things, knowing she was happy too made me feel so much relief.

“There he is,” Karen said as she approached Marjorie and I. She had a huge card in one hand and a tray of cupcakes in the other. The staff all began to approach me, some giving

me small parting gifts and others simply shaking my hand.

Kelley walked up and placed a cowboy hat on top of my head.

“There you go, now you will fit right in,” she said. I laughed and patted the top of the tan cowboy hat.

“You know I grew up in Texas, right?” I said. I accentuated my southern accent. Despite the fact that I was Texas born and raised, I had never owned a cowboy hat. It definitely wasn't my normal style, but I caught a glimpse of myself in the reflection of the glass at the nurses station and I didn't hate it. I sat around with the other nurses and listened as they all told stories about me. It was actually quite nice, I would miss them, but I was ready to start the next phase of my life.

I felt my phone ringing in my pocket, I dug into my scrubs pulling it free. The name lit up like a neon sign. Allie.

“Guys, I have to take this,” I said as I walked away from the group. My heart was beating so hard it was making me dizzy. I hit the answer button as I rounded the corner to a more private area.

“Hello? Allie?” I tried not to sound desperate, but I was failing miserably.

“I’m ready, Ryan. Let’s talk. It needs to be in person.”

“Okay, I’m leaving in the morning, I will be there in a few days. I can come to your apartment as soon as I get to town,” I said.

“Okay. Actually, it probably needs to be somewhere in private. We can figure that out once you’re here. Just call me when you make it,” she said softly. She sounded nervous, but it was so good to hear her voice. For the first time in three months, I felt my shoulders relax.

“I’m so sorry it took me so long, Ryan,” she said slowly and deliberately.

“I would have waited forever,” I confessed.

“I have to go, but please be safe. I’ll see you soon. And Ryan?”

“Yes?” I asked, completely breathless.

“I love you,” she said, so softly I almost missed it. My heart pounded at her words.

“I love you, too.” I hung up the phone, a huge smile stretched across my face. She had finally called. I practically skipped back to the nurses station, ready for my shift to end so I could get home and finish packing my last minute things. It

felt like everything in my life was clicking into place. It had been almost two decades since Allie and I had lived in the same town. I was giddy with the thought of being able to see her any time I wanted. And she loved me, she said she loved me.

“You look happy,” Kelley said when I rejoined the group.

“It’s been a pretty great day,” I replied. Our conversation was interrupted by the ER doors opening with a new trauma patient. We went to work, falling into the comfortable rhythm of saving lives. The familiar work helped to calm my rapid heartbeat and I was able to fully focus on the job at hand. It was truly a great last shift, the satisfying ending to a lonely chapter in my life. I was more than ready to start the next chapter.

Four hours later I sat alone in my apartment with Duke, sharing a pizza from my favorite Portland pizzeria for the last time. I would miss the view from my apartment, I would miss the snow, I would miss the waterfalls and the breathtaking scenery. I would miss Oregon, but I was dying to get back home. I never thought I would miss Austin, but there I was, desperate to get back. I stared out the window at the Portland skyline. Lit high rise buildings and lights from distant windows stared back at me. The snow was gone for the season, replaced by a clear sky with few stars twinkling above the buildings. I stretched my legs, readying my body for the long drive before me.

“Are you ready to see Sarah, Duke?” His tail began to wag at the mention of her name.

“I’m excited to see them too, boy,” I said as I rubbed his big brown head. I tossed him a pepperoni and he chomped on it gladly. I finished my own slice and took our trash outside to the outdoor trash cans, my own can had been packed up and sent to Texas. I looked up at my building, admiring it for the last time. I was proud of myself, of my accomplishments in Oregon, of the direction of my life. My phone sounded,

alerting me of an incoming message and pulling me away from my thoughts.

*Sarah: I'm taking Mom to the hospital. I wanted you to know. She fainted, she's awake now but I'm making her go in.*

My heart stopped beating. I should have been there already. I decided right then that I would not let Sarah ever experience that fear alone again. I forced my fingers to type a reply.

*Ryan: Do not try to drive her. Call an ambulance. I'm leaving now. I won't stop, I will be there as soon as possible.*

I shoved my phone into my backpack and ran up to my apartment as fast as I could to get Duke. I wouldn't wait until the next morning. It was time to get back to Austin. Immediately.

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Sarah

May 2023

“I’m calling an ambulance, you look really pale, Mom,” I said as soon as I received the text from Ryan. He was right, I shouldn’t be driving while upset.

“No Sarah, I’m fine, I can drive,” she said. I gave her an incredulous look.

“Okay, you’re right I probably can’t. Call Joey. If he’s off work he can come get us.” Mom took a sip of water. Lifting her arms seemed to cause her pain, her face grimaced at her movements.

“Please, Mom. Let me call an ambulance,” I whispered, my voice cracked on my words. Tears had formed in my eyes and had begun dripping down my cheeks. Mom made eye contact with me and relented.

“Fine, call an ambulance,” she finally agreed.

“Do I dial 911, or who do I call?” I asked.

“How should I know?” she replied.

“You’re the mother,” I mumbled. Not knowing what else to do, I called 911 and told them I needed an ambulance. After giving them my name and address, I sat by Mom and held her hand. She took another sip of water, her face contorted and she looked as if she might vomit. She thrust the cup into my hands, I took it and sat it on the coffee table.

“I told Ryan,” I said. I knew that she was going to be upset with me. She sighed heavily.



“Sarah, why would you worry him like that? He has a really long drive, he doesn’t need to be worrying about us,” she said.

“He would want to know,” I told her.

“I can take care of myself, Sarah.”

“Can you?” I asked, my voice rose to a pitch I didn’t recognize, “Because from where I’m sitting it seems like maybe you’ve been feeling bad for a few days and you’ve been ignoring it.” I was worried about her. I had been noticing that she was moving slowly for a couple days after her last doctor’s appointment. She looked like she was in pain while doing simple tasks. She was pale and had a low appetite. I had been watching her, noticing her movements. I was worried about her, but I was also mad at her.

“I’m fine, Sarah,” she said shakily, her eyes filled with tears to match my own.

“You’re not though, Mom. You don’t look fine at all.”

“I will go to the hospital and they will give me some blood and then we will come back home tomorrow. Please, try not to worry, okay? For me?” Her look was pleading and it tugged hard on my heart strings.

“Okay, Mom. Let’s just get you better,” I said. I pulled out my cell and sent Ryan another message.

*Sarah: The ambulance is on the way. She is okay, probably needs blood. I will keep you updated.*

*Ryan: Okay, loading up my car now. See you soon.*

I slipped my phone into my back pocket and held Mom’s hand until I heard the knock at the door. I bolted to answer it and unlatched the dead-bolt for the paramedics.

“She’s in here,” I said, by way of greeting. I led them to my mom, who looked very embarrassed to be getting on the gurney. I knew she didn’t want to go in the ambulance, but I was so relieved to see medical professionals at our door that my hands began to visibly shake from the adrenaline dump. I tried to hold in the tears, but I was scared and overwhelmed.

“Can I ride in the ambulance with her?” I asked, my voice was so shaky I barely recognized the sound.

“Of course, follow us,” the paramedic said. He was tall and slender with kind eyes, his patient tone and obvious kindness caused my tears to flow faster. I locked the door

behind us, shaking so hard that I dropped the keys on the first try. Mom kept shooting me wary glances, she wasn't used to me being so unhinged. I was very emotional, and I couldn't put my finger on why. We had been to the hospital together thousands of times, and never had I cried on the way. I tried to take some calming breaths, but the tears would not stop, I could not find the off switch. We rode the entire way to the hospital with hands clasped together and silent tears falling from both of our eyes.

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Allie

May 2023

The morning after my fainting spell I woke up in the hospital room. I opened my eyes to see the far too familiar white walls surrounding me. I was no stranger to nights in a hospital bed, or mornings waking up to beeping cardiac monitors and bleach cleaned sheets. That particular morning

felt different. When we arrived at the hospital the day before, I was in pretty bad shape. My blood levels were dangerously low, causing me to also have low oxygen levels and confusion. I knew Sarah was scared and alone. I tried so hard to be strong for her, but I was too sick to be her rock.

That hospital stay was different from previous stays. Sarah was somber and emotional, which in turn made me somber and emotional. I blinked a few times, allowing my eyes to adjust to the bright light above. I looked around, I was in the room alone. I saw the fluid bags connected to my port, dripping saline and God knows what else into my veins. I grabbed my pillow, held it in front of my face, and screamed. I then threw the pillow across the room, where it hit the plastic clock on the wall, causing it to crash to the floor and crack down the middle. I watched as the second hand stopped ticking, the clock fully broken. The clock no longer ticked, freezing the time at nine fifteen in the morning indefinitely. I couldn't help but think of how fitting that was, for I also felt frozen in time.

I heard a knock at the door before it swung open. I wasn't sure why the nurses and doctors even bothered to knock, they never waited for a reply. I grabbed the blankets

and threw them over my head, not wanting to see or talk to anyone.

“Is that really the good morning I get?” I heard Joey’s familiar voice deadpan. I peeked out from the top of the blankets, relieved it was Joey standing in my room.

“Good morning,” I mumbled.

“Your mini me is downstairs eating in the cafeteria. There’s a boy with her,” he said.

“Probably Weston. He’s in her art class, they have been spending a lot of time together lately,” I said as I pulled the covers the rest of the way down.

“You better keep an eye on that, he is obviously super into her,” he said. He walked over to me and sat down on the side of my bed.

“How are you?” he asked as he took my hand. I could tell by the way he was acting toward me that he had already spoken with my doctors. I shrugged, allowing only one single tear to escape. I looked down and noticed he was wearing a white t-shirt and dark washed jeans. I looked at him in confusion.

“Where are your scrubs?” I asked.

“I’m not here as your nurse today. I’m here as your friend,” he said. With that, I lost all control of my emotions. He grabbed me and pulled me into a hug. I let him hold me, as I sobbed into his shirt, soaking it with my tears.

“Shh, I’m here. It’s all going to be okay. We got this,” he said into my ear. He held me for either minutes or hours, I was unsure which, until the door softly opened. Sarah walked into the hospital room and I hurried to wipe away my tears.

“It’s okay, Mom. You can cry.” She walked over and put her arms around us both, we all cried until our tears turned into hysterical laughter. Sarah could always make me feel joy in the darkest moments of my life. The three of us sat in my hospital bed all afternoon, watching movies and eating snacks and allowing the mood in the room to change. We decided to laugh instead of cry. We decided to ignore our surroundings and just be present in each other’s company. I let myself enjoy it.

After my third soda and fourth movie I looked out the window to see the sun setting. I knew Ryan would be there by the next morning. I took a deep shaky breath. How many more hours did I have before my life changed forever? It was time to tell Ryan everything, no matter the consequences. It was go

time. I would lose him, but I didn't have a choice. I had to do the right thing. He deserved to know.

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Ryan

May 2023

It takes around thirty-three hours to drive from Portland to Austin, and that's if you don't stop. Normally I would take breaks to sleep, but I was too wired for sleep. I stopped only to get food and allow Duke and I a few restroom breaks. I would have flown, but this move was permanent, so I needed my truck. Adding in all the stops for food, gas, and bathroom breaks, we made it to Austin around seven thirty AM. I went straight to the lakehouse to shower and change clothes. I let

Duke run around outside by the water while I freshened up. I was home. The lake house would be my forever home. I would hopefully live there with my own family some day. A family that I wanted to plan with Allie. But first, I needed to go to her, see if she was okay.

“Come on Duke, you can stay inside while I’m gone,” I called. I looked at the back door, already planning where I would install a dog door. Duke was going to love it here. It would be so much better for him to have freedom to go in and out as he pleased as opposed to being cooped up inside an apartment all day. “I’ll be back soon,” I told him. He was already making himself at home on the couch. I grabbed my keys and headed outside. It was after nine by the time I pulled out of the driveway. I could safely assume Allie was awake and ready to talk. I typed a quick text to Sarah before I hit the freeway.

Ryan: *On my way to the hospital*

Sarah: *Yay! Can't wait to see you. Mom's awake*

I put my phone down in the cupholder and focused my attention on the road. I was nervous to see Allie again, my hands were sweating on the steering wheel. I turned on the radio to distract my mind from my anxiety. The familiar voice



of George Strait bellowed through the radio, one of Allie's favorites, and I took it as a sign. It was time to see my girl.

I arrived at the hospital after what felt like forever being stuck in a traffic jam. I took the time to listen to country love songs and sike myself up for my talk with Allie. I knew she needed to tell me something, I hadn't forgotten what I had read in her journal, but I knew nothing she could say would change my feelings for her. I pressed the elevator button that would take me to the oncology floor where I knew I would find Allie. I sent Sarah another text.

Ryan: *I'm here, what room?*

Her reply was immediate. I could always count on Sarah for a quick response.

Sarah: *605*

I found her room and let myself inside after a soft knock. When I laid my eyes on Allie my heart skipped a beat. She looked pale and small, but she also looked beautiful. I loved the way her hair was growing in, and it remained the same beautiful color from all of those years ago. Joey was there, the nurse I had met in February, and Sarah was sitting at the bedside. I walked straight to Allie and wrapped her in my arms. I kissed her right there, in front of God and everybody.

She blushed from my display of affection. Last time I visited, I was careful not to show affection in front of Sarah, but I couldn't help myself.

“Hi,” I said.

“Hi,” she said, a blush spread across her pale face.

“Have you had a blood transfusion yet? If not, I know a guy,” I said. I rolled up my sleeve to expose my veins. She laughed and nodded her head. The sound of her laugh sent goosebumps up and down my skin.

“I've had four units so far, but I will be sure to keep that in mind,” she said smiling. I turned my attention to Sarah, wrapping her in a big hug that she excitedly accepted.

“Hey kid.”

“I'm so glad you're here,” she beamed up at me, “I have so much to tell you!”

“I can't wait to hear about everything. Have you been driving some?” I asked. She looked over at Allie and then back at me. “A little bit, but Mom's a sucky teacher,” she said.

“Well, I'm here for good now so we can continue our lessons,” I told her as I gave her one more squeeze. I stuck my hand out to Joey to shake.

“Joey, good to see you again,” I said.

“Same to you, glad to see you back here. I know these girls have missed you,” he replied.

“Sarah, Joey, do you guys mind giving us an hour or so to talk?” Allie asked.

“Sure, I’ll take Sarah out to breakfast. Pancakes?”  
Joey asked Sarah.

“Duh. Mom, do you need me to bring you anything back?”

“Decent coffee?” Allie replied.

“On it,” Sarah said before she left with Joey.

Allie looked up at me, a sadness in her expression. I studied her beautiful face, wanting to ease her worries.

“Whatever you need to say, it’s going to be okay,” I said softly. A tear slipped from her eye and she quickly wiped it away.

“Scoot over,” I said as I attempted to sit next to her on the bed. She moved slightly over allowing me space to slip into the bed beside her. She rested her head on my shoulder.

“Are you feeling okay?” I asked. She nodded, I could feel more of her tears collecting on my shirt. I tilted her face up so I could see her eyes.

“It’s okay,” I said softly. I cupped her face in my hands and kissed her gently.

“It’s not okay. There’s so much to say...” she trailed off. She started to sit up in the bed.

“Can we move over to the table?” she asked. I stood and made my way to the table, an unease settling in my chest. Whatever she had to say, it obviously wasn’t good. She went to her bag before joining me at the small table and pulled out a white envelope. She approached me and took a long breath and sat down. She slid the envelope across the table where it rested in front of me. On the front of the envelope it said simply, *Ryan*.

“Don’t open it yet. Inside is a letter that I wrote to you that explains everything. Read it later,” she said. Her voice was unsteady and her hands were violently shaking.

“Allie, what is it?” I asked, afraid to hear the answer. She stared at me, her face contorting into a pained expression. She started to say something, then closed her mouth again. Silent tears streamed down her face as I waited to hear

whatever was causing her so much anguish. When she finally spoke, my mind was buzzing, her eyes connected with mine and she took a long, shaky breath.

“It’s about Sarah, Ryan. She’s your daughter.”

Allie

March 2006

Thailand

I was getting ready for work when I heard a knock on my bedroom door. I shoved my feet inside my sandals and ran over to open it. Rachel stood in the hallway outside of my room with an apologetic look on her face.

“Hey, sorry to bother you so early but do you have a tampon? I ran out and I don’t think I will have time to get to a store before school starts,” she said.

“Let me check,” I said. I walked further into my bedroom with Rachel behind me. Suddenly my own truth hit me, stopping me dead in my tracks. I had been in Thailand for more than two months and I had not had a period once since my arrival. I felt a wave of anxious nausea wash over me and I sat down suddenly on my bed.

“Hey, you okay Allie?” Rachel asked. I shook my head. No, I was not okay. I was definitely not okay. I looked up at her, fear pulsing through me and spreading like wildfire.

“I haven’t had a period the whole time I’ve been here, Rachel,” I whispered, afraid to voice my fear any louder than a prayer.

“Oh no...do you think you might be pregnant?” she asked, her eyes were wide. I nodded slowly. I thought back to the past few weeks. I had a few episodes of nausea, but I thought it had been from eating such new and different foods. I had gained a couple pounds but I didn’t think much at all about that. I had gotten dizzy a few times, but I was living in a new country away from everything that was normal to me, so small changes felt expected. How had I not noticed I had missed two periods. Maybe even more than that.

“You should call into work and go see a doctor,” Rachel said.

“Will you go get Pram for me?” I managed to ask. My mouth was dry and my head was spinning. When was my last period? January? December? I couldn’t remember. I felt like such a fool. I had been so distracted with my new job, new friends, applying to grad school, and finding my footing in my new environment that I had completely ignored my own body.

“Good idea, he will know where to go and what to do,” Rachel said. She ran from my bedroom to go find Pram. I sat

on my bed frozen, my hands ringed together in my lap.

Pregnant? I couldn't be. But in my heart, I knew I was. I was terrified, my entire body began to tremble. Pram came quickly into my room and shut the door behind him.

“What's wrong, Allie?” he asked, his eyes wild with fear. I couldn't speak and I couldn't stop shaking. I must have looked dreadful. Pram grabbed my face into his hands and forced me to look into his eyes. I tried to focus on his familiar features.

“Do I need to call an ambulance?” he asked. I shook my head adamantly. I forced myself to calm down, taking big breaths in and out until I stopped violently trembling.

“I think I might be pregnant,” I said. I sobbed on the last word. He didn't say a word, he simply wrapped his arms around me and let me cry. After several minutes, I pulled away, my tears slowing. He looked at me, his expression soft and encouraging.

“What can I do?” he asked. He always knew exactly what to say.

“Do you know any doctors? I have no idea about healthcare in this country...”



“Of course, yes. I know someone. I will make a call and get an appointment for you,” he said, already getting his phone out.

“Will you come with me?” I asked softly.

“You don’t even have to ask, Alison. Yes, I will go with you.”

“I guess I better not work today. I am in no shape to be around children,” I said to Pram. Children. My own child might possibly be growing in my belly. Was I ready to be a mother? I didn’t have enough time with my own mother to learn how to be one myself. Would I be any good at it? What about Ryan? His cell was shut off, he had moved from our apartment, how would I even get a hold of him? I could call his mother but that would be a disaster. I could only imagine all of the awful things she would say to me if I told her I had moved to another country with her grandchild growing inside me. I didn’t do it on purpose, but that wouldn’t matter to Caroline. She would make me move back. I couldn’t do that, Thailand was a part of me, a part that I was not prepared to give up. Not to mention, she hated me. I knew she didn’t want me to be the mother of her grandchild. Jason had said to me on the phone that Ryan hated me and wanted nothing to do with

me, so I could assume he also would want nothing to do with our child. I was going to be a mother. I was going to be a single mother. I was going to do this all alone, in a foreign country, by myself.

“Are you going to tell him?” Pram asked, he seemed to read my mind. I shook my head back and forth. No, I would not pull Ryan away from his life, from his dreams of being a doctor. He made his choice when he didn’t show up for me, it was over between us and this complication didn’t change that. Did it?

*He has a right to know.* A voice inside my head said over and over. I wavered, wondering what I should do. Did I change his life forever, in the same way my own life was about to change, or did I leave him alone to have the life he dreamed of?

“Did you two ever talk about having children together?” Pram asked.

“Once. I asked him if he wanted a family. He told me I would be his family. When I pressed about children he was vague, saying maybe someday but not any time soon. I don’t think it is something he wanted.”

“What will he do if you tell him?” he asked.

“Probably say all the right things and beg me to come home. I don’t want to go back, Pram. And I don’t want him to marry me only because he has to. He had the ring, he didn’t ask. He doesn’t want me as his wife. But if I tell him, he will marry me out of obligation. I don’t want that.”

“I understand,” Pram said as he nodded. My own words took shape in my brain. I was right, he would marry me and I would have to move back, or he would move to Thailand and be miserable. I would ruin his entire life if I told him. I had to do this without him, for his sake.

“If I am pregnant, and I really think I am, I’m doing this alone,” I said. New tears fell down my cheeks.

“You will not be alone, Alison. I will be here, every single step of the way. I promise you,” Pram said. He wrapped his arms around me again.

“You don’t have to say that, this isn’t going to be easy and it’s not your responsibility,” I said, the side of my face was pressed into his chest.

“I want to, if you’ll let me. I don’t want you to do this alone, Alison. And I can help you. I care very deeply about

you,” he said. I could only nod, not finding the words to express how much I appreciated him and his words. He was right. With Pram in my life, I would not ever be alone. He was the most loyal friend I could ever hope for.

“I will go call the school and tell them that we will both be out today. Then I will call the doctor. You go take a bath or eat something, anything that will make you feel more relaxed. If you are pregnant, stress is not good for the baby,” he said.

“How do you know that?” I asked.

“I have four younger siblings,” he said.

“I didn’t know that,” I said, “I feel really bad that I didn’t already know you had siblings.”

“Don’t feel bad, I hadn’t told you. I can tell you more about them later,” Pram said.

“I’d like that,” I said. He embraced me again, his comforting arms wrapping around me. I sank into him, allowing him to comfort me. Pram was going to help me, everything was going to be okay.

“I’ll be back,” he said. He released me to go make the phone calls. I decided to get back into my pajamas and crawl back into my bed. I sank my head into my pillow and looked

up at the ceiling. I let out a long breath. A baby. A child. Me, a mother. I wanted to see my dad, to have him tell me everything was going to be okay. How would he feel about this? I would have to call him at some point and tell him the news. Knowing my father, he would book the first flight over to be there for me. He would be kind and supportive of me and my decisions to raise the baby in Thailand so I could continue my plans. My head was spinning. My life had changed dramatically in ten minutes time. I rested both of my hands on my stomach. It felt slightly hard and I wondered briefly how I hadn't noticed.

“Is there someone in there?” I whispered to my stomach.

“If so, I guess I'm your mom. I have no idea what I'm doing, but I can promise you that I will love you and take care of you, I hope that's enough.”

Pram came back into my bedroom, shutting the door behind him. He slipped off his shoes and came to lay down next to me in my bed. He took one of my hands into his.

“Will I be a good mother?” I asked, my voice was a whisper.

“I’ve seen you with your students. You are kind, patient and loving. They adore you. I know for a fact that you are their favorite teacher. You are very good with children and your own child will be the luckiest little person in the entire world,” he said with confidence.

“Pram, you’re the best person I’ve ever met,” I said as I gave his hand a squeeze, “Thank you for always knowing exactly what to say to make me feel better.”

“I mean it, though. You will be an incredible mother,” he said.

And just like that, I believed him.

## Chapter 42

Ryan

May 2023

“What? I can’t be her father, Allie. Why would you say that?” I stammered. Surely I had heard her wrong. I wasn’t Sarah’s father. That was impossible.

“You are, Ryan. I didn’t know it at the time, but I was pregnant when I left for Thailand,” she said, sobbing between her words. My head was pounding as I tried to process what she was saying.

“But Sarah is only fifteen...” I said, my voice trailed off.

“Sarah is sixteen, Ryan. She will be seventeen in September,” she said softly. I stumbled backwards, her words hit me like a physical force.

“But she said she was learning to drive before her birthday...” I whispered.

“Just because she got a late start, Ryan. With me being sick...” she didn’t finish her thought. My daughter? Sarah was my daughter? My confusion quickly turned to hurt, and then, just as quickly, to anger.

“So you’re telling me this now? After I have missed almost seventeen years of her life?” My voice started to rise, my face flushed with fury.

“I know. I know, Ryan. I am so sorry,” she sobbed.

“Does Sarah know?” I demanded, my voice was shaking from the anger pulsating through me. I clenched my hands to my side, willing myself to calm down. Allie didn’t speak, but she shook her head back and forth. Sarah didn’t know. Suddenly, I needed to get out of there. I was going to say something I could never take back. I needed to calm down before having a conversation with her.



“It’s all in the letter,” Allie said softly. She sat back down on the bed, her hands folded in her lap like a child in trouble.

“You think words can change what you did? She’s my DAUGHTER Allie and you kept us apart for SIXTEEN years,” I yelled. Allie sobbed into her hands, and for the first time ever, I did not want to comfort her. The door to her hospital room opened and a nurse poked her head inside.

“Sir, you can’t yell in here. This is a hospital,” the nurse hissed.

“I was just leaving,” I said. I grabbed my keys and the letter and walked towards the door.

“Ryan, wait,” Allie said as she stood up from the small table. I turned around and glared at her, barely able to see her through the angry tears in my eyes.

“I will contact you when I’m ready,” I said through clenched teeth, “And don’t worry, I won’t make you wait three months like you made me.” I turned and stormed out of the room. I ran as fast as I could to the elevator, then to the parking lot. Once I was safely in my truck, I allowed myself to think. To cry. To breathe. To grieve the years I had lost.

I was a father.

Sarah was my daughter.

I was her dad.

She was my child.

Suddenly, I knew where I needed to go. I needed to go home. I needed to see my parents, to get their advice on what to do next.

I had been wrong when I believed that there was nothing Allie could say that would change things between us. Her confession changed everything.

I don't remember the drive over to my childhood home, my brain was so preoccupied with the bomb Allie had dropped on me that it was a true miracle that I made it there in one piece. I walked up to the door of my parents house and turned the knob. It was locked. I began to knock until I became frantic. When the door finally opened, my face was tear-

stricken and my hands sore from the wild banging on the solid oak door. It was my mother who answered, her expression confused and then concerned. She moved to the side, allowing me to enter.

“Ryan, what’s going on,” she asked. She wrapped her arms around me, the pressure calming me down slightly. I allowed my mother to hold me, something I was not entirely used to, and I wept.

“So I guess she told you,” Mom said quietly. I pulled suddenly out of her arms.

“What? How did you know? Allie told you about Sarah?” I asked, flabbergasted that she seemed to already know why I was upset.

“No, Allie did not tell me anything. I took one look at that girl and knew she was yours.” Her words hit like a mack truck.

“How?” I asked her. I needed to understand,

“She has your ears, and your exact laugh. And did you notice her feet?”

“No...” I said, shocked by everything she was saying. Did Sarah really have my laugh?

“She has webbed toes, Ryan. Just like you. I noticed as soon as she took her shoes off at the door. That is not a common trait.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” I asked her.

“Well, I was giving Allie some time to tell you herself. It was clear you had no idea, and Allie needed to be the one to tell you. I knew she would do the right thing when she was ready.”

“How did I not notice after spending a week with her, and you noticed within five minutes of meeting her?” I asked, more to myself than my mother.

“I’m your mom, Ryan. I know I have never been very good at it, but you’re still my baby. Your features are engraved into my heart and soul. Of course I would notice,” she said, holding my hands in hers.

“What am I going to do?” I whispered.

“First, you’re going to come sit on the couch while I make you a cup of iced tea. Then we are going to get your dad and we will figure this out together,” Mom said. She led me to the living room and I sat down, feeling the envelope in my back pocket as I did. I pulled it out and looked at it. I wasn’t

ready to read it, but would I ever be? I sighed and ripped the envelope open. There was no time like the present, after all. I breathed in and out with my eyes closed tight. I opened them and began to read.

*Ryan,*

*Where do I even start? First, let me say that I know that my actions are unforgivable. But I want you to know I never intended to hurt you. Quite the opposite. Every decision I made all of those years ago I truly believed was the right decision at the time. I was young and scared and heartbroken, and I thought I was doing the right thing to let you live your life and pursue your dreams. I know it was wrong now, I regret it every single day. I'm getting ahead of myself though. Let me start from the first day I discovered I was pregnant. I had been in Bangkok for more than two months before I realized I was going to be a mother. My friend and roommate, Pram, took me to see a local doctor who confirmed the pregnancy. Pram and I did not have a romantic relationship at the time, so he obviously knew that the baby was not his child. Nonetheless,*

*he was there every day helping me through my pregnancy and through Sarah's first few years. She called him Dad when she began to talk, and I never corrected her. I wish I had told her the truth from the beginning. I will be telling her everything shortly after I tell you, and I know she will probably hate me for a while. I am so ashamed of my actions, and I know I have caused you so much pain. I didn't tell you about the pregnancy for a lot of reasons. I was selfish, for one, and wanted to stay in Thailand. I am not proud to admit that, but I am going to be nothing but honest from here on out. I also didn't want you to marry me out of obligation. I didn't want to destroy your dreams and change your plans. The day I called our apartment and Jason answered, he told me you hated me and wanted nothing to do with me. I know he was just trying to protect you, but his words haunted me. I thought of your mother, and how she would hate me even more when she realized I had left the country with her grandchild in my belly. I made the decision to leave you all out of it, convincing myself that would be the best thing I could do, but I know now it was the wrong choice. I am so sorry for leaving you out of Sarah's life. She deserved to have you, and you deserved to know her. When Pram died, I thought I was getting what I deserved. I thought I couldn't keep his love because of the decisions I had*

*made. When he died, I hated myself for everything I had done when I was pregnant with Sarah. His death felt like my punishment for my past mistakes. When I was in Thailand, it was easier to convince myself I had done the right thing. When I got sick and we moved back to America, I thought about calling you every day. I wanted to find you and tell you, I thought about it almost every minute. So much time had passed, and fear kept me frozen, so I did nothing. I didn't tell Sarah, and I didn't find you, and because of that I hurt everyone that I love. I wanted to make it right, but I was sick, and I was terrified to tell Sarah I had been lying to her for her entire life. As you can see, I am a coward. I hope and pray that despite my poor choices, you and Sarah can form a strong relationship. It is especially important now. This next part is also very hard to write. Ryan, I am not going to get better. I am dying. My chemo round did not work. I have only time now, and probably not much of it. I know I have no right to ask you for anything, and I know you probably hate me and never want to see me ever again, and that is okay. I really do understand. But I am asking you to look after Sarah, to be there for her when I die. Because I am going to die, Ryan. And I am not telling you this so that you will feel bad for me or forgive me, I know what I did is unforgivable. I want only for you to know*



*how serious I am when I say that Sarah is going to need someone. She has no other real family, and it's a lot to ask but I hope you will look in on her often and make sure she is okay. I hope she is over eighteen by the time I'm gone, but if not, you will have no legal responsibilities since you are not on her birth certificate. My will states that she will go back to Thailand to live with my friend Maya. But if you want her to stay, Ryan, I will change it. Everything is your call now, I will do whatever you want. I have enclosed several pictures from Sarah's childhood for you to have. I am so sorry, Ryan. I wish I could have a do-over. I know you would have been the best dad to her, and I wish I had given you that chance all those years ago. But the chance is yours now, if you want it. Please also know that I love you desperately. I need you to know that. I was scared to tell you because I knew I would lose you. I also knew telling you would blow up my life and Sarah's life. It was very hard to tell you and I am so sorry I didn't have the courage to do it sooner. I wish I had fifty years to beg your forgiveness, but karma has other ideas. My time is limited now, but I will tell you I am sorry until my dying breath. I love you, Ryan. I am forever sorry. Please understand I thought I was protecting you. I'm a fool.*

*Yours always, Allie*

I folded the letter and put it back in the envelope. My mind was unsure of what to focus on first. Sarah was my daughter. Allie was dying. I was furious. I was devastated. I was confused. I was a father. I was going to lose Allie. I forced the tears to wait as I pulled the photos of Sarah from the envelope. The first was a baby picture. Sarah sat in her mothers arms in a blue dress. My mother was right, she had my ears. I felt a hollow pit in the bottom of my stomach, a loss so deep I couldn't explain it. I wasn't there for her birth. I wasn't there for any of it. Every picture showed Sarah in a different state of childhood, always laughing with a big smile, often pictured with Allie. She did not include any picture of them with Pram, and for that I was grateful. I hate that Sarah had called another man dad. I wish it had been me.

My mom and dad entered the room and approached me. They both wore matching concerned expressions. Mom sat down next to me and handed me a fresh glass of iced tea. Inside the tea there were mint leaves and it smelled also of

lavender. I took a big drink, the cool and fresh liquid calming my nerves. I silently handed my mother the envelope, allowing her to read Allie's words. She sat beside me reading, tears formed and then fell from her eyes. She folded it into her lap when she was done. I then handed her the pictures of Sarah.

"May I?" Dad asked as he gestured toward the letter. I nodded, allowing my mother to hand it to him. He read it, his emotions evident on his face. I felt my own tears falling. My heart was shattered. I was hurting in a way I couldn't even put into words.

"Oh, Ryan. She was such a cute little baby," Mom said breathlessly.

"I'm so mad at her," I whispered through my tears. My mom grabbed my hands and held my gaze. "I know, Ryan. I'm mad at her, too. But I believe her when she wrote that she didn't mean to hurt you. She was young and away from her home. Being pregnant is terrifying and I can't imagine being in her shoes."

"You're taking her side on this?" I asked.

"There are no sides, Ryan. The past is something we cannot change, but we can move forward. I want to be in

Sarah's life, and I know you do too. Allie made bad choices, but we all did. Every action that took place all of those years ago led to Allie's decision. She felt alone, and we helped make her feel that way. I was cruel to her, our family was not accepting of her. You and her left things on a bad note. It was not the right thing, to keep Sarah a secret from you, but I understand why she did it. I understand that she thought that was her only choice."

"I lost almost seventeen years of her life, Mom."

"But now you have a chance to see the rest of them," she said as she held my hands.

"Allie is going to need your support. She is dying, baby. I can't imagine how she must be feeling. She knows she will leave her daughter behind. That is a mother's worst fear. You need to find a way to forgive her, to be there when things get ugly. This is going to be nearly impossible to navigate," Mom said.

"I don't know. I don't know how to forgive her."

"You forgave me," Mom said.

"And me," Dad said.

“You’re a loving and forgiving man, Ryan. I know you will find it in your heart to forgive Allie. But even if you can’t, you will need to be strong for Sarah,” my mom said.

“How will I be a good father? I don’t know how to be a dad, especially to a teenage girl.”

“No one knows how to be a dad. You just have to figure it out as you go. I’m still learning every day,” Dad said.

“Don’t do anything right now while you’re upset. You don’t have to make any plans or decisions right now. Your brother will be here in two days for their visit, why don’t you stay here until then? I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to be alone right now,” Mom suggested. I thought of being at my parents home overnight, and for the first time in a long time, I wanted to be there. I wanted to have dinner with my parents, to enjoy their company, to not feel so alone. I needed my parents’ comfort, to help me navigate this new chapter in my life.

“Yeah, that actually sounds really nice,” I said,  
“Thank you. I’ll go get my clothes and Duke before dinner.”

“I’m not very happy with Jason right now, though,” I said as I thought about the role he played in how my life turned out.

“Well, remember Ryan, that was many years ago. Y’all were practically children. Your brother only wanted to help you. He had no idea Allie was pregnant,” Mom said.

“I know. I just wish he had told me.”

“I know, baby,” she said. She rested her hand on my knees. I picked back up the letter and held it in my hands. I unfolded it, preparing myself to read her words again.

“I’m going to get dinner started. Do you still like salmon?” Mom asked.

“Sounds great, Mom. Thanks.” They both left me alone with the letter. I read it again. I would read it over and over until the words no longer hurt.

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Allie

May 2023

I stared at the door to my hospital room, willing it to stay closed. The conversation with Ryan was absolutely brutal, but it was the next conversation I was never going to be ready for.

Sarah.

My baby.

We had always been so close, thick as thieves, and this was going to destroy us. My hands sat in my lap, violently shaking. I had to tell Sarah that Ryan was her father. I had to tell Sarah I was dying. I was not sure which truth would hurt her worse. I grabbed my journal from the side table and began writing down everything I was feeling. Putting it down on paper helped me to process my own thoughts. I had four pages written before the door swung open. I stilled, my heart stopped, the room spun.

“I told you that nurse has a crush on you,” Sarah was saying to Joey as she came flying into the room. Her smile was huge as she joked around with Joey. She was in a good mood. This was going to be impossible.

“Here you go, coffee that doesn’t taste like dirt, “ Sarah said as she handed me over the cup.

“Joey, do you mind giving us a minute?” I asked, the words tasting like bile in my mouth. His expression sombered and he nodded. He knew I was about to tell Sarah about my prognosis, but he had no idea about Ryan. He didn’t know there were two bombs waiting to blow up her life.

“Text me if you need anything. You too, Sarah,” he said as he left us alone. I sat up straight in the bed and patted



the empty space in front of my legs.

“Come sit,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

“Everything okay?” Sarah asked. There was a quiver in her voice which gave away her unease.

“Not really, babe,” I said, the tears were already starting.

“Okay. Well, what’s going on?”

“Nothing I am about to say is going to be easy, but I need you to let me say it. All of it. Before you react. Can you do that for me?” I practically begged. Sarah only nodded, fear radiating off of her.

“The chemo didn’t work, sweetheart. The cancer is getting worse. Things don’t...well, they don’t look good,” I said.

“We can try other treatments. There has to be other options out there, Mom. You can’t give up,” Sarah said, her words were urgent and wild.

“I’m not giving up. If there are other options, I will take them. I will do anything possible to stay here for you. I will fight like hell for every minute of life. But the conversation has moved from fighting for remission to

fighting for time. The doctors will do everything in their power to give us as much time as possible. But I am not getting better, Sarah.”

“I can’t lose you, Mom,” she cried. She was violently shaking her head back and forth.

“It’s going to be okay, Sarah, I promise you. We will be okay. You are going to be okay. You are so strong, stronger than you even know. I wish I could tell you that I was going to survive this, but I will not lie to you. Not anymore. No more lies between us,” I said. Her face changed, confusion showing on her features.

“What do you mean by that? We never lie to each other,” she said.

“That’s the other thing I wanted to talk to you about. There’s something else you need to know,” I said. I tried to gather up every ounce of bravery in my body.

“What?” she asked, “What else is there?”

“We need to talk about Ryan,” I said softly.

“Okay... what about Ryan?”

I pulled another envelope out from under my pillow and handed it to her.

“What I’m about to tell you is going to be upsetting. You may not understand, and that’s okay. I wrote it all down in case it’s too much right now. The letter explains it all.”

“What, Mom? Tell me,” she demanded. She took the envelope from my hands.

“When I moved to Thailand, Ryan and I had just broken up. We had been together for several years and it was very serious. I loved him so much, but our lives didn’t line up anymore so we went our separate ways. When I got to Bangkok, I started my teaching job. I loved it. The country, the job, the food. I loved it all. But, I soon realized I was pregnant...” I said, my voice trailed off. Sarah’s face filled with confusion.

“What? What do you mean? You were pregnant? What happened to the baby? I have a sibling? Did you have an abortion or something?” Her questions came at me in rapid succession.

“I was pregnant with you, Sarah. Pram isn’t your biological father. Ryan is.”

“WHAT?” she asked, her eyes wide and seering through me.

“He’s your father. He didn’t know though, Sarah. He would have been around if he had known,” I said quickly.

“Why didn’t he know? Why didn’t you tell him?” she demanded.

“I was young, it was complicated.”

“I can’t believe you,” she spat. She got up off of the bed. Seeing her like that killed me. She was in so much pain, my betrayal was written all over her face.

“I am so sorry, Sarah. Please don’t go, not when you’re this upset.” Sarah grabbed my keys from the table and turned her back on me, running from the room. I scrambled up from the bed, trying to follow her, but my arm got twisted in the medication line. I fought it off, trying to free myself from the IV. I sat back down on the bed, realizing I was not strong enough to run after her. I got out my phone and tried to call her. She didn’t answer. I tried again and it went straight to voicemail. She had turned off her phone, meaning I couldn’t even track her on my parent app. Earlier that day, I had begged Joey to go get my car in case we got discharged. I was kicking myself for it, wishing I had left it at the apartment. The

ambulance ride would have saved me from this moment had I left well enough alone.

“No!” I screamed. I slammed my hands down onto the mattress. I dialed Joey’s number. I prayed he was still in the hospital somewhere. He picked up on the first ring.

“Hello?” he said, “You okay?”

“No, Sarah took my keys. She doesn’t even have a license yet and she does not need to be driving when she’s this upset. Are you still here?” I asked, completely frantic.

“I had to leave. The girls have their end of the school year banquet,” he said, “Do you think maybe she went home?”

“I have no idea. I’ll call the neighbors. She was really upset, Joey. I’m really worried.”

“I’ll come back as soon as the ceremony is over. Call Ryan, he’ll help,” he said. I didn’t have time to tell him the entire story, so I said my goodbye and hung up the phone. I thought about it for a moment, deciding that Joey was probably right, I should call Ryan. I knew that even though he was angry with me, he would help me find her. With shaking hands I dialed his number.

*Ring.*

*Ring.*

*Ring.*

No answer. I was not surprised, I wouldn't have answered either. I typed a text, hoping that he would read it.

*Allie: I told Sarah. She took my car and turned off her phone. She was really upset and I'm really worried.*

A reply came immediately.

*Ryan: I'll find her.*

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Sarah

May 2023

Ryan is my father. My mom's words ran through my head as I tried to navigate the busy streets of Austin. More than one vehicle had honked at me and my knuckles were turning white on the steering wheel. I didn't want to go home, I didn't want to go back to the hospital. I was so angry at my mother, but I was also terrified. She said she wasn't getting better. My breathing became rapid as every single human emotion ran through me. I needed to get somewhere that allowed me quiet where I could cry and process my thoughts in peace. I looked at the road ahead, my eyes landing on a billboard for properties on Lake Travis. I quickly took the next exit, deciding that's exactly where I'd go. To the lake house.

The drive out to Ryan's cabin helped me to calm down, the streets becoming less crowded the further I moved away from downtown Austin. When I turned into the driveway of my cabin, my heart had slowed to its normal rhythm. I killed the engine and stared at the front porch. There were more flowers blooming, spring bringing with it new and vibrant colors. When I had last seen the porch, it had been late winter. The porch in the spring was an entirely new experience. I sat like that for a while, drinking in the view, allowing the beauty to erase my mind from all its worries. I sat in the driver's seat until I heard a dog barking. I realized right away it was Duke. I scrambled out of the car and up to the front door. I tried the handle but it was locked.

"Hey, buddy!" I said through the door. He whined and scratched at the wood.

"Hold on, I'll find a way inside," I told him. I looked around the property, trying to find my easiest point of entry. I walked around to the back door, it was locked too. I tried the back windows, but they didn't budge. Duke was barking loudly, trying to get outside to see me. I was so angry. Angry at my mom. Angry at my life. Angry that she was dying.



Angry that I couldn't get inside. I picked up a rock and looked at it.

"Sorry, Ryan," I said to no one as I threw the rock through the window. The bottom of the window shattered. I ran up to it quickly, pulling the glass outside onto the ground.

"Stay back, buddy," I said to Duke. I didn't want the glass to hurt him. I took the big pieces over to the outside trash can and decided I would find a broom and dustpan to clean up the rest later. I was able to reach my arm in and unlock the window. I then crawled inside, attempting to avoid the glass as I pulled my body into the cabin.

"Ouch!" I grabbed my hand and held my palm. A piece of glass had cut me right down the center of my hand. I ran to the sink, leaving droplets of blood in a trail behind me. I turned on the cold water and ran my hand underneath the stream. The cut did not appear to be too deep and I decided I probably didn't need a doctor. Duke sat at my feet, staring up at me with his huge brown eyes. I found a dish rag and some painters tape in a drawer and I used my new found supplies to wrap and tape up my hand. When the bleeding stopped, I found the broom and dust pan and cleaned up the inside glass from the floor underneath the window.

“That’s better,” I said to Duke as I dropped the last of the glass into the trash can. Duke walked over to the back door and scratched at the frame.

“You need to go outside, buddy?” I asked. I found the lock and unlocked the back door. As soon as the door was opened, he took off to chase the birds. I followed him down to the dock and sat down by the water. It was peaceful to listen to the sounds of the lake. It was the perfect spot to think through my feelings. I remembered the envelope I was carrying in my back pocket and pulled it out, deciding the dock at the cabin was the perfect place to read my mothers words.

*My Sarah Bear*

*I am so sorry. Please understand that all I have ever done is try to do the right thing. I know I have made many mistakes, but I tried to always do right by you. I wish I had brought Ryan into your life sooner, I know he will love you and you will love him. It’s crazy how he came crashing into our lives this year, filling up the spaces we didn’t even know were*

*missing. He is an amazing man and I hope you two find a way to navigate this life together once I am gone. I love you. I love you in a way that you will only understand once you're a mother yourself. It's an all-consuming love that can't be explained with words. I hope that I've given you a beautiful life. All I want for you is happiness, my darling love.*

*I'm so sorry that I'm dying. I don't want to leave you, ever. I'm not afraid to die, but I am afraid to leave you alone in this world. But you won't be alone now, you'll have Ryan. Please lean on him and allow him to know you. I will be able to process this last chapter in my life better if I know you have him to help navigate you through the rest of your days.*

*Please forgive me, Sarah. I don't want us to spend the last of my life at odds. I know it is selfish of me to beg for your forgiveness, and I know I do not deserve it, but please allow me as much time with you as possible. Please remember me as the mother who loves you, not the villain who kept your father from you. I thought Pram was good for us, he was a good dad to you when he was alive. He loved you and I allowed him to step into that role. I should have done every single thing differently, but I was young, scared and stupid. I never meant to hurt anyone, least of all you. I never want to hurt you, and*

*that is why it has taken me all of these years to tell you about Ryan. I was so afraid I would lose you forever. Please tell me I haven't lost you, please forgive me. I will spend every moment of the rest of my life making this right in any way I can. I love you, Sarah Bear. Forever plus another day.*

### *Mom*

I read the letter seven times before I sat it on top of the water and let it float away, allowing the waves to carry my pain across the lake. I sat there for minutes or hours, I'm unsure how long, but I know time passed as I stared out at the water and cried until the tears stopped coming. With my face red and puffy and my skin streaked with sadness, Duke joined me on the dock. He looked at me, reading my sadness with his wise brown eyes, and placed his soft head into my lap. I felt immediate comfort from his presence and took a deep calming breath.

“Come on, buddy. Let's go inside,” I said. I walked with Duke toward the back door of the cabin. He followed closely at my side, my own little protector. The hours of crying mixed with the heaviness of the conversation with my mom

left me exhausted. I needed to lay down, and the comfortable couch inside the cabin was calling for me. I let us through the back door, wincing slightly at the sight of the broken window. I found my favorite cashmere blanket in the hall closet and cuddled up on the couch with Duke.

My mind wandered as I closed my eyes and gave way to the exhaustion. Things had been going so well for me. My art class was exciting and my work was getting so much better. I had made friends and finally had a social life. I was ready to take my driving test, feeling more and more confident on the road. I had even met a guy. Everything in my life was clicking into place before my mom hit me with her news. She was dying. Ryan was my biological father. My mom had been lying to me for my entire life. Everything around me had changed. I wondered if I was even the same person as I was when I woke up that morning. I wasn't really Sarah Delacruz. I wasn't a girl with a dead father. I couldn't trust my mom. I didn't know how to feel or who I was anymore. I felt the weight of the blanket in my hands, allowing the soft fabric to comfort me as I drifted into a fitful sleep.

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Ryan

May 2023

I had been searching for hours. I knew Allie must have been beside herself, stuck in the hospital while Sarah was missing. Sarah's phone was off and I had looked everywhere I could think of. I didn't know any of her friends, or any of the places she liked to hang out, so I felt like I was flying blind. The more I looked for her, the more I realized how little I really knew my daughter. My own flesh and blood. I felt a jolt of anger. I felt so cheated. I had missed so much of her life. I needed to find her. I needed to know her. I wanted to be her dad, not just her biological father.

I pulled into Crazy Scoops, the only other place I could think of that she might be. I knew Sarah loved ice cream. Just like her mother. Just like me. I looked around, but the place was filled only with college students whose faces I did not recognize. I pulled out my cell phone and walked up to the counter.

“What can I get you today?” the young woman at the counter asked.

“Have you seen this girl?” I asked. I handed her my phone and showed her the picture of Sarah, Allie and I that we took at the cabin in February.

“Yeah, I’ve seen her before. She comes in here sometimes with her Mom,” the girl said as she popped her bubble gum.

“Has she been here today?” I asked.

“No... are you a cop or something?” she asked as she eyed me suspiciously.

“No, I’m her father,” I said as I tested out the word.

“Then how come I haven’t seen you before?” she asked, her arms were crossed across her chest.

“Because I just moved here from Oregon. Look kid, Sarah is missing and I am just trying to find her. If you see her, will you please call me?” I asked as I jotted down my number on a napkin. She picked it up and shoved it in her pocket. I highly doubted that this girl was going to be any help to me, but I was desperate.

“If she’s missing, why don’t you call the cops?” she asked. I sighed heavily, completely exasperated by the conversation.



“She hasn’t been missing that long so it’s a little early for all that. Just please, if you see her, call.” I left the store, no closer to finding Sarah. I sent Allie a quick message.

*Ryan: No luck yet. Any luck on your end?*

Her text came back before I had even made it to my truck.

*Allie: Nothing. Joey is helping now, too. I’m stuck in this damn room.*

*Ryan: We will find her. She’s just upset.*

*Allie: Yeah, I know. It’s all my fault.*

I put my phone on the console of the truck without replying to the text. I couldn’t bring myself to tell her that it wasn’t her fault. It was her fault. But maybe my mom was right, maybe everything that happened was the fault of all of us.

I put the keys in the ignition as the lake cabin key and fish keychain caught my eye. A slow smile started across my face. The lake cabin. Of course. She had to be there. I started the truck with renewed energy. I felt it in my bones that I was right. She had to be at the lakehouse with Duke. I sent up a silent prayer that Sarah was there, safe and sound in my happy

place. If she was there, that meant she was safe. If she was there, it meant maybe I knew her after all.

Forty minutes later, I pulled into the driveway of the house. I saw Allie's car immediately. I let out a long breath of relief, adrenaline flooding my body so quickly that I got light-headed.

*Ryan: Your car is at the cabin. I'm going in now.*

*Allie: Thank God. Text me when you see that she's okay.*

*Please. Thank you, Ryan.*

I walked up to the front door, absently wondering if Sarah had picked the lock. She wasn't on the porch where I thought she might be. She loved the front porch. I assumed she must have either been out back by the water or inside with

Duke. I started to get nervous, knowing we were about to have a very real conversation about what we had learned that day. I took a breath and jiggled the front door handle. It was locked. I took out my key and let myself inside.

I saw Sarah asleep on the couch, cuddled with Duke, her hair wild and covering most of her beautiful face. Duke lifted his head, gave me a bored expression, and placed his head lazily back on the couch cushion. I noticed the broken window, discovering how Sarah had gotten into the cabin. I wasn't angry though, I also felt like breaking something. She had obviously cleaned up most of the glass, a gesture that was not lost on me. I stood rooted to the floor for a while, studying Sarah, trying to find pieces of myself in her features. I looked at her ears and then touched my own. How strange, I thought, that this young girl was made from parts of me.

I sent a quick text to Allie.

*Ryan: She's fine. She's sleeping, but she's safe.*

I then turned my phone on silent, wanting to have zero distraction from the outside world when finally getting to talk to Sarah. I chose to let her sleep, deciding that we could talk when she woke. I walked to the kitchen and made a pot of coffee, attempting to be as quiet as possible. I sipped in

silence, my hands sweating as nerves ripped through my veins. After my second cup, I was completely wired. I gulped the last drip as I heard Sarah stir on the couch. I sat my cup in the sink and slowly approached, trying not to scare her.

“Hey, Sarah. It’s just me,” I said softly. She jumped a little, her eyes wide upon hearing my voice. She clutched her hand to her chest and relaxed when our eyes met.

“You scared me,” she whispered. She sounded as nervous as I was.

“I’m sorry. You had me really worried, kid.”

“I know. I just had to get out of there. Mom told me about...well...everything,” she said. I nodded and went to sit across from her on the couch.

“I didn’t know, kid. I would have been there,” I said, tears breaking my words.

“It’s not your fault, it’s her fault,” Sarah said, venom in her voice.

“Don’t be mad at your mom,” I said softly.

“Why? Aren’t you?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I am, but I understand that she didn’t mean to hurt us. I’m only mad at the time wasted. I have

missed so much of your life. I don't want to miss anything else."

"Really?" she asked. She looked insecure.

"Really. I'm here for good, Sarah. I will be whatever you need me to be. I will be your friend, your driving teacher, your shoulder to cry on. Anything you need. I'm here. I want to be your dad, if you'll let me try. I'll probably suck at it, I have zero experience, but I want us to figure it out together. If that's okay," I said as I wiped tears from my face. Sarah was crying, too. She could only nod her head.

"I broke your window," she finally said. I laughed and went to sit next to her. I wrapped her into a hug.

"I didn't like that window anyway," I said. My words caused Sarah to smile up at me. I noticed she had a dish rag taped around her hand. She saw me looking at it.

"I cut my hand trying to get inside," she explained. I nodded and looked it over, deciding it probably didn't need stitches. Sarah let me wrap it again, a far away look on her face.

"You okay?" I asked. Her face crumpled under her blue eyes.

“I’m so mad at her,” she whispered.

“I know, kid. But your mom is going to need you now, more than ever. We have to be strong for her.”

“I don’t know if I can be strong anymore,” she said sadly.

“I can be strong for the both of us.” I said.

“I don’t want you to live with regret. I know all too well about regrets. The three of us will figure out how to navigate all of this. Together. We can’t shut her out,” I told her. Sarah nodded into my chest.

“What do you say we tape this window up and then go have dinner at my parents house?” I said.

“Do they know you’re my...dad?” She said the last word as a question.

“They know. My mom knew as soon as she saw you in February,” I told her.

“Really? How?” she asked, surprise filled her face.

“She said we have the same ears,” I said, “She also noticed your webbed toes.” Her eyes grew wide at my words.

“You have webbed toes?” she asked. I kicked off my shoes and wiggled both of my feet.

“Oh my gosh, that is so crazy,” she said. She pulled her feet out from under the blanket and did the same. We laughed together until our laughter again turned to tears. Both of our emotions were all over the place.

“I feel like I missed out on knowing you as a dad. You seem like you’d be the best dad,” she said.

“We can start now. Right here. It’s not too late,” I said. I hugged her again.

“Come on, let’s grab Duke and get back into town. I know two grandparents who are dying to get to know you better,” I said.

“I have grandparents,” she said, her tone bewildered as if she hadn’t considered this yet.

“My mom will probably try to buy you a pony or something crazy like that.”

“I can be bought,” Sarah joked.

“What if we swing by the apartment and you grab an overnight bag. I’m staying with my parents for a few nights

and there are a million spare rooms, plenty of space for you to stay with us. We have a lot of catching up to do,” I told her.

“I’d really like that,” she said.

“I’ll text your mom and tell her.”

We got to work duct taping the window to keep out any creatures or other runaways. I then helped Sarah properly bandage her injured hand, deciding that we also better stop at an urgent care on the way so they could properly check it out. I felt better after talking to Sarah. More centered. Encouraging Sarah to forgive Allie had helped my own heart to soften. I wasn’t ready to forgive her yet, but I felt my anger slowly dissipating. I was afraid that once the forgiveness came, the pain would begin. I was losing her, and that fact had not yet hit me. The anger was hiding the hurt and protecting my heart. When the anger went away, I knew the heartbreak would soon follow. I was going to lose Allie again. I swore I would never lose her again, but there I was, feeling her slip away. I wasn’t sure I could bear the loss of her twice. I didn’t want to find out.



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Sarah

May 2023

“I’m not sure why, but I’m a little nervous,” I admitted  
as we pulled up to Ryan’s parents’ massive home.

“Don’t be, it’s going to be great,” Ryan assured me. I nodded and began opening his car door. On wobbly legs, I approached the house with Ryan at my side. We had gone to urgent care where they cleaned and bandaged my hand. They also gave me a long lecture about breaking and entering. When filling out the paperwork, they asked Ryan if he was my relative. He looked nervously at me and then said, “Um, I’m her father.” His words had sent tingles up and down my spine and I tried to suppress my smile. We left urgent care and went to the apartment to get my things. I packed more than I probably needed, but I wanted to impress Ryan’s family. I wanted to be accepted into his world. I was devastated by my mother’s lie, but I was thrilled that Ryan was my father. He was incredible, and I would get to keep him in my life.

I stood at the doorstep of the Andersons, my overnight bag in my hands. I looked over at a beautiful sign to the left of the front door.

### *The Andersons*

How strange that I should be Sarah Anderson. I whispered the name almost silently under my breath as the door swung open.

“Hello!” Ryan’s father said as he swung the door open wide, “Come in!” We were ushered inside and I immediately felt welcome. My shoulders relaxed and Ryan’s mom came and grabbed my bag, set it on the floor, and wrapped me in a big hug.

“Welcome to the family, sweet girl,” she said. Her smile revealed perfectly white teeth.

“Mom, don’t freak her out,” Ryan said in a mock whisper.

“Oh hush, Ryan. We have girl things to discuss,” Caroline said. She grabbed my arm and pulled me into the kitchen. Ryan followed close behind me, as if he was afraid to let me out of his sight.

“Ryan,” Caroline said as she turned her attention to him, “Your brother took an earlier flight. He and Cadence and the kids will be here in a few hours. I had to tell him about your, um, situation... just so it wouldn’t be awkward for you all when he got here. I hope that’s okay.”

“That’s fine. I bet that blew his mind. You told him Allie is her mother?” Ryan asked, he chuckled slightly as he did.

“I sure did. I also told him he was a big idiot for scaring Allie away seventeen years ago,” she said. I had zero idea what she was talking about, so I just stood there staring at them both.

“Well, like you said, it wasn’t just his fault. Mostly it was my dumb fault for falling asleep in the library before Allie’s flight.”

“Seems like I have a lot to learn,” I said. I was dying to know more about my mom’s relationship with Ryan before I was born.

“We should probably let your mom fill you in on all the details,” Caroline said, patting my shoulder, “Come on dear, would you want to help me make dinner?”

“I’m not much of a cook,” I admitted.

“Me either, darling. We can figure it out together.”

“I can help,” Ryan said, “I’m actually a pretty good cook.”

“He really is. Have you had his pancakes and homemade pizzas?” I asked Caroline.

“I haven’t, but now I know who is making breakfast in the morning,” she said.

“Won’t you have to be at work tomorrow morning, Mom?” Ryan asked her.

“No way I’m going into the office when all my kids and grandkids will be here. There’s a new cardiologist picking up most of my workload. I was very serious when I told you I’m nearing retirement.”

“That’s great, Mom. Surprising, but great,” Ryan told her. I tried to listen to their conversation, but something Caroline said had struck me. All of her grandchildren would be there. She meant me, too. I was one of them. I was about to meet my uncle and aunt and my cousins. My mind reeled at all of the changes happening around me. I always believed it was only Mom and me, now suddenly it seemed I had family everywhere. I needed to step away for a moment and catch my breath.

“Caroline, is there a restroom I can use?”

“Of course, dear. Head down that hallway, second door on the right.” I left Ryan and his mom in the kitchen and found my way around the large downstairs floor. Once alone in the bathroom, I sat on the closed toilet lid and pulled out my phone. It had been off for hours and I was sure I had at least ten messages from Mom. Suddenly, I was desperate to talk to

her. I turned on the phone and waited impatiently for it to load. After the screen came to life, my phone began dinging in rapid succession. There were several from Ryan, a few from the kids in my art class, two from Weston, but only one from Mom.

*Mom: Please call me. You are my world Sarah.*

I was so mad at her, but I needed her. I called her cell phone, holding my breath as it connected. She picked up on the first ring.

“Hello?” she said, her voice sounded desperate.

“Hi, Mom,” I said. I was already beginning to cry.

“Oh baby girl, I am so sorry. Where are you? Are you okay? I’m going to sign out against medical advice and come get you. I can’t stand this,” she started, her words falling like vomit from her lips.

“No, Mom. I will be so mad if you do that. Don’t leave the hospital. I’m with Ryan at his parents’ house. I am safe and they are being really nice to me. It’s probably good for me to be here for a while, to get to know them all.”

“Okay. I understand. It’s just killing me to be away from you. There is so much I want to say,” she said.

“I’m really mad at you,” I whispered.

“I know, baby. You have every right to be.”

“But Mom?”

“Yes?” she asked softly.

“I love you. I just need a little bit of time to process everything, okay?”

“Anything you need. Just please text me often to let me know you’re okay,” she said.

“I had to call you because I was feeling overwhelmed. Ryan’s brother and his family are about to be here. It’s weird to suddenly have all these people around that are related to me. I don’t really know how to act or what to do,” I confessed.

“Just be yourself. You are the most amazing young woman and they are going to absolutely love you,” she said, her emotions evident in her voice.

“You can’t die, Mom. I won’t let you,” I said. I was suddenly overcome with anxiety about her diagnosis.

“I will be here with you as long as I can. I will do everything the doctors say to give us as much time as possible. Who knows, we may still have years together. I won’t get better Sarah, and I won’t lie to you about that, but they say

they can give me time. I'm okay right now. Take this time to get to know Ryan. I want that for you," she said.

"Okay. I can do that. Thanks, Mom. Thank you for telling me about Ryan, I know that had to be really hard. And thank you for telling me the truth about your health. I'm glad you didn't keep that to yourself," I told her. I fought the tears, swallowing them down to the bravest parts of myself.

"Go be with the Andersons. They deserve to know you, and you deserve to know them. Keep me posted," she said.

"Love you, Mom. Bye," I said as I hung up the phone. I felt better after hearing her voice, our conversation gave me the courage to rejoin the Andersons in the kitchen. I washed my hands, even though I had not actually used the bathroom, and made my way back to help Caroline with dinner. When I approached the kitchen, I stopped in the doorway for a moment and watched Ryan and his mother. Ryan was rolling out some sort of dough and laughing loudly at something his mom was saying. Dan was sitting at the table, listening to their conversation with a wide grin on his face. They looked like a real family. They looked happy. A warmth started in my chest and bloomed through me. I loved my life with Mom, just the two of us against the world, but looking upon the Andersons



made me realize I also longed for a family like theirs. I wanted to be a part of big family dinners with grandparents and cousins around the table. Now that I had found a big family of my own, I was in danger of losing the only family I had ever known. I closed my eyes and said a prayer, begging to be allowed to have both.

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Ryan

May 2023

“Grandma!” a tiny voice said. The sound pulled all of our attention away from our kitchen tasks. Mom was cooking homemade pasta and salmon, I was working on the sauce, and

Sarah was adding melted garlic butter to the bread. Dad was busy chopping vegetables to make a dinner salad.

“My girls!” Mom squealed. She turned and squatted down, allowing two small girls to enter her arms. My nieces were there, meaning Jason and Cadence were not far behind. I had not seen Jason or Cadence since their wedding seven years before. Guilt washed through me at the sight of the tiny girls. Lilly was three and Bella was five, and I had never met either of them. Shame filled me and I swallowed hard. I had missed watching Sarah grow up, but it hit me suddenly that I had also missed watching my nieces grow up. Jason and Cadence entered the kitchen behind their daughters, interrupting me from my thoughts.

“Little bro!” Jason said. He wrapped me in a big hug. He hadn’t changed at all, his presence still took over the room. Jason was loud and fun, and it hit me how much I had missed him. Why had I avoided him for so long? Why had I allowed the hurt that I had felt towards my parents to bleed over into the relationship with my brother? I had wasted so much time, so much of my life, being angry and alone.

“Jason,” I said. My voice was already cracking under the weight of my emotions. I returned his hug with gusto,

squeezing him tightly.

“Lilly, Bella, this is your uncle Ryan that I have told you girls so much about,” Jason said, waving his daughters over to us. They both stood shyly in front of me, Lilly giggling and hiding behind her sister. They were both beautiful with long curly brown hair flowing over their shoulders. Their brown curls reminded me of my own wavy hair.

“I’m really happy to finally meet you girls,” I said. I was crouched down to their level.

“We’ve never seen you before,” Bella said.

“I know, but that is all about to change. I hope to see you both a lot from now on,” I said, meaning it.

“Cadence, it’s good to see you again,” I said. I extended my hand to Jason’s gorgeous wife. She was a lawyer and her presence always made me a little nervous. She was very intimidating with her tall frame, beauty, and smarts.

“Long time no see,” she said pointedly. I noticed Sarah in the background, looking about as uncomfortable as I felt. I walked over to her and placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Everyone, meet Sarah. My daughter,” I said.

“Words I never thought I’d hear,” Jason said laughing. The young girls ran up to Sarah and threw their arms around her, giving her a very warm welcome. Sarah laughed and picked Lilly up into her arms.

“Can I do your makeup?” Bella asked Sarah, causing Sarah to laugh, which reminded me again how much her laugh mirrored mine.

“Of course!” Sarah said. Bella ran out of the kitchen, presumably to gather her makeover gear to attack Sarah with glitter and Lord knew what else.

“So how long have you, uh, known about, you know,” Jason stammered over his words. He was trying to be quiet so Sarah wouldn’t hear our conversation.

“About five hours,” I said.

“Damn, bro. That’s wild,” Jason said, bewildered.

“Tell me about it,” I laughed.

“Where’s Allie?” he asked.

“She’s still at the hospital.”

“The hospital?” Jason asked.

“I guess Mom didn’t fill you in on that part,” I said. I looked over at Sarah, who was looking back at me.

“I’ll fill you in on everything later,” I said softly. Jason nodded and went over to hug Sarah.

“Are you sure this isn’t Allie? Wow, you are her exact spitting image,” Jason said.

“I get my ears and my feet from Ryan,” she said. Something unfamiliar pulled at my heart. Love? Pride? Joy? I didn’t know how to put a name to the feeling.

“You got the webbed toes?!” Jason laughed, “Bro, you could have kept that certain trait to yourself.”

“We like our toes,” I said, wrapping my arm around Sarah.

“I bet we can swim faster than you,” Sarah said, joking around with Jason.

“Sounds like a bet. I challenge you both to a race after dinner. We can put Mom’s pool to good use,” Jason said.

“Oh, I am IN!” I said as I gave Sarah a high five.

“What do we get when we win?” Sarah asked Jason.

“IF you win, I’ll do the dishes,” Jason said.

“No way. Twenty bucks,” Sarah said.

“Ha! She’s definitely your kid, Ryan,” Jason said laughing.

“If I win, you two have to do the dishes the rest of the week,” he said.

“You are so going down,” I said to Jason.

“Can we swim, too, daddy? Bella asked. She had just returned to the kitchen with a large pink box overflowing with makeup.

“Did mommy bring your floaties?” he asked. He bent down to pick up his daughter.

“Grandma always has floaties for us,” Bella said.

“That’s right baby girl,” Mom said. She was beaming from ear to ear. I took a moment to look around the kitchen. I couldn’t believe this was my family. We had really come a long way from stiff, cold, hostile family meals. This felt better. Dad grabbed a chilled bottle from the fridge and popped the top.

“Let’s have a toast,” he said. Mom pulled out several champagne flutes and began to pour the bubbly liquid for the adults.

“To family,” Dad said, raising his glass into the air.

“To family,” we echoed.

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Allie

May 2023

The hospital had never felt so lonely. Without Sarah by my side, the silence of the room echoed through me. The beeping of the machines threatened to drive me crazy. I grabbed my journal and poured my feelings down onto the paper. The sun was setting outside and I absently wondered what Sarah was doing at the Andersons. I was excited for her, but I was also jealous. She had been only mine for so long. My heart ached for her. My heart was also aching for Ryan. I thought about his face when he left the hospital earlier that day. The hurt expression he was wearing cut right into my chest. I hated myself for hurting him, and for hurting Sarah. I wondered if maybe I deserved all of the bad things that were happening. Maybe I deserved to be slowly killed by my



cancer. A knock at my door caused me to put my pen down and wipe at my eyes.

“Come in,” I called. I didn’t care who was at the door. Anyone would be better than the loneliness of my own company.

“Room service,” I heard Joey’s voice ring through the room. I heard the giggle of little girls with him and I immediately brightened.

“Clara! Sammy! I haven’t seen you two in forever!” I said.

“You have some hair now!” Sammy said. She immediately ran over to the hospital bed and jumped into my arms. I laughed and gave her a big hug.

“I know! It’s growing back finally,” I told her.

“You look like a fairy princess,” Clara said as she joined her sister on my bed. I looked over at Joey who was holding a huge strawberry milkshake. He handed it to me and kissed my forehead. I sucked back tears and gave him a grateful smile.

“How do you always know exactly what I need?” I asked Joey. I gave Sammy another tight squeeze.

“I’m your best friend,” he said with a shrug. I realized that he was right, he was my best friend. I nodded and reached for him, pulling him into a hug with me and Sammy.

“I want a hug, too,” Clara said as she wrapped her arms around us.

“How’s Sarah?” Joey asked. He pulled out of the group hug and gazed at my face. I’m sure I looked half-way dead between my tears and my pale skin.

“Safe and sound. Probably being wined and dined by the Anderson’s” I said.

“Don’t worry. She won’t forget you,” he said jokingly. But that was exactly how I felt, like I was about to lose her. Like I was being forgotten.

“Daddy, can we stay here and watch a movie in Allie’s magical bed?” Sammy asked.

“Magical bed?” I asked her.

“Yeah, with all the buttons that make it move up and down,” Clara said excitedly.

“Want to go for a little ride?” I asked the girls. They both bobbed their heads up and down with wide eyes showing

their excitement. I pushed the button that lifted the bed into the air. Their giggles were the exact medication that I needed.

“Thank you for this, Joey,” I said after we had settled down and started an animated movie for the girls.

“Anytime, Allie. Anything for you,” he said. He allowed me to rest my head on his shoulder. I knew, no matter what happened next, I had people who loved me.

## Chapter 43

Ryan

June 2023

“I win!” Sarah screamed as she threw her fists into the air.

“You cheated!” Jason said. He pointed a finger at her as she laughed and pulled all of the poker chips into her lap.

“Nope, I’m just multi-talented,” Sarah said.

“Ryan, your daughter is stealing all my hard earned money,” Jason whined.

“You would think after a week together you would learn not to challenge her to any more bets,” I told him. We had all been at my parents house for six nights, our new family unit getting to know each other day by day. Sarah and I hadn’t left to go to the cabin, or to the hospital, or to the apartment. Sarah

said she wasn't ready, and I was trying not to push her too hard. My parents had barely been to the office at all, and the eight of us had fallen into a comfortable rhythm. Having the time to get to know Sarah in a family setting was exactly what I needed. The only thing missing was Allie. I knew Sarah was mad at her, I was too, but I felt like it was time for them to talk. We didn't know how much time Allie had and I didn't want Sarah to live with any regrets.

“Bella, let's go help grandma start dinner,” Jason said. He scooped up his daughter into his arms. I watched as Jason stuck his tongue out at Sarah, causing her to howl with laughter. She began cleaning up the mess from their poker game, eyeing her small pile of Jason's cash as her winnings.

“Hey Sarah, you think we should go see your Mom tonight?” I asked her gently. She looked up at me, considered my question, then finally nodded.

“Okay, yeah we should,” she said softly. I had been in touch with Allie in the evenings, keeping her updated on how Sarah was doing. She was out of the hospital and back at home, and I knew she was dying to see her daughter.

Our daughter.

“Can we eat with everyone first?” Sarah asked. Mom was making chicken and vegetables and we could smell the fresh herbs from the kitchen.

“Sure, kid. Whatever you want to do. Maybe we could take her a plate?” I suggested.

“She would like that,” Sarah said.

“I know she wants to see you. She misses you,” I told her.

“Can I confess something?” Sarah asked me.

“Of course,” I said. I patted the couch next to me, inviting her to sit down. She sat and ran her fingers through her hair. She grabbed a piece and twisted it around her finger.

“I don’t want this week to end. I haven’t gone to see Mom because I’ve been afraid she will make me stay home. I don’t want Jason and the girls to leave tomorrow. I guess I kind of just want us to stay here like this for a while,” she said sadly. It had been a really great week, and I knew exactly what she meant. I didn’t want it to end either.

“You are a part of this family now, Sarah. You will be here for every summer break, every holiday, every birthday party, every life event. This doesn’t end when you go home or

when Jason and his family go back to New York. We are here to stay. I know how you are feeling though, and I understand it, because I feel the same. This is the first time I have been around my family in many years. I'm afraid for it to end, too," I confessed. She let out a long breath and her shoulders relaxed a little. She leaned into me and laid her head on my shoulder.

"It's been a pretty great week," she said.

"I know, it really has," I agreed.

"I think I've needed a little bit of time to avoid my mom's cancer, too. I know when I see her I'm going to get really sad. I want to live in this happy bubble for a little while longer," she said sadly.

"I'll tell you what. We will have dinner here with everyone, run over to the apartment with food for your mom, hang out with her a little bit, and then I will talk to her. I will tell her you want to come back here for one last night at my parents house before the others go back to New York. I think your mom will let you stay one more night. Plus, I really want to see you beat Jason in another board game. Which one haven't we done yet?" I said.

"Battleship?" she asked.

“Definitely,” I replied.

“Okay, sounds like a plan. We will go to the apartment after dinner and see Mom,” she said, jumping up and heading toward the kitchen where everyone else was gathered.

I was going to see Allie again. So many emotions ran through me at the thought. I was angry, but the feeling had dulled some. I missed her, I knew that much. I thought about her constantly. It was hard not too while spending so much time with Sarah. They were almost identical. I was dying to see her but I was also nervous. Could I forgive her? I wasn't sure, but I knew I wanted to be near her. No matter what happened between Allie and I, I would keep up a good front for Sarah. For the first time in our lives, we would have to learn how to co-parent Sarah. Whatever that meant for a sixteen year old girl.

I walked into the kitchen and watched my family, as I had done so many times that week. It was the thing of my childhood dreams, to see everyone happy and together like we were. Sarah, Lilly, and Bella were sitting at the table coloring in some of Bella's princess coloring books. Cadence was at the table with her laptop out, probably catching up on some of her cases. Jason was telling the girls a funny story, making all



three of them laugh with his over-the-top voices and arm gestures. But my eyes fell on my parents and settled there. Dad had his arms wrapped around my mom, whispering into her ear. Mom swayed softly back and forth to the soft jazz music that was playing through the stereo. She looked up at him, a look of pure adoration on her face. After all of their years together, they were still so in love. They had always been a powerhouse couple at the hospital, but seeing them in their home was something special. They cherished each other, looked after each other, and loved each other. As they were growing older, they were also growing closer. I had watched them as a child, and I knew their relationship took work. All relationships worth having took work. If it was easy, everyone would have love that lasted a lifetime.

If only it were easy.

But it wasn't.

My heart was talking straight to my head, causing my blood to pump wildly in my veins.

“Sarah, eat fast, I need to run out to the cabin before we go to the apartment,” I told her. She looked at me quizzically, then nodded and shrugged her shoulders.

“What’s with your face?” Jason said as he waved his hand in front of my eyes.

“Nothing, I’m just happy I guess,” I said. I shoved him playfully to the side.

“Of course you are. Being a dad is pretty great, right?” he said quietly, “And you hit the jackpot, buddy. Sarah is the best, the girls love her.”

“I love her, too,” I said, surprised by my own admission. But I did, I loved her. My daughter.

“You guys are going to go see Allie?” he asked.

“Yeah, Sarah needs to see her. And if I’m being honest, I need to see her too,” I said.

“You still love her?” he asked.

“I never stopped,” I confessed.

“You know, about that phone call all those years ago. I was just really mad at her for hurting you like that. I just wanted to protect you. I really thought I was doing right by you,” he said.

“Don’t worry about it, we were all just a bunch of misguided kids. It’s water under the bridge,” I told him as I clapped a hand on his shoulder.

“Let’s not let another decade go by before we do this again,” Jason said.

“We won’t, I promise. I’m in Austin for good. I’ll see you guys at Christmas, if not before,” I told him.

“Maybe this is how it was always supposed to happen,” Jason mused. And maybe he was right, maybe everything was falling into place exactly the way it was supposed to.

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Allie

June 2023

I was going absolutely crazy without Sarah at home. There was a deep sadness I couldn't shake without her there. I realized that maybe I had been leaning on her too much the past few years. Just another thing for me to feel guilty about. I felt a depression sinking its teeth into me, but I was fighting it as hard as I was fighting my cancer. Joey had come over daily since I had left the hospital. He was making sure I was fed, hydrated, and cared for. When I was especially down, he would bring the girls over with him. It was impossible to be sad with Clara and Sammy around. I was in the middle of heating up yet another microwave dinner when I heard the front door unlock and open.

“Mom?” I heard Sarah's familiar voice call out.

“In the kitchen!” I called. I tried to make my voice sound nonchalant. Inside, I was having a silent party at the sound of that voice. The voice that had me captivated from the first time she ever said *momma*.

Sarah rounded the corner with Ryan close behind her. He had his hands shoved deep in his jean pockets. He looked good. Really good. Sarah beamed over at him. She looked older. She looked amazing. I guessed the week with Ryan and his family had been really good for her. I tried to not feel jealous. I wanted her to have everything, but I didn't want to lose her.

“We brought dinner,” Sarah said, setting tupperware on the table. I could smell the rich food, causing my stomach to rumble.

“It's surely better than whatever that is,” Sarah said as she gestured toward the microwave. We stared at each other for a moment, both of us timid from our time apart.

“Can I hug you?” I asked, unable to keep my distance from Sarah for another moment. She nodded, her eyes filling with tears. We stood in each other's arms for several minutes, the tears flowed freely between us. Ryan let us stay that way,

keeping silent to allow us to have our moment. Sarah finally pulled away which allowed me to look her in the eyes.

“I really am sorry about everything,” I said.

“I know, Mom. I have had a lot of time to think this week. I understand why you made the decisions you made. I’m still upset about it, but I know you were just young and trying to figure it out as you went. It just sucks. I wish Ryan had been around. He’s really great, and I love his family...” she trailed off.

“I know,” I said. I cut my eyes over to where Ryan stood, “It’s the worst mistake I have ever made, keeping you two apart. It was not intentional. Sometimes you make one choice, and that choice snowballs into more choices, and before you know it, it can feel impossible to go back and change things,” I said. Sarah nodded and wiped her eyes.

“I hope the both of you will one day forgive me. Please know that I absolutely hate myself for this. Even if you guys forgive me, I will never forgive myself. I have been thinking a lot this week, that maybe this terminal disease is my punishment for all the bad choices I have made,” I said, confessing my innermost fears. Ryan jolted forward, almost knocking me over as he wrapped his arms around me. His

sudden movement shocked me. He gripped my arms tightly and looked into my eyes.

“Do not say that, Allie. You do not deserve your cancer,” he said firmly. I could only shrug my shoulders. I could hear Sarah crying as she stood next to me.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you both. I guess I have just had a lot of dark thoughts this week. I just feel so selfish and so stupid. I wish I could change it all,” I cried.

“But you can’t, Allie. And it’s okay. I forgive you, okay? I forgive you,” Ryan said, pulling me into a tight embrace. I shook my head violently back and forth, trying to push him away.

“I don’t deserve your forgiveness, Ryan.”

“But I’m asking you to take it anyway,” he said.

“I can’t,” I sobbed.

“Please, Allie. I need you to accept my apology so I can tell you something,” he said.

“What?” I asked, still trying to break away from his embrace.

“I love you,” he said simply.

“Why?” I asked, baffled by his words.

“Well, for one, you are the best mother to Sarah. She is the most amazing young woman I have ever met, and that’s because of you. I didn’t watch her grow up, but I can see the morals and values you have worked so hard to instill in her. You put me in my place when I need you to. You make me laugh, even when I don’t want to. I love the way you look when you laugh, how your eyes and nose crinkle up on the sides. I love the way you look when you eat with your eyes closed, like maybe you can taste it better in the dark. I love the way the silence between us is comfortable. I love that you make me feel like the best version of myself. I love being here in this apartment, with you and Sarah, watching movies while the two of you consume enough food to feed a small village. I love making you happy. I want to make you happy,” he said.

“Wow,” I heard Sarah whisper. My throat bobbed up and down as I swallowed. I was frozen, unable to respond to his profession.

“You may need to sit down for this next part,” he said to me, a mischievous smile on his beautiful face. With my mouth slack from shock, I sat next to Sarah at the table. Ryan turned to Sarah, taking her hand in his.



“Sarah, I am so glad you are my daughter. This week with you has been the most amazing of my life. You are what my life was missing, you and your mom. I hope you will let me be your dad. I want to take you to art shows, and teach you to parallel park, and scare off all your boyfriends. I want to show you how to make my famous pizza sauce. I want to have you beside me at my parents house for every single holiday. I want to be at the front row of your first art show, and then all of the shows after. I want to walk you down the aisle at your wedding. I want to hold your first baby in the hospital one day. I want you to call me Dad,” Ryan said. Sarah sobbed and grabbed Ryan into a hug. I tried to hold back my own tears. Ryan then turned to me, taking both my hands in his as I sat and he stood before me.

“Allie. I want you to let me love you. I want you to let me into your life. I want you both to move to the lakehouse with me so we can spend every single night letting Sarah kick our butts at monopoly. I want you to let me take you to every doctor’s appointment. I want you to let me hold your hand when you feel sad. I want to kiss you every night and every morning. I don’t want to waste one more second without you in my life. I have never loved another woman, I don’t think I’m capable of it. I’m going to need you to stand up now,” he

said. Wordlessly, I stood as I watched him pull a small, blue velvet box from his back pocket. My breath caught in my throat, I knew that box. He knelt down on one knee in front of me.

“Alison Delacruz, I need you to be my wife,” he said as he opened the box that revealed the same ring I had found in the safe so long ago. He had kept it all this time.

“I need you to say yes to me. I want to marry you right now, today even, as soon as we can legally do it. I have been waiting my entire adult life to marry you. Please, Allie. Be my wife,” he said, his voice cracked on every word. I finally found my own voice to reply.

“Ryan, I’m not going to get better. The cancer...” I said as I looked down at my feet.

“If you have five minutes, five months, or five years, I want them all, Allie.” He put his lips on mine, catching some of my tears in his mouth.

“The ring. You kept it all this time? I saw it once, in the safe before I left. I can’t believe you still have it,” I mused.

“Of course I kept it, I knew one day I would give it to you. You didn’t answer my question, Allie. Will you be my

wife?" he asked. I began to slowly nod into his embrace.

"Okay," I whispered, my heart swelled in my chest. He forgave me. He loved me. He wanted to marry me. Suddenly, Sarah was on her feet, jumping up and down and screaming nonsensically.

"We have to go back to your parents house, Ryan. We have to all celebrate together before everyone leaves," Sarah said, her hands were still clapping wildly.

"I have a better idea. Allie, do you have a white dress? We can have a backyard ceremony. Tonight. We can worry about making it legal next week. I want to marry you, tonight, under the stars with our family around us," Ryan said. I couldn't stop the smile from spreading across my cheeks. I nodded, kissing Ryan again, unable to believe that all of it was really happening.

"Sarah, will you be my maid of honor?" I asked.

"I will," she said through a tearful smile.

"I have a million phone calls to make. If there is anyone you want there, call them now. You girls get ready and I will meet you at Mom's house at eight-o'clock sharp. That gives us two hours to get this all put together," Ryan said.

“Ryan,” I said. I grabbed his hand and pulled him to me.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“I love you,” he said. We parted and I dug out my phone. There was only one person who I needed to be there. Maya wouldn’t make it into town in two hours, or I would have called her too.

“Hello?” Joey’s voice said.

“I’m getting married. In two hours. I need you and the girls there. I’m texting you the address.”

“Excuse me?” he said.

“Ryan wants to marry me.”

“Wow, the plot thickens,” he said laughing.

“Will you be there?” I asked. I was practically begging.

“Of course, obviously I will be there. What should we wear?” he asked.

“Nice but casual. See you there.” I hung up the call and looked over at Sarah. The look on her face was pure bliss.

“Shall we get you ready for your wedding?” she asked.

“How’s my hair?” I asked. I moved the short strands to the side of my face.

“Really cute. I have a white flower headband that would look so cute with your pixie cut. I’ll do your makeup. Let’s go pick out the dress,” she said.

“We’re going to be a family,” I said, somewhat to myself and somewhat to Sarah.

“He’s really good for us,” Sarah said. I nodded and hooked my arms through hers.

“Think there’s time to get a bowtie for Duke?” I asked. Sarah threw her head back and laughed, looking exactly like Ryan as she did. At that moment, I remembered the snow. It had snowed on the day Ryan came into town that cold February day. Snow in Texas, unlikely but magical.

It had brought me my miracle.

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## Chapter 44

Ryan

Two hours isn't much time to throw together a wedding, but with Caroline Anderson in your corner, it's possible. And Mom certainly delivered. I had called her as soon as I left Allie's apartment and told her I was marrying Allie and I

wanted to do a ceremony. At eight pm. That night. After squealing with delight, she promptly hung up the phone with me and presumably got to work.

I had just enough time to find a decent suit, it wasn't a tuxedo but it would do fine, and settle down at a coffee house to write my vows to Allie and Sarah. I then went to buy a ring for myself that Allie could place on my finger when the time came during the ceremony. I had called Jason and asked him to be my best man. Then asked my nieces to be the flower girl and ring bearers. Everyone was excited and busting their tails to help this happen for Allie and I. Everyone seemed to understand our rush. Allie and I had waited seventeen years and I didnt want to wait one more second. I then called Dad and asked him to officiate. He was not ordained, but the ceremony was just for us, legalities could come later.

Upon completing all of my tasks, I made it back to my parents house with thirty minutes to spare. Inside, the house was quiet with the exception of the kitchen. I walked toward the voice of my mother barking orders at someone in the kitchen.

“I need these done in fifteen minutes, Charles. Chop, chop!” she said, as I entered the room.

“I’m working as fast as I can, Caroline,” the unfamiliar man replied.

“It smells good in here,” I said as I took in the delicious aromas. There were three large plates of cookies on the island, and two large trays of appetizers. The man in the kitchen, Charles I presumed, was frosting a small but beautiful white and lavender wedding cake.

“Ryan, thank goodness you’re here. This is my friend Charles, he is a brilliant cook. This is all the food we had time to make, but I assure you it will be delicious,” she said.

“Nice to meet you, Charles,” I said. I extended my hand to him. “It looks perfect, that cake is beautiful. I can’t believe you did all this in less than two hours.” I was in awe of the beautiful display of food before me.

“I went with a lavender and moss green theme, I hope that’s okay. Go outside and check everything out, make sure you like it,” Mom said.

“Thank you, Mom. This is incredible,” I breathed. I walked to the back patio doors and opened them, my breath caught in my throat as I took in the view of the back yard. The first thing I noticed were the white and lavender candles floating in the pool, the lights flickering so beautifully against



the moon light. The outdoor hanging lights were turned on, revealing two rows of white chairs facing a small arch of white and lavender flowers. On each side of the arch there sat a cluster of tall candles. White rose petals were sprinkled all over the lawn.

“Do you like it?” I heard my mom ask beside me. I turned to her, a bewildered look on my face.

“How did you do all of this?” I asked.

“A lot of teamwork. Dad went and bought food supplies while I called Charles to come help me cook. Jason went to the flower shop and bought every purple and white flower they had. Cadence decorated with the girls outside. I already had all of the candles. The arch was something the neighbor had from her daughter’s baby shower. I remembered seeing it last summer and begged to borrow it. I just added a few flowers to make it go with my color scheme. And I have more than enough wine in the cellar. Everything is ready to go, I just need to change,” she said.

“Mom, I can’t explain to you how much this all means to me,” I choked out.

“It’s really the least I can do, honey. Plus, it was really fun,” she said. I kissed her on the cheek before pulling her into

a hug.

“Don’t mess up my makeup by making me cry. The mother of the groom has to look nice,” she said, wiping her eyes. She ran off to freshen up, leaving me standing in awe of the beautiful surroundings. Jason walked up to me with my nieces behind him. They both wore simple sundresses with fresh flowers in their hair.

“Pretty amazing, right?” he asked.

“It looks like y’all had weeks to plan instead of hours,” I said as I shook his hand.

“Our mother is a machine,” he laughed.

“Look uncle Ryan! I have a basket of rose petals!” Lilly said. She showed me her flower girl basket.

“Wow!” I said, “You are going to be the most beautiful flower girl ever. And Bella, you get to hold the rings, that’s a very important job,” I said. My niece beamed with pride. Just then, Cadence approached us, looking as chic as ever. Behind her I recognized Joey, Allie’s friend. He had two small girls with him, his daughters I assumed.

“You guys have a seat there on the second row,” Cadence said as she gestured toward the chairs. I shook Joey’s

hand before he and the girls found their seats.

“Allie and Sarah just arrived, we will be getting started soon. Ryan, you go stand up by the altar. Dan is on his way down to join you. Jason, take your place next to Ryan. Girls, you come with me, you will be the first ones to walk down the aisle before Allie and Sarah,” Cadence said as she gave everyone their marching orders.

I felt a twinge of nervous excitement as everyone began to take their places. I had waited almost two decades for this, and it was finally happening. I felt the last of my resentment and anger slip away, ready to start completely fresh with Allie as my wife.

My mom came out of the patio doors, dressed in a cream dress with applique flowers, looking perfect as always. She took her seat in the front row, her smile directed right at me. Everyone was seated as my Dad joined me at the altar. He looked nervous so I gave him an encouraging nod. Cadence pointed a remote at a speaker and soft music began to play. Lilly and Bella began their march down the aisle lawn. They looked so proud as they marched toward me, finally reaching the front to sit by their mom. The music changed and Cadence gestured for everyone to stand.

Sarah and Allie came into view and it felt as if my heart stopped. Sarah was walking Allie down the aisle toward me, and the sight of them together was enough to melt any remaining ice around my heart. Sarah looked perfect in a knee length baby blue dress, the color making her eyes practically glow. It was Allie though, dressed in a white floor length flowy dress, that made my heart beat faster. Her tinkerbelle hair was adorned with white flowers, and she had simple pearls around her neck. I remembered the pearl necklace from college, it was the one of the few pieces of jewelry she owned that belonged to her mother. I noticed she also had her fathers old watch on her wrist. She joined me at the altar and her hands found mine.

“Can I borrow that?” she whispered and pointed to my pocket square.

“Sure, why?” I asked as I handed it over.

“I have something old,” she touched the watch and the necklace, “something new,” she touched her dress, “and something blue,” she said as she looked over at Sarah in her blue dress and then down at the sapphires of her ring. “All that’s missing is something borrowed.”

“You borrowed my blood, remember?” I teased. Her smile grew on her beautiful face as she nodded, remembering what brought us back together after all of our time apart. Dad cleared his throat and we turned our attention to him, our hands joined together.

“Friends and family of Ryan and Allie, welcome. I think we all know what acts of fate brought us all here today to witness this long awaited joining of these two souls. They were meant to be together, and I always secretly knew they would eventually find their way back to each other. I am so thrilled that I was right,” Dad began. I listened to him talk briefly about our history together, causing several smiles and chuckles from the few guests witnessing our ceremony. I couldn’t tear my eyes away from Allie, our eye contact was intense and spoke so many words between us. I felt whole for the first time in a long time.

“Now Allie and Ryan will exchange their vows, which they have written themselves,” Dad said. He looked at me to go first. I pulled the paper from my pocket and began to read.

“Allie, we finally made it. I believe God himself led me back to you. Call it fate, call it destiny, call it faith, but don’t

call it luck. It's so much more than that. I know we have had a lot of bumps in our journey, but I choose to try and live without regrets. Our time apart taught me many things, but the most important thing I learned is that life is sweeter with you in it. I have had a great life, but I always felt like something was lacking. As soon as I found you again after learning that my blood was donated to you I found all of the missing pieces. Not only did I find you and Sarah, but our reconnection also led me back to my family. I believe without you, I would have never come home again and discovered how much I was missing out on. Looking around at all of the faces here, I know without a doubt I am exactly where I want to be. I have so many things I want to tell you and so many things I want to give you, and I promise you these vows. I promise to listen to you, to be your shoulder to cry on when you're sad. I promise to laugh with you when you're feeling happy. I promise to watch every horror film and chick flick that your heart desires. I vow to keep you safe and to be with you no matter what life throws our way. I vow to help you in your fight for cancer. I vow to take you and Sarah to Thailand or anywhere else you want to travel. I promise to take care of Sarah if there is ever a day when you cannot. I promise to take you girls to church and pray with you at night. I vow to love you, which is the easiest

thing in the world, I have been doing it almost my entire life. I promise to never give up on us,” I finished my vows and folded the paper back into my pocket. Allie wiped her eyes before beginning her own speech of promises.

“Ryan, where do I even begin? I think I should start on the first day I met you, when you jumped right over me on campus trying to get to your test. When you looked back at me, calling your apologies over your shoulder I was immediately captivated by you. I sent up a prayer that our paths would cross again, and sure enough I saw you a few weeks later. After that night, we were pretty much inseparable for the rest of our time at UT. I will always love this city because of you. I cherish every memory we made during those years. From our time at the lakehouse catching fish, to all of our movie nights in our apartment. After those amazing years together, our paths went separate ways, but I always held onto you in my heart. A very dear person in my life once told me that we get three great loves during our time here on earth, but for me it’s only ever been you. So my vows to you, Ryan, are this; I vow to be honest with you. I haven’t been great at that in the past, but you can be sure from now on you will get all of my ugly truths. I vow to love you. I vow to share my popcorn with you. I vow to take each day as it comes to us and live it to

the fullest. For the past year I have been obsessed with my own mortality. I have been worried about dying and leaving behind Sarah. I was so focused on death that I forgot how to live. Thank you for helping me remember. I vow that I will approach each day that I have left with life. No matter what comes next, I am no longer afraid. I don't feel worthy of your love, but I will accept it anyway because you asked me too and selfishly I want it. I vow to kiss you goodnight and good morning. For as long as I live, I am yours."



Two Years Later

October

## Chapter 44

Sarah

October

What does someone even wear to their mother's funeral? Could a piece of clothing portray the sorrow I felt in her absence? Three days without her. Seventy-two hours of fully engulfing sadness. I had to be strong though, for Dad. He was barely holding it together.

Dad.

Ryan.

My dad.

I had been calling him Dad for a year and a half. It took me a little while to use the word, but once I did it felt so right I had regretted not saying it sooner. We had two perfect

years together. Me, him, and Mom. It was impossible to believe she was gone, the realization kept hitting me right in the gut causing bile to rise in the back of my mouth. I forced myself to hold it together, throwing myself into my painting as I sat on our porch. It was my favorite spot in the world. Mom had planted even more flowers and the effect was breathtaking.

Two years ago, right after the wedding, we traveled to Hawaii for their honeymoon. They brought me along with them, despite my insistence that they should go alone. They both wanted me to be there, so I went. It was the trip of a lifetime. We spent twelve days eating pineapple by the water. I had no idea pineapple could taste that good. When we got back, Mom and I moved into the lakehouse where our days were full and happy. Every night was movie night and every morning was a pancake breakfast. Mom and I would go to the dock and read by the water together in the afternoons if the weather allowed. Sometimes it was too hot for Mom, but she loved to be close to the lake.

Ryan was the glue that held us together. He was home most of the time, never wanting to be away from Mom. He had found a nursing job he could do from home helping an

insurance agency with risk assessment. I had deferred art school to stay at the lakehouse. I wanted every single second of Mom's time that I could get. Mom had stopped pursuing treatments when her cancer was deemed terminal. The doctor said they wouldn't prolong her life, and Mom wanted to spend the rest of her time on earth feeling like herself. She didn't want any more medicine or painful treatments. We had taken one last trip to Thailand last Christmas so she could see Maya and show Ryan Bangkok. She loved Thailand, and she wanted Ryan to see it first hand. We had an amazing time, and Ryan's parents had even come with us. We had packed a lifetime of memories into two years, but it still wasn't enough. I wanted my Mom. I missed her desperately.

“Hey, kid. Are you ready?” Dad asked. He came out to join me on the porch. He wanted my help going through some of Mom's things. We needed to pick out an outfit for her to be buried in and he wanted me to take some things of hers that I wanted to keep. It felt so invasive, going through her personal things, but I knew we needed to do it.

“As I'll ever be,” I replied. I set down my paintbrush and took his hand. He looked so tired, his warm eyes creasing around the corners. I knew he was hurting. Mom was the great

love of his life. I wrapped my arms around him, causing him to stop moving and rest his cheek on the top of my head. We had known her death was coming for a long time, but that did not make it much easier.

“She wouldn’t want us to be sad,” he whispered. I nodded, knowing that if I tried to use words I would crumble. I held onto him like a lifeboat in the middle of a dark sea.

“Come on, the faster we do this the faster it can be over,” he said. He walked toward their bedroom. We started with her closet. I stepped inside and inhaled deeply. It still smelled like her.

“I want all of her t-shirts,” I said as I began to make a pile of all of Mom’s old concert tees.

“All of them?” he asked, “Even the Spice Girls one?”

“Especially the Spice Girls one,” I said, a smile tried to escape my lips. It felt wrong to smile without Mom there. Dad must have noticed the struggle on my face.

“It’s okay to smile. It’s even okay to laugh. She would want you to laugh,” he said.

“I know, it just doesn’t feel right yet,” I said. I kept skimming through her clothes and my hands landed on the

white, flowy silk dress Mom had worn at their weddings. I pulled it off the hanger and held it in my arms.

“Dad, I think we should bury Mom in this,” I said. His eyes filled with tears as he nodded his agreement.

“Also with her mom’s pearls and her dad’s watch,” I said.

“You don’t want to keep the pearls?” he asked. I shook my head no. Before Mom had passed, she had given me her wedding ring. She had told me she did not want it buried underground. She wanted the ring to have the big life it deserved. I told her I would take it if it was okay with Ryan.

“Mom gave me her wedding ring, she wanted me to wear it. But if you want it to be buried with her-” He cut me off with a wave of his hand.

“She is right, you should keep it,” he said. I reached up and grabbed the ring in my palm, the feel of it grounding me. She had given me the ring last week and I had hung it on a chain around my neck. I couldn’t bear to put it on my finger. I walked to the back of Mom’s closet, looking for shoes to go with her white dress. Did she even need shoes to be buried in?

“Do you know what’s in this box?” I asked as I found a small white box behind her shoes.

“It’s not mine,” Ryan said, shrugging, “Open it.” I took the top off of the box and looked at the contents. There were three spiral notebooks inside with a note on top. I recognized the notebooks as the ones Mom was always writing in.

“I think it’s her journals,” I said. I took the box and sat on their bed. Dad came and sat down next to me.

“We can’t read her journals,” he said.

“I know, but this letter on top is addressed to the both of us,” I said. I held up the white envelope. I slipped the piece of paper out and began to read.

*My dearest Sarah and Ryan,*

*So you found my journals, which probably means I’m in heaven right about now. Hi from the sky! Imagine I am waving down to you both from a cloud because I totally am. Now that I have hopefully made you smile, listen up. These journals are my written account of our story. I want you both to read them, together, and add your own thoughts as you go. Write down*

*your own experiences with mine so that the story can be complete from all of our perspectives. I have left plenty of room throughout for your thoughts, dreams, and experiences. I want you both to move on with your lives and be happy and fulfilled in every way, but first do this for me. I want you to read my words and know how much you both have shaped me into the person I am (or was, haha). At the end of my life, I am okay to leave because you both gave me the best years anyone could ever ask for. I feel complete. I am ready. My hope and my request is that every Christmas you both will sit down together and read our story. I hope that when you have little babies, Sarah, that you will tell them about me through our journals. I know you both are probably missing me, but please lean on each other. Ryan, I love you babe. Please don't turn into a sad, grumpy old man. Get you a hot young girlfriend or something. You have my complete permission and I promise I won't haunt her or anything weird like that. Sarah, take care of Dad but also let him take care of you. Sometimes you try to be too strong, let others pick you up, baby girl. Read my story. Read our story. I love you both so much it physically hurts. Thank you both for being mine, for letting me borrow your hearts for all of this time. I give them back to you now so that you can go live big and wonderful lives.*



*Always and forever, Mom*

I tried to keep my tears off of the page as I read Mom's words. Dad sat next to me, silently sobbing and laughing as he read the letter.

"So I guess we better do what she asked," Dad said.

"She's still bossing us around from the grave," I joked. He smiled and gave me a hug.

"You go get some pens, I will go grab some snacks and meet me back here," I said.

"You want to do this now?" he asked.

"I need to do it now, Dad," I said softly.

"Okay, then let's do it. We have a few hours before we need to take this stuff to the funeral home," he said.

"Popcorn and M&M's?" I asked Dad.

"Obviously," he said. I left the room to go find pens. I followed behind him, making my way to the kitchen. Mom's hospice nurses had been sure to stock the kitchen with our favorite treats before they left for the last time. The house had been so quiet without their presence and the ever beeping

machines Mom needed overnight toward the end. I popped a bag of kettle corn and grabbed one of the many bags of candy and poured them into the bowl with the salty treat. I made my way back to my parents bedroom where Dad was sitting on the bed waiting for me. He clicked the pen and smiled up at me.

“Let’s tell our story.”

## Epilogue

8 years later

December 25

Ryan

I closed the notebook that contained our words. The story never got old. Sarah's children clapped at the end, as they always did. Sarah and I cried at the end, as we always did. I looked over at my beautiful daughter, her long strawberry-blond hair the same as my late wife. I had never been able to bring myself to remarry. I know Allie wanted me to, but I just couldn't bring myself to love another woman. However, I was not lonely. Duke passed away a few years ago,

but shortly after his loss I became a foster parent for dogs waiting for homes. I had up to five dogs at once, keeping me busy and happy.

Sarah has her own art studio in Austin. Her husband, who she met through my parents oddly enough, is a physician that works locally. I was so relieved when she wanted to stay in Austin to be near me. She is my entire world. Well, her and her babies. She has Olive, who is five now and is her mothers spitting image. And the twins, Oscar and Otto, are almost four. The twins were born on Allie's birthday, something I know was heavily organized by their grandma. Sarah has her hands full, but I babysit every single day while the both of them work, and I wouldn't have it any other way. My life is full. I miss Allie everyday, but our time together was magic.

"Dad, let me go put the kids to bed so I can beat you in monopoly," Sarah said with a mischievous grin on her beautiful face.

"Now Sarah, you know I'm going to win," Jason said, entering the room with his two girls. They had grown into beautiful young ladies, and they visited often. There had even been talks of all of them moving back to Texas when Jason retired.

“Let me go check on Mom and Dad and then you both better be ready to lose,” I said, going to check on my parents in the kitchen. They are moving a little slower these days, but they are still in good health. Our relationship has been rock solid since the day I stepped foot back into Texas.

“We have the wine,” Dad said, taking Mom’s hand.

“Great, sounds perfect. You two up for a game of monopoly before Santa comes?” I asked.

“What are we putting together this year?” Dad asked.

“A huge doll house for Olive and little tricycles for the boys,” I laughed.

“Ho, ho, ho,” he deadpanned.

We all made our way to the living room, crowding around the Christmas tree. Allie would love this tree. Christmas always made me miss her more. We settled in with our wine and board games, Christmas carols playing softly in the background.

“Merry Christmas, Allie cat,” I whispered, looking up toward the ceiling. Sarah came to sit beside me and took my hand in hers.

“Merry Christmas, Daddy,” she said, giving me her huge smile. I looked down at her left hand where the sapphire ring sat. A single tear dripped down my cheek, but my smile was happy and true.

“Merry Christmas, baby girl.”

## About the Author

Thank you for reading my first novel! I'm Hailey Lisle and this book was my passion project. For a living, I am a registered nurse specializing in geriatric care on a medical/surgical unit. The idea for my novel came to me while I was at work giving a blood transfusion. I read the little green heart on the blood bag that said *Thank Your Donor* and it made me think about the potential connections between the giver and recipient of blood. Two years later, I completed the novel. I have no formal training as a novelist, but I read constantly. Reading is my passion. My other passions include, my fireman husband, my amazing three children, sewing, and hosting a monthly book club. I watch zero television, with the exception of sports. I love baseball, football, and most importantly,

basketball (go Mavs!) Thank you for reading my book, I hope you enjoyed getting to know Ryan, Allie and Sarah.

