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a novel

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# Part One

## PROLOGUE

**Auburn**

**I** pass through the hospital doors knowing it'll be the last time.

On the elevator, I press the number three, watching it illuminate for the last time.

The doors open to the third floor and I smile at the nurse on duty, watching her expression as she pities me for the last time.

I pass the supply room and the chapel and the employee break room, all for the last time.

I continue down the hallway and keep my gaze forward and my heart brave as I tap lightly on his door, waiting to hear Adam invite me in for the very last time.

“Come in.” His voice is somehow still filled with hope, and I have no idea how.

He’s on his bed, lying on his back. When he sees me, he comforts me with his smile and lifts the blanket, inviting me to join him. The rail is already lowered, so I climb in beside him, wrap my arm over his chest, and lock our legs together. I bury my face into his neck, searching for his warmth, but I can’t find it.

He’s cold today.

He adjusts himself until we’re in our usual position with his left arm under me and his right arm over me, pulling me to him. It takes him a little more time to get comfortable than it usually does, and I notice his breathing increase with each small movement he makes.

I try not to notice these things, but it’s hard. I’m aware of his increased weakness, his slightly paler skin, the frailty in his voice. Every day during my allotted time with him, I can see that he’s slipping further away from me and there’s nothing I can do about it. Nothing anyone can do but watch it happen.

We’ve known for six months that it would end this way. Of course we all prayed for a miracle, but this isn’t the kind of miracle that happens in real life.

My eyes close when Adam’s chilled lips meet my forehead. I’ve told myself I’m not going to cry. I know that’s impossible, but I can at least do everything I can to forestall the tears.

“I’m so sad,” he whispers.

His words are so out of line with his usual positivity, but it comforts me. Of course I don’t want him to be sad, but I need him to be sad with me right now. “Me too.”

Our visits over the last few weeks have mostly been filled with a lot of laughter and conversation, no matter how forced.

I don’t want this visit to be any different, but knowing it’s our last makes it impossible to find anything to laugh about. Or talk about. I just want to cry with him and scream about how unfair this is for us, but that would tarnish this memory.

When the doctors in Portland said there was nothing more they could do for him, his parents decided to transfer him to a hospital in Dallas. Not because they were hoping for a miracle, but because their entire family lives in Texas, and they thought it would be better if he could be near his brother and everyone else who loved him. Adam had moved to Portland with his parents just two months before we began dating a year ago.

The only way Adam would agree to return to Texas was if they allowed me to come, too. It was a battle finally getting both sets of parents to agree, but Adam argued that he was the one dying, and he should be allowed to dictate who he’s with and what happens when that time comes.

It’s been five weeks now since I came to Dallas, and the two of us have run out of sympathy from both sets of parents. I was told I have to return to Portland immediately or my parents will be slapped with truancy charges. If it weren’t for that, his parents might have let me stay, but the last thing my parents need right now is legal issues.

My flight is today, and we’ve exhausted all other ideas for how I can convince them that I don’t need to be on that flight. I didn’t tell Adam this and I won’t, but last night after more pleas from me, his mother, Lydia, finally voiced her true opinion on the matter.

“You’re fifteen, Auburn. You think what you feel for him is real, but you’ll be over him in a month. Those of us who have loved him since the day he was born will have to suffer with

his loss until the day we die. Those are the people he needs to be with right now.”

It’s a strange feeling when you know at fifteen that you just lived through the harshest words you’ll ever hear. I didn’t even know what to say to her. How can a fifteen-year-old girl defend her love when that love is dismissed by everyone? It’s impossible to defend yourself against inexperience and age. And maybe they’re right. Maybe we don’t know love like an adult knows love, but we sure as hell feel it. And right now, it feels imminently heartbreaking.

“How long before your flight?” Adam asks as his fingers delicately trace slow circles down my arm for the last time.

“Two hours. Your mother and Trey are downstairs waiting for me. She says we need to leave in ten minutes in order to make it on time.”

“Ten minutes,” he repeats softly. “That’s not enough time to share with you all the profound wisdom I’ve accrued while on my deathbed. I’ll need at least fifteen. Twenty, tops.”

I laugh what is probably the most pathetic, sad laugh to ever leave my mouth. We both hear the despair in it and he holds me tighter, but not much tighter. He has very little strength even compared to yesterday. His hand soothes my head and he presses his lips into my hair. “I want to thank you, Auburn,” he says quietly. “For so many things. But first, I want to thank you for being just as pissed off as I am.”

Again, I laugh. He always has jokes, even when he knows they’re his last.

“You have to be more specific, Adam, because I’m pissed off about a whole hell of a lot right now.”

He loosens his grip from around me and makes a tremendous effort to roll toward me so that we’re facing each other.

One could argue that his eyes are hazel, but they aren’t. They are layers of greens and browns, touching but never blending, creating the most intense, defined pair of eyes that have ever looked in my direction. Eyes that were once the brightest part of him but are now too defeated by an untimely fate that is slowly draining the color right out of them.

“I’m referring specifically to how we’re both so pissed at Death for being such a greedy bastard. But I guess I’m also referring to our parents, for not understanding this. For not allowing me to have the one and only thing I want here with me.”

He’s right. I’m definitely pissed about both of those things. But we’ve been over it enough times in the last few days to know that we lost and they won. Right now I just want to focus on him and soak up every last ounce of his presence while I still have it.

“You said you have so many things to thank me for. What’s the next one?”

He smiles and brings his hand up to my face. His thumb brushes over my lips and it feels as if my heart lunges toward him in a desperate attempt to remain here while my empty shell is forced to fly back to Portland. “I want to thank you for letting me be your first,” he says. “And for being mine.”

His smile briefly transforms him from a sixteen-year-old boy on his deathbed into a handsome, vibrant, full-of-life teenage boy who is thinking about the first time he had sex.

His words, and his own reaction to his words, force an embarrassed smile to cross my face as I think back to that night. It was before we knew he would be moving back to Texas. We knew his prognosis at that point and we were still trying to accept it. We spent an entire evening discussing all the things

we could have experienced together if we had a possibility of forever. Traveling, marriage, kids (including what we would have named them), all the places we would have lived, and of course, sex.

We predicted that we would have had a phenomenal sex life, if given the chance. Our sex life would have been the envy of all our friends. We would have made love every morning before we left for work and every night before we went to bed and sometimes in between.

We laughed about it, but the conversation soon grew quiet as we both realized that this was the one aspect of our relationship that we still had control over. Everything else about the future, we had no voice in, but we could possibly have this one private thing that death could never take from us.

We didn't even discuss it. We didn't have to. As soon as he looked at me and I saw my own thoughts mirrored in his eyes, we began kissing and we didn't stop. We kissed while we undressed, we kissed while we touched, we kissed while we cried. We kissed until we were finished, and even then, we continued to kiss in celebration of the fact that we had won this one small battle against life and death and time. And we were still kissing when he held me afterward and told me he loved me.

Just like he's holding and kissing me now.

His hand is touching my neck and his lips are parting mine in what feels like the somber opening of a good-bye letter.

"Auburn," his lips are whispering against mine. "I love you so much."

I can taste my tears in our kiss and I hate that I'm ruining our good-bye with my weakness. He pulls away from my mouth and presses his forehead against mine. I'm struggling for more air than I even need, but my panic is setting in, bury-

ing itself in my soul and making it hard to think. The sadness feels like warmth creeping its way up my chest, creating an insurmountable pressure the closer it gets to my heart.

"Tell me something about yourself that no one else knows." His voice is laced with his own tears as he looks down at me. "Something I can keep for myself."

He asks this of me every day and every day I tell him something I've never said out loud before. I think it comforts him, knowing things about me that no one else will ever know. I close my eyes and think while his hands continue to run across all the areas of my skin he can reach.

"I've never told anyone what goes through my head when I fall asleep at night."

His hand pauses on my shoulder. "What goes through your head?"

I open my eyes and look back into his. "I think about all the people I wish could die instead of you."

He doesn't respond at first, but eventually his hand resumes its movements, tracing down my arm until he reaches my fingers. He slides his hand over mine. "I bet you don't get very far."

I force a soft smile and shake my head. "I do, though. I get really far. Sometimes I say every name I know, so I start saying names of people I've never met in person before. I even make up names sometimes."

Adam knows I don't mean what I'm saying, but it makes him feel good to hear it. His thumb swipes away tears from my cheek and it makes me angry that I couldn't even wait a whole ten minutes before crying.

"I'm sorry, Adam. I tried really hard not to cry."

His eyes grow soft with his response. "If you would have

walked out of this room today without crying, it would have devastated me.”

I stop fighting it with those words. I fist his shirt in my hands and begin to sob against his chest while he holds me. Through my tears, I try to listen to his heart, wanting to curse his whole body for being so unheroic.

“I love you so much.” His voice is breathless and full of fear. “I’ll love you forever. Even when I can’t.”

My tears fall harder at his words. “And I’ll love you forever. Even when I shouldn’t.”

We cling to one another as we experience a sadness so excruciating, it makes it hard to want to live beyond it. I tell him I love him because I need him to know. I tell him I love him again. I keep saying it, more times than I’ve ever said it out loud. Every time I say it, he tells me right back. We say it so much that I’m not sure who’s repeating who now, but we keep saying it, over and over, until his brother, Trey, touches my arm and tells me it’s time to go.

We’re still saying it as we kiss for the last time.

We’re still saying it as we hold on to each other.

We’re still saying it as we kiss for the last time again.

I’m still saying it . . .

## CHAPTER ONE

# Auburn

I squirm in my chair as soon as he tells me his hourly rate. There’s no way I can afford this with my income.

“Do you work on a sliding-scale basis?” I ask him.

The wrinkles around his mouth become more prominent as he attempts to keep from frowning. He folds his arms over the mahogany desk and clasps his hands together, pressing the pads of his thumbs against one other.

“Auburn, what you’re asking me to do is going to cost money.”

No shit.

He leans back in his chair, pulling his hands to his chest

and resting them on his stomach. “Lawyers are like weddings. You get what you pay for.”

I fail to tell him what a horrible analogy that is. Instead, I glance down at the business card in my hand. He came highly recommended and I knew it was going to be expensive, but I had no idea it would be this expensive. I’ll need a second job. Maybe even a third one. Actually, I’m going to have to rob a damn bank.

“And there’s no guarantee the judge will rule in my favor?”

“The only promise I can make is that I’ll do everything I can to ensure the judge does rule in your favor. According to the paperwork that was filed back in Portland, you’ve put yourself in a tough spot. This will take time.”

“All I have is time,” I mumble. “I’ll be back as soon as I get my first paycheck.”

He has me set up an appointment through his secretary and then sends me on my way, back out into the Texas heat.

I’ve been living here all of three weeks and so far it’s everything I thought it would be: hot, humid, and lonely.

I grew up in Portland, Oregon, and assumed I would spend the rest of my life there. I visited Texas once when I was fifteen and although that trip wasn’t a pleasant one, I wouldn’t take back a single second of it. Unlike now, when I’d do anything to get back to Portland.

I pull my sunglasses down over my eyes and begin heading in the direction of my apartment. Living in downtown Dallas is nothing like living in downtown Portland. At least in Portland, I had access to almost everything the city had to offer, all within a decent walk. Dallas is spread out and expansive, and did I mention the heat? It’s so hot. And I had to sell my car in order to afford the move, so I have the choice between public trans-

portation and my feet, considering I’m now penny-pinching in order to be able to afford the lawyer I just met with.

I can’t believe it’s come to this. I haven’t even built up a clientele at the salon I’m working at, so I’m definitely going to have to look for a second job. I just have no idea when I’ll find time to fit it in, thanks to Lydia’s erratic scheduling.

Speaking of Lydia.

I dial her number and hit send and wait for her to pick up on the other end. After it goes to voice mail, I debate whether to leave a message or just call back later tonight. I’m sure she just deletes her messages, anyway, so I end the call and drop the phone into my purse. I can feel the flush rising up my neck and cheeks and the familiar sting in my eyes. It’s the thirteenth time I’ve walked home in my new state, in a city inhabited by nothing but strangers, but I’m determined to make it the first time I’m not crying when I reach my front door. My neighbors probably think I’m psychotic.

It’s just such a long walk from work to home, and long walks make me contemplate my life, and my life makes me cry.

I pause and look into the glass window of one of the buildings to check for smeared mascara. I take in my reflection and don’t like what I see.

A girl who hates the choices she’s made in her life.

A girl who hates her career.

A girl who misses Portland.

A girl who desperately needs a second job, and now a girl who is reading the HELP WANTED sign she just noticed in the window.

**Help Wanted.**

**Knock to apply.**

I take a step back and assess the building I'm standing in front of; I've passed by it every day on my commute and I've never noticed it. Probably because I spend my mornings on the phone and my afternoon walks with too many tears in my eyes to notice my surroundings.

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That's all the sign says. The name leads me to believe it might be a church, but that thought is quickly dismissed when I take a closer look at the glass windows lining the front of the building. They are covered with small scraps of paper in various shapes and sizes, concealing views into the building, removing any hope of taking a peek inside. The scraps of paper are all marked with words and phrases, written in different handwriting. I take a step closer and read a few of them.

*Every day I'm grateful that my husband and his brother look exactly alike. It means there's less of a chance that my husband will find out that our son isn't his.*

I clutch my hand to my heart. What the hell is this? I read another.

*I haven't spoken to my children in four months. They'll call on holidays and my birthday, but never in between. I don't blame them. I was a horrible father.*

I read another.

*I lied on my résumé. I don't have a degree. In the five years I've been working for my employer, no one has ever asked to see it.*

My mouth is agape and my eyes are wide as I stand and read all the confessions my eyes can reach. I still have no idea what this building is or what I even think about all these things being plastered up for the world to see, but reading them somehow gives me a sense of normalcy. If these are all true, then maybe my life isn't quite as bad as I think it is.

After no less than fifteen minutes, I've made it to the second window, having read most of the confessions to the right of the door, when it begins to swing open. I take a step back to avoid being hit, while I simultaneously fight the intense urge to step around the door and get a peek inside the building.

A hand reaches out and yanks down the HELP WANTED sign. I can hear a marker sliding across the vinyl sign as I remain poised behind the door. Wanting to get a better look at whoever or whatever this place is, I begin to step around the door just as the hand slaps the HELP WANTED sign back onto the window.

**Help Wanted.**

**Knock to apply.**

**DESPERATELY NEEDED!!**

**BEAT ON THE DAMN DOOR!!**

I laugh when I read the alterations made to the sign. Maybe this is fate. I desperately need a second job and whoever this is desperately needs help.

The door then opens further, and I'm suddenly under the scrutiny of eyes that I guarantee are more shades of green than I could find on his paint-splattered shirt. His hair is black and thick and he uses both hands to push it off his forehead, revealing even more of his face. His eyes are wide and full of anxiety at first, but after taking me in, he lets out a sigh. It's almost as if he's acknowledging that I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be and he's relieved I'm finally here.

He stares at me with a concentrated expression for several seconds. I shift on my feet and glance away. Not because I'm uncomfortable, but because the way he stares at me is oddly comforting. It's probably the first time I've felt welcome since I've been back in Texas.

"Are you here to save me?" he asks, pulling my attention back to his eyes. He's smiling, holding the door open with his elbow. He assesses me from head to toe and I can't help but wonder what he's thinking.

I glance at the HELP WANTED sign and run through a million scenarios of what could happen if I answer his question with a yes and follow him inside this building.

The worst scenario I can come up with is one that would end with my murder. Sadly, that's not enough of a deterrent, considering the month I've had.

"Are you the one hiring?" I ask him.

"If you're the one applying."

His voice is overtly friendly. I'm not used to overt friendliness, and I don't know what to do with it.

"I have a few questions before I agree to help you," I say, proud of myself for not being so willingly killable.

He grabs the HELP WANTED sign and pulls it away from the window. He tosses it inside the building and presses his

back against the door, pushing it open as far as it will reach, motioning for me to come inside. "We don't really have time for questions, but I promise I won't torture, rape, or kill you if that helps."

His voice is still pleasant, despite his phrase of choice. So is that smile that shows off two rows of almost perfect teeth and a slightly crooked front left incisor. But that little flaw in his smile is actually my favorite part of him. That and his complete disregard for my questions. I hate questions. This might not be such a bad gig.

I sigh and slip past him, making my way inside the building. "What am I getting myself into?" I mutter.

"Something you won't want to get out of," he says. The door closes behind us, blocking off all the natural lighting in the room. That wouldn't be a bad thing if there were interior lights on, but there aren't. Only a faint glow coming from what looks like a hallway on the other side of the room.

As soon as the beat of my heart begins to inform me of how stupid I am for walking into a building with a complete stranger, the lights begin to buzz and flicker to life.

"Sorry." His voice is close, so I spin around just as the first of the fluorescent lights reach their full power. "I don't usually work in this part of the studio, so I keep the lights off to save energy."

Now that the entire area is illuminated, I slowly scan the room. The walls are a stark white, adorned with various paintings. I can't get a good look at them, because they're all spread out, several feet away from me. "Is this an art gallery?"

He laughs, which I find unusual, so I spin around to face him.

He's watching me with narrowed, curious eyes. "I wouldn't

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back

go so far as to call it an art gallery.” He turns and locks the front door and then walks past me. “What size are you?”

He makes his way across the expansive room, toward the hallway. I still don’t know why I’m here, but the fact that he’s asking me what size I am has me a little more concerned than I was just two minutes ago. Is he wondering what size coffin I’ll fit in? How to size the handcuffs?

Okay, I’m a lot concerned.

“What do you mean? Like as in my clothing size?”

He faces me and walks backward, still heading in the direction of the hallway. “Yes, your clothing size. You can’t wear that tonight,” he says, pointing at my jeans and T-shirt. He motions for me to follow him as he turns to ascend a flight of stairs leading to a room above the one we’re in. I may be a sucker for a cute, crooked incisor, but following strangers into unknown territory is where I should probably draw the line.

“Wait,” I say, stopping at the foot of the stairs. He pauses and turns around. “Can you at least give me a rundown of what’s happening right now? Because I’m starting to second-guess my idiotic decision to place my trust in a complete stranger.”

He glances over his shoulder toward wherever the stairs lead and then back at me. He lets out an exasperated sigh before descending several steps. He takes a seat, coming eye to eye with me. His elbows meet his knees and he leans forward, smiling calmly. “My name is Owen Gentry. I’m an artist and this is my studio. I have a showing in less than an hour, I need someone to handle all the transactions, and my girlfriend broke up with me last week.”

Artist.

Showing.

Less than an hour?

And girlfriend? Not touching that one.

I shift on my feet, glance behind me at the studio once more and then back to him. “Do I get any kind of training?”

“Do you know how to use a basic calculator?”

I roll my eyes. “Yes.”

“Consider yourself trained. I only need you for two hours tops and then I’ll give you your two hundred bucks and you can be on your way.”

Two hours.

Two hundred bucks.

Something isn’t adding up.

“What’s the catch?”

“There’s no catch.”

“Why would you need help if you pay a hundred dollars an hour? There has to be a catch. You should be swarmed with potential applicants.”

Owen runs a palm across the scruff on his jaw, moving it back and forth like he’s attempting to squeeze out the tension. “My girlfriend failed to mention she was also quitting her job the day she broke up with me. I called her when she didn’t show to help me set up two hours ago. It’s kind of a last-minute employment opportunity. Maybe you were just in the right place at the right time.” He stands and turns around. I remain in my spot at the bottom of the stairs.

“You made your girlfriend an employee? That’s never a good idea.”

“I made my employee a girlfriend. An even worse idea.” He pauses at the top of the stairs and turns around, looking down at me. “What’s your name?”

“Auburn.”

His gaze falls to my hair, which is understandable. Every-