

A person is seen from behind, holding a large, multi-colored umbrella. They are standing on a wooden deck or walkway. The background is filled with trees with vibrant autumn foliage in shades of orange, red, and yellow. The person is wearing a dark jacket and light blue denim jeans. The overall mood is romantic and nostalgic.

Grace Ravel

Friends through time
and distance. Will they
ever be more?

Always Never

a short story

ALWAYS NEVER

GRACE RAVEL

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Editing: Anna Snow Breck

Cover Design: Grace Ravel

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DEDICATION

To Anna and Sheri whose patience and love convinced me that I'm (mostly) sane.
That, or they're as certifiable as I am.

KINDERGARTEN

Rowan Oren was a goner at age five. All he did was look into her deep brown eyes, and her pigtails swinging behind her. It didn't matter that she scrunched up her face as if she smelled something bad, she was still the prettiest girl he had ever seen. When she turned to look at him, he could have sworn she gave him a faint smile. Barely, but it was there. He was sure of it. He was glad he showered that day and let his mom comb his unruly, curly hair until it was straight and flat, away from his face.

He found out her name was Bree Pascal, right after his last name. So, it was fate then. They would sit next to each other, even during snack time. Especially at snack time. Rowan's mom packed him a small feast: a sandwich, a yogurt, a banana, and goldfish crackers, his favorite. Bree had a sandwich too but nothing else. She ate it with her head down, and she finished before anyone else. When she was done, she sat still, her back straight, her hands on her lap. At first he thought she was looking at him but her eyes were glued to his food, particularly his goldfish crackers. Without saying a word, Rowan pushed the white and yellow packet beside her. Her shoulders straightened as she moved away from him. Maybe he was wrong. She probably didn't even like goldfish. But after a few minutes, Bree's hand crept to the packet. Rowan, of course, pretended not to notice. She

opened the crackers and set it between them. Rowan picked one goldfish, and she followed, until all the crackers were gone.

When Rowan got home that day, in his backpack was a green paper with a drawing of a purple sun and a red flower. It was the prettiest purple sun he'd ever seen.

Der Rowan, tank yu far shareng yur fissies. Bree.

From that day on, Rowan made sure he had a packet of goldfish crackers in his snacks.

FIRST GRADE

Rowan: Want to come over? I got a new game for my Wii.

Bree: I can't. I've got to help Dad plant veggies.

Rowan: Sounds cool. Can I come over and help?

Bree: Sure.

SECOND GRADE

Bree: Wanna hang out again?

Rowan: Sure. Meet you at your house?

Bree: I like your house better. It's nice and clean. And quiet.

Rowan: Too quiet.

Bree: I know!

Rowan: Your place is fun.

Bree: It's loud. My sisters are a pain.

Rowan: Your sisters are fun.

Bree: You're weird. Come over then. But don't complain of the mess.

Rowan: Never.

THIRD GRADE

He heard her scream but he couldn't see her. Rowan ran toward the sound, pushing through a whirlwind of activity with hundreds of students rushing after the dismissal bell. Within seconds, he spotted her, on the ground while that third grade bully Warren was laughing. Without thinking about it, Rowan pushed him using his entire body. Warren tumbled to the ground, joining Bree, but not for long. Rowan held his hand out to her. Bree grabbed him with a trembling hand but her grip was tight.

"Next time you hurt my best friend, I'll punch you in the face." Rowan yelled at the stunned Warren, his face red, his eyes were hot with anger. He wanted to kick Warren so bad.

"Whatever!" Warren spat out as he struggled to get up. "Your friend is an ugly welfare brat."

"Shut up!" Rowan took a step forward, his fists clenching in front of him, ready to swing.

Bree pulled his arm, dragging him away. "Let's go, Rowe. I don't want us to get in trouble. Hurry." It took a few tugs and the soft pleading sound of his name before he followed Bree. Regret filled him that he didn't punch Warren, but he would regret it even more if he did something Bree didn't want him to do.

They walked to the car line where Rowan's mom waited for him everyday, and lately, they'd been taking Bree home too because her mom had to work a lot of over time.

Before they reached the car line, Bree pulled him to the corner of the school building. There she stood, her back flushed to the wall as if she wanted to disappear into it. Before Rowan could ask her if she was ok, she burst into tears.

He didn't know what to do. Bree wasn't the hugging kind of girl. He learned that the first time he attempted to hug her years ago, when she pushed him away. Instead, he patted her arm. "He won't hurt you again, I promise."

"I'm not crying because of that, you idiot," she said between hiccups. Trust Bree to still sound her brash old self even when she was upset.

"Then why are you crying?" Rowan liked Bree a lot, but sometimes she was weird. Actually, he probably liked her best when she was being weird. His mom said Bree was special, and he agreed.

"Because I'm so mad I let him hurt me. Warren and his friends are so mean. And now they'll tease you too. You shouldn't have done that. I got it." She shoved her shoulder against his. It was the closest Bree would go with physical contact: shoving him with her arm, or shoulder, or tapping his leg with her foot, or poking him with her elbow.

"You were on the ground!"

"I was fine." She stopped crying now, intent on proving she was tough. Rowan didn't doubt she was tough but he wished she would admit she needed help sometimes. They were friends. That was what friends did.

"You weren't."

"Was to."

"Was not."

“Shut up.” *Shut up*, that was what she said whenever she was losing an argument, or agreeing, or conceding. It usually meant Rowan won the argument. So every time she said “shut up,” Rowan did, but he did it with a smile.

“You would have done the same thing,” he mumbled. Picking up her backpack on the ground, he handed it to her without another word.

She pushed herself off the wall, took his hand and waited until his mom’s new Mercedes Benz pulled up to the car line. Rowan would do whatever it took to make sure no one made Bree cry. Ever.

Dear Rowe, You’re my best friend too. Thank for being my bestest friend. Bree.

FOURTH GRADE

Rowan: I’m sorry to hear your dad is sick.

Bree: Thank you.

Rowan: Cancer sucks.

FIFTH GRADE

Bree hated math. She would rather write and read. Reading she could do for hours but numbers gave her a headache, and she was bored. She looked behind her. Rowan was busy writing on his worksheet. Rowan was good at math. In fact, he was good in a lot of things, even sports. Sometimes, she couldn’t believe he was friends with her because he was perfect in everything, while she was too quiet, too moody, too poor, too everything to make any real friends.

She looked at their teacher, occupied with whatever was on her phone. Bree tore a small piece of paper, scrunched it and tossed it to Rowan. It hit him right on the head. Rowan looked up, his eyebrows knitted and his lips pressed together. Bree gave him a small wave. Then his face changed. His frown turned into a smile. She liked how his face always broke into a grin whenever he saw her. But Rowan was also a very serious student so even as he smiled, he put his finger to his lips and pointed with his head toward Ms. Lopez. Bree didn't care. She pushed a note to Jordan, and nodded to pass it along to Rowan.

Are you going to the dance?

Rowan lifted his head toward her, mouthing yes.

Bree wrote another note, ignoring Jordan's annoyed look when Bree passed it to her.

Got a date?

Bree made sure she included a smiley face. But when she received the note back she was ready to scratch that smiley face out.

Yes. Raine. You?

Stupid Raine. With her stupid name, and her stupid red hair, and her stupid dimples. Whatever. It was a stupid dance anyway. She went back to her boring math worksheet without answering his note.

When the bell rang, Bree couldn't wait to leave. She needed to get home soon, and she didn't want to miss her bus. Her dad would be waiting for her, and her sisters would need help with homework. But as she slammed her locker shut, Rowan was leaning on the lockers beside hers with his dimpled grin, and his curly brown hair falling over his face.

“What?” She wasn’t in the mood to deal with Rowan right now. She had ten thousand chores waiting for her at home. Ever since her dad got sick, and her mom had to work longer hours, Bree had to help more around the house. She didn’t mind. She loved her parents. Her siblings could be a pain but she loved them too.

“Well, hello to you too.” He walked down the hall with her, slinging his new backpack over his shoulders. He got it while on vacation in Hawaii. He brought her back a nice blanket with bright flowers. Bree didn’t tell him but she slept with that blanket every night. It was the prettiest thing she had. And it was all hers. Not secondhand or a hand-me-down. Hers. Just like she thought Rowan was.

“I gotta go.”

“We can give you a ride.”

“It’s ok.” She walked faster, fighting the urge to push through the other students who probably didn’t have a pile of laundry waiting for them at home.

“We’ve given you a ride every day this week.” He sounded so reasonable, and so kind. She hated it when he did that, did something nice because it made her feel bad that she wasn’t nice enough to Rowan.

“I know. Your mom must be sick of it,” she mumbled. Sometimes, she wondered why Rowan and his family were so pleasant to her. His mom was always kind. Like Rowan, Mrs. Oren didn’t look at her with pity in her eyes. She treated Bree and her mom like people, not charity cases.

“Nah, she doesn’t mind.” Rowan waved back at a girl as they passed her by. Madison. Bree guessed she now had to add Madison to the Rowan fan club. Madison was a nice,

sweet girl. A little too loud for Bree's taste but she was nice all the time. Unlike Bree. She gave Madison the death glare. Bree didn't like Madison today.

"Still." Bree bit her inner cheek. She didn't know what else to say except she wanted to get rid of Rowan today, and fast.

"Still' what?" He prodded. He was annoyingly, enduringly persistent when he wanted to be. Usually, Bree found it endearing. Not right now.

"Fine." She responded, a little meaner, louder than she wanted but Rowan was aggravating her today.

"Are you mad at me?" Ugh. Not that look. She hated that look. It was his puppy dog look with his light blue eyes, so round and pretty with long eyelashes. When he gave her that look she always felt a funny tickling sensation in her stomach which meant she was going to do or say anything he wanted.

"No, why should I be?" Bree held on her old backpack closer to her, her grip tightening around it.

"Is it because I'm going to the dance with Raine?" Rowan smiled at her, the kind that lit up his face, not the polite ones he gave to grown-ups or strangers.

"It's a dumb dance." Bree wished she could infuse her voice with more conviction, instead it came out in a pathetic whisper.

"Then why did you ask if I was going?"

"I thought you'd rather go to the skate park than dress up for some silly dance." Bree cringed. Even in her ears that was a lame excuse. She just started learning to skate so Rowan knew it wasn't in her top ten things to do, and she only learned because Rowan liked doing it.

“Try asking instead of growling.” His voice was soft and low as he leaned closer to her, giving her his adorable grin.

“Fine. Go to the skate park with me instead. Please.” Bree’s tone didn’t change. She still sounded annoyed but it was quickly melting away, a smile slowly tugging her mouth.

“Ok.” Rowan shrugged as if he really didn’t care about the dance.

“Ok?” She was surprised at how easily he agreed. Poor Raine. She was such a nice girl. Now she had to find someone else to go to the dance with her. Oh, well.

“Of course. You’re my best friend.” With that, Bree poked her elbow on his stomach, her face beaming.

SIXTH GRADE

Rowan: I hate tennis.

Bree: Then quit.

Rowan: Can’t.

Bree: Can.

Rowan: Dad said no.

Bree: Your dad is mean.

Rowan: You have no idea. You’re lucky your dad loves you. But that’s ok I know you love me.

Bree: Cool it there, dude. Don’t go around telling people that. It’ll ruin my reputation.

Rowan: Your sulky, arctic rep, you mean?

Bree: Exactly.

Rowan: That’s the best part of you.

Bree: Shut up.

SEVENTH GRADE

Rowan jumped out of the car even before his mom put the car gear in park. He didn't bother knocking. He pushed the door open, and bounded up the stairs, taking them two at a time. He didn't notice the stunned silence that greeted him when he barged into the clean but dilapidated home, or the teary look from Bree's mom that followed his steps.

When Rowan pushed her bedroom door open, he thought she was asleep. She was facing the window, her body curled into a fetal position. The window was open, the old, faded teddy bear curtains waved in silence against the frigid October winds. When she turned to him, her face almost broke his heart. There was so much pain in those eyes. Too much for someone so young. A sobbed escaped her lips, so loud and so forlorn as if she was holding it all in until he came. For the first time since they were six, Bree allowed Rowan to hug her. And how he hugged her. It was a hug that said he loved her, that she was the best thing in his life, that he was sorry her dad died, that her heart was breaking. It was a hug that made up for all the bad jokes he made, when he teased her, when he wasn't the best friend he could be. It was a hug that made up for the years she didn't allow a hug. It was a hug meant to span the years to come, when he knew in his young mind that he would probably do something stupid to annoy, anger or even hurt her, but never intentionally. It was a hug that tried to carry some of her pain away, even though he knew he wouldn't be able to. It was a hug that tethered her. It was a hug that meant to give her the best part of him—his heart.

When they finally pulled apart, they didn't really. They still circled each other. She laid back down on her bed. Her old mattress sat in the corner of the room, her two sisters shared a bunk bed on the other side of the wall. Rowan didn't let her go. And neither did she. She cried. The cries of a thirteen-year old that just lost a piece of her heart, whose knowledge of the world as fair and good was gone, whose security in her universe was now laid six feet underground. Her father, gone. Forever. Irrevocably. She let out loud, angry, ugly cries. The kind that seared one's soul at any age. The kind that wracked her small, young body. The kind that broke her heart, and his too over and over again. All the while holding on to Rowan. When Bree's mother found them later, asleep, face to face, she covered them with a blanket and closed the window, glad that her daughter had a friend who cared deeply for her.

Rowan: I'm here. Forever. Always.

Bree: Don't ever leave me.

Rowe: Never.

EIGHT GRADE

Rowan: How do you like the new cellphone?

Bree: Lovely. Another reminder of the inadequacy of my social life.

Rowan: How's that?

Bree: I have two speed dials. You and my mom. Oh, three. Pizza Hut.

Rowan: You've got all the ones that matters. Plus you're on the top of my list.

Bree: Well, that's something. And more evidence why high school's gonna suck.

Rowan: It'll be fun.

Bree: Easy for you to say, Mr. Popularity.

Rowan: I can't help it if your best friend is the shit.

Bree: Gag me.

Rowan: Please. You love me.

Bree: Always. But you better not turn into an asshole jock.

Rowan: As if you'd let me.

Bree: Never.

NINTH GRADE

Bree: I can't sleep.

Rowan: You want me to come over? We can watch Scrubs.

Bree: Ugh! Too upbeat. And JD's annoying.

Rowan: Six Feet Under?

Bree: Yes!

Rowan: You're so weird.

Bree: You dig it.

Rowan: Always.

Bree: Never stop being my friend.

Rowan: Never.

TENTH GRADE

"What the fuck did Logan want?" Rowan bristled, kicking the grass as they walked toward the lacrosse field. He practiced almost every day. Bree half watched, half did her

homework, until Rowan was done. Then, he would either drive her home or to her part time job at a local grocery store.

“Your team captain Logan? The guy that can make your life miserable for the next year if you don’t make nice? That Logan?” Bree smiled at him from the side, ignoring his angry rant. More than anything her response made Rowan angrier. As if he should be thankful to her that she was being nice to Logan. Well, he wasn’t. He could handle Logan. He’s bossy but not an all-out asshole.

“Yes, that guy.” He kicked the grass again. It was either the grass or Logan’s ass. There were plenty of girls in their school. The guy had no respect for boundaries. Bree was off limits. She was, well...she was Rowan’s best friend. Like a sister. It was a guy code. You didn’t mess around with sisters, girlfriends, and well, best friends like Bree.

“He wants to get matching tattoos, then go to the top of the Empire State building where we can get married at sunset and have a ton of babies.” She let out a husky laugh, clearly amused at her own joke but Rowan wasn’t. “He wants to see a movie,” she finally said when his glare stayed in place. She sat on the bleachers, and took her books out. Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea that she watched almost all their practices. Logan was probably getting the wrong idea about her.

“Like a date?” He enunciated the last word, grossed out at the idea that Bree would actually consider going out with Logan. He wasn’t even that good looking, or smart. The only thing he had going for him was that he was a great athlete. Surely, Bree wouldn’t fall for that kind of guy.

“I guess, like a date.” Bree shrugged. How could she be so apathetic about going out with a much older guy (he was a senior, after all) who probably would want more than just a kiss from her at the end of the date.

“What did you say?”

“I said ok since clearly matching tattoos was a little too much for a first date. Plus, you didn’t want to watch *The Pianist*.”

“I said yes!” He couldn’t help it, his voice rose. When Bree gave him a withering look, he mouthed a quiet sorry. But he was still pissed off. Bree had asked him repeatedly to watch that movie with her, until he relented. He wasn’t looking forward to it but he was going to go because of her. Now, she was ditching him for Logan.

“I had to bug you.”

“But I said yes.”

“Well, I didn’t have to bug Logan.” She opened her notebook, dismissing him. She could be such a pain in the ass sometimes. If they weren’t friends since they were kids, he wouldn’t put up with her quirks. He often found them endearing, the little things about her that bothered people, like the way she didn’t seem to care what people thought of her, or her tendency to be a loner, and quiet. She really wasn’t like that. She was shy so she didn’t make friends easily. She was too busy with school, work and taking care of her family to do the silly things girls did at their age, or to be preoccupied with shallow stuff. Rowan liked that she wasn’t silly or frivolous, that she was level-headed, and responsible. But right now, Rowan was having a hard time liking anything about her. Not her clear, bright eyes, or her husky laughter, or her kind, nurturing ways, or her wicked sense of humor. None of those. He was beyond annoyed with her.

“You can’t tell me you’ll watch a movie with me, then ditch me for someone else.”

“I didn’t ditch you. I’ll watch it again with you.” She released an exasperated sigh. Rowan could have sworn she rolled her eyes but Bree wasn’t the kind of girl who rolled her eyes. Instead, she looked at you straight with those cold eyes, as if she was trying to pierce through your soul. When she gave him that look, he could swear she was a witch, trying to possess him with one look, bending him to her will because it invariably led to him doing whatever it was she wanted.

“Like I’d want to watch it with you, like a pity date.” He hated that he sounded eight but he was angry. Angry at her. And angry at Logan.

“You’re annoying.” She moved her body, angling it so her back was half turned to him while he stood beside the bleachers. Practice was going to start soon and he was growing desperate. Desperate for what, and how, he wasn’t sure but he couldn’t leave this conversation like this.

“You’re not even allowed to date until you’re sixteen.”

“I’ll be sixteen in two weeks. That’s soon enough.”

“Not quite.”

“Quit being an ass.”

“So, are you going to watch *The Pianist* with me or not?” He’d had enough. She had to choose. For a moment his heart stopped because she chewed on her inner cheek like she usually did when she was thinking. But when she turned to him, her eyes were soft and warm again.

“I will. I’ll have to tell Logan we’ll watch something else.” Although not completely satisfied with her response, it would have to do.

Rowan jogged to where his teammates were standing, waiting for practice to start. Logan waved at Bree, and when Rowan saw the smile on her face as she returned the wave, he felt like an ass. Why did she put up with him when she can have Logan, the team captain?

Rowan: I'm sorry I was an ass. We can watch something else. I'm sure you and Logan will enjoy The Pianist.

Bree: We're good?

Rowan: Always.

Bree: You're not mad at me?

Rowan: Never.

Bree: I love you, bestie.

Rowan: Back at you.

Rowan stared at the note, hating that he couldn't say the words back as easily as she said them. They hang heavy in his chest, sitting there like a lump. He couldn't say it to her. Not right now, not like this. Maybe someday. Or maybe never.

He couldn't help himself, Rowan had to ask how the date was. Even though he didn't want to know, not knowing would be worse. "How was movie with Logan?"

"It was fine." She popped a goldfish cracker in her mouth, they consumed the last of their school lunch a long time ago.

"Fine, like how?"

“Like he-shared-his-popcorn fine.” She smirked at him, knowing his propensity to buy two large tubs of popcorn, one for each of them because he refused to share.

“I share my popcorn.” In his defense, he did if he really had to. But why share when one could buy two or more?

“And he-didn’t-get-sugared-up-with-soda-and-candy fine.”

“You like Skittles.” Rowan wanted to add she usually ate half of them, choosing all the good flavors too.

“And he-actually-watched-the-trailers-rather-than-talking-through-them fine.” Her smile widened as she kept describing the date. It must have been a hell of a date if she looked happy as a cat.

“You laugh at my made-up dialogues and commentaries on the trailers.” Sure, sometimes she would elbow him to shut up when she wanted to see a particular trailer but she rarely acted annoyed, if at all. In fact, she participated in some of them.

“And he-walked-me-to-my-door fine.” He was growing irritated in direct proportion to her grin. This conversation wasn’t going well at all.

“You always jump out of the car when I drop you off without waiting for me.” Who was this version of Bree? She would kick him if he as much tried to open the car door for her, and now she was waxing poetic because some boy walked her to her front door, like she would get lost if he didn’t? He clenched his fist in front of him, fighting the urge to grab and finish the rest of the goldfish crackers just to spite her but he didn’t, especially when she looked this happy, her smile wide and unburdened. He braced himself, wanting to kick himself for even asking but he couldn’t help it. “So a second date, then?”

“Hmm....” She finished the rest of the crackers, filling her mouth, as she tugged her ponytail. Her response a frustratingly non-response. Bree could be secretive but never with him. Was this the beginning of the end for them?

Still Rowan couldn't leave it alone. He needed to get his ass out of his head and be a good friend. Whatever confused feelings he had for Bree, he had to set them aside. He wanted to stay in Bree's life in whatever capacity. If he kept acting like an ass, he wouldn't be in her life for long. She had low tolerance for drama or negativity.

Rowan: I'm glad you had a nice time with Logan.

Bree: You want to know how the date really went?

Rowan: It sounded like you had fun.

Bree: Not quite. He gave me a look when I ordered the super-size popcorn. He said we could share his small one.

Rowan: No!

Bree: It gets worse. He shushed me when I talked during the trailers. Who pays attention to commercials?

Rowan: Not us.

Bree: Nope. Not us. Topping on the cake? He snored in the middle of the movie. The only thing that kept me on my seat was the thought that he could make your life difficult if I left him sleeping in the middle of the theater. So you owe me, buddy.

Rowan: You want to watch The Pianist again? This time with no snoring?

Bree: Nah, you're right, it was a depressing ass movie. Spiderman?

Rowan: You're on.

Bree: You need to save me from myself.

Rowan: Always.

Bree: And never ever let me go out on a date again with Logan or someone insanely boring.

Rowan: Never.

ELEVENTH GRADE

Bree: What's with you and Madison?

Rowan: Nothing.

Bree: You going to the prom with her?

Rowan: No.

Bree: I heard she asked.

Rowan: I told her no.

Bree: Why not? She's pretty.

Rowan: You're prettier.

Bree: Shut up.

TWELFTH GRADE

“So, are we going camping again this year instead of the prom?” They didn’t go to the prom last year, instead they went up to the mountains for a short camping trip, dragging Bree’s sisters with them. They whined the entire way but in the end, they all had fun between the campfires and the hiking.

“Hmmm....don’t know. Mom thinks I need to have normal teenage experiences.”

Bree stretched, groaning as she moved from her cross-legged and hunched position over Rowan’s laptop. Books, notes and papers scattered all over his bedroom. She flexed her legs in front of her, pushing books with her feet to make room on the cramped bed.

“Did you tell your mom that ship has sailed?” He ducked his head when he saw the blue pillow in the air, landing on his desk behind him. He laughed tossing back the pillow to her. She caught it and placed it behind her, resting her back on it.

“She likes to think she didn’t completely fail in raising a conventional daughter.” Bree had that look on her face, the one that told him she was trying to come to terms with doing something she really didn’t want to do. He wanted Bree to go to the prom. He agreed with Mrs. P. Bree worked so hard between school, and her job, she often acted like someone ten years older. She needed to be a teenager once in a while.

“So, prom then?” Rowan prodded gently, hoping he didn’t have to push too hard. If there was one thing guaranteed to not make Bree do something, it was to tell her she had to do it.

“Ugh!” She plopped into his pillows, putting one over her face, muffling her frustrated scream.

“Yes?” He leaned from his chair, pulling the pillow off her face.

“Yes. As long as we go together. And no dancing, please.”

“Oh, I don’t know. Might be a good time to pull my moves to Yeah. Channel my inner Usher.”

“I will leave you.” She threatened with a smile.

“Never.”

"You're right. Never."

Rowe, thank you for giving me my one normal high school experience. It was fun. Love, Bree P.S. I'm glad you didn't pull your Usher moves. Thank you for not humiliating both of us.

FRESHMAN

Bree: You coming home for the holidays, right?

Rowan: You bet. I can't wait.

Bree: How's Ivy League college, hot shot?"

Rowan: Better with you.

Bree: I feel bad for you. Community college, living at home is so much fun. Really.

Rowan: Don't have too much fun without me.

Bree: Never. Don't forget me.

Rowan: Never.

SOPHOMORE

Bree worked overtime for two weeks straight. She wrote notes to her teachers. She finished her assigned coursework early. She asked for work in advance. She worked like the devil was on her tail. Sleep became optional. She drank a copious amount of coffee. And with her budget, all of it was the instant kind that she swore left her with a gaping ulcer in her stomach lining. It took five hours of chugging along the freeway in her car that was older than dirt but when she finally arrived, it was worth it. His smile when he opened the door wiped all the miserable hours of work and toil. There was no other word for it, she stumbled in his arms. He buried his face against her hair inhaling her scent. She buried her

face against his chest. She didn't know if she wanted to cry or laugh. All she knew was she missed him so much, and she didn't want to let go of him ever.

When they finally pulled apart, Rowan pulled them inside his apartment, his arm still around her shoulder. "What are you doing here?"

"Being awesome." She smiled at him through her tears. So she was crying. She didn't even realize it, but it wasn't from happiness or relief. It was because her heart was full of pain. For him.

He laughed, as he wiped her tears with his fingers, his own eyes welled up. "You are awesome." He wrapped his arms around her again, this time his body rocked gently against hers, his movement soothing and familiar. Bree wasn't sure who was providing comfort—if it was him, or if it was her. But they took and gave to each other, the way they've been doing for almost all their lives. They stood in the middle of his living room for a long time, neither one willing to let go. It wasn't until she felt the wetness on her shoulder did she realize that he too was crying. Quiet, broken tears that told her the tall, handsome nineteen-year-old in her arms may be an adult, a man in some ways, but in so many ways, ways that still mattered, he was still just a boy, a boy whose heart was breaking over his parents' nasty divorce, over his mother's heartache, his father's betrayal. So she held him, for as long as he needed. If it took forever, she wasn't going to let him go. Unless he pushed her away. He didn't.

"So now what?" Bree asked in between bites of the two-day old Chinese food take out. It was half warm and half cold after sitting in the microwave for thirty seconds but she was too hungry and too lazy to warm it up again.

“My dad can go screw himself.”

“Ok...” She needed to tread lightly. This constantly angry Rowan was new to her.

“Don’t. Don’t even try to be the pragmatic, practical one here.” Rowan pointed his chopsticks at her, his eyes blazing with anger. He had been angry for weeks. Sometimes he looked scared, sometimes sad, and hurt but mostly angry. But Bree let him be. He needed to process his new reality on his own terms, just like she did with her Dad’s death. In a way she never stopped processing it, grieving through the years. So that part, at least, she understood.

“I wasn’t.”

“He’s an asshole.”

“I agree.” Bree continued to dig through her noodles but she was taking it all in, waiting for the right time to say the words, hoping she would find the right ones. Although there were rarely any right ones in these kinds of situations so perhaps she should aim at *not* saying the wrong thing instead.

“A fucking cliché.”

“Yes.”

“His secretary. His young, blonde secretary.” He tossed the chopsticks on the table, shoving his greasy food away in disgust. If it was over the food or his father, Bree couldn’t say but if she had to bet, it was a little bit of both.

“I’m sorry.” She put her food down too, watching him as he stood up, opening then closing the fridge, looking for what, she didn’t know. But he kept moving as if he couldn’t stand to be still. This was going to be a long day, so Bree sat placid, listening, watching. When he finally sat back down, neither of them said anything for a long time. Rowan stared

at the wall, his eyes unseeing while Bree saw everything about him. She saw his struggle to understand, his distress over his mom's heart break, his denial, his conflict at seeing his dad in a new light. It was all new and raw for him. It would take time, but she was going to be there every step of the way.

"I'm never going to get married. Marriage sucks. I'm never going to do that. What's the point of it all?"

"For love? Because when two people fall in love, they want to get married."

"He says he loves her—the bimbo. So that's what love does? Hurt your family? Make you leave them?" He leaned over on his chair, defeated. He put his face in his hands, his elbows resting on his thighs.

"That's not love. It's selfishness. You're not selfish."

But he wasn't listening to Bree. He shook his head, trying to drown out her words, wanting to just disappear in the hole of pain and hurt. Bree, tenacious, obstinate, patient Bree knelt before him and took his hands from his face. Instead, she placed her hands on the side of his head, forcing him to look at her.

"You're kind, loyal. You're the least selfish person I know. I know," she emphasized, trying to remind him of some good deeds he had done in the past which are now too hazy to remember.

He shook his head again, disagreeing with her. Because if he was as good as she said, then why wasn't he, his brother, and his mother been enough to keep his father from straying and destroying their family? "Look at me. Rowan, look at me." When he finally did, what he saw terrified him. Her eyes were filled with love, admiration, respect, and all things

good and fine, things he didn't deserve, things he wasn't. He was about to say something stupid, something cutting to make her stop acting like he was worthy of her love and friendship, when she leaned into him. She pressed her lips on his forehead, then his cheek, then on the other side. She peppered his face with rapid kisses, telling him with conviction how wonderful, good, and amazing he was. Bree, whose version of physical affection was to tap him with her toes, was kissing him with no reservations.

Rowan wasn't sure who moved. Maybe he did. Maybe she did. Maybe they both did but soon, her lips opened to him, meeting his tongue with hers. It seemed so natural. He had expected it to be awkward, for he had thought about kissing her, his best friend, many times. But there was no awkwardness in her kisses, nor in her embrace. Instead, she was giving, open, and warm, just like she was every day in everything she did for her loved ones. The kiss kept going and going, until she was sitting on his lap, and part of her body pressed firmly against his. They probably would have kept going if his cell phone didn't ring. But it did, and when Bree pulled from him, he braced for her regret, maybe some admonition, but none of that came. Instead, she stood up, smoothing her shirt and her hair. She leaned over him as he answered his mother's call, and gave him an almost maternal kiss on the forehead.

Rowan didn't know what to expect after he ended his call with his mom. So, he approached Bree with the wariness one did with a wounded pet. Bree was a control freak. Events in her life had made her a planner, someone who needed to know what the next minute would bring, who had no patience for spontaneity. Rowan took his cues from her. When he walked in on her in the living, flipping through the TV channels, he waited for her to look at him. When she patted the space in the couch beside her, he sat down, putting his

feet up on the coffee table, like she did. When she handed him the remote control, he took it, and flipped through the channels until he saw an old episode of Friends, a show they both loved. When she said she was tired and wanted to go to bed because she was still catching up on sleep, he showed her the guest room. When the next few days she acted like nothing unusual happened, Rowan didn't say anything. He didn't push. He didn't ask. When she still gave him comfort, generous in her wisdom, and soothing in her silence, always taking his side, validating his pain, Rowan stayed present and grateful. When she left, and she whispered she loved him, he whispered the words back to her, firm in his belief that they would forever be friends.

Rowan: Thank you for the visit.

Bree: Anytime.

Rowan: We're ok?

Bree: Always. There's no divorce in this friendship.

Rowan: Never.

JUNIOR YEAR

Bree: Who was the girl on your Facebook?

Rowan: What girl?

Bree: Someone tagged you in a picture. The young Tyra Banks. On your lap.

Rowan: Samira.

Bree: You guys look cute together.

Rowan: Thanks.

Bree: So am I going to meet her?

Rowan: Maybe. She might come by for the summer.

Bree: You never said anything about her.

Rowan: Just a couple of dates. Nothing serious.

Bree: Serious enough to meet your family.

Rowan: I said maybe.

Rowan: Hey! What's with the radio silence?

Rowan: Hello, air. This is or was Bree Pascal's best friend. Can you tell her to text me back?

Rowan: Answer me or I'll post those pictures.

Bree: What pictures???

Rowan: Ah, you're alive!

Bree: What pictures???

Rowan: You crying during a baby commercial.

Bree: You're an ass.

Rowan: But you love me.

Bree: Shut up.

Rowan: I'm coming home in a couple of weeks. Need to know when you can hang out.

Bree: Can't. Been busy. Still busy.

Rowan: You've been ignoring me.

Bree: My world doesn't revolve around you.

Rowan: Talk to me when you're not hormonal.

Bree: I hate you.

Rowan: Good. You're not my favorite person right now, either.

Rowan: WTH! I've been home for weeks, I haven't seen you.

Bree: What do you want?

Rowan: I don't know. See you. What is wrong with you?

Bree: Nothing. When's the princess coming?

Rowan: Stop calling her that. Next week. Are you going to be nice?

Bree: I'm always nice.

Rowan: Thanks for meeting Sam and me for coffee. She adores you.

Bree: She's nice. I'm glad you're happy.

Rowan: Thanks. I am.

Rowan: I miss you. Let's hang out before I leave.

Bree: I can't.

Rowan: You promised me.

Bree: Promised you what?

Rowan: No divorce.

Bree: There's no divorce.

Rowan: Then why does it feel like there is?

Bree: Never.

Rowan: Still besties?

Bree: Always.

Rowan: When will I see you again?

Bree: Tonight?

Rowan: My place.

Bree: Yes.

SENIOR YEAR

The knock on the door startled Bree from her late night studying. Her sisters were both home, and her mom was at work. Whoever was at the door needed to go away stat. She had exams coming up next week. Her final one before graduation.

When she opened the door, joy unchecked unfurled inside her. She couldn't help it, she jumped in his arms. She may or may not have squealed. At this point, she didn't care that they hadn't seen each other since that summer night, that she had avoided him during his Christmas break, or that her notes, her texts had become more and more sporadic. She let go of her resentment that he had easily replaced her in his heart with beautiful, smart Samira. A spot she never held in the first place. Not really. Not the way she had hoped or wanted. For years, that hope had grown, without her permission, without her knowledge into something that laid latent within her, until she saw his arms around another woman. Then the fierceness of her want stoked into a fire inside her, made of hope, love and jealousy until it threatened to consume her. It was either let go or burn with it. So she let go. As much as she could let go of Rowan, because to completely let him go was akin to

cutting off her arm, her leg, or maybe even a part of her heart. She couldn't do it. Not completely. Now as he stood on the threshold of her home, she held on to him, her feet not touching the ground as he lifted her and held her against him.

When he put her down, she asked, a little breathless from laughter and joy, "What are you doing here?"

"Came home early for Mother's Day."

"When did you arrive?" She pulled him inside her dark house, closing the door behind him.

He looked at his watch and smirked. "Forty-five minutes ago. You're my first stop."

Bree gave him a soft pouty smile, inclining her head, she leaned toward him. "It's good to see you."

"It's good to be wanted again." He gave a short laugh but it wasn't quite a happy one.

"Of course, you're wanted. You're always wanted." Bree frowned, shame filled her at his reminder of how easily she had shunned him in her life.

"I hadn't felt wanted by you in a long time." There was no hint of pity in his voice, instead it was mostly pain. She was responsible for that. Her cold response, her distant politeness had put that hurt in his eyes. Her, his supposed best friend, had hurt him.

"I'm sorry. I was a bad friend, wasn't I?" She tugged at his shirt, pulling him closer to her. He moved but barely. He was still apart from her, resisting one of her patent Bree touches, a touch but not quite.

"The worst," he agreed with her. There was no criticism in his eyes, which was worst because he understood the kind of person Bree was—stubborn, insular, and petty. She

might have hated him for his recognition of all the flaws she tried to hide but he accepted her and all her flaws so she loved him more for it.

“Forgive me?”

“Always.” He whispered as he grazed her cheek with a soft kiss, causing her stomach to flutter into that almost familiar heat.

She moved away from him, suddenly aware that she was wearing nothing more than a pair of boxer shorts, and a tank top. She lifted herself on the kitchen counter, tossing him an apple. “So how long are you staying?”

He caught the fruit and took a bite out of it. “A couple of weeks. I’m done with all my exams. I go back for the actual graduation.”

“Then what?” She gripped the kitchen counter, dreading his answer. But she promised herself that whatever his response was, she was going to be the most supportive best friend in the history of best friends, it would put Thelma and Louise to shame.

“I’m moving back here. Look for a job.”

“Oh.” Bree was rarely speechless. But this piece of news took her by surprise. She had imagined scenarios after scenarios of distances, of time and space forever separating them. She was so relieved, she might actually have choked from it. “I thought—”

“What?”

“I don’t know.” Bree was silent again but this time it wasn’t from relief, it was dread. Perhaps he wasn’t moving back alone. “With Samira, and all, I thought—”

“Samira has her own plans,” he interrupted her, chucking the apple core in the opened trashcan.

“Is everything all right?”

“As far as I know. With me. I don’t know about her. We broke up.”

“When?” Bree should be happy. She should be relieved but all she felt was sadness for her friend. Of all the people she knew, of all the people in her life, Rowan was entitled to happiness, to be with someone he loved, who loved him back.

“Several weeks ago.” He stood beside her, leaning his back against the counter. He looked down on the floor, as if he was seeing something unpleasant.

“What happened?”

With his arms crossed, he shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. I was busy. She was busy. She wanted to plan out our entire lives. It just...I don’t know.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” She gently pushed her shoulder against his when all she wanted to do was hug him. But Bree wasn’t sure if he would welcome her hug. It seemed like they’ve taken several steps back from their friendship over her infamous summer rebuff of Rowan and Samira.

“Why did you freeze me out?” He challenged her, his blue eyes cool and assessing when he looked at her.

“I was an asshole.” She had no defense. She was an ass. She was so determined to dislike Samira, so threatened by her presence that she acted like a grade A ass. So now her best friend was forced to deal with a broken relationship on his own, fearing rejection from her.

He shook his head, crossing and uncrossing his ankles. “I needed you.” It was a statement of fact, and an admonition. It carried so much weight with it, Bree knew it would take a long time before she could make it up to him, and she was willing to do her time,

because he deserved nothing less. In fact, he deserved so much more, more than her but he was here, and they were friends so she was keeping him.

“I’m sorry.” This time, instead of a tap on the leg, or a poke with an elbow, she opened her arms to him. He moved into them, seamlessly, with no hesitation. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there.”

“Don’t try to cut me off again.” He buried his face on her neck.

“Never.”

POST COLLEGE

Rowan: I got the job. Let’s celebrate.

Bree: I knew you would! Tonight?

Rowan: My place. I got furniture.

Bree: Couch?

Rowan: And a TV.

Bree: Beer or wine?

Rowan: Both.

Bree: Wow! Going all out!

Rowan: Nothing but the best for my girl.

Bree: Pizza?

Rowan: I’ll even throw in extra toppings.

Bree: I’m in.

“God, this place is so beautiful, you lucky bastard.” Rowan had moved in a few weeks ago. Bree had visited him several times, putting up with the uncomfortable pillows on the floor until his furniture arrived. To his credit, he always had a well-stocked fridge and pantry, complete with goldfish crackers, which given her propensity to skip meals, Bree was forever grateful. Every single time she was here she couldn’t help but stare at the big, wide windows, looking out into the city, or the high ceilings with the heavy, dark beams.

“Well, now it’s even more beautiful.” Bree turned to Rowan who was standing behind her. She looked around the room to see what else he added. There was nothing new, except for the TV on the wall, and the sectional couch. But he was looking at her, with that smirk on his face like he was almost serious, half joking, half waiting. When his meaning dawned on her, she swung her leg, slightly bumping her foot against his shin. She couldn’t help it, her cheeks warmed, even though he was joking.

“Have you been drinking without me?” She side-eyed him. She was suddenly hungry, and thirsty. Where was the pizza?

“Can’t you just take a compliment?” He tugged her ponytail as she walked passed him.

“A sincere one, yes.” She slapped his hands away, laughing at the way he tried to get her attention like they were twelve again. Perhaps, in some ways they were. At least that old easiness between them was there again. Since he had moved back, they’ve surely, slowly found their way to each other again, without the awkward pauses or the lingering silence. It was as if those years apart had melted away, and what was left was their old, solid friendship, and in some ways it was stronger. There are parts of it that were different. Bree couldn’t pinpoint one single thing but it was there. Some pauses. Some looks. Some

other roots taking place, further linking her to him. Bree didn't mind *different* because it was different in a good way, and Bree would take whatever she could from Rowan.

"It was sincere."

"Shut up." She walked to the pantry, not really wanting anything in particular but it was something to do. She grabbed a cookie, tossing one to him. Instead of eating it, he put it down on the kitchen counter.

"Let me show you the best part." He cocked his head toward his bedroom.

"The big ass TV is not best part?" She raised her eyebrow, doubting him. He took long enough choosing a TV, approaching it like a science project, complete with charts and comparisons.

"Not by a long shot." He grabbed her hand, pulling her after him toward the bedroom. The last time she saw it, there was a sad looking air mattress in it that made Bree nervous at how long it would hold Rowan. Not because he was a big guy. He wasn't. Although he was fast leaving the lanky look of his teenage years, and filling out into a man in his early twenties. Rather, it was because Rowan rolled, tossed, turned, and goodness knew what else in his sleep. Bree slept with him in his bed once. That was all it took before she realized sleeping with Rowan was a dangerous proposition. It was during one of those long nights of cramming for an exam in high school. She ended up sleeping on the floor, where there were no limbs kicking her head, or worse pushing her off the bed.

When they entered the room, Bree let out a sound that was part gasp, part choking sound. She was officially in love. It wasn't just the bed. It was the entire room, the way the glow from the moon bathed the king-sized bed in light, and the way it stood in the massive

room solitary, stark, and absolutely gorgeous. The dark, distressed wood floor contrasted beautifully against the white sheets that looked luxurious even from a distance.

She ran her hands on the sheets feeling the softness underneath her fingertips. “Oh...” She pushed gently into the mattress, testing its softness. “Oh...” She sighed again. The bed might have possibly robbed her of all speech. But when she found her voice again, she gushed like a teenager, which was quite unlike her. “I want this room. And this bed. It’s so beautiful.”

“Try it.” Rowan nodded toward the mattress. Bree didn’t need a second invitation. She kicked off her shoes, and laid flat on the bed. Rowan followed suit, laying beside her, no more than two inches separated them. Neither one of them said anything, except for the intermittent sigh that escaped Bree’s lips as she stared at the skylight above them. It took up half of the ceiling, and with a night as clear as tonight, the stars twinkled and beacons over them.

“I want your life. I officially want your life. Better yet, I’m going to live in this bed for the rest of my life.” She bounced against the bed lifting her lower body to test it.

“I take it you like it?” Rowan teased her, watching the animated, happy glow on her face.

“I will kill, and maim for this bed. And the skylight. It’s so perfect.”

“So beds and skylights make you gushy and breathy, but calling you beautiful makes you angry.”

“If I had this bed, I’d be a lot less angry.” She gave a small laugh, the kind that had a husky timber to it, softening all her features.

“You’re so easy.”

“You wish.”

Neither of them spoke. For some reason, thick silence followed her words. She didn't know what it meant, his silence, and hers. But she didn't want it to end—this thing, where they were touching but not really; where they were with each other, happy and content. She didn't want to ruin it with some of her stupid, thoughtless words, the ones she would say when she was uncomfortable so she kept that silence, luxuriating in it. But Rowan didn't.

“You're right. You're not easy but you're perfect.”

She closed her eyes for a moment, feeling those words, letting them wash over her. But she pushed them, down where there was no room except their friendship. Instead, she did what she did so well—deflection. “Shut up. I'm relishing this moment.” She pushed his shoulder with hers.

“I want to relish a lot more moments with you.” Bree stiffened with that tone in his voice. It was the ‘I'm being serious, no jokes’ tone. She chewed on her inner cheek. Thinking. Or trying not to think. She didn't want to put meaning into his words that weren't there. Afraid of what they might mean. But more afraid of what they might *not* mean. She desperately wanted to steer their conversation into safer waters, in a place where she could navigate her emotions without having to feel through anything unfamiliar because Rowan's tone, the air in the room, it was all uncharted territory.

“You will. I'll always be here.” Always. Here. But her entire being was already rejecting what she was saying. It was fear. Swift and ugly.

“As a friend?”

“Of course.” She answered quickly but his questions confused her. Thrilled her. Scared her shitless. She wanted to run. It took all her might not to leave, not to turn away and beg him to stop talking. She didn’t want anything to change. She wanted everything to change. She didn’t want to lose him. She wanted him. She was clearly a lunatic. Certifiable. And sooner or later, Rowan was going to figure that out and leave her.

“What about more?”

“More?”

“Yes. More.”

“I don’t know what you mean by more.” She couldn’t take it anymore. She got up, and sat at the corner of the bed. She needed to put some physical distance between them. This close to him, she could barely think.

“You’re smart. I think you can figure it out.” He followed her but he sat on the other corner. Even now, when she may or may not reject him, he was following her cues, respecting her need for distance.

She was figuring it out. It was in her every nerve ending. The words were sinking into her, buoying her. She wanted to grab him, to grab life and say, “*The hell with it, of course I want to be more than friends.*” But it was too precious, too much she didn’t want to assume things, or worse, so much worse, she didn’t want to fuck it up.

The shrill, loud sound of the doorbell cut through the tension in the house. Bree wasn’t sure if she was thankful or angry at the ill-timed interruption.

“Pizza!” She jumped from the bed, her voice louder than she intended. Rowan didn’t move, watching her tug on her shirt. The way he stared at her made her ridiculously warm and embarrassed at the same time. “I’ll get it.”

By the time she rushed out of the bedroom, Rowan was pushing himself off the bed, in no hurry to get up. Bree ran to the door, pulling her hair in a tighter ponytail. But when she opened the door, the person standing there was the last person she expected to see.

“Samira!” Bree let out a strangled sound, which she hid with a cough.

“Bree.” Based on the lift of her eyebrow, it looked like Bree wasn’t the only one surprised. Unlike her though, Samira appeared unruffled and completely confident. “Hi. How are you?”

“Um, fine.” Bree looked behind her to see if Rowan was out yet but he was nowhere in sight. How convenient. Did he know his girlfriend, no, ex-girlfriend was going to show up?

“Is Rowan here?” Bree had forgotten how ridiculously pretty and well-put together Samira was. She felt shabby with her sneakers and bargain jeans compared to Samira’s designer shoes and well-cut ankle pants.

“Yeah. He’s, ah, he’s in the bedroom.” Bree opened the door wider, letting her in. Samira clearly expected to be here. She knew his address even though they broke up months ago, and Rowan just moved here a few weeks ago. Bree could only conclude one thing: they obviously kept in touch. A detail Rowan had conveniently forgotten to tell her. “Come on in. I was just, um,” Bree wanted to kick herself. Rowan invited her too, so why was she acting like an intruder? Whatever this little scenario was between Samira and Rowan, she didn’t want any part of it. “I was just about to leave. He’ll come out soon.” She grabbed her backpack from the counter, and ran out of that house like it was on fire.

POST (EX?) GIRLFRIEND VISIT

Rowan: I'm coming over.

Bree: No.

Rowan: I know what's going on in your head so stop it.

Bree: Really? Like what?

Rowan: Like you're adding one plus one, and coming up with eight.

Bree: My addition is completely accurate.

Rowan: I doubt it.

Bree: Don't come over.

Rowan: Too late.

Bree: Stop texting and driving.

Rowan: Then tell me you'll stay put.

Bree: Fine!

Rowan: WTH! You said you'll be home. I don't care that you're not here, I'm squatting outside your house.

Rowan: Dammit, Bree! This is insane. Where the hell are you?

Rowan: Fine, I'm leaving. Come back home. I'll be gone when you get here. But this is not over.

POST BRINGE DRINKING OVER BEST FRIEND'S (EX) GIRLFRIEND'S VISIT

Rowan went home, tired, and livid. It was almost three in the morning by the time he left Bree's house with no sign of her. Samira had lousy timing but Bree was being a pain in the ass. She didn't even stay long enough to see what the hell Samira was doing in his place. Bree was stubborn as a mule, infuriating as hell. Sure, she was kind, witty, and sexy beyond belief, but there were times, like this, that she pushed all his buttons.

When morning came, his head hurt like shit from lack of sleep but he forced himself out of bed. He grabbed his phone from the bedside. Great. It was dead. He doubted Bree called. She wasn't the kind of girl who would call, much less apologize for running off so once his phone was charged, he was surprised to see a voicemail from her. Whatever she had to say, it probably wasn't pretty. He looked at the voicemail for a long time, bracing himself from her anger (as well-deserved as it was). He took a shower and drank two cups of coffee. He needed to be lucid for this. When he couldn't stall anymore, he pushed play.

Once the message, all two rambling minutes of it finished playing, Rowan jumped in his car parked haphazardly in his driveway. He made it in record time. The door to Bree's house opened before he even knocked.

A smiling Bianca, Bree's younger sister, opened the door, as usual bouncing with energy. She looked so much like Bree, it was uncanny but unlike Bree, Bianca was a bubbly, chatty teen with an easy, happy laugh. She patted his shoulder as she passed by him on her way out. "Good luck, buddy. I hope you girded up your loins. But the coffee is a good touch," she nodded at the cup he was holding. "I doubt it'll help you though. In the kitchen."

Sure enough, Bree was sitting in the kitchen, her head resting on her arms folded on the table. Rowan placed the cup of coffee in front of her. She lifted her head but barely, just enough to take a peek at the cup and at Rowan standing in front of her. She put her head

back on her arms but her hand snaked to take the warm drink. She didn't attempt to drink it, as if every movement was a struggle. It probably was. If she didn't look like near death, Rowan would have said she deserved to have a hangover.

"Exactly, how much did you have to drink?" He pulled a chair settling himself beside her.

"Everything except the bar sink," she mumbled. Rowan didn't doubt it. She was a hot mess. Her hair was greasy and tangled, her eyes were blood shot, and her skin was blotchy.

"I hope it was worth it."

"Nothing is worth this shit." She pushed her hair off her face, but it was useless. She had massive amounts of hair, thick and beautiful but not right now, with it standing on ends like she was on the bad end of a fight.

"Never again?" He placed his phone on the table beside her, waiting for her to lift her head, or at least look at him.

"Never." She said while she was still face planted on the table.

"Can we talk?"

"No." It was a half groan, half growl, but Rowan was sure she said no.

"Fine. I'll talk. You listen."

"I hate you." That one was clear, and for good measure she lifted her head this time. She was still resting her face on her arms but at least she looked at him, which may or may not be marginally better considering the death glare she gave him. He had seen grown men wither under that look but he had been at the receiving end of that cutting look more times than he cared to think about and he had survived. He'd survive this one too.

“Well, that’s a start.” His voice was deceptively soft. It didn’t reveal the fact that he was crawling out of his skin. He wanted to confront her, confirm some of those things she said in her voicemail that revealed far more than she likely intended.

“Go away.” She moved her head into her arms again. This time she pulled the hood of her sweatshirt over her face.

“Never. So shall I start?”

“No.”

“Good idea. You start.”

“No.”

“I think it’s a great idea, actually.” Rowan leaned toward the table, sliding his fingers over his phone until he found her saved voicemail and he hit play.

Her voice came on, muffled, like she was struggling with the phone. For the first time, since he entered the kitchen, Bree’s head left the table. She sat up straight as if trying to figure out why her voice was coming through Rowan’s phone.

“Whatever is between you and Samira, your quote unquote ex, is your business. I don’t care. I’m not even angry. You can go ride in the sunset with her and her fashion sense, and her oh-so-cultured voice and oh-so-perfect smile, and have perfect little Samiras and perfect little Rowans running around. I. Don’t. Care.”

“Is that me? When did I leave that message?” Before Rowan could answer, her eyes rounded like saucers, and a look of horror moved across her pale face. “Oh my god.”

Rowan recognized right away what she was going to do so he grabbed the phone from the table, pushing himself off the chair and away from Bree’s reach. Her words

continued to pour from the phone, sounding garbled as if her tongue was too big for her mouth.

"It's not like we're in love or anything. I'm so over your shit anyway. Saying bullshit stuff like I'm beautiful. That you want more. Gag me. You're so full of it."

"Give it to me!" She tried to swipe the phone from Rowan's hand but Bree had to hold on to the table as she wobbled, her balance was still off. That would teach her to imbibe too much. She cussed long and loud, and quite creatively too.

"No way. It actually gets interesting." Rowan moved to the other side of the small kitchen, holding out the phone so they could both hear it clearly.

"I'm done taking scraps, pinning for your Ivy League ass. I don't care how hot you are. Or how nice you smell, or how I want to jump your bones so bad, I may actually hook up with Larry the bartender."

"Larry, the bartender? Really? He may have alcohol but I have these." Rowan hit "pause" on the phone, then lifted his shirt showing off his abs. He gave her a smirk. He was being absurd but he was embracing his ridiculous inner self because he was happy. He was messing with her, giving her a hard time but there was no way this was going to end without him ending his platonic friendship with Bree, for all the right reasons. She was probably going to kill him but he was ok with that, knowing what would be on the other side of it. Bree. His beautiful, wonderful Bree. Always his. Never anyone else's. Just the way he was with her. He was always hers.

"I'm glad you find this amusing."

"Actually no. I'm way passed amused. I'm everything but amused. I was ticked off fourteen hours ago, that my so-called best friend would jump to the worse conclusion

about me, rather than ask me. Then about twelve hours ago, I was livid when you wouldn't return my call or my ten thousand texts. By midnight, I was embarrassed that I was sitting in your front porch like a puppy waiting for you, which soon enough passed to worried because you didn't come home. Then I was too tired to care. That voicemail is not amusing. It's the opposite of—“

“Fine! Fine! You're not amused. And I'm the asshole one.” Rowan hit “play” again, ignoring her rant, the words from her voicemail cutting off her train of thought.

“God! My head hurts. And it's your fault. Everything is your fault. I had a job offer in Colorado, you know. But I said no thank you because I'm the lame chick that stays because of a guy. What is wrong with me? I can't believe you're back with Samira. I thought for sure this time...I hate you. I hate you so much. I hate that I don't even hate you, even when I want to kick your ass so bad. This love thing sucks. Like major ass. I'm just going to die alone and—“

Rowan hit stop on the voicemail again. Panicked gripped his heart because Bree's face was frozen in misery. She looked like she was about to cry, and Rowan never ever wanted to make Bree cry. Ever.

“I'm sorry,” he said, instantly sobering up. He moved to where she was sitting but she flinched away from him as he got closer. “I shouldn't have done that. Use your words against you like that. I didn't mean to hurt you.”

She shook her head, her voice coming in a rough croak, “It doesn't matter.”

“Of course it matters. I'm such an ass. Bree,” he touched her shoulder but she shrugged him away. “Bree, please.” Still nothing. Her back rigid but the hand that combed through her hair was trembling. “Tell me to shut up. Tell me I'm an idiot. Bree?”

“Can you just go?” Her voice was small, coming out in a painful whisper.

“That I won’t do.”

“I was drunk. I shouldn’t have called you.”

“You should have called me. But before deciding to die of alcohol poisoning. You should have asked me what Samira was doing there instead of running away.”

“I didn’t want to intrude on your reunion.”

“You know that’s not true. You were already off to run even before Samira showed up. Anytime anything remotely serious or uncomfortable passes your path, you hide tail and run. It’s your M.O.”

That seemed to put the fire back in her, refusing to let Rowan off the hook, ignoring the truth in his words. “So now, this is my fault? I’m not the one inviting his ex-girlfriend over.”

Rowan pulled a chair in front of her. He stared at her face, lovely and enticing even during her worst. “She was passing through town. I had some of her stuff. She picked it up. End of story.”

She turned her face away. A million emotions crossing her face. Doubt, regret, pain, and so much happening and fleeting in and out of her until she gave a heavy sigh. “I’m sorry.”

“You should be.” But Rowan didn’t sound upset. He was quite the opposite. His smile was back. “I do like the voicemail. I like that you were honest. That you said things we should have said to each other years ago.”

“You mean that I was a raving lunatic?”

“That was always a given. But you were open. For the first time in a long time, you opened up to me.”

“That gets buried.” She tried to look severe but light was entering her eyes again.

“Never.” He locked his phone to make his point, putting it back in his pocket.

“You want to get pass the friend zone or you want to get kicked off the reservation?”

“That’s blackmail.”

“Your choice,” she shrugged, leaning back in her chair. A sort of sexy confidence replacing her earlier scowl and misery.

“What if we negotiate it over dinner?”

“Like pizza?” She frowned, perhaps remembering the last pizza they almost shared.

“Like a grown-up dinner with white table linens.” He laughed at her expression of horror, tucking a stray hair over her ear.

“Like a date?”

“Not like a date. A real date. Then we can do a play by play of the voicemail, starting with wanting to jump my bones.”

“With all that rambling mess, that’s what you got out of it?”

“Well, you did mention something about a love thing and smelling nice too.”

“Shut up.” This time, instead of elbowing him or kicking him, Bree moved into his lap, wrapping her arms around him.

“Never,” he answered, and it was the last word exchanged between them for a long, long time.

Bree: Dinner was nice. Thank you.

Rowan: The after dinner was nicer.

Bree: Shut up.

Rowan: I was talking about the dessert.

Bree: So, is this more?

Rowan: So much more.

Bree: You like it?

Rowan: I love it. And I love you.

Bree: Good. That will make things less awkward since I love you too.

POST FRIENDSHIP

Bree: Let's get married.

Rowan: Are you pregnant?

Bree: No!

Rowan: Ok.

Bree: Ok to getting married, or ok to not being pregnant?

Rowan: Both. But let it be known you asked me.

Bree: I got tired of you hinting and hiding that pop rock ring. FYI, you suck at hiding stuff.

Rowan: Hey! It's a nice ring. It was my grandmother's.

Bree: I'm not your grandmother.

Rowan: Thank God!

Bree: I'm picking out my ring.

Rowan: I'm picking out the honeymoon destination.

Bree: Ok.

Rowan: At least ten days of naked, baby.

Bree: Ok.

Rowan: Next year? On our fifth anniversary?

Bree: Ok.

Rowan: You're awfully agreeable. Does this mean I'll always get my way?

Bree: Never.

Rowan: You love me?

Bree: Always.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Grace is married to a wonderfully patient man who is convinced she has ADD. Her short attention span is great for raising four active boys, not so much for doing grown-up things, which also means writing is a challenging process for her. But she loves to write so she forces herself to sit longer than five minutes without getting sucked into the internet rabbit hole or impromptu football games. She is currently working on her first manuscript, and second, and third (see, short attention span). Her ramblings can be found at www.graceravel.com, via Twitter @graceravel, or on Facebook.