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Once the Ashes Settled

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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

Once The Ashes Settled
written by

Brittany Parker

and submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for completion of
the Carl Goodson Honors Program
meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

Dr. Barbara Pemberton, thesis director

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Dr. Barbara Pemberton, Honors Program director

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Once the Ashes Settled

By: Brittany Parker

Prologue

She grabbed her ballcap that she had worn almost every day for the last thirteen years and started the short walk. A three blocks jaunt had its advantages on days like today, especially this morning. He promised he would pick up the roses and meet her here at eight which hopefully allowed them enough time to have a private moment before people started moving about. As she waited, she stole a few glances at the space around her, the water a constant reminder of what all had been taken in the background. It had changed so much over the years, but its most drastic change had happened in a matter of minutes. She started to drift back when suddenly he was right beside her. They shared a look of understanding and a sympathetic smile.

“Are you ready?”

"No, but let's go ahead," she whispered.

He grabbed her hand as she threw the rose into the cascading water.

Chapter 1

“You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law.” Beau Porter repeated the familiar lines as his six-foot-three frame towered over the delinquent. Beau ducked the guy’s head into the back of the cop car.

“Beau, you have a way of running down kids.” Freddy gave Beau a slight push, grinning at his partner of five years.

Beau rolled his eyes at Freddy, thankful for every non-violent collar they brought in. At least this arrest was a sixteen-year-old kid trying to steal a six pack instead of the domestic abuse call they had gotten last night.

“We’re getting too old to pull these night shifts. How about after we process this guy, we grab some breakfast before we head home?”

“Sounds good to me. I could go for a big stack of pancakes.” Freddy always was ready to eat.

Sliding his glasses over his dark eyes, Beau pulled into the familiar traffic of New York City. Within the hour they were sitting across from each other at their favorite café by the station.

“Isn’t your anniversary this weekend?”

“Sure is. September 3rd will be 20 years.” Beau grinned before taking a swig of his black coffee.

“What did you get Ellie?” Freddy had known the Porters for six years now and still didn’t understand how Beau had gotten lucky enough to get a girl like Ellie. Ellie was quiet, kind, but had a smile that demanded attention. Their 17-year-old daughter,

Kate, was already a spitting image of her mother with her blonde hair and blue eyes, but her mannerisms were all her dad's.

"I repaired her mother's gold watch that she left Ellie before she died and then had it engraved on the back. We're going out to that new restaurant on 8th street. I've heard it's pretty nice."

"How about Sunday afternoon you, Ellie, and Kate come over to the house and watch the game with me, Sherry, and the boys?" Beau hadn't seen Freddy's family in a while, and it would be nice to get everybody together before school started.

"Sure, I'll talk about it with Ellie tonight, but I'm sure she would love to." Beau checked his watch. "Speaking of which, I better get home. I'll see you tomorrow." Beau gave Freddy a slap on the back on his way out.

Beau made the familiar drive to Staten Island, hoping he would catch Kate in time to say bye before school. He had grown up in Staten Island and loved that now he and Ellie could raise Kate here. As Beau drove over the bridge, he flipped through the radio stations, trying to find 80s rock. After a few verses of "Livin' On A Prayer," he pulled up at 208 Alpine Avenue. The white townhouse wasn't extravagant, but it was home, and he was always glad to pull into the driveway. Kate slowly made her way out of the house as Beau slammed the door shut to his Maxima.

"Don't you look happy this morning?"

Kate looked up and immediately started pleading, "Daddy, please can't I please just stay home this one time? I really don't want to go. I need a break."

Beau looked down as Kate's braid swayed back and forth with her earnest pleas. He acted like the strong, father figure, but in reality, it took everything in him not to give in to those big, blue eyes that hid behind her sunglasses.

“How can you already need a break? It’s only the second week of school. I’ll make you a deal.”

Kate prematurely slumped, knowing already she had lost.

“You go to school and tonight I’ll grill hamburgers to help you cope with another traumatizing day of 11th grade.” With the word traumatizing, he dragged it out, making sure to deliver it with his best teenage girl interpretation.

Kate started walking towards school, but looked over her shoulder, “You think the streets of New York are dangerous! You have no idea, dad! The real emergency is in the halls of a typical American high school. Kids are brutal.”

“I love you too!”

Kate waved over her head as she made her way down the street.

Beau chuckled. Whoever was going to marry his daughter one day was going to have to be pretty special. Kate was a firecracker but in a quiet kind of way.

Ellie was vacuuming the living room which made sneaking up on her easy. Ellie threw the vacuum, screaming and jumping simultaneously. Beau’s rich laugh filled the small room as he held his side, falling onto the couch.

“You should’ve seen your face! What’s wrong, sweetheart?” Beau looked at her innocently, trying to stifle his laughter.

“Beau Porter, you are not funny! You’re lucky I didn’t turn around and hit you with this vacuum cleaner.”

“Yeah, you just threw your only weapon down.”

Ellie gave him both a push and a hug, always glad when he made it home safe.

Beau gave her a kiss as she picked the vacuum back up.

“I told Kate that I would make hamburgers tonight. How does that sound?”

“Great, she tried to get out of school this morning.”

“Yeah, she did with me too in the driveway just now. Is she having that much trouble?”

“No, I think she’s just tired of it. She’s halfway through high school and wants to be done. I tried telling her she really needed to embrace these last two years. Soon enough she’ll be at college and although she doesn’t realize it, she will miss this time in her life.”

“You’re completely right. Hey, before I forget, Freddy asked if we wanted to go over to their house Sunday and watch the game. What do you think?”

“Sounds good to me. Will you ask him tomorrow what I can bring?”

“Yep.”

Ellie looked over at the grown man sprawled out on the couch, trying to keep his eyes open, but starting to fail miserably.

“How about you head up to bed? I’ll wake you up before Kate gets home.”

Beau didn’t even bother with words; he simply gave Ellie a nod and kiss.

Chapter 2

Ellie Porter sat at the table icing cookies, trying to keep her curly hair out of her eyes. She only had three more to do before they left for Freddy and Sherry's.

"Kate, can you help me finish these up really quick? We're about to leave." Kate didn't contest.

"Did you get your homework done?"

"Yes, ma'am. Who doesn't love a good Calculus problem on a Sunday afternoon?"

Ellie nodded, "Well, at least you're good at math. I could barely get through Algebra. I wanted to have my nose in a book instead of finding x."

"I did start a really good book the other day. I was hoping if we get back from watching the game in time maybe I could finish it up tonight."

"That sounds good. We shouldn't be gone too long."

Ellie and Kate put the final cookies into a container and met Beau outside.

"You girls ready?"

"Absolutely." Ellie climbed into the front seat.

"What are you guys going to do for your anniversary?" Kate made eye contact with her dad in the rearview mirror.

"Go out to eat, but on Tuesday we thought we could all go to the Yankees game. How does that sound?"

"Good to me! You know I'm always up for a game." Kate looked out the window as a steady rain fell, clouding up the windows. The drive wasn't too far to the Rodriguez's house, but it at least would be a twenty-minute trip with traffic and the rain.

“Will you tell me the story about how you two met?” Kate asked as her mother looked back and grinned.

“You know most seventeen-year old’s hate to hear their parents’ stories.”

“It’s not too bad. Besides, it’s a Porter tradition. You tell me the story every year around your anniversary.”

Beau nodded. “You’re certainly right about that. Ellie, you start, and I’ll jump in if I need to correct you.”

Ellie quietly grinned and started telling the story etched on her heart immediately.

“Well, a long, long time ago” –Ellie drew out each word all while giving Kate a skeptical look, “I was at a school dance talking to my friends when your father walked up with his brother. We all started talking and before I knew it, it was time to go home.

Before I left, he asked me out to go skating with him the next day.

“And you just fell into my arms, didn’t you?” Beau piped up.

“Oh, of course. Hook, line, and sinker.” Ellie uttered sarcastically. Even though Beau wasn’t far off from the truth.

“Well, you kind of did fall into my arms.”

Ellie laughed at the memory.

“Kate, your mom is one of the most graceful people I know but skating that day you would have never used graceful to describe her. She barely got off the railing, when I finally did coax her to grab my hand and try to skate, someone came whizzing past her and she got scared and started to fall. I had to grab her until she caught her balance. If you ask me I think she wanted me to catch her and she was just pretending to be a bad skater.”

“Beau Porter, I was not!” Ellie slapped his arm, shocked at his accusation.

It may have been cold and rainy outside, but in the car, everything was good and warm.

Chapter 3

Saturday pancakes always brought the Porters' tiny house to life. Beau loved the quiet before dawn when he could sit and drink coffee from his favorite mug, but just as much he loved when the rest of his family would join him as soon as the smell of syrup wafted up the stairs. Beau Porter might be walking the beat in New York City during the week, but Saturdays meant that Beau could be home with his two favorite girls. Even if it was a few hours before they rose for the day.

Beau got the plates down and started the bacon frying. Kate came sauntering down the stairs, talking before Beau could even see her.

"Are you making bacon?"

"Good morning to you too."

Kate gave Beau a sleepy smile as she rose on her toes to kiss him on the cheek.

"Good morning, dad. Are you making bacon?"

Beau laughed. "How can you have pancakes without bacon?"

Kate started setting the table. Beau looked at his daughter. He wished she would stop growing up so fast. Weren't he and Ellie just praying for a child? He remembered the morning they had found. Beau had been about to leave for work when Ellie had come running into the kitchen.

"Beau, I'm pregnant! The test is positive!"

Beau hadn't even known she was taking the test. Needless to say, he had been a little late for work that morning. He had smiled the whole day and though he had tried to keep it a secret, he had finally caved and told Freddy, who'd seemed just as excited as Beau. Though patrolling Times Square could be hectic, Beau had felt a new sense of

peace that day knowing that he was going to be a father. He had fallen in love that day with a baby he had only known about for a few hours. Years later, he loved his blue-eyed girl even more. He flipped the last pancake as Ellie walked in.

“Have I mentioned how much I enjoy sleeping in while you make breakfast? Because this is definitely my favorite day of the week,” Ellie declared, all while smiling at her husband.

“You may have mentioned it a few times.”

Beau silently thanked God for his family. Most would call their life boring. After all, they lived in a two-bedroom townhouse in Staten Island and their weekly excitement was pancakes and bacon. But Beau had everything he needed. They were smiling back at him around the breakfast table.

Chapter 4

Kate was tired of shopping. She and her mom had been out since 10:00 that morning and now it was almost 3:30.

“Mom, do you think we could go get coffee or something? My feet hurt and I’m ready to be done.”

Ellie was visibly relieved. “Absolutely, I was hoping you were almost ready to leave.”

Kate tried to get a better grip on the shopping bags that almost weighed her down. They walked to the car without any words, both exhausted. Kate’s calves were screaming, but she loved these outings with her mom. Even though teenage years usually tore mother-daughter relationships apart, Kate had always run to her mom for help. Part of it was due to her being an only child. Kate was close to both parents and though she wished for a sibling, she was also okay with it being just the three of them.

“Did you finish your biography yet?”

“Yes. I stayed up late last night to get the last of it done. I hope dad likes it.”

“I’m sure he will. I know it meant a lot to him that you chose to do your biography over him. I think your teacher will like the human-interest perspective over a New York City police officer. It’ll be a unique paper.”

“Yeah, most people chose a President or celebrity to write about. I do have a question for you though. I’ve been thinking about it for the past few days.”

Ellie looked at her waiting for her to finish as they climbed into the car.

“How do you handle dad having such a dangerous job? I mean I get so scared sometimes when he’s at work and I just don’t know how you deal with it.”

Ellie took her time with her answer, knowing that she had definitely not aced being a cop wife.

“Sometimes the fear suffocates me. I mean I’ll be doing a meaningless task and then all of a sudden I start to worry about what your dad is doing at that exact moment. Is he okay? Is he being shot at or involved in a high-speed chase? I think knowing that he’s doing what he loves and that he’s the best guy for the job helps. At the end of the day, I just have to trust the Lord to watch over him. I can’t protect him every moment, you know?”

Kate thought about her mom’s words, knowing that she was right.

“Yeah, it’s just hard. I’ve never told you this, but when I was younger I wished that he would come home, tell us he had quit and was going to be a teacher.”

“A teacher? Why a teacher?” Ellie chuckled at the thought of Beau Porter corralling a classroom.

“So, he could go with me to school every day. He wouldn’t be in trouble on the streets and I would be safe with him at school.”

The conversation died out as they pulled up to the quaint coffee shop by their house. Ellie and Kate both ordered caramel lattes and found two seats by the window.

“Your dad is working late tonight, why don’t we rent a good movie and have a relaxing evening at home?”

“Sounds good to me. We can make brownies and popcorn.”

“That’s a combination. We’ll stop by the movie store on our way home.”

They both agreed on a rom-com and spent the night crying and laughing. After the brownies had a decent dent in them, they both retired for the night.

Beau tip-toed back home at 11:03 p.m., sure his wife would be asleep. He wanted to quit working so late, it wasn't like he had a choice. He crept into his bedroom, trying to be quiet, but Ellie was up anyway.

"Hey, what are you still doing up?"

"You know I have trouble sleeping when you aren't here."

He kissed his wife, noticing that she was forcing her eyes to remain open.

"Well, that won't be a problem much longer. Sarge told me and Freddy that he's putting us back on morning patrol. I'm tired of not eating supper with you two and seeing Kate before she has to go to bed."

"We definitely have missed you the past few weeks, but we understand you have to work nights sometimes."

"Maybe I can take her to grab donuts before school tomorrow."

"I'm sure she would love that."

"It's a plan then. I'm going to jump in the shower really quick. You've got to love the smell of New York City. Go ahead and shut those pretty eyes and quit worrying."

"Wha...? how....? I'm not worrying!"

"Yes, you are. I can tell. You think after all this time I can't tell when my wife is worrying? I came home in one piece. You know Freddy and I watch out for each other when we're out, and more than that, you know the Lord is watching over me. You know the pastor's sermon last Sunday was about how we have to trust the Lord and not worry."

"I know, I know. I'm working on it. It's just hard sometimes."

He arrogantly performed a little dance, drawing a laugh out of her. "Now doesn't it look like I'm just fine?"

She threw her pillow at him.

“Okay, okay, Mr. Smarty Pants. Just go take your shower so you can come to bed.”

“Yes ma’am, Mrs. Porter.”

Chapter 5

"Jack! Hurry up! We're going to be late for the game! Your dad and sister are already in the truck!"

Megan Harper waited at the bottom of the stairs for her favorite football player who happened to be the star of the San Francisco High team. Jack barreled out of the house with his jersey untucked and his cleats half-tied. Megan rolled her eyes as she shut the front door behind them. She would help him finish getting ready when they got to the field even though he was eighteen.

"Are we ready?" Charlie asked his family.

"Ready!" they all cheered.

There was nothing the Harper family loved more than a good game of Friday night football. Megan couldn't help but grin at her husband who had won her over twenty-five years ago at a church softball game. Wanting to get out of the house for a little bit, she had felt the game offered a good excuse. Megan had never been so thankful for an excuse. It had been only the second inning before she was convinced that no one would ever compare to the home team's pitcher. He was tall with wavy brown hair and sharp ocean eyes, and she had spent the rest of the game trying to come up with a reason to talk to him. In the end, she shouldn't have wasted her time thinking of a strategy. Charlie Harper had noticed her in the first inning and as soon as the game ended, Charlie had walked up to her and asked her out. Just like that. After all these years that same courage that had excited Megan at the beginning was one of the things she loved most about Charlie—no fear. He just jumped in and did whatever needed to be done.

"Jack, are you ready for your game?" Charlie asked his son. Jack had been unusually quiet today.

"Yes, sir. I'm a little worried about Mill Valley. I've heard they are a lot better this year. We should be fine, but if our defense plays like they did in the last game, we'll be in trouble."

"I'm sure you will do great and will bring home a win." Megan looked back at her youngest, Rachel, who was sitting quietly in the back beside Jack. "Rachel, you get to pick where we eat after the game. What are you thinking?"

Rachel had hit the pre-teen years hard. Charlie and Megan had daily conversations over how to handle her sass. Thankfully, she was starting to settle down. Maybe.

"How about pizza? Jack, what do you think?" Rachel thought Jack hung the moon. Fights were few and far between. Megan loved their friendship even if it sometimes surprised her.

"I like that idea, Rach."

They dropped Jack off at the fieldhouse and found a parking spot close to the gate. Charlie swung the chair on one arm and grabbed Megan's hand with the other.

"You coming, Rachel?" Megan looked behind her making sure she was behind them.

Rachel came jogging up.

"What's wrong?" Megan noticed Rachel's subtle, scrunched up face.

"Nothing."

Megan nodded at Charlie to go ahead.

"Rach, what happened? Why are you upset?"

Rachel let out a typical thirteen-year-old sigh as if the world was ending as they knew it.

"I just saw Robert and he's here with that rude girl, Claire, from my class. I thought he didn't like her, but it looks like he does!" She gave another sigh to bookend the statement in case Megan forgot how she felt about it.

"I'm guessing you like Robert?"

"Mom, gross, it—I—Well, I mean I don't want to see him with anyone else."

"Rachel, just because he is here with someone else doesn't mean they like each other. It's also unfair to not want him to have other friends. He can have lots of friends, whether he likes them as more of a friend or not."

"I guess so."

Megan gave her hormonal daughter a side hug as they reached their normal spot by the end-zone. Charlie already had their chairs set out.

"Everything okay?" Charlie whispered to Megan.

"Just typical girl stuff."

"Say no more."

The Harpers stood as the National Anthem started playing. Megan's eyes grew misty as she looked out at the boy who filled his shoulder pads out a bit more than last year. She was going to miss watching Jack play next year. Charlie rubbed her back, somehow understanding what she was thinking. He was leaving for business tomorrow in New Jersey. At least this trip was only a few days. It was always hard for him to be gone.

The crowd clapped as the song ended and the teams hustled out to the line.

“Let’s go, Tigers!” Charlie whistled like the usual, American dad did at every football game.

It was another perfect night for the Harper family, especially when Jack scored the winning touchdown.

Chapter 6

Megan grabbed her favorite buttercream mug out of the cabinet. The black liquid was steaming and smelled perfect due to the freshly roasted coffee beans. She sat down in her rocking chair and grabbed her Bible, taking a sip of the coffee in the process. The mornings were quiet as she spent time talking to the Lord before the rough and tumble of the day started. Charlie had been gone for a few days, and Megan was more than thankful that he was flying home today. In fact, his plane should be leaving soon. Even though they had been married for years, she still hated when he wasn't beside her. He brought stability and calmness. She always felt safe as long as Charlie stood watch beside her.

“Lord, I prayed for my husband for so long. I dreamed of how we would love each other fiercely and protect each other diligently. You were faithful and answered those prayers more than I could have ever hoped. Thank You for this life You have given us. May we glorify You through it all.” Megan smiled to herself. She loved dwelling in the Lord's presence, knowing that He wanted to hear from her and have an intimate relationship.

The house phone broke through the moment of stillness. Megan jumped up and jogged over to the phone.

“Hello, Harper Residence.”

“Wow, that voice sounds like it belongs to a very beautiful woman. Your husband is pretty lucky.”

Megan held in a giggle, never tiring of her husband's childish banter.

“I don't know. I feel like I'm the one that struck gold. I like him a little bit. Actually, I like him so much that I'm just about ready to walk to New Jersey to see him.”

“Hmm, well, how about you hold off on that, because I bet he’s about to board the plane. Word is he’s ready to see you, too, and already asked the pilot to break any speed limits.”

“Oh, Charlie, I love you and am ready for you to be back. The kids have missed you too. I know this work trip wasn’t for very long, but I just always hate when you have to leave.”

“I do too, but hopefully this will be the last trip for a while. Listen, they are starting boarding, so I better go. I love you, Meg. Leave the front light on for me.”

“Always. I love you. See you soon.”

Megan hung up and walked back over to her chair. She picked up her Bible and gave a sigh of relief. Charlie was on his way back to continue his watch beside her.

Chapter 7

Charlie hoped that his flight home would go by fast. He missed Megan, Jack, and Rachel. The work trip had come up quick and he had flown out with barely any notice. Of course, Megan had understood, but he could see in her eyes that she was disappointed to see him go. Charlie didn't like it at all either.

"Now boarding United Airlines Flight 93 to San Francisco."

Charlie grabbed the one bag that he always used on business trips and his black leather briefcase engraved with his initials that Megan had given him for their fifth anniversary. He held his boarding pass, which seemed more like a golden ticket home. Business had gone well, and Charlie had won the best deal for his company. Spending three days in New Jersey made him love San Francisco that much more. He was quick to hate Newark, but it's not like he ever really got out to see the city. Meetings started as soon as he had landed Saturday and had not let up even a little bit. As far as Charlie knew all Newark was in his hotel conference room.

"Good morning, sir."

"Hello." Charlie tried to muster up a cheerful attitude for the lady checking his boarding pass. Besides he got to go home now. Things were starting to look up.

"Have a nice flight!"

"Thank you."

He slung his bag over his shoulders and walked through the tunnel leading to the Boeing 757. He found his seat towards the back and tossed his carry-on in the overhead bin. Megan was the one who always told him the best seats were towards the back. He could hear her now: *The most interesting people always sit in the back.* Charlie chuckled

every time and gave a slight roll of his eyes, but every time he found himself flying, he always took the farthest window seat. Charlie leaned back and looked out the small window. The sky was clear with a temperature of mid-sixties. It was a beautiful September morning with the promise that today would be a good day. Charlie was excited about Jack's game tonight. Thankfully he wouldn't miss the 6:00 game due to his early flight. He was looking forward to forgetting about work and enjoying a good hour of football. Jack was a solid player and Charlie only felt slightly proud of his son. Charlie had taught Jack the basics when he was little, but Charlie's most important lesson was to have fun. Charlie had great memories himself from playing football growing up and he was thankful his son would hopefully have the same childhood of hot summers and cool falls with his friends.

The flight was pretty sparse compared to most flights, but Charlie wasn't complaining. It would make the flight more comfortable. He always loved flying. People from different backgrounds all caught up together as they flew across the country for various reasons. Maybe it was just that Charlie was exhausted, but he always found it interesting when he flew.

A frazzled mother who looked like she hadn't slept in a few months, pushed through the aisle while rocking what looked to be a nine-month-old baby girl. Charlie gave her a sympathetic smile and offered to put her bag up for her.

"That's so kind of you. Thank you very much."

"No problem. I remember when my kids were this age and it takes four hands to do everything. What seat are you?"

"Let's see. 22 F."

“That’s right beside me. Nice and easy aisle seat.” Charlie took his seat by the window as the mother settled in. The baby gave him a questioning look, but as Charlie gave her a funny smile she was hooked.

“I’m Charlie, by the way.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Jessica and this little cutie is Lydia.”

“She certainly is cute. I know flying with a kid is tough.”

Jessica gave a slight roll of her eyes as she bounced Lydia. “Oh, absolutely.

Especially since my husband isn’t with us. He got deployed three months ago and on days like today I really miss him.” Jessica looked down for a minute and then gave Charlie a sheepish grin, obviously wishing her husband was flying across the country with her.

“He always helped so much with Lydia that now that I have to do stuff on my own, I can tell a big difference.”

“Do you know when he’ll be home?”

“Hopefully early March. I don’t get a lot of details. I’m not even sure where he’s at.” Jessica smiled at a cooing Lydia, “We’re ready for daddy to be home, aren’t we?! Yes, we are! We have a countdown and everything!”

Charlie liked Jessica and Lydia and was thankful he would get to hug his own wife and kids tonight.

“So where are you headed? Is San Francisco your destination?” Jessica asked.

“Yes. I’ve been here for work the past few days and finally get to head home. What about you?”

“On our way to see my parents for a few weeks. Take our mind off everything. I think it’ll be good to feel the cool ocean breeze and have time with my family. I’m definitely ready to get out of Newark for a bit.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome aboard United Airlines Flight 93 bound to San Francisco, California. All carry-on items should now be stored securely, either in an overhead bin or under the seat in front of you.”

Charlie gave Lydia a little tickle, “Here we go!”

“Beau, get up now! Something’s wrong!”

Without even thinking Beau jumped out of bed and ran into the living room.

“What’s wrong? Is Kate okay?”

Ellie pointed at the television with confusion.

Beau didn’t understand. “Wa-Thi-That’s the World Trade Center?! What happened?”

The North Tower had black, billowing smoke but there was no way a simple fire was giving off that much smoke.

“I don’t know. I just turned on the television and the news anchor said something about a plane crashing into the tower. They don’t know for sure what kind of plane it was.”

“How did a plane hit the World Trade Center? That doesn’t make sense. It had to be a small plane.” Beau couldn’t think straight. Did a plane really just hit the World Trade Center?

"Maybe the pilot lost control or there were air traffic control problems?" Ellie tried to make sense of it all, but sense was the last thing any of this was. Ellie and Beau stood motionless in front of the tv unable to sit down. They had friends in the tower. All of a sudden, a large plane came into the frame. Before Ellie could even breathe, it flew into the other tower.

"Another plane just flew into the tower!" The news anchor seemed completely shocked and Ellie could hear the whole news station let out gasps as they watched in horror like those at home.

"Beau, what's going on?" A scared sob broke out before Ellie could swallow it. Beau's instincts kicked in and he ran to the bedroom. He had his uniform on before Ellie could follow him back.

"Where are you going?"

"El, I've got to go help. They are going to need every uniform down there. I've got to go in."

"No, Beau, please don't leave me. I don't want to be alone and I don't want you down there. Please don't. It's your day off!"

Beau grabbed Ellie and pulled her in for a hug. Ellie's sobs were still hushed, but they reverberated throughout her body. Beau held her. He clenched his eyes shut, mustering up the resolve he would need to leave Ellie and go help where he was needed. He brought her face in front of his and looked into the eyes of the girl he had loved for fifteen years.

"I don't know what's going on, but I have to help. I love you." Beau was caught off guard by the emotion that broke his voice off. "You know, that, right? And that

tonight I will be back. Promise. But right now, I have to go out there. Can you go get Kate from school? I'll be back as soon as I can. I love you."

"I love you too. Please, be careful."

Beau gave her one more kiss and then he was gone. He tried calling the Sargent, but all the phones were down. Jumping into his car, he hoped he could even get down to the precinct. He knew every cop, firefighter, and paramedic were sure to be called down to the World Trade Center. As he came closer to the bridge, he suddenly quit breathing. The beautiful New York skyline had been desecrated with smoke and the Twin Towers, which usually defined the skyline, had huge fires enveloping them.

The Towers that boasted of America's prestige were now whispering one message— America was under attack.

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"Sit down! We have a bomb!"

Everyone quickly gathered at the back of the plane as cries started to break. Charlie instinctively made sure he was covering Rachel and Lydia as he jumped up to give another woman his seat.

"It's okay. Just do what they say." Charlie ignored the gripping fear in Jessica's eyes.

"Lord, what's going on? What do I do?" Charlie started praying the words before he could even process what was going on.

There were three guys with red bandanas, yelling at passengers to sit when all of a sudden, the plane made a hard turn right.

Passengers screamed as people tried to keep their balance.

Charlie looked at the guy beside him, "They've got control of the plane."

"Oh my gosh! Two planes flew into the World Trade Center!"

Charlie whipped around to a woman crying as she talked on the phone.

"What?" Charlie didn't understand. It had to be an organized attack. There's no way it was an accident.

The pieces came together in Charlie's mind immediately. If there was an organized attack with terrorists using planes, then United Flight 93 just became part of the terrifying narrative.

.....

Beau finally reached the Twin Towers, but instead of a symbol of American freedom, it looked more like a war zone. Papers flew around, the smoke was blinding and every few seconds there was a huge boom.

"You, when people come out of the tower, take them to a paramedic and make sure they get help!"

Beau didn't recognize the cop who was yelling at him, but finally, having a mission, Beau jogged to the front doors. He looked up to see falling objects. What was that? Beau suddenly was nauseous. The booms were people. Beau didn't want to think about how bad it must be up there for people to willingly jump.

"Keep your eyes up!" Beau looked up to a firefighter who was helping get people out of the buildings. The firefighter didn't have to say why. Running into the lobby, people started to funnel down the stairway. Beau grabbed a man, who looked to be in his sixties, from the stairway and threw the man's arms around his own, helping him out.

"What's your name, son?"

“Beau, sir.”

“Beau, I’m Richard, nice to meet you.”

“Richard, let’s get you to a paramedic. You’ve got a nasty gash above your left eye and your cough isn’t great either.”

Hurrying him to the ambulance, Beau left Richard with a young paramedic who looked like she was barely keeping it together.

“Richard, this nice lady is going to help you. Do what she says, okay?”

Richard leaned up on the stretcher and looked straight to Beau’s heart.

“Thank you, Beau. Be careful, you hear me?”

Beau pursed his lips and gave the older man a nod. For the next thirty minutes, Beau helped people out of the building. One after another. Men and women, all ages and races. Some were yelling about friends and colleagues who were still trapped. One woman grabbed Beau.

“Please, please, go get my friend. Her name is Carol and she’s on the 115th floor. Please, go get her, you have to help her.”

“Yes, ma’am. It’s okay. Firefighters are up there right now bringing people down.” Beau gave her his water and wiped the dirt from her face as he led her away.

The crashes were less often now, but with each one, Beau shivered. He wanted to help these people. With new resolve, Beau marched up to one of the Captains who was leading the rescue mission.

“Captain, I’ve got to go in and start getting people out of there.”

“Alright, but first I need you to help this man get to the nearest ambulance. It may be a few blocks away though but walk till you find one.”

"Yes, sir." Beau looked at the man who could hardly walk on his left leg. It was probably broken. The man's eyes looked empty as he grabbed onto Beau's shoulder.

"I've got you, come on, here we go, nice and slow."

"My brother's still in there."

Beau shot a helpless look at the burning Tower.

"Well, they've got people in there who are helping people down. They'll do everything they can."

"That's what I'm afraid of. My brother is a firefighter. He's the one running up those stairs instead of down."

Beau and the man kept limping along, trying to put distance between them and the fire. The man stopped and locked eyes at Beau.

"Nothing's ever going to be the same anymore, is it?"

Beau grabbed on tighter to the man, choked back his emotion, and put more of the man's weight on himself.

"Come on, we need to get you help now."

By now they were almost a block away from the site when Beau heard what sounded like an avalanche. He looked back just in time to push the man under a car. Beau squeezed under the car trying to shield the man's head.

"Don't breathe! Don't breathe!"

Beau held his breath as images flashed through his mind. How Ellie had captivated him from the moment he saw her, their first dance, Ellie telling him she was pregnant, and holding Kate for the first time. *Please, God, no.*

Even though seconds earlier the sound had been deafening, now everything was quiet. Beau leaned up ever so slightly, but he couldn't see anything. Everything was black and he couldn't breathe.

"Are you okay?" Beau tapped the guy underneath him.

"Yeah, I can't see. What happened?"

"I think the Tower fell. Here let's climb out. We need to get out of here."

The man looked at Beau and suddenly he didn't seem like a thirty-something, businessman in his nice suit: his eyes looked like a child's.

"My brother's dead."

They held onto each other like they were the only two left as they walked away from the rubble.

"Charlie, are you okay? Two planes just flew into the World Trade Center and another plane into the Pentagon."

"Listen, honey, some guys have control of the plane. They say they have a bomb on board. We're all at the back of the plane right now, but we're going to try to do something."

Charlie sucked in a quick breath as Megan sobs came fast and hard.

"Megan, listen to me. Tell Jack and Rachel I love them more than they'll ever know. I love you, Meg. I'm sorry. I love you so much. I've got to go. We're getting ready."

“Charlie, wait,” Charlie stopped just in time to bring the phone back to his ear Megan’s voice broke, but Charlie could hear the words that would help him get through the next few minutes, no matter what happened.

“I love you. I’ll leave the front light on. Always.”

“I love you, Meg.”

Megan heard someone in the background yell, “Let’s roll.” Before the line was disconnected.

.....

Jack sat in Chemistry class when whispers about an attack in New York started to make their way around the school. By fourth hour, school had been let out. Jack picked Rachel up without saying much. How do you explain terrorism? Jack pulled into the driveway and saw their grandparents car. His stomach immediately flopped. Why were they here? Something had to be wrong.

Megan met them at the door and drew them in her arms.

“Mom, what’s wrong?” Jack looked at his grandparents’ glimmering eyes.

Megan led them to the couch and tried to muster up a bit of a smile as she looked at Jack first and then Rachel. She was about to ruin the rest of her kids’ lives.

“I have some bad news for both of you. Dad’s plane had an accident and he didn’t make it. I’m so sorry.”

Megan barely got out the last few words as her sobs took over her. Her parents dropped their heads, wishing they could take it all away, as they hugged the kids, trying, unsuccessfully to shield them from the uncontrollable blow.

“It’s okay, to be sad.” Jack looked at his grandpa whisper the words, in complete shock. He always had looked so strong to Jack, but here, right now, he wasn’t. His grandpa kept talking, even though his voice cracked.

“Your grandma and I are really sad. I know your dad loved you kids.” Rachel glanced up at Jack as if she needed to gauge his response to process what was really going on.

Jack stared at the pain in his mother’s eyes, not able to believe he would never see his dad again. His dad would never walk through the kitchen, yelling at them every night when he got home from work, vowing he would never leave them again— he simply missed them too much. When they were younger, Jack and Rachel had always laugh and called him out on the lie.

“Daddy!” Rachel would squeal, “You said that yesterday, but you still went to work today!”

“Oh,” Charlie would slap his forehead in disgust. “You’re right. Okay, well, just one more day and then I’m really going to quit so we can build forts all day!”

Jack snapped back to the moment as his mom grabbed his hand. Jack peered at her as tears slowly started to fill his eyes. Didn’t kids just have nightmares that their parents would die, but it never was going to happen? And yet it was.

“Mom, that’s not fair.”

“What, sweetheart?” Megan tried to comfort Jack, trying to understand what he was thinking.

Jack looked at her with eyes of innocence. Eyes that all of a sudden had to deal with one of life’s hardest curveballs— death.

“We didn’t get to tell him bye.”

.....

Megan rolled over on her side and grabbed another tissue. She might as well have gone down in that plane with Charlie. Never had she thought this kind of emptiness existed. The television was quietly playing. Megan couldn't take her eyes away. Every few minutes, it showed a field in Pennsylvania with smoldering plane remains. All the pictures that came across the screen were forever etched in her heart. She didn't need to hear the news anchors to know what they were saying. At this point, Megan had memorized every word. Flight 93 went down in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. It was unknown whether the aircraft had been shot down or if the hijackers had crashed it. There were no survivors. Those four words pounded in her head.

The bedroom door slowly creaked open. Megan didn't even look.

“Meg, sweetheart, you need to eat something.”

“Not hungry.”

Her mom sat down on the edge of the bed and gently put her hand on Meg's arm.

“Meg.”

Megan slowly brought her eyes to the woman who had always been there to hold her hand. Megan noticed her face was tear-stained too. She was trying to keep herself together, but when a few tears still escaped, her mother looked at her with all the love and hurt in the world.

“I'm so sorry, sweetie. Know that Dad and I will be here as long as you need us. Jack and Rachel are watching television with your dad.”

Carol looked at her daughter, never wishing she could take someone's pain away so much. *Lord, give me the words.* Carol cleared her throat.

"I need you to eat just a few bites of this sandwich. I know you're not hungry, but you have to eat."

Megan glanced at the peanut butter and sandwich her mother had made and cut into triangles. Slowly pushing herself up, she tentatively took one half.

"Meg, I know there is nothing I could ever say, but we are all here wanting to do whatever we can. I know you can't see it now, but you all will get through this. It'll be ugly, but you will be okay." Carol tried to break through Megan's complete attention on the footage.

"How about I bring Dad and the kids in? I know you want the kids close."

Megan gave a slight nod. Carol left, returning a moment later with a shell-shocked son and daughter.

Megan held out her arms as Jack and Rachel climbed up into the bed. They both crawled up beneath her arms, desperate to be as close as possible to their mother.

"We're going to be okay. You know it? I love you both so much and Dad loved you more than anything." Megan's voice cracked. She squeezed her eyes shut, wishing she could will away this nightmare. "And he would want us to soldier on. If he saw us here crying like this what do you think he would say?"

Rachel's dark eyes looked up into her mother's loving eyes.

"He would make a silly joke."

They all chuckled, knowing full well that their constant joker would look at their tears for only a second before trying anything and everything to garner a smile.

Chapter 8

Megan grabbed Jack and Rachel's hand as they walked down the long aisle. She kept her eyes straight ahead, willing the tears to be held at bay. It had been a week since the accident and Megan still felt like tomorrow she would wake up to Charlie brewing a pot of coffee. Megan sat down on the first pew and looked at the empty space in front of her. They didn't even get the closer of seeing a casket. All that memorialized him was a large portrait. A picture Megan had taken earlier in the summer at a BBQ. Charlie was had a huge grin on his face as he stood behind the grill. Would she now sell the grill? The thought came out of left field. Or would she keep it and learn how to grill? The past week had been full of heartbreaking moments of both sentiment and practical. There were things she would have never dreamed of having to think about, but without Charlie suddenly she was worrying about silly, small things—like selling the grill.

Jack leaned over and grabbed her hand as the music began. Megan looked as Jack no longer looked like a teenager, but the man of the house. He had done anything and everything to keep her and Rachel laughing the past few days. Charlie would be so proud of him and how he had picked up where Charlie left off at leading the family.

Megan had mentioned to her mom yesterday that she was considering moving to Pennsylvania. She just felt like she and the kids needed to be near the place that Charlie had died. It was too hard staying here where everything reminded them of their dad.

Suddenly the preacher broke into Megan's thoughts. "We are gathered here today to remember a great husband, loving father, and faithful friend. If you knew Charlie Harper then you know the familiar feeling of your cheeks hurting from laughing so much. Charlie could keep people laughing like no one I have ever known. He will be missed and nothing nor no one can ever erase the impact he had on all of our lives."

Chapter 9

Beau grabbed another bucket and headed back into the rubble. Ground Zero wasn't a rescue mission, but one of recovery. Smoke had settled over the City to make sure they didn't forget that they had been attacked. Their city, their people had been desecrated by two planes full of American people and on Beau's watch. Beau wasn't just mad. He was furious. Having friends who worked with the fire department, Beau knew the anger and complete shock the men felt. Hundreds of firefighters had run into the tower to help anyone they could, knowing there was no way there could be any survivors. Not only were there firefighters who fell with the towers, but there were New York policemen and women who gave their lives.

He looked out over the rubble at the other New Yorkers working the massive pile. They all came back day after day, helping sort through the remains of what once was. There were things found that Beau would never be able to forget, but the most heartbreaking things weren't the body parts, papers, or office supplies. It was the identification cards they would come across every once in a while. It gave a face instead of a number. It reminded Beau that there were real people with lives and loved ones they left behind. It wasn't simply thousands of victims, but thousands of men and women showing up to work or boarding their plane thinking it was a routine Tuesday when it was actually their final day on this earth.

.....

"Mrs. Porter, your husband's body is shutting down. He doesn't have much longer. If there is any family you need to call, I would do it now." The nurse looked at the young woman who in a few hours would wear the despised label of a widow.

"I am very sorry, ma'am. Your husband is a hero." The nurse hated this part of the job. Those who worked at Ground Zero, sifting through the rubble, came in with various diseases due to their time with the toxins they encountered. Even though she had worked at the hospital for fifteen years, this part of the job never got easier. In fact, ever since the attacks, it had become harder. With one final sympathetic nod of the head, she turned around to leave Ellie Porter with the teenager, who looked like a fear-stricken child holding her mother's hand.

Chapter 10

Ellie slowly walked into a tiny, dark room. She was only forty-three, definitely not old enough to sit beside her husband's hospital bed to say goodbye. They still had a daughter to raise. Who would help Kate move into her college dorm or walk her down the aisle? Beau would never see his grandchildren or hold her hand as they entered retirement. She wasn't just losing her best friend, but also her future. Not only would Ellie not have Beau tomorrow, but she wouldn't have him five, ten, forty years from now. Ellie didn't know which realization suffocated her more. Falling into the chair, Ellie started to grieve the life they would never get to share together, the one they had dreamed about for the past ten years. Ten years simply wasn't enough time.

Ellie looked up as someone ever so slightly squeezed her hand. Beau blinked a few times slowly, willing himself to open his eyes. He looked over at Ellie whose eyes were bloodshot and empty.

"Why are you crying, pretty girl?"

Ellie rolled her eyes.

"Even in the hospital you act like nothing could possibly be wrong." Ellie breathed in, trying to muster up any composure she could,

"I can't do this without you, Beau. I don't want to. We're supposed to grow old together. Wh—" Ellie's voice broke. *Come on, El, be strong.*

"Wha- what am I supposed to do without you here beside me?"

Beau rubbed the back of her hand as he searched for the perfect words. He could feel his body losing strength with every second, but even that wasn't as painful as watching Ellie crumble beside him.

“El, you are the strongest girl I know. You are the best mother and will be more than good enough to make up for me not being here. I’m sorry. I wish I wasn’t sick.”

“I feel selfish.”

Beau looked at her confused.

Ellie sucked in a quick breath, willing herself to finish her sentence.

“We had more laughs and love in our twenty-years of marriage than some have in seventy-years. But I wanted more. I’m thankful for what we had, but it wasn’t enough for me. I guess it was never going to be enough. I wanted more. I want you to be here.”

What could Beau say? He wanted the same thing.

Chapter 11

The Camp Andes sign haunted Kate as she and Ellie drove under it. Was it too late to run away? Green trees hung over the winding, gravel road in order to give it more of the horror movie vibe. Eventually, they pulled up to the cabins.

Kate tugged at her bag, trying to heave it out of the trunk.

“Sweetie, I know you don’t want to be here, but I really think it will be good for you in the end. You have to get out of the house.”

“Okay, mom. I just don’t see why I have to leave you.”

“It’ll be over before you know it. I think you’ll like being outdoors, away from the craziness of the City. You’ve been through a lot the past couple of months and you deserve a break from it all.”

Kate hugged her mom before she could see Kate’s tears. Kate knew deep down this was just as hard on her mom as it was her. A few minutes later, Kate watched as their old car made its way further and further away from her.

“Campers, after you put your bags away, you can explore the campsite!”

Kate barely paid attention to the camp director. She gave out a puff of frustration as she threw her bag onto her top bunk. Why did she have to come to this stupid camp anyway? She would rather be at home with her mom, talking about dad as they made yet another round of pancakes. It had been three months since they said goodbye in the hospital. That Tuesday morning Kate was ashamed to admit that at first, she had been so relieved that her dad wasn’t at work, even though she felt terrible for all the other kids who had lost a mom or dad. Never did Kate think that her strong, brave dad was still in trouble and could die from lung cancer.

Kate couldn't help but feel a little angry toward her dad for insisting that he had to help with cleanup at Ground Zero. If he would have just stayed home and not gone down there, he would still be here with them. With that thought came a small tear in the corner of her eye. Kate would have given her right arm to talk to her father. Who was she going to play baseball with now? Or make pancakes with on Saturday morning?

Kate gave a chuckle thinking about her mom trying to make breakfast the week before. She had ended up burning the pancakes and smoke had filled the little house. They both ended up on the floor, laughing and crying, thinking about what dad would have to say about the fiasco.

I miss you, daddy. The whisper floated across Kate's heart, and she hoped God would pass the message along. She grabbed her glove and baseball and headed out to toss the ball around for a bit.

Chapter 12

Jack threw the basketball to his teammate as the July sun canopied the boys. They were two baskets away from winning the afternoon basketball tournament. Jack used all the force he could muster to lodge the ball across the court. As soon as the basketball left his hands, a flash of blue caught his eye. A girl who had to be around 17, wearing a baby-blue t-shirt, laughed as she walked beside three other girls. The crowd jumped to their feet in excitement. Jack didn't notice any of it.

"Dude!" Jack's best camp friend jogged over completely distraught. Jack couldn't take his eyes off of the girl. He had never been so enamored with anyone before.

"Jack are you listening to me?! We just scored; we only need one more basket and we win! Come on!"

Connor dragged Jack over to the bench, drawing Jack's attention away from the blonde beauty.

"Okay, boys, one more and we win! I know you can do it! Stay focused and let's bring the win home!" The coach lit a fire under the boys, but Jack was anything but focused. The mystery girl walked over to the stands and sat down with her friends. He looked over just in time to lock eyes with her.

"Buddy, are you good?" Connor gave Jack a little shake. What was up with him all of a sudden?

"Yeah, man, I'm fine. Let's wrap this up."

He glanced over before he threw the ball in, making eye contact. She gave him a slight smile, but that was all he needed.

Chapter 13

Kate had noticed him almost immediately and though she was interested, she scurried along after the game ended. Better to play it cool and see if he follows her.

“Kate, what is wrong with you? Your cheeks are red.”

Kate gave her the side-eye. “Nothing. Let’s go get some ice cream.”

Kate put him out of her mind for the rest of the day. She was too young anyway to mess around with boys. Thinking about falling in love wasn’t simply going to be the “Happy Ever After” ending but would be another void of missing her dad. Another reminder that he wasn’t here.

Kate felt a tear start to cloud her vision and willed it away. She didn’t want to get married. It wouldn’t be the way she had always dreamed of, anyway. She wouldn’t grip her doting father’s strong arm as he carried her down the aisle. During the reception, her parents wouldn’t get lost in each other’s eyes as they danced to their own wedding song while Kate watched on with love. She saw how her mom had lost not only her best friend but herself too when Kate’s dad died. Kate wouldn’t ever put herself in a situation, especially marriage, where she would endure such a loss because someone was no longer beside her.

.....

Three days after Jack first laid eyes on the mystery girl, they were in the same group for canoeing. He glanced over as she was straightening her lifejacket. What could go wrong? Jack walked over feigning confidence.

“Hey, I’m Jack.”

Kate brushed her hair out of her eyes, pulling it behind her ear, looking down at the hand extended.

“I’m Kate. Nice to meet you.” It was hard not to notice the darkest eyes she had ever seen. Kate went back to buckling her lifejacket instead of focusing on the boy standing in front of her.

“Have you enjoyed camp so far? I mean, uh, is this your first year? It’s mine and I enjoy it alright. Sure, it gets annoying sometimes, but there are times it’s been fun.” Jack finally took a breath long enough to look at Kate, who was politely smiling at him. Probably waiting to get a word in.

“Yeah. It’s been pretty fun. I guess.”

The camp counselor thankfully broke up the awkward conversation.

“Everybody pair off and get a canoe! We’ll start floating in 5 minutes.”

Jack’s eyes cut over to Kate quickly.

“Um, you wanna be my partner?”

“Sure.”

Usually, Kate was annoyed with all of these stupid camp activities, but today she thought she might actually enjoy it.

Chapter 14

"You've seriously never seen it?" Jack's disgust drew an easy laugh out of Kate.

"No, I'm sorry. My taste in stupid, guy movies have been lacking lately, specifically the past seventeen years."

"Kate, you've got to watch it. It's hilarious." Jack tried telling her about one of the scenes.

"The main character loses a bet and has to walk up to these different girls acting like he's meeting someone for a blind date."

"Oh, well, that sounds like something I have to watch." Her voice dripped with sarcasm, even though she felt herself on the verge of uncontrollable laughter at Jack's description of the comedy.

All of a sudden Kate found herself underwater when Jack caught her arm and brought her up to the surface.

"Jack Harper, you're flipping us on purpose! You better quit!"

"Kate, I know this is hard to believe, but maybe I'm just not great at this and can't help that we keep flipping this thing over."

It took both of them to turn the canoe right side up.

Kate rolled her eyes. There were about 15 canoes in all, and they all took turns getting a nice dunking. Jack dragged the canoe over to the side of the lake so they could get back in easier. Jack held out his hand for Kate to climb in. Slowly, Jack Harper was making his way into Kate Porter's heart.

Chapter 15

Kate hadn't planned to be talking to Jack about her dad. She had no idea his dad had died on Flight 93.

"Jack, I'm really sorry about your dad."

"It's okay. I don't expect you to understand, but I figured you should now. Some days are easier than others. I guess today is just one of the harder days. I really wish he could see the man I'm growing up to be. And of course, I would love for him to meet you." Jack gave a slight smile amidst the serious conversation.

"Jack, there's something you should know. I don't talk about it and we really don't have to get into it today, but I do understand what you're going through."

Jack gave her a confused look. Kate forged ahead, knowing if she paused too long, she wouldn't tell him.

"My dad was a cop in New York. He was off on September 11th but went in any way pretty soon after the planes hit. He helped with the recovery at Ground Zero and because of his work there, he died of lung cancer. I understand the pain of having your father there one moment and gone the next and no matter how much you wish things would change, he'll never come back. I get it, Jack."

Jack looked at Kate suddenly forgetting his own grief and wondering how to carry hers. Jack pulled her in and tried to comfort her.

"I'm sorry, Kate. I didn't know."

"Now you do. It's okay. It's been a few months."

"I wonder if it ever gets easier. You know? Like after a while will it stop hurting so much?"

Kate pursed her lips together, her insides screaming that the pain would never let up. Kate sat up, ready to push the pain down.

“Have I ever told you about how my mom lost me in the mall when I was four?”

Jack tried to ride the rollercoaster of such a topic change.

“Um, no, I don’t think so.”

“Well, we were in a department store and for some reason, I still don’t understand there was a giant bear mascot walking around.”

“What? Why?”

“I have no clue, maybe advertising their woodland section. That’s not the point anyway! Just listen.”

“Alright, alright. So, there’s a giant bear.”

“Yes, and my mom was too focused on shopping for a dress that she didn’t really clue into the giant bear, but I saw it. Obviously when a four-year-old little girl, especially an angel like myself”— Kate emphasized angel by dramatically placing her hand over her heart, drawing an eye roll from Jack— “sees a bear she’ll do the only logical thing. So, I did. I ran. I weaved in and out of clothes racks till I went to the other side of the store, breathing hard. I was so scared. I saw a dressing room and decided the bear couldn’t fit in there, so I hid in one of the rooms behind a chair. By this point, my mom had realized I was gone and started freaking out, as any mother would. After about three minutes, this old woman came in and was just about to start changing when I screamed bloody murder, terrified of what I was about to see. I bolted out of the dressing room and crashed into a worker who ended up taking me to my mom at the front of the store. Now I have an unhealthy fear of bears, department stores, and changing rooms.”

Jack couldn't take it anymore he threw his head back, laughing from his core.

All of a sudden, everything clicked. The world seemed to stop for just a second.

Kate realized in that moment of making Jack laugh, she wanted to spend the rest of her life doing just that. Kate started slightly shaking, not understanding what had just happened. Whatever it was, she knew things would never be the same now.

Chapter 16

The camp was winding down and Kate was ready to get home and see her mom. Though Kate kept her guard up with everyone else, her mother could always sneak past the barriers Kate had built around her heart. Kate always enjoyed summer camp at the Outer Banks. It was nice to get away for a while and be by herself. The ocean and greenery that surrounded her was something that though she may search for, she would never be able to find anything like it in New York.

Her mom's black Nissan pulled up. Their eyes said it all. Two weeks was too long to go without each other. Kate ran and gave a big hug to her mother who was waiting with her arms opened wide.

"How was it, sweetheart?"

"It was good, but I'm glad to see you and head back home. Can we grab a pizza for supper?" Nothing said home like a thin crust from Ricardo's.

"Of course! Here let me help you with your bag."

They started on the eight-hour trip back home, laughing and talking. Kate had managed to keep her secret till hour five when suddenly her mom cracked her open.

"So, what aren't you telling me? What else happened at camp?"

Kate looked at her mom in shock, giving her best questioning laugh.

"Wha-what are you talking about? That's ridiculous there's nothing I'm not telling you."

"Katherine. What was it? Did you go streaking during the night? Play hooky during an afternoon activity?" Ellie suddenly paused. Giving her daughter a knowing side-eye glance.

“Oh, I know exactly what happened.”

Kate’s heart started beating harder. Keep cool, Kate. There’s no way she knows.

“So, what’s his name?” Ellie asked with a knowingly glint in her eye.

Kate lost the little composure she had.

“How in the world did you know, mom? Seriously, what did you spy on me or something?”

A deep belly laugh found its way out of Ellie as she tried to explain. “I knew it! I had the same look in my eyes when I first met your dad!”

Kate’s stomach constricted at the mention of her dad. She was really starting to fall for Jack. They had spent almost every day for the past two weeks together. They took walks, got ice-cream, and played all the activities together. She was violating her number one rule— don’t ever get attached. If you’re attached then when they leave, they leave with your heart too. No one was guaranteed tomorrow. Better to just keep to herself. Besides, if there was one thing she was good at, it was being alone.

“Mom, it’s nothing really. We are just friends. His name is Jack and he’s nice, but don’t make a big deal out of it because it’s not.”

Ellie gave her daughter a sympathetic look. Might as well go ahead and have the conversation with her now. She had seen that it was coming and now was as good a time as any.

“Kate, sweetie, I know you don’t want to let anyone in, but you can’t live your life like that. It’s a miserable way to go through life, never living life to the fullest by loving and receiving love in return. What is so bad about getting close to someone? What

are you so afraid of?" Ellie finally took a breath and looked at her daughter just in time to see a single tear fall. Pulling over immediately, Ellie enveloped Kate in a hug.

Kate didn't sob, but the overwhelming sadness was mostly silent. The worst kind. Every once in a while her body moved up and down as she gave way to the grief.

"Mom, I loved dad. With everything in me, you two were my complete world. Your love was all I knew. One day everything is normal and we're all watching a movie, talking with one another, and the next he doesn't come home, and he's gone forever, just like that. Why am I afraid to let anyone in? Because I can't handle another loss like that. I can't, Mom, so if that means that I lock my heart up, so be it. I can't take any more hits like losing Dad."

Ellie soon couldn't figure out which tears were Kate's, and which were hers.

"You know, there are days that I miss your dad so much I'm sure that I can't go along anymore. The pain is suffocating, and I would do anything to have your dad beside me, but no matter how hard it is now that he's gone, the times we did have together make the pain all worth it. If I had to do it all over again, knowing me and your dad would have limited time and would never grow old together, I would still choose your dad and have the wonderful years we did together. The magic of our time together doesn't even hold a candle to the difficult times."

Kate dried her tears as they rode the rest of the way talking about lighter things. By the time they got to Staten Island, Jack had already asked to call her the next night. Kate was already in for the ride of her life. Whether she wanted to be or not.

Chapter 17

After a few months of daily phone calls, Jack was on his way to New York to visit Kate with his family. His nerves were at an all-time high, but he also had never been so excited. Jack knew his mom and sister were going to absolutely love Kate.

The taxi pulled up to a modest two-story yellow house. Jack's mom paid the driver as they all hopped out of the car. Kate came barreling down the front steps just as Jack had pulled his suitcase from the trunk.

"Welcome to Staten Island, Harper family!" Kate gave one of her best smiles.

"Mom, Rachel, this is Kate. Kate, this is my family." Suddenly Kate remembered what was happening and tried not to let her nervousness show on her face.

Jack's mom slowly approached Kate.

"Is it okay if I give you a hug? Jack talks about you so much I feel like I already know you!"

"Of course!" Kate hugged the sweet woman, surprised at their immediate kindness.

"Here let me help with your bags."

Ellie was coming out of the house as the crew made their way up the walk. After a quick round of introductions, everyone went into the house for cookies.

Chapter 18

Kate loved watching the Harper family experience Times Square. Growing up in New York, she had grown numb to the thrill of the City, but she enjoyed experiencing everything through Jack's eyes. He couldn't believe all the lights and crowds.

Ellie motioned at Kate and Jack.

"Okay, you two let me get a picture."

Jack threw his arm around Kate as they smiled in front of a ginormous billboard.

"I just can't believe this is where you guys live. It's amazing!" Megan spun around, looking up at all Times Square held. The lights almost blinded her. There was a billboard for *Wicked*, ads for television shows, and a commercial playing for a perfume. It was hard to focus on all the different images and videos that played.

Kate smiled up at Megan. She had instantly been drawn to Jack's family and already loved being around them.

"Are you getting settled in Pennsylvania? Jack told me you had moved about a year ago." Jack had told Kate that they had moved in order to be closer to where their dad had died. It had helped the grieving process.

Megan lowered her head for just a second and Kate regretted saying anything. Megan looked at Kate and Kate could see the deep sadness in her eyes.

"Yes, we are. Thank you for asking. It's both hard and helpful to be where Charlie passed away. But I wouldn't trade it for anything. We loved San Francisco, but we're happy in Pennsylvania. It was a nice change."

Kate nodded and smiled, wondering how they had moved across the country after their dad had died. Being in New York was hard sometimes, especially as they had

recently started rebuilding at Ground Zero, but the City was all Kate had ever known and couldn't imagine leaving her home. Jack called for Kate to come look at something and just like that Kate's thoughts fell away.

Chapter 19

Kate wasn't in love. She wouldn't let herself. But it was something, right? Was there even a word for it? If she brought Jack completely into her heart, then it would only end in heartache and misery. Lately, her thought process had been in dangerous territory. Kate didn't have to stretch her imagination far when thinking about marrying Jack. She could see them spending nights laughing because they couldn't stop talking, sneaking away for a weekend road trip, raising babies while still acting like kids themselves. Kate could not only see it but feel it, 100%. And the feeling was the hardest thing to deal with. She not only dreamed about it but felt the dream all the way to her toes. She had to end it quick. Kate was almost to the level of no return where love was concerned.

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Kate knew she had to do it quickly before she lost the smidgen of determination she had mustered up. It wasn't that she wanted to end it with Jack, but she had to. She knew she was losing herself to him, but the scary thing was she didn't mind. Because even if she lost part of herself, she was gaining him. The calmness she felt about the whole thing is what scared her more than anything. She had to remember to keep her guard up. Better to let Jack go now so he could find someone who could freely give him their heart. Kate simply couldn't. Kate asked Jack to sit on the front porch with her. They sat in silence for a few minutes before she finally was able to talk.

“Jack, this isn't going to work.”

Jack looked at Kate in horror.

“What? What are you talking about?”

"Us. We're too young, and I think we just need to call this off before it gets any more serious. I want to focus on school right now and can't be distracted." Kate hoped she had made the bogus excuse believable enough. She didn't care about school, he wasn't a distraction, and they were young, but that really didn't matter in the end. What mattered was, Kate was getting too attached and Jack saw right through her.

"You want to know something, Kate, I can't imagine spending all my days with someone. I mean seriously. Spending the rest of your life with one person. That seems crazy! Except when I think about you. Then it would be easy, natural to have someone by my side for the years to come. The way we are together is how love is supposed to be. As far as I can see. We're like magnets. In a crowded room, no matter how far apart we are, we somehow always find each other. I can't imagine being with anyone else. This is what it's supposed to be like in life. Me and you together. Forever. How can you not see it?"

Kate kept her eyes anywhere but staring into his. He always could see straight through her and she hated it.

"Jack, I just can't do this right now."

"We get caught up in our own world. The problem is I want to stay in the world, while you try anything you can to get out of it. It's not that you hate it, but you love it and that terrifies you. You're starting to love me. Well, you know what, Kate? I already do love you. We're perfect for each other and you know it. But if you want to quit, fine. But just know that whenever you're ready to pick up the phone one day or drive down to Pennsylvania, I'll be waiting. You're it for me, Kate. Even if you can't see that right now."

Jack hopped up and walked back in the house just in time to miss Kate's first tears of the heartbreak.

Chapter 20

The next day, Jack and his family left. He gave her a slight hug and whispered in her ear that he would be waiting, no matter how long it took. Kate watched as the taxi pulled away, knowing she loved the boy inside of the yellow cab. The days turned into weeks, and suddenly six months had passed. Kate tried to find her new normal. Even though she wouldn't admit it to herself, she knew that she desperately missed Jack. She tried not to think about what he was doing, if he missed her, or if he had moved on, but the thoughts still snuck in at the most inopportune times. Kate was realizing as time went on and especially as she entered into year two without Jack Harper, that she had made a huge mistake. Maybe it was time she did let someone in.

Chapter 21

"Hello, who is this?"

"Hi, It-It's-uh, It's Kate. Kate Porter."

"Oh, hey, Kate. Wow, I haven't talked to you in forever. What's up? It's pretty late."

"Yeah, uh. Sorry about that. I just wanted to tell you something really quick."

Suddenly silence took over. Did she really have to tell him? Why did she call again? She knew she had to. Kate had lived in a prison the past four years and maybe if she finally just told him exactly what she thought of him she could finally escape. Suddenly words started to form. Once they started there was no stopping them. Kate let loose.

"Okay, yeah, I just wanted to call and tell you how much I hate you. I really do. I hate that I haven't seen you in two years and yet I think about you all the time. I have met countless guys, some even thought I hung the moon, but I never wanted any of them more than I want you. I mean really great guys, okay, Jack? And guess what— every single one of them paled in comparison to you. Why is it that I got you out of my life, but I can't seem to get you out of my heart? You're a real piece of work, you know that? I hate you and the power you have over me. You are the only one I have wanted over the years. At any given moment if someone asked me who I wanted your name runs roll off my tongue without hesitation."

Finally taking a breath, Kate finally felt the tears come. *No, push them down, Kate. Remember you never were going to let anyone in? Don't let him have this emotion from you. Shut it down, you're fine. You don't need anyone, remember?* But it wasn't that

she realized she needed Jack, but that she wanted him. And the wanting was what really had kept her up at night all these years.

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Jack's stomach was in his throat, unsure of how to respond. He had loved her all this time and had never given up on the possibility that she may come back for him. Underneath all the anger in her voice, he heard the thing that Kate tried to hide more than anything.

Fear. Kate had never wanted to fall in love, never wanted to need someone. At any point tragedy could happen and take the person you love the most away, but after all this time on her own she had realized that no matter how much time she would have with Jack, it was worth it to be with him even for a little bit. There was no need to constantly worry about what would happen.

"Jack?"

"Yeah, I'm here." Jack cleared his throat, trying to regain composure.

"I love you and I don't care what I have to do, I want you to be in my life."

Jack's heart leaped, realizing that his hope was finally coming true.

"Kate, I'll see you tomorrow. I'll catch the first flight out and be in the City tomorrow morning by 11:00. Would you mind picking me up at the airport?"

Chapter 22

Six weeks later, Kate fixed her veil in front of the large mirror. Her room in the back of the church had finally cleared out and it was only her as she waited for her mother to come get her.

Kate missed her dad as she knew she would just like she knew Jack missed his father on this special day. A soft knock came, and Kate turned around as her mom opened the door.

“Oh, Kate, you look absolutely beautiful.”

“Thanks, mom.” Kate wiped a tear from her mom’s cheek.

“Are you ready to go?”

“Absolutely. It took a little bit of work to get me here, huh?”

Ellie smiled at her daughter who had grown so much in the past year. Ellie had prayed that she would open her heart up to Jack and she was so thankful she got to see their story unfold.

“Just a little. Kate, I know your dad would be so proud of you. You know that right?”

Kate nodded her head. Emotions had gripped her tongue.

“Let’s go, mom. I’m ready.”

The church doors opened, and Kate glided down the aisle, in the easiest walk of her life. She couldn’t imagine missing out on this moment for anything. It came time for the vows, and Kate forced herself to keep her voice steady. She so badly wanted to be able to say everything she wanted to.

“Jack, I have never felt the way I feel about you to anyone else. You get quiet sometimes., escaping somewhere else and at times it takes a few minutes to come back. Other times you’re the center of the moment. Everyone gives you attention, but my eyes never stray. People have asked me over the years, ‘What is your dream? If you could have anything, be anything, or do anything what would it be?’ I smile to myself. The answer is easy. It comes naturally and without hesitation from my heart. I want to marry the boy who captured my heart even when I thought I had it locked away. I want to sit beside him as we drink our morning coffee, giggle as we share something just between the two of us and raise a family, that our parents— both those here and those who aren’t with us anymore— would be proud of. If I could have anything, I would ask for you every time; if I could be anything, I would be yours’ if I could do anything, I’d be on your sideline for the rest of my life. Today, my desire is finally fulfilled. I can’t wait for every second of our time together— no matter how short or long.”

Epilogue

Kate saw Jack waiting for her with the rose in his hand. As soon as Jack saw her, he walked over and simply kissed her forehead.

“I love you.”

“I love you too.” She looked up at him with adoration and sadness, wishing they didn’t share this in common.

Jack handed her the rose and grabbed her hand as they walked towards the bronze wall. Beau had heroically worked here in the aftermath of 9/11 and now they could come here to remember his sacrifice. Kate kissed the flower and tossed it into the water that streamed into where the Twin Towers once stood. The ashes had settled after all these years. The feel of Jack’s hand in hers reminded her of that and the reality that the Twin Towers no longer stood would forever be a beacon of sacrifice.