

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

THAT DAY IN SPRING

Bj Sheppard

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

THAT DAY IN SPRING

By BJ Sheppard

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

Two men embrace lovingly. The taller of the men holds back tears as he grips his hand into the others long, dark hair. His face is etched with emotion, resting his chin in the crook of the others neck, his beard rough from lack of care. His eyes are haunted, behind them a story that has sparked a great sense of feeling inside him; his lips quiver, holding back the words he needs to say.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

These two men have known each other since they were teenagers, and have been in love almost as long. They've laughed, fought and cried together. Through it all, their love never wavered. However, something recently occurred that has shaken them to the core. What happened and how do they pull through it?

Please give this couple the happy ending they deserve. :)

Please no death (of the MCs), threesomes, or BDSM. This couple has been through a lot and needs some fluff. Even though this picture was taken from the TV show Spartacus: War of the Damned, it is not necessary for the story to be historical. I actually prefer a modern love story.

Thank you!

Mw138

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: established couples, hurt/comfort, amnesia, non-explicit, tearjerker

Word Count: 28,865

THAT DAY IN SPRING

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Memories. Memories are like magic; indelible images permanently cast on the brain to relive in the face of sorrow, bound for eternity in the annals of the human mind. They are a safety net that catches you just before the fall. The good memories buoy you when the world confronts you in an attack of such gravity it threatens to break the mast and leave you endlessly floating on a sea of your own making. The bad ones, well, they have their place too, they guide you home in their own way. Bad memories teach you which way to turn when the road forks precariously, your compass breaks and the trail of breadcrumbs you left seems to have been eaten by birds. Lennox and I were lucky. We found a home in each other and we swore all along that no matter where life would take us, we would go there together, each other's Northern Star that would lead us to the place we were meant to be.

Memories save us from ourselves. But what happens when the memories vanish? I never thought I'd say this, but I envied Lennox for every memory he lost; every memory I was forced to collect that I would never share with him; every memory that acted as a cloud that covered the star that would lead me back. I hated myself for not being able to go back, but somewhere deep inside, I hated him more for the bliss that was forgetting.

It's impossible to know where the memories go when the brain can no longer recall them. I will never know what happened inside his head to erase the part of him that kept me from hitting rock bottom. I thought I had found the basement, but there is always another floor to fall through. This is the story of what happened, how two lives were damaged that day in Spring.

Twenty-eight Days Before:

I could only tell what time it was from the way the sunlight bled through the slats of the blinds, casting an ethereal glow around the dark corona of Lennox's messy hair. Near-black tendrils curled about his face, his lips slightly parted in soft breaths as his eyes darted back and forth behind closed lids. I noticed every tiny detail about this man, because, as he had once told me, that is what love is; it is hidden in the details, tiny observations, collected and committed to

memory, stoking a fire inside you as you yearn for the person at whom that love is aimed. I woke before him every day, without fail, and watched while he slept his still-silent sleep, marveling in the luck that had brought me such an unexpected and undeserved gift all those years ago. But there was something different about that morning, a feeling I could not attach words to, but that lanced through my system like white light and adrenaline and the aftermath of the most treasured of experiences. Today was the day.

I shuffled further under the blankets, let my knuckles drift against the warm, hairless skin over his ribs and smiled to myself at how this man, this perfect man, would be mine for the rest of our days. My fingers traced circles around the dark nubs of his nipples; followed a road map painted by the ridges of his ribs. Through my tender advances, he never once stirred, as if the years together had acclimatized him to the wondering fascination of my touch on his skin. It felt like some dam might burst and I would explode with excitement if I kept myself detailing every lithe line of his body, so I pulled my hand away, twisted onto my back and stared up at the ceiling fan, spinning round and round and round above my head, casting a cool breeze down onto me that helped to dull the heat I was feeling. The rotating blades helped me calm myself; fear and nerves knotting inside me were washed away by the light whirl of the circling blades. This day would be a very different day indeed.

I lay there in the silence, letting time be counted down by each inaudible rotation of the blades like a stopwatch, winding down the seconds to the finish line. Five. Four. Three. Two. One.

I reached beside me to the dresser, slowly pulling open the drawer of the wooden chest so as not to make a sound that might wake Lennox. This moment had been plaguing me for weeks, playing on my mind in panoramic views with digital audio and the clarity of twenty-twenty vision, but this morning was different, because it was the morning the moment would become reality. I grabbed the small box from beneath a pile of clothes, its weight in my hand heavier than it had been weeks previously when I had found it. I turned the velvet case over and over in my hands; so small, yet so magnificently massive all at the same time. I did not need to open it, nor look at it one more time, as all the fantasies involving this one small item had seen me learn every fascinating detail of what was inside. I closed the drawer and turned back onto my side.

Lennox still rested where he had been before, one hand supporting his head while the other, the left, lay between us on the sheets. Flecks of paint lined his

fingernails, and though I hadn't seen any of his latest work, I knew that what he had created would be one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen. I knew this because they were made by the most beautiful man I had ever seen. I shifted closer to him until my face was inches from his, my top lip quivering as I fought the need to wake him with a kiss that would derail my concentration and deviate from the way I had planned this moment. It was not possible to love him any more than I did. That love was a part of me, spliced into my DNA as if my life had started the moment I met him all those years ago.

Gently, I placed the box on the white covers, lifted the lid, and pulled the ring out, carefully, between my thumb and forefinger. Again, I noticed the weight of it, though rational thought told me that this one symbol would mean nothing more to us than a visible reminder of the chance to celebrate our love before the eyes of our friends and family and have it recognized in the state of Massachusetts. Before my mind could wander away from the beauty of the moment, I gently slipped the ring on the fourth finger of his left hand, closed the box, and stored it away in the drawer.

Only seconds passed, but it felt like eternity before his eyes fluttered open, sleep blurring his vision until he blinked a few times and those brown eyes found me before him.

“Good morning,” he croaked, beaming at me with the smile that had the power to reduce me to nothing more than a quaking mess, even twenty years after I first saw it.

“Good morning back,” I answered, nerves crippling me as I waited for the moment he realized what I was doing.

Lennox leaned towards me, kissed me deeply as I closed my eyes and let myself get lost in his presence.

“Have you been watching me sleep again?” he asked.

“I couldn't help myself,” I answered, which was, and had been, true for decades of my life. “You know I can't keep my eyes off of you.”

He laughed, a deep rumbling laugh from deep in his chest, as he flipped over onto his back, his golden skin glowing in the morning light as it poured between the blinds. As he turned, his hair migrated across his face, and he lifted his hand to brush it from his eyes. As he moved to place his hand on mine, he saw the ring, his eyes widening as he looked, first at his hand, and then to me. I licked my dry lips, and shuffled slightly closer.

“When I met you, I was nothing,” I began, reciting the speech that I had been revising and rehearsing every second of every day leading up to that point. “You made me everything I am today, and I will never be able to repay you for all the love and happiness you have given me.”

His eyes were still wide as they vacillated between the new addition to his left hand and the man at his side professing his love.

“We have had the most beautiful life together. But now I want to make it more. A dedication to love you until there is no more life in my body; until the world ends and there is nothing left of me but dust. And even then, I promise to love you still.”

I shuffled out from beneath the covers and planted one knee on the floor beside the bed, taking his ringed hand in my own.

“Lennox DuWitt, will you marry me?” The words were so soft they were barely a whisper, and yet seemed to echo into the silence that followed them.

Once again, Lennox looked down at his hand, and I noticed the moisture welling in his eyes. With one solitary tear rolling down the side of his face, he nodded to me, unable, it seemed, to speak a word. Instead he pulled me back onto the bed, right across to his side until I was lying on him.

“Are you serious? You want to marry me?” he asked, as more tears trickled from his eyes.

“As a heart attack. I should have done this years ago, Baby,” I admitted. “There was never any question that you and I were meant to be together.”

And, with that, he pulled me into a kiss so deep I thought he might swallow me whole, and I would let him, willingly. This was the man I wanted to be joined to forever, and after so many years of being by his side, I was about to be a part of him for the rest of our days. That morning was something I would never, ever forget.

One Hundred and Fifty-nine Days After:

I sat across the bar watching Warren as he deftly spun a vodka bottle in his hand, winking at the woman next to me as he slid another shot her way. After flirting with the aging blonde, he replaced the bottle on the shelf behind the register and came back to face me, throwing a rag over his shoulder and completing the image of the classic stereotype of every bartender from here to

Cheers. This little trip had become a part of my routine on the way home every night, and true to form, Warren, masquerading as the quintessential straight barman-type, when in actual fact he was a flaming queen that ruled the scene with exaggerated panache, did not once fail to make me feel worse in my predicament. Warren was all hard lines, sweeping sandy blonde hair, with a waistline that I envied on a daily basis. We had met through a friend of a friend, but in the weeks following the incident, we had grown closer as I sought refuge in his place of work. Though there wasn't a bad bone in his body, I could tell that my continued presence as a prop at the end of his bar was starting to grate on him, if only for the simple fact that mine was a predicament without a simple solution. I averted my gaze, trying to keep from seeing the sadness behind his eyes, warring with the frustration he no doubt felt at this waste of a man sitting before him. He grabbed the rag from his shoulder, making large exaggerated sweeps across the sticky bar top and sighed, a little too loud.

"You can't keep doing this, Ryan," he said, as I looked down into the glass of ginger ale clenched in my hands. "It's killing you, man."

"What's the alternative?" I asked. A question I'd asked a thousand times before but for which I had never received a satisfactory response from the man.

"You already left," he replied. "You don't have to keep torturing yourself by going back every day."

"I've loved him my whole life, Warren. I can't just leave him like that. None of this is his fault."

And that was the truth. Lennox had done nothing to deserve what had happened to him, had never courted the thing that had created a rift between us that was so wide it seemed impossible to cross. I kept my eyes averted from Warren's, praying he wouldn't see how close I actually was to just giving up all together. And the truth was, I had thought about what he was suggesting endlessly since I decided to leave. Could I simply just cut and run after all we had been through? Could I save myself at the expense of the man I loved? And every time I asked myself these questions, the answers were always the same. I couldn't do a damn thing but the thing I was doing.

I turned the tumbler of ginger ale around in my hands, wishing it would magically transform into something stronger, something that would take the edge off whatever I was feeling. But I was driving, so I knew that part of the night would have to wait; wait until I was locked in the dingy apartment I was subletting in the district neighboring the one where our house was located,

where Lennox was now probably settling down to read a book or grab some sleep.

The whole idea of him being there alone made my heart hurt, so I tried to push it from my mind, taking a long pull from my glass until the ice clinked against my teeth,

“Of course it’s not his fault,” Warren countered, placing a calming hand on the back of my own as I set my glass down on the bar. “But there is no benefit to you staying. You are driving yourself into the ground, Ryan. When was the last time you slept?”

“It’s been a while,” I laughed, though the joke died as soon as it left my lips.

“He’ll be fine without you,” he answered, his tone soft, trying not to corner me when I was feeling as low as I was. “He’ll just assume you had to go away.” His voice lilted at the last, almost pleading with me to put myself first, assuming that what had happened several times before, Lennox’s fear and confusion, would never happen again.

“And every day he’ll worry when I don’t come home. He’ll call, and I’ll have to lie. I’ve had enough of lying to him. I don’t want to do it anymore.”

Our eyes locked, and he knew I was never backing down. True, I didn’t share our house with Lennox any more. I had left, and he was none the wiser, but, if it were in my ability to save him the grief of realizing that, to spare him feeling that loss because of something outside of his control, then I vowed to take every measure I could to keep up the charade. He might never be the same again, but the least I could do was to try and be the same for him. After all the years we were there for each other, I needed to be there for him; maybe now more than ever.

I pulled my hand from beneath Warren’s as I climbed off the bar stool, grabbing my jacket from the slick bar surface and throwing it on over the yellowing shirt I was wearing that was long past needing laundering. Straightening my collar, I did my best to straighten out myself as well, pulling myself up into a stance of confidence, while underneath it I had none.

“Thanks, Warren. I appreciate it.”

And I did.

Driving back to the apartment, I took every side street I could, three rights and a left taking me in huge sweeping squares across the city, until after an

hour had passed, I was parked back outside my old house. It looked different, smaller somehow, and though I was not going to go inside, I could imagine every little thing Lennox was doing on the other side of the door. I imagined him washing dishes, or settling down on the sofa to eat a late night bowl of Captain Crunch. I sat and just watched the house silently, creating a world behind the door I would not be a part of again. I did this more often than I cared to admit, but it was a routine I had developed that made me feel just that little bit closer to the life I had abandoned when the going got too rough. This wasn't the first, and most certainly would not be the last, time I would sit outside the house we bought together and conjure images of normalcy behind the walls of the house that was no longer my home.

The top bedroom window went dark after a while, and I knew Lennox had gone to bed, ready to close his eyes to another day that would never matter again. I fired up the engine, put the car in drive, and headed straight back to the apartment, wishing to return to a day that only ever existed in my own mind. As I parked the car in the lot outside the run-down apartment complex I refused to refer to as home, I gripped the wheel until my knuckles turned white.

The frustration was overbearing, like a child on Christmas Eve just praying for the clock to chime twelve and for it to be tomorrow already. But in my world, tomorrows were pretty hard to come by.

Seven Thousand, Two Hundred and Ninety-nine Days Before:

Before he arrived, high school was like a war zone, it was dog eat dog and only the alpha would ever survive. I was lucky to be on the side of the big dogs. No one knew how good I was at math because they were all too focused on how many wins I'd had for the wrestling team. I guess you could say I was a jock, but to me I was a nobody, because nobody really knew a thing about me except I had mastered the double-leg take-down at the age of fourteen.

As a sixteen-year-old kid in high school, I was still just a one-trick pony. I would have given up that mantel long before I actually did, were it not for the fixed place at the lunch table and my ability to evade getting chucked in a dumpster at every juncture. Wrestling was my mask, and I wore it so well no one would ever have been able to tell it was not my real face at all.

There was always a loneliness that came with pretending to be something you're not. There was never a soul to confide in, anyone to trust, anyone to

press me to be the person I truly was; all that loneliness to the extent that, though I knew I was different, I never truly knew what it was that made me that way. That all changed the day Lennox arrived.

Every guy in the wrestling club seemed to want to be my friend and take me down all at the same time, and it confused me why it was like this. Sure I was taller and physically bigger than most of the guys in the club, but most were my friends from the lunch room. Put us in a singlet and it was like we were trained to attack, to seek dominance over the other boys, and though I didn't much like it, it was just something I'd become used to in order to stay on top.

I was fiddling with my mouth guard, ready to take on whoever coach was going to throw at me. I wiped my shield on the royal blue nylon of my shorts leg, distracted in my own thoughts, when I heard the door swing open and the crash of someone literally falling into the gym.

Not with a fizzle, always with a bang, Lennox DuWitt tumbled into my life. Through the roaring laughter of the other boys in the class, I looked up to see the boy right himself quickly, untangling his sneaker from the ball net that had sent him flying. He was five foot and change, his dark hair falling carelessly around his shoulders, his face burning in embarrassment so it matched the color of his bright red singlet. I didn't know why I noticed any of this at the time, but I figured it was because he wasn't wearing the school colors.

"Gather 'round boys, let's get this show on the road," Coach yelled as we all gathered in a circle with the big guy at the head of it. The new kid stumbled over, standing back from the boys in the circle, trying to stay undetected. It seemed pointless that he would try after that less-than-graceful entrance, but I took my mind off the smaller kid and paid full attention to the Coach.

"Okay, today we'll do the usual warm-ups, then we'll work on some new moves," Coach said, his huge voice bellowing and ricocheting off the parquet floor like he was speaking with the voice of God. "New kid," he shouted, making the new arrival stumble back, shock on his face at being singled out. "You ever wrestled before?"

"No, sir," the boy replied, his voice lost in the wake of the Coach's booming baritone.

"Okay, son," the Coach replied. "I'm going to pair you with one of our best wrestlers; have him teach you the basics. You okay with that?"

"Yes, sir," the boy replied, shaking his head a little too enthusiastically.

I should have known it would fall to me to teach the newbie, but it wasn't until Coach called my name and sent me off to the neighboring hall with the new guy in tow that I realized I would not be doing much of anything besides teaching a rookie how not to get his head ripped off or his arms pulled out of their sockets. Part of me was annoyed that I'd be missing the practice, but another part appreciated the respite. If I was out of the class, then it seemed to me that my title as the best wrestler for my age was intact.

I led the new kid into the empty room, closing the connecting door between us and the other athletes when we were safely inside. The sound of grunting and horsing around died as the latch clicked shut, and I was alone with the kid.

The kid headed over to the far wall, dumping his pack down on the floor and stretching out, his arms raised high above his head, his spine almost audibly cracking as he made himself bigger with the stretch. I assessed him covertly out the corner of my eye, careful not to be caught noticing the way his skin was so smooth and pale everywhere that the singlet didn't cover. With his arms raised like that, I could see a faint outline of ribs under the fabric and two tiny points where his nipples had hardened with the ecstasy of the motion. I didn't know why at the time, but my own singlet began to feel too tight, every inch of his body that I noticed making sweat collect at my brow and sending shivers down my spine. As he released his arms, he turned to me. Still staring from the corner of my eye, I quickly covered it up by ripping padded mats from a pile in the front corner of the room. I laid them out into a square big enough for two people to grapple on and wiped my forehead with the back of my hand, meeting his eyes for the first time since he had fallen into the room. They were dark pools, almost black, with a slight golden tinge to the edges that softened the lines of his angular face. I still had no idea why every detail was registering with me, as I slowly moved towards him.

"So, first time wrestling, eh?" I asked, as I dropped down cross-legged onto the square of mats.

"Yeah," he said, sitting across from me, mimicking my position. I forced my eyes to stay away from the shorts of his wrestling singlet, the way they crept up between his legs, revealing further inches of milky, hairless flesh all stretched over what looked like lean muscle. "My dad wanted me to join up. Said I had to stop getting lost in my comics and start acting like a real man." He punctuated the last two words with exaggerated air quotes, and together we smiled as he rolled his eyes.

I was stuck in the moment, the laughter dying as I became unsure of what to say next. I wasn't sure where it came from, but the next words out of my lips were puzzling, even to me.

"I like math." I felt so stupid, I felt my face flush.

"No way?" he asked, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, taking a conspiratorial tone. "Quite a pair of nerds, aren't we?" Again we laughed, and again, our eyes met, static electricity running from the top of my head, down through my chest and settling in my lap.

"Don't tell anyone," I said. "I have a reputation to uphold." And I winked at him, which led him to look down at his hands as they fidgeted in his lap. The whole situation was ten kinds of awkward, but there was something about this kid that I seemed to be drawn to.

As if stumbling from a trance, he looked up suddenly. "I'm Lennox," he said. "Lennox DuWitt."

"Cool name. I can't decide if you sound more like a Bond villain or a magician," I joked, which he met with a crooked smile that revealed deep dimples at either side of his mouth.

"I'm Ryan Matheson. Wrestling superstar and closeted math genius." Again with that smile.

I felt like fire ants were crawling over my skin, except there was no pain, just a warm glow that I don't think I had ever felt before.

"Nice to meet you, Ryan Matheson," he replied with a thousand-watt smile that displayed all of his gleaming, pure white teeth. Why was I noticing all of this?

To shake myself from the trance Lennox had me under, I leapt to my feet, started stretching my arm muscles, lunging to elongate the muscles in my legs. Lennox just sat there and stared, his eyes a little wide for whatever reason. "So we gonna wrestle, or what?" I asked him, as his eyes trained up to my face.

"Uh," he stuttered. "Maybe we should stay sitting down for a bit?" he asked, his tone baffling me as to its meaning.

"Why?"

He cocked one eyebrow, nodded his head towards what I thought was my legs.

“Just sit down,” he said a little more forcefully.

I let my gaze wonder down my body, trying to locate what he was hinting at with the suggestive nod of his head.

“Oh, God,” I whispered, mortified when I reached the point of his focus. Somehow, without me knowing, my body had grown excited; my cock engorging under the thin spandex of my suit, and the outline was perfectly visible. It was so visible in fact you could see every last vein that throbbed and every single line of my package. I quickly put both my hands over my groin, trying my hardest to recover my modesty, expecting a roar of thunderous laughter from the boy before me. I quickly sank down, crossed my legs and leaned forward, doing all I could to cover both my shame and as much of my body as possible.

“I...” he began, but I raised one hand away from my groin to halt him.

“Don’t,” I snapped. “Just don’t.” I shook my head, realizing that this new kid had the power now to take me off the popularity map with just one word to the right person.

“Hey, it happens,” he said, shrugging his shoulders, not taking his eyes off my face. “Happened to me once in church. *That* was embarrassing, I can tell you.” He nudged my arm, smiling as he willed me to look him in the eye. I smiled a little to myself, but the damage was done. How would I ever look Lennox in the face again? “I think it’s these suits they make us wear. They’re just too sexy. I feel like He-Man wearing this thing. How are we not supposed to get turned on wearing this stuff? It’s almost pornographic!”

I couldn’t contain my laughter; it came bellowing out and through the small hall.

“So don’t sweat it, okay? You have nothing to be embarrassed about.” He gestured again down to my groin. “Nothing at all.” And the little guy winked at me.

Though words seemed to fail me, my body seemed to be back to its usual state of flaccid non-description, so once again I uncrossed my legs. “So, how about we try this again? Ready to learn a thing or two?”

Lennox looked down at his lap, and flushed. “Think I might need a minute myself,” he said, rolling his eyes and looking around the room, trying not to focus on my own wide eyes. “I’ve got some comics we can read. I was never really excited about wrestling anyway.” He reached behind him slowly and

grabbed his bag, unzipping it, and shuffling through the contents. "You like *Batman*?"

One Thousand and Seventy-seven days before:

I was so nervous my palms were sweating like rivers. If he noticed, Lennox made no attempt to let go of my hand, as I fiddled in my jacket pocket for the keys. This dream of ours had been years in the making; scrimping and saving every penny we could, taking shortcuts, eating off-brand foods, forgoing gym memberships and date nights just to arrive to this point. Though Lennox didn't bring in much more than we needed to live off every day, my job had been mostly ear-marked for the ever increasing savings that had led to the down-payment on this house. Though I earned more money than Lennox, this house was a joint effort, a collaboration of both of our lives coming together to achieve something we had been talking about since high school. But in that moment, as we approached the door, hand in sweating hand, the reality was so great for me.

We had seen this house many times before, we knew exactly what it looked like, could recall every room and what we planned to do with every square inch of the property. But each step towards it felt like an eternity. The work needed was astronomical. I was working such long hours, that time to work on it would be limited. And with the bulk of our savings spent on buying the house, we would be unable to afford to keep our apartment while restorations were being done. This whole plan, the years spent on executing it, was starting to feel like a really bad idea.

"You got the keys?" Lennox asked, pulling his hand from mine, trying covertly to wipe the sweat from my own hand on his pants leg. He rubbed his hands together in excitement and raised his eyebrows with an impatient smile.

I drew the keys from my pocket, dangling them between my thumb and forefinger. "Right here," I said as he made a grab for them. Pulling them just out of his reach, he missed by inches and we tussled on the browning lawn of this strange house that was now ours. We scrapped and played for a while. I was doing anything I could to delay him seeing the magnitude of the work ahead of us. Though we had saved for years just to be able to afford even the deposit on the place, the real work was still laid out ahead of us. Finally, he pulled me into his arms, our faces inches from each other, his top lip brushing against my bottom one. He breathed a sigh between my lips, and closed his

eyes as his tongue painted a languid line across my upper lip, tasting my smile as I pulled him in closer to my body. I let my eyes flutter shut, let him guide me with his kiss. I may have been physically bigger than him, but there was never a question over who was in charge. Electricity jolted in my veins, much like it did every time I had kissed him since the first time, and I moaned into his mouth. He let his tongue dart into my mouth and taste my own, breathing a sigh of contentment into me that only served to fuel my desire for the man. Lennox snaked his arms under mine, one hand cupping my ass while the other stroked my back and then...

Ripped the keys from my hand, struggling from my grip and running up the path to the steps.

I watched him bound up them two at a time until he was at the door, dangling the keys in his hand much like I had done moments before.

“Come on, Baby,” he yelled to me, as I stood and smiled at the child-like excitement that was beaming from him. “Let’s go home.”

Home.

I jogged towards him, slowing my pace when I reached the steps; desire, excitement and fear all warring inside me as I took in the image of my man fumbling to find the right key.

When I reached him, I pulled his hands into my own, took the keys, and located the correct one, confused by the sparring feelings and breathless from the mild activity. “You will be the death of me, Lennox DuWitt,” I breathed, much to his appreciation.

“Don’t go dying on me just yet,” he laughed. “I can’t fix this place up on my own.”

His playfulness never ceased to amaze me, and, as he pushed the key into the lock and I heard the bolt relent, I put my hand on his shoulder.

“Not so fast, Len,” I said, pulling him away from the threshold. “If we’re going to do this, let’s do it right.” And with that I swept the man off his feet, pulling him up until he was cradled in my arms like an overgrown child. “I think it’s only fair I get to carry you across the threshold of our new home.”

“That’s the honeymoon, you freak,” he laughed, nuzzling his face into the crook of my shoulder.

“Well when that day comes, I’ll do this all over again.”

I nudged the door open on its creaking hinges and carried Lennox through the door.

Inside, it was dark; the heavy, velvet drapes all pulled to against the mid-afternoon sunshine.

The drapes, of course, would have to be burned, but I let my eyes adjust to the darkness, let my vision strip away the current decor and my imagination decorate it in the splendor that littered countless of Lennox's sketchpads, all documenting era styles and interior preferences that we had stayed up countless nights discussing.

Lennox wriggled down from my arms, keeping one hand on my bicep as he looked around. I knew him well enough to know that he was seeing the same things I was; seeing the plans we had dreamed up and the sketches and mood boards he had designed all coming to life against the blank canvas of the dilapidated, old house. I also knew him well enough to know that he could not remain that still for much longer. He let his hand fall from my arm and like a spitfire, began sprinting from room to room taking in every tiny detail he could. I just stood back and watched him fly between the lounge and the dining room, waited as he disappeared into the kitchen and came back around full circle into the lounge. I drank in the view as he swept a hand across the fireplace and blew the dust from his fingers, giggling. I watched all this, the whole while lost in every tiny detail that made me love him more than anything else in the world.

He walked slowly back over to me as the warm feeling settled into my heart, reaching for him and pulling him close. "So, what do you think?" I asked as he cuddled into my side, my voice just a whisper in his ear as I planted a soft kiss on his temple.

He looked up at me with misty eyes. "I love it," he said. "It's ours. It's finally our home."

I pulled him in closer, maneuvered him around until he was pressed up against my front, and stared into those deep, dark eyes. "You are my home," I whispered, as a single tear escaped his brimming eyes.

Lennox reached around me, running his fingers through my short hair, balling his fists into it as he dragged my mouth to meet his. And we kissed, standing in the empty shell of the house that was everything we had hoped for and was now ours.

Six Days After:

I didn't want to be in the house alone. Without Lennox everything was just too quiet; like something in the silence was taunting me, muttering under its breath a mantra that sounded a little too close to loneliness. I pulled my feet up under me, closed my robe tightly around me as the air conditioning breezed over my wet skin. It was the first time I'd been home in days, but the doctors assured me that I would be contacted if there were any change in Lennox's condition. I thought I would have more trouble with the hospital since we were not married, but since Lennox and I had listed each other as our emergency contacts, the doctors just talked to me as if I were his blood.

I shifted in my seat, curling in on myself further, trying not to think any more of blood. It had been everywhere; coating the car in fluid seemingly too dark to have come from a human being; casting a shocking contrast between itself and the pallor of Lennox's skin. Try as I might, I could not stop picturing him there, me bound in the seatbelt, his body hunched over the dash, still and unmoving.

I had to keep busy, had to do something with my hands, keep my brain distracted before I broke down again. I lifted off the couch and slowly paced the wooden floorboards until I found myself in the kitchen. Auto-pilot senses grabbing the wares to make coffee before my brain even realized what it was doing. I grabbed a cup from the draining board, ignoring the mounting pile of dishes in the sink, as I shifted from cupboard to cupboard trying to focus on the job at hand. I found the coffee and filters above the machine, the sugar on the work surface, a spoon in the drawer. Since I hadn't been home for days, the milk in the fridge had gone sour, so I busied myself emptying the lumpy remains from the carton and throwing it in the trash. Every motion I made served only to drag me back to the accident, as the throbbing bruise across my chest protested my activity. My wrist, still wrapped in a bandage was the worst of the pains, niggling me with every tiny movement I made to place the filter into the coffee machine, to fill the machine with water, to add beans to the grinder. I carried out each part of the process meticulously, and before I knew it, hot java was pouring into the carafe like molten lava. I trained my eyes on the drip, counting slowly in my head to keep my mind from wandering. As the coffee brewed, I paced up the stairs slowly, still counting in my head as something to do.

Our bedroom was dark, the drapes drawn, where normally the space would be flooded with bright rays from the spring sunshine, which was the cause of

the temperature rising in the city precipitating the need for the AC to be switched on. The bed itself, a hard king-sized mass of Tempur goodness, was abandoned, an island in the centre of the room that I didn't think I'd ever be able to sleep in alone. I had slept on the couch the night before, unable to make myself get into the bed without Lennox, unable to stand the smell of his pillows or the negative space where his body should be.

I pulled the robe from my shoulders, let it drop to the floor, and stood before the full-length mirror. My body was dotted with tiny, fading abrasions, slices and bruises from glass that had made its way into me as Lennox hit the... *Fifty-seven, fifty-eight, fifty-nine*... the bruise across my chest was still as angry as the previous days, an indigo indent spanning from one shoulder down to the opposite hip, like a sash awarded as a prize. The only prize I felt I deserved was for having fucked up the most.

I lifted my bandaged hand to my chest, trailed my fingers over the bruising, pressing down hard to revel in the sting both from the bruise itself and the pain in my wrist. I pressed harder, wincing as my eyes watered, almost enjoying causing myself the pain. This was a product of my own doing, of my carelessness. I had been given the greatest gift of all and with one lapse in my concentration I stood to lose it all.

My hand trailed further up my body, hooking my fingers around the chain that hung there. The thin silver thread was weak, weak enough to easily break. I wanted to pull it apart, to destroy it like I destroyed everything else, but I resisted the urge, instead turning the two golden rings over in my fingers. Our rings. Rings we never got to wear.

The floodgates broke and the tears came easily, causing me to hunch over at the waist, grasping the mirror as I buckled in agony. Lennox. My Lennox. What had I done?

I sat naked on the floor, my own face a drama mask of helplessness reflected back at me through the limited light that allowed me to see my own sorry reflection. I sat and cried for what seemed like hours, until the only thing that could break me from my own emotional wreckage rang out through the silence that punctuated my desperate gasps.

The phone rang.

Seven Thousand, Two Hundred and Ninety-seven Days Before:

It had been two days since that afternoon in the gym with Lennox, and I hadn't seen him again since. He shared none of my classes that I knew of. I had no idea where his locker was or where he lived or how to contact him. Not knowing anything except that I liked him was weighing pretty heavily on me. I replayed the details in my mind of the rest of wrestling practice, after the incident happened. We sat on the mats for the whole hour, talking about comics and movies we had seen, what we liked and disliked. It shamed me that through all of this I didn't ask enough questions to even find him in school the next day. Now, two days later, I was feeling an ache for my new friend, staring at the clock as it ticked toward the end of my history class. I had heard nothing Mrs. Pennington had said the entire hour and as the final seconds counted down, I shoved all my books into my bag, ready to leave as soon as the bell chimed.

The halls were a mess of students all running to get somewhere other than where we were, an end of school frenzy that was damn near lethal if you got in anyone's way. I made my way silently back towards the other side of the school building, a longer way than usual in case I ran into Lennox by his locker, wherever it was.

As I rounded the final corner to my locker, the crowds began to thin out, allowing me easy access to dismount my backpack and put the last textbooks back inside the mess that was my locker. I fiddled, distractedly, with the combination before it popped open in my hand and the door released. I pulled the two heavy textbooks from my bag and shoved them into the deepest recesses of the locker, not needing them again until the following week. As I pushed the heavy tomes back inside their education casket, a small folded piece of paper fell out and landed between my feet.

This was no cause for alarm as my locker was so stacked to the brim with old papers and sketches and discarded candy wrappers that things tended to fall out on a daily basis. I picked up the small piece of paper and unfolded it, expecting to see a scrawled math equation or a crude note from one of the team about a cheerleader with a nice pair of tits or a fat girl wearing the wrong outfit. The paper was too nice to be part of my usual stationery, and as I smoothed out the leaf, my face broke into a wide grin.

Ryan,

Meet me by the bike-sheds after school if you want.

Lennox

His handwriting was curly and artistic, the “y” in my name linking in a swirling loop that joined it to the following letters. My name had never looked so good written down before and my face started to ache with the smile still in place, so much so that I felt like the Joker from one of Lennox’s comic books.

I looked down the hall for the nearest clock and realized school had let out ten minutes ago. I relocked my locker and grabbed my pack and headed the quickest way I could to the parking lot where the bike-sheds were located.

Outside, the sun was unseasonably hot, hanging directly overhead and blinding me slightly as I made my way towards where Lennox would be waiting. I hurried quickly to where I had locked my bike up that morning, scanning the lot for any sign of Lennox. He was nowhere to be found, and my smile started to fade. I had taken too long looking for him. I must have missed him altogether. I unlocked my bike and pulled it from the rack, lifting up the spindly kickstand with the back of my sneaker.

I nearly jumped out of my skin when I felt someone behind me grab my arm and thrust it into an arm lock, that, holding my bike as I was, I was unable to get out of. The shock of the confrontation all but rendered me useless as I dropped my bike and started to try and counter the lock, stopping as I heard a familiar laughter peel through the corrugated iron sheds.

Lennox released my arm as I spun round, terror on my face, a look of smug amusement on his. “Gotcha,” he exclaimed, as I rubbed at the ache in my throbbing shoulder.

“Where did you learn to do that?” I asked, shocked at the strength contained in the little guy.

“I have no friends, Ryan,” he began. “I have nothing but time to read up on this stuff. Not bad for my first try, right?”

He looked so proud of himself, I couldn’t help but laugh at his enthusiasm. And when he was off guard, I tackled him, throwing him down onto the grass so I was straddling his hips, his wrists pinned above him. We laughed so hard our bodies were shaking.

“Okay. Uncle!” he screamed as he wriggled beneath me. “Come on, big guy. Let me up, let me up!”

I released him and rolled onto my side next to him in the grass, our little fingers only centimeters away from each other as we lay there squinting in the sun. I tried not to notice the close proximity of our hands, but before I could

really think about it, the tips of our fingers gently connected, and we looked over at each other, smiling.

“Wanna go grab a soda?” I asked, not moving my hand away from his.

“Sure thing,” he replied. “Let me unlock my bike, and I’ll race you.”

We dashed to the bike shed where I retrieved my fallen bike and backpack and he fiddled with the flimsy lock of his own bike until it was free.

“Do you even know where we’re going?” I asked, as I hooked one leg over the seat and readied myself for the ride.

“No,” he called, peddling away at top speed. “But I’ll still beat you there.”

I couldn’t help but smile, a warm feeling spreading through my limbs that had nothing to do with the heat and everything to do with my new friend. I raced off after him, determined to get as close to him as I could.

Nineteen Days After:

It seemed wasteful to just sit around the house whilst Lennox rested, drowsy under the weight of all the drugs that were keeping him placid in his pain. I had returned to work for short stints a few days before, and though I was unable to focus on anything other than Lennox while I was there, I needed to keep up my hours as his hospital bills had begun to add up. I drove home in silence, the radio off as it distracted me so much that I was afraid to drive. It seemed so stupid that a little under three weeks ago I had driven this route subconsciously and now I had to pay attention to everything going on around me, as if there were something out to get me, to add more injuries and threaten to take more than already had been lost. I pulled up into the drive and switched off the engine. Only then did I realize that all the muscles in my upper body were clenched tight, my hands a vice grip around the steering wheel, and my shoulders hunched so tight they were nearly up to my ears. I exhaled slowly, letting all the tension gradually release from my body, unfurling my fingers one by one from the steering wheel. I took my time gathering myself before I stepped slowly out of the car, my legs feeling unsteady as I placed them one at a time on the gravel driveway. It was important to me that I showed no signs of distress when I went back into the house. Though I expected Lennox to still be resting, if he were to see me tied up in knots like this, then it was likely to have an effect on his mental state, and all I really wanted was for him to recover with nothing more than the physical scars he had sustained.

As I unlocked the door, the scent of cooking hit me like a wall, faint sounds of Motown music blaring from the stereo. To say I was alarmed was an understatement, as this was the first time Lennox had really been coherent enough to even move about, let alone get out of bed and cook a meal. I closed the door gently and placed my briefcase beside the hat rack. I found him in the kitchen, swaying softly to Martha and the Vandellas as he cracked two eggs into the frying pan, unaware of my presence.

“Lennox?” I asked, leary of seeing him so energetic after the trauma he had been through.

“Oh, hey Babe. You’re home,” he called over the music, dropping what he was doing to rush over and hug me, kissing me gently on the lips. I pulled him close, extended the kiss and let my hand run over where I knew his wound was in the back of his head.

“You okay?” I asked, as he pulled out of the kiss to return to his place at the stove.

“Yeah, just starving. I woke up feeling like I could eat a horse. You shouldn’t have let me sleep in when you left.”

“You need the rest, Baby,” I said, though I was unsure whether or not he heard me.

I looked around the house. Everything was as it had been when I left, no signs at all that he had been up for long. I was amazed at how together he seemed, and the feelings warred inside me, concern battling with relief. I stopped staring, realizing how self-conscious he would feel having me stare like that after all he had been through. I let myself wander up to him as casually as possible, snaked my arms beneath his as he set to cooking the eggs. I kissed gently beneath his ear, observing the ugly scarring hiding just beneath the thickness of his dark hair.

“You hungry?” he asked, as I squeezed him tighter to my body, the grip one of relief that seemed to ease me to no end. Maybe everything would be okay now he was on the mend.

“Famished,” I whispered into his ear with another kiss, reveling in his smile as he turned to look at me over his shoulder.

“Brilliant.”

I held him for as long as I could, until he was ready to serve the meal. Then I let him go long enough to serve the meal of eggs and bacon, and place the plates on the side.

“The TV isn’t working. Can you call someone to fix it?” he asked.

The television had broken before the accident, but I brushed off the remark, figuring it was a small thing to remember in all that he had suffered through. I grabbed the plates and led him to the dining room. We ate in silence, the flavors of the fried food causing my stomach to grumble as I consumed it at full speed. I couldn’t even remember the last time I had eaten something that wasn’t from a coffee shop or the hospital cafeteria.

He placed down his knife and fork, and rubbed gently at his temples.

“You okay?” I asked, not even attempting to hide my concern.

“Yeah, just a bit of a headache.”

“I’ll get you some painkillers and a glass of water,” I offered, clearing the table as I made my way back to the kitchen and opened the cupboard where we kept the medication the doctor had given him for the residual pain.

He washed the medication down quickly, draining the last of the water with it.

“Maybe you should go lie down?” I asked, squeezing his shoulder.

“Yeah, I think I will.” He got up from the table and kissed me, before mounting the stairs and disappearing from my sight.

Though it was good that he seemed to be more alert, something about him was plaguing me, though I couldn’t put my finger on what it was. I hoped as the days passed, things would get easier for him. I hoped everything would be okay.

One Thousand, Six Hundred and Eighty-four Days Before:

That day was like a dark cloud had descended over the house. All it took was one phone call and Lennox felt like he was being ripped in half; one half mourning, the other a child again, relishing in the Karmic retribution that came with the death of his father.

Malcolm DuWitt had always been hard on his son; so much so that it often scared me to imagine what the man was capable of. Years of both mental and physical abuse towards Lennox had led me to despise his father, but whilst I was happy he was gone, and would merrily have danced on the old bastard’s grave, I kept my feelings buried so as to not effect Lennox as he sought a way

to reconcile his current grief with the negative feelings toward the man who had made his formative years a nightmare.

The first time I had met Malcolm, he made me feel terrible, like my presence was not welcome in his house. He warmed to me for all of two seconds when he found out I was a wrestler, but as soon as our relationship came to his attention, it was like a leper had stepped into his life, and the man could never look me in the eye. Every chance he got, he would stop me midsentence, put me down verbally and make me feel like the smallest person on earth. This was nothing compared to the cruelty that Lennox was forced to endure; and when graduation came around, Lennox and I fled from our neighborhood and never once looked back.

As a final nail in the coffin of their relationship, Malcolm withheld all financial support to Lennox when he decided to attend art college. My SAT scores and personal recommendations afforded me a full scholarship, whilst Lennox was forced to work two jobs to pay his tuition. We found a cheap apartment together in a shitty part of town, and I got a job as well. Using all my income to sustain our living expenses alongside studying for my finance degree, Lennox focused on just making enough to pay for school and working every second he had free just to not be kicked out of school. Times were hard, and every day I watched him struggle, I hated Malcolm that tiny bit more.

I sat silently staring at Lennox, who hadn't moved for what seemed like an eternity. From the second he had replaced the phone into its base, he had been as still as a statue, and I was at a loss as to what to say or do for him. I gave him a minute more, letting the silence stretch between us like a hundred miles of bad road, before I leant forward, carefully placing my hand on his knee.

"Len? You wanna talk?" I asked, my voice a little more than a dry whisper.

He looked up, his eyes wide and focused on my own. I could almost hear the cogs turning in his brain as he processed what he wanted to say. I didn't expect his reaction to be what it was.

Without any hint of warning, Lennox threw his head back, the sound of gleeful laughter ripping through the room. "Oh, God," he heaved between fits of giggles. "The old bastard finally died."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. After decades of being in love with this man, I never witnessed him being so cold, so cruel and emotionally detached. The chill emanating off him made me recoil from him. I removed my

hand from his knee and sat back, leaning away as he bent at the waist, unable to contain his laughter. I expected it to all be a cliché, like the people in movies who start out laughing and that laughter turns to hysterical tears. But Lennox was not letting up. I stood up suddenly, catching his eye.

“Lennox, stop,” I said, loud enough that he could hear me over his wails of chortling. “Your father is dead, this isn’t like you.”

“Because you know how I react when my father dies,” he said, between heaving breaths. “It happens all the time.” The inappropriate joke set him off again until he collapsed on the couch, burying his face in the pillows to muffle the sound as his shoulders ratcheted up and down in a staccato rhythm.

I leaned down to him, grabbing his wrist in a vice grip and yanking him up until his face was inches from mine. “Stop it, right now,” I screamed, a string of spittle flying from my mouth as I spat the words at him, sobering him up enough to cease his laughter.

“Why?” he said, gravely, his eyes squinting with withheld anger. “You hated him as much as I did. Why the hell shouldn’t I enjoy this? That man gave me nothing. Nothing but abuse and fear, before he wrote me off all together with nothing but a feeling like I’d done something to cause all the pain he had inflicted on me. All I ever did was try to please him, Ryan. That was it. And he kicked the shit out of me. He hated me. He turned against me when I told him who I really was. What kind of man does that to his own kid?”

My eyes locked on his and I noticed them begin to soften as his breath steadied.

“You aren’t like him. This, what you’re doing now? This isn’t you. It’s something that he would have done.”

I knew I’d said the wrong thing immediately. With all the force in his body he yanked his hand free from mine, using the momentum to push me back away from him. I wasn’t prepared for him, and as always, was completely shocked by how much strength the smaller man had in his body. The motion sent me flying backwards, the back of my knees catching on the coffee table and sending me sprawling backwards across the floor. He made a small motion to go to me but stopped.

“Maybe I am like him,” he whispered as he looked down on me, his eyes filled with sorrow, regret, and defeat. “I’m sorry,” he said as he walked quickly to the door, grabbing a jacket before disappearing across the threshold,

slamming the door in his wake. I lifted myself up onto my elbows, watching the space where he disappeared, noticing how the glass in the door had splintered with the force of his departure.

Lennox didn't come back for hours. I sat in the lounge, waiting for him until well after two a.m. Finally, as I felt my eyes closing, I heard his key turn in the lock and sat upright on the couch, studying him as he walked through the door, eyes down, shoulders hunched in defeat.

I'd seen him get like this before. He was a hothead when he was angry, but as soon as he calmed down, he was back to being my sweet, gentle Lennox. My spine cracked as I climbed off the couch, slowly moving towards him as he hung near the door, shamefully keeping his eyes trained on the wooden floorboards.

As I reached him, I slowly pushed my body close to his, letting his head fall onto my shoulder and felt his arms snake around my waist and up my back, taking handfuls of my shirt in his fists as he relaxed into me. And finally he cried. I held him as he let himself feel the loss. It was conflicted, a confusing concoction of loss and anger, and I held him as it all washed through him.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, between sobs.

I squeezed him tighter, running my fingers through his hair the way I knew would calm him down. Together we sat on the couch until the sun began to rise over the city. We talked about his father, about the physical characteristics Lennox had inherited. The color of his eyes was Malcolm, but the warmth in them was all from his mother. He was short like Mrs. DuWitt, but toned and sinewy like his father. He had Malcolm's hot temper and propensity for cold detachment, but his mother's kind heart.

As we fought to keep our eyes open, entwined in each other's bodies, he turned his tired eyes towards me. "Promise me," he said. "Promise me you'll never let me end up like he did."

"I promise," I whispered back, running my hand across his cheek, tracing where tears had fallen and dried several times that night. "I promise I will spend every day of our lives reminding you of all the good inside of you. I will spend every day until the last day I have left making sure you know exactly who you are. Because you are the most wonderful man I have ever known."

"You think?" he asked, and it made me laugh that after all this time he still couldn't see all the beauty that I saw so clearly.

“I know, Baby. I know exactly who you are, and you are nothing like he was. If you ever think that again, I’ll be here to remind you. I promise.”

We fell asleep that way, nestled in an embrace that glued us together; our own family, found in a time when we needed it most, surviving through the worst of our battles.

Seventy Four Days After:

“The TV isn’t working. Can you call someone to fix it?”

I stopped where I was standing, unable to move. I couldn’t do this anymore. It had been months of this same bullshit and I was tired as hell. I couldn’t eat, couldn’t sleep. I loved Lennox with all my heart, but this man wasn’t Lennox any more. What he was now was just a faded Polaroid picture of the man I loved. A looping hologram that sounded like my Lennox, and smelt like him, but was incapable of being the person he really was.

I’ll never forget that moment. It felt like there was an anvil in my stomach that was weighing me down, making me want to simultaneously vomit and cry and run. My instincts were stronger than I was that day. I decided to leave.

I had never got around to fixing the television. It seemed cruel to give him the access that would alert him every day to what had happened, a window into the outside world that steadily moved on whilst he was frozen in place. The TV sat dusty and unused against the far wall of the lounge, never again to be watched, never letting him know exactly what he was missing as I allowed him to be reduced to this sorry state of exile. I’d cancelled the papers as well. His cell phone and laptop were locked in the trunk of my car, and as of now I hadn’t heard him ask about them. This house was locked in the state in which it had existed before the incident, much like I felt, and like our relationship truly was. What we had been was arrested in time, atrophying like a hollowed-out car sitting on breeze blocks in someone’s front yard.

I knew when I walked out it would only be for the night. I was never fully capable of ending things, but I couldn’t stand to suffocate one more minute in this house that was now just a tomb for the memories that, to Lennox, never were and never would be.

I walked over to Lennox, as he served the eggs and bacon up on the same plates he used every night. Nothing ever changed.

“Think you can manage both servings?” I asked, my voice heavy with so much defeat that even I could hear how lazy I had gotten with the charade.

“Why? You not staying for dinner?”

“I can’t, Len. I have a business trip. Mr. Porter needs me to go to New York and meet with some clients first thing.” I was lying through my teeth, but it came so much easier than the truth ever would.

“A bit last minute isn’t it?” he asked, just a question with no hint of suspicion surrounding it.

“Yeah. Things have been tricky with this one company and they need me to head down there to calm them down. It’s my account so I couldn’t say no.”

“When do you have to leave?” he asked, scooping the last of the bacon from the second plate onto his own.

“Just came back to get some clothes, then I’m heading out.”

“Okay,” he said, turning and heading for the dining room; a small peck on my cheek offered as he went past.

I fled the downstairs, taking the steps two at a time and closing myself into my room before I lost it completely. I pressed my back against the door, rubbing at my tired eyes with the heels of my hands, taking huge breaths to try and calm myself. I was doing this. I was really leaving.

I grabbed a travel bag from the closet, started filling it indiscriminately with everything I could think of for at least a few nights away. The thing about Lennox’s condition was that anything I forgot, I could just come back the next day to collect and he’d be none the wiser.

When my bag was full, I opened the door to the en suite and dashed inside. Toothbrush. Toothpaste. Face wash. Soap. Shampoo. I grabbed all I could and chucked it into the bag.

I turned on the faucet and let the water run a while until it was as cold as it could get. When it was chilled enough to sting, I started splashing my face, hoping the rush of adrenaline would be stimulus enough to get my ass out the door before I changed my mind. The water invigorated me enough to get me moving, and before I could stop myself or think too hard on it, I was down the stairs, bag in hand, ready to walk out on twenty-odd years of a life together.

“I’m going now,” I yelled, praying he’d just yell back, and I wouldn’t have to see him as I left him behind.

I wasn't that lucky. He came round the corner drying his hands on a rag, and pulled me close to him. I closed my eyes as he kissed me, savored the taste of his mouth and the feel of his smaller body pressed against me. My eyes began to sting.

"See you," I said, as I turned and closed the door behind me, the faint sound of his voice telling me he loved me echoing in my wake.

I made it to the end of the street before the anvil in my stomach jarred me the wrong way. I quickly pulled the car up to the curb and threw the door open as my gag reflex lost the battle to keep my feelings and any residual food inside. Having skipped dinner, all I accomplished was dry heaving bile into the grass, much to the chagrin of a passing woman walking her dog.

When it felt like I had vomited out my soul, I straightened up, wiping my mouth on the sleeve of my suit jacket. I righted myself back in the car, flipped the AC on full and took huge breaths to calm myself. I knew I wasn't really leaving. How could I? Even if I never went home, Lennox would sit and worry about me afresh every day. I had to go back. I had to go back every day. But for that night, I was on a business trip,

I pulled the car back onto the road and headed away from the house.

The hotel I checked into was a standard Holiday Inn not too far from my office. The woman at the desk smiled too brightly and the elevator ride up to the room took too long.

The room itself smelt strongly of lemon cleaning products and the sheets were that itchy, over-washed cotton that was most likely older than I was. I tried not to think about what would happen if I turned a black light on in the room, and quickly unpacked my bag. I was undressed and wearing only my boxers and a plain white tee before ten minutes had passed.

And that was it.

I called down to reception, ordered an entire bottle of vodka and several bottles of coke, and sat back waiting for the delivery.

I achieved nothing that night but the fueling of my own self-hatred. None of this was about me. Not one second. I had a duty to Lennox, and though I knew it would never be the same, I had to at least pretend it was. I had to spare him the trauma of any more loss in his life. I had to sacrifice my own happiness for his, even if he would never really know what I was doing.

That night was lonely and painful. But it was the first night I had slept well in the last three months.

Seven Days Before:

It was rare, but sometimes there was just no talking sense into Lennox. Sure, a superhero-themed wedding might have sounded fun and whimsical, as well as being a throwback to the first time we met, but it took a late night drunken visit from our friends Warren and Bradley, respectively dragged up in Wonder Woman and Catwoman costumes to really push the idiocy of the idea home. So with those less than favorable ideas cemented in my brain for all eternity, we finally settled on a low-key, classic interpretation of the modern wedding, only without the church. He listened when I told him I didn't want anything extravagant. He heard me when I said a union at the Courthouse was preferable. He paid attention when I limited the guests to twenty to minimize costs. He certainly took it all in when I forbade him from making us wear kilts on account of how neither of us had any Scottish heritage at all.

But with all that in mind, Lennox, ever the artist, threw himself into crafting a wedding worthy of British Royalty, with each tiny detail meticulously pondered over for hours on end.

A week before the wedding, we'd had just about enough. The house looked like the inside of Bridezilla's psyche, and we could barely move for samples and scrapbooks and swatch pads in every shade of the rainbow. We'd taken everything that had littered the lounge and dining room, and all but thrown it into Lennox's studio to clear the house in preparation for the rehearsal dinner. We were holding it early because we needed an excuse to drink copiously and be relatively distracted from our upcoming nuptials and the stress of the big day.

Essentially, it was just a dinner party, but to keep Lennox busy I gave him free reign to do as he wanted as far as decorations went.

I sat with my feet up reading the newspaper as he kept to his tiny corner of the lounge, strategically cutting flower stalks down to measure exactly seven inches. Tiny vases surrounded him, a tight semi-circle boxing him in that extended to the coffee table and all across the mantel. The TV was flickering with some non-descript real life movie about a girl ballerina dealing with some form of tragic disease and I was distracting myself with the bleak stories of

local crime rates in the city. The whole thing was a guise. What I was actually doing was staring at Lennox out of the corner of my eye, his face scrunched up in concentration as he measured stems against his ruler, making diagonal cuts that all went in the same direction and all fit perfectly with his plans. As he made each cut, his tongue would poke out the side of his mouth, giving him a childlike innocence that brought me back to high school and the days when we first realized our love for each other. To me, he was the most beautiful thing in the room; that was saying something as the lounge filled more and more with extravagant flower displays of matching shades of white and turquoise.

“I think you’ve got enough, Baby. You must have at least thirty vases of flowers and we only have three tables,” I said, breaking him out of his workforce reverie for just a second.

“I bought them all, and they won’t last until the wedding, so no flower will get left untrimmed,” he giggled, returning back to his arduous measuring and cutting routine.

I kicked my feet down off the arm of the couch and placed them on the floor, scrunching my toes up in the brand-new, patent leather brogues that he had picked out for the occasion. He had requested I wear them all week in order to break them in so I wouldn’t limp to the altar, but after two days they still felt like Italian leather torture devices and I was sure they were gradually filling with blood and strips of skin which they had stripped from my feet.

“Can I take these things off yet?” I asked, twisting my feet around in a vain attempt to stretch the non-relenting leather.

“Unless you can perform an upbeat Charleston in them, then no,” he quipped, not taking his eyes off the last of the flowers. When he made the final snip and delicately placed the flower into his final vase, he looked up at me, lifting one eyebrow in question.

“I couldn’t do a Charleston in sneakers, Len. These shoes aren’t magical. Just painful.”

He hopped up from his cross-legged position, hurdling over the vases as he moved towards me.

“Those dance lessons will not go to waste. Come on, get up,” he said, putting out a hand to lift me.

I groaned, placing my hand in his as he swept me up from the couch. He dusted my shoulders off and patted my head. “Just relax,” he commanded,

leaving me standing there whilst he muted the television and hit play on the iPod dock attached to the stereo. As the slow string arrangement of Etta James' sultry hit song, "At Last", started to flow through the house, he rejoined me with a smile, placing one hand on my shoulder and lifting his other up to signal that I should assume the stance I had learned in our dance class. Rolling my eyes, I begrudgingly placed one hand on his waist and my other entwined with his beside us, level with his shoulder. "Remember what Rita taught us?" he asked, pulling me closer.

In all the weeks of dance classes, I had left it to Lennox to take the lead, despite the fact that I was technically the leading partner in the slow waltz. He pulled me towards him, and I clumsily followed him back as we twirled in awkward circles, my new shoes stepping on his bare toes at awkward intervals.

"Sorry," I muttered after one such event.

"Don't apologize," he said. "You're doing great."

We danced that way, his lean body swaying gracefully with the music while I held my muscles tight and fumbled along to keep up. It was like watching a figure skater perform a routine with Frankenstein's monster, only less coordinated. As the music died out, I sighed and let my muscles relax, unhinging my clenched fist from Lennox's as I mopped away sweat that had gathered on my brow more from nerves than actual exertion.

"Wasn't so bad, was it?" he asked, standing on his tiptoes to give me a brief, chaste kiss on my lips. I surprised him by grabbing him around the waist and lifting him up until his face was close to mine, a small yelp escaping his lips in shock. And with that, I covered his mouth with my own, kissing him deeply before spinning him around in circles. He tucked his legs around my waist as we twirled, my careless imitation of dancing making him giggle out loud.

"This is not dancing," he yelled as we spun faster and faster.

"It's much more fun this way, Baby," I yelled back, reveling in the glow he got when he laughed with such abandon.

I swung him around faster, so much so that my head was starting to swim and my circles were getting wider and less uniform. "I'm going to be sick," he yelled, as he uncurled his legs from around me and let the force of the spin carry them in an arc around us, trying desperately to find a way to reconnect his feet with the floor.

I began to slow down, barely able to stay upright, both of us laughing at the sheer childishness of my actions. When he was safely on the floor, supporting himself against the couch, I tried to keep myself from blacking out or falling down, stumbling around carelessly as I reached for something with which to steady myself. Of course, in all my clumsiness, the only thing I could find was the mantel, displaying all of Lennox's flowers and boasting hours of hard work. As my hand reached out to steady myself, two of the vessels tumbled from the surface, the ceramic vases breaking with a crash against the back of the television. It was like watching it in slow motion; the shards of pale glass scattering and tumbling down to the floor as drizzles of water gathered around the stand of the television, one single trickle running down the lit screen.

I pushed myself away from the television, balanced on the arm of the couch as the box began to spark, huge white jets of light pouring from the back making loud cracking sounds as the light from the screen died. I stared on wide-eyed, knowing that Lennox would most likely kill me for being so clumsy again. But as I turned to face him, he was folded up in hysterical laughter, tears streaming from his eyes.

"What?" I asked, bewildered by his response.

"Your face," he yelled. "You look terrified."

"I am. I broke the TV!"

He laughed louder, pulling himself along the couch until he stood between me and the useless contraption that used to be our idiot box. He took a stance between my thighs, putting his hands on my shoulders as I looked up into those big, dark eyes; two globes of onyx in his face that were as deep and alive as drowning pools. He leaned down and kissed me, pulling back after a second and chewing at his bottom lip.

"Think we can register for a new TV?" I asked, only joking, my mouth curling up in a smile.

"I don't think any of our friends are *that* generous," he replied, kissing me again and resting his forehead against mine.

"Guess we'll have to find other activities to pass the time," I whispered, a low, seductive rumble deep in my chest.

"Race you to the bedroom," he replied, grinding his hips into mine.

We lost an afternoon that day, and needless to say, dinner was late.

Seven Thousand, Two Hundred and Thirteen Days Before:

The darkness was closing in, cool wind whipping against our faces as we traversed the bike path down to the river. For weeks we had performed this same ritual; spending as much time together at school before gathering at one of our houses for dinner and a movie, then a late night bike ride down to the city to stare out across the water. I held back, peddling half speed as Lennox raced ahead, his hair sweeping fluidly behind him, resembling a dark river. I watched his lean legs pump the pedals and the way his biceps tightened as he gripped the handlebars. Even in the fading twilight, I could still see every inch of the kid, in large part because in the weeks since we met, I had studied him for so long I could not forget any detail of him.

Even when I closed my eyes, there he was; a fully formed image that resided in the back of my mind. I was still confused by the feeling I got when he was around, but I figured since I'd never had a best friend before, that this was how all guys felt about their closest friends. He was definitely the closest friend I had ever had, everything about him seemed to radiate magic and buoy me if ever I was feeling low.

I could still make out his perfect silhouette ahead of me as the night grew darker, the rushing sound of the wind and his far off whooping all that I could hear over my own breath and my heartbeat in my ears. I watched him closely as he deviated from the bike path, cutting between two benches and dismounting his bike while it was still going at full speed. He let it tumble to the ground and abandoned it on the grass as he jogged slowly closer to the bank of the river. In all our time together, which was not much if I was honest, I had never told him how these nights by the river were my favorite time of my day. I cycled faster to where he had abandoned his bicycle and let mine fall beside it, the handlebars of mine by his back wheel, forming a yin yang in the grass. I raced over to where he sat, his arms resting on his bent knees as he looked out over the river towards the gleaming lights of Cambridge, lit with the buzz of a Friday night in the halls of Harvard.

I came to a skidding stop beside him, slamming down hard into the grass in a skid worthy of the high school baseball team, making him jump with my sudden and dramatic entrance.

“What you thinking about, buddy?” I asked him, nudging his arm just to feel the contact.

“*Batman*. What else?” he asked with a crooked smile that made my insides feel like they were melting. He was so incredible that I had to look away,

picking at a patch of grass next to where I had landed, between where my arm rested and where his leg now lay against the moist surface.

“What about him, Len?” I asked, knowing I was sure as shit in for another of his amazingly well thought out and a little too energetic rants.

“I just finished *Knightfall*. Just got me thinking.”

He'd been talking about *Knightfall* for weeks. He was behind on the previous summer's comics, but he'd finally been catching up and the story was getting him more riled up with each installment. He would go on for hours about the new bad guy, Bane, and how lethal he was because of his huge size and his devious ways. I loved to sit there and stare at the pictures with him while he detailed the back story I had missed and the symbolism that I was clearly too dumb to figure out. When he talked about comics, it was like a part of him he never got to use found the freedom to come out and play, and I felt blessed he invited me to be his playmate.

“So, what happened?” He looked over at me.

“Stupid question, Ryan,” he laughed. “He won. Bruce Wayne always wins.”

“So, why do you look so sad?” I whispered, chucking bits of grass onto his cargo shorts and rubbing them off soon after in a continuous loop that, if I was honest, was just an excuse to touch his leg. My touches started to last longer, and he looked down at me and smiled.

“He just wants to help people, you know?” I nodded as he looked back across the river.

“He's just this normal guy who uses what he has to help people. To protect them. It just seems like such a cool thing to do; helping people you don't even know because it's the right thing to do.”

I stopped to consider it a moment, unsure of what he was really saying, but feeling there was more unsaid in that sentence than the words that he had spoken out loud.

“You want to become a vigilante, buddy?” I asked with a chuckle.

He smiled and pushed me.

“No, doofus,” he said. “I just like that there are people out there looking out for others.”

I placed my head on his leg. “We look out for each other,” I said, unsure if it was the right thing to say.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “If you ever need protecting, I’ll protect you, Len.”

I turned over onto my back and stared at him, his gaze meeting mine, a wide smile on his face.

“I’ll protect you, too,” he whispered.

Our eyes stayed trained on each other for the longest time, and in that moment I understood the feeling I had whenever Lennox was around. He was everything to me; more than a friend, more than anything I’d ever known before. And I meant every word I had said to him. I would protect him, and I hoped I would get the chance to do that for as long as I lived.

Time stood still. I reached up and pressed my hand onto his cheek, which was cold from the dropping temperature of the approaching night. I let it rest there as he closed his eyes and pressed his cheek further into my palm, rubbing it against his baby soft skin.

He leant down to me, and I wondered what was going to happen and if whatever it was would change everything forever. As our lips gently brushed each other’s, I physically felt the world shift beneath us. Everything changed as he brushed the tip of his tongue against mine.

My world changed as he became a part of me; as he became mine. We kissed slowly before he pulled back and looked back over the water, a small smile on his face.

“Len?”

“That was just like I thought it would be,” he said, avoiding my eyes.

I sat up in the grass, draping my arm across his shoulders. “You wanted to do that?”

“I did it, didn’t I?” he said, elbowing me in the ribs.

“Can we do it again?”

And we kissed once more; the sound of the flowing river our soundtrack, backlit by the silence of the city and facing a future that was never going to be the same, in the best possible way. We kissed passionately as the reality of life with Lennox wrapped its arms around me, making me feel, for the first time ever, like I had found my place in the world.

We were one. And Lennox tasted like infinity.

Twenty-two Days After:

The same smell came flooding from the kitchen. The same dulcet Motown hit of yesteryear. The same man standing at the stove, cracking eggs into a frying pan. It was like *déjà vu*, only I fully recalled the last time I had seen him do this. It was yesterday. The concern was racing down my spine like someone had walked over my grave as I put down my briefcase and rounded the corner to the kitchen.

“Oh, hey Babe. You’re home.” Same greeting, different day. I was weary as I closed in to greet him, observing the way he moved, hoping he’d take a different route back to the stove or come in for a hug instead of a kiss. He kissed me. Same as yesterday.

“You okay?” I asked, as if reading from a script.

“Yeah, just starving. I woke feeling...”

“Like you could eat a horse?” I asked, interrupting him midsentence.

“I was just going to say that,” he chuckled. “You read my mind. You shouldn’t have let me sleep in when you left.”

And just like that we were back to the script.

It was like the movie *Groundhog Day* in the open scenes where Bill Murray was trying to figure out what was causing him to wake up on the same day, every day. Only I knew what the cause of this was, and I was too terrified to admit it to myself.

I played my part like a pro; wandering into the kitchen, snaking my arms under his and kissing him just below the ear. The scarring now looked ominous instead of the hopeful reminder of his survival. I felt sick to my stomach.

“You hungry?” he asked, as I fought to swallow down the bile rising in my throat.

“Famished.”

“Brilliant.”

I squeezed him tighter, this time not from desire, but from devastation. What was happening to him? I was feeling sick to my stomach and the smell of the greasy eggs and bacon were coalescing with that feeling, causing my mouth to moisten like it does the second before you vomit. I released him and walked away, trying to find my breath, my control, and my composure; trying not to alarm him in any way. But something was wrong. I’d been feeling it for days.

“The TV isn’t working. Can you call someone to fix it?” he repeated, an automaton on an endless cycle.

Again I grabbed the plates and led him to the dining room and again, after eating his meal, the meal I barely touched, he placed down his cutlery, and rubbed gently at his temples.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, just a bit of a headache.”

“I’ll get you some painkillers and a glass of water.” The repetition was unbearable.

“Maybe you should go lie down?” I deadpanned.

“Yeah, I think I will.”

He excused himself, walked away, and through the alarm bells ringing in my head, all I could think was one word.

Help.

Seven Thousand, One Hundred and Ninety-five days before:

Some people can’t stand the clap of thunder or the strobe effects of lightning. I wasn’t one of those people. I lay in bed that night counting the minutes between the loud crashes of the weather pattern, trying to locate the distance of the storm overhead, like I had done my whole life. I counted twelve as I pulled my sheets up under my chin, rubbing my hands together to generate as much heat as I could. Rain pounded on my window in a constant barrage of muted sound, and it soothed me like the hypnotic beat of a metronome. I closed my eyes in the dimness of the room; rid myself of the sight of silhouetted trees dancing against the far wall through the open drapes. I focused only on the sound and nothing more.

As the storm grew closer, the sound between thunder claps and lightning came quicker, first ten, then eight, then six. With my eyes closed I tried to predict its location, tightening my closed eyes every time I thought another sound would ring out through my room. Every time I guessed it right it felt like I controlled the storm, that I commanded it with sheer force of will and it gave me a rare sense of control. The rain slammed harder against my window; once, twice, and a third time, harder than before. It took me a while to realize that it wasn’t the rain, but something else.

Though the room was frigid, I pulled back the covers, and dressed only in my boxer-briefs, went to the window to stare out. As I approached the glass, one more loud noise shook the fixture with the aid of a small stone, and as I traced the yard for its origin, I could make out a dark shape standing beneath the window, partially obscured in the darkness.

Had it been anyone else, I would have been scared, but I would recognize the lines of that body from miles away. I could see the curve of this shoulder and the severe definition of his jaw even through the rain-splashed glass panel. Lennox was indelibly marked in my memory.

He looked up at me from beneath the sheet of his dark hair, wet and slicked against his face. But the way he held himself told me something was very wrong.

I pulled a T-shirt over my head and ran to the stairs, bounding down them two at a time and threw open the door. I could make his shape out, stationary on the lawn; waves of defeat pouring off him like heat. Something inside me screamed to run to him, so abandoning all reason, I bolted outside in bare feet and my thin tee and boxers. I skipped down the steps of the stoop two at a time on the balls of my feet, my clothes sodden within seconds of my being in the path of the rain. I ran across the lawn, my feet sinking into the damp earth, making sloshing sounds with every step I took closer to Lennox. I almost body-slammed him when I reached him, the slick ground allowing no purchase for my bare feet.

“Lennox? You’re soaked. Come inside,” I yelled over the roll of fresh thunder, taking his slick hand in mine and leading him down the path to the stoop, leaving dark, muddy footprints in our wake. We rushed up the steps until we were finally back inside the warm sanctity of the house. I didn’t want to wake my parents, so we kept the lights off. I stripped off my T-shirt and used it to wipe the mud from my feet as Lennox removed his sneakers. I wrapped them in the T-shirt and in silence, led him to my room at the far side of the house, away from where my parents were sleeping.

Safely inside, I shut the door, wedging the chair from my desk beneath the handle to maintain as much privacy as we could. Lennox began to shake violently, the shock of the cold rain wearing off and taking with it any resolve he had to keep his shit together. I pulled off the thin sweater and T-shirt he was wearing in one go and abandoned them on the floor. He still wouldn’t look at me, and the feelings his evasion caused were starting to churn inside me and my nerves started to manifest, and within seconds I was shaking beside him.

I moved slowly, reaching up and sweeping his damp hair off his face, tucking the thick, wet tendrils of darkness behind his ear. I nearly cried out when I saw what I saw.

Blood trickled freely from his nose, his lip was cut straight through, and the start of a nasty bruise was forming under his left eye. My heart started to break for him, and I thought I might lose control, scream and yell, put my fist through a wall. Someone had hurt him and I wasn't there to protect him. The guilt ripped through me as I did my best to stay strong, because in that moment, my strength was all I had to give.

I grabbed a towel from the dresser and draped it across his shoulders, and he pulled it in tightly around himself, as I fumbled with the button on his jeans, pulling it open and then carefully taking off what remained of his drenched clothing. He was glorious, standing there naked and trembling, but even defeated and bruised, Lennox DuWitt was still the most beautiful sight that I had ever seen.

"Climb into bed," I whispered, stroking his hair and kissing the side of his face that wasn't blossoming with damage. "Get warm, I'll be right back."

He seemed to panic, grabbing my wrist to stop me from leaving. "It's okay," I assured him. "I'm just going to get something for your lip. I'll be down the hall and back before you realize I'm gone. I've got you. I won't go anywhere."

He nodded and turned to climb under the covers that had cooled in my absence.

As I returned to the room, I replaced the chair under the door knob and went slowly to the bed with the bowl of warm water, the cotton balls, and the peroxide I had taken from the bathroom. I set them all down beside the bed, stripped off my own wet clothes, and looked around for something to replace them with. Lennox reached for me, shook his head once and when I put my hand in his, he pulled me in beside him under the covers. I shuffled in until our naked bodies were touching and all at once the world was okay; we were together and the feel of his cool, lean thigh against mine meant that nothing could hurt us. Lennox and I were a team, and together we were always so much better. I put my hands on either side of his face, pulled him down for a chaste kiss on the forehead. He closed his eyes and reveled in the security he found beside me. He didn't need to say a word, because I felt every bit as safe as he did.

I didn't need to ask what had happened that night. Though Lennox's father had never gone this far before, there were times he had pushed him around, slapped him a bit, but for the most part, the emotional abuse was the worst. Over our time together, our nights at the river, Lennox had revealed more and more about his past with his father and what he was forced to endure when his mother would travel for her job. The bruises on his face had Malcolm DuWitt written all over them, his signature written in bruises and blood upon the face of my lover.

I leaned back, grabbing the bowl and the cotton from the nightstand and set to work clearing the blood from his nose. He flinched on occasion as I dabbed away the flecks of dried red, but Lennox never once complained or asked me to stop, and his bravery and determination made me want him even more. Even when I applied the peroxide to his cuts, he didn't say a word; his silence both eerie and strangely ethereal.

When he was all cleaned up, he started to look more like himself. The previous tension in his body dissipated as I ran my hands over his skin. I became more aware of our nudity; the first time outside the locker room we had bared ourselves to each other. But a question was chewing at me, gnawing at my consciousness, and begging to be asked. Though the timing was all wrong, I let my lips whisper the question that in that moment they seemed to need to speak.

“Why did he do this?”

Lennox broke eye contact with me, looked down into his lap, and inhaled a big breath that seemed to swell him to twice his size. He reached across me, fumbling on the floor for his soaked, discarded jeans, and pulled a folded piece of paper from the pocket. As he righted himself back in the bed, he handed me the paper, never once meeting my eyes,

I took the paper, its edges moist from the rain and opened it up, nervous about what I would find. With the sheet flat on my lap, I inhaled sharply when I registered what I saw. There in front of me was a perfect comic book rendition of a man; his abs tight and his pecs visible through the costume. He stood, regally, his hands on his hips as a cape billowed behind him.

And his face was my face, every detail perfectly drawn to capture my likeness.

“Wow,” I whispered, and slowly he lifted his head to finally regard me. I was lost in the lines of the image and swelling with pride that he would do something so beautiful for someone like me.

"This is so beautiful," I said, my eyes starting to prickle with the warmth I was feeling for the trembling boy at my side. "You made me into a superhero!"

"You are a superhero," he said, so quietly I could barely hear a word. "You're my hero."

I kissed him gently, careful not to split his lip open and start the bleeding again, but he pulled me closer, forced the kiss to deepen and dragged me down under the covers with him, evidence of his impressive arousal pushing against the flesh of my naked thighs. I was lost to this boy, a slave to his every desire and his desire right then seemed to reflect my feelings.

That night we made love; a consummation of the relationship that I had found against all odds and now refused to ever let slip from my hands. That night we became men together, and solidified a bond that had started with an unnamed attraction and blossomed into something that made me feel like the luckiest guy in the world.

Eighty-eight Days After:

I thought about just calling from the road on my way back to the hotel, but I couldn't bring myself to brush him off like that. Though I had spent every night sleeping apart from him, Lennox still needed me, and though our friends went to visit him when they could, the bulk of his care still fell to me. I drove silently through the streets, in the car he would never remember, until I found myself back on the street where our house was located.

Every day it was harder and harder to get out of the car. Every day was the same, and though to Lennox it felt like nothing was wrong, each day made the whole thing seem more real to me. And at the root of all of this, I missed my Lennox so very much. I knew what I would find when I walked through the door and just once I wanted to find something else. I suppose it didn't help that I had been restocking all the eggs and bacon every week, but for once I wanted him to deviate just a little from the monotony of that one daily routine. The day was so nondescript, so pointless.

Just another day off from the coffee shop where he had nothing to do but stick around the house being lazy. The twenty-sixth. It was always the fucking twenty-sixth.

I turned off the engine and hauled in a deep breath. I would stay for a few minutes, make sure he was okay, swing by and see Warren and be back at the hotel by 8:30 to drink this day into oblivion.

I was unsure how much more of this I would be able to take as I neared the door, already sickened by the smell of fried eggs and bacon brimming on the other side of the wooden barricade. How much can one man truly take before he breaks? Lennox, in his brokenness, would never understand what I was doing for him, and the thought made me feel selfish. It wasn't about me. I had to keep repeating that like a mantra just to get me across the threshold. I stood in the hallway, dropped my briefcase down and played my part like a pro, my defeated vocal chords fighting with the Motown track I could no longer fucking stand. I turned off the music and walked to the kitchen.

“Oh, hey Babe. You're home.”

It was the twenty-sixth again.

The Day Before:

We lay there, folded in each other's arms, slick with a post-coital sweat and panting from the exertion. Lennox draped one leg over mine, placed his head on my chest, and snuggled in, the way we had fallen asleep together ever since we started sharing a bed.

Outside, the storm picked up, the wind blowing the shutters so they nudged against the house. Whilst Lennox lay there, no doubt counting my heartbeats, which were elevated by our sexual adventures, I continued to count the seconds between rolls of thunder, my eyes closed and tightening when I predicted the next would fall. It was a holdover from my childhood; one that I had maintained throughout my life after the first night I made love to Lennox, after which I was even more enamored by the sound of a storm outside. Behind my closed eyes that screwed shut tightly every ten seconds, I could still see Lennox as a boy, standing in my yard, his hair slicked over his face, thinking his life had ended. I can still remember every detail of the rest of that night when I proved that it had only just begun.

“Are you sleeping?” he asked, his voice vibrating against my chest.

“Nope,” I replied. “Not even tired.”

“Well that's a kick to the ego,” he laughed.

“The sex was phenomenal, Baby,” I said, planting a kiss on the top of his head. “My body is well and truly ready to collapse after that. But my brain...” I let the sentence trail off, knowing he would pick up my meaning.

“Big day tomorrow.”

“The biggest.”

It was the night before the wedding, and though I trusted he had everything worked out and that it would all go off without a hitch, something inside me was still racked with nerves. I couldn't quite get a handle on what I was feeling, since I had known I wanted to marry Lennox since I was sixteen years old, when it wasn't even an option for us. I guessed it was the fact that, though I was bound to him in every way important, we would have to stand up and make a big fuss about it in front of our friends. I don't know why this realization surprised me, since I had set these wheels in motion by placing the ring on his finger, but outside of a sporting arena, I was always nervous to be the centre of attention. I knew Lennox had similar issues, so I kept my anxiety to myself in a vague attempt at reassuring my self-assured fiancé. Fiancé. The word tasted foreign even when spoken in my mind. Fiancé wasn't a thing. That's why the wedding had been planned and executed so quickly. Fiancé was a limbo between together and forever. I wanted no part of it. I wanted to drag the man down to that courtroom until he was bound to me for all eternity and could never get away. Only then would my nerves subside.

The storm rang out again as I squeezed my eyes right at the moment it sounded. I could control the storm outside, but only Lennox could calm the storm I was feeling internally.

It took a while to realize what he was doing, running his fingers gently across my chest to the side of his head. With my eyes closed, I paid attention to the shape he was tracing; the outline of a heart with our name inside, the name we had decided to take for our own. Matheson-DuWitt. I chuckled when I realized.

“Excited?”

“You have no idea. The storm is making it worse.”

“How come? I thought you didn't mind storms?” I asked, as he shifted himself off my chest and lay on the pillow beside me, facing me as I turned over to face him back.

“I love storms.” He said with a smile.

“Then what's up, Baby?”

“Just brings it all back. That night.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” I said, running a finger gently across his cheek.

“We’ve come so far, and we are so close to having everything we ever dreamed of. Tomorrow, life will be complete.”

“My life was complete the second you fell into it,” I giggled as he slapped me on the arm.

“Literally.” I paused and took a breath. “Tomorrow will be great. It’s just another day. This,” I said motioning to us both. “This has been complete since back then. The rings change nothing. I’ve been your husband since I was lucky enough to meet you. You have to know that, right?”

His smile grew so wide I thought his jaw might snap, and I knew I’d said just the thing he needed to hear.

“Still, I don’t think I can sleep,” I said after a moment.

“Me neither,” he replied. “And you know I feel the same. I’ve loved you since I didn’t know what love was. And I will love you forever. Until we’re old and senile and die on the same day like in *The Notebook*.”

“You better not forget me though. I am not coming and reading our life story to you on the off chance you remember my name once in a while,” I laughed as he threw himself on top of me, straddling my legs as he initiated a tickle fight.

“I could never forget you,” he said, forcing his hands under my armpit as I shrieked like a girl, which, on a broad guy of six-foot-two, sounded absolutely ridiculous, and it was evident Lennox thought so too, from the way he laughed even harder.

“You better not,” I panted, pulling him off me and settling him back at my side, drawing him in for a deep kiss. His body melded to mine in a way that always made me marvel at how well we fit together; like two puzzle pieces, and without one, there was no way to tell what the picture was.

“Never,” he promised.

But, like all promises, *that* one was made to be broken.

One Hundred and Ninety-seven Days After:

I sat across the table from the man, nodding intermittently at the things he was saying that I was so far from listening to I couldn’t repeat if he asked me. I was sure my face was a mask of indifference, so every thirty seconds I would

nod my head and smile to feign my participation in the conversation. This was the first date I had ever been on, and everything about it was warring against my instincts to just get in the car and drive back to the house to see Lennox. My hand tightened around the frosted glass of whisky rocks at the thought of his name, and I took a long, hard pull from the drink, nearly draining it in one swig.

Terrance was an investment broker from Winchester, only a few miles outside of the city proper, and our awkward blind date came courtesy of a friend of a friend of someone Warren went to college with. He had catalogue-model hair, was five years my senior, and had so many teeth he could be killed by ivory poachers. His shoulders were a mile too wide for his body, and his suit, I suspected, could be sold for the price of a small yacht. He was attractive, sure, and the man in me felt a deep stirring in my loins that had no doubt resulted from months without being able to touch Lennox absent the feeling that I was taking advantage.

After months of destroying myself with guilt, and Warren's constant nightly barrage of platitudes that I should move on with my life, I had finally relented to his demands, if only just to show him what a colossally bad idea it would be.

I drained the last of my drink, and raised my glass to Warren who was stood, arms crossed, assessing me behind the bar. With an enthusiastic thumbs up, he poured another drink and ran it over, clearly enjoying being able to eavesdrop at a closer range. As he placed the drink down, I fired daggers at him from my eyes, causing his quick retreat as I made a hasty start on the fresh drink.

The amber liquid burned going down, and I welcomed the numbness that accompanied it, covertly looking behind Terrance for the clock mounted on the wall. We had been there for one hour, and I had barely said a word.

"Can you excuse me a moment?" I asked in my nicest faux-pleasant voice. "Nature calls."

He stood up as I left the table, the picture of chivalry, and I spared a moment to assess his broad body, clearly gained from years of gym membership and careful diet.

In the bathroom, I braced myself against the sink, assessing my reflection in the mirror.

What was I even doing there? This felt so much like cheating that the thought of going back out there made my skin feel like it might crawl off my

body. The liquor had numbed most of the residual guilt, but the thoughts that crossed my mind when I thought of Terrance's huge muscular body and the things he could do with it spurned an extra flash of guilt. I could sleep with him, sure. We could have a night of meaningless sex and it would end right there. But I could never get involved with another man while the situation with Lennox was so precarious. As much as the idea of sex wasn't entirely unwelcome, my heart was still trapped in that house with a man who thought I was out of town on business.

I splashed my face with cold water to try and wash the traitorous thoughts away, and dabbed at my skin with the rough blue paper towels. With a deep inhale of thick, bleach-filled bathroom air, I readied myself and returned to the table.

Again, the handsome man rose as I moved to take my seat, and my nerves once again got the better of me. He resumed his casual conversation, regaling me with stories of his nephew at Harvard and how he was alumni of some other boring shit I didn't care about; all the while I was polishing off drink after drink in the hopes I would just black out and the night would be over.

As I swallowed the last of my sixth whisky, Warren startled me out of my trance.

"You okay there, buddy?" he asked, his face a mix of consternation and concern.

"Uh huh, I'm fine," I scowled.

"Maybe you guys should call it a night? You're looking a bit out of it."

I rose from my seat, stumbling, and causing Terrance to rise as well as Warren steadied me on my feet.

"Maybe I should call you a cab?" Warren asked, as he reached in my pocket and removed my car key, placing it into his jeans pocket.

"Good idea," I replied, turning to Terrance. "Sorry, Terrance. I guess I didn't realize how much I was knocking back."

"That's quite alright. As long as you had a nice night."

"Oh he did," Warren chimed in. "But I better get that cab sorted and get him home to bed."

"I can drive him," offered Terrance.

And that's how I ended up in Terrance's car, parked outside my Spartan apartment at 9.30 p.m. on a Tuesday.

As he idled by the curb, the silence seemed to stretch on forever. I unfastened my seatbelt and inhaled deeply, the scent of his cologne mixing with the fresh air.

"I had a nice time, Ryan," he said with a smile.

"I did as well. Guess I was pretty nervous."

"It's okay to be nervous. I heard about what happened, and it's completely understandable to feel that way, being back out there. Trying to leave certain things behind." He placed his hand on my knee, squeezing it gently before shifting it up to my thigh.

My body froze in shock. A strange man, who wasn't Lennox, was touching me, and I was scared half to death. The fear mingled with a hidden desire, and I turned to look him in the eye, speechless.

He moved slowly, clearly giving me a chance to back away if I needed it, but as his face drew near, my lips parted, perhaps to protest, but were silenced by the kiss. His lips were soft and felt so foreign against mine, and as his tongue slipped into my mouth, I let him fall into the kiss, tasting the remnants of whisky that no doubt lingered on my tongue. He knotted his hand in my hair and shifted closer to me, and it reminded me of the way Lennox would initiate sex; back when we were whole and the world hadn't pulled us apart.

Lennox.

I pushed him back with so much force that he hit the driver's door with a thud.

"I'm sorry," he uttered. "I shouldn't have done that. I'm very sorry."

"No," I said. "No, it was my fault. I just..." I couldn't find the words. My face was burning red, tears threatening at my eyes and I felt like my tie was choking me; like I couldn't get enough air into my lungs. "I'm not ready," I whispered, opening the car door. "I'm so sorry, but I have to go."

Slamming the door behind me, the fresh air hit me full force, almost knocking me to the ground. I stumbled clumsily and righted myself, making a swift beeline away from the handsome man and his unwanted kisses. The tears streamed down my face, and I was acutely aware that I could barely stand up, more than aware that Terrance had gotten out of the car and was ready to help

me if I needed it. But I was determined to put as much distance between myself and the man as possible. Without looking back, I stumbled up the last of the stairs, shoved my key into the lock and slammed the door behind me, crumbling into a pile on the other side of the threshold.

I lay there for hours, feeling like all the tears might help to wash away what I had done. But even after I had cried a river, I still couldn't wash away the betrayal. I cursed the world for the hand it had dealt me, and when the tears would no longer come, I pulled myself up and threw myself into bed, not even bothering to take off my shoes.

That was the moment I was truly defeated by the whole sorry situation.

One Hundred and Thirty-two Days After:

I'd given up hoping for change; dreaming of a day I'd walk through the door and Lennox would do something, anything, different from the day before. I'd given up talking to people at work, discarded focusing my mind on elaborate fantasies of the wheels in Lennox's head finally spinning forward, and the rings being back on our fingers, ready to start a new life together. Instead, I rehearsed my lines in my head; an actor on the stage of my own life. I had tried to say something different, to lead the conversation away from where it usually went, but when I left my character, Lennox barely seemed to notice, steering us right back to the words we had both become accustomed to.

I had no friends to really rely on, other than Warren, and even my visits to the bar had decreased in the past weeks. I was a shell of a person, and though he was frozen in time, even Lennox had started to notice how the light had disappeared from my eyes; the light he put there that had been stolen by the events that led us there.

I had long since abandoned any intimacy I had previously showed him before I decided to leave each night, and his reaction to my frosty demeanor had been met with one of his own. I had tried to convince myself that that was a good sign; that somewhere inside him, his mind was starting to grab hold of some of the memories we were reliving, and their minute deviances, for keeps.

The bedroom door stayed closed as I packed fresh clothes and discarded the old ones into the hamper; the smell of eggs and bacon barricaded outside the door as the familiar scents were starting to choke me. I would never eat these foods again, an olfactory reminder of all that had changed in just a few short months.

When everything was packed, I hurried down the stairs, hold-all in hand, and yelled an unenthusiastic goodbye to Lennox as he sat, alone, at the dining room table, lost in the diet he had carved for himself which was inexplicably adding the pounds around his middle. He would never truly be able to grasp where those pounds were coming from.

“See you tomorrow,” I yelled as I opened the door to exit, stage left.

“Enjoy your business trip.”

The cool air was always a welcome, the smell of burnt asphalt and freshly mown grass a rewarding respite from the unfamiliar scent the house had gathered in my absence. I hurried, double speed to the car, opening it remotely and throwing myself inside after chucking my bag onto the back seat.

I sat, hunched at the shoulders, a picture of defeat with my hands gripping the steering wheel. Deep breaths refused to calm me and my chest felt so tight I could barely breathe. I reached inside my shirt, liberating the chain hanging there and gripped my hand tightly around the two gold rings that it held. My breath eased. My chest lightened. These were totems from another time, the only things left tethering me to a time that had all but been lost to one second of careless distraction. The rings were not what they used to be, but to me, they signified a love that most people never got to experience; one that I had enjoyed for longer than ever expected and one that, though gone, would always live on in my memory, even if it was locked inside Lennox's, abandoned and forgotten.

I started the car, drove away, and let my own repetitive routine recommence.

That Day in Spring:

Whoever invented the bowtie needed to be shot immediately, as I clumsily fiddled with the knot, my large, ape-like knuckles making it all but impossible. As I faced the mirror, awkwardly messing up the simple technique, I felt two strong hands run up the back of my shoulders, pull my hands away, and deftly tie the knot as if there were nothing to it. When Lennox was satisfied I looked presentable, he let his hands drift away, sweeping them gently down the back of my shirt as he disappeared from my periphery, emerging a second later with my jacket in his hands, holding it open to allow me to finish the look. I bent backwards, arching my spine down to his height as I shoved my arms through the sleeves. Smoothing the front panels gently, I appraised myself in the mirror giving my reflection a crooked smile. I didn't look half bad.

“You look perfect,” Lennox said from behind me, as I turned to face him, armed with a courteous response. What I saw took my breath away. With his hair tied back in an intricate, fish-tail plait, the defined angles of his face were more visible than I had ever seen them. The white of his tux jacket seemed to illuminate his pale skin, hugging to his body so tightly it was like a second skin. In all the years we had spent together, not even at his graduation had Lennox ever looked this way; an ethereal glow emanating from him due to how comfortable and handsome he was looking.

“You...” I stuttered, unable to find words worthy of him. “You look perfect.”

His smile stretched wide as he stepped close to me, running his hands under the fabric of my jacket around the turquoise cummerbund that matched his own. While he was dressed in a white jacket, mine was black; his idea of tipping our hats to age old tradition, though our marriage was far from it. His body lay perfectly against mine, shifting himself upwards to meet my mouth in a gentle, loving kiss. I pulled him as close as I could, wanting to savor every second of this day, to commit it to memory so I would never lose the feeling of being exactly where we should be; together, and for all time.

The kiss deepened as he groaned, rubbing himself against me, causing heat to flare from under my collar.

“Whoa there, Baby,” I whispered. “We don’t have time for that.”

“Yeah, and this suit was not made to accommodate excitement,” he said, looking down at his skin-tight dress pants that almost looked painted on, and blushing. “Are you ready to do this?”

When everything we needed for the humble ceremony was packed into the car we had rented for the day, we climbed into our respective seats, the unfamiliar cushioning, and the tight clothing causing us to shuffle around to get comfortable. Avoiding creasing our jackets at all costs, we fastened our safety belts and I gunned the motor, listening with a smile to the roar of the vintage motor. I looked across at the man I loved, as he fiddled with the Superman pin that his friend Cameron had given him as his something blue. He was determined to adhere to as many traditions as possible; a silent declaration of our right to marry, like every other person out there. His friend Elton had had a floppy disk that contained his first manuscript melted down and made into a bracelet, and Lennox was wearing it with such pride as his something old. We skipped over something borrowed as we were wearing rented tuxes, and the something new was due to happen in about an hour’s time. I took his hand in

mine, mainly to stop him from fiddling with the pin any more, but mostly for my own comfort, just to feel the realness of him, to feel the contact.

“You ready for this, Mr. Matheson-DuWitt?” I asked with a smile, butterflies flying around inside me at just the mention of our new name.

“I’ve been ready my whole life,” he said back, squeezing my hand. “You got the rings?”

I patted my jacket pocket. “Right here, next to my heart,” I said with a goofy grin. He socked me in the arm as I pulled away from the house for the last time as an unmarried man.

We drove in silence, comfortable and content, each step we made closer to the courthouse causing a crackle of excitement to fill the vehicle like static. Each click of the dial that signified another mile had passed was like a countdown to our big moment. I imagined all our friends waiting there, ready to shower Lennox with rose petals. I imagined the beauty of his smile as we finally cemented our relationship in a promise that would last forever. I had never been more ready for anything in our entire lives.

As we stopped at a crossroads, waiting for the light to change, he reached across the car, and put his hand on mine on the gearshift. I looked him dead in the eye and saw my life so clearly before us, what was meant to be happening was finally happening on this day.

The light changed and I put the car in gear and headed forward, as Lennox whispered from his seat. “I love you, Ryan. With all my heart.”

I felt my eyes prickle, my voice catching in my throat as I turned back to him to answer his words with some equal dedication of my own that could express just how I felt about the man at my side; my partner in crime and the love of my life

Those words never came.

I will never forget the way my stomach bottomed out; will never be able to erase the terror that ran through me right before the truck hit us. And I will never, ever be rid of the ear-splitting sound of the car crushing like a tin can, and, as I lost consciousness, the sound of Lennox’s seatbelt breaking and his head colliding with the dashboard. Blood looks so dark when falling onto stark white silk, and that contrast has been burned into my memory for all time, a macabre ending to what should have been the happiest day of our lives.

Fifty-nine Days After:

My office was feeling more like a tomb with each passing day; everything that I loved about my job slowly dwindling down into nothing until I dreaded being in the humble space. The ficus in the corner was dead from my lack of care and my desk chair felt like I was sitting on concrete. I was trying desperately to ignore the smell coming off the shirt I had been wearing for three days, the tie with the red wine stain on it, and how tight my pants were starting to get from lack of caring for myself. I had learned long ago that when you're having a bad day, things can only get better.

In this instance, that platitude couldn't have been more wrong, as the phone rang; caller ID presenting a number I hadn't seen in months.

As I pulled into the parking lot of the coffee shop, I knew exactly what had happened. Lennox sat on the curb, his head in his hands, and an icy chill went through me as I realized what I would have to say to him. This conversation never got any easier. We had had it too many times already, and each time it pierced my heart even harder than the last.

I pulled into an open space and stared at him, his shoulders bobbing up and down with the tears he was crying under the loose curtain of his dark hair. I was frozen, watching the picture of my lover, lost, alone, and confused. I found myself unable to move, watching his colleagues inside the coffee shop look out on him in concern. He hadn't worked there in weeks; following the accident we had kept him away from the place. It had been sheer dumb luck that he had wound up existing in a perpetual day off of work, but things like this were unprecedented. He had never tried anything like this before, and the thought that he might have to experience this again was breaking my heart.

I fought the urge to cry along with him as I swung open the car door and settled both feet on the tarmac, checking to see if my weary legs would hold me upright, before I walked over to where he was sitting, not even bothering to close the car door behind myself.

I hitched my tight trousers up and crouched down on the sidewalk beside him, taking an uncomfortable seat on the hot concrete. He didn't look up at me when I placed my arm gently across his shoulders, just shook his head, and continued to cry into his balled up fists.

"Len?" I said, gently. "Lennox. Look at me?"

He took a moment to gulp a deep breath and finally, when he had composed himself slightly, he raised his head to face me. His eyes were deeply bloodshot

and his face was puffy, providing a perfect frame for the complete loss that he was battling inside. I felt bile rise in my throat. I had wanted to shelter him from this. I had wanted him to stay in his bubble and never have to deal with anything to do with that day in Spring. I knew that in order to get him back to the house, I would have to evade all his questions, and help him get lost in a sedative that would take him into tomorrow, where the pain and the loss would be long forgotten.

"I don't understand," he said, through his sobbing. "They're lying. They have to be lying!" His yell a precursor for a fresh wave of grief, as more tears poured down his flushed cheeks and trickled to his chin before falling into his lap.

"What happened, Baby?"

"They said I don't work here anymore. They said I hadn't worked here for weeks. But I remember. I was here yesterday. I fucking remember it," he screamed. "They're lying to me, and I don't know why!"

"Why don't we get you home, Len? We can talk about it there, okay?" I rubbed my hand on his back, trying to soothe him. He shuffled away, pushing at my arm.

"No, tell me what's going on!" he demanded. "What the fuck happened? I lost my fucking job; you look like shit, and I have this," he said, pulling back his hair to reveal the large scar snaking down the back of his head. "Ryan, please!"

"Len, please. Let me take you home."

"No, not until you tell me," he said, his face pleading with me, every ounce of his pain displayed there like a mask of mourning.

"Okay," I sighed. "Okay."

I didn't want to do it. I couldn't even begin to ready myself for what I was about to say. But I knew him; knew how terribly stubborn he was, and the only way I was going to get him into the car was by telling the truth. I rubbed my hands roughly over my face as I readied myself, carefully considering my words.

I pulled the chain from inside my shirt, letting the two rings dangle in front of him as a tear ran down my face.

"We were on our way to get married," I said, my voice thick and coated with sorrow.

“We got married?” he asked, tentatively touching the rings hanging in front of him.

“We never made it there,” I said, slowly placing my hand in his. “There was an accident.”

His eyes widened in horror as his hand jetted back up to the angry scar on his head. I simply nodded an assent to the unspoken question.

That afternoon we sat there for nearly an hour, as I recounted everything that had happened since our happy day had turned to tragedy. He was inconsolable, and it took all the effort I had left in my body to scrape his damaged self off the curb and into the car; to take him back to the house where we had lived so happily, and feed him a sedative that would put an end to his suffering, rendering him comatose once more until the clock ticked off every second left of his memories of that day. I lay on the couch that night while he rested silently in bed, relaxed into a dreamless sleep that would deliver him from the curse of his memory. I didn't sleep for one second that night, and when the sun began to rise in the distance, I was filled with a relief that allowed me to close my eyes for a short while. That was the only time I was grateful for the effects of the damage the accident had done to Lennox, and continued to do to me.

Two Hundred and Forty-seven Days After:

The fake smiles and tender words had died months before. The best I could manage was forced civility, all emotion I had previously felt being stored in a lock box in the same place where Lennox's memories were hidden. I had lived the twenty-sixth for far too long, and in doing so I had stagnated as much as he had, and the pressure of repetition had broken me. Where Lennox had a scar that you could see and touch, all my scars were on the inside, building up and hardening until the scar tissue halted the function of everything else in my life.

I gave up. I picked up my bag, opened the door, and fled the house once more.

“Enjoy your business trip,” he yelled, as I walked away even more numb than the day before.

Seven Thousand, One Hundred and Fifty-seven Days Before:

“Quick, Len,” I whispered. “No one's around. Give me a kiss?”

He leaned himself against me and leaned into me, kissing me quickly but with a deep passion that we had practiced every minute we had alone.

“There,” he replied. “That’s all you’re getting.”

I poked my bottom lip out, feigning sadness as he laughed at my childlike expression. His laughter was infectious and soon I was laughing with him, the sound of his joy like a blanket that made me feel warm all over. The kid had a power over me that was like nothing I had ever seen or experienced; the ability to put me into a trance just with his proximity, the power to make me do whatever he asked without question.

He turned away from me, flipping the pages of his textbook, and pretending to read about something to do with geography. I knew he was pretending because the book was upside down, and from the way he was staring at it, it was clear nothing on those pages was registering at all.

“What’s up?” I asked, my brow furrowing in concern. “Did something happen?”

“No, why?” he asked, seemingly confused.

I reached across and turned the book up the right way.

“Oh,” he said, before letting out a frustrated sigh and falling back against the grass, his hands covering his face.

We were sitting in a remote part of the school grounds; a secret place we had discovered that only stoners and smokers ever really passed by, which was practically deserted during this, our only shared period together. I let myself fall back next to him so we were both lying, side by side, his face still shielded by his hands. I could see him perfectly, even though my eyes were squinted to protect them from the sun as it glared down on us from overhead, and I could tell there was something on his mind.

“You know you can talk to me, right? About anything you want?”

He let his hands drift away from his face, crossing them over his chest as he stared up into the sky, his eyes closed a fraction to avoid the sun’s glare.

“I know,” he said, quietly. “It’s stupid. Don’t worry about it.”

An uneasy silence settled between us, and my stomach began to knot. I couldn’t stop myself panicking, thinking he had had second thoughts about me, that he didn’t want to be my boyfriend any more. Even though it was a secret relationship that no one knew about except us, the thought of losing it made my skin prickle in gooseflesh.

"You can't say that," I whined. "I'll just worry. Tell me. Please," I said, nudging him over and over until he started to giggle and sat up, looking down at me.

"It's nothing bad. Seriously, Ryan, don't worry."

"Tell me," I chanted, over and over, tickling his ribs until he squirmed.

"Okay, okay!" he yelled. "Just promise you won't get mad?"

"Why would I get mad?"

He got really quiet and again I started to panic. Whatever it was he was hiding was clearly a big deal to him, and his silence became unbearable as he sat before me fiddling with the laces of his sneakers, doing all he could to avoid meeting my eyes.

I gave up on waiting, blurting out my question before I lost my moxie. "Don't you want to be with me anymore?" I asked, the concern more than evident in the sad way I asked the question.

His eyes shot up to mine and widened. "Of course I do," he yelped, his voice lilting up at the end, clearly expressing his own panic that I had even dared to ask him what I had. "Why would you even ask that?"

"No reason," I replied. "It was all I could think of."

"Well, you're wrong." His face grew grave.

"Stop it, Baby," I said, as he flushed. I'd started calling him that recently and every time I did, his face turned slightly red and his smile was impossible to disguise. "You're making me nervous." He stayed silent, until I prodded him to speak. "Tell me!"

"I love you," he blurted out, and my face froze in shock, our eyes locked, and the temperature seemed to rise a thousand degrees.

Love? What was love? I was seventeen years old. What could we possibly know about love? I'd only ever had Lennox as a romantic partner, and I was still so confused about what that meant. No one ever talked about people being gay, and even though I knew that's what we were, I still couldn't fully understand the full implications of it. I had had exactly one girlfriend my whole life, in middle school, and that only lasted a week. And then there was Lennox. I knew I couldn't stand to be anywhere but with him. I knew he was the best and kindest person I had ever met, that he made me smile every day without fail, that sexually I couldn't keep my hands off of him. But was that love? I had never even thought about it.

"You love me?" I asked, baffled entirely by the concept.

"That's what I said," he shot back, slight anger tingeing the words. "Forget it," he whispered. "Forget I said anything."

"No, I don't get it."

"What's not to get? I love you. I love you with all my heart; every single thing about you makes my life so much better. I love you."

"But how do you know?" I felt stupid, really dumb that I couldn't fathom how a person could know such a thing.

"I just know."

"But how?"

He sighed and fell back down to lie in the grass. "It's lots of little things. Like how when we are inside, your eyes are the bluest I've ever seen. But when we come outdoors they have a golden glow that I can't stop looking at, and it's so confusing I can't even mix that color in my paints. You have five freckles on your back that look like a star. You always look at me in a way that makes me feel complete, especially when you think I don't notice. Your favorite book is *The Great Gatsby*. You've read it fourteen times and it's the only book you've ever loved. You have one copy on your bookshelf with a corner turned down and one line highlighted because it is the most beautiful thing you ever read. You never get full when you eat. You taste like candy all the time, even though you never eat it. You open up to me without realizing it because we are so comfortable together. You make me feel like a real person, like I'm the only person in the world, and I never, not once, feel bad when you are around. Your touch can heal me in ways I can't figure out. And you are so smart, so fucking smart that the fact you are being so dumb right now makes me crazy." He gasped in a breath as he stopped, shaking his head and put his arm over his eyes.

The silence seemed to envelope us. I don't know why, but I felt like he might be crying, his eyes hidden from my view. I lay down beside him, gently placing my hand in the one covering his face and squeezed. "So it's the little things?" I asked, gently.

"All the little things, yeah."

"Oh," I said. I got it. I really did. "I guess," I paused, as he took his hand away from his face and turned to look at me. "Well, I guess that means I love you too," I said, a huge smile morphing my face into something that made his eyes widen and his body turn towards me.

“You guess?”

“No, Len. I know. I could list a thousand things like that about you. A million even. If that’s what love is, then I love you so fucking much.”

He launched himself at me, pulling me close, attacking me with a barrage of kisses all over my face.

“He loves me,” he yelled, straddling my waist, his arms high above his head as if in victory.

“He loves me too!”

I couldn’t contain my laughter. So *that* was love. It felt so good to give it a name. I pulled him down until his face was inches from mine.

“I’m going to love you forever,” I whispered, pulling his face to mine for a kiss. We didn’t even check who was around, because he loved me and I loved him and that was all that counted.

Twenty-seven Days After:

“Transient Global Amnesia,” Dr. Gardiner said, not taking his eyes off the computer screen as an image began to form before him.

I tried not to pay attention to the small sniffing noises coming through the speakers or look through the glass window at Lennox on the other side. He was lying still, contained within the huge hollow MRI machine that looked more like a coffin from a sci-fi movie, about to be shot into space. It had taken hours of explaining, of recalling the events of the past three weeks to even get him out of the house, and he hadn’t stopped crying, and it was abundantly clear that his tears had still not stopped as he fought to maintain control to avoid having to repeat the scan.

“It’s rare, but it could be what we’re looking at,” the doctor replied from his trance as the image grew longer. “You say he has no recollection of the accident?”

“He has no recollection of anything. He thinks it’s some random day. He doesn’t remember the accident, getting engaged. Anything.” I was so frustrated, my observations sounded like I was angry at the doctor. The truth was I was angry at the whole situation. We’d been through enough already; this was just too much for us to deal with. “He’ll forget we were here tomorrow. He’ll just

get up, cook the same fucking meal, and say the same useless things. What's wrong with him, Doc?" My voice was desperate. I wanted Dr. Gardiner to fix this; to give me an explanation, a magic bullet, anything to fix what was broken inside Lennox's head.

"The mind is an incredibly complex organ, Mr. Matheson. If what you are saying is true, this is a very rare and very under-researched area of medicine. There are exceptionally few cases of this type of injury documented and the results from those are all different."

"So what does that mean? Will he come out of it?"

The doctor sighed as the MRI completed on the screen. He turned towards me, a look of sympathy painted across his face, so obvious I wanted to slap it right off. "No two injuries are the same. This scan shows no sign of any physical injury. But his coma lasted much longer than we would have expected. There is no way to know if these symptoms will eventually subside, or..." he paused, cautious of finishing the sentence, as my grip on my temper threatened to completely dissolve.

"Or if he'll be like this forever..."

I turned to the window, watching as the platform that Lennox was lying on slowly re-emerged from the mechanical cocoon. I felt so hopeless. I couldn't imagine our lives being changed in such a devastating way. Sure, I was eternally grateful that my carelessness hadn't ended his beautiful life, but the threat of repeating that same day for the rest of our lives was a fate worse than death. How could I live like that; frozen in time, never moving forward with our lives? Never experiencing anything new because the memory of it would just be lost from his mind forever?

"You have to be patient, Mr. Matheson. Unfortunately, all you can do is wait."

"So, what now?"

The doctor paused to think. "You could ask him to keep a diary, and present him with the truth each day? It might help to document his days, so he could read about them each morning."

"So you want me to break his heart every day, and then have him spend the rest of his fucking awful days reading about things he has done but will never remember? Forget that. I can't hurt him like that."

Through the window, Lennox sat up on the metal platform. His eyes were puffy and swollen and he rubbed at them. He looked so lost, all I wanted to do was take his pain away any way I could.

“What other choice do you have?” The doctor asked from behind me.

That was the question. I was suffocating between the rock and the hard place, and all I could do was stay there; to wait the course and pray that something, anything, would change.

Lennox gripped the hospital gown around him, and in my mind, all I could hear was the final crashes of the accident; only this time, that sound was my heart shattering, a collision inside me so catastrophic, I thought I'd never be whole again.

Yesterday:

I was on auto-pilot as I fished the keys out of my pocket, jamming that all too familiar gold key into the Yale lock and twisting it until the door popped open. Like every day, I placed my briefcase down by the door, and walked towards the kitchen ready to participate in a soul-destroying badminton match of words I had played hundreds of times before; the outcome always the same.

One foot stepped in front of the other as I rounded the corner into the kitchen, taking no time to assess my surroundings. They never changed, I thought. Why bother?

Lennox was not standing at the stove.

I walked further into the room, looking for any sign of his presence. All that I found was a pan, slowly simmering on the stove. I opened the lid, for no other reason than curiosity. I leaned in, inhaling deeply as the rich aroma of marinara sauce assaulted my senses. It was a specialty of Lennox's and it seemed like forever since I had smelled the mouthwatering scent.

“Oh, hey Babe. You're home.”

Lennox came up behind me and snaked his arms around my waist, laying his head against my back. I tried not to get too drawn into the familiar feeling, but I couldn't seem to stop myself. I knew that getting too close would only hurt me further, but there was a tiny part of me that craved the intimacy we had shared; that wanted nothing more than to wrap myself in him and get lost in his body, just for one night.

I pulled his arms tighter around me, leant back into the embrace and it felt more like home than I had felt in months. He stood up on his tip toes and kissed my neck, and the familiar scent of his skin, that I had been denying myself, flooded my head, making it swim with a recollection so strong it threatened to overpower me. I breathed another deep lungful of his unique scent into myself and let him fill me, lost for a moment in the sensation of the past.

I turned myself around in his arms, not once trying to restrain myself from him. It was as if I were the teenage boy he had fallen in love with; all hormones and a desire to be connected to this man in any way I could. I stopped when I saw him. His hair was tied back, exposing the strong lines of his face. I reached behind him, pulling the braid of hair around and into view. It was tied in the same fish-tail plait it had been the day of the accident.

“You changed your hair?” I asked, wearily.

“Yeah. Just wanted to do something different. It was a mess. You like it?”

“I love it,” I said, fighting the wave of nostalgia that threatened to mow me down like a truck.

He smiled, running his hand along my face. “When did your hair get so long?” he asked, running his fingers through it carefully. I had forgotten to cut it. I cursed myself for the oversight, reprimanding myself and promising to rectify it the next day in an attempt to keep his days free from deviation, determined to avoid anything that might harm him more than necessary.

“It needs a cut,” I said, as he bunched his fist in it and pulled me down towards him.

His lips were as soft as they were on the banks of the river, and my control departed as I took him in a kiss that buckled his knees. I held him up in my arms, pressing forcefully against his mouth, savoring his taste as he clawed at my shirt, desperate for the closeness. I pulled him from the ground, let his legs circle my waist, and backed him against the counter top, placing him down on the surface as we ground our uncontrolled arousal against one another. I hadn't felt so alive in such a long time, like every hair on my body stood to attention and every inch of my skin was crackling like a lightning storm.

I pulled his hair from its braid, running my fingers through the complicated plait until the hair fell carelessly around his shoulders. I put my face to it, inhaling the familiar scent that had abandoned me in my absence. He lifted his face up, giving me access to his neck and I fed there, hungrily lapping at his

smooth, pale skin in a way I knew drew him crazy. He ground himself against me, starved for my touch. We spurred each other on, our hands roaming over the familiar contours of our bodies, desperate to connect; the passion building to a fever pitch that I feared would destroy me once and for all.

Then I stopped. I had to. It wasn't right to torture either one of us this way. Suddenly, I was back in the kitchen in the house we had shared for years. Before.

"Why are you stopping?" he asked, his face etched in concern.

Subconsciously, I ran my hand across his hair, my fingers running the line of the fading scar that tainted his otherwise perfect skin. "You seem awfully pleased to see me," I joked, trying to avert any rejection I may have caused by ceasing our passionate embrace.

"I feel like I haven't seen you in so long. It's weird. I woke up missing you."

It was such an odd sensation for him to explain, but it was one I understood all too well. I had missed him like crazy; like a piece of myself had been carved off and without it I was useless. This was just my body's way of reminding me where I belonged, and I hated myself for not being able to quit this life; for not being able to leave this all behind and find my own happiness. "I know what you mean," I whispered, leaning in for one last chaste kiss.

I backed away from between his legs, rubbing the sweat from my brow with the sleeve of my shirt. Lennox hopped down from the counter with a smile and his classic signature wink that had me yearning for our old life. This was the most animated and *himself* I had seen him since the accident. His demeanor made me ache inside, and I thought if I stayed in that house one second more I would lose my shit completely.

He moved silently around the kitchen, swaying to the music as he went. Only then did it dawn on me that I didn't recognize the song. While I was used to the same old Motown classics, this tune was far more modern, an electronic piece that was at complete odds with the music that had played in the house for the longest time. He lifted the lid from the pot and began to stir, bringing the spoon up to his lips to taste the flavors before chucking in another pinch of salt and stirring again. After another taste, he nodded his head, replacing the wooden spoon in the pan and drawing out another spoonful. He cradled the drips with his hand and brought the spoon over to me, putting it up to my lips.

“Taste,” he demanded, and my lips parted as he placed the spoon between them. The sauce was too hot but the flavors swept over me, causing me to audibly moan in the euphoria of the taste that I thought would be lost to me forever. “You like it?” he asked, smiling up at me with that glorious smile that I had always found myself getting lost in.

“It’s perfect,” I replied. “You’ve not made this in a while.”

“Felt like a change,” he said, walking back to the stove.

I started to poise myself to inform him of my business trip that didn’t exist, but halted myself from saying a word. I wanted to lose myself in the evening, to spend time with Lennox like he used to be. I wanted to stay exactly where I was and though it might break the remaining pieces of my heart, I couldn’t manage to care one bit at that moment. I wanted to taste our old life, to immerse myself in what should have been and to drown in the man I had loved for my whole adult life. I wanted to be selfish and pretend the last months had never happened; to have him wash every bit of pain away from me and to be myself for one night before returning to the awful reality of my loneliness.

“I think this is just about done. I could fry up some shrimp and cook it with some rice. Sound good?”

I just nodded as he went to the fridge, opening the door and reaching past the fresh eggs and bacon I had been bringing every day since before I could remember. He pulled out the shrimp in one hand and two beers that had been long forgotten, handing them to me so I could remove the caps. I dutifully complied handing one back to him, clinking our bottles together as he reached into the cupboard for the rice.

“Cheers, Babe,” he said, lifting his bottle in a toast. “Why don’t you go put your feet up and I’ll get this finished.”

I smiled, elated by how much he seemed to enjoy taking care of me. I couldn’t place it, but there was something so alive about him that I felt myself falling for him all over again.

“And you can tell me all about your business trip.”

I stopped dead in my tracks, my beer slipping from hand and crashing to the floor, splintering into a thousand moist pieces. “What did you say?” There was no way in hell he could have remembered that trip. “Lennox, what did you just say?” I said more forcefully. He met me with a look of alarm.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “I just asked how your trip went. You looked so sad leaving yesterday I just wanted to make sure you were okay?”

I crossed the kitchen in two strides, taking his arms in my hands and shaking him, like I could loosen an explanation from him that way. “Len, this is important, okay? What date is it?”

“Ryan, you’re scaring me.”

“Len, please! The date?”

“It’s the twenty-seventh,” he screamed at me. I turned to the calendar, and sure enough, the paper reading the twenty-sixth had been stripped from the pad, revealing a fresh sheet I never thought would be seen in this house. I grabbed him in my arms, held him so close, determined never to let him go. And I cried. Which only served to scare him more. He pulled me from around him, staring up at me with a shocked and scared expression.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, a hand on my cheek. “Are you okay?”

“I’m better than okay,” I cried, throwing my arms back around him.

“Let’s sit down,” he said, switching the flame off on the stove and taking my arm, leading me to the couch. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

I braced myself for the conversation, for the talk that would ruin what started off such a perfect night. I would tell him everything, and it would scare him and hurt him in ways I would never understand, but I owed him that much. We had moved forward one day, and I was unsure it would last, but if it did, if some miracle brought him back to me, then he needed to know everything I did.

We sat down on the couch, and I told him everything. I pulled no punches, and together we cried, as the past finally found us, and confronted us in a way we could never have been prepared for.

Today:

We stayed awake as long as we could, but as the sun started to fill our room with early morning rays, I lost the battle with exhaustion and fell into a deep sleep, my body tangled around Lennox as if he were the missing piece of me. When I finally roused, I was alone in the bed, tangled in the sheets. Lennox was nowhere to be found.

And then it hit me. That smell. Eggs. Bacon.

My heart sank, and the tears prickled freshly at my eyes. It had only been one day, but it had felt like the beginning of a new phase of his recovery. But I had been wrong.

I redressed and headed to the bathroom, washing my face in cold water in an attempt to wake myself from what felt like the best dream I had ever had, but in reality was just a nightmare. When I had rid my eyes of tears, and made myself as presentable as possible, I headed down the stairs to find Lennox at the stove, cooking the same meal he had cooked daily since he sustained his injury. I watched him longingly, praying for only one more day like the one before. He looked up when he saw me enter the room and smiled a weary smile.

"I was going to bring you this in bed," he said. "You should take the day off."

"Why?" I asked, with no defeat or venom in my voice.

"Because you just got home, Ryan. You just got back here after months away from me and I need to talk about this."

"You remember?"

"I remember everything from yesterday," he said. "Before that, the things I lost are still gone, but I remember everything we talked about."

Relief flooded me like a hit from a potent drug. I ran to him and grabbed him into my arms, held him to my heart as he reached around me and held me back. He was here, he remembered it all. I don't think, in all my life, I had ever been as happy and relieved as I was in that moment.

In all the talks of what had happened, I had omitted the proposal; never once spoken a word about the wedding. If he couldn't remember that day, then our lives would lead us there eventually. Until then I would keep these rings around my neck, and wait for the right time to put one on his finger as he sleeps; to make him my world all over again. He pulled back and looked up at me with a smile.

"Go back to bed," he said. "I'll bring you breakfast."

He kissed me as we unwound our arms from each other, and I smiled.

"What?" he asked.

"You can bring me breakfast," I smiled. "Just anything but bacon and eggs." He looked at me with a confused look etched into his beautiful face. "I'll

explain when you get back to bed,” I said, laughing as I left the kitchen, to head back to the bed where our lives would begin all over again.

I couldn't wait for all the tomorrows that previously he would never have known. I couldn't wait to give them all to him, every day, for the rest of our lives.

End/Beginning

Author Bio

My name is BJ Sheppard and all at once I found myself an author. Such a strange sensation to actually feel you deserve the thing you had aspired to for many years. After all, all it took was computer access and an inner world that reads like a Sheryl Crow song to pound the keys and translate my crazy ideas onto the page. I feel like I could have business cards printed. Maybe wear a black roll neck and perch my glasses on the tip of my nose. I could drink whisky and smoke a cigar and do all those really stereotypical things I imagine all writers do. Perhaps I could get laid a little more? This is not the end. Nor the beginning. Hell, it isn't even about me. My boys write themselves; I really don't have that much say in the matter. As long as my characters need a voice, I have two chubby typing fingers and a need to please— watch this space: there is more to come.

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