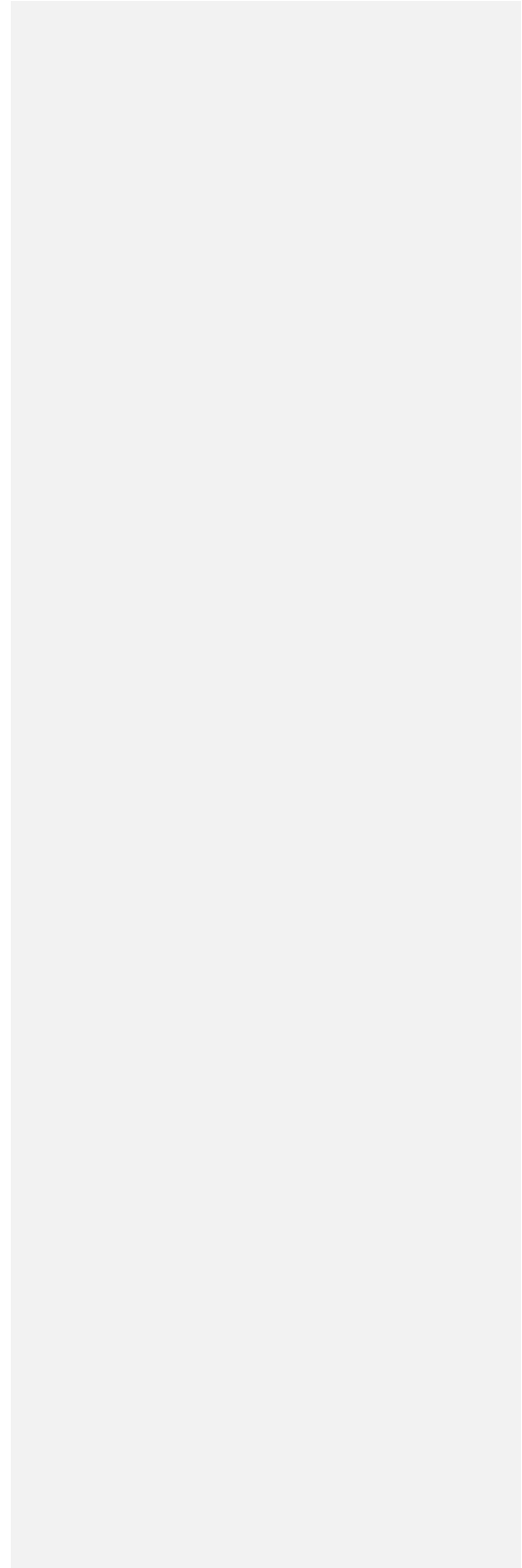


Finding Beautiful

Amanda Kaitlyn



A woman he couldn't resist...A man that terrified her...

Aria Morgan spent four long, painful months building herself up after having had her heart broken. The last thing she wants is to meet a man that makes her weak in the knees at the sight of him. A man that calls her beautiful as if it's her name. A man that entices her to desire more than she ever has before.

The only thing she'd ever loved was ballet. The feeling she got when she stepped onto a stage just waiting for her to blow each and every spectator away with her passion for dance. But when she met Gavin, it seemed she wanted something more. Something she gave up on about four months ago.

It terrified her and excited her, but when he kissed her with both the gentleness she needed and the passion she craved, all her fears and doubts just melted away. She craved him. She needed his touch more than the air in her lungs, and the idea of losing the feel of it could break her heart in two.

But how could she trust again after being broken so painfully? Was it possible?

She had no idea. But Aria had to try.

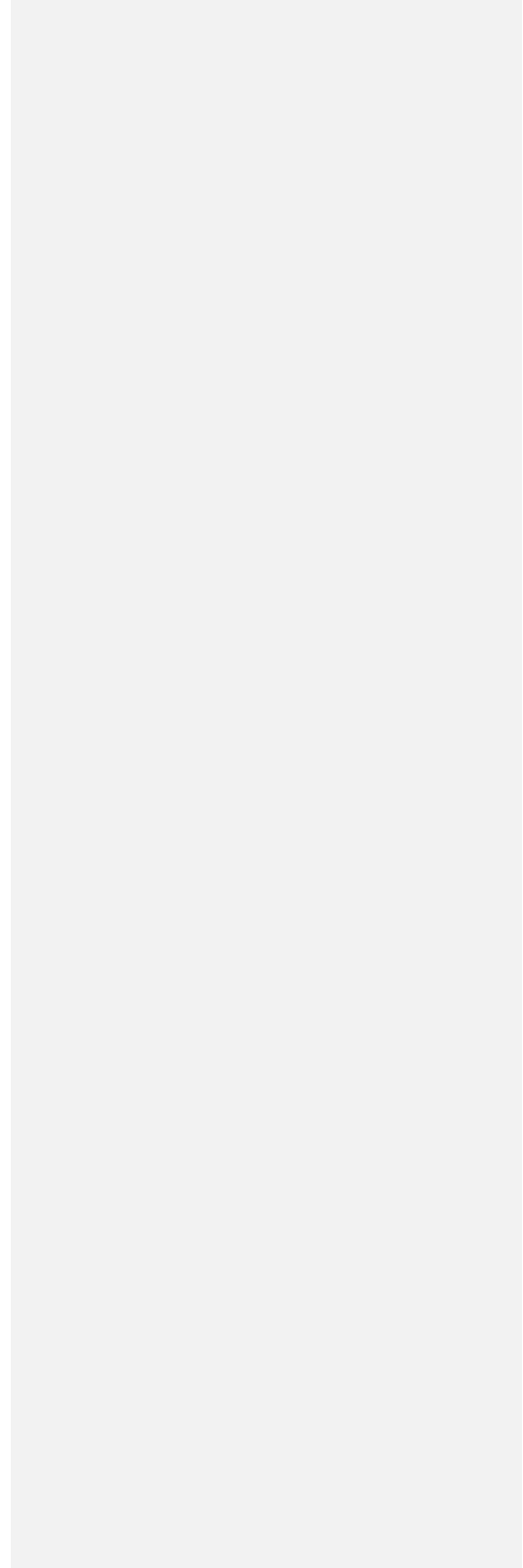
"I'm going to give you the world. This is only the beginning, Beautiful"

When an irreversible loss rocks her world and shatters it to pieces, it forces her to push everyone she loves away. Even the man that's become vital to her in every way.

Can Gavin, a man so filled with love for the beautifully imperfect dancer hold on to her when their shared pain becomes too much to bear?

Dedication

To every person that encouraged, nurtured and pushed me to pursue this dream of mine.
I am immensely grateful.



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Prologue

"Aria, look," Farah whispers from our adjoined desks, as we sit toward the back of Mr. Nelson's history class. Her hazel eyes zero in on someone across the room, her slim eyebrows raised as she cocks her head to the side in that way that tells me she's looking at a guy. And she likes what she sees.

"What?" I whisper, peering down at my notebook filled with the lecture notes I'm supposed to memorize by next class. My overly excited best friend doesn't stop nudging me, even as I try in vain to ignore my curiosity at whom she's staring at. The last thing I'm interested in is some jock that Farah has her sights set on, but *hell*, I am curious. Aggravated, I turn to where she tilts her head and follow the movement only to gasp audibly, seeing a pair of chocolate brown eyes staring at me from three desks over. I was right. He is what you'd call a jock. A Lakers cap is drawn low on his head and there are three girls surrounding him, wanting his attention while he has his sights set on me. He isn't staring, not in that way boys look at you with only one thing in mind. He's just looking at me. With curiosity. With wonder. I know who he is, practically everyone at Beaumont High does. Bryce Williams, a senior. He's the quarterback on our football team and definitely doesn't want for beauty. Chocolate-brown eyes, tousled black hair, and a muscular frame - he's any girl's dream. And he's looking at me? *No way*. My cheeks flame red at the thought and I hastily turn my head to see if there's someone behind me, but there's no one. Oh goodness, it's me. *Why the hell would he be looking at me?*

"He's looking at you!" my best friend gushes as I turn to see her biting her thumb in excitement.

When I look back at the boy, his eyebrows are raised and he has a wide smile playing on his full lips. I know I should look away. My sister warned me away from boys like him, especially after hearing what people say about him. They say he's dangerous; that his last girlfriend, Kristy Jenkins, fled to private school after only two months of seeing him. Looking across from him now, I don't know if I believe those rumors.

One

I clasp the locket in the palm of my hand and take a deep cleansing breath. The dancers, young women whom I've grown attached to over these past three weeks of endless training, practicing, and obsessing in readying ourselves for this very day, glide elegantly over the wooden floors, masses of grace and beauty. I watch and hope that I'll be just as confident when I take the floor. I approach my coach, mentor, and dance partner of six years, Eli Jones, and try to cover up my trembling hands with the wrap I'm holding. I don't know why I'm so nervous. Dancing is like walking to me. I've done it ever since I was old enough to put one foot in front of the other. It's been an outlet for me through the lonely nights of middle school and the stressful exam-filled days of high school, and especially through my four years at Julliard. It's been my relief from everyday life. But this will be the first time since my stay at the hospital four months ago that I'll dance in front of an audience. *Oh, shit.* What if I fall on my face? With my hands shaking terribly, that's a possibility.

My errant thoughts are interrupted by a hand on my shoulder, squeezing me from behind.

"You're going to do fine, Aria," Eli whispers in my ear with another squeeze to my shoulders. I smile because I'm afraid that if I speak, I won't make it to my dance before I talk my way out of it.

I have to do this. For me. For everything I've endured and every person that's lifted me up the numerous times I've fallen.

The slow instrumental of a Celine Dion melody begins, and I slip the gold-bowed ballet flats on my feet and pull my wavy black hair into a bun in preparation.

I pull in a deep breath as I glide onto the floor. It feels as if every moment leading up to this is enhancing my already frazzled nerves. My body is strung tight from my toes to the tips of my fingers. I haven't done this in so long, I'm terrified that I'll mess up. What do they say about riding a bike? Learning to drive? If you learned once, you'll positively remember how to do it no matter how much time has passed. I really hope that's true.

I stretch my fingers to the ceiling, and as I do this, my eyes flick over to see my always supportive dance coach looking at me. When he nods his head, I know I can do this. *I've got this.* Taking another deep, deep breath, I begin to glide, making sure to stay in sync with the music playing overhead. *Near, far, wherever you are, I believe that the heart does go on. Once more you open the door and you're here in my heart and my heart will go on and on.* My eyes close to the words filled with such emotion, such depth. I move to express everything inside me, and soon I don't even have to think about the rhythm or the steps or the people from my academy's dance program watching my every move. I'm one with my body, the angelic music, and the heartbeat inside my chest. My right leg lifts as if in a trance while my other lifts in front of me in a perfect arch. I hold that position through a few strains of the violin and then glide back into position for my finish. When the violin strains end, I go for my big ending and land it with easy grace as the audience applauds for me. A larger-than-life smile spreads my lips, lifts my cheeks, and makes my eyes burn with the need to keep them open as I take in the number of people avidly applauding and celebrating.

This is my world and my love. All I need, I realize. With the grief and the sadness of the last four months, I'm at peace when I'm dancing. The pain, the heartbreak, and the fear I felt when I woke up in the hospital weeks ago just disappears.

I'm caught in a pair of skinny, but muscular, arms as soon as I'm within reach and I giggle as Eli lifts me off my feet and laughs in my ear. He squeezes me gently as he hangs on a little longer to our hug.

"You, my mistress, are back."

I meet his gaze and nod, knowing I truly am back. Eli lets me go as I see my sister Kel standing by the locker rooms. Hastily running to reach her, she hugs me so tightly. Her golden blonde hair engulfs me and I hug her back as tears sting my eyes.

"You were amazing, Aria. I'm so proud of you, honey." She grins against my head and I sniff into her Rolling Stones tee. I blink a few times so she doesn't think I'm sad today, because I'm not.

"Thanks for coming, Kel," I murmur, hooking one arm through hers to leave with everyone else in the building. We turn that way as she speaks only for my ears.

"I wouldn't have missed it for anything in this world. I'm just sorry Mama wouldn't come."

I close my eyes and remind myself to be strong. My mom hasn't talked to me ever since my older brother and her beloved son, died. I still remember the moment he flat lined. I was at Jeremy's bedside with my arm in a sling as he fought for every breath. A drunk driver ran into his side of the cab and he suffered internal bleeding along with broken ribs and massive head injuries. We had no idea whether he'd wake up, and even if he did, would he remember us? Would he be *our* Jeremy? Or would he be a vegetable for the rest of his life? In the end, though, his heart wasn't strong enough and he passed exactly one hour and twenty-two minutes after he was brought into the emergency room. It crushed me. *Hell, it broke me* along with Kel, and my mom especially, who placed all the blame on me. I think the pain got to be too much for her and the only way she could cope was to be angry. At the world. At me. But God, did it hurt.

I don't realize that tears are falling until they sting my cheeks and chin. Kel wipes them away, her amber eyes filled with worry. I miss him so much.

"It's okay," I whisper, struggling to rein in my emotions. Kel wraps her arm around me and leads me to her car, knowing that I have to move, to do something other than relive those terrible moments. We walk across the parking lot and I spot a canary yellow sports car with a black pinstripe detailed on each side. I can tell from the make that it is a fairly new Jaguar. I don't know all that much about cars, but this has to be the sexiest car I've ever laid eyes on. Every inch is sleek, painted in the lightest shade of yellow, and the designs up one side with thin lines of navy blue and black are a stark contrast to the bright yellow. The hood is up and I catch the sight of a lean pair of hips pressed against one tire while working under the hood.

I lose my breath when a pair of piercing blue-gray eyes lock on mine and I swear my heart stops beating. It feels as if the air around me is charged with something as I look ahead of me. My breath falters as I take in the man standing no more than twenty feet away. With brown tousled hair that makes me want to run my fingers through it and a look in his eyes that makes me stop where I stand, I'm mesmerized. His eyes captivate mine, two clouds of brilliant blue and gray. His lean cheekbones and nose complement his face perfectly. His mouth is sculpted and tilted into a half-smile. Somehow, it makes my blood heat in anticipation. Gradually, my eyes sweep down his body. The man is wearing a white dress shirt that hugs his chest in the best ways and is unbuttoned at the top, along with black Wrangler jeans and black dress shoes to match. When my eyes return to his, he cocks his head to one side as if to ask *are you checking me out?* And I can't help the butterflies that take flight in my stomach. He's...*beautiful*. My brain seems to catch up with whatever my eyes are taking in and I immediately ask myself, *what the hell am I doing?* It's not as if I've never seen a good-looking man before. It just feels like my eyes are somehow drawn to him. I watch as he pulls a wrench out from under the hood of his car, straightens up, and closes the hood with a loud thud. As he turns, the way he carries himself is like sex on legs. It dawns on me that he doesn't seem cocky or full of himself like most guys could be with his looks, but he does have a sense of self-awareness and power in the way he moves.

I draw my eyes back to his and he steps forward. The smile he gives me makes me weak in the knees. God, what is happening to me? *Aria, calm down. He's just a man.*

"Like the view?" he asks, his voice gravelly with a southern charm that I hadn't expected. The sound seeps through me, through the space between us, through my overheated skin.

I open my mouth to speak, but I end up just taking in a breath and attempting to gather my thoughts. He watches me quietly, his eyes trained only on my face. I try to reason with myself to get in the car and drive away from him, but I can't truly think of anything that would cause me to run.

Okay, he is just a man, who is sinfully beautiful and has eyes that draw you in like a moth to a flame...

"Oh...um, yes. Is this yours?"

He nods and takes a step forward, startling me a tad when he takes my hand gently in his. The simple touch is like a spark between our bodies, sending tingles over my skin.

"She is," he says, that half-smile lighting up the dips and shallows of his face. I can see at least one day's worth of brown stubble across his jaw, my fingers itch to lift and touch him, feel the roughness I know I'll find along his jaw. I unknowingly bite my lip as he admires me with those eyes of his. God, his eyes are so deep, so full of mischief.

"She?" I cock my head to the side in confusion.

"Yes, that surprises you?" he teases me, his eyes narrowing a bit.

Commented [LD1]: ..through

My mouth stretches into a shy smile, and I feel my heart flutter as he gazes down at me. "Let me guess, you named her, too?"

"I did. Jasmine, after the girl that broke my heart years ago. I'm hoping history won't repeat itself. I can't imagine she'll run off with a French exchange student. You think?"

It makes me giggle, his having a name for his car, but it also saddens me knowing he's felt heartbreak. I can definitely relate. Heartbreak is something I know intimately, but doesn't everyone get their heart broken at one point?

"I hope not." I don't try to take my hand from his. The skin contact is just too intense for me to want to. Beside me, Kel tugs on my arm and smiles knowingly as she looks at our joined hands. *Oh goodness, what does she have in mind?*

Leaning closer to me, she whispers in my ear, "Shall I invite him tonight?"

I narrow my eyes at her and hastily shake my head, though I do want to see him again. My sister insisted on having a party to celebrate my graduation and its tonight.

Kel steps in front of me, probably to block me from his view when she gets a look at him. I watch her lean in to whisper in his ear and I vaguely wonder what he must smell like.

"Of course I'll be there. Thank you." I meet his eyes intentionally, wondering what he must be thinking of her taking a quick liking to him. His eyes sparkle with what I can only guess is mischief, and they don't leave mine while he talks with my sister.

My heart is on overdrive for the first time in my life and it's due to this man. I have to remind myself to focus on something other than his beauty or the speed of my heartbeat in my chest. He is just a man. I keep telling myself that.

"You don't have to come, Kel is just being nice," I half-whisper as he moves a step closer to me. I swear the heat in his gaze could burn me in two.

Shaking his head slightly, he gives me a smile that just about melts my heart. I wonder, could he possibly want to see me again? Do I want that?

"I'd really like to see you again. You're beautiful and mysterious and you intrigue me." *Beautiful and mysterious? God, what am I doing...?*

Still, I find myself nodding my head and I turn to my KIA before I say something else. My thoughts are rattled and all I can think about is how soft his lips look and how those eyes captivate mine.

Suddenly, he catches my hand again and immediately my heart speeds up as the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. His touch resonates through me and when I see the sincerity in his eyes, I gasp audibly.

"Can I at least have your name?"

This man's drawl knocks my heart into overdrive again, his eyes searching mine for long seconds. I wonder what he's thinking as he trains his eyes intently on my face. A strand of my hair flies in front of my face and he deftly lifts it away and tucks it behind my ear. When his fingers dip to my cheek where a blush has spread across my skin, fireworks spark underneath the touch.

"Aria," I whisper just loud enough for his ears, my name a whisper on my lips.

He nods, his eyes heating with something I wish I had a name for as his finger grazes my cheek and my eyes never leave his.

"Gavin," he murmurs, giving me his name. I bite my lip at the sound of it and find myself wanting to lean into his touch. The name fits him so well. *Gavin.*

"I'll see you tonight, Gavin." I breathe, feeling lighter as he smiles that crooked smile at me and takes my hand in his once more, not letting go until distance pulls our fingers away from each other.

"Tonight," he says.

"You're blushing, Ari. Holy shit," my sister says, giggling as we pull away from the curb where I can still see Gavin leaning against his car. Her eyes meet mine in the rear view mirror and I inwardly sigh. I can't stop thinking about the way he seemed to focus completely on me. A man I've never met. I've never felt that with anyone I've dated. Undivided attention.

"That was...intense." I mumble to my still blushing sister as she starts her car.

"I'd say. And that car had to be expensive. Like something out of a movie."

I turn left and flit my eyes over to her with a grin. It was a Jaguar. It's one of the most expensive foreign automotive brands out there. When I explain this to her, she looks at me as if I have two heads and shakes her head.

"Forget the car, he was beautiful! You should have given him your number, honey. He was looking at you like you were water and he was thirsting for a tall glass."

I burst into giggles at that and she joins me as we pull into our apartment lot.

"You're horrible, Kel. I swear I don't know where you got your sense of humor."

She grins at me, giving me that look again. She knows I'm delaying what she wants to talk to me about. About the mysterious man we met today. About how I feel about seeing him again.

"Oh, come on, you couldn't take your eyes off him. I've never seen you react to a man like that. I think you should get back out there, Ari. Don't you think it's time?"

I sigh, feeling both terrified and excited at the idea of seeing him again.

"I don't know, Kel. It's only been four months and honestly, I have no idea how to put myself out there again. I'm not ready."

"I know, but if you don't try you could really regret not taking the chance." Her bright eyes implore me to say something, but I'm speechless. I haven't - no, I couldn't - let myself think about starting something new ever since I woke up in the hospital four months ago. I can't be hurt again. I won't let that happen. But Gavin...he looked at me like no other man has and it confuses me. Am I ready?

"I don't know. It was like he saw me, the real me. Not the ballet dancer or the rich girl or the heartbroken teenager that everyone else sees when they look at me. But you saw him, Kel. He probably has a girlfriend or a wife! I can't compete with God knows who."

She doesn't answer me, just shakes her head and gets out of the car, then leans back in through the window to meet my guarded gaze.

"I didn't see a ring on his finger. And you're beautiful and mysterious, remember?"

I folded my fingers in my lap, trying to clear my thoughts. She's right. He did say that. The thoughts and emotions inside me have me tangled up, confused, hesitant. I don't know if I'm ready, will I ever be?

"We both know I'm not ready for any sort of a relationship right now!" The words tumble out of me, my own insecurities voiced. My eyes sting with emotion and I turn my gaze away from the window.

I get out of the car and circle the back to meet her in the front of my car. I hope that maybe she'll just let this go, *please just let this go, Kel*. But I feel her brown eyes on me as I take the stairs. Taking my hands, she tugs me down to sit on the top step with her. My determined-as-hell sister looks at me, imploring me to listen, and it's not the first time today.

Sighing, I squeeze her hands with mine so she knows I'm listening.

"Ari, it was never your fault what Bryce did to you, and it doesn't mean that you aren't just as deserving of love as anyone else in this world."

No. With the sound of *his* name, my voice dies in my throat. I don't want to think about *him*. My chest aches with the memories that flood me from the sound of a man's name I haven't heard in weeks.

Kel doesn't let go, though. She takes hold of my wrists and glides up the sleeve of my sweatshirt until the yellowing bruises on my skin are revealed, along with the cuts marring the pale skin there. Shame washes over me, and my eyes close briefly as I fight to push down the sadness that tries to make its way into my thoughts. When the pain had gotten to be too much, when I believed I was just as useless as he made me feel, I found a way to take away the pain in my own way. It was the lowest point in my life and I couldn't see my self-worth when I was with him. I see it now, though.

"Look at me." Kel has tears in her eyes as she wipes the side of her cheek. In her eyes I see how much she worries for me. She knows just how much I've gone through, how long it's taken me to feel whole again.

"You. Are. Beautiful. Aria. It wasn't your fault what he did to you and you should never let the fear of getting hurt again stop you from going after what you want, honey. It's been four months, and the fact that you're dancing again tells me that you're moving on from the hurt and the pain Bryce inflicted. Just keep your heart open, okay? You deserve happiness. I found it with Lucas and I know you can, too."

I nod, unable to speak as my heart swells with love for my remarkable sister. Kel kisses my forehead and squeezes my hand, giving me strength in this moment. Taking a deep breath, I decide to give myself a chance. A chance for happiness. One date never killed anyone. Right?

Commented [LD2]: Folded instead of "fold"??

"Let's go get ready for this party, huh?" I grab her hands and pull her to stand, hooking my arm in hers as we head upstairs to plan a celebration.

As we turn the corner and near the apartment, we see Lucas, my sister's fiance as of three days ago, leaning up against our door. With messy blond hair and a lip piercing, topaz green eyes and a lopsided smile, he's every girl's dream and I can see how happy she is with him. He looks up and smiles when he sees us.

"Hey, sweetheart." Immediately Kel steps into his arms and he kisses her forehead.

"You don't have your key?" she asks, smiling as she looks at him through her thick-lashed eyes.

"I do, just thought I'd wait for you. How did it go, Aria?"

Lucas wraps an arm around my sister's shoulder and then releases her to give me one of his well-known and loved bear hugs, lifting me off my feet easily. I grin and laugh and wipe the moisture from my eyes before he sees it.

"It went great," Kel says for me as Lucas takes my keys to unlock our door. The minute I make it to the couch I set my dance bag down and plop onto the love seat, where Kel joins me.

"You were amazing," Kel says, obviously seeing my doubts after this performance. I know she's right, but sometimes I can't help doubting myself. After that night, I don't know if I'll ever be able to love myself and believe in my abilities again.

Four Months Earlier

The sound of a loud crash coming from the kitchen makes my eyes fly open in a mixture of surprise and panic. Bryce comes home faithfully every day at six. Why would he come home at, God, two-thirty in the afternoon? My hands shake as I scramble to my feet, knowing what's coming. The only possible reason he'd come home early is because he's drunk. I make my way toward the bedroom door as a pit in my stomach forms; fear that I've come to live with stopping my body in its place.

"Where are you?" Bryce yells, making me jump when I see his cold eyes and clenched fists, ready to aim when the anger strikes him. I lift my head and I search for any sign of emotion or humanity in his eyes, but all I see is anger. That's all I ever see. Cold, dark eyes of anger and possibly hatred.

"I...I was sleeping, Bryce. I'm sorry." My voice shakes unintentionally.

He narrows his eyes at me, raises the empty bottle of whiskey in his hand, and throws it past my head, making me flinch and jump back from him.

"Do you know how worried I've been?" he asks, quiet venom in his words as he backs me into a corner and forces me to look into his reddened eyes. His hand grips my chin and his fist clenches against it, making me whimper at the force of his hold.

"I'm sorry...I..." He doesn't let me finish as his fist comes down hard on the side of my face and the pain spreads across my skin. I cry out and fall back, my head hitting the hardwood floor with a hard smack. I feel the blood trickle down my face and my body trembles in fear for what's to come. He looks down at me with his brown eyes almost black with anger as he curses and kicks me in the stomach. Once, twice, three times...I lose count as each blow molds into the other, searing the pain low in my abdomen as I shake with tears falling down my face. I struggle for breath, and as he grasps my hair in his right fist, my eyes close and the darkness overwhelms me as the pain ceases and I black out.

The pain wakes me up as I find myself lying face-up in the king-sized bed in Bryce's bedroom. My clothes are in a messy pile on the floor as I feel my panties being slid down my legs and his mouth nipping at my neck. *No, God, no!* He can't be doing this. This can't happen...

"No...No...Please...stop..." I plead, having no strength to struggle against his hands trapping me against the mattress. Bryce grins against my skin and grinds against my hips, making my body shake and tremble in fear. There was a time once when I thought I loved him. I would do anything to please him. But now I know that was only a game to him. This is the man I've come to know. I feel rough, merciless hands digging into my waist while his knee presses against my side. The last of my laced underwear comes off my leg and I pull my knee up and attempt to buck him off me.

"No!!!" I cry out, making contact with his stomach instead of his nether regions. I continue trying in vain to push against his hold, kicking my legs is useless.

Commented [LD3]: forms;

"Oh, I love it when you fight me, princess. So feisty." I feel the rub of his lips against my jaw, my collarbone, my neck, and then my mouth. A whimper escapes me when he pushes his tongue in my mouth and *takes*.

"*You. Are. Mine. Ari.*" He growls each word into the space between our mouths. His chuckle is empty and cruel against my ears. I'm still struggling, forcing my head to the side to try to escape his weight, his voice, his cold, clammy hands gripping my thighs.

And when he takes and takes and takes, there is no one there to hear my cries of agony. The sobs break through my chest and I cry silently, willing this to be a nightmare. My skin crawls with a dirty, horrid feeling and my eyes close, willing myself to die instead of live through this torture.

"Aria, sweetheart, open your eyes," my sister's sweet voice whispers as I force my eyes to open against the numb of pain in my body. She's sitting next to me, kissing and squeezing my hand in hers. When I see her tear-streaked face and hear the beeps of a machine next to me, I realize where I am.

"What happened?" I choke out the words through a dry throat. My head is pounding and I can barely open my eyes to see my sister and an unfamiliar man standing next to her.

Kel leans forward and kisses my forehead. I hear her intake of breath and wait for her to tell me what happened. *Why am I here? In a hospital?*

"Dad found you in your apartment this morning. You were beaten...and..." Her voice trails off, as if she's unable to finish her sentence. I see tears build in her eyes and what's worse is when her voice breaks. "Do you remember what happened?"

I take a deep breath, trying to lift my body that's numb from the medication I must be on. Pain spears me in the chest as I remember his face, my cries for him to stop, and the pain down there and throughout my whole body. I just don't understand how I hadn't seen him for what he really was until that moment. I was so blind. I cover my face with my hands in an effort to gather my scattered thoughts.

"He came home really angry...I tried to talk to him, but then he hit me and I must have blacked out because when I woke up I was in his bed. He...Oh, God..." My voice cracks as I realize the three words that I can't seem to wrap my head around. He loved me, I know he did, but last night, God, he was just...a monster.

Kel squeezes my hand and with her eyes full of sympathy and love, urges me to continue.

"He raped me, Kel," I say in a shaky voice, grasping onto her as she wraps her arms around me and hugs me tight, allowing me to finally let go of the overwhelming emotions that threaten to smother me.

Present Day

My hands are shaking from the force of the memories, the darkness that looms around me from my broken past. Lucas squeezes my shoulders from behind, bringing me back to the here and now.

"You okay, Aria?" Lucas asks over the brim of his second Corona Light. I blink, shaking my head to clear all thoughts of the past. I look to see Kel hurriedly setting out party platters, hanging streamers from the ceiling, and placing buckets of beer bottles on the tables in the living room. That makes me smile. She's in her element right now. Planning a party, making the individual platters, and setting the decorations up, that's something she loves to do.

"Wow, she's excited."

He laughs, a light sound that I haven't heard in far too long. When he hands me a Blue Moon from the cooler, I look over to him and grin.

"She loves a party, huh?"

"She wouldn't be Kel if she didn't love this, right?" His eyes go to my sister, softening when Kel winks at him from across the room. *He's so good for her. Just what she deserves.*

I nod, lifting the beer to my lips.

"We invited someone today. We met him at the studio." Lucas is in the middle of raiding our fridge when he looks up, raising an eyebrow at me. His eyes narrow at me. He thinks I'm kidding, since for most of the time he's known me, I have refused to even think about men. But now I want to. I want to be open to the future if that happy-ever-after is still a possibility for me.

"What?" His voice is incredulous, but he already has that grin across his face. And then, he erupts into a wide, no-holds-barred smile. One I've never seen before. Setting his beer down, Lucas wraps me up in a hug and squeezes too tight.

"You're finally getting back out there! That's great, Aria. Who is he?"

I blush and look away, not wanting to think about how bad I like Gavin, how close I came to leaning into his touch today. It's crazy and it scares me how much I reacted to him when we met.

"His name is Gavin. I don't know...after what happened with Bryce, I don't..." He steps up to me and squeezes my shoulders. It's reassurance.

"Any guy would be damn lucky to have you, Aria. Okay?"

I nod, giving him a smile, and run to catch up with Kel as she balances two trays in her hands. I hastily grab one from her and set it down on the kitchen island.

"Careful, sis"

"You ready, Kel?" Lucas calls from the living room, well into his third beer.

She grins at him, narrowing her eyes. She'll never say so, but she is totally smitten with that man.

It's only an hour later that we have everything set up and the DJ we hired for tonight arrives. I do my best to get him squared away at the table near the bar in our living room and find Kel on the couch with Lucas, deep in discussion. Needing a minute of fresh air, I open the doors to the balcony and close them behind me, taking a deep, fortifying breath. Then my phone rings.

"Hello?" It's an unknown number, which makes me nervous, as if Bryce would call me after all these weeks. *Would he? Would he come back and look for me after all this time? God, what would I do...?*

"Hello, my name is Peter Piers. I'm with Grayson Dance Academy. I'm calling about a spot in our program. How are you today, Ms. Morgan?" Relief and elation swim through me. This is the call I've been waiting for, praying for. Excitement quickens my pulse. I've been waiting for this call for weeks. I auditioned for his dance company, the very company that is known throughout the performance arts world as the most esteemed dance company in the country.

"Yes, thank you for getting back to me. I'm good. How are you?"

I'm proud that my voice doesn't crack with the nervousness I'm feeling at this moment.

I remember how nervous I've been all season about this program. It's a modern dance fellowship and at the end of it I could possibly have a position with any one of their world-renowned studios. It's been my dream since high school, hell, since the very first time I danced.

"I wanted to speak with you about this position. Are you still interested in a full-time spot with our Modern Dance program?"

I beam in excitement, practically jumping in the heels I'm wearing.

"Absolutely." *It's every dream I've ever had. My dance.*

"Good, we're honored to have you. The footage I saw of you was phenomenal. You're a very talented dancer, Ms. Morgan." His voice is filled with awe and I know he means every word. Having the praise of *the* Peter Piers means so much.

"Thank you, Mr. Piers," I say, squeezing my eyes shut from the sting I feel from the tears that threaten to fall.

"I'll send the orientation paperwork to you as soon as I can. Welcome to the program!"

"Thank you. You won't regret this." It's a vow.

I hang up and jump when I see Kel at the door. She beams with such happiness and I know she's heard everything.

Two

"Did you hear?" I ask, and Kel smiles that proud sister smile that I've only seen twice before across her face.

She grabs me by the shoulders, her laughter ringing against my ear as she hugs me tight. We're both basking in this moment. The first happy moment we've had in so, so long.

"I knew you'd get it!" Kel squeals, squeezing me once more. She lets me go and has a wide grin on her face. She's happy for me, just like I knew she would be.

Swinging her arm around me, she whispers in my ear, "He's here, you know. He's talking with Lucas now." A blush rushes to my cheeks in anticipation. My joy in my news is replaced by the excitement and nervousness of seeing Gavin again.

"Do I look okay?" I rub my hands down my lavender mid-length summer dress, biting my lip when it starts to tremble. *I don't want to mess this up. Kel is right; it's time to live again.*

Kel's hand reaches out and squeezes mine.

"You're perfect, Ari." She tucks my hair behind my ears and gives me a little push toward the open door. I step inside and take another Blue Moon from the cooler before veering to a crowd of our high school friends.

"There you are!" Sasha, one of Kel's friend's, calls, wearing a short black dress and heavy makeup. *Ugh*, I inwardly cringe at her high-pitched voice. I remember how many girls surrounded my sister in high school, but she was never superficial like these girls. Kel is in a class of her own. I walk up and take the bowl of pretzels that Lucas hands me. I look around for Gavin as I sip my third beer of the night.

"He had to make a call, Aria." Lucas gives me a knowing smile and throws an arm around me as he downs the last of his Samuel Adams.

"Have you seen that man? You might have to stake your claim before one of us snatches him away!" Sasha squeals, nursing a cranberry martini. Immediately, I imagine kissing him in front of all these people, ruining him for her and all these other girls. But I'm not ready for that. For all I know, he's taken. What is going on with me today? It's not like he's the first hot guy I've laid eyes on these past four months. But, oh my, those eyes. The sculpture of his lean chest, narrow hips...

My thoughts are interrupted by a hand on my shoulder. The touch ignites shocks that light up my skin and I know *he* is behind me. I turn, meeting the crooked smile of the mystery man himself. My heart skips a beat as I look up into his eyes, feeling myself pulled toward him. It's like gravity.

"There you are! Do you want to dance?" Sasha chimes, looking up at him expectantly. Gavin gives me a wink and never takes his stormy blue eyes from mine as I notice the song change to a slow beat that I recognize as one by Coldplay. It's slow and reverent and melts my heart on the spot.

"A dance, Aria?" he asks quietly, his voice resonating through me in the best way. I place my hand in his and nod as he leads me onto the floor. Once we reach the middle of the dispersing crowd, he turns to me and wraps an arm around my waist, his right hand linked with my left as he sweeps me into him, leading us in a graceful slow dance. I look up at him and a smile plays on my lips.

"You showed up."

Gavin's face spreads into a wide, dimple-bearing, soul-consuming smile and it makes me feel lighter somehow. Then I realize he's dipped me in the circle of his arms, which makes my heart beat impossibly fast. I grab his biceps for balance and see his eyes blaze with amusement. I can feel every line of his lean, hard, muscled body on every line of my soft curves, and when he places a hand at the small of my back, my heart hammers in *desire*. God, how long has it been since I've desired or truly wanted a man? Years. I haven't felt like this since my sophomore year in high school. I can't help but think how naive I was back then.

"Of course I did, Aria." He pulls me back into his arms, hooking them around my waist as he balances me again, and I link my hands around his neck, sucking in a breath at the sight and feel of him. *Wow, he's toned.* I try to sort my thoughts into words.

"Why? I'm sure you had plans tonight before I gawked at your car and my sister invited you to our party." Gavin dips his head and his mouth is only inches from mine when he speaks.

Commented [LD4]: ..do you mean Coldplay?

"I did, but I wanted to see you again more. You look beautiful, by the way." His voice is deep and makes me draw closer to him.

"Thank you," I whisper breathlessly.

When he pulls me to his chest, I rest my head against his shoulder and his arms hold me close at the small of my back. My heart beats so fast, and as the song ends, I lift my head and give him my best smile when I feel the nervousness of opening up to this guy I don't even know. Am I really ready to do this?

"I have to go refill the refreshments. Save me a dance, will you?"

Gavin's dark brown hair falls into his eyes as he loosens his arms around me and nods, his eyes locked onto mine. I see uncertainty in the depths.

"Are you okay?" he asks, his hand coming up to my cheek. I suck in a breath, my heart racing at the contact of skin against skin.

"I'll be back, I promise." I just need to take a breath, some air to sort myself out.

Reluctantly, he lets me go and I try to calm my heart as I pull my best friend Farah outside with me. She's the only girl I know that will never sugarcoat things with me. That's what I need right now.

"What the hell, Aria, are you okay?" Farah asks as she grabs my hand and we sit on the steps. I take a deep breath and turn to her. She's been my rock for as long as I can remember. I don't know what I'd do without her.

"I don't know what I'm doing, Farah. I met this guy today and he's, God, so gorgeous. Like his eyes captivate me and when he was holding me just now, it felt so right, you know?"

She grins and squeezes my hand for reassurance, her reddish-brown hair tucked behind her ears, her knowing eyes seeing right through me.

"Then go with it, Aria. Don't start over thinking it!"

"He called me beautiful, Farah. I mean, I don't even know his last name! Is this crazy?"

She shakes her head and looks into my eyes, forcing me to be honest.

"Do you like him?" She cocks her head to the side, pinning me with her gaze.

"Yes."

"Then stop thinking about it. I can tell he likes you." I grin at the thought and narrow my eyes at her.

"Really? How?"

Her eyes gleam with a smile as she throws her arm around my shoulder.

"He couldn't keep his eyes off you. He asked us what your favorite band was so he could request it! Trust me, honey; he's in this with you."

Farah gives me another hug before she goes back into the house and I sit on the steps for another minute, deciding to give this a chance, knowing that if I shy away from him, I'll always wonder what could have been.

"Are you ready for that dance?" Gavin's smooth voice says from behind me, causing my heart to race just from the sound of it.

"Yeah." I lift my head and he offers his hand to me, a boyish smile on his lips.

I giggle at the gesture, letting him help me up and my eyes lock onto his.

"Can I ask you something?" I ask with my hand still wrapped around his. He nods, not letting go of me as he steadies me with a hand placed on my hip.

Trying to organize my jumbled thoughts, I briefly look up at the sun that's hiding behind a crescent-shaped cloud. When I look back into his eyes, I lay it all out there.

"Why do you like me? I mean, maybe I'm misreading this, but I...I like you. But why do you like me?"

He gives me that sexy lopsided smile that makes my knees weak and cups my cheek with his hand as I step closer to him.

"I just want to get to know you, Aria. You're beautiful and kind and I saw the passion inside you through your dancing. It was amazing, as if you lived for each step, each movement, and each spin. Aria...you take my breath away." His eyes fill with some unnamed emotion that stirs something deep inside me.

I suck in a breath as my body is instantly drawn closer to his body.

"You saw me dancing?"

He nods, gliding his thumb over my cheek, leaving tingles everywhere he touches.

"Yes, I saw. You were incredible, Aria. It was elegant, yet modern. Every move amazed me along with the audience. Then when I saw you in the parking lot, I had to talk to you. It was like fate or maybe sheer luck. I don't know what it is, but there's something about you that draws me to you. I want more."

A delicious shiver runs up my spine at his words and when he places both hands on my face, tilting it up to meet his, I see his clear, blue eyes melding into mine.

"More?"

"Do you have a boyfriend, Aria?" he whispers, caressing my cheek achingly slow. I gasp, shaking my head and feeling how fast my heart is beating and the blood rushing through my veins. I feel alive and vibrant, as if my every breath lights my body anew.

"No."

He smiles and leans his forehead closer to mine. I can feel his breath upon my lips.

"I want to kiss you, Aria," he says, his voice deep with lust and a desire that takes my breath away.

Yes, please.

"Gavin..." I whisper, my voice breathy in anticipation.

He leans back, meeting my gaze so that it's impossible for me to look away. His blue-gray eyes capture mine and in this moment, I'm his.

"Yes or no, Aria?" he whispers, urging me closer to him with a hand at the small of my back as his other cups my cheek so gently. All I know is I want to be closer to him. I don't want to worry about whether this is the right thing after what I've gone through. I just want him closer now.

I nod my head, feeling his breath across my face as my chest presses against his. He smells like mint and his touch feels like a dream as I wrap my hands around his neck, my fingers grasping onto soft, smooth strands of his unruly hair.

"Yes."

He smiles, one hand moving across my cheek to my neck where he tilts my head while his arm wraps around my waist, his eyes blazing with a desire that takes my breath away.

"Tell me if you want me to stop, beautiful."

I moan deep in my throat, the sound of that word from his lips slipping past the last of my defenses as his mouth softly closes over mine. His heat engulfs my senses and I grab his hair, tangling my fingers in it. I open my mouth to his. My leg comes up as if of its own volition and wraps around his waist while I gasp against his ardent, all-consuming kiss. I've never been kissed like this. Savagely yet gently all at the same time. I hear Gavin groan, sending tingles up my spine, while his arms wrap around my waist and one of his hands grasps the bottom of my short, satin dress. With his lips eagerly pressing to mine, his tongue slips slowly into my mouth, licking, tasting, and exploring me as I do the same, moaning in desire when he nips at my bottom lip. It sends a jolt of aching desire from my lips to my core. Wrapping both arms around his neck, pressing into him, I lock his mouth with mine and clutch onto his tee as passion runs through my veins. God, I can't get close enough.

"Aria," he whispers against my lips, pulling back an inch to meet my eyes, reading them for a moment before that gorgeous smile graces his mouth and he leans his forehead against mine. I let go of his shirt and wrap my hands around the back of his neck as I struggle to catch my breath.

"That was...wow," I whisper, smiling excitedly. His hand brushes my flushed cheek and his mouth sets in a smile that shows off his ruggedly handsome face.

"Amazing," he says, pressing his lips to mine softly once more before he leans back and grasps my hand, his eyes shining as he gazes down at me. "Do you want to dance, beautiful?"

I grin and nod as he leads me back inside. My heart beats fast and erratically in my chest. His fingers close over mine as we walk back to the almost empty dance floor where a soft melody by Shania Twain is playing. He pulls me into him and presses a hand to my waist. He sweeps me into a slow dance that is just as graceful as before, only this time he presses his mouth to my neck, turning me around so that my back is pressed to his lean chest and his arms wrap around my hips, swaying us easily to the beat.

I close my eyes, enjoying the feel of his ever-so-gentle touch and the feel of his mouth pressing on the side of my neck. And I know, from this moment on I'll be completely and totally his.

Commented [LD5]: ..its

Once a Jason Walker song ends, three dances later, Gavin turns me to him and tucks a curl of my hair behind my ear. His finger grazes my cheek just barely and it makes my breath hitch. The things I feel when I'm with him both scares me and excites me.

"Take a walk with me?" he asks, his hand on the back of my neck causing my skin to tingle from the feel of his touch.

"Of course. I just have to let Kel know. You want to meet me outside?"

He dips his head and presses a kiss to my lips, grazing a finger across my chin before pulling back and looking into my eyes.

"Sure, take your time."

I smile and kiss him once more before taking a step back and spotting Kel talking with Elliot, our cousin, over by the beer coolers.

"Hey! You leaving already?"

I nod, unable to keep the smile off my face, and I hug my arms around her, waving to Elliott from behind her head.

"I'm happy for you, Ari. You deserve some happiness," she whispers before she leans back, kissing my cheek and smoothing the hair from my face.

"We're just going to take a walk. I'll be back later for cleanup. Okay?"

She nods and steps back. I beam up at her, hoping that she's right about opening myself up to love again.

I find Gavin leaning against the door frame as I step outside. Breathing in the cool Chicago air, a smile graces my lips.

"Ready?"

He looks up from his phone and gives me a heart-stopping smile when he sees me staring unabashedly at him. The sudden thought comes to me that I might be pulling him away from his job or someone else. Doubt clouds my thoughts as I step toward him and see how clear his eyes are.

"I hope I'm not pulling you away from anything or..."

He gazes down at me almost comically and bites his lower lip to hide a smile.

"Do you really think I would've kissed you if I had anyone waiting on me?"

I let out the breath I'd been holding, hearing the sincerity in his voice while he places his hands on either side of my face and presses a soft kiss to my forehead.

"Sorry," I whisper, my hands on the middle of his chest. I rest my head on his shoulder. It feels so natural, as if I've known him for much longer than a few hours.

"No worries, we hardly know each other. Let's take a walk. There's a hiking trail not far from here that I want to show you."

I nod as he interlaces his fingers with mine and we head along the road leading to Marley's Cove, a hiking trail I haven't actually been to since Kel and I moved here a few months ago.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

I look up to see Gavin gazing over at me, running a hand through his messy brown hair. He's sitting on a rock on the top of the cove and I'm sitting under an oak tree just three feet away from him.

"I was just thinking that I'd like to know more about you," I say. He smiles and reaches out his hand to me. When I grasp it and stand closer to him, he scoots backward to the flattest surface of the rock and pulls me with him, so that I'm in between his legs. My back presses to his chest and his hand links with mine across my thigh.

"Ask me anything you want, Aria," he whispers, wrapping one arm around my waist and tucking me close to him. I take a deep breath, thinking of all the things I want to know about him. I start with an easy one.

"Why do you call me beautiful?"

I can feel his smile against my neck as he sucks in a breath.

"You're beautiful to me, Aria. I call you that because it's how I see you."

I can't help the stutter of my heart and the wide smile on my lips as I place my arms around his arms that are wrapped around my stomach, reveling in the feel of his skin against mine.

"My turn," he whispers, smoothing my hair away from my neck. He places a kiss on the skin there, his lips moving in a circular motion as he speaks against my skin.

Commented [LD6]: ...it's

"When did you start dancing?" he asks, his deep voice next to my ear.

"When I began preschool, my mom enrolled me in a toddler dance academy, and my love for it grew from there."

"Is your mom a dancer?" Gavin's hands skate down my arms, causing goose bumps.

I giggle and press closer to him. Being in his arms feels better than I could have imagined.

"That's two questions, but no, she isn't. She's a model and travels a lot, too." The last thing I want to think about is my absentee mother, but he asked and, truly, I want Gavin to know me.

"Did I upset you?" he asks, turning me so that I'm facing him. I hastily shake my head, pressing it against his shoulder as his hand strokes up and down my back.

"No, she wasn't around a lot when I was growing up, though. I actually haven't talked to her in a long time."

Defly, Gavin lifts my face with a finger under my chin and gazes into my eyes.

"I understand, but if she doesn't appreciate you then it's her loss, Aria, not yours."

My heart skips a beat at his heartfelt words as I lean my face into his touch.

"What about you, your parents?"

He gazes down at me and smiles softly. That smile makes my heart beat even faster.

"My mom and I have always been close. She's the glue that's always kept the family together. My dad, well, he passed away last year. It was a cardiac arrest."

I gasp audibly, my hand instinctively going to the locket resting against my chest. The pain of losing someone so important, so vital to you never heals completely and my chest tightens at the thought of his own pain. Leaning forward, I kiss his neck urgently, hating the thought of him losing his dad so suddenly. He rubs his hand up my back as if to reassure me also.

"I'm so sorry, Gavin. I can't imagine..." He presses his lips to my temple, silencing me. His arm wraps me tight against him.

"It's okay. I miss him. We all do, but he had a great life and I have to take some comfort in that."

He leans back, meeting my eyes as he nods, reassuring me with more than his words.

I can't imagine losing one of my parents so tragically, though I've felt that sort of pain before. Jeremy...

As if he's reading my mind, Gavin presses closer to me, giving me his warmth when a breeze sways my hair back.

"Do you have any brothers? Sisters?" he asks, his eyes focused on mine.

"Yes, Kel's my sister. She's older by three years. And um..." My voice trails off as I wonder if I should tell him about Jeremy, unsure if I can get the words out without having my emotions get the best of me.

He tilts my face up and reads me with worry stretching over his face.

"Tell me," he whispers, holding me close, giving me strength.

"My brother Jeremy. He was four years older than me and the best brother I could have asked for. He was my rock."

Gavin runs a hand over my cheek, never taking his eyes off mine.

"Was?" Gavin's eyes are filled with sudden concern as he gazes down at me with his hand against my cheek.

"Jeremy and I were on our way home from a dance competition when a semi sped through a red light and crashed into his cab. They...um...couldn't save him. He died from the blood loss." My voice breaks twice and a tear falls onto my cheek as I close my eyes, waiting for Gavin to make an excuse to leave. One day with me and I'm already a mess. The tightness in my chest feels as if my heart is being squeezed by a fist, my worst pain being voiced, I feel naked in front of him.

Will he pull away now? Will it be too much, too soon for him to deal with?

Will he see a damaged, unlovable girl in front of him or will he really and truly see me?

Gavin's thumb catches a tear against my chin and his lips press against my forehead so very lightly. A feeling of such relief comes over me when he wraps his arms tightly around me and I press my face into his neck, letting myself feel the pain for this moment in time.

"I didn't mean to tell you all that. I'd understand if you walked away right now. I know, I'm a mess," I whisper, not daring to look into his eyes for fear of what I'll see there. Pity, regret, sadness, concern, maybe panic. I couldn't bear that so I just press closer to him as he whispers in my ear.

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