

Love Refuge

by
Alessa



Love's Refuge

by Alessa

Chapter 1

The door swung open and hit the wall beside it with more force than I had intended.

Hayley Ashton looked up immediately from the carton of takeout noodles in her lap.

"That bad, eh?" Her voice showed no surprise. She didn't even look startled by the fact that I had come storming in without any warning.

"The ignorant little... Ugh—When will I learn that guys are assholes?"

"You and learning..." Hayley said with a smirk, shoving another portion of noodles into her mouth, "...don't belong in the same sentence."

"Thanks," I sighed, collapsing onto the lawn chair that was pushed up against the wall. "Just... Ugh."

She reached for the remote control and clicked the mute button, then sat up and swung her long legs over the side of the lawn chair, so her bare feet touched the panelling below. "So what happened, Rikki?"

"Right. So we were in his basement playing table football, right?"

"Nothing wrong with table football," Hayley mused.

"So I beat him about twelve times in a row, and he comments that 'I may be good at table football, but I'd never survive in *real* football'."

Hayley nodded and rolled her eyes, as if she knew what was coming. "And outside it goes."

"Now we're in his backyard. He's in the net, and I'm about five metres away. Then he starts saying all this crap about how I'll never make it into the goal because I'm a girl and he's a guy, and blah, blah, blah."

"And you hit the ball right into the net!" Hayley exclaims, punching her fist into the air.

"Right into his face was more like it. I wasn't even aiming for the net," I scoffed and fell backwards, so I was sprawled out on the chair, staring up at the angled ceiling of the shed.

Hayley chuckled and lied back down again. "That's my girl," she murmured. She unmuted the television, and the small area was once again filled with the sound of an old sitcom and its laugh track.

"So how'd *your* date go?" I asked, sounding more collected when I spoke this time.

"Terrific. That's why I'm sitting in a shed watching reruns and eating yakisoba. Yours is on top of the fridge, if you were wondering. I was just about to put it away if you weren't here in ten minutes."

I laughed and got up, taking two strides to the miniature refrigerator placed right next to the TV. One cool thing about our shed was that we didn't have to walk more than 10 steps to get to anything. It might've been slightly cramped, but Hayley and I liked it that way.

I opened the little white cartridge and found the same noodle dish Hayley had—our all-time favourite.

"So what happened with yours?" I probed her again.

"I got nervous and tripped. Spilled my slushie all over him." Hayley said it nonchalantly, as if she had reflected on the matter and decided to forget it had ever happened.

"And he ditched you just because of that?" I asked incredulously.

My best friend shook her head. "Nah. He took off because I tried to put my arm around him and accidentally whacked him in the head," Hayley told me. Then she paused and pensively furrowed her eyebrows. "Or was it because I started choking on popcorn and the guy in front of us yelled at me because he couldn't hear the movie over my coughing?" she shrugged. "Don't remember. The whole thing was a blur."

I scoffed playfully, mixing the Japanese noodles around with my chopsticks. "Smooth, Hayley," I commented. "You know... You might have grown two inches over the summer, and you might have learned about the wonders of contact lenses. Hell, you're even over and done with three years of braces. But you're still a dork at heart," I grinned at her.

Hayley picked up the closest item, which just so happened to be a lantern in the shape of a frog, and hurled it at my head. It hit the wall behind me, missing my face by about three inches. I watched as it fell to the ground with a *thump* and rolled across the wood.

"So how'd you know I'd be back here?" I asked, returning to my noodles. "I wasn't supposed to be home till eight at the earliest."

Hayley turned to me and cocked an eyebrow, almost as if the answer was obvious. "Face it, Rikki. We're both really sucky daters."

I shrugged casually. "I've been thinking, and... Well, I've come to the conclusion that I'm just fine with that."

My eyes travelled up to the old, crinkled snapshot of Hayley and me that had been thumb-tacked to the wall above the window. It had been taken roughly three years ago by her mother. The two of us were standing in front of the shed the first day we got it. The areas around our mouths, not to mention our teeth as we grinned broadly, were stained from our self-congratulatory popsicles; hers was blue and mine was red. The picture was pretty funny, since both of us looked like social rejects and all. But that wasn't my favourite part of the picture. My favourite part was the fact that we were inseparable even back then. It showed in the way we held our hands, our fingers laced, holding tightly to each other, always seeking each other out as if something unforeseen was coming to tear us apart.

"I'd rather be here with you in this stupid shed anyway," I murmured.

To anyone else, the shed might've seemed just that. A shed. But it wasn't—not to us. It was *our* shed. It had been our hangout and a place of refuge for the past three years.

When Hayley and I were around ten years old, we came up with the ingenious idea of buying one for ourselves. We would fill it with all kinds of toys and stuff and spend all of our time there. Thrilled with the idea, we made pages and pages of crayon-drawn plans showing what our new hangout would look like.

The first thing we did was get my dad to take us to a home improvement and gardening store. We looked through sheds for a good two hours until we found the perfect one by both of our standards. It was three by five metres, with two glass-pane windows and a small skylight. The shed had grey siding on the outside, wood on the inside, and came complete with a panelled floor. The price tag read 1,350.

It was quite a lot of money for two ten-year-olds to get on their own. But our determination was greater than the extremely large sum of money. If we could save enough money to buy it, our parents would allow us to get it. That was the deal, and Hayley and I weren't giving up that easily.

For one full year, we set aside money from our birthdays, Christmas, weekly chores, and a million lemonade stands. By the time the summer before our 5th grade rolled around, the two of us had pooled enough money to buy our shed. We even had fifty dollars left over to buy each of us our own reclining lawn chair to put inside.

Since she had more room at her house than I did, the shed was put up in the corner of Hayley's backyard, pushed up against the fence. The lock came with two keys—one for her and one for me.

Over the years, more and more things collected in the shed. We bought a beanbag chair and a small table to play cards on, a whiteboard and hooks for our coats in the winter, and shelves on the walls to fill with picture frames, stuffed toys, and other junk.

Hayley's dad was eventually able to hook up electricity in there. It took a lot of wiring and a few days of work, but he eventually got it. Being a former builder and carpenter, Mr. Ashton was great with that kind of stuff.

Along with the electricity came a small television set, a miniature refrigerator, basic lighting, a tiny stereo, and a strand of coloured Christmas lights strung along the ceiling.

We had personalised the walls with photos and posters of our favourite bands, and we both put blankets of our choice on the lawn chairs, so we could sleep there if we wanted. The shed sort of felt like a refuge for the two of us. If there was nothing to do, we went to the shed. If one of us got into a fight with our parents, we went to the shed. If we got home late, and we didn't want to get in trouble for waking our entire households, we went to the shed.

Although mine and Hayley's friendship centred around the shed, it didn't start with it. Our friendship started in the third grade, when I first moved to town.

My mother began talking to Hayley's mother when they met at a local book club for women that gathered once a week. They became friendly with each other and ever-so-conveniently realised that both had children in the same grade. Since I was new to town and Hayley had no friends, although she refuses to admit it to this day, our parents thought it would be a good idea if we started spending time together.

It turned out that Hayley and I made an incredibly good pair. She was the dork who would rather read manga and play computer games than go shopping or learn to dance, and I was the tough girl who punched just as hard as any of the boys. One time, Timmy Williams stole Hayley's glasses on the playground, and I didn't hesitate to throw a punch in his direction when I saw Hayley's tearful eyes. Timmy went home with a bloody nose that day, and Hayley and I have dubbed ourselves best friends ever since.

"So you're done with dating for a while, then?" Hayley asked, breaking me out of my daze.

"Huh?" I muttered, looking to the side so I could see her. I shook my head free of the daydream. "Oh... Yeah. Yeah, definitely."

"Me, too," Hayley agreed. "I'm so sick of it."

Chapter 2

"Hayley!" I yelled, staring down at her comatose body on the bed. Her arms were resting above her head, and her face was planted directly into the pillow. I didn't have a clue how she breathed like that. Hell, she was such a deep sleeper, she could've been dead for all I knew.

"Hayley! Wake up, you lazy pain in the ass!"

When she didn't even budge, I groaned and grabbed the extra pillow that was resting on the floor against her bed frame. I continuously smacked her with it until she finally showed some sign that she was breathing.

"What's wrong with you, woman!?" she grumbled.

"Get out of bed, Hayley! It's nearly 3 p.m., and I called an emergency shed meeting two hours ago!"

She didn't respond. Her eyes were shut as she pretended to be asleep again.

I sighed and changed tactics by crawling into bed with her and nestling myself underneath her arm. Her hair had that sweet, familiar scent to it that I loved. "Hayyyleeeyyy," I sang, tickling her ribs. "Time to get uuupppp."

Hayley's mouth twitched, trying to prevent a smile from forming. But I had noticed.

"Saw that!" I declared. "You're awake. Now get up, you bum!"

Hayley reached out and shoved me off the bed. I rolled onto her blue carpet with a thump.

She finally sat up. "Who let you in, anyway?" Hayley's words were hard to decipher through a yawn. She rubbed her eyes and then stretched her arms above her head.

"Your Mom did. I've been trying to call your cell phone for a couple of hours now. Then I figured I might as well come over here and wake you up myself, since you sleep like a troll on Ritalin."



I went out, back to the shed, for about half an hour while Hayley reluctantly got up so she could shower, brush her teeth, and make herself presentable for the emergency meeting.

I was flipping through channels with the TV muted and the stereo on when I heard Hayley open the door.

"Alright," she said, taking a step into the shed. "So first things first. What're you doing in my chair, Miss Erica?"

I shrugged. "Closer to the TV," I replied without tearing my eyes away from the screen.

Hayley nodded. "I see." She crossed her arms over her chest and bit her lip, looking like we had some sort of dilemma on our hands. "Well... The way I remember it, we decided that I got to be closer to the TV if you got control of the stereo and the light switch. Do you recall?"

A smile pulled at the side of my mouth. "That agreement does not ring a bell," I stated.

"Hmm," Hayley tapped her finger against her chin pensively. "Alright then. Perhaps we should remind you, yes?"

I dropped the remote and recoiled as far back against the wall as I could. "No! Hayley, don't!" I yelled. "I'll... I'll slap you in the face if you do!"

Hayley laughed. "Rikki... In case you haven't noticed, you stopped growing in seventh grade. I am now about two inches taller than you."

"So? You're still a wimp!" I exclaimed.

A wicked grin spread across my best friend's face. "Oh, now you've done it..."

"No—don't you dare!"

Hayley began tickling me mercilessly, leaning over me so I couldn't get away even if I wanted to.

Just as I was sure I was going to suffocate from laughing so hard, she scooped me up and tossed me onto my own lawn chair. "And stay there!" she added.

Hayley flopped down in her rightful place and picked up the remote, resuming her job of controlling the channels.

"Asshole," I muttered, rolling on my side so I could see the television screen.

"Don't make me come over there," Hayley replied lazily. I stuck my tongue out at her, which she saw out of the corner of her eye, but she didn't do anything about it except smile.

When the next set of commercials came on, Hayley rolled over on her side, resting her head on top of her arm. "So, hey... What was your thought process in waking me up on a perfectly good Saturday morning?"

"First off, it's three o'clock in the afternoon, as I've said before. But that's not the point. The point is, last night I found out some information that you might find especially interesting."

She raised an eyebrow. "Which is?"

I sat up on the chair and leaned over, resting my elbows on my knees. "Right. Well, I was talking to Sam Karlson, who's best friends with Jimmy Parker. And you wanna know what he told me? He told me that he thinks Jimmy likes you!" I exclaimed.

"I know," Hayley said.

I nodded excitedly. "When he told me, I was like, *woah!* I gotta tell--" I paused and turned to stare curiously at my best friend. "Wait. You know?"

She nodded. "Yeah. Jimmy told me two days ago."

I was suddenly at a loss for words, so Hayley continued instead.

"Yeah... He gave me his phone number. Told me to call him about plans for tonight, but..."

"You mean you haven't called him yet!?" I yelled, cutting her off.

Hayley raised an eyebrow at my outburst. "Rikki... I thought we both decided that we were fed up with the entire dating thing?"

I shook my head, waving the comment away. "But... But that was, like... a month ago."

"It was last week, Rikki."

"Whatever! It was before we knew that Jimmy Parker liked you. Just... Forget I said anything about not dating, okay? I didn't mean it."

Hayley narrowed her eyes at me. "If you didn't mean it, then why did you turn Aaron Harris down when he asked you out on Wednesday?"

"Because... Well, because..." I stuttered, searching for an excuse. "I dunno, okay? But just call Jimmy, would you? C'mon, Hayley. He likes you! He's really nice. Plus, he's obviously aware of and okay with the fact that you're a dork, and he likes you anyway! So there's nothing to be ashamed of, is there?"

Hayley picked up the remote and chucked it at my head, missing me by a few inches as usual.

She sighed and turned over on her back, searching the slanted ceiling with her eyes, obviously lost in thought. "I dunno, Rikki..."

I got up and walked over to Hayley's lawn chair, then sat down on the edge and took her hand reassuringly in mine. "C'mon, Hayley. Give it a shot. I really want to see you happy, okay?"

Her gaze travelled over to my face. I begged her with my eyes and shot her a supportive smile.

Hayley rolled her eyes and playfully shoved me away from her for the second time that day. I almost rolled off onto the hard panelling below, but I was just able to catch my footing.

"Retreat back to your own lawn chair, Erica Wimbley." She reached into the pocket of her cargo pants and pulled out her cell phone. "The stuff I get myself into because of you. Honestly," she murmured.

It only took Hayley a second to scroll through her contacts and pick out Jimmy's name. I watched her put the phone to her ear and wait patiently.

The second she heard the monotone ringing sound stop, Hayley's eyes went wide.

She tore the phone away from her ear and covered the mouthpiece with the palm of her hand. "He picked up!" she whispered frantically. "What do I do!?"

"Hello...? Hello? Is anyone there?" I could hear Jimmy's voice very faintly on the other line.

"Talk to him!" I mouthed.

Hayley flailed her arms helplessly. "What do I say!?"

"Try saying hello, stupid!"

My best friend nodded quickly and pressed the phone to her ear again. "Hello, stupid."

I smacked myself on the forehead.

"Oh God," she muttered, her face turning a dark shade of pink. "I mean... Hey, Jimmy. How's it going? It's Hayley."

I could hear Jimmy responding, but I couldn't hear exactly what he was saying.

"Yeah... Yeah, I'm good. How're you?"

Nodding reassuringly, I gave Hayley the thumbs up.

"Um... Why did I call? I called because... I, uh." Shrugging vulnerably, my best friend begged for help with her eyes.

I scrambled to my feet and rushed over to the whiteboard. Uncapping the green marker, I began furiously scribbling away on the surface.

'Movies.'

"Um... Jimmy. Do you like movies?"

I rolled my eyes. Did I have to do everything for this girl? I added, '*Ask him to the*' directly above my first comment.

"Yeah. Yeah, so do I. Do you want to go to one tonight? You know... with me?"

More inaudible responses.

"Tonight. I just said that," she stuttered.

Assuming Jimmy's question had been, "When?" I rolled my eyes and picked up the marker again. '7:00,' I wrote.

"Oh! What time, you mean... 7:00? Is that okay?"

I stood next to the board, marker in ready position, in case Hayley managed to embarrass herself again.

"Yeah. I'm looking forward to it, too. Okay. See you tonight. Bye."

Hayley slowly closed the phone and placed it on the table beside her lawn chair. Her chin fell into her hand as she stared absentmindedly at the far wall.

"What? What's wrong?" I asked.

"Rikki... Rikki, I can't do this! Why'd you talk me into this!? I can't talk to boys!"

"What are you, a mute or something?!"

"No," she drawled. "I didn't mean it like that, Rikki... It's just... Well, of course I can talk. But not to boys... It's like my brain just evaporates into thin air or something."

"You always act like that," I pointed out.

Her eyes narrowed. "You're not helping," Hayley said crossly.

I laughed. "Alright, alright. I'm sorry. Here," I said, dragging my lawn chair closer to hers. I sat on the edge right in front of her, so close that our knees were touching. "Let me help, okay?"

"How are you supposed to help? This date is going to be an absolute nightmare no matter what you do."

No, it won't," I told her. "It's all in your head. All you have to do is get over your fear of the opposite gender, and it'll be fine. I promise."

Hayley rolled her eyes. "Rikki, I've been scared of boys since I was eight years old. I highly doubt I'm going to get over this within the next four hours."

"You will. Trust me, okay?"

Hayley sighed reluctantly but nodded all the same.

"Okay. Good. Now pretend that I'm Jimmy."

"You look nothing like him," she muttered.

"Work with me, Miss Ashton! I'm trying here, okay? Key word: *pretend*!"

She put her hands up, shielding herself as if I were about to hit her. "Alright! Geez, calm yourself. Don't bite my head off!"

I took Hayley's hands in mine. "Now. Tell me I look pretty."

"You look pretty, Rikki."

"I'm Jimmy!"

She shut her eyes tightly and recoiled. "Okay! I'm sorry! This is just really, really weird. You're freaking me out."

"Say it," I insisted.

"You look pretty... *Jimmy*."

"Like you *mean* it, Hayley. If you were any more monotone, he'd think you were a damn robot."

My best friend took a deep breath. "You look *really* pretty tonight, Jimmy."

"Why, thank you, Hayley!" I said cheerfully, taking on the role of Jimmy Parker. "You look lovely, as well."

Hayley cleared her throat awkwardly and looked away, avoiding my gaze at all costs.

Did I have to feed everything to this ditzy girl? Did Hayley Ashton not have a brain of her own?

"Try to make a meaningful conversation," I urged her.

Hayley glanced back at me. "I'm really glad we were able to do this tonight."

"Me, too," I agreed.

There was a long silence between us as I waited for her to make the next move and say something else, but she didn't. Typical Hayley. I sighed inwardly.

"You know, I really like you, Hayley," I said.

She nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, I really like you, too... *Jimmy*." Hayley forced herself to look into my eyes, and the strangest feeling hit me right in the gut.

Hayley had changed. I hadn't noticed it because I had seen her almost every day since we were eight years old. But she had changed, and it stirred something in my chest.

It was almost as if I was seeing her, *really* seeing her, for the first time since we were kids.

Her dark hair had grown long, and her bangs now hung over her eyes. Her face had changed too, losing all of its babyish qualities and leaving her looking quite attractive. Hayley was still thin, but she was tall now too—lanky but energetic at the same time.

Without her glasses, I noticed that her eyes were a more shocking shade of blue than I had thought. Without her braces, she had a killer smile.

Hayley wasn't a kid anymore. She was fourteen. I didn't realise how beautiful she had become until now, or how much she had changed in that little amount of time.

I felt myself leaning forward, almost as if I couldn't control it. Before I knew it, my lips had brushed against hers. I let the kiss linger for a couple of seconds before my mind snapped back into my head.

What the hell was I doing? Hayley was my best friend and nothing else.

I pulled away and got to my feet, nervously wringing my hands. "See?" I said, forcing a smile. "You're not afraid of boys... You'll... You'll do fine tonight," I stuttered.

Hayley stared at me curiously. Her eyebrows furrowed as she searched my face, but I turned away.

"You're not a boy, Rikki." My best friend shook her head free of the daze.

"We—we were pretending..." I reminded her that I had only been pretending to be her date. As long as she thought it was all an act, our friendship was still unharmed, but inside me, there was a turmoil of confusion and doubt invading my mind.

I promised myself that nothing like that would ever happen again.

Chapter 3

I'm not completely sure what exactly happened that night; Hayley never gave me any of the details. All I knew was that she and Jimmy must've hit it off pretty well because the two were considered a couple in no time. I had told Hayley I'd be happy if she was happy. And I was.

Well, I kept telling myself I was, at least. That had to count for something.

Technically, Jimmy was Hayley's first *real* boyfriend. Of course she'd been on dates before, but there was rarely ever a second one that followed the first. As she had told me multiple times before, Hayley wasn't too smooth around boys.

The two looked good together, I thought. Jimmy had blonde hair that fell to his chin, but it complemented his cute features. He was fairly pale, with a few freckles across his nose. His eyes were bronze colour. Jimmy was pretty tall for his age, so he kind of towered over Hayley, who was a little over five feet.

Even their personalities seemed to work well. Where Hayley lacked certain qualities, Jimmy had them, and vice versa. Hayley was shy, and Jimmy was outgoing. Jimmy was impulsive, and Hayley thought things out. Jimmy liked to talk, and Hayley would rather just listen. The two fit together like a jigsaw puzzle.

Time passed, and I started seeing less and less of Hayley. She only had so much of her time that could be devoted to other people, and as Jimmy and Hayley moved deeper into their relationship, more of it had to be spent with him.

I didn't blame her, really. Relationships required a lot of work, and I understood that. I wasn't jealous of Jimmy as much as I was jealous of the fact that he got to see her all the time. I thought back on the way that Hayley and I used to spend every day together, just lying around doing absolutely nothing. It made me realise how much I had taken her company for granted.

By the time the pair hit two months, I stopped spending time with Hayley altogether. Sometimes she would still make an effort to talk. Sometimes she'd call me late at night, knowing I'd be awake watching TV, or she'd drop by my locker at school just to see how I was doing. But I never tried to make an effort in return. I'd let her calls go to voice mail, and I'd always make an excuse for a quick exit. I always told myself that I didn't want to get in between Hayley and Jimmy, but the truth was that I wouldn't be able to *bear* being in between the two.

I even made a decision to stop going to the shed. Sometimes Hayley and I used to relax there alone if we needed to think or something. It used to be easy for me to just go into Hayley's backyard and unlock the padlock of our little refuge, even if I was by myself. Hayley and I had practically lived at each other's houses for years anyway. But it no longer felt right to go there alone. It felt almost as if I was intruding.

I only went back to the shed once after I decided I would stop hanging out there. I didn't stay long; all I did was take the picture of Hayley and me holding hands in front of our newly-bought hangout. Just having it in my possession made me feel slightly more comfortable and a little less sad. I put the snapshot in between the pages of my pocket-sized notepad that I kept in my bag. Then I left, telling myself that I wasn't going to go back again.



I watched as beads of rain slid down the windows, leaving tracks of water on the glass. With my chin in my hand, I absentmindedly tapped the edge of my pen against the book in front of me.

"So if we put the map here... Maybe a couple pictures, then a paragraph about each nationality..."

I nodded slowly. "Yep. Sounds good."

"Maybe we could fit a diagram here, too," Aaron suggested. "A bar graph or something."

"Mhm," I mumbled. "Yeah. Why not."

Aaron raised an eyebrow. "You know what? Screw 'mass migration in America.' Let's just do the project on those man-eating turtles that have been posing a threat to fishermen all over the coast of Alaska."

"Okay."

"I heard some of them grow to be, like, 12 feet tall. Their diets mostly consist of whole deer and grizzly bears."

"Alright. Sounds cool," I agreed. Then my head snapped up to look at him as his words finally made their way into my brain. "Wait... What?"

Aaron laughed. "You alright, Erica? You seem kinda... distracted today."

I cracked a smile and shook my head, but avoided his gaze. "Nah. I'm alright. I'm sorry; I'll stay focused."

I looked down at the empty poster board in front of us. The only thing we had so far was a title that read, "Mass Migration in the United States from 1840-1914." Then, slightly below that in smaller font, it said, "By Aaron Harris and Erica Wimbley."

Aaron and I had met a year prior when he began eating with Hayley and me at lunch. Aaron was a pretty cool guy in my book. We had a lot of interests in common, and he was absolutely hysterical. He had one of those quick personalities; Aaron could crack a joke about something the second it came out of our mouths. He'd often have Hayley and me in stitches before we were halfway through the lunch period.

This year, Aaron and I were put in the same History class. Since neither of us knew too many other kids in the class, we frequently paired up for group-involved work or assignments.

For the last project of the fourth quarter, our teacher informed us that we each had to do a poster board that summed up a unit we had worked on during the year. It could be on any important event that shaped world history, and she allowed us to pair up with one partner. Thus explaining why Aaron and I were sitting in the library, surrounded by textbooks, markers, construction paper, and stacks of research.

"Alright," he said, standing up from the square table. "I'll go see if I can print out some pictures or charts or something... You start writing out the information in paragraphs, okay?"

I nodded and got to work.

Two and a half hours later, Aaron and I had three-quarters of the project done. We had separated the poster board into four parts: Italian, Irish, Russian, and a smaller section that read, "Forced Migration." That section has been blank so far.

"Do we have any info on forced migration yet?" Aaron asked, putting the cap back on the glue stick for the time being.

"I definitely read something about it in the textbook," I told him. "I think I wrote the page numbers down somewhere. Hold on." I picked up my bag that had been resting against the leg of the table and began searching through it.

Finally locating my pocket-sized notepad, I flipped through it to see if I could find where I had scribbled the page numbers. Something fell out and drifted to the floor, landing face-up on the rug.

I hadn't seen the snapshot in about a month. I had even forgotten that I put it there in the first place. My eyes scanned over the photograph. Ten-year-old versions of me and my best friend stood there in front of our shed, grinning stupidly and holding hands as we looked at the camera. I missed Hayley more than I could explain. My eyes started to get foggy, but I pushed the tears back and swallowed them.

I think that was when I first realised that I loved her.

Well, I always knew I loved her. Of course I did; she was my best friend. But this time I finally acknowledged the fact that butterflies rose in my stomach whenever I thought about her, and my heart sped up whenever I caught sight of her in school.

It wasn't fourth-graders-holding-hands, best friends-having-sleepovers, or little-kid stuff anymore.

I actually *loved* her.

I was broken out of my thoughts when I felt Aaron's eyes on me. I glanced up at him to see that he was looking at the photo in my hands with his eyebrows furrowed. His expression was sympathetic. Although I didn't talk about it with anyone, I assumed he knew what had happened. He didn't see Hayley and me hanging out together anymore, so Aaron put one and one together. There wasn't enough room for both the best friend and the girlfriend.

"Want me to walk you home?" he suggested. "We can finish this some other time."

I nodded, but I didn't say anything, too afraid that my voice would falter had I tried. Aaron helped me collect my things, and we left the library.

Chapter 4

When Aaron left me in front of my house, I waited for him to walk away before I turned to face my front door. The lights were on in some windows, which meant that either my mom, my dad, or my little brother were home.

Even though it was drizzling outside, I really didn't feel like going in. Without putting too much thought into the matter, I turned and started walking down the sidewalk instead.

It had been raining on and off all day. One of those late-spring rainstorms had been brewing for the past few days because of the warm weather. The air was humid and smelled like moisture.

As I walked, I didn't really give too much consideration to where I was going. I just listened to the rustling of wet trees and the sound of cars rolling by on damp gravel.

I must've circled Hayley's block about four times before I found myself outside the shed.

I dug through my bag for the key. The rain was beginning to come down harder now, matting my hair and soaking my school uniform all the way through. I got the padlock open just in time and stumbled in.

The shed, even after years of being used, still had a faint scent of plywood and wet paint. It also smelled a little like Hayley. I couldn't describe her scent even if I tried, but it was nice, like an old book or a favourite teddy bear. It comforted me.

I kicked off my muddy shoes outside the door and took off my wet socks that had been soaked by the puddles. The next thing I did was roll up a quilt around my head and shoulders to dry off my hair and keep warm.

I didn't bother turning on the television or any of the lights. The electricity probably didn't work anyway. It often faltered out here during rainstorms, as Hayley and I had figured out early on.

Wrapping myself in a green quilt, I curled up on my lawn chair and faced Hayley's side of the shed.

Even with the lights off, I could tell where everything was. First there was the blue lamp on top of the side table, and above Hayley's lawn chair were a bunch of old stuffed toys and some glow-in-the-dark stars that we had put up back when they were considered "cool". Then, on the floor, was a small pink rug in the shape of a teddy bear. At the foot of the lawn chair was the television set, and beside that was the mini-fridge. One thing that wasn't in its rightful place, however, was my best friend.

I shut my eyes and let my mind go void of all thought. I was tired of thinking about her all the time. It was confusing, and it hurt at the same time. I've never experienced anything like this before.

Just as I was about to drift off, the door to the shed creaked open. A gust of damp air filled my refuge, and I heard someone step onto the wood panelling.

"What," a familiar voice asked, "are you doing, sitting here in the dark, Erica Wimbley?" The door shut behind her.

"I dunno," I replied. My voice sounded small and confused, but not because of her question; it was because of her presence.

I heard Hayley flick the switch a few times, but nothing happened. "Ah. Well, that explains that," she said. I barely saw her silhouette in the darkness as she crossed the shed and reached for something on the shelf. "Did you try the lantern?"

"No," I said. "I figured it wouldn't work. You threw it at me a few months ago, remember?"

Hayley laughed. "Rikki, if everything broke after I threw it at you..." She paused as she sat on her lawn chair and clicked the lantern on. The light, though very dim, still worked. "We'd have a shed full of busted crap."

A smile pulled at my mouth. God, I had missed her so much.

I pulled my gaze away from her, remembering the thoughts that went through my mind earlier at the library. Even if she didn't have a clue, I still felt embarrassed about it. "So, what're you doing here?" I asked, pushing the treacherous feelings away.

Hayley raised an eyebrow as if the answer were obvious. "I live here, Rikki. This is sort of my backyard."

"No, I know," I replied. "I mean, how'd you know I was in here?"

Hayley put her hands behind her head and lied down, staring up at the ceiling. "I saw your shoes outside the shed," she told me.

From there, the two of us fell into an awkward silence. This struck me as extremely strange. Hayley Ashton and Erica Wimbley hadn't had an awkward silence since... Hell, I can't even remember if we *ever* had one.

For a good ten minutes, I didn't hear anything except for the rain on the skylight, the soft buzz of the lantern, and Hayley's calm breathing.

"Rikki," she whispered. I turned my head to the side so I could look at her. The lantern cast a soft glow on her face. She looked pensive. "Rikki, what happened to us, huh?"

I simply shrugged. I knew my voice would sound choked-up if I tried to respond.

"I haven't seen you in three months... We're best friends, Rikki."

"I know," I told her. "You've just been... busy, you know? I didn't wanna..."

"Not too busy for you, though... C'mon, Rikki. I'd always make time for you. You know that, don't you?"

I didn't respond for a minute, telling her that, apparently, I didn't know. Hayley sighed, thinking over her words before she said them. "We broke up, you know. Me and Jimmy. Last Tuesday."

"What?" I asked in disbelief. "Hayley, why didn't you tell me?"

"Believe me, I tried. You haven't returned any of my freakin' calls in months."

I bit my lip. "I'm sorry," I whispered. "And I'm sorry it didn't work out."

"Don't be," she said. I heard her shuffle around, the way she always did whenever something was bugging her. "I ended it."

"What? Why?! I thought you really liked Jimmy... Why would you end it?"

"For you, Rikki," Hayley told me.

I sat up and stared at her, giving her the "why-on-earth-would-you-do-something-so-stupid" expression. "Hayley! Why'd you do that!?" I exclaimed. "Hayley, I miss you more than anything, okay? And yeah, I wish we could spend every day together like we used to. But the reality of it was that... sooner or

later, we were going to grow apart. When I told you that I wanted you to be happy, I meant it. And if that means—"

"No, Rikki, that's not what I meant," she said, cutting me off.

I closed my mouth and searched Hayley's face, attempting to figure out what she was trying to tell me. Hayley looked stressed and frustrated. She rubbed her forehead nervously and shut her eyes. Her foot was bouncing nervously.

"I meant that..." Hayley sighed, unable to continue. "Come here a second, Rikki."

Puzzled, I got up and crossed the shed in my bare feet. Hayley sat up and motioned for me to sit beside her.

"Rikki. I gotta... Uh... I have to tell you something. But, I... Um..." My best friend cracked an anxious smile. "I guess I kinda suck at talking to girls, too."

I laughed. "That makes the two of us."

Hayley didn't reply. I thought I saw a blush rise on her face.

"Here," I said, reaching out for the lantern. "Maybe this will help." I turned it off, and the shed was engulfed in darkness. I couldn't even see three inches in front of my face.

I heard her shuffle around, so she was facing me. "Yeah. Yeah, a little," she said. Hayley's voice was still shaky, however. "This is still gonna be hard, though."

"Nah... You're my best friend, Hayley. You can tell me anything, right?"

Even though I couldn't see her, I knew her well enough to know that she had just nodded. "Yeah. Alright. I'm holding you to that."

I laughed. "Alright," I agreed. "Now what is it?"

She took a while to collect her thoughts. More than anything, I wanted to hug her or hold her hand—just something to reassure her that I wasn't going anywhere, no matter what she had to say. But I couldn't bring myself to do it. Something still felt weird between Hayley and me. I sat patiently instead.

She took a deep breath. "Wanna know why I agreed to stop dating?"

"Because you were fed up with it?" I asked.

"No," she replied.

"Because you suck at it?"

"Well, yes. But no. That's not why."

I folded my legs and sat Indian-style on the bed. I heard Hayley do the same, so we were facing each other in the dark shed. "Then why, Hayley?"

Her voice was soft, but what she said was unmistakable. "Well, I didn't realise it at the time... But it was because the person I wanted was right in front of my eyes."

The air suddenly stopped in my throat. There was no way in hell she meant *me*. I was her best friend. That was all she saw in me.

"I... I always compared everyone to you. I think that's why relationships never worked out for me. Cause it was always, '*he's not as pretty as Rikki*' or, '*I don't have as much fun with him as I do with Rikki*'... I could never even look at them without thinking about you. But the thought that I might have... Well, the thought never occurred to me until we sort of... kissed."

I was having trouble comprehending everything that Hayley was saying. I tried to focus on her words, but I was starting to feel slightly dizzy.

"And then, well... I kept telling myself that it was wrong. Because we are both girls, and you didn't think of me like that. And you were so set on me going out with Jimmy, so I did. I mean, don't get me wrong. Jimmy's..." Hayley paused, searching for the right wording. "Jimmy's interesting... But I guess you can't stay with someone forever knowing that the person you really want with all your heart and soul is drifting away from you."

My heart was speeding up now, beating a million times a second.

"So I guess I'm just gonna say it now, Rikki. And I'm really sorry if I creep you out, because, honestly, that's the last thing I want to do to you," she stuttered. "But I guess now that I'm this far into it, I might as well just say it, because you probably know now anyway. I mean, I've definitely dropped enough hints and—"

"Hayley..."

"What?" She sounded alarmed.

"Just spill it out already so I can kiss you!"

"I—Wait, really? You mean you...?"

A smile pulled at the corner of my mouth, and I rolled my eyes. "Only one way to find out," I challenged.

"Right. Yeah, so, uh... Here goes." Hayley cleared her throat. "I think I love you, Rikki. And not the 'I've-been-best-friends-with-this-girl-since-third-grade-love,' either. Well, I mean... Of course, I love you like that. But it's something else now, too. As in, 'I'm-falling-for-the-girl-I've-been-best-friends-with-since-third-grade.'"

Hayley took my hand and held it in hers. A feeling that was a mix between nerves and excitement settled in my stomach. It hadn't been there when I held hands with Hayley in front of our shed and the camera flash went off. But it was there now, and I wondered why it had taken me so long to feel it.

"Hayley... I feel the same way," I admitted.

"Really?" Hayley asked. Just judging by her voice alone, I could imagine her face. She was grinning like an idiot, like she always was when she heard something that made her happy.

"Yes, really. I love you, Hayley."

She squeezed my hand. "Rikki?"

"Yeah?" I replied.

"I'm pretty sure now would be the right time for that kiss you promised..."

"You're right. But it's really dark, and I'm not sure I can see where your lips are... So I might miss."

She laughed. "That's okay. Just give it your best shot."

I didn't miss, though. And this time I wasn't pretending to be Jimmy, and there was no turmoil or doubt invading my mind. I was kissing the girl I loved more than anything in my life, and it felt like the most natural thing in the world. She drew me into her arms, and we became inseparable. Neither of us wanted to let the other one go until we gasped for air, which finally broke our kiss. But this wasn't the end, and as I looked into Hayley's eyes, I could see the one thing that had been there all this time—her love reflected in them like a jewel—only brighter and deeper than ever before.



One of my favourite things about the shed was that it was one of the most serene places I could think of. If the TV and the stereo were off, it was almost like being separated from the rest of the world. The reality of it was that we were really only ten metres from Hayley's house, but still, it felt secluded.

I opened my eyes and stared at the wood panelling on the ceiling. If I listened hard enough, I could hear the faint sounds of birds and the wind rustling the trees. A beam of early-morning sunlight flooded in through the two glass-pane windows.

Hayley was still asleep. I could tell by her steady, even breathing.

The two of us had been up until all hours the night before, talking about everything and anything, until we got so tired that neither of us wanted to get up and go home. We had pushed our lawn chairs together, and I fell asleep with my head against Hayley's chest and her arms around me.

In the following days, things had just about gone back to normal between us. Well, besides the whole 'coming out' thing, of course. We went back to joking around, teasing, and spending countless hours doing nothing.

Apparently, Hayley and I were the only two people out of everyone on the face of this green earth, including both of our mothers, who hadn't seen it coming. The news spread around fairly quickly, and just about the only response we received from everyone was "finally."

It's sort of funny how I thought everyone was nuts for suggesting that Hayley and I were crazy about each other, when really it was all too oblivious. I didn't see that the person I loved the most was right in front of my eyes.

I sat up and stretched my arms above my head. At my sudden movement, Hayley shifted in her sleep and rolled over onto her side. In a matter of seconds, she was still, and her breathing was quiet again. I gazed down at her, and my heart skipped a beat at the thought of how beautiful and peaceful she looked with her dark hair falling over her closed eyes. Hayley's expression was calm, and her chest rose and fell steadily with each breath. Just looking at her was enough to give me butterflies.

A slight smile pulled at my mouth as I tore my gaze away from her and directed it above the window. My eyes immediately found the two pictures on the wall, tacked up side by side.

On the right was a picture of Hayley and me standing in front of our new shed the first day we got it. Even back then, our hands were inseparable, and I remember thinking it was the happiest day of my life.

On the left was a picture of my best friend and me three years later in front of that same shed. It was slightly older now, weathered and peeling in some spots, but it was our refuge just the same. My favourite part of the snapshot was that she was kissing my cheek while I grinned stupidly.

I'd never been so happy.

The End