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Dreams die every day

Some drown in the endless churn of a washing machine, some get lost under an avalanche of responsibilities and still others suffocate in the wake of a broken promise. Dreams die—disappearing with the sun in the western sky.

But a sprig of grass will sprout from a blanket of snow, new life will be born when two become one, and a phoenix will rise from the ashes left behind.

Dreams reborn—blooming with dawn's radiant new light.

~sh~

Chapter One



Scarred corners framed the small journal she pulled from the old shoebox. She traced the cover with one finger, dark stains and pebbled leather disquieting, yet as oddly familiar as the stale odor of cigarettes her mother promised to quit smoking and never did. Now the tenuous reminder, void of the peppermints her mother nursed to disguise the smell, threatened to unravel the tethers holding her together.

God, how she wished she could rewrite the last year.

With her legs crossed beneath her, Ryleigh Collins clutched the journal to her chest, leaned against the wall of her mother's apartment—as empty of her possessions as the world was of her—and let the shadows of the waning morning swallow her.

"I can't do this." She grabbed a loose thread in the denim stretched over her knees and yanked hard.

Two feet bundled in thick navy blue socks appeared in front of her. "Can't do what?"

Ryleigh raised her eyes, moist with remembrance.

"Ah." Natalie crossed her feet, lowered herself with the grace of a toned dancer, and placed a firm, yet gentle hand on Ryleigh's arm. "The personal stuff's the hardest."

After a pause, Ryleigh tucked the knot of emotions neatly back where they belonged and turned. "I'm such a wimp."

"You'll get through this." Natalie Jo Burstyn's perfectly manicured brows knitted together in a scowl that masked her usual playful grin. "I intend to see you do."

The lump in her throat strangled the words she'd rehearsed since Natalie had offered to drop everything to help. Of course she would. Her meddling best friend always seemed to know exactly what to do. Or say. She grasped Natalie's hand and squeezed.

Sometimes words got in the way.

Ryleigh released a long breath and straightened her legs. The journal tumbled to her lap.

"What's that?"

She swiped a hand across the journal's cover and then wiped them

on her jeans. "An old journal," Ryleigh said, brushing away the dusty handprint.

"Don't just sit there fondling it, open it."

The binding creaked. Timeworn pages fanned in a graceful arch as if her touch had resurrected them. Faded ink swirled across the unlined parchment, and the musty balm of old paper and ink tapped at a recollection, distant and unformed, yet ripe for picking—but couldn't pluck it from her memory. Smudged and watermarked, the words danced across the aged pages. She turned each one with care.

Nat leaned in. "Well?"

Ryleigh frowned. "Looks like a collection of poetry."

"I didn't know your mom wrote poetry."

"This isn't her handwriting," Ryleigh responded without thought, "and my mother never wrote anything more literary than a grocery list."

Natalie peered over her shoulder. "Then whose?"

"Don't know. Just an 'R' at the end of the entries." The pages crackled as Ryleigh turned each one. "And the year. '66. '67 on some." A shiver feathered its way from her neck to the tips of her fingers.

"Want to read it?" The familiar weight of Nat's head settled on her shoulder. "Like old times?"

She'd never considered not sharing something with Nat and quickly harnessed the prickling urge to slam the book shut to prying eyes.

Careful not to damage the pages, she smoothed them flat, the tickle of selfishness nibbling at her consistent, rational side. As she scanned the pages, she muttered lines at random, the only autograph the watermarked scars of blurred ink. "The air is thick, gray ashen snow, the ghost returns, its presence unfought." She flipped the page. "Fireflies flicker against azure skies, frolicking hither in reverent riverdance." The weight against her shoulder anchored a covey of troublesome thoughts, but Ryleigh continued to pluck lines from the pages. "Sodden showers of infected rain, across crystal skies littered with fire." She dragged a finger across an eyebrow. "Intriguing."

"You're mumbling."

"They dance to their reticent song."

Natalie frowned. "Who?"

"Fireflies." She tapped the page with her index finger. "One of the poems is about fireflies. I wonder if they're really like that."

"Seriously?"

Ryleigh tucked a strand of hair behind an ear and closed the book

with a finger marking her place. "I've never seen one."

"C'mon," Nat said, crossing her arms. "Kids catch fireflies in jars all the time."

"Not this small-town, sheltered Arizonan."

"Come to think of it, I've never seen one since moving here."

"They're on my bucket list."

Natalie opened and then shut her mouth. "You added to your bucket list without telling me?"

The concentrated effort Nat used to curb her bewilderment caused Ryleigh to forget her grief for a fleeting moment. "I'll see one someday," she said and reopened the book to the last page.

"Read to me, Riles." Nat folded her long legs beneath her, anticipation deepening her eyes to warm chocolate. "Like when we were kids."

Ryleigh glanced sideways at her. "I had to explain them to you." "So?" Nat said, the short word long on sarcasm. "It's nostalgic."

"Okay." Ryleigh took a deep breath. "This is the last entry. It's called 'Lost."

"'I placed my love inside your heart and softly called your name— I placed a hole inside of mine as God's heavenly angels came.

I placed a kiss of golden tears upon your tiny chest— I placed a rainbow at your door the day you came to rest.

I placed a single pure white rose upon your tiny feet—
I placed my hand against your cheek and said good-bye, my sweet.

I placed a gentle autumn breeze within your tiny space—
I placed with you, a piece of me and let you go in God's embrace.'"
~R~'67

The words stuck in her throat with painful intensity. Ryleigh dragged her finger over the 'R'—the last letter in the journal. "Forty-three years ago."

Natalie picked at a stray thread in the shredded knee of her True Religion jeans. "I'm not very good at analyzing poems, but—"

"Whoever wrote this lost a baby." Careful fingers traced the cover, the stained leather unsettling, yet somehow comforting beneath her touch. Ryleigh's neck prickled. A tear trembled on the edge of her eye. "I feel like I'm eavesdropping," she said and closed the book. Sheer will eased the roiling in her stomach.

"Sounds like something you'd write."

Ryleigh shook her head. "Cozy articles for *The Sentinel* on county fairs, care packages to our soldiers, and Mrs. Grayson's baby quilts don't count. I haven't written fiction or poetry in years."

"You should."

Ryleigh raised the journal. "This is raw passion," she said, sniffing back the telltale signs of her emotion. "Emotion stripped naked."

"Your work is like that. Peeking inside the places of your heart no one ever sees."

"Maybe I don't want anyone to see."

Nat paused, and then wrapped her arm over Ryleigh's shoulder. "Things will get better. I promise."

Nat's words soothed her, a spoken ointment soothing a fresh wound.

* * *

The women sat cross-legged in the empty apartment sorting a mishmash of items. One scrap at a time, Ryleigh placed the pieces of her mother's life into neat piles, turning each one front to back, puzzled at how little she knew about the odd trinkets, mementos, and letters safeguarded inside wornout cardboard boxes. With one pile marked "Save" and the other to be discarded, it occurred to her what a parallel her mother's passing was to the death sentence Chandler had given their marriage. Nothing remained but the pompous flashbacks of one and a handful of useless trinkets from the other, and with one flick of the wrist (or philandering penis in Chandler's case), they are tossed aside with yesterday's trash. Yet the part that remained—the part that had wrapped itself around her heart—seemed useless to try to dismiss. Love doesn't stop with someone's absence. Sometimes it grew heavier, the ache deeper, until the hurt no longer gave in to tears.

The gravity of grief had exhausted her, and she felt as overused as the boxes that held her mother's meager belongings. Ryleigh pressed her fingers hard against her temples as if the pressure would numb the ache and quench the niggling urge to leave it all behind and walk away. Yet that wasn't entirely true—the impulse to run bulldozed past any rational thought.

"You okay?"

Ryleigh rubbed the back of her neck. "Just tired." Her hands fell to her lap. "It's just," she said with a sigh, "none of this makes any sense." Ryleigh picked up a patch embroidered with an open-mouthed eagle's head and tugged at the broken threads. "Who keeps junk like this?"

Natalie shrugged.

"Or this?" She held up a single brass button. "Mom had hundreds of orphaned buttons. Why isn't this one with the others?"

"Don't know," Natalie said, straightening, "but I'm curious about the letters."

Ryleigh stilled. "What letters?"

Natalie reached for the stack bound with a rubber band. "These," she said, "postmarked forty-something years ago with no return address."

Fragments of Eleanor's life lingered in Ryleigh's hands—tokens she never bothered to share. Or had she simply not paid attention when her mother spoke of these things? In either case it was a moot point: she'd never bothered to ask. And now it was too late.

The items were meaningless, but an ambiguous feeling tapped at her like the annoying click of a retractable pen. "I don't want to save this crap, but it feels strange to think about throwing it away. Does that sound weird?" She voiced the question with no expectations of a reply.

"Of course it does," Nat said, the usual lilt returning in her tone. She rose and brushed the dust from the backside of her jeans. "But it doesn't surprise me. You *are* weird."

"Thanks," Ryleigh said, reaching for the shoebox. The penciled sketches on the front had faded, but the drawing of the stylish low-heeled dress shoes remained intact. Over the years, the corners had become torn and sloppy and the lid slipped easily free. She placed the items inside and then pressed the lid into place, concealing portions of her mother's life, remnants absent of explanation.

An empty feeling swept over her. "Something isn't right, Nat." In truth, it felt as if she'd been yanked from the pages of a fairy tale and didn't know how to find her way back.

Or if she truly wanted to.

"We're almost done, Riles." Natalie offered a hand up, her deep brown eyes glistening with tiny flecks of copper in the afternoon light. "All that's left is the desk."

Ryleigh's shoulders slumped. "I forgot." She clasped the journal with one hand and grabbed Natalie's outstretched hand with the other. Nat had been her rock when she needed a steady hand, yet waggish enough to celebrate the good times with all-out regale. Always there. No matter what. With an achy groan that migrated through every forty-three-year-old bone, she allowed her best friend to pull her upright.

A photograph fell to the floor between them.

Ryleigh reached it first. They rose together and turned toward the apartment window, light spilling across the photograph. Yellowed and creased, and deckled edges crimped in several places, it wore the markings of time.

"Wait...is that your father?"

Ryleigh nodded.

"Where'd this come from?"

"Must've been inside the journal." She pushed the hair from her eyes. "Why didn't Mom ever show this to me?"

"Don't know, but check out your father's friend. The Kodak is faded, but he's gorgeous. Killer eyes," she said, letting loose an exaggerated whistle.

Ryleigh flipped the photograph over. "Look at this," she said, tracing a finger over faded ink, a ghostly impression of time long passed. "Today this may be nothing, but tomorrow it may be all that's left."

"An 'R' and 1967." Natalie raised an eyebrow. "Just like the journal."

"I wonder if my father's friend is still alive? Is he the author?"

"Be fun to find out."

"Fat chance. I'm a fair hand at research for inconsequential feature articles for my column, but I'm no sleuth. I can't find my phone half the time." Ryleigh slumped. "Or keep track of a husband and where he's sleeping. Or with whom."

"Ouch." Natalie paused, cleared her throat, and then pointed to the photo. "The jungle background. The dates. This was taken in Vietnam. It's as good a place as any to start."

Ryleigh tapped the photo three times against her fingers. She worried her bottom lip in a series of successive tugs and slipped the photograph into the shoebox.

Natalie grinned. "Well, Sherlock? Shall we find him?"