

## EXCERPT:

Ryan ran his fingertips across the wall, tracing the letters and words. He sat on the floor in the doorway of my closet, legs stretched out in front of him, inches away from mine as I sat, leaning against the end of my bed across from the closet, watching him.

I wasn't sure why I'd decided to show him the wall when I'd never shown it to my own parents, even though it wouldn't matter if they knew. It would just be words on a wall. Maybe I just wanted to show someone else. I had kept it a secret for two years, hiding it behind hanging shirts and ironed pants. Maybe I felt like I'd finally found someone I could show it to that would understand the way it made me feel. The sadness of the whole thing.

That was probably why. The sadness of it. Ryan knew that feeling. That sadness that came with life, with being a person. The sadness that Brooke probably felt when she wrote her little messages on the wall. It was the weight of all the different struggles that life would throw at you. Despite not wanting to see that in others, he understood it in a way that felt familiar. We both understood the sadness in a way that connected us.

I could see it on his face. He smiled a little as he read each little feeling Brooke had left on the wall. It was the kind of smile that came about in conversation with someone. It was a smile that said, "I get that" and "I know what that feels like." It was the kind of smile that made you feel like you weren't alone. It made *me* feel like I wasn't alone.

"Sometimes I look at that when I'm feeling upset or lonely," I said. "I read them and imagine what she was going through or who she was talking about. It helps get my mind off things."

He turned to me. That smile. *I get that*. "What kind of things do you have on your mind when you come in here?"

"I don't know, just . . . stuff with my mom."

"Is she still hurting?"

"Yeah."

"How long has it been since they separated?" He leaned his head against the door frame.

"Four months, which, I mean, I know that's normal. I know divorce isn't something you just get over, but I . . ." In my head, I saw my mom crying at the kitchen table. "I'm just tired of watching her cry and not being able to do anything about it."

He looked down at his hands, clasped in front of him. His face fell slightly, the sides of his mouth turning down.

“What’s wrong?”

He ran a thumb across the knuckles of his other hand. I watched his mouth open slightly, hesitating before speaking, “I was just thinking that’s how I used to feel, kind of. Except I used to be your mom.”

“What do you mean?”

He clenched his shaking hands together, “I used to get so sad, and it felt like there was nothing anyone could do about it.”

My heart broke a little as he said that.

“Do you still feel like that?”

He took a deep breath and let go of his hands, “Not as much anymore.”

It was at that moment that we both became aware of my hand on his calf. At some point while we were talking, I had dropped my hand to my side, where his ankles were, and was rubbing my fingers across the skin. I looked down, the contrast of his tan skin against the pale flesh of my hand was mesmerizing. The soft hairs slid back and forth between my fingertips. His warm muscles tightened and released beneath my hand.

I looked up at his face, his eyes watching my fingers move back and forth across his leg. There was something intimate about it, surprisingly so. Not sexual, necessarily, just intimate. Close. Closer than holding hands. It felt comfortable in a way that I’d never felt with anyone else.

It seemed like he could feel it, too. I could see it in his eyes as they watched my fingers slide across the skin of his leg. He looked apprehensive, but almost hypnotized at the same time. His own fingers were close together, one thumb running across the nail of the other.

Before I knew it, I was on my knees, crawling from my spot at the end of the bed to where he sat, no more than two feet away from me in the doorway of my closet. Sitting down, I turned toward him, my upper body facing his. His eyes were on my shirt. I lifted my hand, placing it on his cheek and turned his head. His eyes hovered over my lips, watching as I slid my tongue out to wet them. He was shaking slightly, but I knew it wasn’t out of fear of me. He didn’t let people get this close; he didn’t let people touch him like this. I knew he wanted it though. I could see it in his eyes as he watched my lips, in his own lips as they parted to let out soft breaths, could feel it in his body and the magnetic pull that was drawing us closer.

I moved forward, head leaning into his. I paused, inches from his lips, listening to the heavy breath, feeling it against my lips. The scent of his skin floated under my nose.

I closed the gap between us.

A shudder went through his body as our lips touched. His were soft, smooth against mine. I ran my thumb across his cheek as I pressed myself further into the softness. It felt so good being that close to him, but I knew I couldn't push too fast. I had to make it okay for him. I had to make him feel like he could let go with me.

He pushed forward gently, restrained, as if he wasn't quite ready to let himself go off that cliff. His hand rested against my knee, his fist tight.

I let go of his lips, pressing my forehead against his. He wouldn't bring his eyes to mine, so I slid my hand around to the back of his neck, "Look at me. Please."

Slowly, slowly, he lifted his eyes up my face to lock with mine. In that moment, I had never felt closer to anyone.

"It's okay," I whispered into his ear.

I pressed my lips against his again. I felt his body unclench just a bit, testing the waters. His hand uncurled at my knee, not moving. He couldn't let go completely until he was sure. His lips pressed a little bit more into mine.

When it happened, I felt it. I felt his body drop into my arms, his lips pressing unrestrained into my own. His hand slid up my arm and wrapped tightly into my sleeve, pulling at me. He kept trying to get closer, his need coming out and grabbing me, anchoring itself on me. He was going over a cliff and needed me to catch him. So I did.