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Ashley Poston

A Novel Love Story



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romantic, and packed
with charm.”

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The Dead Romantics

The Seven Year Slip



**A
Novel
Love
Story**



ASHLEY POSTON

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Contents

[Dedication](#)

[Also by Rachel Flowers](#)

[An Ending](#)

[Chapter 1: Country Roads](#)

[Chapter 2: Meet-Cute](#)

[Chapter 3: Signatures](#)

[Chapter 4: Star\(t\)ling Realization](#)

[Chapter 5: Beginnings of a Book Club](#)

[Chapter 6: Honey, Honey](#)

[Chapter 7: Like a River Runs](#)

[Chapter 8: Sweet as Whole](#)

[Chapter 9: Good Enough](#)

[Chapter 10: Plot Twist](#)

[Chapter 11: Monsoon Season](#)

[Chapter 12: Haunted](#)

[Chapter 13: All By My Shelf](#)

[Chapter 14: Spine\(less\)](#)

[Chapter 15: The Cemetery of Deleted Things](#)

[Chapter 16: Heroic](#)

[Chapter 17: Cloudy with a Chance of Kisses](#)

[Chapter 18: Unintended Consequences](#)

[Chapter 19: Unrequited Affliction](#)

[Chapter 20: Four Shadow o'Clock](#)

[Chapter 21: Sweet Tooth](#)

[Chapter 22: Romantic Gestures](#)
[Chapter 23: The Course of True Love](#)
[Chapter 24: Sub Plots](#)
[Chapter 25: Something Wicked This Way Comes](#)
[Chapter 26: Pineapple](#)
[Chapter 27: Good Bones](#)
[Chapter 28: Don't Go Chasing Waterfalls](#)
[Chapter 29: Plumb Luck](#)
[Chapter 30: Lyssa Greene Is Not Okay](#)
[Chapter 31: Statues and Limitations](#)
[Chapter 32: The Last Manuscript](#)
[Chapter 33: All Roads](#)
[Chapter 34: Rachel Flowers](#)
[Chapter 35: The Only Road Out](#)
[Chapter 36: True Love](#)
[Chapter 37: The Montage at the End](#)
[Chapter 38: The Grand Romantic](#)
[Chapter 39: Book Ends](#)
[A Beginning](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Readers Guide](#)

[Books and their Readers](#)

[Discussion Questions](#)

[A Recommended Reading List for Books about Books](#)

[About the Author](#)

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*To the author of my favorite book,
I wish I could've met you,
but I hope my books find your books on the shelves,
and I hope they're friends*



Also by Rachel Flowers...

Daffodil Daydreams

Unrequited Love Song

Honey and the Heartbreak

Return to Sender

[Unfinished Book 5]

An Ending

THERE ONCE WAS A TOWN.

It was a quaint little town, in a quiet valley, where life moved at the pace of snails and the only road in was the only way out, too. There was a candy store that sold the sweetest honey taffy you ever tasted, and a garden store that grew exotic, beautiful blooms year-round. The local café was named after a possum that tormented its owner for years, and the chef there made the best honey French toast in the Northeast. There was a bar where the bartender always knew your name, and always served your burgers slightly burnt, though the local hot sauce always disguised the taste. If you wanted to stay the weekend, you could check-in at the new bed-and-breakfast in town—just as soon as its renovations were finished, and just a pleasant hike up Honeybee Trail was a waterfall where, rumor had it, if you made a wish underneath it, the wish would come true. There was a drugstore, a grocer, a jewelry store that was open only when Mercury was in of retrograde—

And, oh, there was a bookstore.

It was tucked into an unassuming corner of an old brick building fitted with a labyrinthine maze of shelves stocked with hundreds of books. In the back corner was a reading space with a fireplace, and chairs so cozy you could sink into them for hours while you read. The rafters were filled with glass chimes that, when the sunlight came in through the top windows, would send dapples of colors flooding across the stacks of books, painting them in rainbows. A family of starlings roosted in the eaves, and sang different songs every morning, in time with the tolls of the clock tower.

The town was quiet in that cozy, sleepy way that if you closed your eyes, you could almost hear the valley breathe as wind crept through it, between

the buildings, and was sighed out again.

There once was a town, and I was so certain that it would feel like home if I ever made it there.

There once was a town, and it didn't exist.



Country Roads

I WAS LOST.

Not metaphorically—at least, I didn’t think so—but physically lost, hundreds of miles from home, in the middle of nowhere.

No cell service. An outdated map. A gas tank running on empty.

Oh, and I was alone.

When I started this road trip yesterday, before eight hours on the interstate and a pit stop at a dinosaur-themed hotel, and eight more hours today, I didn’t think I’d lose my way on the last leg of the journey. I was so close—the cabin where I’d be staying for the next week was within reach—but Google Maps kept glitching as I drove my way through Rip Van Winkle country, until my phone screen was nothing more than beige land and my little blue dot roamed, without a road, in the middle of nowhere.

I’d taken the same road trip with my best friend for the last two years to the same cabin in Rhinebeck, New York, to meet the same people in our Super Smutty Book Club. I *shouldn’t* have gotten lost.

But this was a year of firsts.

Overhead, angry-looking clouds rumbled with thunder, dark purple with the coming night and heavy with rain. I hoped the weather held up until I found the cabin, unearthed a bottle of wine from my back seat, and settled down in one of the rocking chairs on the front porch with a romance book in my hands.

The promise of a week of wine and happily ever afters had kept me sane all year, through boring English 101 classes with half-asleep students and AI-generated papers on Chaucer and colleagues who swore that *War and Peace* was a riveting read. The English department was rife with people who would love to talk to you for hours about *Beowulf* or modern literary theory or the intersectionality of postmodern texts. But for one week out of the year, I looked forward to shucking off my professorial robes and disappearing into the twisting roads that hugged the soft hills of the Catskills, and reading about impossible meet-cutes and grand romantic gestures, and no one would judge me for it.

And when everyone else pulled out because life got in the way, it was just going to be my best friend, Pru, and me—and that was perfect, too. I *needed* this. Pru didn't understand how much. No one did. So when she told me last week that she couldn't go, either, it surprised me. No, that was the wrong word—it *disappointed* me—but I didn't want it to show. I sat on the couch opposite her, *The Great British Baking Show* in the background, digging my fingers into the comforter I'd pulled over my legs because she always kept her and Jasper's apartment freezing.

"I'm sorry," she'd said, twisting the rings on her fingers nervously. Her dirty blond hair was done up in a sloppy ponytail, and she was already in her pajamas and fuzzy slippers. She was petite and perpetually sunburnt in the summers, with wide brown eyes and a scar on her chin where my teeth went into her face when we were twelve and trying to do backflips on a trampoline. Through the crack in her open bedroom door, I could see her suitcase half-packed already with warm sweaters and cute knit hats. Definitely not summer apparel. "Jasper surprised me with a trip to Iceland, and this is the only time we can go because of, you know, his job," she gushed quickly, like saying it faster would make it hurt less—ripping a proverbial Band-Aid off a very hairy leg. "I know it's not ideal but he *just* told me. We *just* found out. And...we can all go to the cabin again next year?" The question dipped up, hopeful.

No, I wanted to tell her, but I couldn't quite muster up the word. No, we *can't*. I *needed* this. I still *need* this.

But if I said that, then what would happen? Nothing good. She would still go off to Iceland, and I'd be stuck exactly where I was. Besides, we both knew what Iceland meant: a proposal. *Finally*.

It was something she'd been waiting for for years.

So, what did it matter if she couldn't come to the cabin this year? It was nothing, really, in the face of what she had to look forward to. So I put on a smile and said, "Obviously. Next year we'll be back to normal."

"Absolutely," she promised, and she didn't suspect a thing. "Oh, and maybe this year we can all get on a video call together instead?"

"C'mon, Pru. You know if Jasper's taking you to Iceland, you won't have time to video call with anyone." Then I held up my hand and wiggled my bare wedding ring finger. "You know what he's gonna do."

My best friend squirmed anxiously. "He might not, and I know how much this trip means to you..."

"Go, have fun, don't think twice about it," I urged, draining my glass of wine as I stood to leave, because I didn't want her to see how upset I really was. Jasper was a pretty low-level attorney at his law firm, so he only had certain days off once in a blue moon, and this was a last-minute trip that he'd managed to snatch up for them. I would be a monster to be mad at that.

Prudence might've been able to sacrifice this trip, but I certainly couldn't. I was desperate for it—I needed to get drunk on cheap wine and cry over happily ever afters, even if I'd be the only one in the cabin this year.

So, in the summer of my thirty-second year, with no money and no prospects and one too many AI-generated papers waiting for me to grade for my college English 101 class, I set off on a sixteen-hour road trip alone.

I *needed* to get lost in a book.

More than I needed anything else.

Besides, it was the ten-year anniversary of the publication of *Daffodil Daydreams* by Rachel Flowers, and that was something that I wanted to celebrate. The author had passed away a few years ago, and her books had brought the book club together.

And, I think, deep down I just wanted to get away—no matter what.

On the sixteen-hour drive, I listened to *Daffodil Daydreams*. The audiobook narrator was in the middle of my favorite scene. I fished out a stale fry from the fast-food bag in the seat beside me and turned up the volume.

“Junie crossed the rickety bridge to the waterfall, searching the plush greenery for any sign of Will, but she felt her heart beginning to break a little with each beat. He wasn’t here.”

“Just wait,” I told her. “Love is neither late nor early, you know.” Then I frowned at my half-eaten fry, and dropped it back in the bag. I was so sick of fast food and gas station bathrooms. Almost twenty-four hours of it could do that to a person.

My puke-green hatchback, lovingly nicknamed Sweetpea, had started making this sort of high-pitched whining noise somewhere back in DC, but I’d elected to ignore it. After all, Sweetpea was a 1979 Ford Pinto, the kind that had a penchant for exploding gas tanks. So I was just betting that it’d want to go out in style rather than by a faulty gasket or an oil leak.

I probably should have turned around, because I couldn’t imagine anything worse than being stranded in a no-name town, but I was a part-time English professor who filed her own taxes and knew how to change her own tires, goddamn it.

Nothing would stop me. Well. *Almost* nothing.

A fat rain droplet splatted on my windshield. Then another as, in the audiobook, Junie worked up the courage to leave the waterfall, succumbing to the awful nightmare she’d been afraid of all along—that Will didn’t love her. Not in the way she did him.

I knew these words like Holy Scriptures. I could recite them, I’d read them so many times.

In just a few paragraphs, Will would come running up the trail to the waterfall, out of breath and exhausted. He’d pull her into his arms and propose that they fix up the Daffodil Inn together—make it their home. Their happy ending.

I knew what she’d say, but my heart fluttered anxiously anyway.

I knew her voice would be soft, and it would be sure as she took him by the hands, and squeezed them tightly, under the glittering spray of the waterfall. And there would be magic there, in that moment. The heart-squeezing, tongue-tying, breathless, edge-of-your-seat magic of Quixotic Falls. Of true love.

What did it feel like to love someone so much you ached?

I thought I'd known once.

If life were like a storybook, I would be a premier scholar on the material. Most of the year, I taught English classes at my local university. I waxed poetic about history's greatest romantics. I taught at length about Mary Shelley's devotion to her husband, and Lord Byron's...promiscuity. I handed out the letters Keats wrote, and challenged students to see the world through rose-tinted glasses.

I graded papers on *The Vampyre* and Lord Byron, and I taught that Mary Shelley kept Percy's calcified heart in her desk drawer because that was the closest thing to romance as real life could get.

I didn't *need* love. I didn't need to fall into it. I didn't need to find it at all. Not again. Never again.

Because love stories were enough. They were safe. They would never fail me.

The rain came down harder, and my hands grew clammy with nerves. I hated driving in the rain. Pru always drove whenever we went anywhere. I rubbed my hands on my jean shorts, muttering to myself that I should've planned out another day and booked a hotel for the night. Maybe I still could, because I didn't know where the hell I was.

Shit.

I gave up on trying to fix Google Maps and returned my eyes to the road.

Somehow, the rainstorm seemed to get *comically* worse, until I found myself driving through a complete washout. I think I passed a town sign, but I couldn't make out what it read. The rain on the roof of my car was so loud, I couldn't hear the audiobook anymore.

“Will pressed...kiss...whispered...‘It sounds...lo...dream...forever?’ ”

“Damn, that’s my favorite part,” I muttered, turning up the volume, but it was already as loud as it could go.

Then—the road seemed to veer off ahead. Thank god, maybe I could find some civilization and wait out the storm.

Putting my blinker on, I turned off onto the exit. There was an old barnlike covered bridge ahead, crossing a small river that overflowed and frothed with white water. I slowed down to putter over it. I was sure in the sunlight this drive was gorgeous, but right now I felt like I could go hydroplaning off into the wilderness at any moment and never return. The road beyond the bridge turned around a steep embankment of pines and wound down between more tall firs, plush and verdant with summer. I thought I’d made a mistake, because the road didn’t seem to end, until through the haze of gray rain a tall clock tower appeared, and with it came the soft lines of buildings and light posts and cars—a small town.

Night was coming fast. I tapped my phone one last time to see if I could refresh the map—there *had* to be cell service in the town, right?—but I must’ve tapped it too hard, because my phone came dislodged from its magnet holder and fell down onto the floorboards, ripping out the cassette converter with it.

Almost immediately, Junie’s quiet musings about walled gardens and true love turned into a blaring pop song, so loud it startled me straight in my seat.

“*Come on, Eileen,*” the eighties song sang.

A blur of something caught in the headlights. I saw it out of the corner of my eye a moment before I looked up to the road again—

A man. There was a man standing in the—

“*Shit!*” I cut the steering wheel to the left. Sweetpea’s tires squealed. My car swerved into a parking spot, tires slamming against the curb. My car gave a *clunk* (a disastrous *clunk*, actually), and came to an abrupt and final stop. The pop song died with it.



Meet-Cute

MY HEART HAMMERED IN MY CHEST. OH MY GOD—OH MY GOD, DID I HIT him? Did I kill him? Oh god, I still had student loans to pay off. I couldn't go to jail yet.

Clawing my seat belt off, I gulped in a breath and took in my surroundings. There wasn't blood on the windshield, so I hadn't hit him, right? Where was he? I'd come to a stop in front of a bar. The red lights on the sign flickered as the rain came down harder.

I shoved open my door and forced myself to my feet. "Hello?" I called, whirling back toward the road, the rain drenching me almost instantly. I pulled my fingers through my matted copper hair. "Hello?"

The man was sitting on the ground, his oval glasses lopsided and foggy. He slowly turned to face me, dazed.

Oh no.

Oh no no no n—

"Oh, sir—sir, are you okay?" I asked, hurrying over to help him to his feet.

He was tall and wiry, soaked to the bone, his white button-down clinging to his muscular torso, looking like the brooding, blond-haired pale ghost of Darcy, his angles all sharp and solid. An electrified zing tingled down my spine. In the pinkish-gray light of evening rain, he was very handsome...and very much glowering at me like I'd just tried to murder him.

Which, to be fair, I *hadn't*. On purpose.

“Are you okay? How many fingers do you see?” I held up four fingers, but really three because I angled down my fourth one—

He grabbed my hand and lowered it. “Three, trick question—you almost ran me over,” he accused, his words clipped. The warm streetlights made his eyes glitter like peridots.

I yanked my hand away. “Well, why were you in the middle of the road?”

His mouth twisted into a scowl. “I was crossing it.”

“No, you were just standing there.”

“You almost *hit* me.”

“You were standing in the middle of the road!”

He bent down to grab his keys from the asphalt. “Not anymore.” Then he turned and stalked across the street.

I watched him go, dumbfounded. “What the hell?” I muttered, pushing my wet bangs out of my face, and looking around.

Now *I* was the one standing in the middle of the road.

At least I’d parked in front of a bar. Most of the neon letters were out, save for two Os in the middle that, every time it thundered, flickered so it looked like they were screaming OOOOOOOOOOOO in angry red lights. Not ominous at all. If nothing else, I could get dinner there and directions to the nearest hotel. My heart was hammering too fast to drive, anyway. So I dug my wallet and cell phone out of my car and gave the steering wheel one last loving pat before I left for the bar.

I sent a text to the book club—**MADE IT TO A TOWN.**

Who knew *which* town. Then, for good measure, I put a smiley face at the end, which was far more optimistic than I was feeling. A moment later, my phone pinged with a notification—the text had failed to send.

Perfect.

“Well,” I said to myself, “this is certainly how all horror movies start.”

Alone. In a rainstorm. In a no-name town in the middle of the woods. Without cell phone reception. If Freddy Krueger or the *Saw* guy came out from behind a building, I’d pull Sweetpea back onto the road and drive until I hit Nova Scotia.

This was going to be worth it—I kept telling myself that. The alternative was...that this was all for nothing, and I'd wasted gas, sanity, and my time on this ill-begotten adventure. Like Bilbo Baggins as he left the Shire, I was beginning to wonder if I'd made a *horrific* mistake.

A bolt of lightning crossed the sky, quickly followed by a clap of thunder, and I was running for the bar.

The door closed behind me with a slam, and all seven patrons at the bar turned to look at me. I dripped rainwater onto the scuffed hardwood floors. Well, this was certainly awkward. I quietly took a seat on the barstool closest to the door, and as I did the patrons went back to their drinks.

This night *really* couldn't get any worse.

At least I wasn't in the rain anymore.

“What can I get for you?” the bartender asked, sliding over a dry towel. I took it gratefully, and began to squeeze out the droplets in my hair. The bartender was an older woman with dark brown skin, gray-streaked short hair, and bright orange nails, wearing frayed jeans and a T-shirt with a flaming rooster logo. She had a kind of openness about her that told me she often played therapist to most of her patrons. It was a good thing I was just passing through, I doubt she had time for all my baggage. “Beer? Wine? A fruity little drink with an umbrella? We just got pink ones with flowers on them.”

“Um—whatever your house red is, is fine, and do you have a food menu?” I asked hopefully, and she produced a beat-up menu. The plastic was peeling at the corners, and there was a strange stain near the wine section.

“Sure thing. Take a look at the menu, and I'll go fetch your drink,” she replied, taking a glass from the rack, and left.

The barstool was leather, and my wet thighs stuck to it as I tried to get comfortable. The bar was chilly, and I shivered as I checked out the menu. Or *tried* to. The words were blurry, so I rubbed my eyes, but it didn't seem to fix them at all. The place probably had the normal bar food, anyway. I'd eaten at enough of them in my lifetime to know that there was at *least* a burger on the menu, some cheesy fries, and a chicken tender option.