



# Fool's End

A Lesson in Forever Book 1

ASHLEIGH WOODWARD

Preview

*Part i : I'm A Survivor*

Preview

## Prologue

Summer, 2000 I stand frozen in terror as the medics surround her lifeless body, blocking her from view.

It was supposed to be a good day.

We were just having a fun time at the pool with all our friends, for the last time before summer break ends.

She never liked being in the water. She preferred watching everyone else swim, while she enjoyed the safety of sitting on the sides. When she felt a little adventurous, she would sit on the shallow steps, but she would never go further than that. There was no amount of convincing that could get her all the way in. And then she was there. In the deep end. I

will never forget her screaming. I have never seen someone look so scared before.

I wanted to jump into the water to rescue her, but I couldn't move. I just stood there, with water dripping from my hair down my face, disguising my tears. It felt like time slowed down. I couldn't think fast enough, move fast enough, or even yell for someone else to help her.

She shouldn't have been in the pool.

She can't be dead.

We're just kids. We still have to grow up.

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If she wakes up, I will do everything I can to protect her. I promise.  
Forever.

# 1: The Morning After

December 2024 I wake up floating in the barely heated pool, with my body lapping on the edge—like the trash I was left as. No panic fills me at the weightlessness the water brings. Gratitude is all I know in this moment. I clutch the wall's edge, raising myself upright. I'm surrounded by green party cups, confetti, honeybun wrappers, someone's lost box braid, and who knows what else. Twisting around, I place both hands on the edge, pulling myself up on weak arms. The moment my stomach presses against the concrete edge, I vomit. The sudden movement was either too much, or my body was simply waiting for me to be conscious of it, as I expel nothing but neon green fluid and stomach acid.

Once I finish heaving, I roll onto my back, laying on the ice-cold pavement to catch my breath. It's still pretty dark, so it can't have been long since the partygoers dispersed. I close my eyes, taking a deep inhale through my nose. The cold air smells fresh. Like welcoming me back to this life with a clean slate—A fresh start. I release a slow, controlled

exhale, opening my eyes to focus on calming my hammering heart. Other than the zinging sound of the broken bulb in a nearby light post, the only sounds are my slow exhales—in an audible hiss, and the soft ripples of water lightly splashing against the edges of the pool. Though these breaths are a little painful, a smile crosses my face. I am so grateful for this new day. Especially knowing I wasn't meant to see it. I roll back onto my stomach, pausing to make sure I'm not

about to hurl again. The ground seems to move a little beneath me, so I take a moment to convince myself that it's solid. Once I'm confident my insides are staying put, I pull up on all fours. The winter temperature has made my

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body so stiff, that getting up is taking more effort than I'd like. After another deep breath, I finally push myself to stand. Once I'm upright, I have to steady myself and will away the dizziness.

A dramatic yelp escapes me as the wind blows violently cold, reminding me that it is indeed December. I look down to the unwelcome sight of my black halter mini dress, twisted, with one of my boobs plopped out to the side. I struggle a bit, shifting the drenched fabric back into place, then hug myself around my middle, rubbing my palms over my bare arms. Wearing this dress in the winter was already not the smartest choice, but as I stand here—wet and shivering—I think about never wearing a dress again.

I look down at my bare feet, and notice my left big toe is chipped in a gnarly u-shape. Reaching down to inspect the broken nail, I see that my nail bed is bruised, and there's definitely a cut that bled from the break.

"I really hope this doesn't get infected. Good thing my feet are cute," I sigh through my frown. "Who took off my boots?" I ask, as if the air could answer.

I begin to take in my surroundings. My memories are a clouded mist in my mind, struggling to come into focus. I look to the tree line, where I know I left my bag and coat. The extra chairs that were brought out for yesterday's party, remain lined a few feet before the fence to Nowhere, along the largest protruding root of the Initial tree. I remember putting my things in the awkwardly leaning chair closest to the trunk. I walk over, trying to ignore the pains in my body. When I realize the chair is empty, my breath catches. This is annoyingly inconvenient.

I turn my focus to the Initial tree, with its many markings. Like a fool in love, I somehow joined this ridiculous tradition. I was clearly out of my right mind. I crouch down, tracing our initials with my pruned fingers, and my mind replays the moment.

RHJ + LG

"Now, we'll be immortalized here forever. Like something in the movies."

His voice has the slightest rasp to it, and it tickles my ear in the sweetest way. He folds his pocketknife back into its cover, smiling at me, with all his teeth showing. Those dimples are like black holes against his milk chocolate skin, and one front tooth is ever so slightly overlapped onto the other. It's the cutest tiny thing. He looks so happy, I can't help but to smile back.

"Movies end, Reelin. Nothing is forever." I use the lopsided chair that holds my things as leverage to stand to my full height. Reelin stands too.

"You really gotta learn to live in the moment, La." He reaches over, cupping my chin, angling my face to look into my eyes. "You always looking for the end of everything. I always tell you, you could be missing the whole point of the story."

"And I always tell you, that knowing how a story ends keeps me from being irritated about the inevitable plot twists in the middle. You know I hate not knowing if something's all for nothing."

"Well, I still enjoy the twists. Especially the ones where the real bad guy—the one who's been getting away with everything that no one really thinks about—finally learns their lesson." The look in his eyes is so serious, like he's looking through my physical body, to who I am without it.

I look over at the pool just in time to see Maliah Harris bellyflop off the diving board. The sharp smack of the water sends droplets flying everywhere, and a roar of laughter erupts across the pool. I turn back to Reelin, and he has not looked away from me, or changed his expression. The heat of his gaze sends a shiver down my spine, as he pushes my hair behind my shoulder.

"Well, yes. Lessons are always an important part of life, because they promote growth."

He shrugs, placing his hands around my waist, pulling me closer to his warmth. "Or the bad guy is just a bad guy. And the lesson, was that being bad means suffering the consequences, and there's nothing they can do to make it better."

"Okay, but I don't believe no one is irredeemable. In the end, everyone deserves a chance to be the best version of themselves. No one's all bad, always. I can't believe anyone would wanna be, either."

"I love that you want to see the good in everyone, La. Don't ever change that."

"I couldn't if I tried," I give him a soft smile.

He kisses my forehead, and his lips linger at my temple. "I'm so glad you decided to come. I really needed you here."

"It was a split-second decision. The Reliving is gonna be a cool experience though. When it's over, I think there'll be positive shifts in everyone who participated."

He pulls away, giving me a soft smile, with a slight shake of his head. "There you go, thinking about the end. Focus on right now." He lifts his hand back up to my chin, pulling me in to kiss me, as if my lips are his reason, his redemption, and his salvation.

I reach up, touching my lips, remembering the heat from his.

"That boy, that boy, that boy..." I chuckle to myself.

Turning around, I can now take in the entire scene of the crime against my life. You'd think a green, black and gold bomb went off out here. It's the perfect representation of good ol' C.S. Williams High, and our Python pride.

There are floating balloons tied to chairs and scattered all around.

Streamers are still hanging in disarray, and the "Forever Young" banner is half-hanging over the makeshift karaoke stage. The oversized pool almost looks like a solid sheet of neon green, courtesy of Kieran Michaels and some pool dye. The honey bun vending machine Jessy Rodriguez provided, is busted open on its side. The grill and food tables near the far end of the pool are littered in trashed aluminum pans, and half eaten plates and cups. There's an overturned pan of baked beans in the grass beside the last table. I shake my head. "Wow, the cleanup crew has their

work cut out for them."

The gate blocking off what we call the woods to Nowhere, has liquor bottles tied to it with the pool rope. There's silly string stuck to things,



Ashleigh Woodward

weed paraphernalia left around, and literally everything you'd assume would be at a party filled with fully grown adults—living as teenagers again, is somewhere around here. I'm not sure if my eyes are deceiving me, but the air might actually be a giant glitter puff.

The sky is beginning to lighten up, casting a deep purple glow. I really need to get home. Another gust of wind attacks me, and I groan dramatically, turning in place once again, hoping to spot my missing belongings.

“Seriously, where the hell are my things?” I mutter, walking toward the old gym building.

The pool is so large, it runs along the length of the old gym. As I walk around it, my gaze moves from the ground—watching my steps over abandoned glow sticks, beer cans, and whatever else—then back up to the building. The wall is covered in green, black and gold spray-painted names and sayings, commemorating the night. My nickname “La,” short for Lailani, is close to the left end of the wall—sprayed in green with a gold heart around it. Just below, is Reelin’s nickname, “Rizz,” in black. His name wasn’t here when I put mine. I see what he did there, and I can’t help but to smirk at the thought.

Carefully stepping around a broken glass, I pause on the final edge of the pool, deciding to look into its surface. “Oh! A damn waterlogged birds’ nest.”

The blurred mess staring back at me, is almost a surprise. The platinum blonde wig I know was laid for the Gods last night, is now a matted mess. I know after floating in the pool for whoever knows how long, my lace is lifted too.

The wind picks up again, and I suppress a scream. I’m half-naked in this wet dress, barefoot, with none of my belongings in sight. I stand upright again, walking quicker towards the building. I wish I could run, but my body would never allow it.

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I hurry into one of the unlocked outer doors. Janitor Mike was aware of our party, and was kind enough to unlock them before he left for winter break. It feels like heaven in here. Thanks to Kyler Gaines's tinkering, the heaters in each wall between the inner doors are blasting. These heaters were perfect for the party last night, as a place to come to for a short respite from the frigid air. I lean against one, sighing in thanks. The heat is almost orgasmic as it melts into my furiously stiff, freezing body.

I give myself a moment to focus. I can't quite remember everything that happened. In this moment, I know exactly three things for certain:

One: My life ended last night.

Two: I'm clearly alive to understand why.

And three: I really need a shower.