



End's

Beginning

A Lesson in Forever Book 2



ASHLEIGH WOODWARD

27 : Foolish Decisions

Reelin

"You heard me," Lailani's eyes widen, "go, Reelin. And this time, don't question whether or not I want you to fight for me, because I don't. This is already becoming exhausting, and I've got enough going on."

"Lailani..." I step closer, but she pulls back.

"No. If you can't get over yourself, and accept that I don't care [REDACTED], I have nothing to say to you," her face turns to disgust, while she looks straight into my eyes, "Go. Please."

I watch her eyes shift from nervous confusion to hopeful, and it swaths me in a feeling I can't begin to describe. I stare back at her, as she tries to convince herself that she wants to do what she thinks *I think* is best, and my love for her once again grows past what I knew it could be. I could never walk away from her. She's got to know that.

I have to just let her feel how she feels, and unpack my own failure to protect her, some other time.

"Your eyes tell on you, every time," I half smile.

"Don't even," she pouts.

"Do you really think I can just walk out of here?"

"If that's what you want, absolutely."

"How can you believe that?"

"Because you're fully capable. You have two working legs, Reelin. So, do whatever you feel is necessary."

"*Whatever?*"

She shifts her weight, crossing her arms, "I'm genuinely disinterested in whatever game you're playing."

I take her hand, "seeing this ring on your finger, gives me hope."

"It shouldn't," she shrugs, "I still think it's pretty, and with all the crazy, I hadn't thought to give it back, but you can take it with you," she pulls her hand back, and twists the band.

"Don't you dare."

"Do you want it, or no?" she raises her eyebrows.

"Do you?"

"I like nice things, so duh," she scrunches her nose, nodding once.

"Is it *just* a nice thing? Or does it still hold meaning?"

"If you're asking do I think we're gonna ride off into the sunset, just because I got this thing back, the answer is no. I wouldn't assume something so silly, and I wouldn't say I do, just to convince you to stay here, when you want to leave."

"I never want to leave."

"You are infuriatingly confusing."

"I never want to be away from you, again."

"Then why are you trying to convince me [REDACTED]?"

"Because I'm an idiot."

She rolls her lips between her teeth, with a nod.

I hold her face in my hands, "do you mind if I stay?"

She stares at me, silently, and I take it as a challenge, pressing a kiss to her lips, "do you want me to stay?"

When she doesn't respond, I smile, "I'd like to stay... I'm staying."

"Good," Lailani shifts her weight, like she's relieved.

"I'll try to get over myself."

I gently kiss her lips again, and she pulls away, with a shrug, "it's not the easiest thing to do."

"What?"

"Getting over you."

"You left me, not the other way around, baby."

"That didn't make it any easier," she frowns, "I think it made it worse, actually."

"No way," I smirk.

"No, seriously. I was a disaster, but no sense in dwelling. Let's go to bed," she hurries out the room, but I catch her before she gets to the stairs, swooping her off her feet, and into my arms. She laughs, "it's really not worth talking about."

I playfully bite her cheek, then carry her upstairs, "don't do that. I was losing my mind, without you. It would be nice to know you missed me."

"I cried. It was pathetic. The end."

I close her door, then set her on her bed, "give me something."

Lailani sighs, running her fingers through her hair, "um... I wrote like, sixty songs about being a heartbroken loser, and begging you to take me back."

“No way in hell.”

“Way,” she shrugs, “I even self-recorded a few, on the harder days, and almost released a little bootleg mixtape, but I decided to keep my devastation private. I also knew my daddy would be disappointed in me releasing low quality music into the world, but there was no way I was ever gonna sing those songs again.”

“So, you felt bad for leaving me, but still never came back?”

“Never is *crazy*, when you’re in my bedroom.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I wasn’t even sure what I wanted, Reelin. You have no idea what I was going through.”

“Because you shut me out.”

“You wouldn’t understand,” she looks at her hands, twisting the ring on her finger.

“Help me. Tell me what happened. I told you what that did to me. Your turn.”

She lays back, looking up at the ceiling, then puffs a breath through her nose, “okay. But get comfortable, because this could take a while,” I walk around her bed, and just as I’m about to sit in her reading chair, she clears her throat, “you’re not gonna snuggle me? I’m a fragile girl, about to share my most embarrassingly intimate moments with you. Where’s the comfort?”

I smile, “I’ll hold you nice and tight, baby girl.”

“Oh, you’re still so cheesy,” she pats her thigh, “take these leggings off of me,” I raise an eyebrow, and she laughs, “stop it. they’re fleece, and I hate the way they get caught in my sheets. That’s all.”

I shrug, reaching for her waistband, then pause, “if this is your way of tricking me, I won’t fall for it.”

“I’m fragile, and exhausted. I don’t have the energy to take off my own leggings *and* tell you a story.”

“Lailani...”

She closes her eyes, pretending to fall asleep.

I laugh, removing her leggings from her body, and toss them to the chair, “there.”

She smirks, “okay, now your shirt.”

“No.”

“I’m kidding. Come, come,” she pats her bed, climbing under the covers, and I remove my socks, getting in with her.

She snuggles up to me, “if you so much as *breathe* in judgment, story time is over.”

“Whatever you say, my love.”

She sighs, “that day, I literally freaked out the second I got inside.”

May 20, 2012

Lailani

I walk into my house, and I don't know if I'm even breathing.

"Dinner's almost ready," my daddy says, but then he looks at me, alarmed, "hey, what's wrong?"

I shake my head, walking toward the stairs, "I need you to make sure he leaves. Please."

When I get to my room, I begin to hyperventilate. The world is spinning, my mouth is watering like I might vomit, and my entire body is pin pricking. I rush into my bathroom to throw up, then climb into my bed, without caring to brush my teeth, remove my dress, or shower. The outside germs don't even matter.

I just blew up my entire life, and I know I can't undo it.

I almost call Reelin, to correct my statement, and to explain my panic, but as I lie here, with my head buried under my pillow, I know I can't. There's no way he'd accept me saying what I said, and making him believe I've found someone else. There's no way I can explain that I've literally been suffocating in my own indecision about the future, and that his efforts are freaking me out.

He wants to live in my old dreams, but I don't even live there anymore.

He's been struggling so much, since his surgery failure, but he's still trying to make sure I get everything I wished for.

Every day, for months, I had to bring him back from the brink, reminding him of his own goals. Then, he woke up one day, and started pouring more into me.

Every day, he paints on a brave face, ignoring his loss, and putting me first.

Every day, he shows me how important I am, and how much he wants me to be happy.

How do I tell him I appreciate the way he loves me, but I don't want him to love me that much? I don't want him to love me harder, as his coping mechanism.

He already loved me more than enough.

If he continues on like this, I can't imagine the pain that would come out of his resentment later on.

I knew the end would come, so maybe me bringing it on sooner, was necessary.

It has to be.

This really is for the best.

...but why doesn't it feel like it?

June 8, 2012

"You sure you don't want Rizx to come?" my sister asks, after my dad finishes loading up our things, "whatever y'all fought about, it's gotta be over, by now."

"We aren't in a fight, Lonayla. We broke up."

"Yeah, that's not registering to anyone, but you. What actually happened?"

"Our story ended. It was inevitable. Leave it alone."

I put in my earbuds, and lean my head against the seat, trying to pretend I'm not completely devastated. For the last three weeks, I've been unable to decide if I really believe this is for the best. My mom came to my room that next morning, and when she noticed my appearance, I blinked, and Dr. Howard was there. I told her the same thing I keep telling my family: sadness is normal after a breakup. I'm fine.

I'm really not okay, though.

"Need to stop anywhere?" my dad asks, and I know he's thinking the same thing as Mom and Lo.

"Not until the first rest stop," I shrug, and turn up the volume on my iPod.

My mom said she wanted to road trip for my move, so we could spend a little quality family time. So, my dad rented a nice RV, and suggested we stop at Disney World, but I don't feel up to being happy. So, I told them I needed to get to my apartment, and straight to work. They'll spend the first night there, then my parents will fly back home, leaving Lo with me, for the summer.

I slept most of the drive. Lo would wake me when we were stopped, but I'd pull my hood back over my head, and go back to sleep.

When we pull up to my apartment, I'm overwhelmed with emotion. This is technically my first time living away from home, if you don't count the fact that I basically lived with Reelin. I never technically moved in with him, but his place was where I slept almost every day.

Tears flood my eyes, and I try to hold them back, but they come anyway.

"La?" Mom smooths my hair away from my face, "whatever you need, we'll make it happen."

I nod, but I know that's not true.

I feel like I need Reelin, but I also need to accept the way things have to be, and move on. It's time for me to grow up, and not depend on the love of a man I knew I'd eventually have to say goodbye to.

...but I didn't say goodbye.

I was a coward in the way I forced our separation, and the fear of being wrong about this entire thing, ripples through me, carrying a note of sadness that's freezing my spirit.

Was this premature end a mistake? Or can it be a blessing? If it hurts this bad to be apart now, it would have only gotten worse as time pressed on.

I have to believe that, or I'll break.

The furniture for my place arrived just before we did. My landlord, Jorge, was kind enough to be available for the delivery, and when we pulled up, he was waiting outside. Weeks ago, my dad made sure to impress upon him the importance of my safety, and what happens if he does anything out of line. So, he was on his best behavior upon our arrival. When my parents went inside, Jorge's look—as handed me my keys, with his tongue between his teeth—told me he'd soon get on my nerves.

"It's gonna be such a cute summer!" Lo exclaims, "I can't wait for the guys to visit!"

"There will be no guys in my house, Lonayla," I step out of the shower, and stare at my reflection. I don't even look like myself, anymore. I don't think I know who I am, without Reelin.

"Lailani, be serious," Lo aggressively turns me to her.

When her eyes meet mine, the dam breaks, and I fall to my knees, hysterically in tears.

"La, what is happening?" my sister embraces me, "you have to tell me what happened!"

My mom walks into my bathroom, and pulls me up, into her arms, "Lonayla, get that boy out here."

"NO!" I yank myself free, "it's not that," I lie, "I'm just really tired, and... and hungry... and just sad about being away from home."

"Is that really all this is?" my mom cups my cheek, "because we can stay a while, or you can come back home. You never have to do anything you don't want to do. You know that."

I nod, and Lonayla's pitying face turns away, as she pulls out her phone, "Lonayla, calling him will not help me."

"What happened? Why are you both so disgustingly sad?"

"We. Broke. Up."

"But, WHY?" Lo groans, "was he mad about your plan to move, since he's still gonna be in school? Because I don't know if either of you forgot this, but a flight has never been an issue. Especially for you two."

"Our story ran its course. I really want you to let it be. I don't want to think about what could have been—I just want to enjoy tonight, as a family."

My mom kisses my cheek, giving me a comforting squeeze, "your father should be back with the food, any minute. We'll watch a movie, or something."

We watched Set it Off, and I cried from start to finish. I told them I was just thinking about the end, in advance, but I know no one bought that. I can't let them know I broke my own heart, though. If they know, they'll only tell Reelin, and I don't think I can face him.

I don't think he'd want to see me, anyway.



"Lailani, wake up," My mom's voice follows the gentle touch of her fingers, brushing my cheek. I open my eyes, seeing her fully dressed, like she's been out. "your father made breakfast. Let's eat, and then we have to head to the airport."

"What time is it?" I ask, wiping my eyes.

"Almost 11. You were sleep like the dead," Lo smirks, "if I didn't know any better, I'd think you were pregnant."

I frown, "that's rude."

"We're out on the patio, come while the food's hot," Mom sighs.

Lo sits by my feet, watching me, "that's not it, right? You aren't, or weren't..."

"No, Lonayla. We definitely took better care, with that," I climb out of bed, "I'll be out in a minute. I have to use the bathroom."

We have a nice breakfast, my parents leave, and Lonayla convinces me to go to the beach. I lay in the sand, with my oversized sunglasses shielding my tears, for hours. When we got home, I stood in the shower, and cried until I couldn't anymore. When I got into my bed that night, a new level of depression enveloped me, tucking me in tighter than it had, in the previous weeks.

I was mechanical for the days that followed.

Lo and I would go to my shop, and meet with vendors, who were all excited to be part of "Little Laila's Shop," and while referring to me as just my mom's daughter—and not my own person—would normally have set me off, I couldn't bring myself to care.

This very numb existence continued for weeks.

By the second week of July, Lonayla accepted that Reelin and my breakup was just a normal thing, and stopped asking about it. She told me she didn't like this new, working version of me, though. She thought my new sullen disposition was because of my stress, from trying to take on such a huge project, in such a short amount of time. In my defense, during the day, I really was too busy to only think about Reelin. It was quite possibly a mix of the two. So, she wasn't wrong.

When inconvenient things happened, my reactions were so far removed from my norm, and Lo would both commend and criticize me, because I was being both mature, and completely stupid. To be honest, I felt exceedingly stupid, but it had nothing to do with anything happening around me, and everything to do with my decision to block Reelin out of my life.

He would have been here, helping me, and making sure I was okay.

He would have made everything so much easier.

He would make the days feel fuller, longer, and happier.

That's no longer an option, though. I have to let that part of my life go.

Lonayla left, the first week of August, because she had to get back to school, and without her around, I was able to schedule in time to fully wallow in my sadness. I literally put in little pockets of time to cry, because it made me feel lighter than holding it in.

It got so bad, I stopped caring about anything.

Things that would have stressed me to my core kept happening, and I felt nothing. My sign for "Grander Things" came in with no 'N' in Grander, and if my mom weren't in town, the day it arrived, I'd have let them put it up. I started to think that maybe God was telling me to quit this, go back to Atlanta, and beg Reelin to take me back, because life without him wasn't for me.

It's now the night before my shop's grand opening, and I don't know if I'm prepared to do this. I keep feeling like this whole thing, might have been a mistake. It was all an excuse to run away from being a disappointment, and the pain of heartbreak.

...but my heart broke anyway. So, what's the point?

"Lailani?" my dad grabs my attention.

I look around the table, seeing some of my favorite people, here to celebrate the launch of my business, and I try my best to be in the moment. It's my parents; my sister; Kieran; Granny-Gran; Jaimie, and her husband, Kyle; Kayla; my Uncle Lovell and Aunt Ava; Sir Rumi, and of course Celestine. I look at their happy faces, and feel the gaping hole in my heart spreading further, because the one person I need more than anything, isn't here.

"Would you like to say anything?" Jaimie asks.

"Um," I look at my glass, trying to find words that don't sound pathetic, "thank you all for supporting me in this new journey. I think I've been a little terrified about all of this, and I'm grateful that you're all here, in case I fall flat on my face tomorrow, and want to quit," I look at Kieran, and feel him trying to lend me comfort, through his eyes, "and I really appreciate the way all of you have been feeding my mind with only the good things, because you know there's more to life, than the unexpected ones."

Kieran winks, and it gives me a second of warmth, before my heart ices back over. He and Lo came in a few days ago, and at first, he was a jerk, but then he was his typical, delightful self. Lonayla did a lot of running around, handling the last-minute things with decorations and aesthetics, while Kieran stayed with me, most of the time. He didn't ask any questions about Reelin, or pressure me to talk about anything at all. He simply let me exist in my little bubble of guilt, filling me with much needed words of affirmation, while making sure I gave myself whatever space and time I needed. He was also pretty helpful at assisting my staff with the finishing details for the opening.

"Okay, we should probably call it a night! Miss Grander is on to Grander Things, and she probably wants to soak up the moment" Sir Rumi suggests.

I say my goodnights to everyone, and Kieran drives me and Lo home.

When we get to my house, a very champagne-toasted Lonayla, goes straight to sleep. I'm wide awake, and Kieran seems to be, too. He follows me onto my patio, overlooking the ocean.

"This really is a nice ass spot you got, Nani," he lifts my legs, sitting under them, on the wicker loveseat, "it still trips me out that the ocean is your happy place, but you're the water's ultimate hater."

"You think he'd like it here?" I ask, not even wanting to hide the sadness I feel.

"He'd love it anywhere with you. You know that," he playfully smacks my knee, "you know he should be here."

The tears start to fall, "I know, but Kieran, we can't just pretend everything is okay. We can't pretend the last year of our relationship wasn't a mess. It was so hard to keep him together... And then, I just... We tried, we really did. We tried fighting against the things that weren't going well, and it just... didn't work."

Kieran's thumb smooths away my tears, "he thinks you've been out here with some man, and that Lo and I only say you aren't, to protect his feelings. Why's he think that?"

"I told him I found a love that wasn't him."

"And that love is what? A beachfront patio?"

"Maybe," I shrug, "do you want to go down to the water?"

"No, and neither do you," he grabs hold of my legs, pulling them to his chest, "I ain't letting you make dumb decisions, and Rizq ain't finna murder me, if he finds out you were in that water."

I laugh, "oh, I don't want to get in. I just want to let the water wash over my toes."

Kieran huffs a small laugh, "how often do you do that?"

"I don't know. Every so often, when I get a moment to myself. I like to just sit on the shore, and let my thoughts be free, and when the water washes over my feet," I pause, puffing out a breath, "I can't explain it."

"You feel close to him. Y'all started doing the little shore thing after you ran into the ocean, on our sixteenth birthday. I remember," he shakes his head, "you only went to the beach with him, after that. So, it makes sense why you only go alone, now."

"But I'd like you to join me," I pull my legs away, and stand, "you can be like, my spirit guide."

"Why not just let him come, Lailani? You obviously miss him, and it's crazy as hell to pretend you don't want him here."

I walk around the patio gate, down the stairs, and onto the beach. I mostly only come out here at night, so I know my way around the rocky area well enough to walk barefoot. I sit in the sand, and breathe in the calm blissful air that overrides the taunting of my biggest fear's wrath.

When Kieran sits beside me, I take his hand, "the water still terrifies me, but sometimes, I can feel his touch in the little ripples, and I can hear the rasp behind his voice in the crashing of the waves. It beckons for me, to let it consume me, every time I'm out here. It's like my mind believes he'll save me, just like before—even though I know he's not here. Some days, when I feel the most broken, and when I feel like I need him more than anything, it's so hard to convince myself not to run in, anyway."

Kieran squeezes my hand, "I mean it Lailani; I'm not getting murdered for you. I got kids."

"I wanted you to come with me today, because you might be the only one who could stop me from giving in, right now," I look at him through tear-soaked eyes, "so, thank you for being here. I'm glad to have a brother, in you."

Kieran wraps his arms around me, and I fall apart. I cry so hard, it hurts, and I feel like the volume of my tears could rival the sea before me. Kieran just holds me, being the comforting presence I needed to release with. I don't know how much time passes before I finally sit upright, but I feel better, after letting out my pain.

"I'm gonna let you do what you think is best, Lailani," Kieran stands, helping me up, "I hate this whole thing, but I know you don't do shit for no reason. You know I'm always here, and I'll try not to pressure you to explain, or to fix shit, until you're ready. This is obviously heavier on you than I thought, and I really don't like it, but I pray you figure it all out soon, so y'all can stop being so miserable."

"Thank you," I pick up my shoes, and start toward my house, "I'm deciding to release him. I know he loves me, and I love him. It's not very likely, but if he's supposed to be in my life, I know it has to be later on. So, I have to get through this, and focus on myself, no matter how much it hurts. All things end—even the pain."

Kieran opens my patio gate, for me, "exactly. So, this thing with y'all being apart will end, too. This is you fulfilling your little 'nothing is forever' nonsense. So, you had your little break, calling it 'the end,' and making your statement true. And at the right time, y'all can just come back together, and be happy."

I look at Kieran with fresh eyes, because that was an insane thing to hear, but it seems so logical. I actually hadn't thought about it like that, and while I know that's not how this works, it makes me feel better about it. Maybe he's right, and after some time, Reelin and I could find our way back. And if I survive this end, I'll be prepared for the pain the next time, and I can get past it again. Right?

I shake my head with a smile, "sometimes you're alright, Donny Duck."

"Damn, you ain't called me that since we was kids."

"I'm glad I didn't kill you sophomore year," I kiss his cheek, and go to my shower, feeling lighter than before.