



End's

Beginning

A Lesson in Forever Book 2



ASHLEIGH WOODWARD

Preview

Part i : The More You Know

Preview

Prologue

In the same moment...

Kieran

Damn, I think Lailani broke my nose.

I don't know what the fuck is going on, or what kind of twisted person sent that box, but La ain't thinking straight. I didn't think she would still be feeling a way about whoever the hell Rizz admitted to talking to the other night, before she ended up in the hospital, but here she is—making insane accusations.

Honestly, in the chaos of her passing out, I never even thought to ask him who it was. The only woman I saw him with, was *her*.

Right before her elbow slammed into my nose, she said Rizz watched her drown. That's the craziest shit I've heard in a while, because that nigga would die before letting anything happen to her, and even then, he'd find a way to make sure she's safe. She also said something about Lo knowing about some woman, and that's equally as insane, because Lonayla believes Rizz and La belong together. So, she would've chased any other woman out the picture, the moment her sister told her she was thinking about him.

Lo making it a big deal for the four of us to do the Reliving, was part of her whole big-hearted wish to get those two in close proximity, hoping they'd get back together.

She's holding the towel over my nose, asking *me* what's going on, but shit, if she doesn't know, I don't know why she thinks I would. It's clear that whatever it is, it's super fucked up, because La's literally shaking,

with tears in her eyes, and I was just cleaning up the chunks she blew all over the place.

I want to say she's having some sort of psychotic break, but that box with her ruined coat says otherwise.

All weekend, Lailani was weird, and her attitude was beyond trash. We tried to chalk it up to her being afraid of falling back into the "Reelan?" flow too soon. She asked all kinds of silly questions and kept acting out of character. She even yelled at Lonayla about some damn *lip gloss*. So, I knew there had to be something else going on, and the rest of us were missing it.

But now, I'm thinking about this woman she keeps mentioning from the party. How the hell don't I know who it is? She asked if Rizz was in love with someone else, and the question confused me, because he never took another woman seriously, and everything in his world's been even more about *her mean ass*, since they reconnected. He's dealt with a few people over the years, so I guess it's possible he had some old work in attendance. The party was exclusive as hell, but who knows?

I can't imagine him risking what him and La got going on, either way.

Anyone who knows anything about Rizz, knows he don't play about Lailani Grander—no matter what she does. She acts like she doesn't care, but I know how happy she was, when she realized he still loves her the same. She'll deny it, but she missed him, and she needed him to welcome her back with open arms. One thing everyone should understand by now: Nani always gets her way, especially if that nigga Rizz has something to say about it. I don't know a sane person who would even think to get in the way of that.

...

Wait...

...nah.

Damn, I remember thinking I saw Stacee's evil ass, at the pool, telling me she wanted La gone, and aint *nothing* sane about her, when it comes to a Grander.

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There's no fucking way that shit was real though, right? I was high out of my mind, and knew I was tripping, because there was no reason for her to be there. She couldn't have even known *we* were there, and truth be told, she's legally not even allowed to be around the Granders.

But that fucking coat...

Only a demented ass person would steal La's things, then send them in secret, to freak her folks out. Only a sicko would do whatever was done to that coat, then have it delivered like a gift. I didn't even see the note inside, but it scared the shit out of Lailani.

Stacee's been holding a grudge since she got locked up for nearly killing her, when we were ten, and she always said she'd make La pay for ruining her life. What spoiled nut job would hate an innocent child, because they had consequences for their own criminal actions?

...Stacee.

But Rizz hasn't willingly spoken to his sister in more than 24 years. When she got locked up, he refused to acknowledge her existence most of the time. Then, he did everything he could to keep his distance, when she got out. So, if it's her, why the hell would he decide to talk to her at *that* party, of all places?

Earlier, Mr. Grander helped Rizz and me take some precautionary measures, ensuring Stacee couldn't just show up at his ceremony. We planned to do that more than a week ago, So. I didn't think anything of it, and he didn't mention talking to—or even *seeing* her—to me.

My mind races through the facts from the weekend:

- Rizz said he thought La left the party with *me*, but I was sure they left together, beforehand.
- Lonayla said she picked up Lailani from the school, looking crazy as hell—like she went through an ordeal.
- Lailani was on edge, then she fainted, and the doctors said she has a submersion injury—which corresponds with her claims that she drowned in the pool. So, she wasn't just tweaking out, or trying to be mad at Rizz, to avoid connection.

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- Lailani's stuff went missing from the party, then randomly started showing up in blank packages, like some sick game of clue—worrying her parents.
- La remembers Rizz talking to some woman, and now, I'm thinking that woman might've been Stacee, because the shit that's not making sense, can only be because it was caused by someone who's equally smart *and* crazy as all hell.

Fuck!

But, *If* it *was* Stacee, why the hell would Rizz be talking to her? Why wouldn't he have mentioned her being there?

Bigger question: if Lailani saw her, and she harmed her in any way, why does she think Stacee's a woman Rizz has been fucking? Surely, she would have remembered the face of the person who tried to kill her—or at the very least, notice the nearly identical resemblance between Stacee and Rizz.

So, that *can't* be who she's talking about.

I look back at Rizz, and he looks just as mortified by this accusation as I expected. The man's got tears in his eyes, and everything. I can't blame him. I wonder if he's piecing together the same things I am.

We don't even know how the hell Lailani ended up back at the school, and she kept saying she was left for dead. When anyone suggested she might've been confused, from being drunk, that set her all the way off. Lo kept taking her drinks, but she really didn't seem to finish any, now that I think about it. We all recall things differently, so I really don't know.

Not a single thought could have brought anyone to the conclusion that Lailani was actually nearly killed, though. We basically called her a liar, all weekend. So, if Stacee is behind all this confusion, and she somehow got to Lailani, Rizz might *never* forgive himself.

To make all this shit worse, Lailani seeing Stacee, and *not* remembering her, might break him a little further. That part of her memory not coming back, means it's likely gone for good. Rizz would be crushed, because no

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matter how much he pretends he's fine, he wants her to have all the pieces to their story.

He always wanted her to remember the time when we were kids, because their love story goes back a lot further than she knows. He said that by the time they found their way back to each other, he'd find a way to tell her, because being apart made him question whether or not the missing parts of their history would have made a difference in their distance. He thought if La knew how much more connected they were, she would rethink her fear of forever.

Right now, her fear seems to have taken her to a very different extreme.

Even if this is what I'm thinking it is, Lailani can't really be thinking Rizz would let anything happen to her. She can't seriously believe he would be dealing with some other woman, while trying to win her back, either. This is all crazy, but I know she's misunderstanding his role in whatever is going on.

I swallow, tasting copper. My nose is bleeding heavy as hell, but I ignore the pain, and the ringing in my ears, "Lailani, please. You really don't understand."

"I don't want to!"

"I don't understand. What the fuck is she talking about?" Lonayla's in tears, too, "Rizz, what is happening?"

"So, I take it Stacee knows I survived, huh?"

As soon as the name leaves her lips, I feel sick.

I miss part of what she's saying, because in this confirmation of my thoughts, all I can think about is ten-year-old Nani being thrown into that pool. It was so fucked up, and we were all too scared to help. I can't imagine whatever happened to her this time, but I know that with all of this confusion, it was probably much more terrible than anything I can make up.

"I watched you watch me, with not a single feeling—knowing I would die."

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There's no way in hell. Maybe her panic has her remembering wrong, and she *thinks* she saw his face, because him and Stacee look alike.

I know I can't be the one to explain Stacee, but I have to try getting Lailani calm down enough to know my cousin would *never* allow anything to happen to her. Not again.

"It's not what you think, it's much more complicated than that," I say, standing up.

Lonayla looks at me, like I'm a complete stranger, "what the fuck are you talking about?" she backs away, moving closer to Lailani, shielding her, "what do you mean, '*it's complicated?*' You actually tried to kill my sister?"

A phone rings, before I can ask how she could even question that.

The ringing is coming from that box.

"Don't answer it!" I yell, when Lonayla takes a step toward it. She listens, leaning against the wall, still looking at me like a stranger.

Rizz rushes over to the box, taking out the phone, and putting it on speaker.

"Hey, Sweets. Remember me, yet?"

Stacee's smug voice claws at my anger. The matching fearful expressions Lonayla and Lailani have on their faces, sends me into a dark place, and I'm overrun with the need to protect them.

Rizz seems spaced out, like he may be too fucked up to process what's happening.

Every thought I just cycled through about this whole situation, is playing simultaneously, and I don't know what to do to make any of this better.

I walk over, yelling at the phone, "Stacee, this isn't a fucking game! What the fuck is wro—"

"Aww, KK. Don't be that way. I told you and Matty I wanted her gone."

"Who the *fuck* is that? Who is Matty?" Lonayla's confused expression reminds me that she's just as lost as La is.

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All those years ago, when little La got home from the hospital, she couldn't remember anything about what happened at the pool. Even worse, she somehow forgot little things that were closely related to the situation, too. Nine-year-old Lonayla was so traumatized, she eventually decided to only remember whatever Lailani remembered. If La didn't bring it up, it didn't exist. So, we really never mentioned that summer again. There's something in the way Lo was able to shut off her own memory that scares me a little, because years later, when we realized Rizz was one of La's lost memories, Lonayla didn't remember him, either. She asked a vague question about him, but it was clear she didn't know who he was.

Stacee's voice fills the room, "yikes, the love of your life uses that kind of language? That tone? How gross. I really hate those green-eyed demons."

I can't stand that she calls them that, when she's clearly the demon in all of this. I look at Rizz, and he's still frozen solid, tearfully staring at Lailani. I can't let myself get worked up, because one of us has to be stable through this shit. La's about to find out who Stacee is—after all this time.

This is not a normal situation, and I have to try to make sure it doesn't get worse than it already is.

I steel my anger, "what do you want, Stacee?"

"I want the last 25 years of my life back! I want her to know what it means to ruin a life, just because you can!"

She wants to be the victim, so bad. She acts like we weren't there. She's constantly spewing some bogus nonsense about Lailani manipulating everyone, *just* so Stacee would get in trouble.

That lie will never fly, because everyone knew La couldn't swim. Stacee even laughed about her *swimming in the air*, instead of under water, while she carried her to the deep end. I remember every detail of that day. It all happened so fast, but played out so slowly, in the moment. We begged Stacee to leave her alone, and when La hit the water, every one of us was stunned completely silent.

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I look at her, remembering the horrifying screams that came in between the splashes, while the rest of us were frozen in fear. She's coming closer, with Lonayla right beside her, staring straight at Rizz. The look in her eyes is something I've never seen before.

This shit is getting worse by the second.

"It got really quiet over there. Having a moment, are we?"

La takes the phone, "Stacee?"

"Remember me, now?"

Lonayla gasps, and I know by the way her lip trembles, and her green eyes darken behind fresh tears, she's remembering.

Lailani never takes her eyes off Rizz. The curiosity on her face is mixed with something else, but I can't place it.

"You're *Matthew*?"

Her energy is intense, and still uncomfortably unrecognizable. Whatever she's feeling, it's strong as hell. Lonayla grabs her other arm, trying to pull her away, but La holds steady, studying Rizz's face.

"Stacee, from the pool. *Summer* Stacee. Stacee is your sister."

That wasn't a question. She definitely remembers.

I know Rizz is going through every terrible scenario, by the way his face twists. The man's about to fall apart.

For La to find out *like this*? After everything they've been through?

Her learning the truth changes everything for them.

God, let them make it through this.

I hope this just shows her that they've always belonged together, and in spite of everything that has kept them apart, he's really her forever.

1: I'll Remember For You

Reelin

Summer, 2000

“He hasn’t said a word in four days, and I fear he’s in some sort of mental shock. He’s already missed the first two days of school, because we don’t want to push him too hard, after everything.”

Dr. Broadway’s voice comes through the speaker, “Mrs. Houldover, it’s not uncommon for trauma to cause young people to shut down. I would like to see MJ as soon as possible, and I’ll ask Dr. Dooby—the child psychiatrist I told your husband about—to offer additional support. We’ll do whatever we can.”

I know my mom’s worried, but I also know that nothing will help. I’ll never be okay again.

When the ambulance left that day, Lailani’s body wasn’t moving. I had never been so scared before. Mr. Grander was so calm, and I kept thinking that if he was okay, she had to be. But she really looked like she was dead.

I was so angry at myself, for not saving her. I felt like I was going to die, too. I looked over at my sister, as the officers put her into the back of their car, and she was still smiling, as if it was all a game.

The world spun around me, then.

My anger at myself is nothing compared to the hate I feel for Stacey. I knew in that moment, I would never look at her the same. Her smile was like an unbreakable bolt on the door to who she was before, locking away the sister I thought I knew. I hope I never in life have to look at her again, and I pray she stays locked away forever.