

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF  
THE DEAD ROMANTICS AND THE SEVEN YEAR SLIP

*Ashley Poston*

# A Novel Love Story



LOVE IS  
STRANGER  
THAN FICTION



## Praise for Ashley Poston

‘I LOVED this book. A beautiful, poignant story, full of beautiful, poignant characters ... *The Dead Romantics* is like a beautifully crafted puzzle: at the end all the pieces fall perfectly into place, and the picture that they form is at once touching, funny, breathtaking, hopeful, and dreamy’

**Ali Hazelwood**

‘A book to make you laugh and cry’

***New York Times***

‘*The Seven Year Slip* is a gorgeous love story from one of the finest romance writers out there. I laughed, I cried, I didn’t want it to end. Consider me Ashley Poston’s greatest admirer!’

**Carley Fortune**

‘A tender, nuanced love story that fans of Emily Henry will adore’

***Red***

‘*The Dead Romantics* was an absolute and unexpected delight. Voicy and quirky and fun; the pages will probably sparkle (but with black glitter)’

**Christina Lauren**

‘Smart, quick, and absolutely bubbling over with love for the genre of romance itself’

**Emma Straub**

‘Smart, quirky and funny. I loved this one’

**Sarah Morgan**

‘We could all use a good summer ghost story, and you can’t get much better than Ashley Poston’

*Entertainment Weekly*

‘*The Dead Romantics* takes so many things I love ... and gives them all a fresh, fun, thoroughly modern spin. This is truly a rom-com to die for’

**Rachel Hawkins**

‘Poston[’s] sparkling dialogue makes the characters come alive – even the dead ones’

*Publishers Weekly*

‘Charming and deliciously romantic, *The Seven Year Slip* serves up a speculative twist on the idea that we might meet the right person at the wrong time’

**Catriona Silvey**

‘This book made me fall in love ... Ashley Poston is the real deal’

**Gwenda Bond**



**ASHLEY POSTON** is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Dead Romantics* and *The Seven Year Slip*. A native to South Carolina, she lives in a small grey house with her sassy cat and too many books. You can find her on the internet somewhere, watching cat videos and reading fan fiction.

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Also by Ashley Poston

*The Dead Romantics*  
*The Seven Year Slip*







**A  
Novel  
Love  
Story**



ASHLEY POSTON



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES





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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*

# Note to Readers

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# Contents

Cover

Praise

About the Author

Also by Ashley Poston

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

Note to Readers

An Ending

1. Country Roads

2. Meet-Cute

3. Signatures

4. Star(t)ling Realization

5. Beginnings of a Book Club

6. Honey, Honey

7. Like a River Runs

8. Sweet as Whole

9. Good Enough

10. Plot Twist

11. Monsoon Season

12. Haunted

13. All By My Shelf

14. Spine(less)

15. The Cemetery of Deleted Things
  16. Heroic
  17. Cloudy with a Chance of Kisses
  18. Unintended Consequences
  19. Unrequited Affliction
  20. Four Shadow o'Clock
  21. Sweet Tooth
  22. Romantic Gestures
  23. The Course of True Love
  24. Sub Plots
  25. Something Wicked This Way Comes
  26. Pineapple
  27. Good Bones
  28. Don't Go Chasing Waterfalls
  29. Plumb Luck
  30. Lyssa Greene Is Not Okay
  31. Statues and Limitations
  32. The Last Manuscript
  33. All Roads
  34. Rachel Flowers
  35. The Only Road Out
  36. True Love
  37. The Montage at the End
  38. The Grand Romantic
  39. Book Ends
- A Beginning

Acknowledgments

Books and their Readers

Discussion Questions

A Recommended Reading List for Books about Books

About the Publisher



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.