

How do you find yourself after you lose the one you loved the most?

Promise Me Sunshine



CARA BASTONE

AUTHOR OF READY OR NOT

BY CARA BASTONE

When We First Met

Just a Heartbeat Away

Can't Help Falling

Flirting with Forever

Ready or Not

Promise Me Sunshine

AUDIBLE ORIGINAL NOVELLAS

Call Me Maybe

Sweet Talk

Seatmate

Love at First Psych

Maybe This Time

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*For anyone who has ever been a Miles for someone else.
I know it can sometimes feel thankless. So, thank you.
This book is a love letter to you.*

And, of course, for Jon. Who carried me on his back.

PART ONE



After

Chapter One

This baby will not stop judging me.

The B train brakes and we all slide two inches to the side. Perched atop their mother's lap, the straps of a bright red sunhat pinned under chubby cheeks, somber, unblinking eyes, the baby studies me, trying to decide if I have a soul.

I stick my tongue out and make my ears dance.

No reaction.

I pull my cheeks out to the sides and do rabbit teeth.

Not even a blink.

Finally, as the train is pulling into my stop, in a last-minute bid to be judged human, I use my ponytail as a mustache.

And there. Finally. I get one radiant, two-toothed smile.

Thank goodness. I guess there is a soul in this scraped-out husk of mine after all. I wave goodbye and bound up, off the train, and head west. It's dog-breath hot out here and I can't believe I've mustered up the energy for this.

But the thing about losing the person you love the most on earth is—somehow—you still have to do mundane things like tie your shoes and make enough money to continue to exist in this punishing world. So, I plod on. Toward yet another short-term nanny gig. Just to keep the Froot Loops on the table. Even though I'd really rather crawl into that trash can over there and emerge in about a decade.

Oh, look. I'm here. It's a gigantic brick apartment building. The lobby is populated by a group of people who look so happy I wouldn't be surprised if their lives suddenly turned into a musical. They mob the

doorman with luggage, so I go up on tiptoes and shout to him where I'm headed.

"Ah. They're expecting you," he calls to me in an Eastern European accent. "Eighteenth floor."

By the time the elevator dings, I'm in a better mood. One of my former babysitting families recommended me to Reese so that I can help out with her kid while she's out of town this weekend. Besides, here in the worst six months of my life, the only thing that's brought me even a hint of happiness has been hanging out with the kids I babysit. I'm between jobs right now, so this new family is likely going to be the only spot of light in my life for a bit.

I ring the doorbell and ten seconds later, perfection personified answers the door. She's got blond hair in a high ponytail and is decked out in head-to-toe Lululemon.

"Hi, I'm Reese." She holds out her hand and smiles so toothily that I find myself grinning back.

"Lenny. Nice to meet you."

"Thank you for agreeing on such short notice. My friend Harper usually helps out for stuff like this, but she's busy during the days this weekend. She's the one who will be staying overnight with Ainsley. Anyways, come in, please. Did you get my email?"

"I did," I assure her. It was literally six and a half pages single-spaced and filled with so much loving detail on how to care for her daughter that it teared me up. I come inside and kick off my shoes, straightening them when I realize that all the other shoes are in perfect pairs. We're in a roomy front hallway, painted a trendy mauve and lined with gigantic black-and-white photographs.

"So, Ainsley is back in the—" The doorbell rings again right after Reese closes the door, and she frowns. She pulls the door back open and her shoulders cinch about two inches upward when she sees who it is. "What's up, Miles?"

There's a man standing in the crack of the door that Reese has just opened, and I get the feeling he might have wedged his foot in there so she

can't close it.

He's not good-looking, really. Low-grade sexy. He's wearing a used-to-be-black hoodie stretched over two big shoulders and faded blue jeans. Viciously short dark hair and the kind of stubble you can't ever shave away. Judging by that promising scowl, he's the type who'd really enjoy partaking in a public bathroom tryst with a near stranger. I can already see it now. He and I will have a tumultuous two-year fuckfest, defined by me perpetually being sent to voicemail. He'll stand me up on Thanksgiving, thereby dumping me. But then he'll realize horrifically, cataclysmically, that he's been in love with me this whole time. He'll come crawling back to me on all four appendages. I'll make him wait outside my door for a year before I let him back in. Eventually there'll be a ring with a black diamond so dark I can see his soul inside it. We'll get married on Halloween and his wedding present to me will be a sex toy. It sounds ecstatically fun.

It's probably apropos to mention that I instantaneously spin elaborate fantasies about almost every man I ever meet. Not to say that this guy isn't special; I have just fallen in love, after all.

He looks over Reese's shoulder and spots me, his gaze narrowing and his eyes taking me in from socks to eyebrows. I don't think I've passed the test because he leans forward and thus commences an aggressive (and nearly silent) whisper fight between the two of them and it's getting a little icy in here.

I occupy myself with the black-and-white prints for something to do. That's when I realize that what I'm looking at are actually gigantic photographs of someone very famous.

"Sorry about that," Reese chirps at my elbow, and I jolt. I hadn't heard her approach. She's got a plastic smile superglued to her face and when I look back, the man is still standing in the now fully open door, glowering in our general direction.

"No problem," I say, and then jog one thumb toward the portraits. "Big Willie Nelson fan?"

"Hm? Oh! Ha. Willie's great. But that's my dad there next to him. They toured together for a while."

“Oh, wow!” I lean in and sure enough, there’s another guy in all the pics, at the mic in some and jamming on a steel guitar in others.

“Carp Hollis,” she says, supplying the name I clearly couldn’t come up with. “Ever heard of him?”

“Your dad is Carp Hollis?” I don’t know much about bluegrass or country, but even I know that he’s kinda royalty.

“Yup. That’s Dad.” She looks affectionately at the pictures before her expression clouds. I instantly recognize that look, and my stomach drops to my toes. “He passed about a year and a half ago. This is his apartment. Ainsley and I are still getting used to it, to be honest...Why don’t you come meet Ains.”

She starts to usher me out of the hallway.

“Reese!” calls the man who is still standing in the open door.

She doesn’t turn around. “Then stay if you want, Miles!”

I’m looking back and forth between them. “Um. I’m Lenny,” I offer to him with a little wave of my hand. “Lenny Bellamy.”

He’s ignoring me, staring daggers into the back of Reese’s head.

“That’s Miles. Ainsley’s uncle,” Reese finally says into the silence. “He lives upstairs. He’ll probably be around today, if that’s okay with you.”

“Oh, uh. Sure?” I don’t usually enjoy babysitting with an audience, but he *is* my future husband after all, as prickly as he may be.

The apartment is gargantuan and curated and polished. Kitchen, living room, dining room, a handful of bedrooms and bathrooms, and then, finally, in what she refers to as the “drawing room,” is a little somebody who is, in fact, drawing.

“Ains,” Reese calls.

The little somebody doesn’t stand, she just drops her colored pencil and pivots on her knees to face us. She’s about seven years old, with dandelion levels of staticky hair. Tiny purple glasses magnify her eyeballs to twice their size and she’s swimming in a very faded Madonna concert tee. “Is that a cat eating lasagna on your shirt?” she asks me.

“It’s Garfield,” I clarify.

“Who’s that?”

“Oh, it’s a good thing we’re going to hang out all weekend because we’ve got a lot of ground to cover.”

She nervously tugs the hem of her T-shirt. “Okay.”

“I’m Lenny,” I say, and I leave the adults behind to sit next to her. “What’s your name?”

She frowns at me. “Mom didn’t tell you?”

I smile. “She did, but people usually start getting to know each other by exchanging names.”

“Oh. Yeah. I’m Ainsley.” She makes a puke face.

“You don’t like your name?”

“There are three other Ainsleys at my school. Different grades but...” She shrugs.

“Oh, really? Wow. Ainsley sounds like a unique name to me. If you could choose any other name, what would it be?”

She shrugs again, still nervous to meet me. “I don’t know. Something cooler. Like...Blackbeard. Or Darth Vader.”

I burst out laughing, and she tries to hide her pleased smile while she plays with the hem of her T-shirt.

I instantly like her, and I like her mom more by extension. This uptown address, Reese’s perfect ponytail, head to toe in Lululemon, I would have put some serious money on Ainsley having been carefully manicured into a mini-Reese. I’ve seen it before. But Reese and Ainsley are a delightfully odd couple.

Reese is leaning in the doorway and smiling at us. “Listen, I’m going to get a little work done in my home office for a bit before I head out. Come get me if you need anything, Ains.”

“’Kay.”

Reese disappears with a wave and Ainsley does a double take at the doorway. “Oh. Hi, Miles.”

“Hey. I’ll be around too...if you need me.”

Ainsley looks instantly confused. “Why would I need *you*?” she asks in that guileless yet utterly gutting way that children have.

For the length of a single camera flash Miles looks mortally wounded. But then his gaze hardens as it flicks over to me. “Just in case,” he grumbles.

Miles disappears and Ainsley turns back to the hem of her shirt.

Well, ohhhhkay. Guess we’ve got some *family dynamics* to navigate here.

I spot some computer paper and help myself. Ainsley rolls a few colored pencils in my direction. Half an hour later—after her stomach starts making goblin noises—we’re exploring the fridge and pantry, chatting about what we could make and laughing at how bad the fancy cheese in the cheese drawer smells.

Twice I think there’s someone else standing there, but when I look up, we’re alone. The third time, it’s Reese in the doorway, smiling.

“I’m gonna head out in a minute,” Reese says. “Do you wanna come help me pick my jewelry for the weekend, sweetie?”

Ainsley scampers after her mother and I’m left in the kitchen to make lunch. I put my hands on my hips and start a slow perusal of my options.

“How old are you?”

I jolt at the unexpected deep voice behind me. Miles is at the other end of the kitchen, leaning up against the counter.

“Twenty-eight. Are you staying for lunch?”

“I don’t need you to feed me.”

Good thing I’m not easily scared off. “Do you think Ainsley would want the white cheddar mac or the double-cheese stars and moons?”

“I think her mother would prefer she eats something that isn’t pure chemicals.”

I deftly ignore that, because Reese is presumably the person who bought the mac and cheese in the first place. I start searching through the cabinets for a pot. “How old are *you*?”

He frowns. “Got a lot of childcare experience?”

“Yes.”

He's waiting for me to elaborate, but when I don't he crosses his arms over his chest. "What are you looking for?"

"A pot. There's a lot of real estate in this kitchen." I've opened six sets of doors and have yet to find the cookware.

He doesn't direct me toward it, which leads me to believe he either wants to make my life as hard as possible or he doesn't know his way around their kitchen.

Is *uncle* a euphemism? They don't seem to know each other very well. Or even *like* each other very well. Based on the way he's acting, I might have wondered if he was perhaps Ainsley's overprotective father, but Reese made it very clear when we spoke over the phone earlier in the week that she conceived Ainsley on her own and she's a single mother. Probably so I wouldn't put my foot in my mouth and ask Ainsley about her dad.

"Okey-doke," Reese says, reappearing with a rolling suitcase in one hand and Ainsley attached to the other. "I've gotta jet if I'm gonna make my flight." She bends and gives Ainsley a squeeze. "It's gonna be great. And it's only two nights. I'll see you after school on Monday."

Ainsley nods like they've already been over this. "I know."

"Okay. Well, Lenny, thank you. You're a lifesaver. Call me for *any* reason."

She gives Miles a nod and then heads to the front door. Ainsley trots after her and I migrate in that direction, wanting to give them some space for their goodbye but also wanting to be on hand.

Reese stops at the front door and slides her shoes on, saying something quietly to Ainsley.

"I *know*, Mom," Ainsley says, somewhat petulantly. "Just go already. You'll be late."

Reese gives her one last kiss on her staticky head and then the door clicks shut behind her.

Ainsley immediately power walks back in my direction, and even from here I can see that her eyes have gone watery and her chin is starting to quiver.

"What kind of movies do you like?" I ask her.

She skids to a stop. "I'm not allowed to watch movies during the day."

"Well, let's make an exception."

"Really?"

"Really."

"I like Indiana Jones."

I'm charmed. "Let's do it."

Ainsley happily eats two bowls of stars and moons while Indy punches his way through a crowd of fascists, and I consider that a win.

By the time we're done with lunch she doesn't seem so weepy anymore, but I want to keep her as distracted as possible, so we dig through the pantry and unearth a box of cake mix and frosting. We gleefully make a gigantic mess in the kitchen and I let her turn the vanilla frosting acid green with food coloring.

"You wanna know an old family tradition of mine?"

"Sure," she says, carefully mixing the frosting while her tongue is sticking out. She's wearing an apron fifty times too big and standing on one of the dining room chairs to reach the counter.

"When we make cupcakes, we always make one lucky one and hide it in with the rest."

"How do you make a lucky cupcake?"

"Well, first you fill the cups with batter, and then you pick one of them to be the lucky one. This one or this one?" I ask.

"That one." She points.

"Okay. And then you stick something unexpected into its batter."

"Like what?"

I open the fridge and consider my options. "Liiike...ooh! Green olives. Or a little bit of lunch meat, maybe? How about—"

She bursts out laughing. "*Gross!*"

"Yes," I agree. "But so much fun. What should we choose?"

She scrambles down from the chair to come look. "How about those onions that Mom puts in fancy drinks?"

"Cocktail onions. PERFECT. I think you have a knack for this."

I open the jar for her and she pokes the onion so far into the cupcake she's got batter up to her third knuckle.

Her mom calls to check in while the cupcakes are baking and Ainsley starts to cry after they hang up. It seems like a good time to offer the little bit of videogame time she's allotted each day, and she jumps at the chance. By the time she's done zooming around the universe in a bright pink rocket ship, the cupcakes are cool enough to frost.

We each have a cupcake after dinner, and we decide we're both simultaneously relieved and disappointed to not get the lucky cupcake.

"It's getting late," Miles says from out of nowhere, and Ainsley and I both squeak and jump.

"Are you still here?!"

"It's her bedtime," he says, frowning and crossing his arms over his chest. I wouldn't say he's got a very gentle bedside manner, but I forgive him because he's wearing *that* sweatshirt and I'm in love and he's going to be my everything one day.

"Oh, you're right. Yeah. Things kind of got away from me."

"No kidding." He's frowning at the spilled batter on the counter, the dishes in the dripping sink, the opened packages of meat and cheese and bread I used to make sandwiches for dinner.

"I'll get to it," I say with a wave. I pull up Reese's email and refer to pages four and five. "Ainsley, shall we start the bedtime proceedings?"

She climbs down from the table and pads back toward her end of the apartment without a single complaint. Either she's tired or she doesn't know me well enough to argue yet.

She takes a shower and I help with the tricky buttons on her pajamas after she brushes her teeth. She E.T.'s herself into an impressively gigantic pile of stuffies and asks if she can read for a while before bed. I hand over her bedtime book, which is called *Squirrel Genius Mystery File #48*, and something tells me she's already read the other forty-seven.

"I'll be in the living room until Harper gets here to spend the night, but I'll see you bright and early, okay?"

She nods solemnly, already turning toward the wall with her book, and she just looks so tiny in her PJs. I let her have her privacy and gently click the door closed behind me.

The carpet in this place is a foot and a half thick so I pad soundlessly back toward the kitchen, freezing when I hear Miles hissing into his phone in the kitchen.

“Come on, Reese. She let Ainsley watch TV all day. They ate nothing but crap. Videogames for hours. The house is a total mess. Where did you even find this girl?...She looks like she’s fresh off a week-and-a-half bender. Shouldn’t we, I don’t know, drug test her or something?”

And wow. Just like that. My love fantasy goes up in smoke.

What a total asshole.

I march into the kitchen and raise my eyebrows at him. He goes rigid, his eyes on mine, self-consciously running a hand over his hair. To my satisfaction he breaks eye contact first and leaves the room, finishing his phone call with Reese elsewhere.

In a flash I’ve got the kitchen polished to a high shine, so I gather my things and set up shop in the living room to wait for Harper.

I’m on the couch and digging through my backpack when:

“So—”

“Ah!” I jump at his sudden voice behind me. My backpack tumbles to the ground. “Quit doing that!”

“Sorry,” he mumbles, and I can’t tell which part he’s apologizing for, but either way it’s nowhere near enough. His eyes drop to my spilled backpack. My wallet and a book have skidded across the floor toward his feet. Our hands reach them at the same moment, but his freeze.

Grief and You, the title of the book blares up at us. *Life after the Death of a Loved One*.

I can feel his eyes flick from the book to my face and back.

I hate this book so much. If my mother hadn’t given it to me at the funeral, inscribed with her sweet, perfect handwriting, I probably would have launched it into the Hudson River by now.

“So—” Oh, God. He’s trying to talk again.

No. I've had enough for one night. I scramble the book into my bag.

"There are fresh-baked cupcakes in the kitchen," I offer sweetly, beating him to the punch and watching his face scrunch in confusion at my change in tone.

I turn away from him and flick on the TV. After a moment he seems to accept that there will be no more discussion from me and wordlessly heads back into the kitchen. I cross my fingers that he's selecting the cupcake at the top of the pyramid I engineered.

I strain toward the kitchen, turning the volume down just enough to hear him gag and cough. "What the fuck?" he mutters incredulously as he tosses the lucky cupcake in the trash.

I sigh with sweet, sweet satisfaction and settle back into the couch.

Two best friends sit facing one another on a twin bed. One of them will die too soon. The other one is me.

They are eating salt-and-vinegar potato chips and trying to figure out how life could possibly go on after unspeakable loss.

“Look...after this you’re gonna have to come back to life at some point. You can’t live dead, you know.”

“Says who.”

“Says me, your best friend.”

“Fine then, Wise One. Lay it out for me. How. How am I supposed to come back to life after...”

“Oh, come on, complainer. Where’s that happy-face T-shirt I bought you? You think that was ironic? No way. Life is for the living, yadda yadda.”

“Easy for you to say, butthead. You’re the one who won’t have to go through all the after.”

“OMG! I just came up with a brilliant idea for a T-shirt slogan. Ready?”

“Hit me.”

“Life is what happens during the yadda yadda.”

“We’re going to be rich.”

“Right?”

“... ”

“... ”

“You really have no idea how to live again on the other side of this? Like, seriously? No ideas?”

“Not one.”

“Okay, fine. Here’s what we’ll do. We’ll make it so easy. The easiest. We’ll make it multiple choice.”

“My life?”

“Yeah. We’ll make a list. All you’ll have to do is check the boxes. Pick task, perform task, reclaim your joie de vivre.”

“A list for living again?”

“Bingo.”

“Look, yes, you’re my best friend. You obviously mean well. I know I’m not easy to be around sometimes. But...can we just not talk about this? Trying to imagine living again. Living without—Can we just not talk about this, please?”

“We’re making the list. If you want to throw it in the garbage afterward, that’s on you. Where’s my pink pen?”

“I can’t stop you, can I?”

“Item number one on the Live Again list: fall in love with a gorgeous man who is obsessed with you and is, like, a fireman or something.”

“Wow, you even wrote the ‘or something.’ ”

“There should be a little wiggle room to increase the odds of it actually happening.”

“ ’Kay. Got it. Gorgeous man. Should be easy.”

“Atta girl. Item number two: wear ridiculously ugly clothes and pretend that they’re expensive ugly, not cheap ugly. Then eat amuse bouche and go underbid on outrageously priced art.”

“Unless ‘amuse bouche’ is a fancy word for ‘chili dog,’ I don’t want it.”

“Fine, just the art, then.”

“The Met?”

“Always...I bet your mom would let you wear your grandma’s vintage fur coats.”

“Fine! But I want one of those little Jackie O hats where the lace comes down over your eyes.”

“Deal. Wear whatever you want, the Met is on the list as its own bullet point. Now for the next item—”

“Can there be no more items for now? It hurts to think about it.”

“I feel I should warn you. It’s probably never going to not hurt. Just thought you should know.”

“I know.”

“And that’s why you need the list. When I’m not around you can use it to—”

“Let’s watch Clueless and eat BLTs.”

“You’re a true queen of distraction. Okay, fine, but only because you know bacon is my weak spot—Hey...You’re not throwing the list in the trash?”

“Well. You’re going through all this trouble to make it. I figure the least I can do is keep it safe.”

This is a love story, I swear.

This is what happens when you’ve promised someone you’ll live again.