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ALL GOOD PEOPLE HERE

ASHLEY FLOWERS

with ALEX KESTER

THE MISSING HALF

A Novel

BY ASHLEY FLOWERS

The Missing Half

All Good People Here



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A Novel

ASHLEY FLOWERS

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*To the two women, who long ago as girls, taught us what sisterhood meant.
Allisa Flowers & Rachel Kiester, this one is for you!*

PROLOGUE

A sharp twist of underbrush clawed at her knee as she ran past, like fingernails brittle and slicing. She yelped out in pain, then clapped a hand over her mouth. Quiet. She needed to be quiet. But the swampland was deceiving at night, and although she'd passed this place many times, she'd never before been inside. The canopy of trees was dense, consuming the light of the stars, and the air was thick around her, filling her nostrils with a murky, earthy scent.

Solid ground turned to mud beneath her, swallowing her feet. She took a few more blind steps, then she was in the water, its algae-slick surface lapping against her thighs. Just as she yanked her foot free of the sucking mud, the toe of her shoe caught on something—a rock? A branch?—and she lurched forward with a splash, announcing her presence as loudly as a siren.

She looked over her shoulder, but all she saw was black.

She waited, not moving, not breathing.

As she stood motionless in the water, some dark part of her brain not engaged in self-preservation unexpectedly spat out a flash of memory of her and her sister at the lake. Her sister's face was cracked wide with laughter, their tankinis billowing beneath the water's surface, both their noses red and peeling. She thought about the way it felt to make her sister smile and realized that even if she was caught tonight, at least she'd lived a life with some small, happy moments.

Then a twig snapped behind her, and there was only one thing she could think.

Run.

CHAPTER ONE

2019

I'm mopping up vomit by the claw machine when I notice her watching me.

She's sitting in a booth where the tables end and the arcade begins, near the old pinball machines no one uses anymore. In her early to mid-thirties, with the slightly haggard look of a parent, she fits our customer mold here at Funland, the go-to birthday destination for every preteen in Mishawaka, Indiana. But there's none of the usual evidence of kids around her table, no gnawed-on cheese sticks or packet of wet wipes or discarded action figures. Just a half-drunk soda. When she notices me looking, she nods, then turns away.

There's something off about the gesture that makes me think she's nervous, like a bad PI going for casual. I keep watching to see if she's checking up on a kid in the throng of the arcade, but she just stares at the side of her drink, rubbing her thumb against the glass. Our dinner options are greasy pizza or rubbery burgers, the undersides of the tables are speckled with wads of gum, and the background noise is the shouting voices of children. If she doesn't have kids, what the hell is she doing here?

The woman flicks her gaze in my direction and then away again. The hair on the back of my neck rises.

I do a last few rushed swipes at the puddle of yellow sick, rinse out the mop and bucket so I can stow them back in the cleaning supplies closet, then scan the place for my manager, Brad. I spot the back of his head as he makes his way over to the computer where we ring up customer bills and half walk, half jog to catch up with him. "Hey, Brad?"

He turns, an affable smile spreading across his face. “Nic, hey. What’s up?”

Brad Andrews gave me my job at Funland eight years ago, back when I was working summers in high school, out of sheer nepotism. He was the best man in my parents’ wedding, and growing up, our families vacationed together every summer. He and his wife, Sandy, are more of an uncle and aunt to me than those related by blood. Neither of us could have foreseen how long I’d be here though, and sometimes our relationship shows the wear.

“That woman.” I nod in her direction. “I think she’s here alone. We may want to keep an eye on her.”

“What woman?” Brad peers over my head. “That one in the blue?”

“She doesn’t have any kids here.” I don’t need to elaborate. We get a certain kind at Funland every once in a while—childless middle-aged men whose eyes linger too long. We usually ask those people to leave.

“She looks pretty harmless to me. A little lonely, maybe, but harmless. Don’t you think?”

I roll my eyes. Brad’s brand of sexism manifests as an unwavering faith in the fairness of the fairer sex. He probably thinks his wife, Sandy, doesn’t masturbate when he’s away, or ever fantasize about a one-night stand with the young cashier at the grocery store. The idea of a female with actual bad intentions would gobsmack him.

“She was watching me.” I regret the words before I finish saying them.

He glances over in the woman’s direction again, but she’s looking at her drink. “Are you sure?”

“You know what, never mind. I’m probably just...” The end of my sentence hangs in the air between us. Brad doesn’t need me to tell him my paranoia and suspicion are habit. He was there seven years ago when my life flipped upside down, and he’s seen me almost every day since.

“You sure? I can go and check it out if you—”

“No,” I say. “It’s fine.” I know he’s just offering for the brownie points anyway.

Brad studies my face. “You doing okay, Nic?”

“I’m fine.”

“It’s just—I know you have a lot on your plate right now, what with the...program and all that.”

At first, I tried to keep the details of my “program” quiet, but my hometown is small, and a DWI is a juicy piece of gossip. Plus, I never had a shot of keeping it from Brad. He and my dad have a beer together every week. “I’m fine,” I say again.

“Good. Good.” Brad bobs his head. “Well, listen. You’ll let me know if you need anything, yeah? If you ever want to talk...”

I soften a little at this, but we both know I won’t take him up on it. Between working this job to pay off the state fine, going to my weekly AA meeting, preparing for my appearance in court, and fulfilling my mandatory community service at the local animal shelter, I don’t exactly have the emotional bandwidth for a heart-to-heart. But more than that, I learned years ago that numbness is better than pain. I’ve been not talking for so long, I’m not sure I’d even know how to start.

My gaze flicks to the woman in blue, but she’s gone, her table empty, her drink still half-full. Did she see me talking to the manager and leave before we could kick her out? *Stop*, I tell my churning mind. *You’re being paranoid.*

“I should probably get back to it,” I say to Brad.

He claps my shoulder. “You should come over for dinner soon. Sandy would love to see you.”

As he turns to walk away, I scan the place one last time for the woman, but she’s nowhere to be found.

—

We close an hour later, and I walk out the double doors of Funland into the Indiana summer night. The near-empty parking lot sprawls before me, telephone wires crisscrossing the black sky above. The heat is a muggy slap. I unlock my bike from the rack, then slip the lock into my backpack.

“Nicole! Nicole Monroe.”

I turn and see the woman in blue emerge from the shadow of a tree on the edge of the parking lot. My fingers tighten around my bike handles. Most people's reaction when they're confronted is fight or flight. I freeze. And I hate myself for it.

"I just wanna talk." She lifts her hands as if she's approaching a wild animal. "About Kasey."

My sister's name is a fist in my gut, and I want to smack it out of this stranger's mouth. Although no one has showed up at my work like this in years, there have been countless like her in my life. Reporters, podcasters, bloggers. People who expect my eager participation as they turn my tragedy into their dollars. "Unbelievable," I mutter, turning to leave.

"Wait!" There's a flicker of desperation in her voice. She probably has a tight deadline, and I feel a stab of cruelty. *Good*, I think. *Let her squirm*. "I just want a minute of your time. Please."

"I have to catch a bus." My lawyer petitioned the court for an occupational license to drive to work, but until it goes through, I'm stuck like this. Hauling my bike onto the bus, riding five miles to the stop nearest my apartment, then biking the remaining two miles to my door. This bus is the last one of the night. If I miss it, I'll have to bike the entire trip in the dark.

I've already started to walk away when she says, "I know it hurts to talk about—"

I whirl around. "You *know*?" I don't have time for self-righteousness right now, but this is my button. People thinking they can empathize with my pain because they listened to a fifty-five-minute episode about it once.

"I..."

"Go on," I say. "Really. I'd love to know how you, a perfect fucking stranger, could know how it feels to talk about *my* sister." Over time, my grief has morphed to anger. Now it lives just beneath my skin. Prick it and I bleed. "Are you some sort of psychic? Or wait, no, let me guess. You're an empath. Right? You just feel everything *so* deeply?"

"No, I—"

“You don’t know what it feels like. You couldn’t. So please just leave me the fuck alone.”

This time I’ve already hopped onto my bike and am pedaling off when she calls after me. I didn’t think there was a single thing this woman could say that would make me stop, but I was wrong.