

# Always

Liam was only sixteen when he died. Caught in a riptide while swimming in the ocean. I haven't set foot on the beach since.

"You have to eat something, Mika," my mother kept saying to me. "Please. You're so skinny."

"I'm not hungry," I always replied. "My stomach feels weird."

It wasn't a lie. Ever since Liam's mom called our family to tell us the news, my stomach wouldn't stop twisting and turning. It was as if a tiny demon was grabbing my intestines and was attempting to form the world's largest ball of guts. Besides, anything I ate came right back up.

I always said I never believed in true love, but that was before I met Liam. You can say I'm crazy, say that I was a stupid teenager with a blurred perception of love, but I know myself. And I was in love.

Liam and I had been dating for almost three years before he died. The day after he drowned was Valentine's Day, our third anniversary. I found the flowers in his room when I went to pick up the stuff I'd left there. There'd been a note, too. It was attached to the roses and written in his beautiful, flawless, cursive handwriting.

*My Darling Mika,*

*Can you believe we've been dating for three years now?! I haven't ever dated a girl for that long. I hope you know how much I love you. I love every inch of you, from your milk chocolate hair to your dazzling green eyes, from the dimples in your cheeks to your button nose that scrunches up when you smile. I'd say your smile is my favorite part of you, but I'd be lying. Because even though my stomach flips over when you laugh, your heart's my favorite part.*

*I always thought that my heart was full, that I was as caring and compassionate as I would ever be, but I was wrong. My heart was just a half. You, my best friend and my favorite girl in the whole world, filled the other half. Thank you for being my perfect other half.*

*There are thirty-seven roses in this bouquet: one for every month I've loved you. Because one month before we started dating, I noticed the shy, nerdy girl in the back of the room who was too scared to raise her hand, even though she knew the answer. I'm so glad I noticed her.*

*I'll be there for you, always.*

*Love,*

*Liam*

But he lied. Liam, the only boy I had ever loved, had lied. He wouldn't always be there for me, no matter how hard he wanted to be with me. Liam was dead and I was alone.

That note had been lying under my pillow for three months. The roses are still in a vase in my room, but they're dead and brown petals are currently decorating my desk. I'd stare at them when I was trying to fall asleep, when I was trying to follow step six.

I had a routine when it came to going to bed: One: put on pajamas; Two: brush teeth and hair; Three: read note. And again. And again. And again; Four: cry; Five: lie in bed and feel miserable; Six: try not to think about the past.

Step six was when I'd stare at the roses, read the note just *one* more time, when I'd count sheep that all had Liam's face on it, no matter how hard I'd try to make them look just like Jabba the Hutt or some other strange creature that would keep my mind off him.

But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't stop thinking about . . .

*Liam's body was warm against mine. He played with my hair, twisting it around his finger. The grass was tall, probably just tall enough so that people who glanced over wouldn't spot us at first. It was utter bliss as we watched the sky darken.*

*"End of summer, Mika," Liam said. I loved how he said my name: as if his entire existence depended on it. "School starts tomorrow. Are you sad?"*

*I sighed.*

*"No," I said. I snuggled closer and inhaled his scent: vanilla and clean laundry. "I'm not sad at all."*

*"So . . ." Liam turned to look deep into my eyes. His were a shocking blue, like ice, but warmer and pleasant. "Since it's the last day of summer, how about we celebrate?"*

*"I'm listening."*

*"I was thinking we could do something . . . special." I recognized the twinkle in Liam's eyes. My heart started to race. "Something . . ."*

*But then he broke off and he was kissing me. I'd like to say I was taken by surprise, but I wasn't. I was kissing him back, and the whole time I was thinking, bliss just got a whole lot better.*

*The snow on the ground looked like tiny diamonds, sparkling and blinding in the sun. I couldn't believe we had a white Christmas. We weren't in Florida that year--my parents and I traveled to Pennsylvania to visit my sister and Liam tagged along. Still. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen snow. It truly was a Christmas miracle.*

*"My first white Christmas." Liam sighed and wrapped his arm around me. He squeezed me against his body and didn't let me go, like he was afraid a breeze would come and blow me away. It made me feel all tingly inside. He liked me. He wanted me. He cared about me. He protected me. He loved me.*

*"You're my good look charm, Mika." Liam chuckled and looked down at me. He was so tall. He used to joke that he could put me in his pocket if he wanted to. "This was my Christmas wish."*

*"A white Christmas?" I said. "That's dreaming big."*

*"I wish for it every year." Liam shrugged and looked out at the snow. It was cold out on his back porch, but all I could feel was the warmth he gave me by keeping me close to him. He sighed again. "This was the first year I finally got it."*

*I heard a click from behind me, but I ignored it. It was probably my mom taking a picture of us. She loved to do things like that. I told her she should be with the paparazzi. She told me to shut up and hug Liam again so she could get a picture that wasn't blurry.*

*"What did you wish for this year?" Liam said. "A horse?"*

*"Nah, I gave up on that dream when I was eleven." I rested my head against his shoulder. "I wished for something a little more realistic."*

*"What?"*

*I shook my head and squeezed his hand.*

*"If I tell you it won't come true. Isn't that the rule with wishes?"*

*Liam bent down and kissed me. His kisses were the best, even though his were all I'd ever known. He was soft and gentle, and he put so much care into one kiss that you almost felt like an amateur when you were kissing him back.*

*"Now will you tell me?" He whispered.*

*"That," I said. "That's what I wished for."*

That's why I reread the note so many times: to take my mind off things. Even though I'd already memorized it, even though I thought about the past, I tried to keep myself distracted.

But not once had I managed to look at the other piece of paper inside again.

It was a map. A map to a certain spot on the very same beach where Liam had drowned. I didn't want to go to the beach; I didn't want to go to that spot. I was afraid of the hurt I would feel there. Call me a coward, but I didn't want to face any place where Liam had been. Of course, this was impossible at school, but I always sat far away from Liam's favorite desk and I never ate lunch outside, as he had always done.

It was only on a Sunday afternoon when I looked at the map again. Mom had suggested the unthinkable at lunch.

"Mika," she said, very slowly and carefully, as if approaching a growling dog. "Your father and I have been thinking."

Nothing good ever came after those words. They used that exact tone, that exact sentence, worn that exact expression on their faces when they told me we were going to move, when we had to give away my cat because she was mean and aggressive. And now when they told me something that made me blow my top.

"Your father and I think that you should go to therapy."

I stared at them both. My dad was cleaning his glasses on his shirt and my mom was looking at me with big, droopy eyes.

"Therapy?" I said. "Why?"

"Because-because of your depression." Mom had obviously rehearsed all of this with Dad before talking to me. Her pauses, her tone, her expressions: all of it had been carefully planned so as not to upset me.

It didn't work.

"My *depression*?" I could hear my voice already starting to crescendo. I placed both of my hands on the table as if I were about to stand up. "What *depression*?"

"Well . . . ever since L--" Mom had started to say Liam's name, but quickly caught herself. Liam's name had been tabooed ever since he drowned. Just the mention of his name was enough to make my tears flood the house.

"Ever since . . . the *incident*, you've been depressed. You haven't called Kelly, even though she's called you three times now. You've barely eaten anything for months, and you always have bags under your eyes. It's time to get help."

"Help?" I shouted. I leaned forward and placed both of my hands on the table. "I don't need *help*. What I *need* is Liam back! Why do you think I'm *depressed*? Huh? I'm *depressed* because my boyfriend *drowned in the ocean* right before freakin' Valentine's Day! What do you expect me to do, Mom? Shrug it off like it's no big deal and continue with life?"

"No, honey," Mom whispered. "Of course not. It's just—"

"It's just *what*? It's just that you want me to be happy again even though I feel like I'm drowning myself? It's just that you can't stand to see me not eating like this even though everything I put into my mouth feels like rubber? I need time, Mom. I need you and Dad and everybody else to just give me some space and let me figure this out."

"Sweetie, that's what everyone's been doing for three months." Mom bit her lip and looked to my dad for support. He looked up and pushed his glasses farther up his nose.

"We've given you space, we've given you time, we haven't even harassed you about your terrible grades," Dad said. "I think it's time to . . . not *move on* exactly, just . . . start the healing process."

"What healing process?"

Dad sighed and leaned back in his chair, looking up at the ceiling. Then he looked back down at me and continued.

"Mika, I think what you need is closure."

I raised my eyebrows at him.

"Closure? Isn't that for when you break up with someone? We didn't break up, Dad. He drowned."

I put heavy emphasis on the word *drowned* and bit my tongue to stop myself from interrupting as Dad continued.

"Closure isn't just for breakups," Dad said. "You're feeling restless and confused because there was no wrap-up. L—he just . . . drowned and that was that. I think you need to figure something out that will help you to move on."

"No." I was surprised to hear how firm my voice was even though I was choking back tears. "I'm not moving on. *Ever*. I love him."

"Not move on," Dad hurriedly corrected himself. "Start the healing process."

I sighed and put my face in my hands. I was so tired. I just wanted to go to sleep and never wake up. I could dream of Liam and never know the reality. That he was gone forever.

"All right." My voice was quiet, barely louder than a whisper. "All right. I'll find . . . *closure*."

Dad smiled and Mom looked like she could cry with relief.

"That's my girl," Dad said.

The sand crept into my sandals and tickled my toes. The air was the perfect temperature and the breeze was just heavy enough to blow my hair in front of my face. I was wearing my white dress, the one I had worn for our date on my birthday in February. The last date we had before he drowned. It was his favorite.

"You look like a cloud," he said. Then he kissed me.

I tried not to look at the ocean, to hear the ocean, to smell the ocean, when I stared at the map. I followed it carefully across the sand, dodging the few people who were walking on the beach. I tried to not resent the couples who were holding hands and laughing, because I could never have what they had ever again.

Finally I came to the spot. It was a hole, maybe a foot deep. There was something in it. I knelt down in the sand that dug into my skin and picked it up.

I let a sob escape me. It was a journal, leather-bound and at least two inches thick. It was filled with poems and letters he'd written me, but never sent. One page said simply, *I love you, I love you, I love you*, over and over again. In between the words, there were pictures; pictures my mom had taken, pictures he'd taken, all pictures of us. One of us from behind, holding hands, one of us messing around in my room with silly string, one of us kissing in the snow.

I flipped to the last page. Underneath the *Happy Valentine's Day!* he had written a word—a single word—in his perfect cursive.

*Always.*

Tears were blurring my vision, but that didn't stop me from staring at the word.

*I'll be there for you . . . Always.*

He hadn't lied after all. He would be there for me.

*Always.*