

# Almost

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# *One*

Loving him was like walking through the desert and getting surprised when inevitably bitten by a rattlesnake: Ayla knew she would get hurt, yet she let herself fall for him anyway, because she was so desperate for a drop of happiness that she didn't mind bleeding out in the process of obtaining it.

Gazing apathetically at the blood trickling sluggishly down her wrist, she sighed. A drop definitively splattered onto the dark hardwood. "You know, roses would be a lot less annoying without these stupid thorns."

A loud scoff echoed across the room. "You'd be a lot less annoying without the constant complaining, but you don't hear roses make a fuss about that."

Ayla raised a brow. "Did you take some of grandma's medicine and ask their opinion?"

Audrey, Ayla's little sister, rolled her eyes. "I'm glad you amuse yourself so at least one person can find you funny."

Shaking her head fondly, Ayla shifted her focus back to the flower in her hand, which she had freshly cut from the backyard this morning. Her most important daily responsibility was picking one flower to cut, clean, and deliver to her grandmother, who lived in the extension of the house, to help encourage a good day. This was the sad pattern that had engraved itself into Ayla's life: encouragement, hope, and continual disappointment.

When she first found out about the diagnosis, Ayla couldn't bring herself to feign surprise. She always had a hunch that something was wrong when her grandmother Cecilia kept forgetting little details, and habitually switched items between the freezer and refrigerator. To

help Cece live more pleasantly with Alzheimer's, Ayla started a garden for her the year of the initial diagnosis. Now, two years later, Ayla had become a near-expert on horticulture and fallen hopelessly in love with the coffee-haired boy she stole flower seeds from.

It wasn't that she couldn't afford to buy seeds from the market, but rather intoxicating thrill that stealing things gave her that made Ayla a botanist by day and serial-thief by night. She glanced down at the crimson rose and sighed delicately. This one had a certain smell to it that reminded her of a special candy her mother would bring home, years ago, each evening after work.

After slicing the last thorn off of the stem, Ayla made her way to Cece's room, feeling nerves begin to eat away the edges of her stomach. She never allowed herself to set expectations about Cece because she typically ended up disappointed. When Ayla arrived, she reached forward and knocked softly on the already-cracked door, causing it to open slightly in the process. She peeked in hesitantly, and released a sigh of relief when she saw Cece wave her in with a smile. Today was going to be a good day.

"Come in, my child," Cece said in a low voice.

Ayla held out the rose. "I brought you red today."

Cece smiled. "Thank you," She coughed as she accepted the offering, making Ayla wince. "You always bring me such lovely flowers."

"How are you feeling?" Ayla asked, concerned, as she reached over and felt Cece's forehead.

Her grandmother attempted to shake her off, but Ayla refused to budge. "I'm completely fine, Ayla," Cece said. Then, her gaze wandered to the bright ruby rose in her hand. "You brought me this?"

Ayla sighed, nodding sadly.

Cece creased her brows. "Why do you look so sad? You always bring me such beautiful flowers. Though none are ever as pretty as you."

"Thank you," Ayla smiled softly. "Which flower would you like me to bring tomorrow?"

Cece paused for a moment to contemplate. "What about something orange?"

"I'll see what I can do," Ayla responded, wracking her brain in an attempt to remember if she had grown any orange flowers.

After a little, Ayla decided to leave her grandmother in search of the requested orange flower, and to her surprise, found there were none outside. With a stunning realization she immediately began preparing to break into the nameless boy's garden and take a flower of his.

# *Tulo*

The night tumbled harshly on the world, as if the moon had fallen loose from the sky. Ayla had splayed herself onto the bed, leaving her window open as an invitation to the pleasant breeze. She knew tonight would be the perfect night to trek across town and steal from the stranger's garden, feeling a twinge of panic at the thick wall of apathy she had developed toward criminality. Regardless, she felt a wave of excitement crash over any doubts, replacing them with a biting urge. Since she didn't have any orange flowers in the garden, she felt the crime was justified—not that she needed a justification—almost like her own interpretation of Robin Hood.

Grabbing her backpack and black hoodie, she tiptoed past Audrey's room and out the door, feeling giddy like a young child entering a toy store. Through the yard, past the neighbor's broken mailbox, and into the woods, Ayla was encompassed by a freedom that she hadn't experienced in a long while. After passing what felt like thousands of identical trees, she finally arrived at a large field: the last obstacle to conquer in her extensive journey. Taking her first step forward, and one step closer to the lovely stranger who hid far from town, Ayla smiled.

By the hundredth step, she was ready to turn back. The tall grass angrily scratched at her defenseless legs, almost as if each blade were begging for attention. Ayla felt her skin flare up in retaliation and released a passionless grunt. Treading through footlong blades of what was essentially sandpaper was really killing her mood. The only thing pushing her forward rather than back was the thought of what creatures lurked near her feet, which sent a shiver down her spine and added an extra pep in her step.

However, as the quiet of the night began to carry her, the taste of after-midnight sweetened her sorrow. The moon's rays beamed softly onto her skin, covering her shoulders with a faint glow, as the wind brushed her elbows and knees, effectively cooling her irritated skin. There was something beautiful about 2am; the tick of the atmosphere beat in stride with the tick of hidden insects singing in the leaves. The farther she walked on, the more she began to enjoy the scruff of the grass, feeling the crunch of fallen leaves under her feet as the midnight sky inked itself into her lungs with every breath.

Having finally crossed the large field, Ayla had arrived to the small clearing where the stranger's garden began. Her stomach sank, heavy with guilt, as she entered for what seemed like the hundredth time. The adrenaline soon kicked in, however, replacing that guilt with a burning desire to take everything she could carry and run. Stepping softly under the canopy of lilies at the front of the garden (well, front to her since that's where she always entered, but was actually the very back of it) Ayla began to search for any orange flower. The problem with thieving in the middle of the night, however, was the brilliant way darkness masked color in a trench coat of oblivion. Cursing under her breath, Ayla shone the screen of her phone's homepage at the lowest brightness possible to avoid being discovered. If humans had night vision, this would never have been a problem!

After a few minutes of prowling around, she met the back wall of the stranger's house: the one that the beautiful boy lived in. Staring through the window and into the warmly lit home (like a professional stalker), Ayla sighed. The curtains were drawn but there was still a sliver of the inside visible since the cloth of the drapes didn't meet all the way. Suddenly, the silhouette of a man's figure passed by the glass, making Ayla jump back while her stomach dropped. What

was he doing up so late? She couldn't get caught, but also couldn't resist tiptoeing closer to see him through the gap in the curtain. Ayla moved forward, feeling the rush of adrenaline fueling every step, and peaked through the crack in the drapes. With a creative tilt of the head, she managed to spot the back of his ruffled, espresso-colored hair and a white t-shirt that stretched pleasantly across the muscles in his back as he bent over messing with something in front of him. He had a beautiful body, but what really intrigued Ayla was what kept him up tonight. She sighed, shaking her head.

Turning away from the stranger, she forced herself to focus on the task at hand. Allowing the faint white glow of her phone screen to guide her from plant to plant, she spent what felt like eternity searching. She was about to give up when she finally saw it: a beautifully laid out, lush bed of marigolds with petals of a beautiful golden hue. Letting out a quiet breath of relief, Ayla removed the small scissors from her hoodie pocket, ready to snip a flower at the stem, when she heard a rustle in the bushes. She felt her blood freeze.

Glancing over her shoulder to see it was only a rabbit, Ayla muttered a curse. She quickly snipped the flower and ran out of the garden as fast as quietly possible.

# Three

The petals of the marigold seemed to sparkle as it soaked in the morning sun. Cece seemed enamoured with this flower like she had never been before. In fact, as she strolled through the garden, brushing her fingers softly over its petals, she began to talk about an old memory of her late husband, Ayla's grandfather.

Ayla froze. "You remember?" She asked, a desperate edge to her pleading voice.

Cece looked at her with a gasp on her lips. "I... I do!"

They talked for hours more, as Cece sniffed the marigold softly. She began to detail the story of her love for orange flowers. "The first flower your grandfather ever gave me was an orange marigold. He did that on purpose, of course, because he listened to how I used to always complain that orange flowers are always overlooked in favor of pink, red, and even yellow. Every Friday morning after that conversation he started leaving any orange flowers he could get ahold of on my doorstep before I left for school. I remember the feeling of smelling them, like he had sprayed some love right onto the stem. I can't believe I..." She trailed off, tears filling her eyes. "...Forgot." Using the bench next to her for support, Cece sat down and put her head in her hands, the marigold wiggling as it caught between her fingers.

Ayla felt lost. Seeing her grandmother cry because she had forgotten the love of her life made her want to shake the Earth until things fell back to the way they were before any of this had happened.

Audrey came outside then, chewing on her cheek when she saw Cece. "Hey grams, you wanna play go fish?"

Cece glanced up at her, wiping her eyes. “Of course.” She stood up, delicately placing the flower in the empty space next to her.

Ayla watched as the two of them went inside, holding back a scream of frustration. She didn’t understand why such bad things happened to such good people. Pacing around the empty garden made her wonder: if one marigold brought back a memory, what would another do? What could the power of an entire bunch of them, growing in a confident succession, accomplish? She had to go back to the boy’s garden tonight.

Making her way back inside, Ayla decided to make lunch to pass the time. A brightly colored salad, full of red, yellow, and green peppers, carrots, cucumbers, tomatoes, and strawberries. She loved the taste of things fresh from the garden, and tried to implement them into every meal. It was hard for Ayla to remember the last time she had bought any sort of fruit or vegetable from the store, which made her proud. If she knew one thing, it was how to grow stuff.

Audrey came in later, sniffing around the kitchen. “Is the food coming soon or am I going to starve to death?”

“Get ready to starve,” Ayla responded with a smile.

Audrey crossed her arms. “How much longer?”

Ayla looked at her and laughed. It was moments like these that made her remember just how much younger Audrey really was, when they weren’t struggling to take care of themselves and their grandmother. “Not long. I just need to add a sprinkle of love.”

Audrey made a noise. “I’ll pass.”



After lunch, they all sat in a circle playing *Monopoly* as Ayla patiently waited for the glowing sun to go to sleep. Summer was always much harder than the school year, since Ayla had nothing to do but sit and wait. Time was such a fickle thing, and it never went by quickly when you needed it to. Luckily, after a few rounds of *Monopoly*, some *Uno*, and one game of *Go Fish*, it was finally time for bed. Ayla could barely contain her excitement as she upstairs and began to pack her things. It was time to steal some flowers and save her grandmother's memories.

# Four

The edges of Matthew's vision turned red. There he had been, innocently strolling about his precious and expertly cultivated flower garden when he came across this—this *abomination!* In front of his very eyes there stood a missing marigold, snipped three-fourths of the way down, the leftover stem protruding proudly in the ground in spite of the loss it had faced.

Who breaks into a garden to steal flowers? They grew *everywhere* around town!

Matthew couldn't help but let out a whine. His entire life had been dedicated to continuing the floral fantasy project he had started with his mother as a child. Before she died, she loved flowers, and taught him everything he knew about botany. Cultivating flowers wasn't even a hobby for him anymore, it had become a lifestyle—something he continued to keep the spirit of his mother alive. And now, there was some dirty thief snipping it at the stem! How *dare* they!

After a few minutes of angrily staring at the stub that was once a beautiful flower, he decided to take action. This thief would probably come back if they went through all the trouble of stealing from him once and getting away scot-free. Matthew went to work, running inside to grab his camera, determined to hide it somewhere and leave it recording overnight. He looked around for the perfect place, trying to think of the best way to catch them. If they went for the marigold the first time, odds were if they came back it would be for the same flower, hopefully, so Matthew tucked the camera on a ledge on his hanging planter facing the bed of marigolds, right between some leaves of his tomato plant, to mask it as much as possible. All he could do

now was wait, hoping the thief wouldn't come back for the sake of his flowers, but hoping if they did come back, the camera would at least reveal their identity.

Matthew went back inside then, looking for something to do to calm his anxiety and impatience. He needed to distract himself from the impending doom of spiraling into a manic-mode Sherlock-wannabe looking for clues in the dirt with a magnifying glass. After some restless pacing throughout the house, he settled on playing some piano.

Sitting on the bench, a wave of nostalgia crashed over him, distracting him with thoughts of piano concerts as a little boy and excitedly showing each new song he learned to his mother. His fingers seemed to melt into the keys as he moved them up, down, and across, playing the first song he'd taught himself. It was a rush of calm, confidence and reassurance that only playing the piano could bring him. Because of this, his favorite hobby, after botany of course, was music. Chopin was fun to play, but his favorite composer was Ludovico Einaudi, and as he played the feather-light notes of *I giorni* he felt his body start to sway in tune with the beat.

The sweet sounds of the piano, however, would be nothing in comparison to the sweet sound of victory when he finally caught the mysterious flower thief. Matthew smiled as he reached the end of the song.

# Five

Ayla's determination to steal now stemmed from a desire to help her grandmother recover, rather than the pure adrenaline rush of doing something wrong. For once in her life, she felt like she was actually doing something right. She tirelessly waited for the day to die, but time seemed to be moving slower now that she had found purpose again. She wanted to help Cece. She needed to. She *had* to.

Making her way through the trees and across the giant field was never an easy feat, but now, the thought of helping her grandmother remember kept her going strong. Ayla let the twinkle of the stars soak through her skin as she briskly walked, one foot in front of the other, her determination taking away any and all pain or exhaustion. The quiet of the night was always her favorite part of the day. Ever since her grandmother's diagnosis there had been so much noise shuffling through her head, a static that seemed to carbonate her thoughts and buzz around her blood, she felt like she would dissolve into a million pieces. Being surrounded by the silence that only a blanket of midnight could bring was sombering in the best way.

When Ayla made it to the garden, she stepped through the loose brush carefully, making the least noise physically possible. Walking with soft steps on the grass, she made her way to the marigolds, admiring how plush the grass looked. She debated taking off her shoes and testing her theory, but decided she didn't have the time.

*Another day.* She thought to herself.

Just when she made the couple feet behind where the marigolds were planted, she spotted blink of red in the corner of her eye. Ayla froze, and then started to make her way backwards

carefully. When she focused her stare more directly to the source of the light, she realized a camera had been hidden in a fern that was hanging from a rack of metal decor with vines wrapped around it, and the camera was pointed directly at the marigolds.

It clicked in Ayla's mind then, that the boy had realized she'd stolen from him. In order to take the marigolds she needed, she would have to break the camera. The boy was cute, but he clearly wasn't clever, since all it took was one shake of the fern for the poor device to go smashing onto the ground.

What a shame. It looked expensive.

She figured she probably didn't have to be so extreme and could've tried to turn it off, rotate the hanging planter so the camera was facing a different direction, or place a fern leaf on top of the lens, but desperate times called for desperate measures, and Ayla didn't think about any of those solutions until after she had already smashed the camera.

Shrugging to herself, she walked over to the marigolds, listened for any sounds but found it to be silent (which was a fantastic sign), and crouched down in preparation. Unzipping her bag, she uprooted the first flower. Her goal was to take as many as could fit and replant them in her garden so she could have easier access.

After uprooting about half of the marigolds, her backpack was full, and Ayla felt like a master criminal. It felt good and bad, exhilarating and terrifying, but most of all it made her feel like she was doing *something*. One step closer to helping her grandmother was closer than she'd gotten in a year. Sealing her bag and brushing herself off, Ayla made her way back home with a smile on her face and a skip in her step.

# Six

When Matthew came across half of his marigolds completely uprooted the next morning, his heart fell out of his chest and plopped onto the smushed grass in front of him. Letting out a loud whine, he clenched his fists in frustration. What was that thief's fascination with his favorite flower? Any plant he spent his precious time cultivating didn't deserve the abhorrent fate of being ripped at the stem, but he would not have made as big of a fuss over the hydrangeas! Clenching a fist, he turned and stalked into the house, unwittingly muttering about criminals and audacity.

Now, he was out of half his marigolds *and* a camera! And he was definitely out for revenge. After spending some time carefully thinking and constructing a plan, he finally decided on staking the thief out. They could break his camera but they wouldn't break his resolve. He was ready for action.

Well, if they showed up again the next day at least.

He wasn't sure how long he was planning on staking out and protecting the marigolds but he decided he would do whatever it takes. Though there was an itching feeling scratching at the back of his mind that no thief would be dumb enough to come back right after they realized their target was onto them, Matthew figured he would take his chances. Clearly this was no ordinary thief.

Seriously, who stole flowers from a private garden?

For the rest of the day, Matthew waited. Then, the next day, he camped behind his ferns and began his wait.

# Seven

Ayla woke with a bitter taste on her tongue. She had a bad feeling about today, though she couldn't quite place her finger on where it was coming from. After gifting Cece a marigold, Ayla packed her bag and decided to go to his garden during the day and steal the rest of the marigolds, though the knowledge it was a bad idea tickled the back of her mind.

She knocked on Audrey's door. "Hey, I'm gonna go into town."

"M'kay," Audrey replied absently, too absorbed into the website she was scrolling on.

After making her way to the garden and checking to make sure there wasn't a new camera set up, Ayla began to dig up the remaining marigolds. Just as she had put the last one in her backpack and zipped up, a loud crash echoed throughout the small area. She turned, eyes wide and a flush in her cheeks, to face the culprit.

"So *you're* the one who's been kidnapping my marigolds." A smooth voice greeted her, rich and deep like the expensive chocolate that sold in a shop she passed on the daily.

She stayed silent, and avoided meeting his eyes, finding solace in directing her gaze to any alternate escape routes available and kneading her teeth into her bottom lip, even though it was one bite away from needing stitches.

"Well?" He demanded. "Who are you? What do you want from my precious flowers?" The stranger did a poor job at masking the whine in his voice.

Ayla stared him diametrically in the eyes then, for the first time. They looked infuriated, like a storm was brewing within each iris and eating away the pupil. Suddenly she found she couldn't look away.

“I...” She trailed off, unable to come up with a cover story.

His eyebrows rose and then lowered dramatically as he stared in question. “Do you speak *English?*”

After a few more moments of her stunned, unbroken silence, he released a deep sigh and hung his head low. “You killed my flowers.” This time he didn’t even try to hide the whining.

As her eyes wandered in an attempt to find something to say, they landed on his bare feet and she concluded the grass was definitely as soft as it looked. If only she hadn’t gotten caught, she’d have taken the time to feel it for herself.

“I guess I do owe you an explanation,” She started, swiftly meeting his eyes once again. He regarded her with a poorly-masked avidity, noticeably intrigued. “But first I should probably—” Abruptly, she whisked around and tore into a sprint, fast as her feet would carry her, past the peonies and under the canopy of blooming lilies. Matthew stood dumbstruck, until the fact that she was gone hit him so hard that his shoulders began to sag. He blinked, realizing his mouth was slightly open in shock, and snapped it shut with a defiant vigor.

No. Absolutely not. He would *not* allow this to happen!

Before he realized what he was doing, his feet broke off into the fastest sprint he’d ever ran. His body thought for him, avoiding obstacles, keeping up the pace, and most importantly, tracking the culprit.

Finally catching up to the thief, Matthew began to slow his walk and put more care into his steps. He followed her around the corner, to a house he assumed was hers. He started having to crouch down as the branches on the trees started to extend lower, in order to avoid being scratched. As the girl entered her backyard, he tiptoed against the brick side-wall and peaked

carefully around the corner. At first, he scowled at her planting the stolen flowers in an empty section in her garden, but was quickly distracted by the elegance and biodiversity between the plants.

Suddenly, a small child ran out of the house, looking around eleven years old or so, yelling. “Ayla! Ayla! Help me! Grandma fell!”

The thief, or Ayla, as the girl called her, immediately dropped the plants and ran into the house. All Matthew could hear was commotion, and then a panicked phone call asking for a paramedic.

After eavesdropping on the call, Matthew came to the conclusion that Ayla’s whole life must’ve revolved around flowers, just like his did, and suddenly, he wasn’t mad about anything anymore. He moved forward and presented himself, and waved awkwardly as a teary-eyed Ayla came out of the house.

# Eight

“What are you doing here?” She asked, voice trembling and terribly low.

All efforts to breathe were inadequate. “I... I didn’t know. I’m sorry—”

She sighed, delicate like the first innocent snowflake before a heavy winter storm. “I know.” Her eyes met his, sorrow reflecting off of each other. “I’m sorry.”

He stepped closer, but stopped suddenly, digging his foot into the ground in a sudden bout of nervousness. “How can I help you?”

Ayla creased her brows. “Why would you want to help me?” She asked.

“Why not?” He countered. “At least you’ve been taking good care of my flowers.” He gestured over to the garden with a nod of the head, but his eyes glued to the tulips in the center with a piqued interest. “How did you—?” He looked flabbergasted. “Don’t tell me you stole my flowers and did a better job at keeping them alive than me. That *really* bruises my ego.” He clutched his chest to dramatize the statement.

Ayla laughed. “I actually didn’t steal those. Even if I did steal mostly everything else—” She glanced at him nervously, expecting some sort of retaliation in his features, but found only intrigue in his expression. “—My grandma gave me those tulip seeds. I planted them but didn’t think much to start an arboretum or anything... Your garden inspired me.”

He raised his brows amusedly. “*Inspired* is such an innovative way to put it.”

They stood in an awkward silence for a few moments, until Ayla decided to speak.

“So—I need to go talk to the paramedic. I... uh—never got your name.”

“You never asked for it. Though, you don’t seem to ask for many things in general.” This made Ayla cringe, causing him to erupt into laughter. “I’m just messing with you. I’m Matthew.”

Ayla chewed on her lip. She couldn’t help but wince, knowing she had been enamoured by someone nameless to her. Hearing his name for the first time, however, made her shiver in the most pleasant way. “I’m Ayla.”

Matthew nodded. “That’s a pretty name.” He paused, searching for the perfect place to avoid her eyes. “So!” He started. “Wanna come over tomorrow? I can teach you some botanist secrets.”

Ayla laughed. “Sure.”



The inside of Matthew’s house was just as pretty as the outside. A strange feeling passed through Ayla as she entered for the first time through the front door, rather than the small gap in the bushes. She couldn’t help but sigh at the colorful walls, vivid artwork, and delightful smell of fresh-baked cookies.

“You bake too?” She asked incredulously.

He rolled his eyes. “Everyone is always so shocked that I garden and bake. I don’t really think it’s that big of a deal, but I guess since guys are expected to play football, fix the sink, and mow the lawn I’m a huge spectacle.”

“No, I didn’t mean it *that* way,” She clarified. “I just meant that it’s really cool. And Football is totally overrated, for the record.”

“Yeah,” He laughed. “You can’t eat it.”

Hours passed, and they lost all track of time talking as Matthew attempted to teach her how to make a brownie cake but forgot it in the oven after losing himself in conversation. After laughing and waving away the smoke, he cringed at the blackened, coal-like lump that he had created.

“Okay, I promise that doesn’t always happen,” He said as Ayla laughed.

Realizing it was almost 10pm and they hadn’t once gone into the garden, Matthew invited Ayla over again tomorrow before they said goodnight. Ayla took her time walking back, basking in the warm feeling that talking with Matthew had left within her. She knew she had built up this character of him over the past year and fallen in love with the idea of what he could be like, through the glimpses she’d caught of him, but getting to know him felt even better than what she’d imagined. She knew now she wasn’t really in love with Matthew, and instead channeled her emotions toward him in an attempt to sort through the absurdity that had enveloped her life and taken control. She wanted to take control of her life again.

When Ayla finally returned home, she laid in bed, feeling okay with the future for the first time in forever. Picturing the way his smile brightened the room, she knew it wouldn’t be long before she really did fall for Matthew. Though, hopefully, he would do a better job stealing her heart than she did stealing his flowers.