

SWALLOWED ASHES

VICTORIA'S JOURNEY



MEREDITH
BALDWIN

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SWALLOWED ASHES VICTORIA'S JOURNEY

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Written by Meredith Baldwin.

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First Edition

Chapter 1

Finally, My Day Off

I woke up twenty minutes ago but can't seem to move my legs to get off this bed. Instead, I am laying here staring at the cherry blossom mural my mom painted years ago. I always think of cherry blossoms in a romantic way. Maybe most people prefer roses but a cherry blossom is a much better way to say, "I love you." I imagine strolling down a sidewalk, hand in hand, with the love of my life. Nowhere is more romantic than the park in the spring, with the cherry trees surrounding us. That would be the perfect time for him to get down on one knee. I close my eyes to get a clearer picture of the man, the man I have been in love with for three years. He has no idea this will be the way he proposes to me but it's fun to think about the moment in advance. All of a sudden, someone barreling up the stairs brings me into reality. I can only guess who it is.

My door flies open. Piper, my best friend, comes barging in and lands on my bed. Although I am completely surprised by her visit, I still can't seem to move.

"What the heck are you doing in bed? It's 10 o'clock. I got out of work a few minutes early this morning. How come you didn't call me yesterday? I left you like seven messages." Piper stands over me with her hands on her hips while I'm lying flat on my stomach, my face smushed into my pillow with my cheek chubbed up. I only move my eyes to look at her and respond with a moan.

"Are you sick?" she asks, with a concerned look. She grabs my right shoulder to jostle me. If I were sick, that sort of contact would not be appreciated.

"Nooo, I'm not sick," I mumble.

"Scoot over," Piper exclaims. She grabs my arm and torso, turning me on my back. She lies down beside me. When my older sister, Valentina, went to a four-year college last year, I absolutely traded up and took her full-sized bed. I still get dirty looks from her when she comes home to visit, even though, I always graciously give her my room with her old bed back and take back my reject of a twin bed in her old room. Luckily for me, she

had a job this summer and I only had to vacate my room for a long weekend back in July.

“Why didn’t you call me back yesterday?” Piper asks again.

“Because I’ve been working nonstop with the shifts I had to cover, including yours, so I got home late.” I try to stifle a yawn but it comes out anyway. I close my eyes and ask her what I know she’s dying to tell me. “How was your date?” I ask, sincerely.

“Oh, my gosh, it was awesome. He took me to Cavanaugh’s Grill.”

He, being her newest boyfriend, Grant.

“Oooh,” I open my eyes, while salivating and give her a jealous scowl.

She continues with a smirk, “I wanted the fish tacos so badly but I didn’t want to smell fishy all night so I got the gourmet grilled cheese. It was delish.” She lets out a smitten sigh and smiles big. Her chestnut brown hair is extra cute today. Probably still styled from yesterday’s date. All throughout high school, it was long and straight; flat-ironed, constantly. This spring she decided to chop it off and now it’s about shoulder length. She must have curled it yesterday, because it is bouncy and wavy.

“I’m happy you had a good time.” My stomach can no longer remain silent. It growls. “Now I’m hungry,” I say, exasperated. I was hoping to sleep at least half of the day.

“Good, now maybe you’ll get out of bed and I can tell you about my hot date.”

“There’s more than gooey grilled cheese?” I tease, while she hops off the bed and gives me a hand. I slowly rise, feeling all the kinks in my back and feet from working so much.

“Oh, there’s a lot more than gooey grilled cheese,” she states, insinuating a very juicy story coming up.

“Don’t say anything inappropriate if my mom is downstairs,” I give her a warning glance.

Piper gasps, “Victoria Rose, I wouldn’t dare.” She gives me a fake evil glare and her tone is challenging. I immediately start to worry. She is always trying to rile my parents and make them uncomfortable. I sigh, knowing I’m in for an eventful breakfast as we head downstairs.

My mom is squatting under the sink grabbing some cleaning supplies and my dad is at work. My parents are both teachers and, of course, have the summer off; but my dad always works at Rick’s Hardware to make extra money. He’s a natural born carpenter but he combined his love of teaching

and carpentry to teach shop class. This town is small, so my dad got lucky and teaches English for a few periods of the day and is the shop teacher the other half. Shop class is an elective; most kids choose theater or home economics. I, of course, took shop class. I can make an awesome birdhouse. Because he was the only shop teacher, the school allowed me to be in his class. For English, though, they made me have another teacher. I was so jealous of my friends. My dad always interacted with the class and made it fun. He did impressions and told funny stories. It was such a bummer to not get to experience that.

It seems my mom has been busy all morning. There are fresh flowers on the entryway table, the hardwood floors are gleaming and it smells of lemons and Clorox. Our house is small but it's well-kept and cozy. I love it. I am not looking forward to leaving for college in a few weeks, because it means living on campus and not here.

"Hey, mom," I say quietly, so I don't scare her.

"Morning, Victoria. Did I wake you with the vacuum?" she asks.

"Oh, no. It wasn't you." I glare straight into Piper's eyes but she could care less.

"Morning, Piper." Mom says, lovingly with a smile.

"Good morning, Lily. I went straight up to V's room when you were vacuuming, I didn't want to bother you."

"What are you girls up to today?" Mom asks, while spraying the counter with cleaner.

"Nothing," I state,

At the same time Piper enthusiastically says, "School shopping."

"Huh? What?" I slump my shoulders, knowing I have no say in today's plans. I mosey over to the cabinet to fetch a bowl.

"We have to get stuff for college. One of my professor's wants me to get a graphing calculator, I need a thumb drive, paper and we need to get fake I.D.s."

I scowl at her. Mom stops wiping the counter and looks up.

"Just kidding; but, seriously, all those other supplies are necessary. I can't believe we waited until the last minute. We leave in two weeks, V. Two weeks."

"I know, Pipe. I just keep working and working. You know, filling in for people who keep asking off. I never have time to go and get school supplies."

“Well, today you have time. It’s your day off.”

After offering to get Piper breakfast, who refuses, I get my cereal and sit down.

“Tell me about your date,” I insist. Mom grabs her bucket of cleaning supplies and heads to the guest bathroom. No doubt she’s giving us privacy, as she doesn’t want to hear anything about Pipe’s date.

“So, Grant picked me up around 4 o’clock and we went to play mini-golf. We got snow cones. They didn’t have those spoon-straw things and let me tell you,” she looks pretty darn serious and holds both her hands up as if halting traffic, “there is no dainty way to eat a snow cone. It kept touching my nose. It was irritating.” She crinkles her nose, probably recalling the cold annoyance.

I laugh at the thought. “I’m sure he didn’t notice. I have the most brilliant question though.” I put a huge spoonful of cereal in my mouth.

“What’s that?” she waits as I chew.

“What flavor did he get?”

She gives me a puzzled look. I love how she can raise only one eyebrow. I’ve never been able to do that.

“Why is that a brilliant question?”

“It will tell us a lot about his personality.”

“Which flavors mean what?” she indulges me.

“If he got lime, maybe he’s pretty chill.”

“No, not lime.” she smiles, understanding my game.

“Grape, maybe, arrogant,” she shakes her head, “piña colada, he bats for the other team,” serious faced, she interjects immediately, “Absolutely not. Trust me,” she gives me a sly crooked smile.

“All right, all right. Moving on,” I wave my hands at her, shooing her insinuations.

“Bubblegum, he’s immature,” she shakes her head again, “cherry, he wants to have many babies.”

“Aahh,” she throws her head back, laughing.

“Oh, no. Many babies?” I ask, giggling back.

“Yeah. Oh, great.”

“What flavor did you get?”

“Arrogant and babies.” We both laugh so hard we’re crying. We may be strange but we get each other. We’ve always clicked. She continues to tell me about her date, while I finish eating.

“So who won?” I ask, taking my bowl to the dishwasher.

“Won what?” Piper looks at me, confused.

“Putt-Putt, nerd,” I tease.

“He did. It ticked me off, too. I couldn’t get the stupid ball through the dinosaur’s legs. It kept hitting his toe.”

I snicker at the level of her anger, although I know she does this for my comedic benefit.

“That sucks. I know how you like to win,” I give her an apologetic smile, knowing in her fake fit of rage, she does like to win.

“No worries, I whacked it in the shin.”

“Grant?”

“No, that stupid dinosaur.”

“Oh, geez.”

“Uh, he deserved it,” she states as matter of fact and raises her eyebrows at me, completing that topic of conversation.

“So, you think he’ll ask you out again or are you gonna ask him out?” We head back up the stairs, so I can get dressed.

“I think it went rather well. It is Thursday already, huh?”

“Yep.” I slip on my white shorts and navy tee and go in search of my brown loafers.

“I guess if I wanna see him, I better make plans.”

“Absolutely. Maybe jet skiing tomorrow after work?”

“That’s perfect, V.” Piper’s parents have loads of money. Therefore, they have all the fun things in life like Jet Skis, snow skis, boats, all the hunting gear imaginable, motorcycles and go-karts. Yes, go-karts are in their shed.

“Wait, I should ask him if he wants to meet me at the bonfire Saturday night.”

“Duh. I keep forgetting about that. OK, I’m ready. Where the heck are my sunglasses?”

We head out to Piper’s car, hop in and set off to the local we-carry-everything-store.

Piper’s parents didn’t want her to be too cocky at school by giving her a brand new beamer, so they bought her a two year-old one. Yeah, no such luck. She’s still cocky and had by far the best car at school.

Piper never disappoints, she has one of my favorite rock bands playing in her car. We have always had the same taste in music and I think that’s

one of the main things that kept us connected through the awkward middle school years. We've known each other since preschool but have been best friends for about eight years. Because of our long-standing friendship, her parents are also great friends with my parents. Our families have even gone on summer vacations together. It's been pretty awesome that it all works out.

Piper starts air drumming while still driving straight, holding the wheel with her knee and I play the air guitar. We make a great air band.

"Chop Suey. What a funny name," I say, as we get out of the car.

Out of breath from our concert performance, we go into the store, where they play no music at all. Boooo.

We only have to go to one store to get our school supplies. Luckily, Piper's cousin works there and he directs us to every item on our list. We go window-shopping for fun. As we walk to the car, Piper has an idea.

"I should ask Grant if he wants to go shoot darts then go to the bonfire Saturday night."

"That sounds awesome."

Piper is into every sport. Grant is one lucky guy, if he likes a shooting range over a movie and a long walk on the beach. I think if Piper had to do anything involving a beach, it would consist of surfing or beach volleyball.

"Do you think Ryan will be there?" Piper asks.

I freeze at the car door and look up at her. She gives me a sly look, leading me to believe she knows something I don't.

"Ryan MacKenna? Why would you think he would be there?" I try to hide my surging excitement not taking the hook she was baiting. Piper knows me better than my ill attempt at acting casually in the presence of Ryan MacKenna's name.

"Maybe Grant mentioned it?" she lies, coolly.

"What the heck do you know that I don't? Is he back from vacation?" I'm still trying to measure my excitement but I am losing control.

"Maybe," she ducks her head in the car, getting in.

"Piper, is he back?" I almost whack my head, jumping in.

"He gets back tomorrow. You know, you might actually try talking to him."

"He knows who I am, too, ya know," I state sourly. I guess the part I forgot to mention is the man I've loved for three years, is Ryan MacKenna. We have had a few classes together over the years and, sometimes, have

seen each other at school events but there was never a time I told him how I felt. He dated girls and I dated some boys yet the timing was never right. By golly, this is the time. *I have no fear in asking him out and no fear of rejection. I'm smart, I'm eighteen, I'm tan and I'm single. There's no way he'll say no. Right?*

“Well, he’s probably going to the bonfire but I can tell Grant to make sure he is there and I’ll leave it all to you, girlfriend.” Piper, being as feisty as she is, has threatened multiple times to tell him I like him, so she doesn’t have to hear me whine about him anymore. Every time, I plead with her not to say anything because I want it to happen naturally. She reluctantly caves, every time.

I smile and start daydreaming about our romantic evening at the bonfire. Holding hands, sharing cotton candy and maybe even a good night kiss...

“What should I wear?” I cut off my daydreaming.

“White looks great on you, especially since you’re tanned.”

“What about the pink dress I wore to my parents’ anniversary dinner?”

“I like that one; but it’s a smidge fancy for a bonfire.”

“Right.”

“Your yellow one would look great. You’ll just have to try some of them on and we’ll see.

Want to change and go to the lake? We need a nice glow before Saturday.” Piper starts the car, and rolls down the windows and blasts the air conditioner.

“Yeah, let’s get iced coffees first.”

“Of course,” she turns up another favorite and we’re off.

Before we change into our bathing suits, Piper makes me try on at least six different dresses to determine the best one for Saturday night. We decide the yellow sundress is the best choice. It’s bright, so he will be sure to see me coming. It’s sexy, because it’s fitted on the top, and throughout my torso yet flirty and modest, because it flows into an A line to my knees. Perfect.

I put on my new white swimsuit; I had to save the white swimsuit for August, so it and my pasty skin tone won’t blend together. I’m always tan by August, thanks to living next to the lake. The lake is a short walk from my house, across the thick green lawn, down to the wooden dock my dad built and here you are at the usually, icy water. We own a Jet Ski and float rafts for lakes but today, Pipe and I just want to lie out in the sun, read trashy magazines and gossip.

“You don’t think Ryan has a girlfriend, right?” I ask, lying on my back in the lounge chair on the dock.

“No, guys don’t usually want girlfriends during the summer. Who wants to start a relationship when we’re all about to go off to college?”

“Um. You and Grant.”

“That’s different. I wouldn’t call it a relationship. It’s casual. We aren’t boyfriend and girlfriend, like you want to be with Ryan,” she counters.

“OK. I’ll expect him to be single.” I close my eyes and soak in the warm sun. I’ll probably be sorry for this sun exposure later. Still, I can’t help myself. Of course, I have an spf 15 on and an spf 30 on my face, no one wants to be red. *Ugly skin, that thought reminds me of an incident yesterday at work.* “Did I tell you that crazy guy, John “Kooky” Harper, came into the diner last night all drunk and loud, talking about some lady threatening his son?”

“What?” Piper sits up and takes off her sunglasses, “You didn’t tell me.” She whacks me with her magazine on my arm. The slightest societal infraction is enough fun gossip for this town. Everyone’s ears perk up at abnormal behavior.

“Ow. What the heck?”

“Go on, go on.” She rushes me for information. “Everything happens when I’m not there,” she pouts.

“Yeah, Kooky comes in and sits at the counter saying how his son is being threatened by the Mom of a daughter, his son may or may not be seeing. The Mom said she was gonna call the cops on his kid for statutory you know what and he’d be damned if some woman was going to ruin his kid’s life. Yada, Yada, Yada. He started cussing, so Mike told him he needed to get out of there ‘cause he was upsetting the customers.”

“Dude, he’s a nut job. Did they ever find out what happened to his wife?” Piper puts her sunglasses back on and reclines once again, sated with some juicy gossip.

“No, I don’t think anyone knows what happened to her. Some people think he killed her, chopped her body into tiny little pieces and fed her to the bears.”

“What? No, he killed her, stuffed her and sets her out for the holidays.” We both laugh at the direction our wickedly, sick minds are going.

“But honestly, I don’t know what happened to her. They would fight all over town but they seemed to always make up. Maybe she left?”

“Maybe he keeps her locked in his basement,” she says, sounding a little more serious, giving me chills in the heat of the afternoon.

“OK, stop. I’m getting freaked out.”

“Either way,” Piper continues, “that guy is a nut job.”

“Agreed.”

The sun starts going down and we’re called for dinner.

My dad grills hamburgers, which we then throw on some bleu cheese and bacon to make it outrageous. Piper heads home because she, too, has to work tomorrow morning; although, she’s working the early, early shift, 5:30 to about 10:30 in the morning.

Later that evening, Dad and I walk down to the dock and sit in the lounge chairs. I hold my teacup with both hands close to my chest; I’m not cold but it’s comforting.

My dad is a funny guy. He is outgoing and friendly to everyone he encounters. Very charismatic. He caught my mom’s attention with his humor. Not sure how she reeled him in because she is a super quiet and shy person. Maybe she laughed at his jokes and he couldn’t look away? Dad and I have always been real close; maybe because I find him hilarious or because I’m the baby of the family. Either way, there’s a strong bond there. I favor his features mostly. We both have thick brown hair, green eyes and olive skin. Mom has reddish brown hair, brown eyes, pale skin and freckles. Poor thing can never get a tan. At least I have a chance at some color. Because the grays started coming in, she dyes it blonde now.

I can listen to my dad talk for hours. He has many great stories. His parents were missionaries in Africa for many years. His time there sounds to me akin to suffering yet it wasn’t to him. He was pretty young and didn’t know any different. It was how they lived. Every day was an adventure. It’s made him into who he is today. I enjoy our time together.

“Well, Victoria,” Dad always says my full name, even though everyone else usually calls me V. “Are you excited to go to college?” He doesn’t sound too excited.

“Yeah, I’m a little nervous, of course, but I think it’s going to help that Piper will be there with me.”

“That’s why I’m nervous,” he says, with a chuckle.

I laugh. “We’ll be fine Dad. I think Bruce and Amanda will be over here more because of their equally empty nest. You four will be making Piper and me worry.”

He laughs. "That may be true, although, Lieutenant Bruce usually has a tight leash on all of us."

"Yeah, he's a pretty controlled guy. What happened with Piper? He doesn't even have a leash on her." We both laugh again.

"Piper has always had him wrapped around her finger. Some daughters do that to their dads," he gives me a little grin. I knew I was his favorite daughter. *Eat that, Valentina.*

After a while, we sit in silence, enjoying the warm summer night and listening to the locusts. I love being able to look at all the stars and be close to the water and all the trees. This is my favorite place. I can't imagine not living here forever. Although, I haven't actually traveled the world, I've been to California, Arizona and a few other places, although nothing is the same as home. Home is Burton, Idaho. Idaho doesn't seem to get much love unless you just finished a bag of chips.

Yes, we are known for potatoes, which are, of course, associated with couches, grease and oil, scalloped, fried, baked or mashed. One time, Idaho produced 2.7 billion potatoes in a single year. Go us. Honestly though, I love being here, especially living on the lake and being able to explore the woods. It still fascinates me.

Something nasty invades my daydreaming or evening dreaming, rather.

"What's that smell?" We look around and see a glowing light off in the distance with smoke coming from it. "That smells nasty," I scrunch my nose.

"People burn their trash all the time; yeah, that stinks. Let's head inside. I want to catch the news."

Why do old people always like to watch the news? I vow to never watch the news when I'm older. It is always depressing and horrible. I don't need to hear some of the stories they play. It stays with me for weeks and ruins me. All I need to know is the weather and if there's a serial killer in my town.

I head upstairs to take a hot shower. Instead, I grab my phone, which had vibrated itself to the floor, seeing texts from my friend, Camden. Most people immediately hate her. She is a drop-dead gorgeous blonde bombshell. We've been friends since seventh grade, when she moved here from Georgia.

She was beautiful then too, all the boys wanted to ask her out and most did. Almost all the girls gave her dirty looks and were rude to her. I think

many of the girls were dumped when Camden came to town, not making it any easier.

Piper and I befriended her, and she's honestly loved us ever since, very loyal that Camden. She could have dropped us after making friends when she joined the volleyball team, the tennis team, or even the French club; yet that's not Camden. She made several new friends after a while but remembered who didn't judge her in the beginning.

I open the first text.

"Guess who came into the gym today?"

A second text since I didn't respond yet.

"Maybe ur at work? Ryan MacKenna. He looks good V. I asked him if he had a lucky lady and guess what, he said 'NO'. So that's good, V."

"Call me some time, I wanna c u b4 you leave 4 college."

Camden can most certainly ask that kind of question to a guy, without fear of Ryan thinking she was hitting on him, because she is happily dating the star of the hockey team. He got a scholarship to Washington State University. That's where she is going to nursing school. It's funny, she's this beautiful dainty southern belle and she's dating a big husky brute, who has broken his nose at least three times. Not that looks matter, but it's funny to pair them up—you wouldn't put them together on your own. I text her back.

"I KNOW. Pipe told me Grant said Ryan was coming into town. But I thght it wasn't until 2mrw? Yes, let's get 2gether for lunch at Cavanaugh's next week. Thursday is my last day at work. Friday would be good. Want Piper to come too? I'll be at the bonfire this Sat. too. Thanks for the Ryan dating update. It's good to know the timing is right."

She responds quickly to my relief, because I'm exhausted.

"Absolutely, she can come. I don't know if Ryan came in early or Grant was mistaken? Whatev. Can't wait for next week! I miss you ladies. I'll see you at the bonfire."

I text her back.

"Miss you too!! Nighty nite."

I get in bed, immediately entering dreamland.

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