

THE LAST WISH OF SASHA CADE

How far would you go for
your best friend?



CHEYANNE YOUNG



THE DAY Raquel has been dreading for months has finally arrived. Sasha, her best friend in the whole world — *the* best friend in the whole world — has died of cancer. Raquel can't imagine life without her. She's overwhelmed and brokenhearted.

And then a letter from Sasha arrives. Has she somehow found a way to communicate from the afterlife?

In fact, Sasha has planned an elaborate scavenger hunt for Raquel, and when she follows the instructions to return to Sasha's grave, a mysterious stranger with striking eyes is waiting for her. There's a secret attached to this boy that only Sasha — and now Raquel — knows.

This boy, Elijah, might be just who Raquel needs to help her move on from her terrible loss. But can Raquel remain true to herself while also honoring her friend's final wish?

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of Sasha Cade*

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Cheyenne Young



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For Hallee, my angel.

For Chris, my hero.

And for Nova, who is a very good dog.

Prologue

The cancer would take its time killing Sasha Cade. I think we all knew that, in the beginning. Her lymphoma wouldn't be like what happens to someone's random uncle, where he finds a weird lump in his throat and it's diagnosed as stage four, and bam, a month later he's pushing up daisies. "If we'd only caught it sooner," everyone would say.

Sasha and I knew it wouldn't be like that.

Her cancer would take a slow journey, inflaming her lymph nodes one by one until she could connect the painful dots all over her body like tourist stops on a road map to death. The treatment would cost thousands — tens of thousands — draining Sasha's adoptive parents' savings account. Luckily, they could afford it.

It was clear from the moment Sasha returned from that fateful doctor visit that cancer was the villain in my best friend's tragic life story. As we sat on the brick retaining wall in front of her house a week after the news, Sasha told me not to think of it like that. She didn't want the cancer to be the bad guy here. She didn't want to give it credit for anything, much less ruining

her life, because she was still alive and she still had things to accomplish.

That morning, in Mrs. Rakowski's English class, we'd all had to recite our villain narratives. The assignment was meant to challenge our creative thinking. We had to take a known villain, something or someone the general population hated, and write five hundred words from their perspective, convincing the audience that they weren't actually villains at all. Mrs. Rakowski wanted us to make our villains relatable, maybe even characters worthy of pity.

I had chosen Gaston from *Beauty and the Beast*. My fingers shook as I read my narrative aloud in front of the classroom. Gaston was just a hardworking man in want of a loving, intelligent wife. There were too many airheaded floozies in town fawning over him, but he wanted a woman with a brain. A woman like Belle. Was that so wrong of him, to crave someone as delightful as she? Was he *really* so bad?

Sasha winked at me, her surreal blue eyes sparkling with pride as I walked back to my desk, which was right behind hers.

"Told you you'd rock it," she whispered as I slid back into my seat. "You're so much stronger than you think you are."

Sasha had been the first to read her narrative, on pageant moms. The spotlight didn't bother her — she didn't exactly revel in it, but she wasn't bothered. As someone who was pretty much universally loved in school, she was used to people noticing her.

Matt Phillips took small strides to the front of the class. He looked even more nervous than I had felt, his eyes carefully avoiding the middle of the room where Sasha and I sat.

"Cancer, by Matt Phillips," he said, swallowing and then glancing briefly toward Sasha. Her shoulders lifted.

Matt was in a constant battle for valedictorian with Celeste Cho, so it goes without saying that his narrative was incredibly well written. He spoke in first person, as cancer.

Cancer simply wanted to grow and flourish, planting its children as cells and tumors so they could spread and have a happy family. It was just like any other living thing — it *wanted* to live. Just as humans take oxygen and fresh water, just as they eat the flesh of animals to survive, so did the cancer need flesh to thrive. Human flesh.

It didn't mean any harm when it took over a human body, eventually strangling the body's ability to live. In fact, it was sorry it had to come to this.

After all, cancer just wanted to feel the thrill of living, just like we all do.

The class was deadly silent during his reading — even the students busy on their phones had shifted their attention toward him. When he was finished and everybody in the room had chills from head to toe, he looked directly at Sasha, his shoulders slumped, his teeth digging into his bottom lip.

“I'm sorry,” he choked out, one hand scratching his neck so hard it might bleed. “I wrote it before ... well, you know. Before we knew.”

Sasha just smiled, her features as soft and beautiful as before she learned about her sickness. She thanked him for his insightful new perspective on cancer, said she could understand why the disease would choose the fertile cells of her body as the home in which to raise its malignant children.

She just wished the lymphoma had asked her permission first.

Chapter One

Last night had been a good night, one of the best Sasha has had in weeks. Her body is still frail, her cheeks sunken in and her eyes rimmed with dark circles under a nearly bald head, but she'd had a ton of energy. Even though it was a school night (for me, at least), Sasha had declared it Best Friends Movie Night.

The thing about having a best friend dying of cancer? Your parents let you do almost anything you want, including spending days at a time away from home and letting your grades slip from A's to C's. I wouldn't exactly call it a benefit, though. My best friend has to be dying to get these privileges.

We'd spent the night in the Cades' home library, which has become Sasha's temporary bedroom ever since the cancer weakened her body too much for her to walk up stairs. In the corner of the room, on top of the built-in desk, the television plays the DVD menu screen from *Sixteen Candles* on a loop. We must have fallen asleep watching it.

I sit up on the brown leather couch, my body aching to go back to sleep, but Sasha's phone alarm is blaring throughout the small, book-filled room.

“I want to tell Daddy bye before he goes to work,” she’d said last night, setting her alarm for six thirty. Her voice was frail and barely more than a gasp of air. “One of these mornings will be my last, and I don’t want to miss the chance to see him.”

I think my stomach knows before I do. An uneasiness swells up inside of me as I yawn, get up and reach over Sasha’s hospital bed to grab her phone. Silencing her alarm, I notice the three dozen text messages that filtered in overnight. There are 124 students at Peyton Colony High School, and every single one of them considers Sasha a friend. But I am her only *best* friend. We are attached at the hip. Left to my own devices, I would probably be more of a loner, spending my time with only Sasha. But she’s got a personality that attracts everyone, and because of that, we are often invited to parties, school dances and the popular lunch table.

There has been more than one rumor that we might be lesbians. We ignore them. I have a boyfriend, after all, and Sasha would be way out of my league.

When Sasha’s cancer diagnosis hit the school, devastation rocked the entire senior class. Sasha had always been well liked, but after that, she was like royalty. Everyone wanted to sit with us at lunch and take pictures with Sasha as if they were old pals just standing near the lockers between classes. It didn’t matter what menial thing was going on, all of her new best friends wanted to document it on Instagram. While I rolled my eyes and wondered where these girls had been the time Sasha broke her leg and I had to carry her books from class to class, Sasha just smiled and treated everyone with kindness.

Once all the chemo and radiation were over and her diagnosis became the big T — *terminal* — all of her newfound friends

became just as attached as the freaking tumors. A few weeks ago, when she quit school altogether, she was no doubt the most popular girl in our tiny Texas town. I was happy just hanging out in her shadow, although some of the tragic fame trickled onto me, too. I was the best friend, after all, and everyone wants to know the dying girl.

Now I am in my pajamas, staring her in the face.

And I know it. I just *know*.

I don't need to check for a pulse, or watch her faded Zombie Radio T-shirt to see if it moves with the rise and fall of someone alive and breathing. There is something in her face that tells me. She looks peaceful, at rest.

Dead.

I stand there for a long moment, Sasha's phone in my hand, my feet cold on the wooden floor. I even think about going back to sleep, like that time I saw Dad putting Santa's presents under the tree, forever shattering the illusion that magic was real. Pretend it never happened and maybe it never did.

"Sasha," I whisper, then bite down hard on my lip. A desperate act in futility. *Wake up*.

I even hold my breath in anticipation, stupid as it is.

At the foot of her bed, Sasha's golden lab, Sunny, is also awake. His head rests on top of her foot, and his eyes slide over to mine, holding my gaze for the longest moment. Dogs are intuitive. He's known longer than I have. Probably from the second it happened. He'd fallen asleep on the floor because Sasha was in too much pain to cuddle with him last night, but now he's up here on her bed.

I sit on the edge of her bed and touch her hand with my shaking fingers. It is cold as ice — no, colder. The lump in my

throat sinks to my stomach and scorching hot tears of anger flood to my eyes. The back of my throat burns acidic, and — though my heart pounds — I swear I can't breathe.

We all knew this was coming. For months now we've known the lymphoma would kill her. Sasha and I had planned her funeral down to the minute. The six hottest guys in school are her pallbearers and her white, glittery casket is already custom ordered and in stock at Hayes Funeral Home. I've written a beautiful eulogy that references not one but three of our favorite movies. We have known the outcome of this journey for months and knew it would happen soon.

So why do I feel so blindsided?

I pull my feet up on the bed and curl into myself, my hand still on top of Sasha's frigid, lifeless flesh. Sunny lifts up and makes his way across the blankets, settling himself between his human and me. I rest my head on top of his fur and close my eyes. It hurts so bad, so much and for so long.

Movement in the hallway startles me out of my nearly cata-tonic state. I glance at the phone in my hand to see that only eleven minutes have passed since I woke up on the worst day of my life.

"Mrs. Cade?" That's really all I have to say. There is no misinterpreting the tone of my voice.

The shuffling of her house shoes stops, starts and then stops again. "Raquel?"

All she says is my name, but I know she knows. The world suddenly feels so small. We are two people who loved this dead girl, and at this moment, we are the only two people on earth with this pain.

Mrs. Cade calls for her husband, and I hear her sobs before

they walk into the library. Sunny rests his head on top of Sasha's chest. I hold on to Sasha's hand, somehow still seeking comfort from my best friend. I can't face her parents alone. I don't want to see their faces when they learn for certain what I already know to be true.

Sasha Cade has died, and no matter how much we prepared for it, the pain might kill us, too.

Acknowledgments

Here we are. The acknowledgments. This part is almost harder than writing the book. This is the part where I realize all the pages before this point started out as an idea, which was then edited and revised, cut apart and pieced back together, and polished into something that's wonderfully better than what I originally wrote. This book started as my idea, but then it became ours, and these are the people I'd like to thank:

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I promised Matt Howard I would put his name in my book. I trust he will be buying several copies now.

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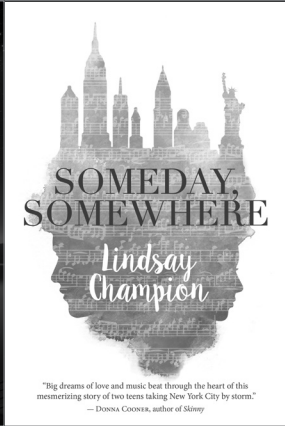
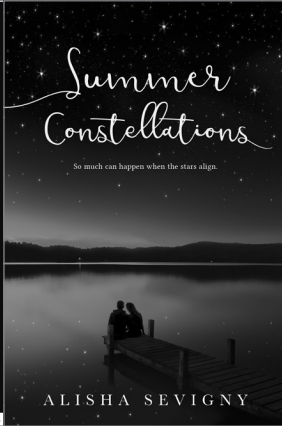
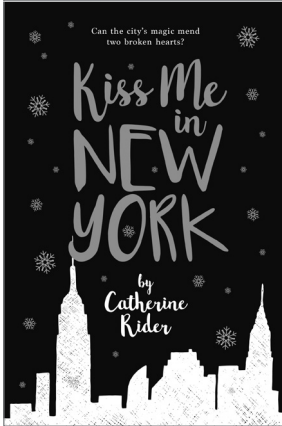
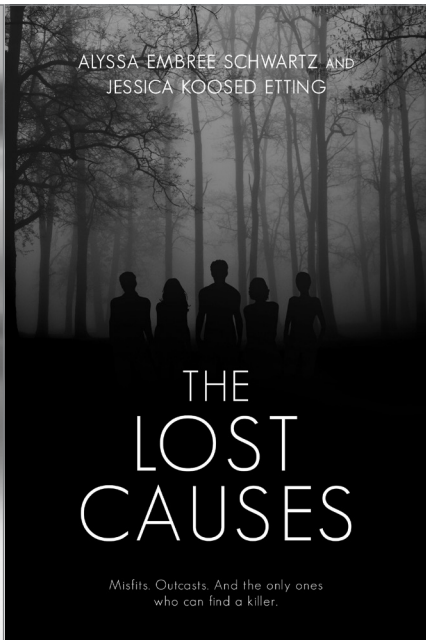
and when I am full of doubt, you bring the hope back. I love you both to pieces.

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About the Author

CHEYANNE YOUNG is a native Texan who has a fear of cold weather and a coffee addiction that probably needs an intervention. She loves books, sarcasm and collecting nail polish. After nearly a decade of working in engineering, she now writes books for young adults. (She doesn't miss the cubicle one bit.) Cheyanne lives near the beach with her husband and daughter, one spoiled-rotten dog and a cat that is most likely plotting to take over the world.

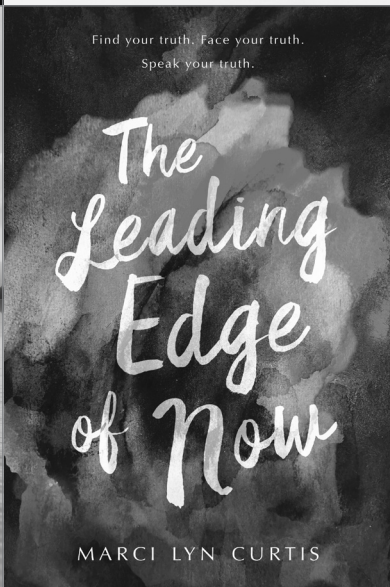
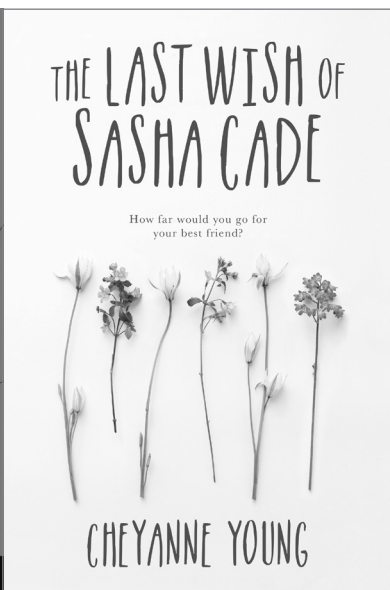
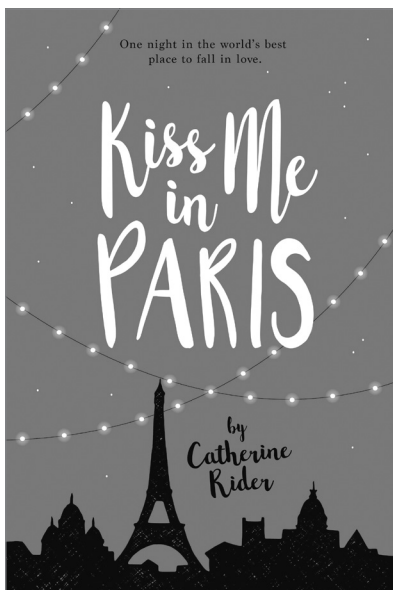
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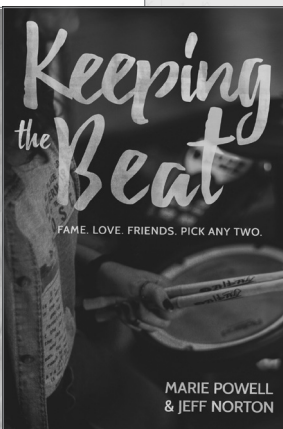
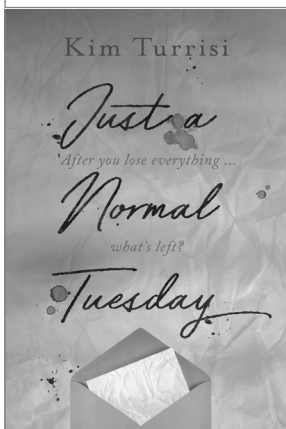
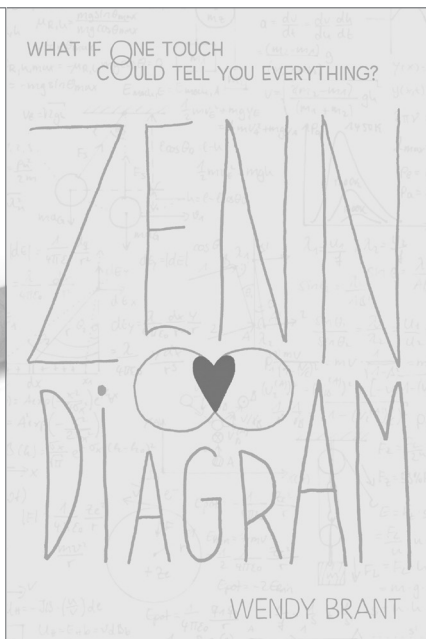
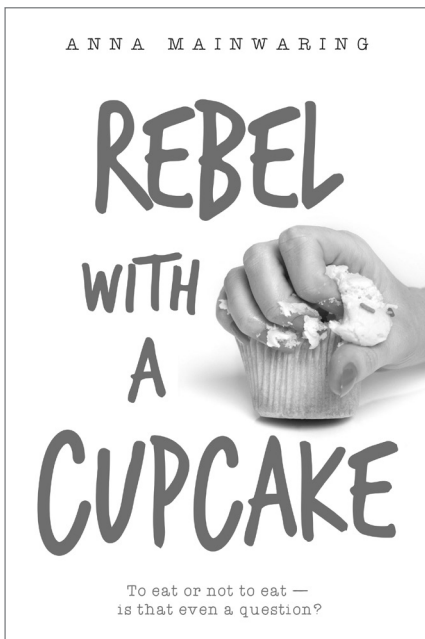


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