

Ashley on the Line Book 2 Love on Life's Zip Line

Sample

Chapter 1

Ashley took a seat on the subway and pulled a crossword puzzle book and pen from her tote bag. Her pen moved across the page and then paused. Damn, this was a hard one. She stared ahead, thinking about the answer as the train left the station.

She smiled, as she picked up speed on the puzzle. She looked up when the train careened around a corner and ground to a stop at the next station.

For a minute or two she idly watched people pushing through the doors and then went back to her puzzle. She looked up again when a tall broad-shouldered man in a khaki jacket sat down in the seat in front of her, blocking her forward view. She smiled to herself. It's a good thing she didn't need to see anything ahead of her. She settled back into the puzzle, and the train pulled out of the station.

A woman's voice ahead broke through the rumble. "Help. Please help me."

The tall man blocking her view sprang from his seat and bent over the woman crumpled in the aisle. He checked her pulse and pointed at Ashley, saying "You, call 9-1-1 now." Then he began mouth to mouth resuscitation.

Ashley grabbed her cell from the cork tote bag and hit the 9-1-1 button. The operator answered. "What is your emergency?"

"I am on the Lexington Avenue Express. We just left the 59th Street station. A woman has just collapsed, and a man is administering CPR."

"Is she responding?"

"I can't tell."

"I'm dispatching help. You don't need to stay on the line."

"Thank you," Ashley whispered. She ended the call with a trembling hand.

The man administering CPR appeared to be having some success. He told the woman, "Don't try to get up. Just lie still."

He looked back at Ashley. "Did you call?"

She nodded yes and he said, "Thanks," and turned back to the woman on the floor.

Ashley was relieved to see two EMTs with a stretcher on the platform as the train screeched to a halt at the next station. Everyone in the car remained in their seats while the EMTs rushed in and checked their patient. One of them picked her up in his arms and carried her off the train. The tall man followed them out and spoke briefly to the EMTs before getting back on the train. He stopped at Ashley's seat. "May I sit with you, Ma'am?"

She scooted over. "Of course."

As he sat down, he said, "She will most likely be just fine." He looked at Ashley. "Your fast response was crucial. Thank you again."

Ashley mumbled, "Of course," as the train moved forward again. "Are you a doctor?"

The man turned in his seat and offered his hand. "I am Mark Barrow. I'm finishing medical school this year and will probably be moving to begin a residency soon thereafter."

Ashley studied his piercing blue eyes. She had the feeling he could see right through lies, problems, whatever, with a look so intent.

She took his hand, "And, I am Ashley Gregory. I work not far from here. I'm a social worker at a foster care agency."

"My mother was a social worker," he said.

"Is she retired?"

He did not answer immediately. "No, she died of cancer when I was 14."

Ashley saw the painful expression on his face. "I'm sorry," she said.

He looked straight at her. "It was a long time ago," he said.

"What is your medical specialty?"

"It will be in physical medicine and rehabilitation, specifically with patients with traumatic brain injury."

"That sounds complicated. How did you get interested in that?"

"I was a medic in the infantry in Afghanistan for two tours. I saw traumatic brain injury right after it happened. The guys weren't just bleeding. Their brains were injured by the force of the blast. As a medic, there was only so much that I could do. I always wished I could do more. When I finished my tours, I got into medical school as soon as I could. I still have a long way to go."

"What's next?"

"I've applied for two residency programs. One in New York City and one in Houston. Either one would be good, but I'm kind of hoping for Houston. It would be a change of pace for me. New York City has a lot of memories for me. Some of them painful."

"I grew up in Dallas, and my grandfather lives in Houston. I don't know him very well, though. Long story there."

"Go ahead. I'm listening if you want to tell me about it," he said.

"My grandmother and grandfather were divorced when my mother was just a little kid. My mother doesn't even remember him. My grandmother never talked about him. I never saw any pictures of him, even when I was a kid rummaging around in my grandmother's boxes in her attic. I liked to snoop around in her things."

She continued, "Then about three years ago when we were at our girls-only two-week vacation at my grandmother's timeshare in Florida this man shows up at my grandmother's door. I was in the room. I'll never forget. My grandmother said, 'My God, John, is that you?' The man said, 'Patricia, may I come in?' She stepped back and nodded yes. He stepped in and touched her shoulder, and she took a step away from him."

Ashley took a breath. “Turns out this guy is my very rich grandfather. I think my grandmother was not happy about him showing up, but we all hung out a little for the next few days. We had dinner on his yacht, and he took us out in it. You could say we sort of made friends. Somehow he talked my mother into letting him pay for the rest of my college. I was a sophomore then. I thought it was a good thing, because my mother was struggling to do it herself. My father died when I was 10, so we didn’t have much money. Anyway, I finished college, and here I am in New York City with a job in social work.”

“Do you ever hear from your grandfather?” Mark asked.

“He has called now and then. But, he’s still pretty much of a mystery. My grandmother still won’t talk about him, and I don’t know why.”

Mark said, “It must be a complicated story. Life does tend to be complicated.” He looked out the window.

“My stop is coming up,” he said.

He flashed Ashley a lopsided grin. “We made a pretty good team today, but I hope we don’t have to do it again anytime soon.”

“Me, too,” she said.

He stood up and said, “See you around.”

She watched him walk along the platform to the escalator. She admired his hard-body good looks as much as his medical skills. He wasn’t movie-star handsome, but he was attractive in a rugged sort of way. You didn’t expect a guy in medical school to be muscled up. Still looking like a military guy.

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When Mark got to street level, he turned left toward his apartment. As he walked, he thought about the first time he had done CPR on a stranger. Rachael had been by his side on a dark street in Queens. Like the girl this afternoon, she had called 9-1-1 when he told her to do it. He could always count on Rachael. It was still hard to believe she was gone.

He turned into his apartment building, grabbed his mail, and took the stairs two at a time to the second floor. Good cardio after a sedentary day.

At the top of the stairwell, he took a hard right and unlocked the second door. He stepped into his postage-stamp sized apartment. He dropped his backpack on the floor and took aim at the coffee table with his mail. Two bills and a letter hit the middle of the table. He smiled at his accuracy and pulled a beer from the fridge. He settled onto the couch, ignoring the mail and reaching for the new issue of *The Journal of Head Trauma Rehabilitation*. He read for half an hour before popping his chicken leftovers into the microwave.

His cell rang.

“Hi Dad, are you back home?”

“Yes. Your uncle’s funeral was yesterday.”

“Sorry I couldn’t be there for you. I know you two were close for a long time.”

“He had a good long life, but he had started suffering a lot. It was time.”

There was a pause. “ So, Mark, how is it with you?”

“Things are still going well in school. As you know, I’m not in the classroom now. I’m on the hospital floor, doing my rotation. It’s going well. I’m looking forward to hearing from my residency applications.”

“That will be a big step toward your goal. Of course, I’m hoping for the one in New York City, but if you need to go to Houston. So be it.”

“Today I had some excitement on my subway ride home. A woman collapsed, and I gave her CPR. A girl on the subway helped me by calling 9-1-1. She kept her cool. Interesting girl. Social worker, like Mom. She kind of reminded me of Rachael. Totally different coloring. Maybe it was her bearing. I don’t know, the girl did remind me of Rachael.”

His dad said, “I think of Rachael, too. I got a letter from her mother not long ago. It sounds like she’s not doing so well. She talked about everything being so tense in Tel Aviv, well everywhere, as usual. But, the letter was mostly about how much she misses Rachael and how unfair it was for her to die so young, in service of her country, at that. I feel sorry for her and sorry for you. A boy shouldn’t lose his mother and his girlfriend. It’s not right.”

Mark was silent for a few seconds. He said, “I’ve got to go now, Dad. I’m beat, and I am looking into a pretty heavy day on my rotation tomorrow. Plus, I like to brush up on things I am encountering in this rotation. The name of the game is being prepared.”

“I don’t ever hear you talking about going out and having fun. It’s good to work, but you don’t need to be serious all the time. Do you ever go out with friends?”

“David Hirsch and I go to a movie now and then. You remember he is my classmate at med school. We don’t go out much since we are so busy with school.”

“Mark, Rachael has been gone for more than a year. A year is a respectable mourning period, if you’re somehow looking at things that way. You loved her. We all loved her and hoped you would someday be engaged. I don’t know how to say this, but you must let go of her. She would want you to go out with other women. You know she would.”

Mark did not reply immediately.

“You are right, Dad, she would. I’ve heard her say more than once ‘life is for the living.’”

“Yes, that is part of the Jewish tradition and faith. It was not just a saying. She believed it.”

“I know, Dad. I will work on all that. I promise. But for now I just have to hit the books some more before I can go to bed.”

“But you’re not in the classroom anymore.”

“That’s right, but I like to do brush-up work with my text books, trying to be ready for whatever happens on my next shift.

“All right, Mark. We’ll talk again soon. Take care of yourself.”

“I will.”

They disconnected.

Mark sat thinking about Rachael. How vibrant she was. So self-confident and cheerful.

He got a glass of milk and then buried himself in a brush-up session with a text book and a yellow notepad. Finally, he rubbed both hands across his face and looked at his watch. He pulled out his Murphy bed.

His heels touching the end of the mattress, he thought about the girl on the subway. She had Rachael's build about 5'8." Big tits, small waist, and not too much butt. Long curly honey-blonde hair and hazel eyes. It was her lips that reminded him of Rachael. Upturned lips always ready to smile. That was one of the things he loved most about Rachael.

He knew his dad was right. He had to let go of Rachael. She would want him to do it, but it would be like letting go of a big part of himself. They had been more than lovers. They were soulmates. They could finish each other's sentences. He didn't know how to let her go. He didn't know if he could do it. He didn't know where to start. But he had to try. He stared into the darkness for a long time before drifting off to an uneasy sleep.