

“Time Can Heal”
Chelsy Nichols

She got out of the car and examined her surroundings. The air was fresh with the scents of early spring. The trees lining the long stone walkway were covered in tiny lavender buds. The large circular white building before her was adorned with decorations that attempted to pass it off as a fancy dining hall, but it was too obviously just a small town expo hall spruced up for a special occasion.

She was utterly alone, despite being surrounded by at least one hundred girls just like her. Long, bright dresses, perfect make-up, carefully styled hair. She looked at her own reflection in the doors of the expo hall: long, straight pale yellow halter dress, light, subtle gold make-up, and long chestnut brown hair in a half-up do and spiral curled down her back. And she almost thought she saw him standing next to her in a perfectly pressed black tux. But, of course, it was only her imagination playing yet another cruel trick on her.

Carley had had a best friend, Braiden, since she was two years old. At age twelve, as they watched her older sister get stood up on prom night and his older brother deal with a snobby date, they could see the pressures of making it a perfect night get torn apart by being with unreliable people. Right then and there, they promised each other that they would go to prom together in high school, no matter the circumstances in their lives at that point.

But neither one of them could have guessed what circumstances they would face.

Just a month ago, Carley had been awakened by a phone call from Braiden’s mother—and it’s not usually good news that comes over the phone at two in the morning. Carley was shocked to hear that Braiden had been in a car accident. She had dropped her phone, not even bothering to change out of her flannel pajamas, and rushed to the hospital. After six and a half hours of desperate surgeries and unexplainable agony, Carley lost her best friend, her biggest supporter, and her prom date.

Carley wanted to move on. She tried to get up in the morning and not check her phone for a text from Braiden saying that he was waiting outside. She tried to go to school and ignore the people asking her how she was doing or telling her some random memory of him that they had just thought of. She tried to go out with her other friends on the weekends and not be reminded of some inside joke she had shared with him and turn to laugh about it with him, only to realize that he wasn’t standing next to her.

But after Braiden’s death, Carley realized just how much she had depended on him. They were always together, and everyone in the school knew that they were friends. She spent nearly every moment of the past fifteen years with him. They had shared first days of school, learning how to ride a bike, even the loss of Braiden’s father. And throughout it all, it was Braiden who always told her “It will be okay,” or “I’m still here.” It was Braiden who always made jokes about the people

people who would put her down in order to make her feel better. It was Braiden who always knew that Carley needed rainbow sherbet ice cream and a *Harry Potter* movie when she was having a bad day. Braiden was the one who understood, who came to her when she most needed him.

But this time, he was the loss, and Carley felt empty, scared, and lonely.

Now that prom was finally here, she wondered how her mother had convinced her to come alone. She felt like crying, and as she walked toward the building, she desperately wanted to stop the sorrowful, sympathetic stares that every couple seemed to be giving her. And she wanted so badly to ignore the quiet comments that the girls walking past her were making.

“It’s good to see you here, Carley,” Ally Baker said, gently patting Carley on the shoulder.

“I’m glad you came, Carley!” said Rachel Parks, a little too much perkiness in her tone.

“I’m sorry you had to come alone, Carley,” Kelsey Lawrence said, holding tightly to the arm of her date.

Carley said a silent prayer to Braiden, asking him to somehow find his way back in the nick of time, even though she knew how utterly impossible that wish was.

The interior of the expo hall was decorated in accordance with the cliché Under the Stars theme. The ceiling was dark blue with tiny silver lights scattered over it. Blue and silver streamers shimmered throughout, and the floor was coated in sparkling silver glitter. Carley knew it was everything a teenage girl should have wanted, but the shine of the decoration was dull through her exhausted, sad eyes.

Carley went straight for an empty table next to a large silver Styrofoam star. Her goal was to stay unnoticed. If no one spoke to her, she wouldn’t have to hear Braiden’s name.

Of course, that wouldn’t stop him from taking over all of her thoughts.

Whenever she sat down and had an extended period of time to think about Braiden, her thoughts always went from good memories to horrifying visions of the accident. She wondered what he had seen. She wondered if he had been in any sort of pain. And she wondered if he had thought about her.

Carley almost felt like she was being selfish. She was upset about not being able to go to prom with her best friend. She was upset about never being able to share a laugh with him, or call him up when she felt bored or scared or just needed to talk. But what about all the things Braiden’s family was going to miss out on? They would never see him graduate high school. They would never send him off to college. They would never see him marry some beautiful girl and raise his beautiful children. What had been taken away from them seemed so much more significant than what had been taken away from her.

But he was still her best friend of fifteen years. She was supposed to be beside him when he graduated high school. She was supposed to drive off to college with him. And she was supposed to be smiling up at the altar as he said his vows to his bride. A part of her had still been taken away.

Carley kept her head down, twirling one of her curls around her finger over and

over again. She knew that if Braiden was with her, he would be commenting on how revealing Katelyn's dress was; how Brooke and Cody slow danced even when the song was fast-paced; and how the music sounded more like they were at a wild party at some rapper's mansion.

Carley willed herself to look up. At least six people immediately turned their heads, making it obvious that they had been watching her. But one person didn't turn away. He stood leaning against the wall on the other side of the room, smiling kindly at her.

Logan had always been the popular guy. Star basketball player, honor roll student, and the guy that every girl wanted. But he was so sweet and humble that he just didn't seem to care. Braiden had become friends with him when they played basketball together sophomore and junior year. Braiden had introduced Carley to Logan, and they had had a few casual conversations about what they might do after graduation or the activities they enjoyed, but Carley had never thought of Logan as anything more than an acquaintance.

And yet, he was striding across the room straight toward her at that very moment. He was old-fashioned Hollywood handsome, with smooth tan skin and calming blue eyes. He looked classy in his plain black tux and light blue tie, but she couldn't make herself feel happy or even comfortable with him approaching her.

"Hi," he said, his voice raised over the music. "It's good to see you, Carley."

She simply nodded.

He flipped his short brown hair off of his forehead. "I saw you over here by yourself. I'm alone too, so I thought I'd join you."

Carley nodded again. "Yeah, I, um—I had a date, but—" her voice trailed off, and she started twirling one of her curls around her index finger again.

"Yeah, I know," Logan replied, his voice sincere even over the sound of the music. "Braiden kept telling you guys had planned to come together. He was really excited about it. I'm really sorry about what happened."

Carley sighed, biting her lip and looking down at the table. More apologies. More empty sympathies for the girl struggling to make her way without the person who had always been by her side. Even though Logan was kind and thoughtful about it, it didn't sting any less.

"He really cared about you, you know," Logan said. "Every time I talked to him, he would always bring you up. You meant everything to him. I know he would have given anything to be here with you tonight."

Carley could feel tears building up in her eyes, but she looked up at Logan anyway. She didn't want to hurt his feelings, but she didn't want to hear him talk anymore, either.

"Logan, look, don't take this the wrong way, but I don't really want to dance with you, if that's what you're getting at. It's really nice of you to come over and talk to me, but I just—I can't. Not yet. Not tonight."

She didn't realize until she finished that a few tears had escaped and drifted down her cheeks. She also didn't realize until that last word had left her lips that she was feeling an overwhelming fear of never being able to let go of Braiden, but at

the same time feeling an equally significant fear of someday forgetting him altogether.

A small smile spread across Logan's face, and he stepped around the table to take the seat beside Carley. He leaned in close to her.

"You are Carley Hamilton. You got a full scholarship to NYU for your drawing project from junior year art class. You were on the dance team freshman and sophomore year. When the teacher calls on you in algebra to answer a question, you start twirling your hair around your finger. You gave this amazing speech about how to stop bullying at a pep rally junior year. You love Adele and Michael Buble. And you got up this morning, dreading what tonight might bring, but you still put on that dress and did your hair and your make-up, because deep down, you want to get up and talk to your friends and live up your last few weeks of high school, no matter what's happened to you and the people you love."

Carley stared at Logan, at a loss for words. He knew her. He remembered her. And he cared about her. The only other person who had looked at her with such kind, protective, sincere blue eyes was Braiden himself.

Finally, Carley shook her head.

"Why do you know all that stuff?"

Logan reached forward and gently pushed a curl out of Carley's face. "Because you're not just Braiden's friend, Carley. You're not just that girl whose best friend died. I know how close you guys were, and I know that right now, it seems like you won't be able to do anything without him. But I promise you that you'll find a way. You have a future ahead of you, and you're going to be okay."

For the first time in who knew how long, Carley smiled. A full, bright smile that even came through in her eyes. She felt the tears falling down her face, but she knew they weren't the same as all the ones she'd cried in the past month. And sure, plenty of people had told her that she'd be okay, that she'd get through it. But Logan had made her remember that she was her own person, no matter how much her heart belonged to Braiden and all of their memories. It wasn't a solution to her heartache, but it was a light shining at the end of a very long, very dark tunnel.

Carley wiped away her tears, not minding that gold sparkle eye shadow was now all over her hands. "Thank you, Logan," she said. "I didn't realize how much I needed to hear that."

Logan nodded, smiling. He sat up straight, running his hands through his hair. Instead of holding out a hand and asking her to dance like she expected him to—which would have been sweet but still much too soon—he sighed and looked back up at her.

"So tell me about NYU."

The sounds of the accident in her mind were suddenly drowned out by the sound of the here and the now. The sounds of a senior prom, the sounds of a boy wanting to get to know her, the sounds of finally releasing a breath and taking in the world around her. And she began talking about her acceptance into the school of her dreams, about her deepest hopes and ambitions. She began talking about her future.