

one

hundred

words

ALSO BY LAUREN HALLSTROM

Dreamweaver

*one
hundred
words*

Lauren Hallstrom

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*To Rebecca –
Friendship is forever.*

Prologue

There is magic in words.

Ink spirals across the page, forming curves, then letters and, finally, words. The words begin to take shape, and soon they will transform into something else entirely.

A story.

The words, scrawled across the page in hurried script, hold a certain raw beauty that only comes from such honesty and simplicity. They seem to have minds of their own as they race on, almost out of control.

Soon, the page is filled and the ink, dark as night, still flows, the lifeblood of the story that courses through the pages and reverberates with pure power.

My hands are stained with ink—ink that I know will never come off—but I don't care. The story is ingrained in my mind, and now the memory of it will

never fade. Ink runs through my veins until I am not so different from what I am writing. I am the story, and it is me.

This is what I feel when I write. If the words come out just right, they can create something that is beautiful, powerful, and inescapable. In this way, words have shaped every moment of my life. They have haunted me and turned me into who I am now.

And then it happened... I wrote one story that was different from the rest. I never expected my words to have the power to not only bring a story to life, but also to condemn a person to death.

Now I am caught between fiction and reality, past and present, and it's only a matter of time before they collide.

Chapter One

I slammed my fists down on the keyboard in front of me, making lines of gibberish stream across the blank page of the document on my computer screen. Groaning aloud in frustration, I angrily jabbed at the backspace button to make it all go away.

Above all, the one thing I couldn't stand was writer's block. For someone who had been writing nearly all her life, you'd have thought it would no longer be a problem. But lately, all the words just seemed to escape me.

Hoping I could somehow gain inspiration by staring at the blank screen, I returned my gaze to my computer, but to no avail. I stifled another groan. How could I call myself a writer if I couldn't write?

With sudden firm resolve, I placed my fingers on

the keyboard, ready to type something—anything. It didn't matter anymore as long as I got something down on the page.

"Tess!" The sudden, loud voice coming from downstairs made me jump, and I almost knocked over the cup of tea sitting next to my computer on the desk. I sighed, slapping the laptop shut. At this rate, I would never get anything done.

"Yes, Mom?" I called out just loud enough to be heard through the closed door of my bedroom. This was how our conversations went these days—yelling across the house, or even face to face. I didn't like the prospect of leaving my room when all I had gained from staring at the screen was a blank page, but it couldn't be helped. My mother would give me no peace until I did.

"Come downstairs and eat with us, please. I've held dinner for over an hour already."

At her words, I felt a little guilty that I had wasted so much of her time—and mine—staring at a blank computer page. Mom disliked cooking, and she usually had just enough energy to buy takeout meals on the way home from the preschool where she taught. With a classroom of energetic four-year-olds to care for on weekdays, Mom had her hands full. Since today was Friday, she had stayed late at the school with the other preschool teacher, Ms. Wilson, to plan for next

week. Today happened to be the one night in months that she was able to summon up the will to make us a real home-cooked dinner, and here I was holed up in my room trying to find the perfect words while dinner grew cold.

I got up from my chair, nearly overturning it in my haste. It had already started to grow dark out, and the light in my room had dimmed. My long wooden desk cast strange, angular shadows against the walls, and my shelves of carefully arranged encyclopedias and other reference books were mounted on the wall above the desk. My bed at the opposite corner of the room was neatly made, and the surfaces of my dresser and nightstand were clear. Around my desk, though, papers and books were strewn across the floor. Not bothering to take the time to pick them up, I hurried from the room.

When I entered the kitchen, Mom was sitting at the table alone, her hands clasped together in her lap. Her shoulders were slumped and her usually neat, dark brown curls were disheveled.

She looked so small at that moment when she thought no one was watching, so vulnerable. So *alone*. A lump formed in my throat, and I swallowed hard. How could I be so self-centered? I had been so wrapped up in my own troubles with my writing that I had failed to notice that Mom was having a hard time

too. It couldn't be easy for her, living with two people who were always off in their own little worlds.

My eyes flicked over to the kitchen table. It was set for three, but two chairs still remained unoccupied. As I hurried over, Mom heaved a heavy, shuddering sigh, but when she noticed I was there she straightened and mustered up a weak smile. I slipped into my seat across from Mom. "Where's Dad?"

Mom looked up at the ceiling. "Where else?"

She meant he was in his studio, which was directly above the kitchen. Dad was up there nearly all the time, immersed in his art much as I was with my writing. He painted constantly; what he painted, though, I had no idea. I was a young girl the last time he'd shown me his work. All I could remember were splashes of blurred color, maybe a landscape. He was good—I knew that much—but Dad never allowed anyone to view his artwork anymore. As far as I knew, it had been years since Mom had seen any of it, either.

A loud bang from upstairs made me jump, and I heard the sound of hurried footsteps on the stairs. A moment later, Dad appeared at the doorway to the kitchen. "Sorry I'm late, guys." He looked in our direction, but his eyes didn't quite focus on us. The vacant expression on his face suggested he was still thinking about his artwork. Mom often told me it was

the same expression I wore when I was daydreaming about my writing.

Dad joined us at the table, and although he immediately helped himself to several heaping spoonfuls from the pot in the middle of the table, he hadn't quite managed to shake the absentminded look from his face. I turned to Mom, who was staring daggers at Dad, and I looked away quickly, developing a sudden interest in the glob of Hamburger Helper that Dad had spooned onto my plate.

Mom and Dad were complete opposites. It was a wonder there was ever a time when they weren't fighting. Mom was tidy and was never late for anything in her life, which was why the time Dad spent in his studio bothered her so much. I glanced at Dad, who had paused from eating to sketch something on his napkin with his special sketching pencil that he always had with him. I noticed the dried paint stuck underneath his fingernails and a red streak smeared through his blond, scraggly hair. Whenever he painted, this was how he looked, and I had become accustomed to seeing a small blotch of paint on his skin somewhere. Without it, he wouldn't be the Dad I knew.

I shoved a forkful of Hamburger Helper into my mouth, gagging at the taste. I swallowed with effort, the too-large bite scraping my throat on the way down. The edges of the pasta were hard, and the texture was

strange. I didn't know how anyone could mess up a meal as simple as Hamburger Helper, but I supposed it was the thought that counted.

The tense silence was stifling. After a brief period of attempting to interpret my parents' expressions, I let my thoughts turn to my writing. I knew what I wanted to say, but every time I put pen to paper, the words didn't come out right. It was frustrating. Would I ever be able to write the way I wanted to? I longed for the words to naturally transform themselves into prose. For if the words I wrote weren't special, the story wouldn't be either.

Without warning, Mom suddenly set her fork down on her plate and turned to Dad. "Chris, I wish you wouldn't spend so much time in that studio of yours."

It took him a minute to register what she had said. "Huh? What do you mean? It's what I love, you know that."

Mom's eyes hardened. Uh-oh. I stared down at my plate, swirling my fork around in the sauce to create a strange kind of artwork. Silently I willed them to stop. *Please, not now. We all have enough on our minds.*

Evidently Mom didn't hear my unvoiced prayer. "You think this is easy for me?" she cried, staring at Dad. He raised his eyebrows but didn't comment. "I spend all day teaching, and yes, I happen to love

doing it, but I don't think you realize how much work I put into it. I have to support all of us, working full-time, five days a week, just so you can have the time to lounge around all day at home, creating your fantasies in paintings that you later just throw away!"

Whoa. Mom's outburst made my stomach churn. Never before had she come right out and said exactly what she thought about Dad's work, though I had guessed she thought as much. "May I be excused?" I couldn't bring myself to lift my eyes from my plate.

Mom whipped her head around to face me. "You certainly may not be excused! I worked hard slaving over the stove for this nice family meal, and we are going to eat it together. No one is going to leave this table until we have finished—and I mean completely finished—this meal. I don't want to see a speck of food on those plates!"

I flinched at her harsh words and glanced over at Dad, who gave me a reassuring smile but didn't say anything in opposition. He must have learned that from years of fighting with her. If he didn't say anything, she couldn't keep arguing forever, I supposed. But I still wished she wouldn't do this.

Tentatively, I pushed the last few forkfuls of Hamburger Helper into my mouth and swallowed with difficulty. "It was a very good dinner, Mom," I offered.

“Hmm,” was all she said, but I thought I noticed the corner of her mouth turn up slightly at my compliment. Dad finished at the same time I did, and the three of us stood. Dad carried our dishes to the sink and wordlessly started washing them. It was just to make Mom happy, of course. I knew what his mind was really on now, and I knew where he would go as soon as he was finished.

I headed to the coat rack in the corner of the hallway between the kitchen and the entryway and pulled on my old, worn denim jacket. I could use some fresh air. And maybe a change of setting would give me inspiration for my writing.

“Oh, Tess,” Mom sighed, watching me from the other room. “You’re not going out tonight, are you? It’s already almost dark.” She seemed to have calmed down somewhat. At least her face was no longer red, and her pupils weren’t quite as dilated as they had been before.

“I know, Mom. It’ll only be a little while. I just have...something I need to do.”

Mom pressed her lips together tightly, and she looked as if she were about to force me to stay here. “All right,” she said finally. “But be back in an hour and no later.”

I turned to leave, but just before I closed the front door I heard her muttering to herself. “It’s a waste of

time. She's never going to be satisfied with her writing, just like Chris is never satisfied with his art. Why can't she be more like me?"

Chapter Two

The playground was obscured by shadows that shrouded the area in darkness, yet kids were still at play. I often made the half-hour walk to this park in the city. Although it was rather far to travel to so frequently, I found myself coming back here again and again, if only because it was a great spot to think. If there was one place that could inspire me to write, this park was it.

I settled onto the stone steps near the playground, pulling out the blue leather-bound notebook I'd left in my jacket pocket since the last time I had come here. Opening it to a fresh page, I smoothed my writing journal so it would lie flat on my lap. Maybe writing on paper would be easier than typing on a keyboard.

As I thought, I rubbed at the birthmark on my

forearm. It was shaped like a half-moon and had been there as long as I could remember, never ceasing to annoy me.

The wind ruffled my hair and I closed my eyes, drinking in the sensation. The park was filled with noise, and I was struck by the steady flow of people who passed by, even at this time of day. But I wouldn't have it any other way.

I watched a young mother on a bench near me rock her baby back and forth in her arms, trying to quiet the baby's piercing cries. On a bright yellow slide, a boy with unruly hair dared his companion to climb it backward. Voices filled the park, but I was in my own little world. When I was alone in a crowd, I was at home.

I took my black ballpoint pen from my pocket and held it in my hand for a moment, motionless. This was the moment I wanted to capture. Oh, if only I could put my thoughts into words. What do you do when you know exactly what you want to write but don't know how to say it?

I breathed in the moment, relaxing slowly now that I was alone. So totally, wonderfully alone. Uninterrupted. Nothing expected of me. I held the pen, hovering over the empty page. One thought came to my mind at that moment, the urgency of it causing me to write a single word.

Bliss

It was how I felt and what I looked for when I wrote. This was a word that was important to me, a word I didn't want to forget.

Ever since I was little, I had collected words, almost like one might collect stamps or coins. My unusual hobby began when I was in kindergarten, forming words with the letters in alphabet soup. That was the day I first began to realize the importance—and danger—of words.

While many of my classmates simply spelled their names, and Sharon, the know-it-all, spelled "school" (but left off the letter "h"), I chose something a little different.

Desolation

I didn't understand why I had chosen that particular word or where I had heard it, but my parents had been fighting a lot at the time. The kindergarten teacher had been shocked and immediately called my parents, making a big fuss about it.

Desolation became the first word that defined me. From then on, I began to look for words everywhere. In books, in conversation, in graffiti on a cement wall in the city. These things that had been dead before—words—came alive with my realization of their meaning. Ever since that first word, *desolation*, I began to assemble a list in the back of my journal that continued

to grow with words that inspired me, intrigued me, or just made me *feel* something. My understanding of language escalated, but my fascination with it never ceased. These words meant more to me than anything else in the world.

I flipped to the back of my writing journal and rewrote *bliss* beneath the list of other words I had added over the years. Rifling through the pages, I then returned to the one I had been writing on most recently. Now that I had a truly meaningful word, I looked around me with new eyes. It was only a single word, but now I had *something*, where before I'd had nothing. The page was no longer blank.

I watched as a man in a dark overcoat passed in front of me, a growing sphere of bubble gum protruding from his mouth. It popped suddenly and collapsed in a mess on his face, and he laughed, oblivious to anyone who was watching.

A woman with purple cat-eye glasses and a leopard print coat hurried past, talking on her cell phone so rapidly her words were jumbled and impossible to distinguish. A little boy trailed behind her, studying a pebble in his hand.

A group of three kids slid down the handrail beside me, giggling hysterically and calling out to each other. The last one jumped off the metal bar too early, nearly falling on top of me. "Sorry!" he called over his

shoulder as he ran after his friends, unable to wipe the elated grin from his face.

Without realizing it, I had begun to twirl the pen in my hand, flicking it back and forth in thought. I absorbed my surroundings, taking in the events of the day and mulling over each thought one by one, in no particular order. My thoughts turned into a low buzzing in my mind, until I no longer thought in words, but in emotions.

I had an idea. It was just a speck, just the tiniest hint of an idea, but it was a beginning. I pictured her face in my mind and knew the story would soon follow. I was confident that, this time, the words would come. They hadn't yet, but they would.

They had to.

I tore a sheet of paper from the middle of my journal, feeling satisfaction at the decisive sound of the ripping. Sliding my journal into my jacket pocket, I got to my feet. No other ideas were coming to me, and I wasn't about to wait for them. In the meantime, there was something I needed to do right now.

Painstakingly, I penned a sentence on the scrap of paper in my hand. Sometimes all anyone needed were a few well-chosen words to change a horrible day into the best day. Hesitation came over me like it always did, but as usual, I shook it away.

The park was darker now. The shadows had

lengthened to stretch over most of the sidewalk in spite of the illumination the street lights provided. I scanned the pathways and found an empty bench at the edge of the playground. When I reached it, I stepped out of the shadows and into the light of the streetlamp overhead. Before I could change my mind I bent down, placing the scrap of paper on the seat of the park bench, and retreated to the shadow-filled corner by the stone steps, away from the light.

Patting my coat pockets, I searched for my cell phone to check the time, suddenly aware of how late it must be. I only felt my journal and pen; it seemed I had forgotten my phone yet again. I didn't wear a watch either, so I wasn't sure just how late it was. A light breeze ruffled my hair and raised goose bumps on my arms in spite of the jacket I was wearing. I picked up my pace and started heading in the direction of home, hugging myself tightly as the wind grew colder.

A rustling noise came from behind me and I paused, midstride, to look over my shoulder. A figure stood bending over a bench and looking intently at something on the seat. My scrap of paper, I realized. The figure was the young woman in the leopard print coat, one of the people I'd seen walk by earlier.

She picked up the note, read it, and raised her head to look around the park, now enveloped in shadows. Her eyes passed over me and I saw the wonder in her

expression. Even from this distance, I thought I could see tears in her eyes. Her lips moved and now she was staring back at the paper, mouthing the words. I knew exactly what she saw: *You're not in this alone.*

The woman called out to one of the boys still running around the playground and he came up to her, panting. Her son, I guessed. As I watched that moment, I pressed my cheek to the cold concrete of the side of the building I was leaning against near the steps. The woman hugged her son and I blinked back a few stray tears of my own. I straightened then, satisfied that my words had meant something to her, and I turned to leave. Before I had gotten more than a few steps away, though, a glint of gold in the sandbox in the corner of the playground caught my eye, and I started toward it.

When I reached the place where I had seen the flash, I stooped down and pulled the object from the sand. It was a gleaming gold pen. I fingered it, turning it over in my hands.

Despite the fact that the pen had been half-buried in sand, there was not a speck of dirt on it. It seemed brand new. Who would leave behind something as special as this?

Even in the darkness the pen shone brightly. It was one of those elegant fountain pens that had an ink cartridge instead of a refillable reservoir. It was beautiful and unique, yet simple.

It was exactly the kind of pen I had always wanted.

I surveyed the area around me and was surprised to be met with emptiness. A lone owl hooted, making me jump. In the time that I hadn't been looking, the park had cleared, and now I was alone.

Not quite alone. When I glanced around a second time, I spotted the lady in the leopard print coat and her son, still there. The mother was just pulling the strap of her handbag over her shoulder, my note still clutched in her thin fingers. I rushed up to her.

When I reached her, I grew flustered and had to make the greatest effort to look her in the eyes. "Um, excuse me, ma'am. Did you lose this pen?"

She startled and glanced up at me, then down at the pen I held in my outstretched hand. She studied it for a moment, then shook her head. "No, I don't believe I did. Why don't you keep it? It's such a lovely pen. It would be a shame for it to go to waste."

My heart fluttered in relief, but I scolded myself inwardly. I had been half hoping she would say that to give me an excuse to take the pen home with me, even though it was not mine. The saying "finders keepers" popped into my mind, but I brushed it away, feeling silly. "Thank you. Maybe I will."

"You really should." She watched me closely, a peculiar expression on her face that I couldn't quite identify.