

*Easter Lilies*

# ASHLEY ELIZABETH LUDWIG

*By Another Name*



# By Another Name

by

Ashley Elizabeth  
Ludwig

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**By Another Name**  
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Cover Art by Nicola Martinez

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Publishing History  
First White Rose Edition, 2008  
Second White Rose Edition, 2020  
Electronic ISBN 978-1-5223-0290-2  
Published in the United States of America

## *Dedication*

To my husband, Perry,  
who gave me my own do-over.

*Praise for Ashley Elizabeth Ludwig*

*By Another Name*

I loved this story. I always enjoy a feel-good ending.  
Isn't that what romances are all about?!

~Denise Harmer, Fallbrook, CA

*Tessa Takes a Chance*

Bravo!!! I loved the story. Just long enough for me to enjoy as I ate a quick lunch. Perfect Mom read without feeling mom focused. I really like Tessa.

~Wendy Nield, Los Angeles, CA

Before the next wave hits the beach, you're in Tessa's seaside world, swept in the undertow...

~Beverly Nault, Temecula, CA



# 1

Kade Sinclair hated being late, and traffic was murder this morning. His truck idled at a green light as he reached into his jean pocket, fumbling for his cell phone. Music from the local country station blended into the weather report of another sunny, warm California day.

The farmer's market blocked the main road. Cars circled, searching for parking. *That's just great. I'm late, and no one's in a hurry to go anywhere!*

There were people everywhere, carrying boxes of garden vegetables and flower bunches by the armload. He had halfway dialed Lindsey's when time stopped. Cell phone forgotten, his jaw dropped. There, searching through buckets of daisies, lilies, roses, and peonies, stood the girl of his dreams.

Behind him, tires screeched. Brakes slammed. Bumper crunched against bumper as he flew forward in the pick-up and knocked his head into the steering wheel.

Sunlight streamed from behind as she leaned through his open window. She looked more like an angel to him now than she had moments before across the street.

"Are you okay? You hit pretty hard." She reached through and touched his stubbly-cheek with tender fingers. Her nails were unpolished. No rings on her left

Ashley Elizabeth Ludwig

hand, thank God. She'd accidentally swiped a grower's bunch of sunflowers while running to his aid. Their happy faces had fallen, a pile of gold in his lap. He smiled dumbly as she inspected the abrasion on his forehead.

"I think you'll make it." She said.

He handed a red-gold petal to her, hoping to unfurrow that look of concern on her heart-shaped face. "She loves me?"

"Whoa, there, Romeo. I just asked if you were okay." Her laughter was rain for his parched spirit. Their hands clasped through the window. *Zing*. He half expected sparks to fly at their touch.

Outside, the driver who hit him grabbed insurance cards and dialed the police on his cell phone. Recounts of the accident peppered the growing crowd.

"I'm fine." Kade touched his bruised forehead, wincing. "Your flowers. They reminded me of that kid's game. She loves me. She loves me not. I'm Kade...Kade Sinclair..."

She drew her hand away, and took a step back, as if punched.

He cocked his head, his smile faltering. This wasn't going the way he'd planned. Not by a long shot. "Do we know each other?"

"I just moved here..." she glanced over her shoulder, wiggling the watch on her wrist.

He hazarded a smile. "Well, thanks for your concern...I'd feel better if I knew your name."

"Mommy! Mommy! I thought you were lost." A little girl of about six or seven darted across the street, blonde ponytails flying. The child's eyes widened in wonder; she surveyed the wreckage. "What happened?"

## By Another Name

The woman eyed him up and down like a spider on a pin, her violet eyes dark with distaste as she pulled her daughter close to her side.

The swirling red and blue of a police car pulled up to block traffic and take the report.

"Come on, Paigie. He's fine."

"Wait! You can at least tell me your name...can't you?"

She turned, stared, and remained silent a long moment. "Lee. My name is Lee."

Kade watched her put her sunglasses on and march her daughter to the café on the other side of the street.

"You okay, Kade?" The Sheriff asked, concerned. "You look kind of shaky."

Kade couldn't help but agree with the cop. Catching his reflection in the side view mirror, he definitely had a homeless guy look going on. Having just hopped out of bed to help his twin sister move, he'd left his auburn hair uncombed, and weekend stubble peppered his chin and cheeks. The accident had left him pale, but his eyes were bright and clear.

He caught sight of the restaurant in the reflection where the woman and her daughter now sat at a window table. The little girl swung her feet and busily colored on a kids menu. Her mother fiddled with her water glass while her attention stayed focused on his truck. His heart warmed with resolve.

*She doesn't think I can see her. Excellent.*

Kade watched his mouth break into a wide, open smile. "Guess that's what happens when you fall in love at first sight."

~\*~

Ashley Elizabeth Ludwig

"We did it! Thanks, bro." Kade's sister swiped her brown curls into a quick ponytail at the nape of her neck. Her cheeks were flushed. Her green eyes danced as she expounded on polished hardwood floors and original plaster crown molding. Kade only noticed that her bungalow lacked modern comforts, like air conditioning.

"Think you could open a window or something?" Sweat rolled down Kade's neck. He flopped down on Lindsey's newly planted couch with a thump.

"Sissy." She obliged. Lindsey kissed the top of his hair and then wrinkled her nose. "You really need a shower."

"I thought your sofa was gonna have to stay wedged in that doorframe."

"That's why I called in the big guns." Lindsey all but glowed from the inside out, eyeing her new husband through the open doorway.

Ricardo pawed through carefully packed boxes in the kitchen. "I made lemonade! Where are the glasses?"

"In the cupboard already, genius!"

Lindsey had always been brusque. Some even accused her of being cruel, once upon a time. Kade knew the truth about his twin sister. She hid behind irony and scathing wit when she was nervous. Or felt outclassed. Or backed into a corner. He wondered what had gotten under her skin today of all days. Out of everyone in their family, he knew how to ask without getting pummeled in the process.

Lindsey frowned, twirling her loose wedding ring with her thumb. "It's the reception. Ricardo's mother is coming in from Argentina. She's already ticked-off that we eloped. The whole world is descending on us, and I

## By Another Name

need a caterer."

"A caterer."

"Ricardo booked the Sea Pointe Lodge."

Kade blew a long, slow whistle. The landmark building had sweeping views of the Southern California coastline. Rocky cliffs, sunset over the water, windswept Torrey pines reaching for the western skyline; you had to like Lindsey's luck—both impossible to book, and the only place to throw an event to remember this small burg. "How'd he manage it?"

Lindsey grinned, and the answer was obvious. Ricardo knew people. Tall, muscular, close-cropped black hair, goatee, an easy manner, and he had to be the nicest man in the universe. "I'm beginning to think Ricardo can do anything. God only knows why he hooked up with me."

"Just shows His strong sense of humor, Linds." Kade ducked the striped pillow that she flung at his head.

"So. What's the big deal? Pull out the phone book and make some calls."

"It can't just be any caterer. It has to be the caterer. This is Ricardo's mom! The first chance she'll get to size me up. It has to be perfect."

Ricardo brought lemonade, freshly squeezed from the ancient, twisting lemon tree out front, garnished with mint floating in frosty glasses.

Kade drained his glass with a long swallow, and clapped his new brother-in-law on the shoulder. "I'll ask around. See if I can come up with any brilliant ideas."

Lindsey touched his arm. "Before you just start surveying the locals, I heard of this new place. Not

## Ashley Elizabeth Ludwig

even open yet, but the word is the owner's some renowned chef from San Diego. Could you look into it for me?"

How could he say no? Lindsey's smile was a million rainbows. He almost hated to remind her that the two of them were cramming two-thousand square feet of furniture into a not-quite-one-thousand square foot bungalow. With a garage already stuffed full with Ricardo's spare furniture, it was obvious who would win the battle of what would go and what would stay.

~\*~

The paint on the storefront window declared "Lee's Treats" in a sweeping script. She eyed the cozy interior of her catering company, heart blooming with pride.

*It looks ready for business, but what about me? Am I ready for all of this?*

The interior still smelled of fresh paint. She'd meticulously chosen café au lait so as not to detract from the cases displaying her creations. Two tiny bistro tables with mosaic tops, and matching wrought iron chairs created an intimate sitting area. The walls displayed framed pictures of her best dishes and table settings. She painstakingly arranged each of them in elegant groupings around the small dining area in a visual display of her catering abilities.

Lee straightened one to level, nodding to herself with approval. From fancy to tailgate, Lee could throw a party for any occasion, and already had. But never like this. Never when so much was at stake. She had returned home to Copper Creek, California, where idle gossip remained a local past time. As soon as word got

## By Another Name

out who owned the new store...Lee grimaced at the thought. Let the Copper Creek masses gossip. Let them drop by out of curiosity. She'd feed them, wow them with her talents, and make a nice living off the town that had, at one time, tormented her.

After little Rosalee Timmons had graduated from high school she left town with her tail between her legs, swearing she'd never come back. A scholarship to San Diego State landed her on cloud nine. Then, she'd met Scott and everything changed. A month later, she was in love. Entranced by his attention. His desire. Six weeks later, no amount of praying would change that dark pink plus to a minus on the stick in her hand. Scott tried to convince her to take care of it. That having a kid would be a mistake; but Rosalee knew the truth in her heart. God didn't make mistakes, even if people did.

Refusing her mother's pleas to return home, she decided the two of them could go it alone. She raised her baby, cooked at a small bistro that the college kids frequented, and switched to night school. When her recipes went off the charts with a rave newspaper review she switched majors from education to business, and shucked her name to match her newfound confidence.

Where Rosalee had been timid, shy, and constantly at the wrong end of someone's whipping post, Lee became energetic, forward thinking, and motivated. There were more burns in her past than the few oven-scars she'd earned on her arms. Seven years after leaving Copper Creek, she'd earned her degree, and had reached a crossroad.

Lee thought on what to do next. Prayed on it, but nothing seemed to fit. Only when a small inheritance

## Ashley Elizabeth Ludwig

came her way did she even consider the thought of starting her own business. With a little bit of seed money, she could do great things. But, where? Unfortunately for her, San Diego had been out of the question. Too expensive, too big, and it would take too much time away from her daughter, just starting elementary school. What she knew of starting business was to find a location that had a specific need, and fill it. But how? And where?

Lee would never forget sharing that tidbit with her mother. "I just have to find a place not already overcrowded with caterers. Have an open house with freebies and samples to wow potential customers, and I'll be all set."

"You know, the only place that does catering around Copper Creek is Fred's Fish House."

"Mom. I'm not coming home."

"Why not? You'll have help with Paige, for once. I don't know how you two have made it all this time on your own. I can promote you to the garden club. We'll get you in the public eye..."

"That's what worries me, mom."

"God can only unlock the door, kiddo. You're the one who has to push it open. Things have changed in the seven years you've been away. People change. And wounds heal."

"Yeah, but the scars have a nasty way of sticking around..."

Long after hanging up, her mother's words echoed through her mind. *Things have changed in seven years...*

Well, Lee certainly had. She was made of tough stuff. Being the victim of high school bullying made you strong. It had to, or the memories would tear you apart. Why couldn't those people just have left town?

## By Another Name

Gone somewhere else? Did everyone love Copper Creek so much that they stayed forever?

She decided she'd sleep on the idea. However, a four in the morning inspiration had sent her to the computer looking for shop space, and starting up a cost/benefit analysis.

Four days later, she'd been unable to shake the idea. While Paige chewed her lips as she mastered the letters of her name, Lee doodled logos on dinner napkins. She made arrangements to return to a place she'd never fit in. A place where the high school girls had been thorny and cruel; where the boys ignored a girl with a glasses, braces that seemed to never want to come off, a stick figure, and tightly-curling blonde hair.

Though she'd dated a handful of times since Paige was born, Rosalee hadn't had a real relationship since Scott. They'd parted amicably. She'd known all along that he wasn't the one God designed to be her soul mate. Inside, she'd always known Scott was merely the biological contributor, and not the daddy destined for her daughter. Not by a long shot. Lee's nerves jangled just thinking of Paige's innocent questions, wondering why she didn't have a dad like her friends. Unearthing a stack of cookie sheets from the washer, Lee wondered if anyone ever would fill that bill.

The front bell jingled. Lee stood suddenly, jumble of trays clanging against her chest.

"Hello?" The familiar, deep voice called out. Her stomach dropped to her knees. Kade. He was here. The metal baking sheets clattered to her feet, a crescendo of orchestra cymbals. How did he find her?

"Back here!" Lee's voice cracked. She knelt, gathering the metal baking sheets together. Suddenly, he was helping pick up the mess. Their shoulders

Ashley Elizabeth Ludwig

brushed. He was so tall. His rich auburn hair looked like he'd just rolled out of bed, his cheeks rough with at least two days of beard. Had Kade always towered over her, so? He'd certainly never looked at her this way.

His sea-foam eyes sparkled. She might as well have been a three-course meal for a starving man. He seemed to eat up the sight of her with those heavy lidded eyes, making her blush to her roots.

"Lee's Treats, huh...?" His gravelly voice played a symphony on her eardrums. "Let me help you." He easily freed the trays from her shaking hands.

Lee's pulse zinged at his half-smile. Her emotions ran the gamut. "It's okay," she snapped. "I've got it."

Kade stood to his full height and frowned, and then blinked through whatever clouded his expression. He merely held the heavy baking sheets as if they were pieces of paper.

One by one, she retrieved her trays, laying them on the stainless steel prep counter.

"I'll take that, please," she said, the last one becoming a tug-of-war match between them.

He held on to it like a shield. "Must be fate. Or a God thing. I only came by because my sister...and here you are!"

"Sorry. We're closed." She yanked again.

He smirked, pulling her towards him. "Have dinner with me. Tonight."

Lee closed her eyes in silent prayer. *Lord, did you send him here to taunt me?*

"Give me the tray, Kade." She tugged.

"Or coffee, if that's easier. We can do whatever you want." He pulled.

"Just give it to me, already!" She shouted.

## By Another Name

"Or, that...but, I didn't peg you as that kind of girl..." He laughed aloud, and she let go, scalded with the dripping innuendo.

*Lord, his sideways smile is going to kill me. Dead. On the floor.* Head in hands, she sighed. "The tray. Just lay it on the counter. Please."

His generous mouth twitched in amusement as he did as she asked.

"Well, thanks for dropping in. I've embarrassed myself enough for one day." Heat radiated from her cheeks to the top of her head. She must be three shades of red, by now.

"You saved me. Buying you a latte is the least I can do."

She eyed the purple bruise at his hairline, biting her lip. "I don't suppose you'll leave me alone until I say yes."

"Think you know me that well already?" His eyes were positively dancing.

Was it possible that he didn't recognize her? Suddenly, it all made sense. Seven years was a long time. She wore her hair different. Styled and loose about her shoulders. Her figure had rounded out in the right places. She'd eighty-sixed the glasses. She had become self-confident. Secure. A business woman and a single mother who should have cared less that she had been needlessly harassed her entire high school life. And here he stood, larger than life. The brother of her tormentor.

He looked so hopeful. Lee could see the boy he had been, a shadow beneath the surface of the man. Did she sense a hint of desperation beneath the cocky exterior? She felt the upper hand, and a bloom of courage filled her breast.

Ashley Elizabeth Ludwig

"I know all about you, Kade." She turned her back to him, jamming her glass measuring cup into a barrel of flour, sugar, and baking soda. She threw the contents into the large Hobart mixer and flicked it to mix, a little harder than necessary. The paddle swung around and around, combining dry ingredients. Deftly, she one-hand cracked eggs into the mix, added butter to cream, and tossed in a generous amount of vanilla and spices with growing fervor.

"What, no recipe?" He peered into the mixer.

"I know this one by heart."

He'd leaned himself quite comfortably on the kitchen side of the counter and was watching her every move. He seemed so confident, so sure that she would roll on her heels and fall into bed with him. Little did he know that she wasn't that kind of girl. Courage stumbled into anger as Lee realized that, for whatever reason, he had made her this way.

She turned to him, wagging her rubber spatula. "You think you can waltz into a woman's life and take control. You're barking up the wrong tree, Mr. Sinclair."

"I only wanted the pleasure of your company over a hot, steamy beverage. If you're too afraid...well..."

"You aren't going away are you?"

"Nope." He folded his arms neatly in front of him, biceps flexing. She caught sight of a barbed-wire-looking tattoo banded around his left upper arm. Not barbed-wire. A crown of thorns. That was new. What else about Kade Sinclair had changed in seven years?

"Fine. Dietrichs Coffee. Half an hour."

"Done."

Lee scooped large heaps of cookie dough onto parchment paper and heaved the sheets into the hot

## By Another Name

oven. "It'll probably be longer. I have a few things to finish up around here, errands to run. I'll have to beat the Health inspector back by four o'clock."

"I'll wait for you." The bell signaled his exit.

*You're gonna have to.* Lee let the righteous indignation steep in her soul, setting the timer for the cookies. Guilty, she wiped the dough-covered paddle with her finger; Paige's favorite part of baking, she mused, munching on cookie dough. She replayed the events in her mind, wondering about the man who'd set her so neatly in his sights. The aroma of freshly baked cookies filled the kitchen. She could tell when they were ready just by the way the kitchen smelled. In baking, like life, timing was everything; she smiled, unearthing the perfect, plump, golden treats, and placed them on the drying racks to cool.

*So how long do I let Kade cook before I tell him who I really am?*

No time like the present.

~\*~

Two hours later, Lee strolled down Main Street to Dietrich's Coffee, twirling her keys in one hand. She juggled a tin of freshly baked cookies in the other, thinking on her growing list of things to do. She needed a manicure. She needed to make a run to the Smart and Final. Paige needed new shoes. Funds were starting to dwindle. Once the health inspector gave his thumbs up, she could have her grand opening and everything would change.

Lee checked her watch. She had an hour to spare before meeting Clive Watkins. His card burned a hole in her wallet. Something about the mid-forties, thin,

Ashley Elizabeth Ludwig

bearded man made the hair rise on the back of her neck. Just a vivid imagination, mother said. Maybe. She knew the reason for her foreboding. The man held her future in his sweaty little hands. Her mother's words of wisdom rang in her ears. *Accentuate the positive, Rosalee! and remember that all things work together for the greater good.*

Good advice—after all, tomorrow was a big day. Paige was starting elementary school in the same halls where little Rosalee Timmons had skulked. But she'd armed her daughter for the dangers of school bullies. By age five, Paige had been enrolled in both karate and gymnastics. A well-rounded and outgoing kid, Lee swore she wouldn't make the same mistakes with Paige that her own mother had made once upon a time.

The Dietrich's sign loomed at the corner. A vanilla latte sure would help get her over the afternoon hump. If Kade wasn't there, it didn't matter. She'd probably scared him off for good. It had been almost six years since she'd had a man in her life. She certainly didn't want Kade Sinclair entering it now.

*Liar.*

Lee took a deep breath as she walked, cookies before her like armor. The sun warmed her skin, though the spring sea breeze left the air cool. The marine layer fingered its way down the mountain, feathering her face with a reminder of what she truly loved about this place. Life hadn't been all bad in Copper Creek, had it?

"Time to get to know the neighbors." She forced a smile and entered through the open door of Dietrich's coffee house.

Lee picked her way through the crowd of kids

## By Another Name

listening to a dread-locked singer as he crooned a Jack Johnson number. She wondered if maybe really did always mean no, as she placed her order.

"\$3.75, right?" She smiled at the kid behind the counter.

"Nope. He's got it for you already." The heavily pierced barista pointed to the back corner of the room.

Lee followed his finger to see a teenage girl leaning casually on Kade's table, a bit too close, in her opinion. He sat back in his chair, telling a story. The girl's hand fluttered to Kade's, giving a quick squeeze before fanning her waist-long hair back from her face. Watching the animated conversation, Lee couldn't help the green-eyed monster that wormed into her heart. The girl looked so young. So vital. So confident. Everything she, herself, had never been.

Kade turned to the counter. He tapped his watch and grinned, shooing off the teeny-bopper. The look in his eye definitely had her feeling the canary to his cat.

She sat down opposite him, the cookie tin clanging on the table. "You have five minutes."

"Wow. You're a tough one, aren't you?" He checked his watch, reaching across to take her hand.

"You seem popular with the children." Her words were venomous, but he didn't seem to care.

"Yeah. Just a school thing."

"School. You're a teacher?"

"Counselor." He corrected.

Lee choked back a mouthful of latte. "For kids?"

He handed her a napkin. It fluttered from her fingers, down to the floor. Suddenly, she became little Rosalee again. All fumbles and angles. She bit her lip to make the insecurity go away. It didn't work.

"You confuse the heck out of me. One minute, you