



*Saving  
Anna*

EMOTIONAL  
FRIENDS TO LOVERS  
ROMANCE

T . T H O M A S

# SAVING ANNA

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FRIENDS TO LOVERS ROMANCE

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*For Riley, my reason for everything that I do.  
Please keep chasing sunrises.*

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Wear your tragedies as armor, not shackles.

— ANONYMOUS

## **AUTHOR'S NOTE:**

This is a clean romance. There is no smut. There is VERY little on page kissing.

Please be aware this book deals with loss of a loved one. The FMC struggles with survivor's guilt, PTSD, anxiety, and depression.

If you have any questions about the content of this book before reading, please reach out to me at [authorthomast@gmail.com](mailto:authorthomast@gmail.com)





## PROLOGUE



*Anna*

“**R**oss, why won’t you tell me where you’re taking me?” I asked my boyfriend for the umpteenth time that night. We’d been together since high school—freshman year to be exact. He was it for me, just as I knew I was it for him.

Our story wasn’t a normal one. Some might even frown upon it. I’d been a foster kid, and his parents had taken me in while the state worked on finding me a more permanent home. I’d been taken from my home in the middle of the night after my mother overdosed and my father took off for the hills. A neighbor had called the authorities and informed them I’d been on my own for days.

But after two nights with the Verns, they wanted to keep me there. They showed me what it was like to have a loving family, to have parents that actually cared about you. It was something I’d been yearning for but had never thought possible.

Over time, Ross and I fell in love. We started out as friends. He’d stay up late with me watching movies when I couldn’t sleep. Sometimes, he’d even read a book with me. He never cared that it was a sappy romance novel. He was interested in doing whatever I wanted to do. Ross was everything in the absolute best way.

Even when his older brother, Ryan, had come home from college for a weekend and met me for the first time, he’d welcomed me with open arms. Ryan had been the older brother I’d never had—a protector, someone that actually cared about my wellbeing. His weekends and holidays at home contained some of the best family memories I held. He truly was the life of the party most of the time.

But in my eyes, no one compared to Ross. Some people said we wouldn't make it, that young love never lasted. But I knew without a doubt that Ross and I were forever.

Nothing could destroy us.

Now, six years later, Ross was taking the little bit of time he had away from football practice and college classes to surprise me with a date.

"Where are we going?" I asked for the umpteenth time. Ross knew I was horrible when it came to surprises. The build-up was exhausting. Anxiety and depression were my silent killers. Ross knew and understood that, and he tried to avoid anything that triggered me.

So for him to do this—it meant he was planning something big. I just didn't know *what*. And it was driving me *nuts* to not know.

He grinned over at me. "Be patient. You'll love it."

I rolled my eyes with a huff. "You know I'm the worst when it comes to having patience."

He laughed softly, slipping into the right turn lane. "Well, I need you to find it tonight." I rolled my eyes. Patience was *not* one of my virtues. His mother teased me all the time for it.

I ran my eyes over his features. Ross looked tired—exhausted, really. I knew between practice, constant games, and studying all the time, he missed out on a lot of rest. Despite my concern for him, it really warmed my heart to know that even though he was just about dead on his feet, he still wanted to spend time with me.

It meant I still meant everything to him. I'd been terrified when he showed me his college acceptance letter, and I freaked out when he informed me they required him to live on campus for his first year of college courses. So, he held me in his arms, a blanket wrapped around us as he rocked us on the porch swing, the rain pounding down around us.

Ross was the one person in this world I was afraid of losing. I wasn't sure if I could survive without him.

I wasn't in college. It wasn't in my plans to go. I instead got a job waitressing at a bar/restaurant, and my tips more than covered the rent for my small apartment, my car note, my car insurance, the utility bill, and whatever else I might need to cover that month. I even made enough to put into savings. I knew I was extremely lucky. Not everyone was lucky enough to land an entry-level position that provided them with a financial cushion.

Ross began to turn just as I saw the eighteen-wheeler turning as well. My eyes widened in horror. My heart lurched into my throat.

“Ross—” I screeched, but it was too late.

The eighteen-wheeler blew its horn, but Ross didn't realize the situation we were in until it was too late. His exhaustion made his reaction time slower.

The last thing I heard was Ross screaming my name before my head slammed against the window, knocking me out cold.



*Ryan*

I rushed into the hospital, my hair a mess on my head, my eyes no doubt as wild as my hair. All I'd done was sling on a pair of gray sweats, my slides, and a long-sleeve shirt before rushing out of the house when my mom called me in tears, telling me to get to the hospital. She couldn't even tell me why I needed to get here. She was crying too hard.

And that freaked me out.

Dad was waiting for me in the small, quiet waiting room, tears rimming his eyes, though they didn't spill over. My heart was thundering against my breastbone. “Dad?” I questioned, coming to a stop in front of him.

He swallowed thickly and led me over to some chairs that were away from everyone else in the waiting room. I slowly dropped down into the seat, my hands beginning to tingle. Somehow, I knew something was *really* wrong.

“Ross and Anna were in a car accident,” he quietly began, taking a seat next to me. I swallowed past the lump that formed in my throat. Dad scrubbed his rough, weathered hands down his face. He was fifty-five years old, but right then, he looked *a lot* older. Something had severely aged him tonight.

“Ross didn’t make it,” he said quietly. Tears burned in my eyes. I dropped my face to my hands. *This couldn’t be happening.* “A witness said an eighteen-wheeler was making its left turn. Ross didn’t check to make sure everything was clear before he turned right. Eighteen-wheeler smashed the car in—crushed just about every bone in Ross’s body with the impact. Anna is unconscious. The only injury the doctors can see she sustained is a pretty bad head injury.”

*She was lucky.*

That was the part Dad didn’t say, but both he and I were thinking it. She was lucky to be alive and not crushed like Ross.

My shoulders shook as I cried into my hands, loss for my little brother ripping through me. He was so full of life, headed for bigger and better things. There was already talk of him all over the United States that he would be the next Tom Brady.

He would never get that chance now. It was ripped from him, just like he was ripped from Anna.

He’d never have the future he dreamed of. He’d never be able to give Anna everything he wanted.

“He was going to ask her to marry him tonight,” I rasped. I sat up, leaning back in my chair, silent tears sliding down my cheeks. Dad pinched the bridge of his nose, agony twisting his features. “He called me for advice, asking if I could pull strings to get him in at Delarosas.” I swallowed thickly. “He was so tired, but he wanted to ask her on their anniversary night.”

I shook my head, staring up at the ceiling. Ross wouldn’t get any of his planned happily ever after, wouldn’t get any of his dreams. And it wasn’t fair.

*And Anna. God, Anna.*

*Sweet, soulful, loving Anna.*

This would *kill* her.

Dad's phone suddenly vibrated, and he grabbed it out, looking down at it. He swallowed nervously. "Anna's awake," he whispered, his voice cracking.

*This was going to destroy her.*

I stood to my feet, swiping at my cheeks. We may be crushed. We may be burying my little brother *way* too early, but Anna had the worst of it all.

She'd lost the love of her life tonight. She lost the man that helped her heal, helped her grow.

And she had been with him in that car. Chances were, she saw everything that happened. And that would sit with her for the rest of her life.

We pushed through the heavy, blue double doors, and I followed Dad down the hallway that led to Anna's hospital room. I swallowed thickly at the sight of her as Dad walked to her side, pressing a kiss to her cheek, asking her how she was feeling.

Her head was wrapped in a thick bandage, and I could tell part of her head was shaved, most likely for stitches. Her face was bruised and swollen on one side, and her movements were stiff.

Dad was right.

She *was* lucky.

"Anna," I rasped, moving forward. I forced a smile to my lips. "How are you, sweet girl?"

I'd always called her sweet girl because that's what she was. She was the sweetest soul I knew. My brother... God, he'd been so lucky to have her. If he hadn't snatched her up, I sure would have eventually. She was everything I'd ever wanted and more.

She licked her lips, her eyes moving around the room. "Where's Ross?" she spoke, asking the question I knew all

three of us were dreading. My mom turned her head to hide her tears. I swallowed past the sudden, large lump that blocked my throat. “Why isn’t someone with Ross?”

She remembered the accident—at least the portion that happened before she was knocked out. But she had no idea what happened to him.

I grabbed her hands in mine, crouching next to her bedside, deciding to be the brave soul to destroy her world. Her eyes followed me, and fear flickered in her eyes. I hated seeing that fear there.

I hated that I was about to be the one to crush her soul and all of her dreams.

I licked my dry lips, wishing I didn’t have to do this. “Anna, sweet girl, Ross didn’t make it.”

It took her a moment to register my words. I watched the emotions play across her face—disbelief, anger, sadness, and finally, gut-wrenching pain. And that pain? I would never forget the way it haunted the light in her eyes, killing it, for the rest of my life.

“You’re lying,” she choked out, shaking her head.

I shook my head as well, trying to swallow down that large lump, but I couldn’t. It was stuck there. “I wish I was, sweet girl.” A tear slid down my cheek. “He didn’t make it, Anna.”

“No!” she screamed, her hands fisting in mine. Sobs tore from her chest.

And I watched my beautiful, sweet Anna shatter completely.





## CHAPTER ONE



*Anna*

I blinked at the white, half-slip of paper taped to my door, cocking my head slightly to the side as I glanced over the words.

*An eviction notice.*

Was it sad that I didn't even care? Maybe a couple of months ago I would have freaked out, cried, *something*.

But now?

Ross was gone. My will to live was... gone. It left when he left.

Everything that mattered to me went right along with him.

We were supposed to be forever, but there was no way forever was that short.

Shaking my head, I pushed open my door, leaving the notice hanging there. I didn't even care. The neighbors could stare at it all day, snicker about it behind their closed doors when they thought I couldn't hear them through the paper-thin walls.

And when I was booted out by the constable, they could go through all my things and decide what they wanted to keep.

Because I didn't care.

There was nothing else in this world left to care about. Not with Ross gone, abruptly taken from me, ripping my soul out when he left.

I shut the door behind me and dropped my jacket to the floor. Once upon a time, I might have cared to hang it up in the coat closet beside the front door, but not anymore. These days, everything ended up wherever the heck it landed. I hadn't

cleaned in weeks, not since he passed away. Dust coated everything. It almost looked like no one lived here.

In a way, no one did. I sure didn't feel like I was living anymore, even if my lungs filled with breath.

A throat cleared from my living room. I jerked my head up, surprised to see Ryan sitting on my couch. He was dressed in a pair of jeans with a navy-colored long-sleeve shirt, the sleeves pushed up to his elbows to reveal his veiny, muscular forearms.

He was a math teacher at the local high school and also the football coach. He'd once been on track to play pro, but when a knee injury killed his career in his senior year of college, he took a different route.

And because he was a football coach for the local high school, I was surprised to see him sitting on my couch at only four in the afternoon on a Tuesday. I was pretty sure there was football practice currently happening, and it wasn't like him to bail on his players when they needed him.

"What are you doing here?" I mumbled.

He laced his fingers together on his lap, still just staring at me, not bothering to say a word. My frown deepened. "Ryan, why are you here?" I repeated, staring at him. Looking at him was like looking at what an older version of Ross might look like, and it sort of hurt.

He leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees. The muscles in his forearms moved as he did. "No one has heard from you in a month, Anna. We're worried."

I shrugged and turned away from him, heading into the kitchen to grab a bottle of water. "Nothing to worry about," I told him. But my voice was scratchy from lack of use, which I knew was a sure sign to Ryan that something was *definitely* wrong.

He scoffed and stood to his feet. Gripping my arm, he spun me back around to face him, towering over me. I was only five-four, and Ryan easily stood at almost six and a half feet tall. Add to that how muscular he was? He was a giant. And I

was nothing more than a tiny little bug compared to him. The man was huge.

“Nothing to worry about?” he demanded. I just unflinchingly stared up at him. “You’ve got an eviction notice on your door. You’re welcome, by the way.” I frowned at him, not understanding what I should be thanking him for. “I paid your back rent and the next month’s.” I scowled at him. I didn’t need him to take care of me. “And you’ve easily lost a good twenty pounds in the past month. Are you even eating?”

I turned back around, heading to the kitchen. “Not hungry, Ryan.”

He wrapped his hand around my upper arm again, spinning me back around to face him. I gritted my teeth. “You can fool everyone else, sweet girl,” I swallowed thickly at the name, a name I hadn’t heard since Ross’s funeral, “but never me. Ross,” I flinched at his name, “told me everything about you. I know all your quirks. I know about your anxiety. I know about your depression.”

Tears burned in my eyes. He needed to go. I couldn’t deal with this. I wasn’t ready. Just the sound of Ross’s name ripped that hole in my chest open wider.

Ryan needed to get out of here before I completely fell apart, and he saw just how bad I really was doing.

“You don’t know anything,” I choked out, barely holding myself together.

He cupped my jaw, his thumb rubbing over my cheek. His soft touch sent shivers racing down my spine. He was making me feel, and I hated it. I didn’t want it. “I know it all, sweet girl. And I know it hurts. I hurt, too. I miss him, too.”

My lips trembled. I was falling apart at the seams. “I should have died with him,” I croaked.

Ever since Ross’s death, I’d felt guilty for being the one to survive. Why was he the one taken from this world? I had nothing to offer this dreadful place without him, but Ross? God, he was life itself. He lit up an entire room, and when he

smiled? You could power an entire neighborhood with the power behind one of his smiles.

Ryan wrapped his arms around me, tugging me against his muscular chest. I sobbed, finally crying after an entire month. I hadn't even cried at Ross's funeral, hadn't felt like I deserved the chance to.

I was alive. I was still breathing.

He *wasn't*.

It wasn't *fair*.

"You shouldn't have died with him, sweet girl," Ryan soothed. "He wouldn't have wanted that for you."

I shook my head, but I was crying too hard to speak. Ryan gripped the back of my thighs and lifted me up, carrying me over to the couch. He sat, leaving me to straddle his legs. But he just held me tight in his arms, squeezing me to his muscular frame.

"Just cry, sweet girl," he crooned, wrapping the blanket off the back of my couch around me. It was the same one Ross had given me on our one-year anniversary five years ago. "He may have left in body, but he never left in spirit." Ryan pressed his hand to my chest as my entire body shuddered. "He's still in here, Anna. You just have to move past all the pain to feel him again."

I grabbed the edges of the blanket and wrapped it tighter around me. "He gave me this," I croaked, my voice hoarse from crying. I hadn't touched this blanket since I washed it two days before our anniversary.

Ryan pressed a kiss to my forehead. "I know," he said softly. "And he would want it wrapped around you right now."

I sniffled, silent tears still sliding down my cheeks. "Stay?" I croaked. I couldn't handle this night alone, not after Ryan just ripped every scab off and tossed them aside. If he left, I didn't know what I would do. I was bleeding everywhere, and I had no way of stopping it.

If he left, I had a feeling I wouldn't be waking up the next morning. I wouldn't make it through the night.

Ryan tightened his arms around me. "I'll stay, sweet girl."

I buried my face in the crook of his neck, my tears soaking his skin. But he didn't even seem to mind. He just continued holding me.

"I'm sorry I'm such a mess," I blubbered.

Ryan pressed a kiss to my cheek. "Sweet girl, if you weren't an absolute mess right now, *then* I'd be worried. This reaction? This is perfectly normal. Have you even allowed yourself to cry?"

I shook my head. "Not since the night of the accident," I whispered. I hiccuped. "I didn't feel like I deserved to."

"Oh, Anna," he rasped. I didn't think he could possibly hold me any tighter, but he did. "I'm sorry, sweet girl. I'm sorry you ever felt like that, and I'm sorry—so sorry—that I didn't come to check on you sooner."

I shook my head and linked my arms around his back, snuggling closer, craving his warmth. He was strong like Ross had been, built solidly. But in so many ways, Ross and Ryan were so different. Their personalities were the biggest difference. Honestly, if they didn't look somewhat alike, you'd never guess they were related.

"Thank you for being here now," I whispered. I sniffled. "I didn't know how badly I needed this."

He rubbed his hands down my spine over the blanket. "Sometimes, sweet girl, I think I know you better than you know yourself. I'll never leave you to suffer alone. Whether Ross is here or not, you are still part of this family. And since Ross isn't here anymore," I whimpered at that sore reminder, "I'll take care of you until you're strong enough to take care of yourself. I promise."

"I can't ask you to do that," I whispered, my voice cracking. That was too much. It wasn't his job to take care of me. "I'm grown. I can—"

“Grown or not, Anna, depression is killing you.” I squeezed my eyes shut, hating that he was right. “And that survivor’s guilt you’re feeling? It’s going to be the final nail in the coffin.” I sobbed at the word coffin. “I know it’s hard right now, but you’ll breathe again. I swear, and when you do, it won’t hurt so much to fill your lungs with air again.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. I didn’t know what to say. Ryan was too good, too sweet for someone like me. My darkness would taint him, and I didn’t want that to happen.

I was terrified that if I told him just how dark my world was right now, he’d run in the other direction. And a selfish part of me didn’t want him to go anywhere. I needed him *here*.

Maybe I still cared enough to not want to hurt him. And something told me that if I left this world, he’d suffer. And I couldn’t stand to see Ryan suffering. I could barely even stand the thought of it.

“Try to get a little rest,” Ryan whispered. “I won’t let you go until you wake up; I promise.”

I closed my eyes, and I prayed that the horrors of that night would stay away while I was in Ryan’s arms.



## CHAPTER TWO



*Anna*

I slowly dragged my eyes away from the action movie playing on TV when Ryan stepped out of my tiny kitchen with a bowl of steaming ramen noodles. He set it on the table in front of me. “You need to eat,” he told me. He had that ‘I mean business’ tone going, but I was stubborn. I hadn’t been able to eat normally since the accident.

Ross had been killed taking me to *dinner*. I just hadn’t known where we were going to eat at.

He couldn’t eat. How was it fair that I still got to?

I shook my head, looking away from the steaming bowl of noodles. It was even my favorite flavor and honestly probably the only edible thing I still had in my kitchen to eat. I was pretty sure everything in my fridge was expired.

“I’m not hungry,” I mumbled.

“Tough,” he told me, not budging on the matter. I slowly looked over at him. “I want you to eat that.” He pointed at the meal. “You’re not going to sleep again until you do.”

I shook my head again, tears burning at the back of my throat. “How is it fair that I get to eat and enjoy food and he can’t anymore?”

Ryan quickly took a seat beside me and wrapped an arm around my shoulders, pulling me against his side. I was still bundled up in the blanket, but I snuggled up against him, sniffing for the umpteenth time that night. *God, it hurt*. It hurt so much that Ross wasn’t here anymore. It felt like an entire part of my soul was missing. How was I meant to survive when half of me was gone?

Ryan brushed my hair back from my tear-stained, raw cheek. “Will you please at least eat half of that bowl?” he



asked me. I turned my head, my eyes meeting his. They were open and pleading in the tenderest possible way. My chest felt like it was going to cave in. I couldn't handle him looking at me like that—like I meant the world to him and he was terrified he was losing me, too.

I turned my head and stared at the bowl in front of me before slowly nodding. He pressed a kiss to my temple, and my skin tingled at the contact. “Thank you, sweet girl.”

Silently, I reached forward and picked the steaming bowl up, the blanket falling from my shoulders. Ryan quickly grabbed it and wrapped it back around me before he pulled my legs across his lap. He watched the movie in front of us while I ate as much of the bowl as I could, barely making it halfway through before I was done.

My stomach couldn't hold as much as it used to anymore. I'd been starving myself, which meant my stomach had shrunk.

Without a word about how much I'd eaten, Ryan took the bowl from me and set it on the coffee table. Then, he tucked his finger under my chin and tilted my head up to look at him. “Thank you. I'm proud of you, sweet girl.” I swallowed thickly, tears burning in my eyes. I hadn't been praised for anything since Ross left this world. He used to praise me for even the simplest things because he knew how hard it was for me to do the simplest of tasks when I was drowning in my depression.

Ryan gently tapped my thigh. “Now, I want you to get a shower. I'll get us a movie started in your room.”

I ran my eyes over his face. Ryan had always been handsome, and looking at him now, I was reminded again of how much he looked like Ross, only a much older version that had lighter hair and a lighter shade of dark eyes—a caramel color instead of the milk chocolate Ross's had been.

“Promise you're not leaving?” I whispered. I wasn't ready to be alone yet. I knew I was latching onto him, but I couldn't help it. I knew it was unhealthy, but I couldn't bring myself to care.

Ryan kept away the demons in my head. They were silent when he was near. This afternoon and evening had been the most peace I'd had since the accident. I wasn't ready to let go of that yet.

Ryan brushed his hand over my hair. "I promise, sweet girl. Now go shower."

I slowly stood up from the couch and padded barefoot to my bathroom to take a shower, eager to have him praise me again. It was my only motivating factor.



When I stepped out of the shower, I was surprised to find a stack of clothes on the counter. They hadn't been there when I'd come in. Ryan must have slipped them onto the counter while I'd been showering. He'd always been a little sneaky like that. Whenever he used to come home from break, he'd sneak into my room and leave me a gift, whether it was chocolate, a book, or even just a card, and I never heard him come in. But I'd always know he was home by the gift left on the pillow beside the one I was using.

I picked up the shirt, and my throat closed. Tears slid down my sore cheeks all over again. They felt raw and chafed. I was so tired of crying, but it seemed to be all I could do. It was like all the tears I'd been holding in since the hospital when I found out Ross hadn't made it was pouring out of me like a dam had busted.

The shirt I was holding was one of Ross's shirts, and it even still smelled like him.

I quickly slid it on, inhaling the scent of his cologne, of everything that was just *him*.

*God, I missed him—so, so much.*

I hiccupped when I grabbed his boxer shorts, slipping them up my legs. I then quickly stepped out of my bathroom. Ryan was leaning against the wall across from the bathroom, his eyes intent on mine. It was like he *knew* how this would make me feel. Somehow, he knew that I would need him after I put these clothes on.

“Did you—” I croaked.

He just nodded.

I crashed against his chest, letting his strength wrap around me as I broke down for the second time that day. But this time, I had the scent of Ross infiltrating my nostrils, somehow making the pain both better and worse all at once.

Ryan buried his face in my wet hair. “Mom was going to donate them,” he said quietly. “I thought you might want them instead. I brought the boxes in while you were showering. I also kept his cologne, his books, anything that might remind you of him.”

I sobbed. “You’re too good to be true, Ryan.” This—all of this—Ryan would never understand how much this all meant to me. I thought I would never have anything more of him except for the very few things he’d left here in my apartment. And I hadn’t reached out to the Verns since the funeral, too afraid that they blamed me, too. I sure blamed myself. After all, if I hadn’t been so needy and always so depressed, Ross might not have felt the need to take me out on our anniversary. He might have waited until the weekend, after he’d gotten more rest.

Ryan shook his head. “I know how much it hurts to lose him, sweet girl, and I know it hurts even more for you. The love you two shared—it was once in a lifetime.” He gently pushed me back from him. My lips trembled when he cupped my face in his hands to brush some tears off my cheeks. “He loved you so, so much, sweet girl.”

More tears slid down my cheeks to replace the ones he’d just wiped away.

Ryan reached into his pocket and pulled out a ring. It had a silver band with a small diamond in the center. I stared at it, wondering what it was. It was gorgeous—stunning really.

“He was going to ask you to marry him that night,” Ryan whispered.

I sobbed. Pain ripped through me.

We could have had *everything*.

And so fast—so quickly—it had been ripped away.

He swallowed thickly. Then, he reached out and gently grabbed my hand in his. “And while I know I’m not Ross, I still feel you deserve to wear his ring.” He gently slid the ring onto the ring finger of my left hand. “To me and to my family, Anna, you will *always* be his forever.” He grabbed my face in his hands and kissed both of my cheeks. “I wish you two could have gotten your happily ever after.”

I squeezed my eyes shut.

*I wish we could have, too, Ryan.*

And it hurt so freaking much that we didn’t. I knew love could hurt. Love had led my mother to get hooked on drugs and eventually overdose.

But I never knew love could hurt *this* much. I’d rather Ross be alive and not be with me than to completely be gone altogether.

“Come on,” Ryan softly coaxed, grabbing my smaller hand in his much larger, calloused one. “Let’s get you to bed, sweet girl.” He gently squeezed his fingers around mine before he dropped my hand. “How’s an action movie sound? *Transformers?*”

I nodded. The *Transformers* series were my favorites movies. I could watch them over and over. “Can we watch *The Last Knight*? There’s not much love.”

He pressed a kiss to the top of my head before he pulled my blankets back for me. “We can watch whatever you want, Anna. Go on. Hop in bed, and then I’ll get the movie started.”

I slid into bed and grabbed my teddy bear that Ross had gotten me for my seventeenth birthday. I’d started sleeping with it the very first night he’d given it to me, and even if Ross spent the night with me, I *still* slept with it.

It was a comfort item.

I followed Ryan with my eyes as he moved around my small bedroom, getting our movie ready. He had changed into a pair of sweats and a t-shirt. I knew from growing up with the

Verns that he normally slept without a shirt, but I also knew he was pretty respectful. He wouldn't sleep in my bed with me without being fully clothed.

“Ready?” he asked, his fingers hovering right above my light switch, the TV remote in his hand.

I nodded. He cut the lights and then slid into bed beside me. I moved closer to him and rested my head on his chest, seeking body-to-body contact. He simply wrapped an arm around me and pressed play on the remote.

And for most of the night, I didn't dream of that accident. But I knew those dreams wouldn't stay away forever.



## CHAPTER THREE



*Anna*

Ryan handed me a cup of coffee when I finally emerged from the bedroom. He was showered and dressed in a pair of jeans, sneakers, and a gray t-shirt that clung to his body like a second skin, revealing all of his muscles and those rippling abs. I hated that I was attracted to him. It wasn't right. He was my dead boyfriend's brother.

I had to be a special kind of screwed up to even be the  *tiniest*  bit attracted to him.

“Can I trust you to eat breakfast and lunch?” Ryan asked me.

I shrugged, not in the mood to verbally answer. My eyes were swollen from crying so much yesterday afternoon and last night. I had woken up at three A.M. screaming Ross's name, my heart pounding hard and fast in my chest. I hadn't been able to breathe, my lungs constricted, my chest painfully tight. Ryan got to witness one of my anxiety attacks for the first time, but he had held strong, coaxing me through my breathing. And then he continued holding me as I silently cried myself back to sleep.

He'd known I wasn't ready to talk. I still wasn't ready to talk. What I really wanted was to pinch myself and wake up from this horrible nightmare.

But it wasn't just a nightmare. This was real life.

I was miserable.

I didn't know how to cope.

I was out here living, and Ross  *wasn't* .

It wasn't  *fair* .

Ross had just wanted to give me an amazing night and ask me to marry him. But he was too tired. His head wasn't all

there during the drive to wherever he'd been taking me to.

And it had cost him his life.

All because he wanted to do something nice for me on our anniversary, I lost him. From that day on, I had hated myself for how needy I was and how much I craved him. It hadn't been healthy, and in the end, I'd played a major role in his death. If I hadn't been so clingy, he wouldn't have felt the need to drive while exhausted. He would have instead gotten the rest he needed.

At the time, I'd thought it was a sweet gesture that he cared enough to still do something nice despite how tired I knew he was. Now, I knew I was just stupid and naive because now I knew he shouldn't have been behind the wheel of the car.

But he was. Because of me.

How did you move on from that? Because the guilt was eating me alive, leaving nothing but gaping blackness in its wake as it devoured me.

I looked at the diamond engagement ring resting on my finger. It was the perfect size, and it complimented my personality. The diamond was small, glittering just the tiniest bit whenever the light hit it just right, and the band was sterling silver and slim.

Ross knew this would be the perfect ring for me.

Tears threatened to spill all over again. I *couldn't* keep doing this. I didn't know how much longer I could keep fighting. I was so *tired*. I was tired of always struggling to put one foot in front of the other. I was tired of forcing myself out of bed each morning.

There was no reason for me to anymore. I didn't see one. My life had become bleak.

"Please don't force me to eat," I begged Ross, my voice a weak whisper. I could barely get the words past my dry, cracked lips. I was dehydrated, but I couldn't bring myself to care.



I heard him release a soft sigh before he dropped a kiss to the top of my head. I couldn't bring myself to look at him. I knew if I looked at him, I would come undone. And I couldn't handle more crying right now. I just wanted to be numb for a little while in the hopes that the pain would freaking stop.

I *needed* it to stop if *anyone* expected me to continue breathing.

"Alright," he relinquished. I was surprised he gave in. "But you'll eat when I get home. And more than half a bowl of ramen noodles, you hear me?"

I nodded, still not able to look at him. He took that option away from me though when he gripped my face in his calloused hands and forced our eyes to connect. My lips trembled. My heart knocked hard against my chest. My barriers threatened to crumble and leave me a mess of pieces in his hands. "I just need you to live for me, sweet girl. Can you do that while I'm gone?"

A tear slid down my cheek. He was asking too much of me. "I am living," I whispered. Even if I didn't want to.

Ryan shook his head. "I mean more than just breathing, Anna. I want you to *live*." He brushed his lips to my forehead. It just about completely undid me. "But breathing is enough for now. Promise me you'll at least keep breathing."

I didn't want to promise that, but Ryan knew me well. He knew I would *never* break a promise to him. I'd had too many promises broken to me over the years. I couldn't stand for them to be broken. He knew I would keep my word, even if I detested doing so.

A tear slid down my cheek when he just continued to hold my gaze, waiting for the words to pass my shaking lips.

"I promise," I breathed in a shaky whisper, instantly regretting it after.

He brushed the tear off my cheek. "I'll hold you up when I get back." He pressed a kiss to my cheek. "Have a bag packed when I get off work. I'm taking you back to my place with me."

I frowned at him. “Why?” Why couldn’t we just stay here? There was nothing wrong with my apartment, right? Did he not like it?

I looked around me. I knew the place was dusty and definitely needed a good deep clean, but it wasn’t that bad, right?

He tucked my hair behind my ears, drawing my eyes back to him. “Because you need out of his apartment for a little while, sweet girl. You’re drowning yourself in here.” I cast my eyes away from him. He wasn’t lying. Any chance Ross had gotten, he had been over here with me, staying with me, holding me in his arms for hours. The outside world had ceased to matter when he could get some time away from football and school. But whenever I didn’t have to be anywhere, I holed myself up at home.

“Maybe I want to drown,” I whispered. God, at least if I was drowning, it was a reprieve from the guilt I always felt. But then again, if I was hurting so badly, then that meant I was paying for still being here when Ross wasn’t. And I deserved every bit of the punishment.

Ryan shook his head. “Not on my watch.” He stood to his full height. “I’ll call to check on you.” He narrowed his eyes at me. “And you better answer. Don’t make me cut football practice again just because you don’t want to deal with me.”

With that, he left my apartment, and I stared at that door long after he walked out of it.

*What was Ryan Vern doing?*

With a heavy sigh and an even heavier heart, I dropped onto my couch and wrapped my blanket around my shoulders. I flicked through TV channels, trying to find something to distract me. But even with the TV on, the apartment felt too silent, too big.

It always did these days.

I both craved being here and hated it. Craved it because it was where Ross and I spent so much time together. But I hated it because of the memories—the crushing, painful memories

that, at one time, had been absolutely beautiful and heartwarming.

Some days, I wished I could just run away from it all and forget it. Other days, like today, I *knew* I deserved to feel like this. I deserved to hurt like this, to suffer.

Sniffing, tears threatening to spill down my cheeks again, I dropped the remote on the couch and stood up, going to my room to change into a pair of leggings, a t-shirt, and one of Ross's old college sweatshirts. If I remembered correctly, he'd gotten it during his freshman orientation, and he'd worn it so much that the lettering was well-worn and the material was extremely soft, thinning in some places.

And it smelled like him. It was weird how it still did after weeks of not being worn, but I didn't question it. No sense in questioning something I was thankful for.

Snatching my keys and my phone up, I quickly left my apartment. I stepped downstairs and frowned at the parking space that had been holding my car.

*My car was gone.*

I turned to look at my door, only to find a notice tacked next to my eviction notice. I snatched it up.

My car had been repossessed. I hadn't made payments on it since Ross had passed. They had warned me how strict they were about their payments. I paid biweekly. They'd told me if I missed more than one, that was it. My car would be gone. And they hadn't been kidding.

I wanted to scream. Ross and I had taken so many drives in that car, and now, because I'd failed to care about anything anymore, that connection with him was gone.

My hands shook. I dropped onto the top step of the stairs and hung my head into my hands, my shoulders shaking as I cried. How had I let myself get to this point? How had I become so wrapped up in my misery that I'd allowed a piece of Ross to get ripped from me?

With shaking hands, I pulled my phone out of my pocket and shot off a single text to Ryan. My hands were shaking so

badly that I had to type out the words multiple times so there wouldn't be errors. If Ryan saw all those errors in my message to him, he'd call out of work and be back here before I could even begin to tell him I was okay.

Because he would already know better.

RYAN

My car got repossessed.

Then, I set my phone aside and rested my head against the wall as my heart began to ache in time with my head.

*Just give up, that voice in my head whispered. Give up, and all of the pain goes away.*

Problem was, as much as I wanted the pain to disappear, I knew I deserved it. Giving up was essentially saying what had happened to Ross was okay. Not to mention, I'd made a promise to Ryan that I'd keep breathing today.

I wouldn't break my promise to him.

Half the time, my reasonings behind the things I believed in these days were confusing. I hardly understood it myself. I didn't want to be here anymore—not by a long shot. But I also couldn't completely give up because Ross deserved better justice than that.

If he hadn't been so worried about giving me such a great anniversary and proposing to me and had instead gotten the rest he so desperately needed, he would still be here. He would still be living and breathing.

But he wasn't. And it was my fault.



## CHAPTER FOUR



*Ryan*

**H**ow could I have let so much time pass without checking on her? An entire month—I'd let an entire month pass before I finally gave in to the urge to see her. I'd thought maybe she'd been focusing on just going through the motions like she always did. Ross told me when things happened that overwhelmed her, she tended to bury herself in other things, which just made her anxiety spike and her depression worsen.

Instead, sweet Anna had been doing something so much worse. She'd let her depression take over her life. She wasn't even *trying* to function anymore. Survivor's guilt was eating her from the inside out. And beneath all of that, I could tell she blamed herself for the accident.

But God, it wasn't her fault. Ross loved her to pieces. For him, there was no one else. His entire world revolved around her. Every decision he made, he made it with her in mind. He *wanted* to spend the rest of his life with her. He *wanted* to spend as much time as he could with her. He needed her just as much, if not more, as she needed him.

But they'd lost it all way too soon.

I hated it so much that she was placing all the blame on herself.

And I hated myself for not checking on her before now.

Mom and Dad had sworn up and down that Anna had just needed space. They kept telling me to let her have it. I'd listened to them—trusted them. I mean, they'd been around her more than I had at some points. Surely, they would actually know best, wouldn't they?

But I should have known that space was the last thing Anna needed, especially with everything I knew about her.

I could hear Ross as if he were sitting right beside me in my passenger seat, telling me how to take care of her now that he couldn't. Before he passed, he vented to me about her a lot, but not in a bad way. He was always worried about her. I never completely understood why because I'd never been super close to anyone that suffered from anxiety and depression.

*Anna has a lot of bad days, Ryan, and on those bad days, she needs extra love and care.*

I understood it now. The moment Anna had looked at me yesterday, I'd known. Everything Ross had said to me finally made sense, whereas before, it hadn't—not really.

Anna was suffering, and she was letting those demons inside of her kill her. She was *willingly* letting it happen.

How many times had my little brother canceled our plans because Anna had needed him? I'd never understood it. I knew depression was a silent killer. Ross had tried explaining how bad it was when it was coupled with anxiety. But unless you really experienced it, saw what it could do to a person first hand, it was hard to grasp it.

God, my gut still clenched when I pictured her broken expression. I could still hear her crying. The way she broke down in my arms yesterday—I knew she wasn't coping. There was no way she was coping if she'd broken down like she had. Inside, my sweet Anna was *dying*, and I was under a tight time constraint to save her. My gut told me that much, and it had yet to let me down.

I was *not* losing her. Not to this. She was going to make it. I refused to face any other outcome.

Every time I'd seen Anna over the years, she'd been calm and collected—happy even. I guess that was why I found it so hard to understand what she was going through. She hid it from all of us. The only person she allowed to see all the pieces of her, even the ugly ones, was Ross.

But yesterday, I'd seen the ugly side of her depression. And like Ross said it could, it was destroying her. And she was letting it. She'd given up on her will to live. Survivor's guilt

was plaguing her, dragging her farther down into a deep, dark pit.

I had no idea how I was going to save her. I didn't know how to do any of this. I didn't know her coping mechanisms. I didn't know what she needed—not really. I was just out here winging it the best I could.

But I was going to try. I *had* to. I'd already lost Ross.

I couldn't lose sweet Anna, too.

And I knew that if she died because of this, I'd live with that guilt forever. My dead little brother would haunt me for the rest of my life. I'd let her down once already by not coming to check on her after the funeral, but I wouldn't be letting her down again.

Anna was stuck with me now. I wasn't going anywhere, and the sooner she came to terms with that, the better.

I was *not* losing her. And I would continue to repeat that to myself until she was on the other side of this. Because every time I looked at her, I was so, so scared that it was already too late. That I was going to end up burying her next to him.

Sighing heavily, I leaned my forehead on the steering wheel, tightening my fingers around it. I wanted to scream, but I bit back the urge. This wasn't fair to Anna. This wasn't fair to me, to Mom, to Dad. What had we done to have to bury Ross like we had? This hurt. It *sucked*. He was so good to everyone, the kindest guy you could ever meet.

Why did all the good ones get taken so soon?

And now that I thought about it, Anna hadn't cried at his funeral. She had just stared blankly at Ross's casket. She'd even left in the middle of the ceremony. I'd seen the tears glistening in her eyes, but she hadn't let a single one fall. And that day, everyone—including myself—had given her a wide berth as if she were going to explode.

Now, I wished she had. At least then I would have known that she wasn't coping, that she needed help.

"I'm going to save her, Ross," I whispered.



And I was going to try to bury my feelings for her in the process.

Because alive or dead, I wouldn't go after my brother's woman, especially one he'd loved as deeply as he loved Anna. I wouldn't betray him like that.

And I absolutely refused to confuse Anna. In the state she was in, that was all it would do.



I watched the football players doing their drills, my phone to my ear as I waited for Anna to answer my call. She finally did, right before I got the voicemail. She'd been doing so good about answering my calls and texts all day, but I wasn't joking this morning.

I'd cancel football practice right now if I didn't get an answer. I wasn't playing games when it came her life and well-being anymore.

I was terrified she would finally completely give up. I wasn't blind. She was on the verge of saying screw it all and ending her misery. And I wasn't going to let her if I could help it.

She was going to heal and move past this. She just had to give it time.

"Hello?" she groggily answered, her voice heavily tinged with sleep.

I softened immediately and relaxed. She'd been sleeping. That meant she was alive, and right then, that was all that I could ask for. Asking for more at the moment was unfair of me. I had to take this all one step at a time. Baby steps, at that.

"Hey, sweet girl. You okay?"

She yawned. "I was sleeping," she mumbled.

I felt bad for waking her, but at the same time, I didn't. I wanted to show her that at least one person on this earth still wanted her alive and breathing.

"You got a bag packed yet?" I asked her.

“Not yet,” she mumbled. “I’ll get it done before you come.”

I bit back a snort. If there was one thing I knew about Anna, she was a procrastinator. It drove Ross nuts when they were together. Thankfully, procrastination never bothered me much. I worked with teenagers all day.

“I’m sure you will, sweet girl.” Sighing, I stared up at the cloudy sky. Rain would be hitting tonight. I could smell it. It was heavy in the air. “I’ll see you in a couple of hours, yeah?”

“*Mhm,*” she hummed, already falling back asleep.

I hung up and set my phone down before jogging out to the field to get the guys practicing. We had a game Friday night, and so far this season, we’d been winning every game. If we kept this up, we had a chance at playoffs for the first time in years. I wanted this for each of them, especially my seniors. It would be a perfect way to end their final years of playing football in high school.

I clapped my hands, drawing their attention to me. “Huddle up, boys!” I called.



Anna was still sleeping when I got to her apartment a couple of hours later. The storm clouds were really beginning to roll in now, and I wanted to get to my place before it started pouring. I hated driving in bad weather, especially storms. They were unpredictable around here, and the last thing I wanted to be caught in was rain falling so heavy that I couldn’t see the road in front of me.

I took a look around her room, barely biting back a snort when I saw she still hadn’t packed. Gently sitting on the edge of her bed, I shook her awake. She groaned and rolled onto her back, blinking up at me. “What?”

I barely bit back a smile. There had been just a tiny bit of snarkiness in her voice. Anna was still in there somewhere; I just had to bring her back to me.

“Pack a bag, sweetheart.”

“*Ughn*,” she mumbled, pulling the blankets over her face.

*God, she was adorable.*

I pulled the blankets back down. “Come on. Up,” I ordered, patting her thigh. “It’s going to start storming soon, and I want to be off the roads by the time it hits. So, come on.”

With a disgruntled sigh, she got off the bed and padded barefoot to her closet. Her hair was a mess on her head, and there was a red sleep line on her face. Her eyes were bleary, and she was sluggish, but she was up out of bed and moving around like I’d told her to do.

Ross had explained that getting out of bed when she had a low like this was hard, so I counted this as a plus.

Besides, she looked adorable when she first woke up. I sure wasn’t complaining—grumpiness or not.

Once she was packed, she slipped her feet into a pair of house slippers. Not thinking twice about it, I grabbed her hand in mine, lacing our fingers together as I tugged her out of the apartment to my car. She didn’t say a word.

But she did hold onto my hand a little tighter. My heart skipped a beat in my chest, but I shoved down every rising feeling inside of me. She couldn’t be mine.

But I still gently squeezed her hand in response.

*I’ve got you, sweet girl.*



## CHAPTER FIVE



*Ryan*

I blew on the steaming sauce before raising it to Anna's lips for her to taste. With pretty, flushed cheeks from the heat in the kitchen, she parted her lips and wrapped them around the spoon. Her eyes widened in shock. "That's actually really good," she complimented.

*Why did she have to look so beautiful when she was so expressive?*

I grinned. "I'm more than just a football coach," I teased her. She used to give me crap all the time when she first came to live with our family about me being just a football player. I knew she never meant it seriously, especially since she'd gone out of her way on my grad day to get me a gift. In fact, that gift still sat on my nightstand.

It was a picture of me and her when she graduated high school. We were grinning at each other, and I was spinning her in a circle. I'd been extremely proud of her. Graduating hadn't been easy for her, but she'd done it.

Despite the odds being stacked against her, she accomplished a huge goal. That was huge.

This girl was full of remarkable surprises, and she was capable of doing so much. I'd get her back to that point. It was a promise I'd made to myself and also silently to her. I knew she wasn't ready to hear that promise yet. She'd shut down faster than I could ever take the words back.

One day, she would be okay again, and she would be able to hear Ross's name without being flooded with guilt and sadness. One day, her memory of Ross wouldn't be tainted by that accident.

It was just going to take a while to get her there.

But for right now, I'd start by getting her car back. As soon as she had texted me earlier, I'd gotten on the phone to find out where it was at and how much she owed. I knew that car meant a lot to her. It was one of her prized possessions because she'd busted her behind to be able to get it. And I also knew it held a lot of memories of Ross.

She'd let herself and all of her things go, but I wouldn't allow it to continue to happen. Not anymore. Not now that I was here to stay.

Thunder shook the house right before rain began pounding down on the roof. I glanced upward for a second before looking back at Anna. There was a faraway look in her eyes as she stared out the window. Sadness mixed with nostalgia in those pretty eyes. The rain was reflected in them, making them shine in a way they otherwise wouldn't.

Her eyes used to shine all the time. Without Ross, they'd lost that shine, now seeming dull. I missed the brightness that used to shine from her. Just the mere memory of it made my chest clench.

"What's on your mind, sweet girl?" I softly asked her as I worked on mixing the noodles and sauce together.

"Just remembering something," she quietly replied.

I wracked my brain for what could have caused her to get so lost in her head while I dished up two plates of food. She kept looking out the window, and it hit me as we were finishing our dinner in silence.

Ross had told me a while back that Anna found comfort in dreary weather, and she especially loved it if it was storming. He knew it never made much sense, but she always felt better when the world was just as gloomy as she was.

*"She says it reminds her that though the sun shines brightly, even it gets down sometimes."*

He would sit outside on Mom and Dad's front porch with her, even if it was almost freezing outside, so she could find a moment of peace from the chaos in her head that day. He didn't care if they both ended up sick the next day and had to

stay home from school. If it made her feel better, he did it. Because to him, physical sickness was easier to deal with.

I didn't really understand it then, but I understood it now. Having a mental low was a lot harder to heal from than a cold or the flu.

*"She never gets better, Ryan. What she deals with on a daily basis—there's no cure for it. I can give her cold medicine and have her mostly better within twenty-four hours. But no matter the pills or the therapy, Anna is never better. But for those few hours on that porch with the rain pelting down around us, she's okay. She's content. And she's mostly happy."*

She ate in silence, not saying a word, her gaze remaining glued to that window, for the most part. After putting our plates in the dishwasher, I grabbed her hand in mine. She jerked her eyes up to mine. Her lips softly parted, and it took every bit of my restraint not to taste them. I imagined she would taste like spaghetti and the chocolate almond milk she'd just drank.

I was *dying* for a taste, but what I wanted could never happen. I wouldn't let it. She was my brother's, even if he'd passed away. It didn't feel right to tread into that territory.

"Come with me," I coaxed.

She stood from her stool and tightened her small hand around mine. I rubbed my thumb along the back of her hand as I led her out onto my back porch, snatching up the blanket Ross had given her as well. Tears welled in her eyes once she realized what I was doing. "Ryan—"

"None of that," I quietly shushed her.

*"For those few hours on that porch with the rain pelting down around us, she's okay."*

And God, did I just want her to be okay for a few hours. She *needed* it. I wasn't sure how much more I could handle of her being miserable and upset like this.

I sat down on the porch swing and gently tugged her down to sit on my lap before I wrapped the blanket tightly around

her. Then, I wrapped my arms around her, my fingers playing with the ends of her hair. “Now, find some peace, sweet girl.”

And for once, she did. She allowed the dreary weather to wrap her in its dark embrace. She became so comforted that she fell asleep right in my arms.

My heart almost couldn't take it. Holding her like this, her trusting me like this... it was almost too much for my soul to bear.

I brushed my lips to her temple. “If I could make it rain every single day for you,” I said softly, staring down into her pretty, peaceful face, “I'd make it storm,” I promised.

For hours, I sat on the porch, even long after I felt like falling asleep. I didn't care how much sleep I lost or how tired I was going to be in the morning when I had to go to work. I wanted Anna to have as much peace as she could. That was all that mattered to me.

I stayed up all night with her. I knew I would sorely regret it in the morning, but I would catch a nap during lunch to sustain myself.

I'd do anything for this girl. And that thought...well, it was a bit terrifying, to be honest. But that fear didn't stop me.

That night, Anna didn't have a single nightmare. She didn't wake up once. She just softly slept in my arms as I rocked us back and forth on that porch swing. The rain continued to pound down on the roof; lightning continued to light up the sky, and the thunder continued its incessant booming.

*“She never gets better, Ryan.”*

I was beginning to understand that more and more, but it was just like Ross had said. For these few hours she was out here, she was at peace. I'd always thought he was sort of crazy to indulge in this, but now, I understood one hundred percent. And I knew I'd indulge in this for the rest of my life if it meant her mind was quiet.

I would endure thousands more cold, wet nights if it meant she felt okay, even if it was just for a little while. I couldn't



begin to imagine the mess in her head. I wasn't sure if I'd ever begin to completely understand it. But every day for the rest of my life, I'd do everything I could to help her. Even when she eventually moved on to someone else, I'd still be right here if she needed me, ready to hold her on all of the rainy days.

It would kill me to see her with someone else, but I'd deal. I would cope. Because I would never touch my little brother's girl—not in that way. It was wrong. It was forbidden. And it would just mess with her more.

*How would she cope with going from one brother to the next?* I shook my head. It was a disaster just waiting to happen with no good, happy ending for either of us.

No. From this moment forward, I'd be her best friend and nothing more. I'd keep everything I felt to myself. I'd focus on helping her move forward with her life.

And on the days that were really hard for her to push through, I'd *drive* us to a freaking storm if I had to.

The rain slowly let up around six A.M., which was around the time I needed to get up and start getting ready for work anyway. I eased up from the porch swing, being careful not to wake her, and I carried her through the house to my room.

I ignored how perfect she looked in my bed when I laid her down on the mattress and covered her up beneath my blankets. She looked like she fit there, like she was *meant* to be there all along. And those were dangerous thoughts to be having.

Instead, I opened the windows in my room and put towels on the floor and the windowsill so she could hear the rain as it continued to come down. I wanted her to still be able to smell it as she breathed.

I brushed my lips to her forehead, my heart clenching in my chest for what was so close, but what I could *never* have.

"I wish I could give you all the rainy days in the world, sweet girl."

With that, I left her in my bed, and I went to go get ready for work. But before I left for the day, I wrote her a note and

left it beneath her phone, which I had put on the charger for her and placed on the bedside table closest to her head.

*Enjoy the rain, sweet girl.*



## CHAPTER SIX



*Ryan*

The weekend came way too fast for my tastes. Anna continued to stay at my place, never once asking to go back to hers—not like I would let her anyway. I was pretty sure a part of her was scared to go back to her apartment. That place held so many memories of Ross; though it was good to have those memories, I knew they were also killing her. Because I knew everywhere she looked in that small apartment she had, she shared a memory with him.

Memories were good to have...until they just weren't. Until they slowly killed you inside. Until you were surrounded by them, all those beautiful memories tainted with the memory of your loved one's death.

And she had—she'd tainted all those memories with her very last memory of him.

When I left in the mornings for work, Anna was still asleep. When I came home in the evenings, it looked like she had just forced herself out of bed. I never said anything; I just let her be. The fact that she was forcing herself to get out of bed for me was enough right now. I didn't want to push her too hard. All of this was so new to me, and I was terrified of screwing it all up by pushing her too much.

Right now, my plan was just to show her that I wasn't going anywhere. My plan was just to give her someone to continue fighting for. Her person used to be Ross. Now, I planned to make myself that person. I had to because it was clear she needed someone to lean on.

But unlike Ross, I'd make sure she knew how to eventually stand on her own. I loved my little brother, but he'd never forced her to stand on her own two feet because he thought he'd always be there for her.

Today was finally Saturday, and I was determined to have Anna enjoy today as much as she could, not wallow in bed all day.

“I just want to sleep,” she mumbled when I tried coaxing her from between my blankets. We’d shared my bed the past few nights. And though it certainly wasn’t helping the feelings I held for her, she slept better when I was holding her.

So, I’d suffer. If it means she was okay for a few hours, I’d force myself to suffer every single night from here on out.

We hadn’t had more rain since Tuesday night, but they were calling for more rain today, and it was supposed to last well into the night. We’d been falling asleep to the sounds of storms that I had played from every TV in my house—the living room, my bedroom, and the spare room—but I knew it wasn’t anything like the real thing.

I was just trying to do my best here.

But I was thankful we were getting rain today. She was hitting another super bad low; I could see it coming. And I was hoping the storm would hold it off a few more days while I tried to figure out how I would help her through it.

“You do more than enough sleeping for the both of us while I’m at work,” I teased her. I knew she slept so much because of her depression, and it broke my heart, but I didn’t want her to feel bad for it. She was doing her best right now, and I couldn’t ask for more than that. “Come on, sweet girl. Get out of bed.”

She huffed but sat up. I grabbed her beneath her arms and pulled her up until she was standing on her feet. “Good girl,” I praised. I’d come to realize that praising her lit her eyes up for a tiny sliver of a moment. If you weren’t watching her like I always was, you’d miss it. And I was a sucker for the light that shone in her eyes—always had been. “Let’s go.”

I led her out of the bedroom, her small hand encased in mine. She held my hand a lot now, and I did my best to ignore the way it always made me feel. She was seeking comfort; that was all this was. I couldn’t read more into it, or I’d make

myself miserable. And both of us being miserable wouldn't do either of us a bit of good.

I set a plate of toast in front of her with a steaming mug of coffee once she sat down at the bar. "Can you eat this for me?"

She frowned down at it. "I'm not hungry, Ryan."

I sat beside her with my cup of coffee and two slices of toast. "Will you do it for me?" I pleaded with her.

She looked over at me, her eyes locking with mine. I kept my gaze steady on hers. Finally, she sighed, caving in. "Okay."

I pressed a kiss to her temple before I focused on my own food and coffee. Once she had managed to eat her slice of toast, she sipped at her coffee. I washed our dishes and dried them before turning to watch her. She was lost in her head, staring out the back door towards the gloomy sky. The rain was coming in fast, and I knew she was longing for it.

Since I saw the good it did her on Tuesday night, I'd been praying for more rain ever since then. And I'd continue to pray for it for the rest of my life because my sweet Anna *needed* it to survive. Just as nature needed it to thrive, so did Anna. She would wither and die without it.

Her mind was the sun, drying up all the water and nutrients she needed, and the rain was her balancer.

"Why don't you go sit on the back porch?" I suggested. "Enjoy the weather."

She looked over at me for a moment before she nodded and slid off her stool. I watched as she grabbed the blanket Ross had gotten her before slipping outside, sitting on the swing. I watched her for a minute, wishing there was some way for me to take her pain and make it my own.

I hated seeing her suffer like this. She wasn't coping. She wasn't healing.

And I didn't know what to do for her. The rain was the only thing that somewhat made it better.

I knew they said only time could heal wounds like that. I knew all I could really do was just stay by her side. Honestly,

though, I wasn't sure time would heal this. Anna didn't work like other people in the world; she never had. Right now, she was finding comfort in her misery.

God, there had to be something else, didn't there? But what else was there? I was running myself in circles trying to figure it out.

My phone rang in my pocket, jerking me out of my head. With a sigh, I pulled it out, staring at the family picture that was my mom's contact photo. It was the last family photo we had that contained Ross.

The sight of his beaming, smiling face made my chest ache.

I debated answering. I didn't feel like dealing with her, but finally, I did. She'd already lost one son. I knew she was latching onto the last living one with both hands.

"Hey, Mom," I greeted when I answered.

"For a minute there, I thought you weren't going to answer," she said. I didn't tell her I was thinking about it. "I just wanted to check in and see how you were doing."

"I'm fine," I assured her. And I was. Days without Ross sucked, but I was coping. But you know who wasn't? Anna. And you know who she hadn't called to check on? Anna. And you know who she told me not to bother? Anna.

I cleared my throat. "You checked on Anna?" I knew she hadn't, but I wanted to see what she would say. Would she dare lie to me? I bet she would. I didn't know why Mom thought she needed space. Was it because Anna was keeping hers?

Space had been the last thing this sweet girl needed.

"She's fine," Mom lied.

I snorted, flattening my hand on the counter. I imagined all of my sudden anger flattened between my palm and the countertop so I wouldn't yell at her. "Want to run that by me again?" I demanded, a hint of anger tinting my tone.

"Ryan—"

“Why did you lie to me?” I demanded to know. “You told me you were checking on her. There’s no way you were. I just had to pay her back rent, Mom. She quit working. She’s drowning in misery. She’s the furthest thing you can get from okay. *Why* didn’t you really check on her? *Why* did you order me to give her space?”

Mom was quiet. I didn’t understand it. They’d taken her in, had loved her as their own daughter. None of this was making sense to me. I was reeling. We could have *lost* her. Did they not know that? All those years she lived with them, and they didn’t have an inkling of how bad things could get with her? I was already beating myself up for leaving her alone for too long. She had *needed* us, needed *someone*, and we’d *abandoned* her.

“She asked us to leave her alone,” Mom said quietly.

I shook my head, though she couldn’t see me. If it had been me or Ross demanding something like that, she would have never let us be, not until she knew for sure we were really okay. Was Anna not a daughter to her?

“I don’t think she was pleased to see me at first, Mom, but God knows she needed *someone*. She’s not healing. She’s not coping. She’s slowly letting herself waste away. Survivor’s guilt is *killing* her, and instead of being the mom you promised her you would be, you let her drown herself.”

“Ryan—”

“I’m done talking about this,” I told her, cutting her off, but I didn’t care. I couldn’t stay on the phone with her any longer. If I did, I was going to explode. “I’m getting off the phone now because I don’t want to say something I’ll regret later. I don’t want to hurt you. I understand you were trying to respect her wishes, but sometimes, we don’t voice what our hearts are screaming for. I love you.”

With that, I hung up the phone and went to go sit outside with Anna. She looked over at me when I opened the sliding glass door. It was sprinkling now, the rain having moved in a bit faster than the weatherman said it would.



I swore, the weatherman was rarely right anymore when it came to the weather.

Surprising me, she held her hand out to me. “You make me feel a little better,” she whispered. My heart clenched in my chest, her words almost having the power to bring me to my knees.

She had no idea what in the world she did to me.

I took her hand in mine and gently pulled her up. Then, I sat down and pulled her down onto my lap, holding her just as I had held her Tuesday night.

“Let it rain, sweet girl,” I whispered, brushing my lips to her temple. “I wish I could make it stay forever.”

She curled her fingers into my shirt. “I wish you could, too.”

I tucked her head under my chin and gently rocked us as the rain began to get heavier, thunder rumbling in the distance. And somehow, I knew it was echoing the pain inside of my sweet Anna’s heart.



## CHAPTER SEVEN



*Anna*

I rubbed my thumb over Ryan's scrawl on the note he'd left me. Since last Wednesday, he'd been leaving a note under my phone before he left for work each morning. I had them all stashed in my bag so I could re-read them when I felt my mind losing control of itself.

Which was honestly way more often than I wanted to admit.

*No rain today, sweet girl, but you know the playlist if you need it.*

I sighed and leaned my head back to stare up at the ceiling, blinking back tears from my eyes. Somehow, most likely because of Ross, he knew I found comfort in dreary weather, and it was even better if it was storming.

Ryan was doing everything he could to keep me with him, to keep me breathing and focused on the here and now instead of losing myself in the past, in all of the what-ifs, and all of the guilt.

*God, all the guilt.*

With a heavy sigh, I slowly turned and placed my feet on the floor before forcing myself out of bed. I felt tired and weak. I needed food, though I knew it would go down like cement. Food just wasn't my thing anymore. But Ryan was doing so much to help me and keep me grounded. The least I could do was make sure I ate a little something for him. It always made him so happy when I did, too, which helped.

It helped knowing he was proud of me for doing something so simple.

The coffee pot was already on, so I worked on making myself a cup before putting a slice of bread into the toaster. Blackberry jam was already out on the counter. It'd been my breakfast all weekend, and I was a little addicted to eating it when I had to eat. It went down the easiest.

Once my food was done, I took a seat at the bar and slowly worked on eating the toast. It always took me a while, and just like the past two days, halfway through, I was already tired of eating, but I somehow got through it. And then, on a spur-of-the-moment decision, I took a picture of my plate with bread crumbs on it and sent it to Ryan.

Today, I just needed a little bit of his praise. Otherwise, I wasn't sure if I was making it through today at all.

RYAN

[Image]

I ate toast, and I have a cup of coffee.

Good girl. I'm proud of you.

I was surprised to feel my lips turn up just slightly at the corners. I couldn't really remember the last time I smiled even the slightest bit.

Blowing out a soft breath, I stood and put my plate in the dishwasher before taking my coffee to the back porch, grabbing my blanket along the way. I paused when I picked it up, my heart knocking hard in my chest.

It smelled like Ross.

Tears burned in my eyes. Pulling the fuzzy blanket up to my nose, I inhaled deeply. A small sob ripped from my throat.

Ryan had sprayed Ross's cologne on my blanket.

Why in the world was Ryan so freaking good to me? What had I done to deserve him going out of his way so much just so I could have one more piece of comfort?

A tear ran down my cheek as I hugged the blanket to my chest with one hand. After I took a seat on the porch swing, I set my coffee down and then wrapped the blanket around my shoulders, staring out into Ryan's backyard.

Autumn was beginning to set in, though the season wasn't officially here yet. The rain was one of the biggest indicators of the season preparing to change. And I couldn't wait until it did. I was ready for everything to look as dead as I felt inside.

Maybe then, I wouldn't feel so alone.

The doorbell suddenly rang. I frowned and stood up from my chair, grabbing my coffee and my blanket before heading to the front door. No one ever came by. I figured maybe Ryan had ordered something, and it was one of the delivery people here to drop his package off.

My eyes widened in surprise when I saw Mrs. Vern standing on the other side. She was *certainly* not a delivery person.

"Um ... Ryan isn't here," I quietly informed her. Why would she stop by on a day she knew he had to work? That didn't make sense.

"I know." A small smile tilted her lips. "I'm here to see you."

My heart was beating uncomfortably fast in my chest, but nonetheless, I stepped back and allowed her inside. I wasn't ready to see her, but I couldn't kick her out of a house that wasn't mine.

My anxiety notched up a couple of levels. Today was going to be rougher than I thought it was.

After I closed the front door, I followed her to the living room where we took seats on opposite couches. I set my coffee down again, my stomach suddenly feeling too cramped to drink it. I clutched my blanket closer to me on my lap, waiting for her to say why she came.

"I'm sorry I didn't reach out to you," she finally spoke up.

I shook my head, a sudden lump appearing in my throat, preventing me from talking. I had asked her to keep her distance, and she had. I couldn't fault her for that. And even now, I still wasn't ready for this confrontation.

She sighed softly when I avoided her gaze. "Anna, can you please look at me?" she asked.

I just shook my head. She leaned forward, and when her hand touched my knee, I jerked back, my head snapping up, our eyes locking. Tears blurred my vision, and my lips trembled. I wasn't sure if I could do this. I wasn't ready to talk yet.

"Anna, I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry." A tear ran down my cheek. Sadness for me rang in her eyes. I couldn't handle this. Not today. Not now. Not when I was feeling so raw and ripped open. "I thought we were doing the right thing by giving you space. I can see now Ryan was right. You didn't need space. You need people to openly love you."

I squeezed my eyes shut. Agony swirled through my veins, making me internally bleed. It shredded my heart, sank its razor-sharp teeth into my soul.

"I miss him," I croaked. God, I missed him so much. This pain, this *agony*—I couldn't deal with it, couldn't live with it, could barely fucking breathe with it.

I felt like I was suffocating, like my head was below the water, and I couldn't find my way up. The waves were steadily crashing over me, beating me down, weakening me.

She quickly got up and came to sit beside me, wrapping me in her arms. "I know, honey. I know. God, I miss him so much, too. You two—you were *perfect* together. The love you shared with him was something incredible to witness, and he loved you to pieces. And I know he's still loving you from wherever he's at. That boy of mine will *never* stop loving you."

I fell apart, sobs ripping themselves from my chest. Clutching my blanket to my chest, I curled into her embrace, allowing her to comfort me like she used to. She ran her hand

over my hair, whispering soothing words to me. She cried silently, both of us mourning a man we loved so much in two completely different ways.

*Why did things have to end the way they did?*

*Why did I have to lose Ross the way I did?*

*It should have been me.*



*Ryan*

I set my keys on the counter and walked into the living room. I'd seen my mom's car outside and had rushed inside to check on Anna. God knew my mom could be overbearing. And after what I'd said to her on Saturday, I had no doubt in my mind she'd been waiting to ambush Anna when I couldn't stop her.

Rage pulsed through me. If she thought she could get away with doing something shady like this, she had another thing coming. I may have let her get away with a lot, but Anna was off-limits.

Mom instantly put her finger to her lips when I entered. My features softened as soon as I laid my eyes on them. Anna was curled against her side, her blanket wrapped around her shoulders, her knees against her chest. Her head was resting on Mom's shoulder, and one of the *Scream* movies was playing in the background—one of Anna's favorite movies. It was the only horror series she could stand to watch, and that was only because she found them funny.

"Let me put her to bed," I whispered, quietly walking forward.

Mom eased her arm from around Anna, and I quickly moved Anna so she was leaning against me. Once my arms were secure beneath her back and her knees, I lifted her against my chest and carried her to my bedroom. She snuggled beneath the blankets, her blanket fisted in her grip.

I needed to get her a stuffed animal or something to sleep with—something a little easier than that blanket. I knew it was

constantly getting tangled around her when she happened to sleep with it.

After quietly shutting the door behind me, I went back out into the living room. Mom was putting two cups into the dishwasher. “She wouldn’t eat lunch,” she informed me.

I sighed. That didn’t surprise me. I was just glad she’d eaten toast this morning. Anna and food weren’t agreeing lately.

“Eating is a struggle for her right now, but she assured me she had a slice of toast for breakfast. I’ll get her to eat something for dinner.”

Mom leaned against the counter, sadness coating her features, pain filling her eyes. “I never meant to neglect her, Ryan.”

I wrapped my arms around my mom when she began to cry. “I know, Mom.” Sighing, I rested my chin on the top of her head. “Trust me, I know. None of us meant to abandon her. We thought that was what she wanted. And maybe she did. But it wasn’t what she *needed*.”

Mom stepped back and swiped at her cheeks. “Someone has to save her, Ryan—before it’s too late.”

I swallowed thickly. “I know,” I rasped. “I’m working on it.”

She pressed her lips to my cheek. “I love you, son.”

I forced a smile to my lips for her sake. She didn’t need to be worried about both me and Anna. “I love you, too, Mom. Drive safe, yeah? Shoot me a text when you make it home.”

She patted my cheek and nodded her head before disappearing out the front door, a silent click when it closed following her departure.

I placed my hands flat on the counter and leaned forward, blowing out a harsh breath.

*God, give me some guidance—please. I can’t lose Anna, too.*





## CHAPTER EIGHT



*Anna*

Ryan slid me a cup of coffee, already made. I frowned down at it before looking back at him, confusion marring my features. He sighed. “I know you didn’t sleep last night, Anna,” he said, his deep voice sliding around me like velvet. His deep baritone was smooth and soothing.

He stared at me for a moment as I slowly took a seat at the bar, my eyes burning from the lack of sleep. “You know you never have to sleep by yourself if you’re not ready yet, right?” he asked me. I swallowed thickly, looking down at my steaming mug of coffee.

Last night, I decided to try sleeping by myself. I felt like I was leaning on him too much, and needless to say, it hadn’t worked out well. Every shadow in the room took the form of Ross, and every time I closed my eyes, all I saw was him. It hurt. I spent most of my night crying. I knew Ryan would have pulled me into his arms and held me until I got to sleep, but I didn’t want to disturb him.

I drew in a deep breath. “It’s never going to get easier, Ryan.” My voice broke. Every time I closed my eyes last night, I just pictured that accident. I remembered them breaking the news of Ross’s death to me. My heart ripped apart even more as those same images flashed in my head, even now. Just when I thought my heart couldn’t possibly be shredded more, I was proven wrong.

I looked up at him through teary eyes, feeling so raw and open. I couldn’t contain it. “Don’t you get that, Ryan? You can’t—you can’t just put your life on hold for me just because I’m broken and damaged and you think—you think you can fix me or something.”

Anger twisted his features at my words. I swallowed thickly. I didn’t like being on the receiving end of his anger.

He flattened his palms on the counter and leaned toward me, bringing his face close to mine. My breath hitched in my throat. “You think that’s what I want to do, Anna? Fix you?” I swallowed past the sudden lump in my throat. He’d never been like this with me. “What I want, Anna, is for you to live, to survive this. Ross died.” I flinched, a whimper crawling up my throat. I swallowed it down before it could escape. “God, I know that, sweet girl, and it kills me to not have my brother here with me. And I know you lost your soul mate that night, too. But *your* life didn’t end that night. You’re just living like it did.”

I sniffled, squeezing my eyes shut. “I wish it had,” I whispered.

A growl ripped from Ryan’s chest, making me pop my eyes back open. “Don’t,” he snapped. I jerked my eyes up to his. He gripped my chin, holding my gaze on his so I couldn’t look away. “Don’t you *ever* say something like that again, you hear me? I’m not losing you, Anna. I *won’t* lose you, too.” He released me and drew in a deep breath, scrubbing his hands down his face afterward, the veins in his arms standing out because of the tension thrumming through his body. He finally dropped his hands to his sides.

We just stared at each other, so much agony pulsing between us, both of us so hurt, broken in our own ways, and yet, he was still trying to save me.

He’d give up eventually, wouldn’t he? Not many people in this world had the endless patience to deal with me like Ross did.

“I’m sorry,” I croaked, a tear running down my cheek. I quickly reached up to swipe it away. “I’m sorry,” I repeated.

He came around the counter and pulled me into his arms, holding my head to his chest. I let more silent tears slide down my cheeks as I wrapped my arms around his torso, clinging to him like he was my lifeline. I was drowning in my misery, but as long as he held me like this in his strong, muscular arms, I had a life raft I could use to keep my head above the water.

But he couldn’t fend off the sharks constantly circling.

“Promise me you won’t leave me, Anna,” Ryan begged, so much agony in his voice that if I’d been standing, I’d have been brought to my knees. I squeezed my eyes shut, forcing a sob back down.

“I promise,” I swore, my voice scratchy. “I won’t leave you.” I hated that he was asking me to make this promise, but we both knew I wouldn’t go back on my word to him.

He dropped a kiss to the top of my head and stepped back enough to brush the tears off my cheeks. “Go get some rest— *in my bed,*” he tacked on at the end, arching a brow at me. “You need sleep.” He stepped back completely, grabbing his to-go tumbler of coffee and his keys off the counter. “I have a game after school today, so I’ll be home late. Feel free to order some food or go pick yourself something up,” he told me. “Your car is in the drive.”

With that, he strode to the front door. Sighing, I left my coffee on the counter and got up, heading to the guest room to grab my blanket before heading to his room.

My chest squeezed when I stepped in. He’d draped twinkle lights down the wall behind the TV, and the TV was already playing storm sounds. I glanced at the nightstand and instantly spotted a note. I walked over and picked it up, my lips trembling at his messy scrawl.

*Today is going to be hard, sweet girl.  
But remember I want you here. You  
were meant to live, Anna.*



I looked up toward the ceiling when the sound of water began to hit the roof. Frowning, I slid off the couch and moved to the window, peeling back a curtain to look outside. The sky was gloomy and dark, and lightning lit it up before thunder clapped, shaking the windows with its volume.

A pang twisted through my heart when I remembered all the times that Ross would hold me on that porch swing at his parents' house, long after I fell asleep.

*God, why was today suddenly so freaking hard?*

Sniffing, I grabbed my blanket off the couch and headed out onto the back porch. The sky continued to grow darker, daylight going away to let in the night, and the rain came down harder, the storm growing wilder. I frowned at the thought of Ryan out in this. I didn't like the thought of him potentially getting hurt. The school wouldn't require the game to go on with this kind of weather, would it? It couldn't. That had to be some kind of safety concern, didn't it?

The sound of the front door opening reached my ears, and I stood up, the blanket wrapped around my shoulders, and stepped into the living room, watching as Ryan took his shoes off at the front door, a pair of jeans hanging low on his hips, his t-shirt plastered to his body from the rain.

I swallowed thickly, my eyes trailing over him. His stomach was flat, his chest broad and toned, and I could see the dark spattering of hair on his chest through his white t-shirt.

Feeling my eyes on him, he looked up, our gazes clashing. His eyes slowly ran over me before meeting mine again. Shivers swept down my spine. "Let me change, sweet girl," he said softly.

I nodded, watching as he disappeared into the master bedroom off the living room. I blocked any thoughts of Ryan and how good he looked from my head.

He was Ross's brother. It wasn't right. And I *certainly* wasn't ready to entertain any thoughts of another guy.

I went back out to the porch, staring out at the swaying trees and the pouring rain, wondering what would happen if I stepped out there. Would the storm raging around me somehow help calm the torment I felt? Would it make me feel a little more alive again?

"If you step off that porch, woman, so help me God..."

I jerked around at the sound of Ryan's voice. He was standing in the doorway, his arms crossed over his chest, his legs spread shoulder-width apart. He was wearing a black t-shirt that was plastered to his chest and abs, stretching over his biceps with a pair of gray sweats.

"I wonder," I whispered, not saying anything more when lightning flashed, lighting up his handsome features right before thunder loudly clapped, shaking the entire house.

He walked over to me before drawing me into his arms, one hand coming up to cradle the back of my head. "Wonder what, sweet girl?"

"If the storm would calm the raging in my soul or fuel it."

He slid his fingers into my hair and gently pulled my head back, his eyes boring into mine. He didn't say anything, just stared down at me before slowly bringing my head back to his chest, tightening his hold on me.

Finally, he quietly spoke, and his words made me terrified.

"Anna, we need to talk."



## CHAPTER NINE



*Ryan*

She tensed in my arms, and I could feel her heart racing against my chest. Sighing, I led her over to my porch swing, settling her on my lap and holding her. I smoothed my hand over her hair, wishing the idea of a talk didn't incite so much anxiety. "Sweet girl, don't panic. But we need to have this talk."

She audibly swallowed, and she wouldn't look at me. Instead, she just stared at her lap. I knew I'd destroyed whatever peace she'd found for a few moments, but this conversation couldn't be pushed off any longer. Not after what she'd confessed this morning.

*I wish it had.*

God, those words wouldn't stop ringing in my head. I'd been hearing them on repeat all day.

"What talk?" she asked, her nervousness and fear audible in her voice.

I hooked my finger under her chin and tilted her chin up, forcing her eyes to lock on mine. I hated the fear in her gaze—hated that she feared anything I might say to her. I never wanted to give her cause to be fearful, but honestly, I'd been afraid all day after hearing her confession.

Which led to the decision I'd made.

"Anna, sweet girl, you need to go to therapy."



I'd been thinking about it all day, had barely been able to focus on my math classes or the upcoming game. I was so happy when we all decided to let the game go. It was too dangerous for them to play, anyway. And I didn't want to be away from Anna longer than I had to be.

Suddenly, my love for football was paling in comparison to the love I had for her.

Why did life have to be so difficult?

She pushed on my chest a little to sit up some, her face paling. "Therapy?" she asked. She shook her head instantly. "No. Ryan, no," she begged, shaking her head adamantly, surprising me. Fear clouded her eyes, becoming so potent, it was like I could smell it radiating off of her. "They'll put me in the hospital, and I don't want to go back."

*Back?*

Her words surprised me. I'd never known she was ever in a psychiatric hospital. All I knew was that she suffered from depression and anxiety, and Ross helped her a lot. Granted, I'd never understood the depth of how bad it was.

Why had she been put into a hospital?

"When were you in the hospital?" I quietly asked her, needing to know.

She blew out a harsh breath, her hands trembling in her lap. I put more of my arm around her and covered her hands with mine, calming her shaking a little. She was beginning to freak me out a little, but I was doing my best to hide it from her.

"Right before your parents got me as a foster kid," she said quietly. "I got released and put with you guys. I was seeing a therapist due to trauma, and the therapist had me committed when I was open and honest about what I was feeling and how dark my thoughts were."

I pulled her to me, cradling the side of her head so it would rest on my shoulder. "I *swear* I will not let them take you away from me," I promised her, the words out of my mouth before I'd even thought about it. But they felt right. And I knew I

wouldn't. I didn't want to lose Anna in any way, shape, or form. That included her being admitted into a psychiatric hospital.

I wanted her home with me every night. I wanted to hold her all night long. I wanted to sit out here during thunderstorms with her and watch her breathing slow and her mind go quiet.

If she got admitted to a hospital, I wouldn't experience any of that with her any longer, and for me, that wasn't an option.

Turning my head, I pressed my lips to her forehead when she stayed silent. "You hear me, Anna? I won't let us be separated, sweet girl. I promise you that."

She fisted my shirt in her hands as she looked up at me, ripping her eyes from the storm still raging beyond the porch. I was pretty sure it was just echoing her soul tonight because she looked absolutely tormented.

"Will you go with me?" she asked quietly.

I relaxed now that she wasn't fighting me on this. I wasn't a therapist. There was only so much I could do to help her. And while Ross's methods helped keep her mind from going to too dark of places, it didn't *help* her. And I wanted her to get help. I wanted her to cope, to breathe, to live.

I wanted to finally see her smile without looking like she was internally killing herself when she did it.

"I'll go with you however often you need me to," I promised her. And I would, even if that meant she wanted me there at every single appointment just to make sure they wouldn't send her away.

She drew in a deep, shaky breath before nodding her head. "Okay," she said quietly. "I'll go."

I pressed my lips to her forehead again and began to gently rock us. I'd worry about getting us something to eat in a bit. For right now, I wanted her to enjoy the storm and calm down as much as she could.



## CHAPTER TEN



*Ryan*

I slowly disentangled myself from Anna's limbs and slid out of bed, yawning quietly. Even though I could definitely use a bit more sleep, my internal alarm clock was going off, and despite yawning, I was wide awake. More sleep just wasn't happening for me.

Getting up early Monday through Friday would do that to you.

I bent and pressed my lips to Anna's cheek, gently brushing her dark hair back from her face. Her cute little nose scrunched up, but she didn't wake up, and her breathing stayed even.

I smiled. She looked so peaceful when she was asleep. It was the only time her mind was mostly quiet anymore. And since she'd started sleeping with Ross's blanket when I wasn't in bed with her, her nightmares and flashbacks tended to stay away.

I quietly slipped out of the room, leaving the door open. After turning the TV onto the news and making sure the volume was low so it wouldn't wake up Anna, I began preparing myself a cup of coffee. Listening to the news anchor drone on about a high-speed chase that happened last night, I pulled my phone out of my pocket to begin making a list of possible trauma therapists for Anna.

I frowned down at the very limited amount of therapists that specialized in trauma. This kind of sucked. She may have

to go outside of the town we lived in to find a decent therapist. But I'd start here first. Maybe we would get lucky.

And not just any therapist would do. Anna needed someone who understood survivor's guilt, and not just the clinical side of it. Anna needed a doctor that wouldn't throw her into a hospital just because she was struggling to cope.

Because I wouldn't break my promise to her. I wouldn't let anyone take her from me.

I knew she wouldn't be able to handle it.

Frankly, I wasn't sure if I would be able to handle it either.

I leaned against the counter, frowning at the small list on my phone. I only had three on my list, and I had to pray one of them worked, or I'd have to arrange time off work every time Anna had an appointment. I knew I'd promised her I'd go with her to every single appointment if she needed me to, but I was hoping after a few sessions, Anna would feel brave and comfortable enough to face them on her own.

Setting my phone down, I sighed before rubbing my hands down my face.

*Ross, how did you keep her breathing?*



Anna dragged her feet, her blanket wrapped around her shoulders. I smiled at her when she looked up at me and slid a cup of coffee to her when she took a seat at the bar. I'd heard her when she got up—she always groaned like a dying walrus. It was cute, honestly.

“Thanks,” she whispered. She wrapped her hands around the mug, staring down into the cup of liquid gold like it held all the answers in the universe.

If coffee held all the answers, I wouldn't be so lost on how to help her.

“You okay, sweet girl?” I quietly asked her.

She shrugged, making the blanket slip from her shoulders. I quickly reached over and tugged it back around her. When

she looked up at me, my fingers froze right when I was about to release her blanket. Her eyes were glassy with tears, and her lips were trembling.

My heart broke at that tortured look.

“I dreamed about him,” she croaked.

My chest tightened. I released her blanket and cupped her cheek, using my thumb to catch her tear when it rolled down her cheek. She drew in a shaky breath. “He was... he was happy, Ryan,” she choked out. “He’s not in pain.” She sobbed. “He told me he loves me,” she cried, her shoulders shaking now.

“Sweet girl,” I rasped, my entire body aching for her. She dropped her face in her hands, sobbing out her pain.

“He begged me to live and to be happy, but I don’t know how, Ryan. I feel so lost without him.” She looked up at me again, her face streaked with tears, her cheeks red. “He apologized for making me a mess. Can you believe that? He apologized!” she wailed, her hands balled into fists.

I rounded the counter and pulled her into my arms, cradling the back of her head. She screamed against my chest, bunching my shirt in her fists. “He told me to let the storm fuel me,” she whimpered.

My heart skidded to a stop for a moment before rapidly beating again so hard, it hurt. I knew I was panicking. In what way did he want it to fuel her? Fuel her in a way so she met him early, or fuel her so the storm would save her and keep her here with me?

“I want a storm,” she whimpered.

I cupped her beautiful face in my hands. “In what way are you hoping it’ll fuel you?” I asked, terrified of her answer. If she said she wanted to leave me, I’d never let her sit in another storm again. I couldn’t lose her, too. I wouldn’t survive it.

She sniffled, wiping her sleeve under her nose, hiccuping as she did so.

“He asked me to live,” she croaked, “even though I feel like I’m dying.” She searched my face like it held all the answers she might need. She hiccuped again. “He said—” another hiccup, “that you need me here.” She opened her mouth to speak, but another hiccup stopped her. I brushed her cheeks with my thumbs, waiting as patiently as I could. “Do you need me, Ryan?”

“I’ll *always* need you, sweet girl,” I rasped, hoping she knew just how much and understood that.

She nodded and reached up to circle her hands around my wrists. “Save me, Ryan,” she begged. “I’m not strong enough to save myself anymore. I’m not sure if I ever have been.”

I pressed my lips to her forehead, holding them there for a moment, all while I thanked my little brother for visiting her in her dreams. If anyone could get through to her, I knew it would be the one who left her in pieces.

“I’ll save you every single day, Anna,” I promised.

She nodded and leaned back to look up at me, hiccuping again. “Then take me to a storm, Ryan.”

I nodded, not even caring about getting dressed. I slid my feet into my flip-flops by the front door, ordering her to get shoes on, too. She frowned but nodded, slipping her feet into her bedroom slippers before gulping down her now-cooled coffee.

I held my hand out to her, and she linked our fingers together, clutching it like I was the only thing keeping her heart beating.

I gently squeezed it, a silent reminder that I’d give every breath in my lungs to her if it meant she got to fill her own one more time.

“Let’s go find a storm, sweet girl.”





## CHAPTER ELEVEN



*Anna*

I was pretty sure we drove around three hours before we finally hit rain. And then a little after that, we finally hit a storm. It was a bad one. Ryan had to pull over on the side of the road because we couldn't see.

But he didn't even flinch or wonder if we'd just found something extremely dangerous. He just turned the car off, stopping the windshield wipers. The rain beat against the roof, making it impossible to hear anything else. Lightning lit up the sky, thunder crashing almost immediately after.

Ryan reached behind him into the backseat and came back with my blanket. Silently, he unfolded it and draped it over me before lifting the middle console between us and holding his arm out to me. I quickly unbuckled and moved over, curling into his arms.

Life was a little easier to bear when he held me like this.

"Better?" he softly asked.

I nodded. "Thank you for driving me here." It meant the world to me. I wasn't sure if he knew that. But these storms... they did something to help my mental health.

He pressed his lips to the top of my head. "If a storm is what you need, sweet girl, then I'll always take you to one, no matter how far I have to drive."

I rested my ear right over his heart, listening to the rapid way it beat before it slowed some, calming itself. "You're too

good for me,” I said softly. He really was. I had no idea what I’d done do deserve a man like him.

He hummed. “I think you haven’t had enough good, Anna.” He slowly rubbed his hand up and down my arm over the blanket. “I’ll never stop giving you all the good that I can.”

My chest tingled at his sweet, gentle words.

*Too good for me.*



I yawned, slowly opening my eyes when the truck shut off. After rubbing my eyes, I looked around me, taking note that we were back home. The rain had followed us, and at some point on the ride home, I must have fallen asleep to the lull of the rain beating against the truck as he drove.

“Stay there. Let me get the umbrella,” he ordered.

I yawned again and nodded my head, sitting up straight now. He reached into the backseat, grabbed the umbrella, and then hopped out the truck, rushing around to my side as he got the umbrella open. Once he had my door open, he placed the umbrella so it would keep me dry, and then tucked me against his side, keeping me covered as he led me to the house.

“I won’t melt, you know,” I lightly teased once we were on the porch and he’d closed the umbrella. I was in a decent mood, and I had Ryan to thank. He always came to my rescue when I needed him.

He chuckled. “Not worried about you melting, sweet girl. I’m more worried about you getting a taste of the rain and deciding to follow it wherever it goes.”

I reached out and touched his arm. His tone had been light and teasing as well, but I’d heard the undercurrent of concern and seriousness there, too.

He slowly turned his head to look at me, a frown pulling at his lips when he took note of the serious expression on my face. “What is it, sweet girl?”

*That name would one day be my undoing. I just knew it.*

“You know I’d never do that, right?” I drew in a deep breath. “I won’t leave, Ryan.”

He reached out and drew me into a hug, crushing me in his strong arms. I sighed in contentment, resting my head on his chest as I wound my arms around his torso. “I worry, Anna,” he said quietly. “I worry about you so, so much.”

I gripped his shirt in my fists, squeezing the fabric as much as my little body would allow me to. “I’m going to get help,” I quietly told him. Tears burned in my eyes. “Losing Ross will never hurt less. The pain will just be something I learn to live with.” A shuddered breath escaped my hurting lungs. “But I can’t keep living like this, and I can’t keep making you live with the constant worry of coming home and finding me gone one day.”

He audibly gulped at the mental image that no doubt popped into his mind. His arms flexed around me in response. “I can’t lose you too, Anna.”

I pressed a kiss to his chest. “And I won’t make you,” I whispered. It was a promise I was determined to keep.

I didn’t know how long we stood like that for, but eventually, it began to rain heavily, more lightning flashing across the darkening sky with booming thunder following in its wake, shaking us both to our bones. But we still didn’t move.

Something was happening, changing, shifting. I could feel it with every drop that hit the roof of this house.

I missed Ross so much, it was a physical ache inside my chest that never went away. But somehow, the shattered pieces of my heart had started yearning for someone else, too. Someone I had absolutely no business wanting like that.

*Ryan Vern.*

Maybe God hated me.

Because how was I still hurting over one man I would never get to love like I want to again, and then turn around and begin falling for his older brother?

I squeezed my eyes shut, willing my tears to stay in my eyes.

Ryan couldn't stand to lose me... well, I couldn't stand to lose him, either.



## CHAPTER TWELVE



*Ryan*

**A**nna was a nervous mess.

I'd taken the day off today to come with her to her first therapy appointment, just as I promised I would. And honestly, it was a good thing I had. Because she couldn't stop shaking. She'd gotten sick twice now. And she was so pale, I was afraid that she was going to faint any second now.

I was right on the verge of canceling this appointment. I didn't want her getting sick like this. She shouldn't be this anxious, but I knew she was traumatized from the last time she'd been forced to seek help.

"Sweet girl," I gently called, grabbing her attention. Her eyes had been flitting everywhere, never settling on one particular thing. But when her eyes locked with mine, she relaxed a little. I brushed the pad of my thumb along the back of her hand that I was holding. "Just breathe. You're not alone. I'll be going back there with you, okay? Remember that. I made you a promise."

She closed her eyes and drew in a deep, shaky breath before leaning forward and pressing the fingers of her free hand against her forehead. "Sorry I'm freaking out," she apologized, squeezing my hand in hers.

I gently squeezed her hand in response. "I won't let them take you from me, Anna," I promised her. "Just breathe."

She nodded and then sat back up again, leaning her head on my shoulder. I looped our arms around her, squeezing her to my side. She sighed softly, her breath softly fanning the side of my neck. A shiver raced down my spine.

She had no idea what she did to me. I wasn't sure if I ever wanted her to know either. She'd lost my brother. I had no business wanting her like this.

The door that led out of the lobby into the back where the therapy sessions were held opened, and a kinder, older lady stepped out, her gray hair swept back into a bun, loose tendrils of hair escaping to somewhat cradle her face. She smiled kindly at us. "Anna Waters?" she asked.

I released Anna's hand and stood before grabbing her hand in mine again, gently pulling her from the couch. She tightened her hand like a boa constrictor around mine, her knuckles white from her grip as I led her over to the kind, older lady. She held her hand out to Anna.

"Greta Childre," she introduced herself. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Anna."

Anna just nodded, keeping her lips sealed. Not the least bit offended, Greta held her hand out to me. "And you are?"

"Ryan Vern," I introduced myself.

She smiled widely. "Ah. You're the one that's sitting with her today, correct? That's very kind of you. So many people come here alone. Having support makes a huge difference." She waved us ahead of her. "First door on the right," she instructed.

I led Anna down the hall and into the first room on the right. Soft nature sounds filled the tranquil space. It was like stepping into a rainforest, and it put me at ease. And the way Anna's hand relaxed just a little bit around mine, I knew it helped her, too.

I took a seat on the couch, and Anna followed suit, her thigh plastered to mine. I placed our hands on her thigh, watching as Greta closed the door and took a seat in the chair across from us.

“Alright, Anna, can you tell me a little bit about why you’re here today?” she asked. She didn’t grab a clipboard, nor did she glance toward her laptop once. Anna relaxed a little more at that.

Mrs. Childre seemed to really want to help Anna.

She swallowed thickly and wiped her free palm on her leggings. “I lost my boyfriend,” she whispered. I swallowed thickly.

Sadness flickered in Greta’s eyes for a moment. Anna continued before she could say anything. “He was taking me out to eat, even though he was exhausted.” A tear slid down her cheek, and her hand tightened around mine again. “He was going to propose. But he didn’t see the eighteen-wheeler when he was turning right.”

“Were you with him?” Greta softly asked her.

Anna nodded, a sob ripping from her throat right after. God, this was killing me. I hated seeing her like this.

“Do you feel like you should have died with him?”

My heart wrenched in my chest, making it hard to breathe for a moment. A world without Anna... I couldn’t even picture it—didn’t want to either. The mere *thought* of her being gone hurt enough.

“Yes,” Anna whispered.

“You know what we call that, hun?” Greta asked her. Anna shrugged. “We call that survivor’s guilt, and it’s normal to suffer through it when you survived an accident and someone you loved dearly didn’t. But you’re here for a reason, and I know wherever your boyfriend is, he’s still loving you and wanting you to love yourself enough to move on. I’m sure he wouldn’t want you to continue hurting like this.”

Anna broke. She sobbed, folding in on herself, crying hard now. I rubbed her back. I wanted to do nothing more than wrap her up in my arms and protect her broken soul from anything else Greta may say, but I knew this was something Anna needed to hear, no matter how much it hurt her.



“I don’t know how to do this without him,” Anna cried, clutching at her shirt right over her heart. I clenched my jaw, wishing I could take all her pain and make it my own just so she didn’t feel like this. “He was my rock for so long.”

Greta leaned forward and placed her hand over Anna’s. “It’s time to be your own rock, hun.”

Anna shook her head, but Greta made a noise of disagreement in the back of her throat. “We become what we feed ourselves, Anna. Remember that. So if you’re telling yourself you can’t, you’ll never be able to. I need you to start finding your strength. Because it’s there, hun. I promise it is. You wouldn’t be sitting here in front of me if you weren’t strong enough to go on without him.”

Anna turned her head to look at me. The pain etched into her features tore my heart to shreds, but despite my own pain, I tilted my lips into a small smile for her benefit.

“You’ve always been so strong, Anna. Ross knew that.” Her lips trembled, her tears glistening on them. “And I know that, sweet girl. It’s time to get off your knees and onto your feet again.”

She sniffled and nodded her head before looking back at Greta. And she whispered the words I so desperately needed her to say. “I need help,” she whispered.

Greta warmly smiled at her. “You’ve come to the right place, Anna.”



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



*Anna*

**M**y therapy appointment yesterday wore me out so much that I came home and slept the rest of the day, only waking up long enough to eat the food Ryan made for dinner. It was currently almost lunchtime, and I was just now rolling out of bed. I'd been doing good about getting up early, but after yesterday, that wasn't happening.

I padded barefoot to the bathroom and got a quick shower before going to fix myself a cup of coffee and a slice of toast. Just like I always did, I sent a picture of my breakfast to Ryan.

RYAN

Eating breakfast.

Sweet girl, it's lunchtime lol

I smiled at my phone, my chest easing at his teasing response.

□

Proud of you, sweet girl. I'll be home a little later than normal. Late practice. Got a big game on Friday, and I need to make sure the team is ready.

Have fun. I'll be here.

Like I'd ever expect you'd be anywhere else. 😊

I smiled down at my phone before slowly eating my toast. Then, I sipped at my coffee, watching the leaves slowly fall outside, the wind carrying them a little before they hit the ground.

I loved Fall. I used to love it because it was a season of being reborn. Everything died to grow new again in a few months. Nature just needed time to rest.

Was that what I needed, too? Just some time to rest so I could eventually grow new again in a few months?

Because there was no way I was coming away from this dark time unscathed and the same woman. Life just didn't work that way.

I looked down at my now empty coffee mug, making a spur-of-the-moment decision. Ryan had a late practice, so what if I went to watch his team train for the upcoming game? It wouldn't require me to socialize with others, and it wouldn't be too much for me to handle.

Shouldn't be, anyway. And it would be an outing, which was something my therapist suggested I start doing at least once a week to get fresh air and clear my mind.

I pulled my phone out and shot Ryan a text.

RYAN

How late is practice going to run?

About seven. Everything okay?

Everything's fine. I promise. Just wondering.



I quickly got up from my stool and washed my dishes, putting them away before I went into the bathroom. Today, I was getting out of the house. I was going to go outside and get

some fresh air and step back into the world again. I'd been hiding long enough.

I'd had my time of rest. It was time for me to start again.



I leaned on the fence, a beanie on my head against the biting cold, my biggest jacket wrapped around me. My fuzzy, warm boots were on my feet. It was colder than it normally was, and it felt so good when I breathed it into my lungs. It was refreshing.

Ryan blew his whistle and jogged across the field to two of the players, showing them where they messed up and where to correct. Then, he jogged back to the sidelines and called the play. The assistant coach that I didn't know the name of looked my way and then nudged Ryan. Ryan muttered something I didn't catch, but the assistant coach shook his head, saying something else.

Ryan looked in my direction, a scowl on his face, but then that scowl immediately dropped, and a wide grin took its place. He called for a break and jogged over to me. I let a small smile tilt my lips, unable to help myself.

“Hey, sweet girl. Surprised you came out.”

I shrugged. “Thought some fresh air might do me some good. The cold always did make me a little bit happier.”

He chuckled, reaching out to cup my cheek, brushing his thumb over my cheekbone. Then, he reached up and tugged my beanie a little bit lower. Always caring for me. “Don't want you catching a cold.” He looked behind him, then looked back at me. “Want to come sit on the bench and watch? I don't like the idea of you standing here the entire time.”

I smiled at him. “Sure. How do I get in here again?” It'd been a couple of years since I'd come out to these fields.

He chuckled and grabbed my hand, holding it over the fence as he led me around to the gate to get inside. My cheeks warmed. Everyone was staring at us, but he didn't even care.

Once I was in the gate and it was locked again, I wrapped my arms around his waist, hugging him tightly. His arms instantly folded around me, and he buried his face in my hair. God, I'd needed this.

"You have no damn idea how proud I am of you for coming out here," he whispered.

"One step at a time," I said quietly, my words sort of muffled by his shirt, but I knew he'd heard me.

He pressed a kiss to the top of my head, making my cheeks heat more. "One *baby* step at a time," he corrected.

I slowly released him, looking up at him beneath my lashes. Something flickered in his eyes, but I couldn't catch what it was before it disappeared again. He just smiled at me like I was the entire world and grabbed my hand again. "Come on. I need to get back into practice."

I followed him over to the bench. The assistant coach held his hand out to me once I was seated and Ryan was back out on the field, giving more instructions and suggestions for improvement. "Jake Carwell. You must be Anna Waters. Heard a lot about you."

I flushed, shaking his hand. "All good things, I hope?"

Jake chuckled. "The way Ryan tells it, you're the epitome of everything good in this world, so I'd say so."

My mouth dropped open in shock, my cheeks warming despite the chilling wind that suddenly whipped around me. Jake just winked and blew his whistle, his eyes on the players on the field.

Ryan arched a brow at me as he came back over. "What did he say to you?" he instantly asked, his tone laced with suspicion. Jake scoffed.

I giggled—actually giggled. God, it had been so long since I'd felt like I could freely laugh about anything. And sure, guilt rose in my chest when I remembered Ross could never laugh about anything again, but I pushed it aside.

He wanted me to move on.

I was trying to.

“Nothing,” I told him.

Ryan rolled his eyes. “It was something. Otherwise, you wouldn’t look like a cherry tomato.”

I scowled at him. He grinned at me. “If you must know, he told me you think I’m the epitome of all things good.”

Ryan’s smile softened, warmth for me entering his eyes. “Because you are, sweet girl.”

*Be still, my heart.*





## CHAPTER FOURTEEN



*Anna*

I slid out of my car, shivering when the wind whipped around me, throwing my dark strands into a frenzy. I quickly zipped my coat up and tugged my beanie further down on my head before shoving my hands into my warm pockets. I'd thought about getting a hot cocoa once I got here, but I wasn't too sure about holding the cup with how cold it was outside.

And like an idiot, I'd left my gloves at Ryan's. And of course, I didn't have an extra pair anywhere in my car. I'd looked, believe me. It was *freezing*.

Ryan was going to be a bit upset with me for leaving my gloves; I just knew it. He was so overprotective of me.

And I... loved it. Even though I probably shouldn't.

My head had been a little bit twisted lately over my feelings for Ryan. I was noticing things about him that I'd never noticed before—like how his hair had lighter strands when the light hit it just right, how his caramel-colored eyes looked like liquid gold when he was happy about something. His chest was hard and muscular, and his abs were flat with a light dusting of hair on it, just like his chest.

I couldn't stop staring at him. I was so attracted to him. And I felt like he could take one look at me anymore and tell how I felt.

And that was terrifying.

Was I ready to move on? And if I was, how in the world could I expect to be with Ross's brother? Would Ryan ever even want me like that? Would Ross hate me for moving on to his brother, wherever he was at?

What if Ryan just kept me around because I'd been the closest person to his brother, and he felt like if he lost me, he lost the last connection he had to Ross?

Pain lanced through my chest at the thought, and I lost my footing for a second. Pausing, I drew in a deep breath and mentally shook my head. Ryan wouldn't do that. He wouldn't go through all this trouble just because he felt like I was the closest he could get to his little brother. That wasn't who he was. The thought was absolutely ridiculous.

I straightened my shoulders, blinking back tears from my eyes. Today had been a good day, and I was determined to keep it that way. I was going to climb up into those bleachers and watch this game in support of Ryan.

My darkness was *not* stopping me anymore.

After paying for a ticket, I passed the concession stand advertising hot coffee and hot cocoa and headed toward the bleachers, taking a seat at the bottom behind where I remembered our team standing during football games when I was in high school.

It didn't take long for the game to start and for the players to run out onto the field. I sat on the edge of my seat, watching Ryan more than I was watching the other players. He was wearing his coaching coat over his collared shirt, his arms crossed over his broad chest as he watched his players, his eyes narrowed, an intense look in them that had my body tingling all over.

Why did he have to look so good at everything he did? Didn't matter what he did—he looked delicious while doing it.

He turned to say something to Jake, and his eyes caught mine, his words dying in his throat. Grinning, he walked past Jake and over to the fence, shooting me an expectant look to meet him. Trying not to grin like a goof, I stood and quickly

moved toward him, shivering when the wind whipped around me again.

“Surprised you’re here,” he commented, softly smiling down at me. He reached up and cupped my cheek, brushing his thumb over my cheekbone. “You didn’t tell me you were coming.”

I shrugged. “I wanted it to be a surprise, and I was a little worried about telling you and getting your hopes up in case something changed throughout the day.”

He cupped my chin. “Nothing you do could ever disappoint me, sweet girl. You know that, right? I’d have been proud of you regardless because even if you didn’t make it, you had plans to. And that’s a lot different than what you were like when I found you holed up in your apartment.”

I pulled one of my hands out of my pocket and circled his wrist, seeking more of his heat, more of his touch. I hated this fence separating us. “It’s getting easier.”

He leaned forward and brushed his nose with mine. “I know the pain doesn’t go away, sweet girl, but I’m incredibly proud of you for learning how to live with it.” He pressed a kiss to my cheek and then held out a pair of gloves to me. I smiled sheepishly, taking them from him and sliding them onto my hands. He shook his head, a mock scowl on his face, though I knew he wasn’t truly angry. He actually didn’t even look disappointed.

“Next time, make sure you bring gloves.” He nodded his head toward the concession stand. “Get you a cup of hot cocoa.”

With that, he turned and walked back to Jake, but he cast me one more glance, a proud smile on his lips that had my heart fluttering in my chest.

I was falling in love with Ryan Vern, and I wasn’t sure what to do or how to feel about it.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN



*Anna*

**R**yan gently squeezed my hand when Dr. Childre stepped out of the back hallway and called my name. “You sure you don’t need me to come with you this time?” he gently asked me.

Swallowing thickly, I nodded my head, tightening my grip on his hand for a moment before I forced myself to relax. “I’ll be okay.” I drew in a deep breath. “You promise you’re not leaving, right?”

He cupped the side of my neck and brushed his thumb over my jaw. Tingles erupted through my skin where he touched me. “I’ll be right here, sweet girl. Not going anywhere. I promise.”

I nodded and stood up, forcing myself to release my hold on his hand. I was terrified to face this by myself, but I was determined. With a lot more bravery than I felt, I slowly made my way to Dr. Childre. She smiled warmly at me. “I’m very proud of you for taking this step on your own this time, Anna. That takes a lot of courage.”

“I’m nervous,” I told her honestly as we walked toward her office. I wrung my fingers in front of me, suddenly wishing I hadn’t tried to be strong and had asked Ryan to come back here with me. I wasn’t sure that I could do this on my own.

We stepped into her office, and she waited until we were both seated before she spoke. “Anna, it’s okay to be nervous. In fact, if you weren’t, I’d be a little concerned. But after

today, you'll see there's nothing to be nervous about. The only thing that's going to be different from last time is that Ryan isn't with you."

I drew in a slow, deep breath and closed my eyes, taking a moment to get myself together just as she'd taught me during my last therapy session. When I opened my eyes again, I nodded. "Okay," I said quietly, "let's do this."

She beamed at me, and pride stirred in my chest.

*I could do this.*



Ryan was waiting for me in the same chair I'd left him in when I stepped out of the back. My eyes were swollen from crying, and I was exhausted, but the appointment had gone well despite crying through most of it.

Dr. Childre said crying was good. It meant I was healing, even if it hurt. I just didn't understand how crying was healing if I'd already cried so much before I even began therapy.

Ryan jumped up from his seat and cupped my face in his hands, brushing his thumbs over my cheeks. "You've been crying. Are you okay?"

Warmth spread through my chest at his concern and how well he knew me. I nodded in answer, yawning right after. "I'm fine. It was just a bit of a tough session, but a good one. Can I wait in the car?"

He nodded and pulled the car keys from his pocket before dropping them in my hand. I closed my eyes and leaned against him a little when he pressed a kiss to my forehead. "I'll be out as quick as possible," he promised me, rubbing his hands up and down my arms.

I nodded and headed out the door. Once I was in the car and had it started, I shut my eyes, letting sleep claim me. I was too tired to do much of anything else.



*Ryan*

I peeked into the car before opening the door, a soft smile tilting my lips at the sight of Anna. She was asleep, her lips softly parted, my jacket covering her. She must have gotten cold and grabbed my jacket from the back. It had taken a little longer than I'd hoped for to check her out since the person in front of me was having billing issues.

I quietly slipped into the driver's seat, and once I was buckled, I backed out of the parking spot and headed toward the highway to get us home. She needed rest, and I needed to make dinner. Maybe after she'd had a small nap, she'd be open to watching a movie with me.

It was something we hadn't done together in a good minute, and I wanted to spend some quality time with her.

I frowned as I eased to a stop at a red light, my mind flickering to my brother. Would he really have wanted me to be with her? I was a firm believer in people visiting others in dreams, but what did it mean that he'd visited her but hadn't visited me?

He told her I needed her here, which was true. But I didn't need her here because I was scared of losing my last piece to him.

I needed her here because, without her, I wasn't sure if I could continue living.

Her death would devastate me. I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to move on from her.

Blowing out a soft breath, I put my foot on the gas pedal when the light turned green again.

I would have Anna in any way she decided to let me have her. And if she one day decided she wanted to be mine, I'd never let her go, and I'd do my best to treat her just as well as Ross had.



I gently lifted Anna from the car. She moaned in protest, her sleepy eyes cracking open. I kicked the car door shut and

strode toward the house. “Go back to sleep, sweet girl. I’m just putting you to bed.”

She nodded and dropped her head to my shoulder, easily falling back asleep again, trusting me so easily to take care of her. I gently laid her on our bed and slid her shoes off of her before I pulled the blankets over her. She snuggled into them, mumbling something that sounded like “thank you”, and promptly passed out again.

A movie was probably off the table, but that was fine. We could watch a movie tomorrow when I got off work. Her needs would always come before what I wanted. And I didn’t mind that.

I slipped from the room, leaving the door cracked, and headed to the kitchen to start dinner.

And try to figure out the mess in my head so I wouldn’t accidentally push Anna into something she might not be ready for yet.





## CHAPTER SIXTEEN



*Anna*

RYAN

You've got this, sweet girl. Take a deep breath.

**M**y hands trembled as I texted him back. Today was my first group therapy session to deal with grief and loss, and I was a nervous wreck. I had told Ryan I could handle it on my own, so I'd driven here by myself, but I had a small panic attack when I parked in front of the building, and I was feeling sick to my stomach as I sat in the hard, plastic chair, waiting for everyone else to enter the small room.

I don't know about this. I feel sick, Ryan. I can't do this.

You can, sweet girl, and you will. It's going to storm tonight. We'll cuddle on the back porch just like we always do. I promise.

I blew out a shaky breath, the promise of sitting in a storm together, me wrapped up in his arms, calming me enough that I could regulate my heart rate and the churning in my stomach eased.

I tucked my phone into my pocket and clasped my hands together before sliding them between my thighs. Slowly, people began to trickle into the room, but we were all silent,

not saying anything to each other. One girl was softly crying, trying to be discreet about it.

I didn't think any of us were going to judge her. We were all sitting in that room for a reason.

We all had a reason to cry. To grieve.

Dr. Childre stepped in a moment later, quietly shutting the door behind her before she took a seat in one identical to ours. She smiled warmly at us, and her smile eased a little bit of my anxiety. "Before we do anything, I want everyone to close your eyes, draw in a deep breath, and then slowly, *very slowly*, release it."

We all immediately did as she instructed, and I felt my body relax a little more. "Good. Open your eyes." I opened my eyes, locking them on her. "Now that we're all a little more relaxed, I want to go around the room in a circle, and I want everyone to introduce themselves and state why you're here."

The man closest to her just lost his mom to cancer. The next man lost his sister to suicide. The woman next to him just buried her oldest son; he lost his life overseas. The woman between me and her lost her best friend a few months ago to domestic violence.

"And you?" Dr. Childre asked gently, a kind, encouraging smile on her face.

My throat closed up, but I swallowed, forcing myself to breathe. Clenching my hands together so tightly that I cut off circulation to my fingers, I quietly said, "My name is Anna, and I lost my boyfriend four months ago."

"And what happened, dear?" Dr. Childre prompted, wanting me to be as open as everyone else had been, but I wasn't sure if I had it in me to be as open as the others. I'd survived, and he hadn't.

It was my fault. I was the clingy one, the one that needed so much from him.

"Anna?" she gently asked again.

A tear ran down my cheek. “We were on our way to eat dinner together. Apparently, he was going to pr-propose.” My voice cracked on the word. “He didn’t see the eighteen-wheeler until it was too late,” I whispered.

Instantly, arms wrapped around me. The woman next to me, who was still crying about losing her best friend, was hugging me tightly.

And I fell apart, sobbing in her arms. Except this time, I wasn’t crying because I wanted to die with Ross.

I was crying because I was in a room full of people who knew and understood what I was going through, and they didn’t judge me. Instead, a kind woman like Elizabeth, the one hugging me, was doing her best to be supportive while she was aching and suffering, too.

Maybe I might heal from this yet.



Ryan was sitting on the front porch just behind the curtain of rain when I pulled into the driveway. He immediately stood as I slipped out of the car, and without a moment’s hesitation, he rushed down the drive to me, wrapping me up in his arms.

I sank into his heat, my fingers clutching at his shirt, the steady thrum of his heart soothing me. We were getting drenched by the rain, but I didn’t care. I desperately needed this hug. That group therapy session had been cleansing, but it was *nothing* compared to being in Ryan’s arms like this.

“You’re going to catch a cold, sweet girl,” he said softly, but he didn’t move.

I shook my head. “You’ll take care of me if I do,” I told him, my voice a little muffled by his shirt and the pounding rain. “Just let me have this please.”

He only tightened his arms around me in response, his chin resting on the top of my head.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



*Ryan*

ANNA

Don't forget we're having dinner with my parents tonight.

This was the first family dinner we were having with my parents since Ross passed away, and I knew it might be hard on Anna. But we *needed* to do this. Even Dr. Childre thought so. It was another step in her healing process, and she'd been doing so well since she started therapy and started taking medication for her anxiety and depression. I was hoping she and my parents could reconnect again and reforge that bond they used to have.

Anna had been sitting in on every football practice, no matter how cold it was outside, which I knew was a feat for her. The team adored her, and I was pretty sure most of them were hardcore crushing on her. And though I was a grown man, it made me extremely green with jealousy. If my skin could turn colors when they flirted with her, I would be greener than the Hulk.

But I would never let it show. I'd suffer every single day if it meant she continued healing.

I haven't forgotten. I promise. I'm nervous though.

No need to be nervous, sweet girl. I'll be right there with you the entire time.

Thanks for being someone I can rely on.

Always, sweet girl.

I put my phone in my pocket and stared down at the pies in front of me. Mom put me in charge of bringing a pie, but I wasn't feeling like eating pie, which made the decision hard to make. I couldn't pick out food unless it was something I wanted to eat.

How did women make shopping for groceries look so easy?

My phone vibrated in my pocket, and I pulled it out, smirking at Anna's text. Sometimes, she knew me too well.

Any pie is good, but I could probably eat some peanut butter pie if you can find it.

I quickly looked through the freezer section until I found one—the last one. I quickly grabbed it and then sent her a text back as I made my way to the checkout line.

Got the last one for you. Be ready when I get home.

Yes, sir.

I chuckled and dropped my phone back into my pocket, smiling at the cashier as I set the pie on the counter.



Anna blew out a shaky breath, wiping her palms on her black leggings. She'd paired them with a comfortable-looking pair of boots and a gray sweatshirt with some skeleton on it that had a pumpkin head. It was surprisingly adorable on her, and it definitely fit the Anna I was used to—the Anna that was *slowly* coming back to me.

“I don’t know if I’m ready to step foot back in this house,” Anna confessed, her voice breaking.

I set the pie down on the roof of the car and then wrapped her up in my arms, squeezing her to me. “You’re so strong, sweet girl. You’ve got this. Just take a deep breath.” She did as I instructed. “Good girl. Now, slowly let it out.” She slowly released the breath she’d been holding, her shoulders relaxing. “There you go. One more time.” Once she didn’t feel like she was going to internally combust, I eased her back, smiling softly down at her. “It’s going to be okay; I promise.”

She grabbed my hand in hers, linking our fingers together, making my heart skip beats in my chest. I grabbed the pie with one hand, and together, we walked up the porch. Slowly, she opened the door, and for a moment, she just stood there on the porch, staring into the foyer where I knew many times, she and Ross had shared kisses and sweet, heated glances.

I gently squeezed her hand, reminding her she wasn’t alone. She blew out a soft breath and then stepped inside, her hand tightening around mine. I gently nudged the door closed behind us and headed into the kitchen where I could hear Mom humming a tune. She turned to face us when we entered.

“Oh, you made it!” she exclaimed. She took the pie from me and set it on the counter before wrapping Anna up in a hug and kissing her cheek. “Hi, honey. You doing okay?”

Anna nodded. “I, um, I started therapy a few weeks ago,” she informed my mom. Mom’s eyes brightened, and she nodded her head for Anna to continue. “It’s been helping, and I’m on medication now for my depression and anxiety.”

I dropped a kiss to the top of her head before slowly releasing her hand to go put the pie in the fridge. “She hasn’t lost her love of rainy days and thunderstorms though,” I teased, winking at her over Mom’s shoulder.

Anna blushed, but the way she smiled at me—God, it tore the breath right from my lungs and made it her own.

She’d be okay, and hopefully, when she was, she’d still remember me when she moved on with her life and found



someone worthy of her smiles and that pretty blush.

Because, unfortunately, I could never be that man.

Mom released her, and Anna instantly sought out my hand again. I wrapped my fingers around hers and drew her to my side. She curled into me a little, aiming that beautiful smile up at me.

My heart clenched in my chest.

*Ross, if I am worthy of being hers, please send me some kind of signal, little bro.*



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



*Ryan*

I was nervous as hell. Had Ross felt like this when he asked Anna out for the first time? How did he know he was doing the right thing?

I felt like Anna was sending me all the right signals to let me know that asking her out on a date was the right thing to do but... God, why was my stomach muscles clenching with fear? I was terrified of destroying our friendship. I couldn't lose her in any form. She meant everything to me, and I'd rather have her as a friend if I couldn't have her as more.

But If I asked her out and she said no, that would make things weird between us, and we'd lose some of the closeness we had.

But I'd asked Ross for some kind of sign, some kind of signal, and I felt like Anna's behavior was blatantly obvious. I just hoped that my love for her wasn't making me see something that wasn't truly there.

I already had the date set up. I didn't want to take her out to eat; Ross had taken her out to eat for their first date. Instead, I was going to do something that was completely us.

The sky was overcast today—no rain—but it was giving the day a gloomy feel. And while days like today used to bother me, now I yearned for them as much as Anna did. Like her, I now felt a closeness to mother nature's sadness and anger.

So, I'd set up a picnic in our backyard. It would be a lunch date—not a dinner date. I'd made sandwiches and cut up some apple slices. We would watch a movie on my laptop and cuddle together beneath the gray sky.

It would be perfect for her—no pressure. At least, I *hoped* this wouldn't put pressure on her.

I frowned, second-guessing myself again. I blew out a harsh breath and scrubbed my hand down my face. I needed to get a grip. I knew Anna like the back of my hand, and I'd done my best to make this special for her.

If she said yes, I hoped everything else went just as smoothly.



Anna emerged from our room freshly showered, wearing a pair of leggings and a hoodie I recognized as Ross's, especially since it sort of swallowed her. Doing my best to ignore the pit of nerves in my stomach, I placed her coffee beside the small note I'd written and left for her on the bar where she normally drank her coffee each morning. She gratefully smiled at me, her eyes brightening.

I easily returned the smile. Seeing that light in her beautiful eyes made it near impossible not to.

When she looked down at her coffee, her brows furrowed. I swallowed thickly and shoved my hands in my pockets as I watched with bated breath while she read the small note I'd written her.

She mouthed the words, *Would you like to go on a date with me?* to herself. With a small gasp, she raised her eyes to mine. A nervous smile tilted her lips before she slowly nodded her head. "I'd love to," she whispered, her hand shaking.

I relaxed, finally feeling like I could breathe normally. I grinned at her. "Really?"

She nodded. "Yeah. Really." She slid onto the bar stool. "Do I get to know what we're doing?"

I looked down at my watch before glancing back up at her. “Well, since it’s almost lunchtime, you’ll see just as soon as you finish your coffee.”

She tried to hide her wide smile behind her coffee mug, but it didn’t work. She giggled when she realized I’d caught her, and my heart somersaulted in my chest.

She had no idea how absolutely stunning she was when she was happy. And if I truly got to have this opportunity with her, I’d do everything in my life to always make her the happiest woman on Earth.



“Easy.” I latched my arm around her midsection, plastering her body against mine when she almost tripped. She had her eyes closed with her hands over them so I knew she wouldn’t peek. And it said a lot that she was placing her trust in me to lead her safely to an unknown destination.

She laughed. “Well, I can’t see, Ryan.”

I grinned. “Good. I want it to be a surprise.”

She huffed but cautiously stepped forward. I kept my arm around her this time in case she almost fell again. Finally, we reached the picnic. “Toe your shoes off.” Once she had them off, I led her one more step forward. Then, with my hands still over her eyes, I managed to get my shoes off, too. Once I was on the blanket next to her, I gently pulled her hands down from her face. “You can look now.”

She slowly opened her eyes and gasped, her hands flying to her lips, the engagement ring she would’ve been wearing for Ross still adorning her finger, but it didn’t bother me. I would never encroach on the love she held for him. I just hoped one day, she’d give me a little bit of space in her heart. Because she completely owned mine.

“Oh, Ryan, this is amazing.” She looked up at me, her eyes shining with happiness and glistening with unshed tears. “You did this for me?”

I sheepishly shrugged. “I wanted it to be special.”

She wrapped her arms around my neck, and surprising me, she placed her lips on mine.

I was a goner.

I laced my fingers in her hair and deepened the kiss. She moaned into my mouth, her lips softly parting for me without much coaxing. I groaned, slowing my pace so I could memorize every delicious corner and the taste of her.

She kissed me back just as hungrily, her fingers pulling at the strands of my hair. She leaned up on her tiptoes, pressing her body tighter against mine.

Grasping her face in my hands, I forced us to pull apart. We were both breathing raggedly, and my heart was beating hard and fast in my chest, stealing the breath from my lungs.

“I’ve wanted to kiss you for *years*,” I rasped, my breathing ragged.

Her kiss-swollen lips tilted up into a smile. Her pretty face was flushed, her eyes bright and shining. She licked her lips. “Kiss me again, Ryan,” she begged.

I didn’t have to be asked twice. I dove in, stealing her lips in another kiss as her body melted into mine.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN



*Anna*

I took a seat on the couch in Dr. Childre's office. I was entering my third month of therapy, and I was becoming proud of the woman I was growing into. I had gotten a job last month and was in the process of paying my apartment complex so I could break my lease early. Ryan offered to do it for me, but I declined.

I needed to do this for myself.

Every Sunday, Ryan and I had dinner with his parents, and every Saturday, Ryan and I went on a date. Picnics were my favorite, though going out to eat or to see a movie were nice, too.

I still went to every practice he held, except for when a therapy session happened to be scheduled during those times, and every Friday night, I was sitting at the bottom of the stands or leaning against the fence, watching him coach his players.

I'd come so far from the girl who wanted to do nothing more than die. I still had nightmares and flashbacks, though they were slowly becoming less frequent with my medication and constant therapy sessions. The rain still soothed me though, and every once in a while, I still sought out a thunderstorm.

"How are things with you and Ryan?" Dr. Childre asked me.



A blush stained my cheeks, just like it always did when anyone asked about me and Ryan. We weren't particularly new anymore, but the things I felt with him... God, they were unexplainable. "They're great."

"No guilt?" she asked me.

That was something I struggled with at first, though I never voiced it to Ryan. I was pretty sure he knew though. I thought I was somehow doing Ross wrong by being with his brother, but Dr. Childre quickly helped me put those fears to rest.

"No guilt," I assured her. That was the truth. Ross would want me to be happy, and I was with someone he trusted most in this world.

"Good! Let's talk about work. How's work going?"

I laughed a little. "It's...going." She chuckled. "The customers can be a bit much sometimes, but otherwise, it's good. I like my coworkers. My bosses are great. Just the morning rush people can be very aggressive and demanding. I try to just remind myself that they might not have had coffee yet."

"Always remember that their actions do not mean you've done anything wrong," she reminded me.

I nodded. That was one thing with my anxiety. I always thought I did something wrong to upset others. It took quite a few therapy sessions for me to get it through my skull that some people just sucked, and it had nothing to do with me or anything I did.

She crossed her legs at the ankles. "Any nightmares lately?"

I shrugged. "Just the usual one a couple of nights ago about the accident."

She hummed. "Well, let's work through it like we always do," she gently said. I drew in a deep breath. I wasn't coming out of this therapy session without crying, but crying meant I was one more step closer to healing.



## *Ryan*

Something smelled *delicious* when I walked into the house later that evening. I was hot and tired. Today was unseasonably warm and muggy. I stunk to high heaven, and my clothes were still sticking to me. And that nasty feeling of salt being on my skin was just about unbearable.

“Hi!” Anna cheerfully greeted me, not looking up from whatever she was doing at the stove. “I’m almost done with dinner.” She glanced up and winced at the sight of me. “You want to shower?”

“Yeah,” I gruffly answered. I walked over and pressed a kiss to her forehead before heading for the room we shared. “I’ll be out in five.”

She waved me off. “Take your time. I’ll need about ten minutes to finish this up.”

I disappeared into our room, stripping out of my clothes before hopping into the shower, a small smile on my lips. I loved coming home to Anna every day. And seeing her light up whenever she saw me always turned any bad day into a good one.

She had no idea how much power she wielded just by being herself.

After a quick shower, I got dressed in a pair of low-slung sweats, not bothering with a shirt. I planned to eat and then probably crash in bed, watching some random movie with Anna. Normally, we cuddled on the couch after dinner, but I knew I was going to end up falling asleep. One of our biggest games of the season was coming up, and all of us were putting every bit of effort into making sure we were ready.

Anna turned to look at me, opening her mouth to say something, but then she kind of choked, her eyes widening the slightest bit as she stared at my bare chest before her eyes slowly lowered to trail across my stomach. A blush stained her cheeks, and I grinned.

I loved the effect I had on her.

I curled my arms around her waist, leaning down to take her lips in a slow, sweet kiss. She hummed and wrapped her arms around me, running the tips of her fingers over my back. Chills raced down my spine at her touch. “Dinner smells great. What are you making?”

“Meatloaf, mashed potatoes, gravy, and sauteed mushrooms.”

My stomach growled in response, and she burst into a fit of giggles. I chuckled, brushing a kiss to the tip of her nose. I couldn't seem to bring myself to stop touching her. I was addicted, but I didn't think she minded my slightly unhealthy obsession with her.

“I'll get the plates and silverware down. What do you want to drink?” I asked, taking a step back and releasing her, though all I really wanted to do was continue holding her.

“Water is fine for me.”

I grabbed her a room-temperature bottle of water and set it on the counter where she normally ate, then began gathering two plates and two sets of silverware. She plated the food, and within minutes, we were eating in companionable silence, one of my hands on her thigh.

Like I said, I couldn't stop touching her, especially now that she was mine.

And man, the past three months with her had been blissful. Of course, we had our down moments, but we still never went to bed angry or upset, and our last words to each other were *always* “I love you.”

She knew the value of last words more than anyone else, and I would never take them for granted ever again.

“Want to join me in bed?” I asked once we'd done the dishes and she was putting the last plate away.

She frowned at the sudden suggestion to change our routine. “Bed?”

I nodded, biting back a yawn. “I’m wiped, sweet girl, and I desperately need to get some sleep.”

“Yeah, of course,” she assured me, reaching out to grab my hand in hers, giving it a gentle squeeze. “Come on.”

I smiled as I followed her to our room. I didn’t deserve her, but I’d fight every single day to hopefully one day be worthy of the love, care, and adoration she gave me.



## CHAPTER TWENTY



*Ryan*

I tapped my fingers on the steering wheel to the beat of the rock song softly playing through the speakers of the car. It'd been four months since Anna and I started dating, and she finally said she was ready to go to Ross's grave.

Today would be hard for both of us, but I knew it would be significantly harder for her. She hadn't been to his grave since the funeral. I'd been a few times, and I knew my mom came pretty frequently, too. The only person my brother was still waiting to come see him was her.

The love of his life.

Even though Anna had come so far in her therapy and her mental health had drastically improved, this would be a huge step for her. I knew Dr. Childre was requiring a virtual appointment afterward, too. It was Saturday, but Anna's therapist didn't care. She wanted to make sure her patient was okay, and she wanted to make sure that Anna's mental health wouldn't go backward in its progress after today.

To be honest, I was worried about that, too. Anna was strong—the strongest person I knew—but that didn't mean that she was invincible. And when it came to Ross... my brother was her kryptonite.

"I'm nervous," Anna whispered.

I reached over and grabbed her hand in mine. "No reason to be, sweet girl. I'll be right beside you the entire time. Just

remember to take deep breaths, practice your grounding techniques, and remember all the progress you've made so far."

She nodded, tightening her hand around mine. "I know," she said softly. "But so much time has passed since he passed, and I didn't visit once." She glanced over at me, chewing nervously on her bottom lip. "Do you think he's angry with me?"

"No," I instantly responded. "There's no way he could be angry with you, Anna, when he knows you've never forgotten about him."

She smiled and relaxed a little. I eased to a stop outside the gates of the graveyard and shifted my car into park. "You okay with walking?" I asked her.

She nodded, and after drawing in a deep breath, she slid out of the car. I followed suit and then grabbed her hand in mine before leading her toward the gate, which had been left open a crack. She squeezed my hand as we stepped inside. Silently, I led her down the path to his plot.

Her lips trembled as she stared at his headstone, tears glistening in her pretty eyes.

*Loving friend. Amazing brother.*

A tear ran down her cheek. She slowly let go of my hand and then stepped forward, not even caring that she was stepping right over him. She crouched and laid her hand on the dirt in front of his headstone, her hair shielding her face.

"I miss you," she whispered, her voice so quiet, I almost didn't hear it. "I hate that you had to leave. Most of the time, I don't understand why, and I hate when people tell me it was just your time. It's the worst thing anyone could say to me, you know? Like, why do people assume someone wants to hear it was just their loved one's time? Seems...cruel to me."

She drew in a shaky breath. "But even though you left, you left me someone who loves me as much as you did. Your brother saved me, Ross. If he hadn't broken into my apartment that day, I'd probably be laying in a plot right next to you."

My heart clenched in my chest at the mere thought of losing her, too. It *hurt*. The pain was extreme. I had to reach up and press my palm to my chest in the hopes I might keep it from imploding.

“I’ll never forget you, Ross,” she whispered, her voice breaking on his name. “But I’m going to live for you. You’d want me to do that.” She glanced over her shoulder at me through her tears, and her lips tilted up into a wobbly smile. Dropping my hand from my chest, I returned her beautiful smile. “And I’m going to love your brother because I know you’d want that, too.”

She stood to her feet and walked over to me. I cupped her face in my hands and leaned down to softly kiss her.

“I hope he’d also approve of this,” I whispered, easing myself down to one knee before I held up a ring I was hoping she’d accept. I hadn’t planned on asking her here. To be honest, I hadn’t decided on where or how to ask her. But this moment with my brother, the first love of her life, as a witness felt right. It felt perfect.

Her hands flew up to her face, tears falling freely down her face once again. “I love you, Anna. I’ve been in love with you for years. I never want to fill the parts of your heart and soul that belong to Ross. I just want the opportunity to love you like I want to for the rest of our lives, even if you never come to love me as much as you love him.”

“Oh, Ryan,” she croaked, falling to her knees in front of me. She grabbed my face in her hands this time, her watery eyes running over my face, drinking in every bit of my devotion to her. “I love you just as much as I love him,” she promised. “And I have plenty of room inside of me for both of you. Yes, I’ll marry you. *Of course*, I’ll marry you.”

I released a shaky breath, not even caring that I hadn’t really gotten to ask her. She’d agreed, and that was all that mattered to me. She was going to be my wife.

With shaky hands, she removed Ross’s ring. She stared at it for a moment, and a tear fell from her cheek, landing on the diamond. It rested there, glittering in the sun. She sniffled and



brought the ring to her lips, pressing a kiss to the diamond. After a moment more, she slipped it onto her right hand before holding her left hand out to me. I gently slid the ring on her finger before cupping her chin and pulling her lips to mine for another sweet kiss.

“I love you, Anna. You’re my entire world, sweet girl.”

She brushed her nose with mine as the wind blew, and the prettiest smile I’d seen in months tilted her lips.

“I think he approves,” she whispered.

*Thank you, little brother.*

I crushed her to me and plundered her mouth this time, kissing her deeply enough for both me and Ross. And I’d spend every moment of the rest of my life making sure I always continued loving her enough for the both of us.



## EPILOGUE



*Anna*

I was getting married in a cemetery.

Never thought I'd see the day I willingly got married in a place like this, but I wanted Ross to be part of this day. And while I knew he was always with us... well, being here in his resting place made me feel a little closer to him.

Ryan and I didn't care about the whole "you can't see the bride in her dress before the wedding day" crap. We didn't believe in superstitions, no matter how much his mother freaked out about them.

We'd faced a loss much worse and survived. We could get through anything life might throw our way.

Ryan grabbed my hand in his, linking our fingers together as we stared down at Ross's headstone. "I think he's happy for us," Ryan said quietly, bringing my hand up to his lips to press a kiss to my knuckles.

I smiled, nodding in agreement. "I know I've said it before, but thank you for not even batting an eyelid when I suggested getting married here." I glanced over my shoulder at his mother, who was standing as one of the witnesses in a light pink dress, Ryan's father standing across from her in a fitted suit. The minister was calmly waiting for us to come say our VOWS.

Ryan gently squeezed my hand. "I couldn't dream of getting married anywhere else, sweet girl." He leaned down

and softly kissed my lips. Thankfully, I wasn't wearing lipstick or lip gloss—only chapstick—so there was nothing for him to ruin. Even my face was bare of makeup, save for the mascara I'd swiped on my lashes this morning.

We wanted this to be simple and easy-going, just another day, except that today, we'd be saying our vows and committing ourselves to each other until death did us part. But even then, I knew we'd never stop loving each other.

Just as I'd never stopped loving Ross despite him being taken away from me before we could have our happily ever after.

“You ready to do this?” I asked him.

He nodded, grinning down at me. “Been ready for years, sweet girl. Let's go get hitched.”

I laughed, and after I lifted the skirt of my dress a little, we walked hand in hand over to the big oak tree where we'd be getting married, where I'd finally become a Vern.

Turning to face Ryan and finally letting go of the skirt of my dress, I gave him my other hand, beaming at him. Ryan gently squeezed my fingers as the minister began to speak.



With a yawn, I lifted my head from Ryan's shoulder just as he clicked my seatbelt back around me. I glanced out the window. The sky was dark, but I could tell by the slant of the plane that we were descending, getting ready to land.

I had no idea where we were going for our honeymoon. Ryan had done a good job at keeping it a secret, forcing me to listen to music the entire time we were in the airport, and now that I realized we were getting close, I was wide awake again and extremely excited.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we will be landing in approximately fifteen minutes. The weather in Alaska is currently clear and a comfortable fifty-three degrees.”

I swung my head to stare at Ryan with wide eyes. I'd always wanted to go to Alaska, and now, we were here.

He brought me to Alaska!

“Oh, my God,” I whispered. I wrapped my arms tightly around his neck and kissed him, so thankful for him and everything he always did for me. “You remembered.” I’d told him a while back I’d always wanted to come to Alaska. I’d never expected him to remember, much less bring me here for our honeymoon.

He pressed a kiss to my cheek and linked our fingers together just as the lights of Anchorage became visible. I couldn’t bite back my squeal of happiness, and I heard a couple of people laugh quietly at my excitement. I was practically bouncing in my seat.

Ross had always refused to come here. He didn’t like the cold, and he didn’t think there was ever much in Alaska to see. But Ryan... Ryan didn’t even care.

He just wanted to make me happy.

I looked over at him again, only to find him still watching me, a smile tilting his lips. I blushed, lowering my eyes for a moment before looking back up at him again. “What?” I self-consciously asked.

He reached up and cupped my cheek, brushing his thumb over my skin. “You look so beautiful when you’re happy,” he whispered.

I leaned over and kissed him again. “I’ll be even happier when we get off this plane and get into our hotel room,” I whispered.

He groaned and slid his hand down my side until he was gripping my waist. I barely bit back a moan at his sure touch.

“And what plans do you have when we get in our room?” he whispered.

I looked up at him from beneath my lashes, my entire body flushed red with need. We hadn’t done anything but make out in the two years we’d been together, and I was so ready for him. But he wanted me to finish my Associate’s degree before we got married and did anything.

“You know...” I whispered.

He grinned and nipped at my lower lip. “Play Monopoly?”

I rolled my eyes and smacked his shoulder with a laugh. He chuckled and kissed me again, shutting up my giggles. “Don’t worry, sweet girl. I can’t wait to get you alone either.” He brushed his nose with mine. “Just a little while longer.”

The time wasn’t short enough. But I’d waited this long, so I could wait a little bit longer.

“I love you,” I whispered.

He grabbed my hand and pressed a kiss to my palm. “And I love you, Mrs. Vern.”

The plane jolted as it hit the runway, and I spun back around to look out the window again, so excited for what was to come. Because even though it would be my first time, I knew Ryan would take care of me. Just like he always did.

We were taking the next step in our lives together.

I rubbed my fingers over my rings.

I’d lost so much, but in that loss, I had gained just as much. And though the pain had been absolutely agonizing, I’d go through it all again. Because even though Ross had tragically lost his life, I knew he was getting his happily ever after, too.

He was getting to see me happy.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

If you're looking for happily ever after, you'll find it here.

T. Thomas is a sweet, clean romance author of emotionally gripping books that always end in love and happiness.

She has been writing since she was thirteen years old. She enjoys spending all of her spare time writing, but she absolutely detests editing and proofreading.

T. Thomas can normally be found in her little room of her own that she calls her "woman cave" writing her next book and putting off editing and proofreading for as long as possible.

