

THE STONE SIBLINGS | BOOK 1

A man and a woman are dancing in a bedroom. The woman is on the left, wearing a white long-sleeved top and shorts, with her back to the camera. The man is on the right, wearing a white t-shirt and jeans, looking at her. They are in a room with white brick walls and a bed with white linens in the background.

Set in
STONE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HAVEN ROSE

SET IN STONE

The Stone Siblings, Book One

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND DEDICATION

Macaela, this one is for you... Thank you for your unending support and excitement for this couple. I hope they were worth the wait.

Author's Note: This book was previously released in the now no longer available Sweet Obsession Anthology. There has been no change to that version of the story, this is merely an individual release for those interested and for the purpose of tying it to the rest of the series.

Things can change in an instant...

Adam Stone learned that the hard way. At twenty-two, Adam knew his brothers and sister must become his top – his only – priority, and so, instead of confessing his unending love for his best friend, he makes the heartbreaking decision to let her go. However, Adam soon realizes he made the wrong choice. His life isn't worth living without her.

Ember Young has loved Adam for so long she can't remember a time she didn't. He's always been the person she could count on, and though it was only as besties, she's ready to see if it can be more. Until the devastating loss of his parents proves how short life can be, and Adam, overwhelmed with grief and responsibility, pushes her away.

As Adam adapts to his new reality, outside forces work against him, not by seeking the destruction of his burgeoning relationship, but that of a family that's slowly healing.

Chapter One

.....
ADAM
.....

August 13th...

Becket, Massachusetts

“Why are you smiling like that?” My brother, Nash, asks as we watch the Red Sox.

“It’s a good game,” I respond.

“Our team is losing.” Busted. “You’re thinking about Ember, aren’t you?”

“I miss my best friend,” I say a bit more defensively than is justified.

“Right. Friends,” Nash scoffs. He’s almost eighteen and a little shit.

“What do you know?”

“That you love her.” I side-eye him, wondering if he’s guessing, trying to trip me up, but his expression is serious. “Your secret is safe,” he vows. “I just know things.” He’s not wrong there. Nash has always been sensitive, more attuned to his feelings and that of others than the rest of us. Mom says he’s a sponge that soaks it all in. The downside is that it can be too much for him and it gets overwhelming. Thankfully, Mom recognizes when that is and helps him through it.

Needing to talk about this, I admit that I do, and confess my plan. “I’m gonna tell her when we get back to campus.” She and I attend Bentley University and will be starting our final year next month. We aren’t that far from home, so we can visit frequently, more of a selling point for me than her as her

parents are useless. She and her older brother, Kent, are close, though. As for me, my family and I are a tight knit bunch. I should've known Nash would figure out my real feelings for her.

She's been a part of my life since kindergarten. I can still recall her standing at the door, holding her mom's hand – this was prior to her mom turning into a wicked witch. At first, I thought she was the one not wanting to let go, but clear as a bell Ember's voice echoed into the room. "Mommy, imma big girl. I've got this. I'm gonna go make some friends now." And then she walked directly to me and stated, "I'm Ember. Wanna be besties?"

Ember has always been it for me, even before I knew what that meant. I've never so much as held another girl's hand. Why would I want to? I want all my firsts to be with her, my *onlys*, and I'm finally ready to tell her that. I've let the fear she might not return my feelings stop me too many times.

Every schoolmate we've ever had thinks we're together anyway. Not that a few idiots haven't still attempted to gain her attention. Thankfully, all it usually takes is one look at me and they run for the hills. Ember finds it funny, not in the least upset they never try again. In fact, she seems relieved. Not as much as I am, of course.

The thing is, she can get just as territorial over me. That gives me hope she sees me as I do her. She says they aren't good enough for me, and I readily agree. What I don't add – out loud – is that it's because they aren't her.

I know how lucky I am to have found Ember at such a young age, giving us even more years to create memories and a family. I just need to take the first step to get us closer to that destination. Her being gone a week has shown me that I never want to be without her again. This is the longest we've ever been apart and she still has seven more days at her grandparents'. Her grandpa had knee surgery and Ember offered to stay with them until he was back on his feet, so to speak. They don't live that far from here, which has allowed me to see her a few times. The last, I swear we were about to kiss. She'd pressed her forehead to mine, finally taking a

moment to just breathe, and thanked me for always being there for her.

That was my cue to admit how I felt, to promise she'd never know what it's like to be without me. Then she'd leaned forward, her lips so close to mine, and I didn't want to move or speak in case I spooked her. But her grandpa had called for her, stealing the moment from us. The potential for it was almost as good. Almost. I want to know if her mouth is as soft as it looks, if her lipstick will smudge and leave remnants of it on me, marking me as hers. No way in hell would I wipe it off if it does. It'd be like I was erasing her claim on me.

Nothing is going to stop me this time. The not knowing is torture. Granted, this might be one-sided, and that revelation will hurt like a bitch, but at least I'd know. Not that I'll give up on there being an us. I'll simply continue to prove she can count on me and hope it makes her fall in love with me.

Maybe I'll just drive down tomorrow and tell her. I'd go now if it wasn't for the fact my parents aren't home. I know Nash can handle keeping an eye on Camden and Riley if I left, not that they're much trouble at sixteen and fourteen respectively. However, dad and mom are having their once a month Saturday date night and put me in charge of the two youngest. I don't want to disappoint them, and them coming home and finding me gone, showing I'd gone back on my word, would do it.

When there's a knock, I jump up, my first thought being that it's Ember until I remember she wouldn't leave her grandparents. Maybe it's a friend of one of my siblings. I assure Nash I'll get it and he heads to kitchen instead to grab more snacks as Camden and Riley make requests.

I peek through the side window and see two uniformed officers, and my stomach starts twisting, intuition warning me that the life we knew, the life I'd hoped for, is gone. I reluctantly open the door and confirm the address and my identity. Hearing the voices of strangers, the others join me, each crowding close, instinctively seeking comfort. I can see it in their faces. They know something is wrong, too.

The cops explain that there's been an accident, that neither of our parents survived, and offer their condolences. Blood rushes in my ears, drowning out the rest of what they're saying. They're gone. They won't be coming home ever again. My mom laughing at a joke dad told her, dad smiling like she's the most beautiful woman in the world.

Nash grabs my hand and squeezes, as if he needs to reassure himself that I'm still here. Camden's fingers grab my shirt and hold on. Riley just starts bawling, calling the police liars and telling them to go away. Thankfully, they don't take that personally. I feel bad for them as I'm sure this never gets easier regardless of how many times they have to do this, but I can't think about that right now nor can I react as I'd like to... by punching a wall or roaring in pain.

I have to accept that as well as the realization I can't be selfish. I need to be the man my brothers and sister need. I can't do that if I'm not here. I'm suddenly the head of the house and that comes with responsibilities. One of those is putting them first. My heart, already fractured from the news that we're now orphans, breaks irreparably with the knowledge of what I have to do.

Let Ember go.

Chapter Two

EMBER

August 14th...

“I’m going to kick his ass,” I mutter as I slam the broom down on the kitchen floor. I’m using it to pick up non-existent dirt because it’s giving me a moment to myself and I can build up a good head of steam because this task doesn’t require focus.

“What did Adam do?” Grandma asks, startling me.

“You scared me,” I tell her.

She shrugs. “Would’ve heard me if you weren’t trying to remove my tile.” I prop it against the wall and take a deep breath, not wanting her to see how upset I am. My feelings aren’t important, Adam’s are, but I’d be lying if I said it didn’t ache that I found out from someone else that his parents are gone. I explain about the accident, leaving out specifics as I don’t have them, and watch tears fill her eyes. “He’s a good boy, Ember.”

“I know he is. It’s just...why didn’t he tell me himself?”

“His whole world just changed, sweetheart. He’s not thinking clearly.”

“I’m his best friend,” I unnecessarily state, though I wish I was more.

“Then you should be with him.”

I share my fear. “I don’t think he wants me there.”

“Perhaps that’s exactly what he wants, but he isn’t asking because he knows we need you here. Maybe he’s trying to keep it together and has to shut everything else off so he can.” That’s Adam to a t, and I should’ve remembered that before having all the feels and letting them rule me, hurt me.

“I’m a bad friend.”

“No, my dear, you’re a great one, which is why you’re upset he didn’t reach out so you can help. Go pack your things.”

“I don’t want to leave you and grandpa. You still need me.”

“I’ll make some calls. People will help. We could’ve asked them in the beginning, but we wanted to see you.”

That gets a grin from me. “Bit extreme, don’t you think? Grandpa having knee surgery to get me to visit.” She laughs, then shoos me from the kitchen as she grabs the broom, tapping my ass as I go to hurry me along.

—

Not even half an hour later, I’m on the road. Twenty minutes after that, I get a speeding ticket. It’s deserved, but it doesn’t stop me from doing it again as soon as I’m out of their line of sight. Thankfully, I’m not pulled over for the rest of the drive and make good time getting home. I’m sure the town is rallying around Adam and his siblings, making space there at a premium, so I park in my usual spot at home and walk next door. I’m eager to see him, hug him, but also worried about my reception.

If it’s not welcome, then I’ll leave. No, that’s a lie. Adam can’t do this alone. Whether he wants help or not, he’s getting it.

****Adam****

I’m barely keeping it together, though I’m putting on a hell of a show otherwise when there are eyes on me. And they always seem to be. That could be my paranoia as I feel like I’m constantly under surveillance, that whoever is watching is just watching for me to mess up. Then they’ll swoop in and

take my siblings. Camden and Riley, at least. I can't, won't, let that happen.

We all woke up this morning, though I doubt any of us actually got any sleep, and raced to the kitchen. I think we were hoping yesterday evening had just been a nightmare. That we'd walk in the kitchen and see dad trying to steal a piece of bacon from the huge plate mom always made us. She'd pretend she didn't see him and he'd act like he got away with it.

When the room was empty, no cooking sounds, no music playing softly in the background, no parents...the four of us had quietly turned to go back upstairs where we entered our respective rooms. Like if we tried it again, the outcome would be different.

Spoiler alert, it wasn't. Not the second nor the third. By then, none of us had an appetite and we sat around, wishing we could put off what we had to do next. Unfortunately, we couldn't, and the doorbell started up shortly after that.

Our neighbors, our friends, gave us space to grieve in private last night. This afternoon they're arriving en masse. As are the casseroles and various other dishes. I could send them away, claim we need more time, but their presence gives us something else to think about. Not to mention the plethora of food that has me wondering where we're going to put it all. "Nash?"

"I'm on it," he agrees, not needing me to say anything else. The kitchen as a whole is his domain. He and mom shared a mutual love for it and it created a special bond between them. They loved making old recipes, those that have been passed down for generations, and creating new ones in the hopes they'd be good enough to join them. He realized it's his calling and he wants to become a chef.

I'm going to make sure he accomplishes that goal. With some help from our parents, of course. There is nothing they loved more than each other and us, which is why they took steps to ensure we'd be covered if the unthinkable transpired.

Which it did.

Being the oldest, dad and I would frequently talk about responsibility. During those conversations, I learned how to be a man. What it took to have a family and what I needed to do in order to keep it. Because of that, I'm not left floundering as I try to figure out what comes next. I've got a list going of what that is and I'm trying to ignore how insurmountable it seems.

I wish like hell Ember was here. It's my own fault that she's not. All I have to do is call her, text her, just reach out in any way and she'd be here without hesitation. But I can't.

She needs to follow her own path, not hitch her wagon to a guy who, essentially, just became a single parent. I need to know she's chasing after her dreams, and while she's on that path, that she has the chance to meet and fall in love with a guy that can give her the happily ever after she deserves. And I need to let her, regardless of how much the mere idea of another giving her that makes a primal scream of rage want to rip from my throat.

It should be me!

"Do you need anything?" Mrs. Vaughn asks as she comes inside.

Ember, I want to respond. Ember is the only thing I need, but instead, I tell her we're okay and thank her for coming. Mrs. Vaughn tilts her head, wisely not believing me, then walks to the kitchen. Having been a good friend of my parents for many years, she knows this house almost as well as her own.

"I'm sorry, son. So damn sorry," my old boss, Chuck Williams, says when he sees me. I worked for Chuck at his auto repair shop during high school. I enjoyed my time there, but never saw it as a permanent position. My end goal was finance, which was another reason I enjoyed the chats dad and I had about them. For all I know, those were why I chose the field I did. That being said, I'm taking him being here as a sign aside from the fact he's showing his respect for my parents and wants to offer his condolences.

“Thank you for coming, sir,” I tell him as we shake hands. “Is there a chance we could talk soon?”

“I know this tragedy changes things for you and your siblings. For your future.” I nod, silently letting him know he’s on the right track. “So, if I’m able to put your mind at ease in any way, let me just say this. You need work, you have it. Whenever you’re ready, come see me and we’ll iron out the details.”

Too choked up, too grateful, to respond, I merely hug him. Seeming to understand, he awkwardly pats my back – he’s gruff and fears emotions are contagious – then slides away the second I free him. I can’t help but smirk at his reaction and make a mental note to do it again.

Being able to cross an item off my list makes me feel as if I can actually do this. I still need to call the insurance company, contact the funeral home to begin the arrangements my parents already set up, get in touch with the dean at Bentley to withdraw, refamiliarize myself with the bills, and so on. This is when Dad’s advice kicks in and I remember not to look at numerous tasks as a whole. To do that gets overwhelming and can cause you to question your ability to get it all done. Instead, pick one thing, conquer it, then move on to the next, so it no longer seems insurmountable.

Fuck, I miss him. Them.

Dad.

Mom.

Ember.

“So you do remember my name.” Did I say that out loud? Am I imagining things? No, I can’t be. I can smell her. *Feel* her.

“You’re here,” I whisper as I yank her into my arms.

“Where else would I be?” She asks. “I’m where I belong.”

Damn straight. Being noble is for those much stronger than me. God forgive me, but I need this woman. I lied. I can’t let her go.

****Ember****

Since I don't want him to, that works for me, so I say,
"Then don't."

"I really need to work on not blurting my thoughts," I hear him mutter.

"I appreciate when you do it," I admit. He tends to when his emotions run high, which isn't often as he normally has good control over them, with extenuating circumstances such as this, though... There's such pain in his voice, in his eyes, and he's trying like hell to hide from both. I still want to scold him for not calling me, and I might at some point, but now is not the time. What I do, however, is ask, "What can I do?"

"Just let me hold you," he pleads. I nod, unable to deny him what we each want, and I feel myself being lifted, feet dangling in the air as he walks through the house. We pass numerous people, some I know more than others, but none of them react to seeing Adam carrying me. They know, just as I do, that I'm safe with him. As he takes the stairs, I feel shudders start to wrack his body and I whisper soothing nonsensical words, letting my palm rub the back of his head where it meets his neck. When we reach his room, he finally stops moving and looks at me, our eyes almost level for once. He's letting me see the tears pooled there and I watch as they begin trailing down his cheeks. Adam merely stares at me, letting me see his grief, and I get the feeling this is the first time he's let it out. That I'm the only one he'll do it with. He'll want to be strong for his siblings, want them to know he's there for them. But who does he have to turn to?

Me.

I lean forward and kiss each cheek, brushing away the tears in the process. It seems to be calming him some, so I do it again and again. On the fourth pass, Adam turns his side and my lips land on his. He and I both freeze, unsure of our next move, until Adam groans and the tip of his tongue appears, outlining my lips. In response, I open my mouth and accept his intrusion. Welcome it, in fact.

So focused on what we're doing, I barely register that we're now completely alone as he shuts the door behind us. He backs me against the wall, his hard chest pressed to my suddenly aching breasts and I moan. We should not be doing this right now, exploring what I believe has always been there. He's in pain, hurting from a tragic loss, and has a house full of people, but I'm not going to stop it.

Adam is devouring me. It's as if he's trying to climb inside my body and seek comfort, something I'm more than willing to give him. And his tongue...holy shit. The way he's working it, using it to turn me to mush, I'm about to lose my mind at the thought of another part of him doing this in a lower extremity. Breathing eventually becomes a necessity, though he continues stealing quick kisses before skimming his mouth over my cheek and down to my pulse. The nips he's now giving me – oh lord, I think I could come from those alone, and when he sucks hard and bites the same spot, I do, soaking my panties with my pleasure.

“Adam,” I moan, and suddenly his warmth is gone and there's a chill in the air. Saying his name seems to have snapped him from whatever haze we'd been under, causing him to place me on my feet and step back.

“I shouldn't have done that,” he mumbles. “It was a mistake.” When I reach for him and he moves further away, putting more than just physical distance between us, I'm suddenly breathless for an entirely different reason. Pain. It's an all-consuming thing and I know if I give into it, I may never recover. “I think you should go.”

I took a chance, gambled on the possibility he wanted more than friendship, and I lost.

Walking through the house, trying not to bring unwanted attention to myself, it hurts to realize that I no longer feel at home here. At least not in this moment and honestly, probably not ever again.

Chapter Three

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ADAM
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August 15th...

What the hell was I thinking? Oh wait, I wasn't because I'm an asshole. I saw her and took what I wanted. There was no finesse, not that I have any seeing as how that was my first kiss, but I know I could've done better than pawing at her like I did. I bit her for fuck's sake. It wasn't until she said my name, her voice shaky in a way I'd never heard before, that my brain kicked in. I set her down, holding on only long enough to make sure she was steady, then backed up. I couldn't look at her, worried she'd see the shame in my eyes at my actions and try to comfort me. To convince me everything was okay.

It wasn't. Nothing was. Instead of finishing college and professing my love for my best friend, I've lost my parents, now have two of my three siblings to raise, dropped out, and alienated the love of my life.

As if I didn't mess up enough, I proceeded to make it sound as if what we did together was wrong, that *we* were wrong, then told her to leave. And I watched her go. I saw the slump in her shoulders, the slowness of her steps, and the part that truly killed me? Her hand lifting to her face, the tremors in it evident from where I stood, as she swiped what I can only imagine were tears from her cheeks.

I want to wallow in pity, but I can't. I have too much to do. First, though, I have to get out of bed. After cleaning up and getting dressed, I go downstairs, the smell of bacon causing me to pause mid-step, foot hanging in the air. Logically, I

know it's not mom, that it's Nash, probably wanting to give us the comfort of some familiarity, but for a split second, I can hear dad and mom in there.

When reality hits, my hand drifts into my pocket and I rub the stone mom gave me. We all got one before we each started kindergarten, but none of us know what word the others have engraved on theirs, only that they're different. Mine says strength. There's irony in that because I currently feel like I don't have any.

I've never felt so alone.

So weak.

So ashamed.

Following a solemn breakfast which we ate because we need the nourishment not due to any craving for it, we pitch in to clean up while Nash gets ready. The rule is that if you made it, your job is done and everyone else has to do the rest. Except a knock in front has my head jerking up as I wipe down the table. We all freeze, the last time this happened too fresh in our minds and hearts to not recall every vivid detail of learning our parents were gone.

I remind them it's probably more people bringing food and they relax a bit, but I see it in their eyes. They can't do this right now either.

Trying to figure out how I can politely send them away, I open the door and see Ember. She came back. Scratch that. She may be standing here, but this is not my Ember. This version is hunched, as if braced for a blow, and the fire in her eyes, the very reason I nicknamed her sparky, is gone. I did that. I single-handedly did what her parents have tried to for years and could not. I extinguished it. Destroyed one of the things I love most about her.

Yes, I wanted her to move on because all I am must be focused on keeping my family together, but calling what we did a mistake, acting as if I regretted even a second of it, was

not the way to do it. I need to apologize for that, but the reasoning behind it? It still stands.

“Hi,” I greet her, feeling awkward in her presence for the first time since we met.

A tremulous smile comes from my brave girl as she says, “Hey. I figured you could use some help.”

“That’d be great. Thank you.” I retreat and let her come in.

“Where should we start?”

“With an apology,” I answer as I lead her to the kitchen. The others have already finished, giving us some privacy.

“For what?”

“I was an ass yesterday,” I admit. “I was out of control and got carried away. I needed something to hold on to and I took advantage of our friendship.” *Stop saying these things! Tell her you don’t regret it, just the circumstances of it. Tell her that you’ve wanted to do that for a long time. Tell her that you didn’t need something, you needed her. Only her.* I want to more than I want my next breath, but I can’t.

“Oh.” She glances at her shoes. “Don’t worry about it, Adam. You have a lot going on and your emotions are all over the place. I know it didn’t mean anything.”

Ember is so wrong. It meant everything to me.

****Ember****

Old reliable Ember.

The friend.

After I let him off the hook, I decide to keep my distance as much as I can while being in his house and helping him pick up the pieces. All while quietly trying to rebuild my own and wondering why I’m never enough.

I’m used to it from my parents. Yes, I love them and they love me in their own way, but my older brother, Kent, is the apple of their eye and we all know it. He’s their Golden Boy. I may have accepted my role as second best in their lives, I just never

thought my best friend would treat me the same...as if I don't matter.

The thing is, I don't hate Kent. He didn't ask for their favoritism nor does he want or condone it, but neither can he change it. Kent and I can joke about it now. It took years for us to reach that point, him from guilt and me due to jealousy. Adam actually helped me get there. He said that I'm who I was meant to be and if anybody couldn't appreciate that, it was their hang up not mine. He gave me the confidence to be myself.

Seems only fitting he'd be the one to take it away from me.

Chapter Four

EMBER

August 16th...

My cell dings with yet another text from Adam asking me to contact him. Emotionally, I'm not ready, but I suck it up, mentally pull on my big girl panties, and take a deep breath. I need to remember this is about Adam and his family, not the destruction of my dreams.

I've never been good at faking it, yet I need to learn how to and fast because I'm about to put on a performance that'll hopefully convince the man I've loved since we were six that he didn't break my heart. Dialing his number, I take one more fortifying breath and get ready to lie my ass off.

"Ember, thank god. I didn't think you'd call."

"Sorry about that, I've been taking care of some things here since I was gone so long and getting ready to go back to school." I know he's not returning, and my initial plan had been the same, but now I can't stay here. I need to put space between us, I just hope it isn't too late to reverse my withdrawal. "And I figured the four of you needed time together, so I made myself scarce." That sounded legit, right?

"I always want to see you, sparky. You know that. I, uh, just wanted to thank you for all your help, especially with Riley." She gloms on to me when I'm at their house. "You mean the world to her." *Her*, not me. "You free to come over? I think we need to talk." No, we don't. He said everything he needed to and more than I wanted to hear. I can't take a repeat.

“I wish I could, Adam, but I have other plans tonight.”
Such as sitting in my pjs and feeling sorry for myself. I need to be alone. Hell, might as well get used to it since that’s apparently how I’m going to remain.

“Oh,” he says, the disappointment easy to hear. Crap! Suck it up, Ember, and be a true best friend. If that’s all he wants from you, then that’s what you’ll give him. He needs you, whether he admits it or not. He just lost his parents. That’s nothing compared to your pain at his rejection. After mentally bitch slapping myself, I stop making this about me and focus on what’s best for him.

“You know what, it wasn’t anything important. It can wait. You want me to bring dinner?”

“Only if you want to.” That’s Adam speak for please, feed us, I don’t know what the hell I’m doing.

“Casseroled out already?”

“I have nightmares about them, Em. I can’t eat another one or I’ll go crazy. Don’t mistake me, they’re good and I appreciate the thought behind each dish, but there’s only so many of them we can take.”

“Your dad would run away screaming if your mom tried to feed him nothing but that.” We snort in sync, knowing Kenneth would’ve made a big joke about it, playing it up to make everyone laugh. And they would have.

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Being you, giving me a happy memory to focus on, and for not writing me off after how I acted, to name a few things. I thought I was doing the right thing and instead, I hurt you because I’m an idiot. I’m sorry for that. I can’t do this without you. Please don’t make me.” And then he ends the call, which works out since words escape me following his confession.

Wow. I was not expecting that. He isn’t wrong. He did hurt me, yet my heart still yearns for him. If there’s even the slightest chance for more, I need to take it.

****Adam****

Hearing her voice, knowing she's at least open to talking allows me the chance to take the first deep breath I've had since losing my parents. Are the two related? No, not at all, but I just breathe easier around Ember. I always have, which is ironic considering she steals it every time I see her.

I knew, in the deepest part of my heart, when those words came out of my mouth that day, when I called kissing her, finally tasting her, a mistake and made her leave, that I'd fucked up. The level of fuckery had to be the highest ever. Her face. God, the pain I saw there, caused by me no less. If I could've kicked my own ass, I would have. As it was, I've mentally berated myself since then, tortured by her expression over and over as punishment. I haven't slept, her face haunting me whenever I close my eyes. I can't eat either. My stomach can't handle it.

I compounded it the next day by spewing that bullshit instead of telling her she's my anchor, the thing that keeps me steady. When she left hours later, I knew I'd successfully pushed her away. Unfortunately, I'd done so by creating a rift that might never mend.

How can I claim to love her and then do that? My treatment was unfathomable and my dad would tell me this isn't how a man behaves. And he'd be right, a realization that has me questioning my motives. What if my underlying intention wasn't to protect Ember from this life, but to protect myself in case she didn't choose it?

My sparky, a little fairy of a woman with a smile so bright it's almost magical to those around her, terrifies me. The power she wields, the ability to bring me to my knees with just a look, to make life worth living.

If I were to lose that or if she were to take it away, I wouldn't survive.

And now she's coming over and my eyes are wide open. In more ways than one because wow, this house is a mess. My mom would be so upset if she saw the disarray we've allowed

it to become. She believed in instilling respect for what we have and that means taking care of it.

As the oldest, I need to literally man up. My brothers and sister are depending on me, especially Camden and Riley due to their ages. Unfortunately, I can't find my parents' will. I know they have one, it's just not with everything else as it should be. I'll have to ask Mr. Boone, the family lawyer, about it when I call him regarding obtaining guardianship. I just assumed it would be a given I'd slide into that role as Franklin and Lily Stone, our paternal grandparents, can't take on two teenagers. They've offered help however and whenever we need it, but constant care would be too much for them. I could tell it hurt them to admit that and I know if there was no other option they'd make it happen, but they don't have to. I'm doing it.

There is no other family aside from our mom's parents which isn't even a last resort. It's a no way in hell possibility. We've met them twice, and the last encounter was too many years ago to remember anything about it. Hell, mom hardly ever talked to or about them. From what I know, which is admittedly not much, they were not only neglectful, but also abusive, verbally and physically. And when mom met dad their senior year of high school and eloped the day after graduation, they threatened to turn him in for statutory rape if they didn't receive adequate compensation. Dad and Mom knew he hadn't done anything illegal as both were virgins on their wedding night, so they called her parents' bluff and said they'd involve the police themselves if they didn't leave them alone.

My parents then moved out of state, returning only when hers relocated halfway across the country. When we were younger, they'd offer apologies and claim to want a relationship with their only child, but eventually their true natures shone through and mom would cut all contact once again. She always gave them a chance, though. Her soft heart, which is where Nash gets it, unable to completely write them off.

Until they involved us by visiting and trying to get all four of us to go somewhere with them. I told them I had to call Dad and Mom to make sure it was okay. It wasn't, which they knew and is the reason they tried to convince me to hang up the phone. Said they promised to get us home before our parents, so they'd never know we left and we wouldn't get in trouble. Something felt wrong and I dialed mom at work. She told me to immediately get the others upstairs and for us to stay there until she or Dad got home. When they did, our grandparents were gone, but I heard mom yelling at them that night. Told them if they ever came near us again, they'd regret it. After she slammed the phone down, she made us promise to never go anywhere with them and to run the other direction if they even tried to talk to us. Every school we attended since that moment was informed that only our parents could pick us up regardless of what anybody tried to claim and to call the cops if someone else tried.

Honestly, I don't even know if they're aware Dad and Mom passed away and I don't care. I loathe them for the pain they caused her, and the unknown of what could've happened that day when they wanted to take us.

A door slamming snaps me back to the present and I reprimand whoever did it. Nash pops his head in and mumbles a sorry. He looks tired and I feel bad for getting on his case about something so silly. He's just as frazzled as I am and has been working extra hours as a distraction. So he says. I have a feeling he's trying to earn as much money as he can in a quest to help out financially. He's been employed at the same restaurant since his sophomore year, rising from dishwasher to waiter to his current role.

Rufus, the owner, saw how interested Nash was in cooking and offered a trial run, a chance for Nash to show what he could do. After making any dish Rufus requested, and nailing each of them, he knew my brother was being wasted on the floor and asked the chef, Samuel, to let him shadow him. Samuel agreed and Nash couldn't stop smiling for a week.

"Shit. I really am an idiot," I exclaim, my mind piecing together Nash's job with a way I can show Ember what she

means to me.

“That’s never been in doubt, but what did you do this time?” Nash instantly replies. I tell him all of it and he stares at me, unable to believe I’m that stupid. Join the club.

“That girl has been in love with you forever, you freaking dumbass. You kiss her, tell her it was a mistake which is essentially rejecting her, then make her leave a place she’s always considered home.” I start to defend myself, not that I can, but he’s not finished. “To make it worse, you state that you needed something and took advantage of her friendship. Did I get it all?” I confirm his replay, cringing at my own behavior. “Do you get that you made her feel like she wasn’t enough?”

“Fuck! I’m no better than her parents. I’m worse because I know what their treatment does to her. I don’t deserve her forgiveness or love, but I’m gonna try like hell to get both.” Being the great brother he is, he asks if I want his help. “As much as it pains me to admit, yes. I can’t do this on my own.”

“Text Ember and tell her you’ve got dinner covered. You can’t adequately express how much you messed up while eating the food you made her not only bring over, but also cook and/or pay for. Did Dad teach you nothing? You know Mom said he was the sweetest man she’s ever met, so how did none of that seep into you?”

“Too many muscles to go through,” I answer with a smirk.

Nash chuckles as I’d hoped, then mimes gripping a phone and using his thumbs like he’s texting. I do as my new relationship guru demands and Ember’s immediate reply has me barking out a laugh. Nash uses my momentary lack of focus to steal my cell and read the conversation.

Me: Don’t worry about dinner. It’s taken care of. Just bring yourself.

Sparky: So, Nash is cooking.

Me: I plead the fifth.

Her response wasn’t a question but a definitive statement because she knows she’s right. Brat. “She’s got you pegged,

man. Hold onto her as tightly as you can. If you lose her, someone else will snap her up and you'll regret that for the rest of your life." With that prophesy, he returns my phone and strolls upstairs whistling what sounds like the *Dumbass Song* by Tom Petty, our dad's favorite singer.

I quickly pick up the trash, straighten a few things, then head toward my room to hop in the shower. Nash and I cross paths in the hall and he assures me that not only does he have it covered but I also owe him. I promise whatever the hell he wants if he helps me fix this.

Thirty minutes later, I'm standing in the living room when I hear a knock and I wonder how long it'll take before I stop associating that sound with bad news.

As she walks in, she stops and looks around, almost as if expecting my parents to appear and greet her like they always would with welcoming hugs. When it doesn't come, her breath hiccups, as if reality just smacked her in the face.

I didn't plan what I wanted to say, knowing the smartest thing to do is speak from the heart since it's full of her anyway. I've never been good at sharing that type of stuff, though. I have enough figurative bottles of emotions inside me to open an impressive, yet sad, wine cellar.

My mom had a saying, 'If you need to make a choice, whichever is the hardest is usually the right path for you.' Over the years, that's proven true so many times. Her parents are an example. She knew they were toxic. It hurt her to let go of the hope of having a normal relationship with them, but Mom had to do what was best for her, and therefore her family, by cutting them out of her life.

I say a quick and silent prayer, asking my parents for guidance, needing it more than ever right now. Ember is too important for me to screw this up. Again. I don't expect an answer, yet I get one nonetheless as my eyes are drawn to a quote mom had written in calligraphy and framed herself. She'd gotten so good at it that people would hire her to address invitations, fancy up their menu, etc.

The heart never steers you wrong.

Thanks, Mom.

Taking a deep breath, I grab Ember's hand and pull her toward me, grateful when she wraps her arms around me.

"I'm a dumbass. A stupid idiot that thought he was doing the right thing, when in fact, I was scared. Of my feelings for you, of losing you, of holding you back, of failing you." She stares at me in confusion. I'm a big man, so the thought of something scaring me is probably hilarious, but things do, and they all revolve around those I love. My family...and her. Ember starts to talk, but I gently shake my head, asking for a chance to continue before I lose my nerve. A slight nod lets me know she, as always, understands me without words needing to be said, at least in that. However, some do and it's time to let them out.

"I was wrong to push you away. I've protected you since the second we met, not wanting anyone to hurt you, only to turn around and do it myself. I won't ask for your forgiveness for doing so because I don't deserve it. But I am sorrier than I can ever express for acting as I did. Losing my parents," I stop for a moment, trying not to let my tears fall. "It hurts like hell, and I knew my brothers and sister would need me. I couldn't let Camden and Riley be taken from us. I would need to become the adult and take over raising them. I've already started the process to be named their guardian, but it's not a sure thing yet. My life as I knew it, things I'd planned, had to come second, and so would you."

"As it should be," she instantly responds, not even hesitating to agree.

I drop a kiss on her head. "When we went back to school, I was going to talk to you and have a long overdue conversation about us. Then the cops stole my chance with their news. I'm ashamed to admit, even for a second, my selfishness. I didn't want them to be gone because that meant a dream of mine was, too. One that involved you."

"Wh...?"

"I love you, Ember. I always have in some way. Over the years, it morphed from friendship into more, but it took a

while to finally realize what kind it was.”

“And that is?”

“The kind a man has for the woman he sees a future with. The woman he wants to spend his life with, have children with, grow old with. I want you to be mine.”

“You love me? You want all that with me?” She asks, her voice whisper soft.

“Yes, and it terrifies me.”

“A-damn you!” She shouts, a look on her face I’ve never been responsible for, and knowing I caused it tears me up inside.

“I don’t want to lose what we have, but I know what we *could* have is worth the chance. If you don’t feel the same, I understand and will accept it, though I reserve the right to work on changing your mind until you fall as deeply in love with me as I am with you. That being said, if a friend is the only way I can be a part of your life, I’ll take it. I didn’t want to tell you all this then ask you to become a parent of two teenagers. It killed me to do it, but I wanted you to move on, live for you, not for me and my siblings. My wings were clipped from fully spreading with the death of my parents, but yours didn’t have to be. I wanted you to fly and I refused to hold you back.”

This time when she says my name, it’s not connected to a curse. “Adam.”

“But I can’t let you go. Please don’t make me. I can’t breathe without you. Just the sound of your voice calms me. Your laugh makes the world brighter. Your smile lightens even the darkest parts of my soul. Your touch ignites a fire inside me and I no longer want to quench it. I want to give it free rein.” Ember places her hand on top of mine and the fraying edges of my sanity start to stitch back together. If she can do that, there’s hope. “Remember that mythology class we took on a whim our freshman year?” She wanted to take it and begged me to as well. “I want this feeling to burn us both up, leaving our past relationship in ashes, so our new life, one with

an even stronger connection than before, rises from the flames like a phoenix.”

My eyes haven't left Ember's since I started speaking, and as silent tears course down her cheeks, my heart feels heavy, imagining the worst. That I'm in this alone, that I've made her uncomfortable, but then...then she does something I've dreamed of for years. She opens her mouth and the sweetest thing I will ever hear, aside from when we take our vows, comes out.

“I love you.” Three simple words that have the power to fell the strongest man. Withstand the fiercest storm. And make even the most stoic smile so bright it could be seen from orbit. “What I feel for you terrifies me, too, Adam. It's scary, and I think if we don't admit that, we're only fooling ourselves. While I understand you thought you were doing what was best for me, you don't have the right to decide that without talking to me. But you'd just had your parents taken from you and that skews everything, emotionally and mentally, so it can't fully be held against you.”

“Yes,” I softly confirm, grateful she understands that I wasn't thinking clearly while knowing she's too good for me.

“You hurt me, and by doing so, yourself as well, but you also could've ruined any chance we would ever have to become more. Not to mention, it makes it sound as if I don't know my own mind well enough to choose for myself, that I'd choose wrong by being with you and regret it. I would never turn my back on you or them. I love them as if they're my own. I always have, always will. You've been my rock since the beginning. Let's be that phoenix. Let's forge a new path, side by side, and become what we were always meant to be.”

“And what's that, sparky?”

“One.”

****Ember****

And then he kissed me. A lot. We only pulled apart at the sound of a throat clearing, loudly, followed by, “I worked hard on this food. You better get your asses in the kitchen and eat.”

I giggle and receive a wink from Nash. He's only a few years younger than me and Adam, so he's hung out with us more than the other two. I've come to think of all of them as my siblings, though. "Ember, glad you're giving dumbass another chance. He's crazy about you, you know? He begged me to cook since he can't even make cereal correctly." Leaning toward me he whispers, as if it's a crime, "He doesn't even know how to boil water."

Laughing so hard I need to hold Adam to keep me steady, I can hear and feel the huff he emits at Nash's teasing. "You think that's funny, sparky?" Adam whispers, stealing my attention so I don't notice Nash leaving.

"Yep," I reply, eager to see what he'll say next. Plus, I'm still his best friend, which means it's my job to give him shit. A responsibility I take very seriously.

"Someone need spanked already?" He growls. The thought of his hand smacking my bare cheek, his handprint marking my skin, has me arching my back and sticking said body part out. I feel him skim the left before giving it a slight tap and shudder. "The things you're gonna beg me to do to you," he says before giving my earlobe a little bite.

"I did not know you had this side to you."

"Me either," he admits with a shrug.

"It's getting cold, people," comes from the kitchen before I can respond to Adam's confession. I still see hints of vulnerability on his face, as if he's worried this is a dream or I'll change my mind. Only time will convince him this is real, that I'll always choose him.

We all had dinner together, which was delicious, and one of my favorites. Something Nash could've only known from Adam. I sat between Adam and Riley, splitting my attention between them, though concentrating was a little hard. Adam constantly touched me in some manner, and while he's done that numerous times before, he and I know it's different now.

It feels like a natural transition, though. As if we were always heading toward this end, we just hit some detours to get to it.

There's a noticeable change in the atmosphere. It's more subdued, lacking the usual, for lack of a better word, life. It's as if the residence is in mourning, too. Yeah, that might sound woo-woo, but this house is more than a building. It's a home that centered around two people that are no longer here.

I can't help but think about the history of my own relationship with Adam. I don't consider the years he and I each kept our growing feelings a secret a waste, but I am curious on whether there were clues I missed. Signs that, if caught, could've gotten us to this point sooner.

Like a flash, I remember a conversation in high school with my friend, Tia.

"He is so gone over you," Tia had exclaimed.

"What? Who? Huh?"

"Don't be coy, Ember. You know who I mean. Adam. You two have been together forever."

"We're just friends." This isn't the first time I've had to make this statement and it probably won't be the last because everyone thinks we're dating. Honestly, I wish we were. I've wanted no one but Adam. I haven't even held hands with another boy. Why would I want a substitute for the person I really want to be with?

"Sure, sweetie. Just keep your secrets. We all know the truth," she says smugly.

"Who are the all and what's the truth?" I ask curiously.

"Pfft. The guys know you're taken and the girls don't even bother trying to get Adam's eye. Hell, Adam threatens any male that looks at you."

I brush it off, not seeing my best friend ever being able to do that. He may be huge, but he's a Care Bear inside. That's it, Tia misunderstood. It's just Adam's size that's threatening, not him actually saying anything.

Then two weeks later I started wondering if her beliefs held merit. A new guy had transferred a few days before and wouldn't take no for an answer, even though I'd repeatedly turned him down when he asked me out. I hadn't told Adam about it, his protectiveness over me legendary, but he saw it firsthand and that set him off.

We were at the mall, but he'd stepped away for a few minutes to run into a store. I found out later he'd had me wait at a certain spot because he was buying my birthday gift. The other boy spotted me and again, started hitting on me. When I tried to walk away, he'd grabbed my arm and slapped my ass with his free hand, telling me he wasn't done with me yet. The next thing I knew there was a whoosh of air strong enough to make my hair move and the jerk is laying on the floor, dazed from the impact. Adam stalked toward him and began talking, his voice a growly murmur I couldn't make out, and I tried. The loser's face went ghost white and he swallowed hard before quickly nodding, then he scurried off like the rat he was. A few people around us clapped, having seen Adam rescue me. That kid never bothered me again, and in fact, either changed direction when he saw me coming or sat as far from me in class as possible.

When Adam returned to my side, he gently inspected my arm and then brushed my hair from my face before looking straight into my eyes, bending almost in half to do so, and asked if I was okay.

I viewed it as him being a great best friend, and he was, but with hindsight, I see it for what it was.

The beginning.

Chapter Five

.....
ADAM
.....

August 17th...

Today is gonna suck. "I'm not ready to say good-bye," I whisper against Ember's shoulder. My face is currently buried there, wishing I could remain there and hide from what's to come.

"Then don't," she replies, as if that's an option.

Raising up, I look at her. "Don't really have a choice, sparky."

"Keep them alive. Talk about them. Share stories. Do something to honor them. Talk to them as if they're still here. Instead of good-bye, say you'll see them later."

Huh. "I like that idea." It doesn't make it any easier, but it does help. Dropping a kiss on her forehead, I stand and remove my suit from the closet. It's the same one I wore for my high school graduation, a much happier occasion, and I'm relieved it still fits. Nash, having finished a few months ago, is covered, too. Camden and Riley needed proper clothing, which our grandparents took care of with a shopping trip to the mall.

It was hard on all four of them, leading to Camden and Riley running straight for their rooms and not exiting them until we coaxed them out with the promise of pizza.

When I can no longer delay getting ready, I withdraw my attire from the garment bag and focus on happier times. Seeming to understand I need a minute, Ember gets behind me, her short stature meaning she isn't even visible in the

mirror in front of us, her arms appearing to float in the air as they wrap around my waist.

I feel her cheek press against my back, centering me, and I know I can get through this as long as she's with me. "Get dressed, honey. I'm going to check on Riley."

Nash was right. She's a keeper.

****Ember****

"Hey, chickadee," I greet Riley after she opens her door for me. As soon as she sees me, she runs into my arms and sobs my name. I quietly back her into her room and close us inside where I let her cry her little heart out. I know this is rough on all of them, but not only is she the only girl and the youngest, giving her less time with her parents, she's also at that age where she needs her mom more than ever. "Talk to me, Riley, please," I urge, knowing she'll more than likely shut down. Unfortunately, I'm right. Trying one last time, I say, "It's okay to be sad. Your brothers are. I am."

"I'm mad," she admits. "They left me. Left us."

"They didn't want to. I know that doesn't erase your pain, but remembering that might ease it." She doesn't say anything and I wonder if I've made it worse.

"I miss them," she says on a sniffle.

"Of course, you do, and I wish I could make it better, but I can't. Neither can Adam, Nash, or Camden, no matter how badly we want to." Riley sits beside me on the bed and expels a breath, one no fourteen-year-old should have in her.

We remain that way as long as I can let her, giving her time to just be, to prolong what's next, until she has to get going or we'll be late. "Will you do my hair?" She whispers.

"I'd be honored."

—

Adam's grandparents rented a limo to transport the family back and forth for the funeral, burial, and return trip home, not wanting any of them to attempt driving on such an emotional day. Inside the vehicle, the silence is suffocating, the sadness

so thick I wonder how the driver can see through it. Adam insisted I accompany them and the others agreed, acknowledging my place in Adam's life as well as my honorary status – and maybe at some point in the future official – as a Stone.

Upon our arrival, we're ushered inside where Mr. Perl, the owner, greets us. Kenneth and Margaret had precise instructions regarding their preferences for their deaths and had already selected and paid for all of it. The only thing Adam needed to do was call Mr. Perl and let him know he needed him to begin the process.

"Misters Stone, Ms. Stone, and Ms. Young, I'm sorry to officially make your acquaintances under such circumstances. If there is anything I can do for you, please don't hesitate to ask." We thank him, then follow his lead toward the room reserved for us. He leaves, giving the siblings and grandparents time alone with their loved ones and I take step back, attempting to blend into the walls to do the same.

Adam turns to me, tears in his eyes, and holds his hand out. I take it, wanting to give him whatever he needs from me. I don't want to look at the couple I was closer to than my own parents in a lot of ways. Kenneth and Margaret never made me feel like I was less than, cheered for me as loudly as they did their own kids, and attended events none of their children were in simply because I was.

My pain is nothing compared to theirs, but it still hurts and I haven't really had a chance to process it. It was easier that way. Staying busy to occupy my mind, focusing on Adam and his siblings, on Adam and I.

But now, there's nothing to do other than accept the truth and learn to live with it.

Life can change in the blink of an eye.

Which is why you need to go after what you want and fight for it if need be.

Chapter Six

ADAM

September 7th...

It's hard as hell letting Ember go home every night when I want nothing more than to hold her in my arms and wake to her beautiful face each morning. We know where this is going, and that's a forever. But with my siblings here and all of us still struggling with loss, we agreed to wait. We want our first time, first in all ways for both of us – individually and as a couple – to be special.

Today, Ember is coming over to take Riley shopping. School already started, yet with everything going on, getting what she and Camden needed in terms of clothing had to wait. I think it'll be good for Ember and Riley to spend time together. Since we learned of our parents' deaths, Riley has basically withdrawn into herself. At least with everybody that isn't Ember. I don't know if it's because Ember is a woman or that she isn't biologically related, though my family has always treated her as if she is. I'm not the only one who has noticed the difference in my little sister, which is why Ember had the idea for a girls' day. While they're out, she's going to see if she can get Riley to talk about what's bothering her. Other than the obvious, of course.

Which leaves me with Camden to tackle. He's been coming home with bruises, acting out here and at school, falling behind in his homework, and failing tests. Ember reminded me that everyone handles grief differently, and while I agree, I don't want his to be with fighting. As if he knows he's on my mind, right on cue I hear...

Slam.

“Camden Michael! Stop doing that!”

“It slipped,” he says while peeking around the corner.

“Lie,” I quickly call him out on it. I know he’s hurting, we all are, but I can’t let him keep going like this. I was hoping he would quit on his own, knowing he needed to come to terms with losing Dad and Mom, but he’s not getting better. He’s getting worse.

“Fuck you. You aren’t my dad.” I stand and stalk toward him. Though he knows I would never hurt him, my size intimidates even him, especially because he knows what he’s doing is wrong. He tries to stand his ground, yet as I get closer, I see the truth in his eyes. He’s scared and it’s not of me.

“No, I’m not. I will never try to be. I could never be dad. But I am doing the best I can, Camden, and I need you guys to help me.”

“What does it matter? They’re going to split us up anyway.” His voice trembles and he swipes a hand across his face.

“The hell you say. Where’d that come from?” He shrugs and starts biting his bottom lip. A classic Camden move when he isn’t being truthful. “Who told you that?”

“I, uh, overheard some people at the store saying how the state will probably take Riley and I. That we wouldn’t be able to stay with you and Nash.”

“Do you really think I would *ever* let that happen?”

“Not willingly.”

“Not ever,” I assure him. “I’ve already taken the necessary steps to keep both of you.”

“Really?”

“Yes. And Chuck gave me my old job back, full-time.”

“What about school?”

“What about it?”

“When do you go back?”

“I’m not,” I tell him.

“So, because of us, you quit.”

“Where the hell is this coming from? Did you actually think I’d still go after losing Dad and Mom? That I’d leave the three of you?”

“Someone said...”

“Who is this someone? They need their asses kicked for not staying out of our business.”

“Mrs. Biddy.”

“As in BusyBiddy?” He laughs, knowing she’s earned that nickname. Oh sure, she tries to cover it up by pretending she truly cares, but I’ve seen her gleefully spread things that don’t concern her to others and never regret the consequences of it. “She knows nothing except how to start trouble. She isn’t a part of this family. She doesn’t know my plans, nor the lengths I will go to in order to keep all of us together. Do you trust me?”

“Yes,” he immediately answers which makes me feel better.

“Then trust that I won’t let anyone take you or Riley. I’ll do anything to make sure the four of us stay together. Okay?”

“Okay,” he replies then closes the distance between us and gives me a hug.

“Is that what’s been bothering you?” He nods. “Have your friends been giving you a hard time about this?” Same response. “Then you need new ones.” Nothing on that, but hopefully he’s thinking about what I said. Dad and Mom really didn’t care for the boys he hung around with anyway, said they were troublemakers and didn’t have Camden’s best interests in mind. Seems that once again they were right. “How about we go out, maybe get you some new stuff?” I point down at his favorite pair of tennis shoes that have seen so many miles they can probably walk without him. “Ember is taking Riley to do

the same, so when we're all done, we'll call Nash and have him meet us for dinner somewhere."

"Can we afford to do that?" There's the real Camden. Always worrying about others.

"Didn't you say you trusted me?" A nod. "Then know that I have it under control." He gives me another squeeze then rushes upstairs to change.

"Nicely done," I hear behind me. I don't know when Ember came in, nor did I hear her unlock the door using the key I'd given her. I'm so damn glad she's here.

"I was winging it. I don't know what I'm doing, but I'm trying."

"I know you are, honey. We all are. We'll figure it out as we go," she reassures me.

"We? I like the sound of that," I tell her while giving her a quick kiss.

"Good. Get used to it."

"Easiest thing I'll ever do aside from loving you."

"You say the sweetest things. What was all that about?" She inquires, referring to my talk with Camden. I fill her in after making sure he isn't within earshot. Now that his fears have been addressed, and hopefully conquered, I don't want to risk them returning. "BusyBiddy just never stops, does she? She cornered me at the grocery store the other day and asked if it was hard living in Kent's shadow."

"I'm changing her name to BitchyBiddy for that." The way Ember's parents treat her, as if she's less than, has always pissed me off. It's one of the reasons she's always come over here instead of me going there. She knows I wouldn't let them do that shit in front of me and preferred to keep us separated to avoid a fight.

She gives me another kiss, this one quickly becoming hot, and I'm tempted to carry her upstairs and have my way with her. But that's not to be yet.

“Are you guys finally together?” Camden asks, interrupting us. To him, her joining us for dinner, being here every day, and so forth, is normal. Her and I locking lips is not.

“Yes,” Ember and I both answer.

“It’s about time,” Camden replies. “You ready to go? I’ll wait in the car.” And he’s already moved on, snagging my keys out of the bowl by the door as he goes. Ember and I just shake our heads as I holler for Riley.

“He’s back to the Camden we know and love.”

“Who would’ve thought talking about feelings and shit worked so well.” When she swats my ass, I ask, “What?”

“Feelings and shit?”

“Uh huh. Camden and I discussed what was bothering him and it helped. I finally got the balls to tell you how I feel and now you can’t stop kissing me.”

And then I run around the table, circling it with her gaining on me. As Riley walks downstairs, I head toward her and use her as a shield. “You’re hiding behind your sister, big man? Seriously?” Ember asks.

“Yep,” I don’t even bother sugarcoating it.

And then I hear a sound I haven’t since the night we found out our parents were gone. Riley’s laughter.

“I’ll protect you, Adam,” Riley informs me through her giggles.

“Riley!” Ember exclaims. “I thought we were gonna stick together against these guys. Girl power and all that.”

“Well, we’re going shopping, and he holds the money, so...” Riley trails off with a shrug. And I can’t help it. I quietly move, grabbing Riley’s hand and tickling her palm, knowing it never fails. “Stop. Stop,” she pleads with a grin.

“I’m just a dollar sign to you, huh?” I tease.

“A big one if that helps. You’re huge,” she quips. “Ember, help,” she begs.

“Oh, now you remember me? You threw me under the bus a second ago.”

“My bad?” Riley tries to win Ember back.

“Hmm...” Ember pretends to think about it before quickly closing the distance between us and wrapping her arms around me, trapping them against my legs. “Run, Riley, run.”

Riley takes off, and I use that moment to steal a kiss from Ember. “Thank you,” I tell her, the words coming straight from my heart. “At times, it doesn’t feel like anything has changed, and then others, it hits us that they’re really gone. It’s like a roller coaster that can’t be stopped, if that makes sense.”

“You’re welcome, and it does. Your emotions are up and down and may always be that way. But your parents would want you to move forward and be happy. Of course, you’re going to miss them, they were wonderful people and loved you guys so much. But I don’t think they’d expect you to spend the rest of your days sad. Celebrate them. Live as if they’re still here, because in your hearts, they are.”

I don’t know how she always knows what I need to hear. Maybe it’s a gift women are just naturally given at birth. Or because she knows me so well. Possibly both. Regardless, I’m scared I’m going to mess up. That I’ll do the wrong thing, or not enough, to take care of my siblings. That despite trying my hardest to keep our family together, I won’t be able to.

Unable to say anything, I just hold her and realize though she’s tiny compared to me, she is my strength. With her next to me, my worries don’t seem so big. We stay that way until Riley reminds us we need to go, and that she needs money for clothes.

As the four of us walk out, Ember and Riley to her car, Camden and I to mine, I swear I hear my dad say, “Well done, son. Well done.”

****Ember****

Riley and I have been shopping for an hour or so at this point, and we’ve made a good dent in what she needs. I’ve noticed her eyeing more grown-up styles and I remember

being her age and wanting so badly to be seen as more than a kid.

She was a little shy when it came to purchasing bras and underwear, but I assured her she can always talk to me about anything. Plus, I reminded her I've been where she is, so if anyone understood it would be me.

"It's hard being the only girl. And the youngest," she admits as we sit on a bench for a quick breather.

"It would be," I agree. "But you know those three would do anything for you, right?" She nods immediately, though it doesn't come off that confidently.

"What's going on, Riley? Maybe I can help."

"I saw Adam kiss you."

I barely refrain from asking where, implying there's been numerous occurrences, which there has, and instead reply with, "He did. Is that okay?"

"Are you guys boyfriend and girlfriend?"

"We are," I answer honestly.

"But you weren't before?"

"No. We were, and still are, best friends, but we realized we love each other in a different way, too. Does that bother you?" She shakes her head, but I can tell something is.

"Is Adam gonna send me away?"

"What? No! Never!" As I'm watching her face, I see tears silently rolling down her cheeks and I quickly wrap my arms around her. "Sweetie, did somebody say he would?" If anyone is spreading lies about him, and hurting his family, he needs to know in order to deal with it.

"I know I shouldn't have listened, but they were talking about me."

"Where and who?"

"This couple at the funeral. They said Adam wouldn't want the responsibility of caring for me. That he wouldn't

know anything about raising a girl. They said I'd probably be taken away and never see my brothers again. I don't wanna lose them, too, Ember. Please don't let that happen," she sobs, her arms holding me so tightly it's like she fears someone will rip her out of mine.

"Riley, you aren't going anywhere," I vow. "Do you remember who they were?" I need to know because I'm tempted to find them this second and kick their asses. I may be small, but paper cuts hurt, too, and if you inflict enough of them, you'll feel the pain for a while. Maybe even bleed out.

"No," she replies. "I don't think they're from around here. I didn't recognize them." That's odd. Who would've been there that wasn't from Becket? Deciding that question can wait until I talk to Adam, I focus on what's important in this moment, and that's reassuring Riley.

"Honey, no one is going to take you. Not only will Adam never let that happen, neither would Nash, Camden, or me. You have nothing to worry about, okay? You will stay in your home, with your brothers. That won't change. Adam is already working on making it official."

"Promise?" She asks, the little girl in her still scared. Of course, she is. She lost her parents, overheard someone say she'll lose her brothers next, and be taken from everything she's ever known. I'm so pissed right now, which means I can only imagine how Adam will react.

"I promise. Is that what's been bothering you?" When she nods, it hurts even more, knowing she's kept this inside, trying to deal with it alone. I lean back and wipe the tears from her face. "Let's do something fun before we finish shopping. My treat," I tell her.

That makes her curious and she looks at me as if I can fix anything. "What do you have in mind?"

"How about a haircut? And, if they have time, a manicure and pedicure?"

"Really?" She shrieks.

“Really.” And just as I’d hoped, her mind is off and running, thinking about this new experience, feeling like a grown up, and no longer worrying about something that’s not happening, nor will it ever. I call my usual hairstylist, Amber, and yes, we joke about our names being almost identical. Thankfully, she has an opening and can fit Riley in. Amber also asks the technicians to see who has room for two manicedis, and we schedule those as well. “Do you need anything else before we go?”

“I want to get some dresses and skirts, okay?” I tell her it is and we take care of that, then stop at a drugstore on our way to the salon where I get her enough boxes of tampons to last her a few months. I also made sure she knows if anything ever comes up of a girly nature, she can always call or text me, and I program my number in her cell.

With that done, we head to our final destination, my trunk full of Riley’s bags, and a few of my own. Watch out, Adam.

Almost two and a half hours later, we’re done and sporting big smiles. Our fingernails match, both of us selecting a pale pink. As for our toenails, we went with a brighter shade, enjoying the contrast.

“I love your hair.” She’s always had shoulder length brown hair and I didn’t want to do too much change to where it could cause problems. Not that I think Adam will mind, but it’s best to start slowly with things like this, especially with overprotective older brothers, and three of them at that. So, after talking with Amber, Riley opted for a cut and blonde highlights, nothing major nor permanent. As I glance at Riley, I know any issues the guys may have, having to accept their little sister is getting closer every day to becoming a woman, will be worth it. She’s happy, twirling in a circle, her strands flying around, and laughing. I grab my phone from my pocket and take a couple pictures, as well as a video. It’s moments such as these that we’ll look back on and remember fondly.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you, Ember!” She squeals before giving me a big hug. “I can’t wait until my friends see it. They’re gonna be jealous.” And now she’s back to being fourteen, I think with a laugh. Her steps are lighter, her smile

real, and her head higher. Those changes are proof of how heavily what she'd heard was weighing on her, and it pisses me off all over again how inconsiderate some people can be. And adults who know better on top of that.

My phone dings with a text from Adam. He'd messaged earlier, but I told him it was taking longer than we thought, not wanting to ruin the surprise about her new do. I let him know we're done and he suggests a restaurant close to their house. After getting a thumbs up from Riley, we agree to meet there in twenty minutes.

"Your brothers were done over an hour ago, so they've been impatiently waiting on us," I inform her.

"That's because they just grab things and say they're ready. Amateurs," she says with a scoff. Oh man, she's gonna be a handful when she gets older. I can't wait to see it. They won't know what hit them.

When we pull into the parking lot, Adam spots us and heads straight toward it. He opens my door and helps me out after I turn it off and remove the key.

"I missed you, sparky," he says before pressing his lips to mine.

"I can tell," I try to say between kisses.

"What did you do to your hair?" We all turn at Nash's question.

I glare at Nash. "I think she's beautiful," I say pointedly as Camden joins us. Adam is glancing at Riley, then me and back at Riley. He's speechless. That could be good.

"You cut your hair," Camden states the obvious.

"And I got highlights," Riley says proudly. "Ember paid for it." And that makes three sets of eyes turn to me. Oh boy. Time to stop this before it even gets started.

"Knock it off. She looks great. She likes it and it makes her happy. That's what matters. It's hers and nothing that won't grow out. Got it?"

Adam, Nash, and Camden all nod then start telling her how much they like it. Riley eats up the attention as Nash and Camden stand on either side of her. She hooks an arm through their right and left respectively and they walk inside. That leaves me and Adam, so he pulls me close and hugs me.

“Did you two ladies have fun?”

“We did except for one thing. Your sister is hurting and needs reassurance. I gave her what I could, but she needs to hear it from you. And soon.”

“What’s going on?” Adam replies, his concern now obvious.

“She’s overheard some things...” I start only to be cut off by his exclamation.

“Fuck me! Can nobody keep their mouths shut and their opinions to themselves? I’m doing the best I can yet I feel like I’m being constantly undermined. My family has suffered enough, more than actually, but it’s almost as if someone is purposely trying to hurt us, pull us apart, and destroy what’s left of the Stones.”

I wish I could comfort him, but after his conversation with Camden and mine with Riley, I can’t disagree. Though each situation individually could be written off as people talking out of turn, being gossips that stick their noses where they don’t belong, when you factor in that it’s happened twice, it does seem almost like an attack. But who would do such a thing?

And why?

Chapter Seven

ADAM

September 9th...

“Riley, can you come down for a minute?” She’s been in her room for a few hours and I’m ready to talk to her regarding what Ember told me. We’d had a good dinner the night before last, even with our parents being noticeably missing. Riley seemed more like herself, and for that I will be eternally grateful to Ember, but I also saw how she watched me, as if almost scared to let me out of her sight. It wasn’t until just a few minutes ago I felt capable of discussing it without wanting to tear whoever said it a new one.

“What’s up?” She asks while flying down the stairs, her eyes never leaving her cell phone. I don’t know how she does that. Is it a skill only teenagers have? I don’t remember being that way at her age, then again, I wasn’t glued to my phone as she is. Besides, the only person I wanted to speak to was Ember anyway, and we were always together.

“I wanted to talk to you about something,” I say gently, not wanting to spook her. I haven’t been in charge that long, yet I’ve already realized being a parent is a never-ending job. You’re constantly on. Dad and Mom made it look so easy, while I’m constantly doubting myself.

“Am I in trouble?”

“Of course not. Should you be?” That sounded parental, right? Maybe I’m not so bad at this after all. I can do this, I remind myself. And perhaps after repeating that at least a hundred times, I’ll begin to believe it.

“Noooo,” she says, drawing it out like a test. I laugh and see her relax.

“I talked to Camden before we went shopping, and discovered some concerns he had about our family, specifically his place now that dad and mom are gone.” I’m not ratting Ember out. I want Riley to feel comfortable telling her things, to always know she can go to her when she’s upset. “It made me wonder if you felt the same.” She doesn’t say anything, just stares at me, but I see her eyes watering and realize once again, Ember was right. Riley needed the words from me. “I’m not saying the same happened to you, or that you’re worried about this, but just in case, Camden overheard some hurtful things, people assuming they knew my plans. They’re wrong. You and Camden are not going anywhere. I refuse to allow it. You’re my family. My brother and sister, and nothing changes that, not even losing dad and mom.”

She nods, but her body is shaking now. It’s then that I see exactly how much she’s been holding inside since that fateful night. I stand and move toward her, then take her hand and pull her to the couch, sitting beside her. She immediately leans her head on my shoulder.

“Camden and I are a lot. You may not want to deal with us. If we weren’t here, your life would be easier.” That last word comes out on a sob and my heart breaks.

“Do you love me, Riley?”

“Of course,” she answers immediately. “You’re my big brother.”

“And do I love you?” Again, her response is instant and full of confidence.

“Of course.”

“Have I made you feel like I don’t want you or Camden? Do you think I would ever send either of you away?” She shakes her head no. “Then why would you worry about this?”

“People said so.”

“Did you hear me say it?” When she says no, I just wait for her to work it out. She needs to realize it at her own pace,

to fully understand that what I'm saying is true.

"You would never let us go."

"No, I wouldn't. When I last spoke to Mr. Boone, he said he doesn't see a problem with my guardianship being approved, but it'll take time to work through some things." She doesn't need to know the rest. That while dad and mom recently had him update their will to state their wishes that I get Camden and Riley should something happen to them, they hadn't signed it yet. Which means it's not official in the eyes of the law. "I'm not going back to school, Riley. I'm staying here, as are you and Camden. Nash and I aren't mom and dad, we never could be, but we're going to do everything we can so the four of us can stay together."

"Are you gonna marry Ember? She's the best, so don't mess it up. Can I be a bridesmaid?"

I laugh before tackling her questions. "Yes. I'll try not to. And I'm sure Ember will ask you."

"Okay. Can I go back upstairs now? I was reading, and the guy was about to save the girl." Having no idea how to answer that, I nod, and she takes off, her worries forgotten. If only it was that simple for me.

Knowing I need to do some cleaning, I go to the kitchen to load the dishwasher. As I turn on the water to rinse a few plates off first, my cell rings and after glancing at the screen, I quickly dry my hands. Hopefully some of my worries are about to be resolved.

"Hey, Mr. Boone. Please tell me you have good news."

"Hi, Adam. I'm sad to say, it's mixed. The judge doesn't see any problem with granting you guardianship, and took into account that was what your parents wanted even though the paperwork hadn't been signed and filed prior to their deaths. There's one concern."

"What is that?" I ask, ready to do whatever I need to, especially since I just told Riley this would all be okay.

"Well, you're a single young man, and that causes some hesitation in granting your request."

“I’m in a committed relationship.”

“Since when? Last time we talked, you weren’t even dating.”

“It’s new, but she’s been in my life for years, and we know it’ll lead to marriage.”

“That helps, Adam. It really does. Though I have to add, if that final step could take place sooner, it would bode well for your case.”

“As in, it could speed the approval process along?”

“I can’t say for sure, of course, but it won’t hurt.”

“I need to talk to Ember first. When do you need to know?”

“I wish I could tell you that you can take your time because this isn’t something you want to rush. However, with the circumstances as they are, as soon as possible.”

“Thank you, Mr. Boone. I’ll get back to you in the next day or so.” We end the call, and I’m left with a lot to think about. Yes, I was gonna propose at some point, but I didn’t want to do it within days of admitting our feelings for each other. I wanted to give us time to enjoy this new phase. Then again, we already know one another more than most couples, and to keep my family together, I will gladly add Ember to it. She already is a member as far as I’m concerned.

She’s coming over later, so I’ll talk to her then. First though, I need to make some plans.

****Ember****

“When are you going to grow up and do something with your life, Ember?” My mom, Ann, asks as my dad, Steven, merely watches what’s sure to be a shitshow unfold.

“I am an adult, mother. The least you can do is talk to and treat me like one,” I remind her.

“Well, when you start acting like one, maybe I will. You’d think with the exemplary example your brother has set that you’d have chosen a different path.”

“And what’s wrong with the path I’m on? I was in the top percent of my class,” I say before she cuts me off.

“A class you’re no longer a part of because you dropped out. What will people think?”

“I don’t care. That’s your hang up, not mine. Also, I transferred which is a completely different thing than quitting.”

“Because of that boy,” she says, her disdain for him clear. She’s never cared for my friendship with Adam, though I’ve never understood why. You’d think, in her eyes, he’d be everything she’d want for her only daughter, that she’d try and push us together instead of apart as she has for years. He comes from a good family. His parents were successful. There was never gossip about any of them. They have a nice home and drove a fairly new car. All things she cares about while I’ve always loved Adam for who he is.

“That *man* has been my best friend for almost twenty years. He treats me like the most important thing in his life. Not that you’d know anything about that,” I state, the beginning strong, confident, but the latter comes out as more of a mumble, the truth of how my parents view me still having the ability to hurt me.

“What was that, Ember? I didn’t catch that last part. Would you care to repeat it?” And there it is, the thinly veiled threat, reminding me of my place. Thankfully, I’m spared from more, or having to lie, as Kent walks in.

“How’s my favorite little sister?” He asks, this byplay familiar to us.

“I’m your only sister, you douche.”

“Then it’s a good thing you’re my favorite, isn’t it?” He teases, bumping my shoulder.

“And yet, you aren’t mine,” I throw out there, laughing when he flips me off over his head as I see our mother shaking hers. She’s always hated how close he and I are. Sometimes I swear she purposefully tried to pit us against each other when we were younger. The thing she’s never figured out is how

protective Kent is of me. He barely tolerates our parents, but they're so blinded by their view of him, their perception that he's perfect, that they miss it. The only reason he's still around is because I am. When I'm not here, neither is he.

My phone goes off with an alert, the tone I assigned to Kent, and I know he's texting me from the kitchen. It's how we've coped with having the parents we do, we vent via messages, dad and mom none the wiser.

Kent: Usual spiel?

Me: All I hear is blah, blah, blah.

Kent: I thought that was what they were saying.

Me: And you're the good kid?

Kent: Brat.

"Really, Ember? We were talking. I'd appreciate it if you'd pay attention to me," my mom says.

"Now you know how it feels," I reply before grabbing my purse and walking out. I'm done with this, with them. I make a mental note to start looking for an apartment. When I was away at college, it wasn't a big deal, but now that I'm home and planning to stay, I'll go crazy if I live in this house any longer. Since I'm still job hunting, I'll have to wait for that to change. I just hope it's soon.

Me: I'm outta here. They're all yours.

Kent: That's mean. Take it back.

Me: Couldn't pay me to. Later, bro.

Kent: Tell Adam hi.

I stick my tongue out at Kent, though he can't see it. I'm just thankful he and Adam get along. The two of them, Adam's siblings, and my grandparents are the most important people in my life.

Kent: So immature.

Me: How do you know when I do that?

Kent: Because I'm awesome.

Me: Awesomely dorky.

Kent: Well, now you're just making shit up.

Me: I don't like you.

Kent: I know. You love me.

I'm laughing as I get in my car, my mood brighter despite my mom's attempt to get under my skin. She's similar to one of those parasites. You don't know they're there until it's almost too late, but once you do, you immediately take steps to get rid of it. Yeah, I just likened my mom to a lethal bug. If she was yours, you'd agree and seek treatment...or bug repellent.

After driving around for about an hour, I feel a little calmer and decide to stop at Adam's. I'm met at the door by Riley and she gives me a big hug. I look at her and can just tell she and Adam talked about what was bothering her. Between me, Camden, and Riley, he's three for three lately in the deep conversations department.

"I love my new clothes. I've been trying them on, seeing what looks good together. Wanna help me figure out what to wear next?"

"Of course, sweetie. Let me tell your brother I'm here first."

"He knows," Adam's deep voice informs me before he wraps his arms around me and pulls me toward him, my back to his very hard chest.

"Gross," Riley says as I turn to kiss Adam. "Unless you wanna send me to therapy, I'm outta here." Then we hear her footsteps as she runs upstairs, getting away from us as fast as possible.

"So that's how to get some alone time with you?"

"I think that'll only work on Riley," I snort while breaking the news to him.

"Fine, I'll just bribe the other two."

After another quick kiss, I tell Adam I'm gonna help Riley and he pouts. "I'm still in the house," I remind him.

“And I like you there,” he says. “It’s where you belong.”

Wondering where he’s going with this, but loving it so far, I start to ask when Riley yells for me. Knowing I shouldn’t keep her waiting, yet wanting to keep talking about this, I’m torn. Adam must see and motions me to continue with the promise we’ll finish this later.

Chapter Eight

EMBER

September 10th...

Later ended up being the next day. Riley was so pumped it took her hours to settle down, and when she finally did, Nash and Camden hyped her back up by suggesting we play some board games.

She and I teamed up in Pictionary and wiped the floor with her brothers. Even stacking the odds in their favor, three against two, they couldn't win. Riley gloated for a while, and they let her, so pleased she was happy and smiling again. They weren't going to take that away from her.

Still ticked at my parents, I accepted Adam's invitation to spend the night. I need to tell him about that, and I will at some point, but it was too raw to rehash mere hours after the confrontation. All I wanted was to sleep in his arms and he happily provided them, along with one of his t-shirts and a pair of boxers for me to wear. His scent surrounding me, his clothes touching my naked body, laying in his bed...dreams do come true.

Unfortunately, we couldn't stay like that. We have things to do, people to take care of, and, in my case, a job to find. An apartment, too, but I need the money to pay for it first.

Over breakfast, we stick to light topics, all of us needing a break from the heavy stuff that's been hanging over us lately. That's not to say we've forgotten about who we lost, only that we need the emotional equivalent of a time out. Camden and

Riley leave for school with Nash as he's dropping them off on his way to work.

Adam and I sit there, table covered in dishes, the sink full of more of them, and wait after their whirlwind departure. No doorbells disturb the silence to warn of a visitor. No phones ring. No footsteps sound throughout the house to remind us others are here.

"Are we actually alone?" I ask.

"Shh," he replies. "Don't jinx it." We both laugh at his admonishment. It's not that he isn't thankful for the condolences, food, and inquiries on how someone can help, and he loves his siblings to pieces. But I wonder if he's had a moment to himself since receiving the news.

He doesn't exactly have it now either since I'm here, but it's pretty close to it. Besides, I have a feeling if I try to leave, he won't let me. Seeing as how I don't want to, that works out perfectly.

"What do you need to do?" I inquire to break the silence. "I'm job and apartment hunting, but I can work around that if you need me to." I also have to finalize everything with the local college where I now attend, though I don't mention that part. Adam doesn't regret choosing to stay here for his family, yet he is a bit disappointed he won't be able to finish his degree and graduate. Maybe once things settle down, he can.

"I start back at Chuck's Monday, so I need to hit the grocery store and run some errands."

"Want company?" I offer, happy to help while simultaneously spending time with him. When he doesn't respond, I try a different tactic. "Or we could split the list and tackle them that way. Two is always better than one. Teamwork makes the dream work and all that." Still nothing. "Unless there's something else you need me to do that'll lighten your load or stress."

"Marry me," he blurts, then sets an unmistakable ring box on the table beside my plate.

Gulp. “I meant like take mail to the post office or pick up toilet paper.”

“You don’t want to be my wife?”

“I do. See? I already have my line memorized.”

“But you didn’t say yes.”

“Kind of took me by surprise, Adam. Are you seriously asking over the remnants of breakfast or...” Oh shit. “What happened? Mr. Boone called, didn’t he? There’s an issue with the guardianship.”

“He did, but that’s not why I’m asking. At least not the only nor main reason.”

“Let’s start with him.”

“There’s some concern about the stability a young single man can provide.”

“But you aren’t single.”

“Which is what I told him. Apparently, a serious girlfriend that will become a wife at some point might not be enough.”

I understand what he’s implying, so I move to the next part. “What’s the main reason?”

“My love for you is greater than all the stars in the sky.” Adam may not speak from the heart often – he prefers to show what’s inside it instead – but when he does, holy moly. The beauty of it rivals Maya Angelou, Emily Dickinson, and Shakespeare combined. “Ember?” He asks, and I realize while I’ve been mentally drooling over how awesome my boyfriend is, he’s been waiting for my response.

“Yes,” I answer, hoping he catches my meaning. He does because he pops open the lid and shows me its contents. “It’s beautiful,” I tell him, my hand shaking as I reach for it. The red diamond in the center shoots off to the sides, the color fading into orange. “They’re sparks.” My voice is whisper soft, at least to my ears because all I can hear is an echo of my pulse in them. And it seems to be saying Adam’s name over and over, proving that my heart beats for him, only for him.

“Because you’re my spark, Ember. The person that gives me life, keeps me going, and lights up my world.” I extend my left ring finger, silently asking him to slide it on. To some, it may seem like we’re moving too fast, but that’s ridiculous. We’ve known each other forever and this is where we were always headed, it just took us a while to get here.

There are no words I can say that will top, let alone match his, so I use my mouth in other ways. As I kiss him, the small part of my brain that can still think can’t help but feel honored I get to do this for the rest of my days. The other, though? All it sees and feels is Adam. What I can tell him is, “I love you, too.”

****Adam****

By silent agreement, Ember and I make our way toward my room. We’re both fully aware of the fact we have the house to ourselves and the only thing standing between us and our first time is our clothing.

Ember lays on the bed and I’m helpless to do anything but stare at her. This moment, with love shining in her eyes, steals my breath. “You’re really going to be my wife?”

“And you’ll be my husband.” Fuck! I’m not sure which sounds better. I know they’re essentially the same, but they’re still striking me differently. I want to ask if she’s sure, give her a last chance to change her mind before taking on the responsibilities I now face, but I can’t. It seems I’m not that much of a gentleman despite being raised to be otherwise. Ember agreed to be mine and I’m holding her to it.

Ember raises her arms, inviting me to join her, and says, “No take backsies.”

The childhood phrase relaxes me, as she intended, and I remove my shirt, hoping she’ll return the favor. She does and seeing her breasts cupped in black lace causes me to come in my boxers. There’s no stopping it and I don’t try. This is what she does to me and I’m not ashamed if she knows it. I want her to.

I press my lips to the skin above her heart and speak directly from mine. “This is the most beautiful part of you. It’s pure and loyal.”

“And yours,” she informs me.

“Only fitting since you own mine,” I tell her.

“I want to give you something else, too,” Ember says.

“What’s that, sparky?”

“You’ll be my first.” I wasn’t sure, though I was hoping. I should be noble and say it wouldn’t matter either way, that there will be no one after me and that’s all that counts. But I’d be lying.

“Thank fuck,” I state, making her laugh.

“Anything you want to tell me?”

“We’re on equal ground, baby. It’s only ever been you.”

“Yay!” She cheers, then my bare chest is on hers, the lace scraping my skin somehow ratcheting my passion. I need more, though, so I skate my lips down, nudging the material with my nose. My tongue circles her left breast then glides to the other and I repeat the process. I have no freaking clue what I’m doing, only that I’m going with what feels right.

When I reach her shorts, I touch the zipper and wait. She nods and I lower the tab, then unbutton them. Sliding them off, taking a pair of panties that match her bra with them, I exhale, needing to get myself under control.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” I confess as I flick my tongue over her clit.

“Good,” she instantly replies. “We’ll learn together.” Knowing she isn’t bothered by my lack of knowledge, and in fact, prefers it, alleviates any anxiety and allows me to focus on us.

Wanting to taste her, knowing I can’t do it wrong in her eyes, I take my first lick and moan as her taste hits me. Then I dive in and I don’t stop until she’s pleading for me to, her nub so sensitive my breath is enough to send her over.

I stand and shuck my pants, thankful I don't have to deal with my socks and shoes, too, because I doubt my ability to be upright for that long. "I, uh, don't have condoms," I admit, feeling like a failure for not being able to take care of her.

Now she's shy, ducking her head as she explains, "I'm on the pill. Girl reasons." As if she's embarrassed to talk about her period with me. Apparently forgetting that I've gone out and purchased tampons for her before. Brought her chocolate to feed her cravings. I should remind her of this, make sure she knows nothing will scare me away from her, but all that I can think of is what this means. She's letting me take her bare. My body twitches, so does my dick, as it releases a stream that starts running down my leg at the mere thought of being skin on skin.

Covering her, my tip resting against her center, I move my hips, hoping it does what it's supposed to. It doesn't and, after trying a few more times, I grab my shaft and literally start to guide it in. "How come that always works perfectly in movies and stuff?"

She giggles, her hand covering mine. "I'd rather have this. It's real, it's us, and that's what makes it perfect." I groan as I push inside her, feel her walls welcoming my intrusion, and hold myself still, waiting for her to be okay before I continue. "Move, Adam," she urges through a slight wince as I do. I hate that I'm causing her pain and am relieved when she adjusts and tells me to take her.

It only takes about five pumps and I'm close to coming, though I'm surprised I lasted even that long. "Next time, sparky. I promise I'll make it good for you," I vow as I give her my seed, relieved when her release coats my cock, letting me know I at least gave her some pleasure in my fumbling.

I want to roll and take her with me, but I hate the idea of slipping from her warmth, so I stay as I am. Then my brain kicks in and I'm scared I'm smushing her. I attempt to shift, but she grips me tight. "Not yet," she says. "I want to stay this way a little bit longer." I gladly agree, not wanting to lose this moment either, though I make her promise to let me know if my weight gets to be too much. "Never," she corrects me with

a smile. “You’re juuuuust right.” And with that, I discover laughter, at least hers, is sexy as fuck because my dick recovers and gets hard from the sound of it. Ember knows it, too. “I was going to suggest a shower,” she informs me with a mischievous grin, “but I like your idea much better.” To prove it, she wraps her legs around my waist and presses against me, silently urging me to do something. I do, and that’s to get to my back and hold on to her hips as she rides me to within an inch of my life.

Chapter Nine

ADAM

September 17th...

How can my heart be filled with love and sadness at the same time? Ember and I opted for a simple ceremony at the courthouse attended by my siblings, hers, and our respective paternal grandparents. The maternal sets aren't part of our lives for different reasons. Her mom's parents having passed years ago and mine might as well have considering the treatment of my mom and zero attempts to make it right since she gave them an ultimatum.

"You may now kiss your bride," Judge Myerson declares and I dip Ember, my tears landing on her cheeks as my hand curls in her waist length dark blonde hair to hold her steady. "Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Adam Stone," he adds once we come up for air. Kent whistles loud enough to shatter glass, yet it doesn't even faze me. I'm too grateful for his presence. Ember had invited their parents, wanting them to be a part of our day. And while she wasn't surprised they'd declined; she had hoped they'd at least be happy for her.

They weren't. Thankfully, she'd already moved her stuff to my house and no longer had to deal with their negativity. I know it hurt – how could it not? – but she was determined not to let them win, and allowing them to ruin what we'd found would do that.

Once we'd finalized our wedding plans, we'd contacted Mr. Boone with the news. Needless to say, he was pleased and asked that we send him a copy of the marriage license as soon as possible. With that, he could forward it on to the judge and

begin finalizing the guardianship. Now that Ember is my wife, that responsibility also includes her and amendments needed to be made to show that. She eagerly agreed to and signed whatever was required, not hesitating to align her life with my siblings to ensure they stayed where they belonged. At home with us.

“I love you, Mrs. Stone,” I tell her, not quite ready to let her go and share her.

As if she knows, she cups my cheek and says, “I love you, too, Mr. Stone.” A quick peck. “And I’ll show you how much tonight.” It’s difficult not to kick everyone out and consummate our union right the fuck now, but I’m an adult and can control my urges. I did it for all those years while I waited for Ember to be mine.

But you hadn’t had her then, so you didn’t know what you were missing. You do now.

My conscience is a dick.

You’re just mad you won’t be able to use yours for hours upon hours upon...

Shut up.

We remind those with us that we’ll be having a little celebration back at the house, thank the judge once more, grab our certificate, and head to the parking lot. I open Ember’s door for her, the sun shining off her wedding rings, and I can’t resist picking her up and spinning us around before she gets inside.

Nothing and no one can burst my bubble.

I really need to learn not to tempt fate.

We’re enjoying the small party our respective siblings arranged for us when the bell rings. Most visitors prefer to knock, but since we now associate that with the worst night of our lives, it’s a relief to hear the chimes instead.

Until I see who is standing on the other side. When I realize who it is, it takes a second as I haven’t seen them in

almost a decade, I start to close the door in their faces.

The only thing stopping it from shutting is a foot, one that belongs to Troy Cross. Beside him is his wife, Karen.

“What do you want?”

Karen, always the spokesperson for them, literally clutches her pearls and answers with a question of her own, evading mine, “Is that any way to treat your grandparents?”

“My grandparents are inside. All I see in front of me are two strangers.”

“Common courtesy dictates letting people know when their daughter has passed, giving us the opportunity to mourn her with our family,” Troy scolds me.

“Mom considered you both dead to her years ago, which means you have no family here.”

“Well I never,” Karen chimes in.

“Exactly. You never apologized, you never expressed any regret for how you treated her or my dad. You let all this time go by before showing your faces, so again I ask, what do you want?” They have an angle, I know it. I just need to figure out what it is.

“We were heartbroken” – liar – “to learn of Margaret’s death.” And our dad’s? Not claiming to be upset about, are you? “Have you spoken to a lawyer? If not, you should. You need to sue the driver’s employer. They owe us.” There it is. Money. It’s what they live for. Hell, I wouldn’t be surprised if they’d had some plan to get more the day mom went ballistic when they came here when we were younger.

“Hey, big man,” Riley calls out. “Your wife needs...” She freezes mid-sentence when she sees the couple on our porch. There’s no way she recognizes them because the last time she saw them she was only four. That’s when it hits me.

“It was you,” I snarl as I put the pieces together. They were responsible for her fear that she and Camden would be taken from me. “Are you proud of yourselves for scaring a little girl? Does it make you feel good that she cried herself to sleep for

nights because of what you said?” Before they can answer for themselves, not that there’s any excuse for what they did, we’re interrupted.

“Did you get lost?” Camden teases, the last word ending with a squeak as he takes in the scene. That reaction leads to me having another epiphany where Troy and Karen are concerned.

Ignoring them, I want to know, “Did you see BusyBiddy talking to them?” Not taking his eyes off them, he nods as he scoots closer to me, his hand reaching out to grab Riley and pull her with him as he yells for Nash.

Nash, presumably registering the underlying emotion in Camden’s tone, comes hurrying toward us at a fast clip. He’s old enough to remember them for who they are, more accurately who they’re supposed to be, and makes to rip the door out of my hand and do what I’d initially intended. Slam it in their faces.

“Leave,” he demands, anger evident in how he’s holding himself as he moves to stand in front of Camden and Riley.

Completely agreeing with him but not in the mood to be as polite, I demand, “Get the fuck off my property and don’t ever return.” And then I satisfyingly close the door and make the motion of wiping my hands of them. “Damn that felt good,” I mutter, making Nash chuckle.

“Honestly, I’m jealous you got to do it.”

Camden, ever helpful, leans to the side to peer out the window, and informs Nash, “They’re still standing there.”

Gleefully, Nash re-opens the door and their expressions are smug, as if they knew we’d change our minds. Jokes on them because Nash says, “And another thing,” then repeats my move. “You’re right,” Nash says. “That did feel good.” I know they haven’t left yet because I can hear them bitching through the wood about how my parents raised a bunch of hooligans and we need to be taught some manners. Not giving a shit what they think about us, we return to the party, putting Troy and Karen Cross exactly where they belong, behind us.

I've got a wife waiting for me, my siblings under the same roof where they will stay, and a happily ever after in the making.

EPILOGUE ONE

Ember

Four years later...

“As always, an outstanding job,” my boss, Danielle Johns, says as she reads over my proposal for an upcoming meeting. Since we’re on a video call, I know she sees me execute a half bow from my chair and I see her responding laugh. Shortly after graduating, I began applying for positions in my field, unsure what I really wanted to do with my degree in English. That all changed when I heard back from a different company, one I hadn’t even thought to try for. They’d discovered my resume through an online site and reached out to me.

For the People is a non-profit agency that provides various forms of assistance to those in need. The more I learned about them, the more I wanted the position. Obviously, I got it. I now spend my days working from home, aside from the rare visit to their headquarters a few hours away, writing grants or proposals to help with their mission. Knowing I play a part in that makes me feel like I’m making a difference and not a day goes by that I’m not thankful for that.

But not as much as I am for my family. They mean the world to me and I’d be lost without them.

After we hang up, Danielle telling me to have a good weekend and I tell her likewise, then retreat to the bedroom and change my clothes. “You ready, sparky?” Adam asks as he pokes his head in the doorway.

“For you? Always,” I reply, loving the smile he gives me in return. “To see the proof Riley is all grown-up? Never.”

We're getting ready to attend her high school graduation. Couple that with her turning eighteen mere days ago and I'm a blubbering mess. She's the class valedictorian and has been accepted at her top choice college where she'll gain her teaching degree.

Camden was in the same position two years prior, though he chose to become an EMT. While a degree is not required for his chosen field, he went the extra steps to acquire one in emergency medical technology. He said that he wanted every advantage he could find that would allow him to provide the highest quality care possible for his patients.

Nash was able to attend a culinary school and officially become a chef. His dishes are in demand and Rufus, who is still his boss, can't say enough nice things about him and the attention he's brought his restaurant. Because of it, Rufus was able to open a second location which Samuel offered to transfer to as he'd been looking for a change.

Adam eventually finished his final semester and Chuck had no problem scheduling him around his classes. Chuck was sad to see him go, but they still talk regularly and Adam helps out from time to time as needed. But his true love, aside from his family, is his job as a financial planner. He knows that he would probably still be playing catch up if not for his dad thinking ahead as he did. With that firsthand knowledge of how quickly and badly things can go, he wants to ensure others are just as prepared should the worst, or the best if expenses arise for happy occasions, occur.

Kent has pretty much distanced himself from our parents and claims the Stones as his own instead. He repeatedly gave them chances to do better until they continually refused to accept my marriage to Adam, and therefore Adam himself, preferring to pretend they only had a son. With that, Kent was done and said he no longer wanted to be a Young. He spoke to all of us, specifically wanting to clear it with Adam, then officially became a Stone.

Our parents didn't want to accept that, but he stood his ground and said he and the Stones are a package deal. They won't get one without the other. I don't think I've ever loved

him more. Adam, Nash, Camden, and Riley even gave him a standing ovation, seeing as how the confrontation took place in front of our house. Dad and Mom have since packed their things and chosen to live elsewhere while Kent moved into our childhood home.

“Riley Abigail Stone,” the principal, Clive Struthers, announces and we erupt with applause, wanting Riley to know how unbelievably proud we are of her.

No longer that withdrawn little girl scared of losing her brothers, she has no problem declaring her feelings nor speaking her mind. Which is why, as the auditorium settles down, she hollers from the stage, “Love you guys!”

And we know she isn’t just referring to us, but also the framed picture of their parents Adam is holding high above his head. They may not be here in person, but they are watching over her, over all of them, and always will.

EPILOGUE TWO

Adam

Six years after that...

“Breathe, sweetheart, breathe,” I urge my wife as a contraction hits.

“I’m going to shove a watermelon up your nostril, then tell you to breathe,” she mutters and I quickly cover my laugh with a fake cough. A glare lets me know she isn’t buying it, but I pretend otherwise. It’s safer that way...for me.

“You ready to meet your little girl, daddy and mommy?” The nurse, Eden, inquires, unaware she just saved my bacon. Or maybe she is and did so to prevent having another patient to take care of.

“Yes,” Ember and I respond in unison. This is our first child, both of us deciding to enjoy some time alone for a while after Nash, Camden, and Riley began making their own marks on the world.

It was the right choice for us and we don’t regret it. However, we are more than eager to hold Margaret Lily, or Maggie as we’ll call her. When Ember suggested naming her after my mom, I couldn’t speak through my tears, so full of love for my wife and her beautiful heart.

I help Ember through her breathing exercises, letting her squeeze my left, and non-dominant, hand to the point I fear she’ll break it. But the pain is worth it when the first cry rings out, telling us our daughter is here.

“You did it, sparky,” I whisper in awe, my eyes never leaving Maggie as the nurses begin cleaning her up before

setting her on Ember's chest.

"She's perfect," Ember says, clearly as amazed as I am at what we created. We simply stare at Maggie, unable to believe that she's here, that she's ours. "You, my darling girl," Ember begins as she nuzzles our daughter's cheek, "will always know you are loved."

It hurts me that she didn't get the same assurance from her own dad and mom. We haven't seen nor heard from them since they left town and while I know she's better off without them, she longs for a real relationship with them. Especially not that she's a parent herself.

If they ever decide to be the people she deserves, I will welcome them back. Unless or until they do, they won't get anywhere near her or our family. Thankfully, she still has her grandpa and grandma and it's easy to see they adore her and the feeling is mutual. They moved to Becket a few years ago, just a few houses down from us in fact, and are so excited about their first great grandchild they've pretty much bought out the local toy store.

Knowing it was their way of trying to make up for their son and daughter-in-law's absence in Ember's life, as well as truly being happy for us, we haven't said a word or asked them to stop. Instead, we've convinced them to keep some of the stuff at their house for when Maggie and any we have after her come to visit.

Not that my own grandparents are any better. Between the four of them, none of our children – mine and Ember's, as well as those Nash, Camden, and Riley might have – will ever want for anything.

"I might be biased," I tell Ember, "but I think she's the prettiest baby ever."

"Then we both are," Ember says, "because I agree."

Be sure to stay tuned for information regarding Nash and Layla's book, Heart of Stone.

If you liked Adam and Ember's story, please take a moment to leave a review. Not only are authors happy to know they've brought enjoyment to someone's life by providing an escape from reality, even if only for a short time, but they are a way for others to decide if they'd also be interested. The greatest way to share your love for their work is by word of mouth, whether it's literally, or through your own written word in a review.

STAY CONNECTED

You can email the author, if you'd like, at havenroseauthor@gmail.com. Haven has created a Facebook page for those interested in connecting with her or for updates on current works in progress and future books – facebook.com/authorhavenrose/. You can also follow her author page or on BookBub (bookbub.com/authors/haven-rose). Her website is havenrosebooks.com, and she has created a closed reader group on Facebook. If you're interested in becoming a member, please visit The Rose Garden at facebook.com/groups/227103614772999/.

Thank you for taking the time to meet this couple, and those near and dear to them, as well as characters you may see in future books.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Haven Rose spends her days high atop the world in a tower overlooking a beautiful meadow, waiting for her prince to find her. No? That's a different story? Okay. In real life, the author, who prefers to remain a mystery, met her true love at a very young age and the two have been enjoying their lives together ever since. Has it had its ups and downs? Yes, but their love for one another has endured it all and only grown stronger. He is the foundation upon which her Heroes are created. She knows things can never be perfect in a relationship, at least not outside of books, which is why the pen name of Haven Rose was created, allowing readers, such as herself, to escape into a world where problems are easily solved, love is instant and true, and the story is always safe.



MORE BY HAVEN ROSE

A Tangled Web Series

Grave Secrets (books2read.com/u/bzPVA2)

Lethal Memories (books2read.com/u/38r9pV)

Final Truth (amzn.to/2LGHZnO)

Love Found (TBD)

Accidental Connection Series (COMPLETED)

The Hopeful Heart (part of the Forever Safe series)
(mybook.to/TheHopefulHeart)

The Enduring Heart (mybook.to/TheEnduringHeart)

The Patient Heart (mybook.to/ThePatientHeart)

The Redeemed Heart (mybook.to/GetTheRedeemedHeart)

The Believing Heart (mybook.to/GetTheBelievingHeart)

Bastion Defense Series

Learning Curve (part of the Yours Everlasting Series –
mybook.to/GetLearningCurve)

Something Borrowed (part of the Yours Everlasting Series –
mybook.to/GetSomethingBorrowed)

In Favor of Forever (mybook.to/GetInFavorofForever)

Take a Chance (releasing 11/16/22 –
mybook.to/GetTakeaChance)

Family by Choice Series

Whispers of Love (I'm Yours Collaboration -
[amzn.to/2EfrQXf](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B00EfrQXf)) (mybook.to/GetWhispersofLove)

Love Taps (Silver Fox Collaboration - [amzn.to/3t6VjXA](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B003t6VjXA))
(mybook.to/GetLoveTaps)

Tapped Out (09/10/22 – Heart of a Wounded Hero Series)

Holidays in Jasper Series (COMPLETED)

Trick or Treat (books2read.com/u/b62Xo6)

Thankfully Yours ([amzn.to/2BR31M5](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B002BR31M5))

Marry New Year ([amzn.to/2F1iehF](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B002F1iehF))

From the Heart ([amzn.to/2GrpkwA](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B002GrpkwA))

Shamrocked (mybook.to/Shamrocked)

His Firecracker ([amzn.to/2J81A0x](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B002J81A0x))

Summer's End (mybook.to/SummersEnd)

Holiday Ever After (a collection of bonus short stories – TBD)

It's Complicated Series (COMPLETED)

A Home for Noelle (part of the Forever Safe Christmas Series
– mybook.to/AHomeforNoelle)

A Place for Daniel (part of the Yours Everlasting Series –
mybook.to/GetAPlaceforDaniel)

A Family for Garrett (part of Forever Safe: The Twelve Days
of Christmas Series - mybook.to/GetAFamilyforGarrett)

Matter of Hart Series

That Day (books2read.com/u/m0gEnM)

Getting Lucky (books2read.com/u/bP5oVj)

Love's Draw (mybook.to/LovesDraw)

Just Right (TBD)

Made to Order (TBD)

Full Circle (TBD)

Giving Chase (TBD)

Deep Desires (TBD)

The Perfect Position (TBD)

By Design (TBD)

The Stone Siblings Series

Set in Stone (mybook.to/GetSetinStone)

Heart of Stone (TBD)

Carved by Stone (TBD)

Solid as Stone (TBD)

Turn to Stone (TBD)

Standalones

Pieces of You (mybook.to/PiecesofYou)

Collaborations

After I Do Series

(series page - amzn.to/3GCBZIr)

Just for You by Haven Rose (amzn.to/3FCecrI)

Breaking Barriers Series

Coming in 2023

Curves for Christmas Series

Snow One Like You by Haven Rose (releasing 10/19/22)

Dude! Where's Your...?

...Shirt

Taylor Made by Haven Rose (mybook.to/GetTaylorMade)

Shirtless in New York by Brynn Paulin (amzn.to/3o1SwvI)

FILO (First In Last Out) Series

A Christmas to Remember Anthology (releasing 12/01/22)

Forever Safe Christmas: Worldwide

Salem Vows (releasing 12/01/22)

Girls on Top Series

(series page - amzn.to/3rYG1pI)

Under His Skin by Haven Rose (mybook.to/GetUnderHisSkin)

Season Two

Coming in 2023

Heart of a Wounded Hero Series

(series page - amzn.to/38rPGhu)

Tapped Out by Haven Rose (releasing 09/10/22) (Family by Choice #3)

Home Cooked Holidays Series

Blending with Boone by Haven Rose (releasing 12/12/22)

Love at First Bark Series

(series page - amzn.to/3wU7HNQ)

Doggone Cute by Haven Rose (mybook.to/GetDoggoneCute)

Love's Valley Duet (with May Gordon)

Spark of Love and Lesson in Love
(mybook.to/LovesValleyDuet)

Magical March Series

Spelling Bea (Mates & Mischief #2) by Haven Rose
(mybook.to/GetBiteMe)

Monster Bait by Brynn Paulin (amzn.to/3tjI8nv)

Signed, Sealed, Yours Series

(series page - amzn.to/3h3oeH7)

Desperate Measures by Annelise Reynolds

His Forever Bride by M.K. Moore

Wild, Wanton, & Wed by Barbra Campbell (amzn.to/2SqzVPU)

Class Act by Haven Rose (mybook.to/GetClassAct)

Farmer Takes a Wife by Brynn Paulin (amzn.to/3w5NQsE)

Sizzle Beach Summer Series

Dirty, Flirty Dancing by West Greene ([amzn.to/3bTLfxd](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08TLFXD))

Fifty Shades of Sun by Brynn Paulin ([amzn.to/3P4CC1d](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08P4CC1D))

Beachside With You by T.O. Smith ([amzn.to/3yFSP7M](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08YFSP7M))

Things We Did Last Summer by Pixie Chica

Heartbreak Beach House by Layne Daniels ([amzn.to/3Ijo77r](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08IJO77R))

Girl on a Beach Blanket by Brynn Paulin ([amzn.to/3RbfDU4](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08RBFDU4))

Crazy Rich Lifeguard by Rachelle Stevensen

Hot For Lifeguard by May Gordon

Guy with a Starfish Tattoo by Brynn Paulin
([amzn.to/3P4DbrR](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08P4DBR))

Rebel without Sunscreen by Haven Rose
(mybook.to/RebelwithoutSunscreen)

Steamy in Sweetville Series

August 2020

Measured Love by Haven Rose
(mybook.to/GetMeasuredLove)

Put a Ring on It by Pixie Chica

Postcards in the Sand by Brynn Paulin

Christmas 2020

Count on Me (mybook.to/GetCountonMe)

Cuddle Up Buttercup by Brynn Paulin ([amzn.to/3j7OEHE](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B083J7OEHE))

Stranded Christmas by Pixie Chica ([amzn.to/30c07yk](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0830C07YK))

February 2021

All Fired Up (mybook.to/GetAllFiredUp)

Pants on Fire by Brynn Paulin ([amzn.to/3nXHQxZ](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B083NXHQXZ))

Ring of Fire by Pixie Chica ([amzn.to/39KDntb](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0839KDNTB))

April 2021

Cross my Heart (mybook.to/GetCrossmyHeart)

No More Running by Brynn Paulin ([amzn.to/2PTmlhj](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B082PTMLHJ))

September 2021

In my Rearview (mybook.to/InmyRearview)

In Plain Sight by Brynn Paulin ([amzn.to/3g90GSn](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B090G5N))

January 2022 (last of original series)

His Sugarplum Kisses by Brynn Paulin ([amzn.to/3gCHJrz](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B090G5N))

Sweetville Season Two

January 2022

Between the Lines (mybook.to/GetBetweentheLines)

March 2022

Smokescreen (mybook.to/GetSmokescreen)

Paws for Love by Brynn Paulin (amzn.to/34KgpDK)

Good Cop Bad Girl by Pixie Chica (amzn.to/35TdkT3)

June 2022

Suited for You by Haven Rose (mybook.to/SuitedforYou)

Amaze Me by Brynn Paulin (amzn.to/34JEDOQ)

Happenstance by Pixie Chica (amzn.to/3P4LtQt)

September 2022

Booked Solid by Haven Rose (mybook.to/GetBookedSolid)

Something So Sweet by Brynn Paulin (amzn.to/3JgYLac)

Falling for the Enemy by Pixie Chica

December 2022

Tickled Pink by Haven Rose (mybook.to/GetTickledPink)

Mistlefoes by Brynn Paulin ([amzn.to/3a35JCS](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B090G5N))

Homeward Bound by Pixie Chica

Sweet Obsession Anthology (NO LONGER AVAILABLE)

Individual listing - Set in Stone (The Stone Siblings, Book One) by Haven Rose (mybook.to/GetSetinStone)

Tarpley VFD (a part of Susan Stoker's World)

Series page - [amzn.to/3uJgBfg](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07JG8BFG)

Fighting for Elena by Silver James ([amzn.to/38lGeGL](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07381GEG))

Fighting for Carly by Deandra Hall ([amzn.to/375rH1I](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07375RH1))

Fighting for Calliope by Haven Rose ([amzn.to/2TpvL8p](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B072TPVL8P))

Fighting for Jemma by MJ Nightingale ([amzn.to/2TEQdTn](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B072TEQDTN))

Fighting for Brittney by TL Reeve ([amzn.to/2R7iOPI](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B072R7IOP))

Fighting for Nadia by Nicole Flockton ([amzn.to/2NGOZmK](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B072NGOZMK))

Series page - [amzn.to/3uBmo6x](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B073UBMO6X)

Fighting for Amanda by TL Reeve ([amzn.to/3b0wTZ1](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B073B0WTZ1))

Fighting for Marcy by MJ Nightingale ([amzn.to/3bIO7tc](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B073BIO7TC))

Fighting for Bree by Haven Rose
([mybook.to/GetFightingforBree](https://www.mybook.to/GetFightingforBree))

Fighting for Lorna by Deandra Hall ([amzn.to/3u8LSQ](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B073U8LSQ))

Fighting for Justice by Silver James ([amzn.to/3kBbBEz](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B073KBbBEz))

The Law Trilogy.

Multi-author series featuring myself, Sylvia Kane, Brynn Paulin, Barbra Campbell, May Gordon, and MK Moore)

Collateral Damage, Beyond the Law, Book One by Haven Rose
([mybook.to/GetCollateralDamage](https://www.mybook.to/GetCollateralDamage))

In His Sights, Breaking the Law, Book One by Haven Rose
([mybook.to/GetInHisSights](https://www.mybook.to/GetInHisSights))

Settle the Score, Book One by Haven Rose
([mybook.to/GetSettletheScore](https://www.mybook.to/GetSettletheScore))

Valentine's Sucks Series

Bite Me (Mates & Mischief #1) by Haven Rose
([mybook.to/GetBiteMe](https://www.mybook.to/GetBiteMe))

Vampire Bait by Brynn Paulin ([My Book](https://www.mybook.to/MyBook))

My Vampire Mate by Pixie Chica ([amzn.to/327lphd](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07327LPHD))

XOXO Series

([Christmas 2019](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07327LPHD)).

Ex Scrooge Me by Brynn Paulin ([amzn.to/37RukoB](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08RUKOB))

Mistletoe Magic by Haven Rose (Meant to Be #1)
(mybook.to/MistletoeMagicBook)

Candy Covered Kisses by Loni Ree ([amzn.to/2OYFqQ6](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08OYFQ6))

His Christmas Delivery by Pixie Chica ([amzn.to/2LjfEm](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08LJFEM))
(Valentine 2020).

Sweet Surprise (Meant to Be #2) (mybook.to/SweetSurprise)
(Spring Love 2020).

Billionaire Bunny by Brynn Paulin ([amzn.to/2yA51dP](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B082YA51DP))

A New Start by Haven Rose (Meant to Be #3)
(mybook.to/ANewStart)

Mr. Boss Man by Loni Ree ([amzn.to/2UHcyQg](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B082UHcyQg))

A Royal Payne by Pixie Chica (mybook.to/ARoyalPayne)
Yours Everlasting Series (YES!).

Brynn Paulin, Dakota Rebel, Haven Rose,

May Gordon, Pixie Chica, and Rachelle Stevensen

Learning Curve by Haven Rose
(mybook.to/GetLearningCurve)

A Place for Daniel by Haven Rose
(mybook.to/GetAPlaceforDaniel)

Something Borrowed by Haven Rose
(mybook.to/GetSomethingBorrowed)

Step Above the Rest by Haven Rose
(mybook.to/GetStepAbovetheRest)

Season Two

May 2022

Count the Ways (mybook.to/GetCounttheWays)

November 2022

Take a Chance by Haven Rose (releasing 11/16 -
mybook.to/GetTakeaChance) (Bastion Defense #4)

Upcoming Standalones

Final Countdown (TBD)

Pardon Me (TBD)

Future Series (with more planned):

Aftereffects Series

Deadly Acts (TBD)

Deadly Intentions (TBD)

Deadly Hope (TBD)

City of Angelis Trilogy (subject to change)

Titles to be Decided

Coming Home Series

Titles to be Decided

Danger Duet

Cuts Like a Knife (TBD)

The Key to His Heart (TBD)

Perilous Love Series (subject to change)

Running from Peril (TBD)

Hidden Peril (TBD)

Triple Peril (TBD)

Reluctantly Royal

Reign Interrupted (TBD)

Other Titles to be Decided

Saints & Sinners MC Series

Dangerous Curves (TBD)

Other Titles to be Decided

Shadow Men Series

Titles to be Decided

The Four Seasons Series

Titles to be Decided

Weathering the Storm Series

My Sunshine (TBD)

A Touch of Frost (TBD)

Other Titles to be Decided