



The Vegas Kings

**THE DUG
OUT**



EMILY C. CHILDS

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*For Andrew and that one time you said you think differently...
different is beautiful, sweet boy.*

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Author Note

This book will address sensitive issues that may be triggering for some readers such as: bullying of individuals with autism, pregnancy loss, and fertility struggles will be discussed throughout.



Ryder



THERE IS SILVER GLITTER IN MY CAR. MORE THAN THE glitter, the seats smell like strawberries and too much cologne. The smell wouldn't be much to complain about, but the glitter is another thing.

I have a thing about order. Glitter is the definition of chaos, the epitome of disorganization, a bane of society. If ever I needed to be tortured it would be me locked in a room with glitter bombs, then only being released when every shimmering piece was picked up.

It would be a life sentence, and everyone knows it.

My car is officially bedazzled.

“Mason!” The kid is lucky I love him or he'd be dead. Dropped in the desert, vulture food, dead. When Mason steps out of the weird canvas canopy set up on the edge of Burton Field, hair on end like he's been sleeping all day, and a forkful of baked potato in his mouth, I jab a finger at my open backseat. “Who was in my car?”

“Sorry, Hunt,” Mason says with a shrug, calling me a shortened version of my name. With his stammer, my name can, at times, be a nightmare for the kid. But I doubt he's all that sorry. “Gertie had g-glitter in her purse from her daycare job. Some of it spilled.”

I deepen my frown but take a breath to cool the blood boiling in my skull. I'd like to be, but I can't be too frustrated he was in my car since I was the one who offered my Range Rover for his use. We showed up to the field, Mason was

pouting that the brakes squeaked in his '99 Toyota, and had the whole moody teenager thing going as he lamented over picking up his off-and-on again high school girlfriend for the small banquet under the weird canvas canopy.

I caved, offered before I could foreshadow the consequences, and now it looks like I have a prom night horror movie on my black seats.

I'm ready to leave, there's been enough socializing for one night. Alice, the team marketing director and the owner's niece, insisted we send the season out with a final dinner. It's informal, and I think it's more to set up her uncle with the caterer.

Pretty sure her mission to hook up Dallas Anderson is a flop, but even I can admit it was good to sit with the team once more before we head into the off-season.

I give Mason a final glare.

He holds up his hands. "I'll c-clean it out, man. I p-p-promise."

Now the guilt hits a deeper nerve. I hate when I grumble enough that the kid's stammer worsens. Griffin Marks, our catcher, likes to tell me I have a glare that could stop a war. Doubtless, this is one of those moments Griffin says leaves people thinking I'm going to explode.

I nudge Mason's arm and try to lighten my tone. "It's all good."

"It's going to stick to me," Lacy whines.

I don't know my date well. Not to sound like even more of a dirtbag, but I don't really care to.

Alice insisted I bring a plus one. Lacy is a granddaughter of a Burton Field investor, or something, I don't really know. She fits the bill of what I need as a plus one. A woman more interested in posting selfies with the MLB than getting to know me. A woman who enjoys a nice dinner, but one who will never ask for pieces of the heart.

"It'll be fine," I grumble.

“Ryder,” she says through her nose. “I’m wearing a black skirt.”

Lacy looks like she’s ready to stomp her foot. She’s already complained about eating on the grass since her sneakers are vibrant white and she didn’t want to get grass stains.

I ignore her, slide behind the wheel, then look at Mason. “I’ll make you pick up the pieces one by one later. Have Parker let Skye know I’ve got the thing covered tonight.”

“Ryder,” Lacy says. “Seriously, what am I supposed to do with silver glitter on black?”

I grit my teeth, irritated, and reach into my back seat where I have a stack of neatly folded Kings towels. I drape one over the passenger seat.

“Best I can do.”

My voice is hardened steel, but I guess in the world of Lacy it’s a cue for flirting. She runs her finger over the divots of my bicep. The touch is horribly light and it’s like she’s dragging a lit match over my skin.

It gets worse when she pecks my cheek. Now, all I can focus on is the wet tingle in the center of my face.

“So sweet,” she says. “You’re saving imported satin.”

I don’t care. All I’m worried about is getting the irritating kiss spot off my cheek. I shrug my shoulder and wipe my face on my T-shirt.

Lacy snickers. Why? I didn’t mean for it to be funny, but she takes everything I do wrong. I guess since I wiped away her unwanted kiss, to her, it means lean over and blow a breath into my ear. I shudder, not in a good way, and lean away.

“Stop,” I say, voice low and harsh.

“It’s just a tease,” she whispers. “I hope you’ll let me make it up to you tonight.”

“I won’t.” My gaze remains ahead as I start the ignition and put the car into gear.

Lacy's mouth sets in disappointment, but she still talks as we drive. I say nothing but for a quick thank you for joining me when I walk her to the door. Over the years I've learned proper things to say in situations until it's second nature, but I'm ready for quiet tonight.

I cannot leave fast enough, but Lacy takes six minutes trying to convince me to come inside. She's not hiding her intentions. Normally I appreciate directness, but when she comes in for a kiss with her tongue already out, it's not what I'm about tonight.

I take an abrupt step back, ignoring the arch to her brow that lets me know she thinks my aversion is strange.

Let her think things. I want to complete this favor for Skye and Parker, disappear into my solitude, and be done with people until I'm forced to people again.

With a lazy wave after Lacy cautiously tells me to call her, I drive away, windows down, alone at last. Tension seeps out of my muscles the more distance I put between myself and the lights of Vegas.

To live life in the off-season is bittersweet. I'm alive on the field. From the musty sand under cleats, to the tang of freshly mowed grass. Even the desert heat of the summer, the sweat, the adrenaline, is a piece of me that fades during the winter. But I enjoy the months of quiet. It allows me freedom to enjoy the quiet of my personal space, check off anything on my parents' extensive to-do lists at our ranch, and binge a list of shows I've been waiting to watch.

Tonight is my first official Ryder-has-all-the-time-in-the-world task. It's not Skye and Parker's fault, it's Griffin's. He's the one who thought it was a good idea to buy Wren, his new wife, a writing cat.

His words, not mine. Wren is an author, and her rainbows and unicorns husband insisted on her having a writing buddy.

It's a mangy rescue named Licorice who hisses at me the second I walk in the door.

Skye and Parker were the ones taking care of the beast at first, but it was promptly discovered they're both allergic. Figures. The cat probably had it all planned out as a way to murder them slowly.

Now, I'm the one who's in charge of the stupid thing.

I don't know why Dax couldn't do it. He lives closer, but he's so squirrely, no doubt Parker didn't even try to ask him to emerge from his dungeon and step out into the real world.

Parker won't leave Skye at night because he's convinced if their baby wakes up, he needs to be part of it.

Only a few months into fatherhood and he's still one of the best ones I've met.

Skye was the one who asked me to manage the creature and deliver the pointless second present from the team ladies. I guess Griffin had arranged a surprise gift for Wren earlier today, cleaning the house or something, and it spurred the last-minute gift idea.

I still maintain Griffin and Wren are so lost in each other they aren't even going to notice it, but I agreed to not kill the cat and deliver the gift. If Parker had asked, it would've been a hard no.

I wouldn't bury a body for my teammates, but for their wives I'd bring the shovel. A Kings Lady is watched over by the team. Daughters, sisters, wives, girlfriends, they're all part of the team. Skye and Wren are even more so since I teeter on the line of friendship with their husbands.

Which is why I'm dropping everything to be Skye's delivery boy for the after-honeymoon gift. Skye wiggled her way into my circle of people I can tolerate, not only because she's our team trainer, but she gets stuck in her head like I do sometimes.

Our reasons aren't the same; Skye has a brain injury, and I have autism.

Growing up, I always felt different. But I didn't match every typical sign, so I slid under the radar until fourth grade. I

can make decent eye contact and do fine in small social gatherings.

What I do know is it's difficult for me to alter my thought process, and I've collected some repetitive behaviors to soothe anxiety. Small social settings, fine, but press conferences—I'll avoid them as much as possible. Sometimes the tone of a room is impossible to gauge, so I fight to appear neutral, afraid I'll give the wrong expression. Certain touches grate on me, despite being innately affectionate. If you're going to hug me, basically crush me. Too light and sweet like Lacy, and I'm left with prickly, irritated skin for hours.

The way Skye and I are similar is our focus. Like her, when I focus on something, I get locked on it. I think of little else until it's conquered, or I lose interest.

One of my focuses was baseball, but I think it paid off in a big way.

I'm fortunate noise is manageable, or my job would be close to impossible. I do wear foam plugs in my ears during games to help me blot out the crowd a little, but at this point the team thinks that's my superstitious ritual.

No one on the team, not even Skye, knows this about me. It's not that I'm embarrassed, but what's the point of sharing? My diagnosis doesn't stop me from doing my job, from living an independent, functional life, and if you ask my great-aunt on my mom's side, who thinks she's being complimentary, "No one can even tell" unless I tell them.

If no one can tell, I see no point in blurting it out. One piece of me does not define all that I am.

But the truer reason is talking about something so personal is an act of vulnerability, and I decided I was done with that sort of thing a long time ago.

Vulnerability, plus trust, plus love equals heartache. A simple enough equation, and one I promised myself I wasn't going to deal with ever again.

Ryder



AN HOUR LATER, I HAVE THE HUM OF *QUANTUM LEAP* EPISODES on in the background. I've always loved the show. The idea of leaping into different people, experiencing so many different things resonated with me since I felt like I didn't fit anywhere for a long time.

As the episode plays, I make the final check to ensure none of the gifts have been forgotten in the large box.

Everyone on the team tossed something inside. Gift cards to fancy restaurants on the Strip; crystal glasses; a platter made from something called pewter; bedsheets that are supposed to make you melt in bed or something ridiculous; and my gift—a second honeymoon to a cabin in Lake Tahoe.

Knowing Griffin and his need to get me to break down and man-sob with him, he'll profess his undying love and friendship for that one.

I used to think it was an act with Griff, his bright, endless need to make others smile. Turns out it's just him. Maybe it comes from a constant fight to keep his thoughts positive and in control, but the guy is the epitome of sunshine.

I drag my thumb and index finger along the edge of the box, creasing the paper neatly, then gingerly fold the sides in. Symmetrical and flat. Now, the bow. Skye sent over three different bows and told me to choose. All satin black. One has glitter which triggers my annoyance over my car again. Another has stripes in varying shades of black. The last one is satin and glossy, like ink.

Which one matches best? There is no point in going through the work of wrapping with seamless edges if I screw it up with a stupid bow. I'm overthinking. I know I am. But when my mind gets stuck on something, I need to see it through, puzzle it out. I'm stuck on this.

Two of the bows are in my palms. I lift and lower them as though I'm weighing their worth.

Wren isn't showy. Deep inside she wants to live a little like I do. Away from people.

Eyes narrowed, I make some decisions. Wren will probably like the inky bow. But Griffin, he's eccentric. The stripes would match him.

I shouldn't be the one in charge of this task.

Maybe I should call Alice. But I have a feeling she'd give me a lecture for being sexist since men are perfectly capable of wrapping and delivering big gifts. There's also the issue of the demon cat. Alice hates that thing.

This is ridiculous. I'm about to break out in a sweat over a bow.

I study the bows once more and decide. "Both."

The next ten minutes are spent rearranging the striped bow and the satin ribbon in a way that makes it look like they're one topper. Satisfied the box is wrapped and topped with a nice enough ribbon, I gather it in my arms and head out to my garage.

The night is mild with the barest chill. October in Las Vegas is pleasant. My favorite time of year. Out here, where farms and empty fields stretch to the brown mountains, there's solace. I sit on two acres with my nearest neighbor down a long dirt lane. Those two things equal my perfect living conditions.

Wrapped around my iron banister are little pumpkin lights. Not my doing. Alexis, Parker's younger sister, has made it her mission to make sure the singles (as she calls the few of us not in a committed relationship) on the Vegas Kings are festive for the upcoming holidays.

I frown at the pumpkins while my chest tightens, knowing the family of one of my teammates finds a bit of joy in taking care of me.

Like they truly do care.

A hard notion to accept. One day, maybe, I'll crack the ribs and accept that these people are sincere. Maybe it'll be the day I truly believe it.

In my car, I seatbelt the box into the front seat. Look, I don't seatbelt my groceries and stuff, but the crystal in that box is imported from Italy. Our left-fielder's wife was the one to buy it, and she was raised in New Jersey.

I'm pretty sure she has an uncle in the Mafia.

My phone buzzes in my back pocket before I pull out of the drive. I groan, annoyed at the name. I have no time for my douche of a cousin, who isn't even my real cousin if I really want to get technical.

Mitch: *Ryder, I have a question for you. Potential business investment. Call me sometime.*

Almost instantly another message comes in.

Mitch: *You're the worst at responding, but remember, I can be persistent and repetitive. Just like you.*

A small growl escapes my throat as I toss my phone on the front seat and pull onto the road.

No matter how old we get, no matter how many years pass, no matter how many zeros are in my salary, he will always add a little jab. It took me a long time to catch them, especially over texts.

By now, I've learned to recognize when he's trying to remind me I'm not the same as him.

The screen lights up again, and I'm three seconds away from throwing my phone out the window until I realize it's a call.

Josh, my former stepdad turned adoptive dad, so in other words—my dad. A guy opposite from Mitch in every way.

Mitch is my dad's nephew, but there's no comparison. There are times I still feel a pang of guilt Josh had a falling out with his brother over me, enough that Mitch and I lost touch for a long time until college. That reunion wasn't anything I want to experience again, and up until a few years ago Mitch and I had zero contact.

But when he congratulated me on getting drafted to the Kings, at first, I gave it a chance. I worked it out in my head that for Dad's sake, I ought to try.

I should've realized he only reached out since being in the MLB meant money. Ever since, Mitch has done nothing but pester me to help him out, invest with him, and pretend we have any sort of relationship.

Mitch is self-centered and only speaks to me when he wants something. On the opposite side, my dad is probably calling to remind me about our run this weekend.

He always does, even though it's a recurring appointment we have in the off-season. My mom told me it's because he gets excited to be back together after months of me being on the road.

I'm pretty strict on not using the phone while driving, so I let it go to voicemail, right next to the two messages I've never listened to. The ones I can't delete, but can't find it in me to open the two different calls. One from seven years ago, another from four.

With every new phone, the messages transfer and continue to stare at me, gnaw at me. I continue to keep them unheard, not man enough to listen or delete.

I flip on my music, desperate to tear my focused thoughts away from that tangent. I don't want to think of the voice behind the messages tonight. I want to get this over with and go home.

Dark emptiness makes up most of my drive. Sounds dreary, but it's not. I love the vastness of the Nevada desert with occasional hills or sandstone formations appearing only when my headlights gleam over the surface.

Griffin and Wren live on the hills above the sparkle of casino lights. Parker and Skye live up the hill a block, right next to Alexis and her rock star husband. Truth be told, his entire band, Perfectly Broken, lives up there. It's gated and too close to neighbors, in my opinion. Still, when we have monthly barbecues it makes it easy to house jump.

Outside the gate, I type in the code, tapping my fingers to the instrumental beat of *Phantom of the Opera*. Not what people expect from an athlete, perhaps, but musicals were on a constant replay in my house growing up, thanks to a mother who taught drama at my high school and needed something to soothe her kid whenever he got overwhelmed.

I'm almost tranquil enough to say I'm in a good mood and glad I stepped out of my bachelor cave tonight.

Until a flash of something bright crosses into my line of vision, then disappears into the open garage. I slam on my breaks. Was it an animal? Licorice? If it was the cat, I think I'll be tempted to run it over.

Until I notice ... why is the garage open? I curse under my breath, assuming Griffin left it open, because knowing him, he'd be so lost in his new wife he would forget to close off his house.

I am about to call the dimwit when a lamp flicks on in the front window. My mind reels to the open garage, boxes in the trunk of an unfamiliar, teal Civic. A Tweety Bird bumper sticker makes me think of crystal blue eyes and a laugh people ought to write songs about.

The same face, the same heated regret and desire, clamps around my chest at least once a day. One might think a decade would make the heart grow forgetful. No, it makes it grow scabrous and black and scorched from all the built-up longing.

I force my gaze off the bumper sticker. No time for that. There is someone here who doesn't belong.

I text Griffin, asking him if he recognizes the description of the car. After two minutes, I have no reply. Why would he,

though? He's on the last night of his honeymoon and I really don't want to think of what he's doing.

Maybe I should've taken some of the cleansing breaths Skye is always pushing during training. Maybe I should have double checked with the Marks or Fox families to make sure Griffin's cousins or Wren's brothers hadn't stopped by. But no, my head went to thieves and murder and poison in their drinking water.

I whip out my cell phone and dial the police. Funny, but I never realized how one phone call could shatter the comfortable control I've had over my life.

But it does.

Ava



FAILURE DOESN'T EXIST. ONLY LESSONS.

My mom likes to say that when something she tries to accomplish doesn't quite go according to plan. I've clung to the feel-good mantra for years, but tonight it's cracking into splintered pieces.

Failure while decorating a surprise love nest for newlyweds seems less like a lesson and more like a disaster of apocalyptic proportions.

A smile is pinned on my face. One so sickly sweet it's oozing high blood sugar and my pancreas is having palpitations. But here's the thing, if I let the smile drop, the barely managed wall of anxiety is going to spill out like a mushroom cloud in the center of the kitchen.

"Ava," Sasha whispers. She's my best friend. We met in a group home when her mom was hired as one of the counselors and she had to tagalong one day after coming down with strep throat.

The best thing I ever did for my friendship department was sneak into the group home administrator's office since she always had gourmet chocolate in a glass bowl. That day, Sasha had peeked up from a chapter book she was reading on the couch, and we've been close ever since.

She knows when I'm about to unravel at the seams. A ginger touch to my arm, a furrow to her brow; the signs are all there—she's *afraid*.

I tilt my head and meet her gaze. She shudders, and if I had a mirror, I would bet my smile looks more like a deranged clown from a murder circus.

“Yes.” The ‘s’ comes out too long, like a hiss.

Oh boy. Doubtless, Sasha senses the million shrieks about to burst from my throat like a banshee. Sasha is soft-spoken most days, but today the storm cloud must be shining out from my gray-blue eyes like a freak-of-nature hurricane is about to hit the boiling desert of Las Vegas any second.

“Um, are you okay? I’m sure he didn’t mean it. Right, kitty?” Sasha tickles the top of the orange cat’s head.

I glare at the little beast. *I was nice to you, traitor.*

The cat seems unbothered by my mental shouting match, and licks its paw, offers me a gurgly meow, then saunters away.

My broken lamp at his back.

“We can go get another one,” Sasha says, glancing at her watch. “Stores might still be open.”

“No.” I hold up a hand. I’m the one my boss sent to see this through. This massively important project for Haven Aesthetic Architecture. Carina Haven combined the science and logic of engineering and architecture with the creativity of interior design and artistic organization into one booming firm. As a junior designer, this project brings with it a commission that could cover rent for three months. “It’s fine. It’s totally *fine.*”

It has to be. My eyes are gouging holes in the Italian wool rug. Not an hour ago my gut gurgled to move the small table with the porcelain vase. Should’ve listened.

Not a failure. A lesson. The lesson here is to listen to my stupid, bubbly gut!

“Hey, where am I putting this?” My brother, Drake, and Sasha’s fiancé, Hudson, stumble through the doorway together. They balance a beautiful chaise with pale blue fabric and silver threading.

“Perfect!” I shriek. Drake nearly stumbles, and Sasha jumps in surprise. “We’ll stick the chaise where the table went, forget the lamp, and we’ll put the little table in that empty space in the entryway. Perfect for a potted plant or something!”

“There she is,” Sasha says with a touch of pride.

“I feel like I missed something,” Drake says as he and Hudson put the chaise on the faux fur rug.

I’m quick to grab the dustpan and small hand broom, sweeping up the broken bits of porcelain. “A little accident.”

“I thought Avie was going to pop a blood vessel,” Sasha says, leaning into Hudson’s broad body. He grins at her and tucks a lock of her raven wing black hair behind her ear. Sasha kisses his cheek before going on. “She thinks because these guys are rich, they’ll scream at her for anything that’s not perfect.”

Drake frowns. “Yeah, that’d never happen. And you can tell Carina to lay off you. If this job was so important, the owner should be here.”

If Drake thinks my boss would descend from her penthouse palace to mingle with broken vases and dusting baseboards, he’s dreaming.

But I enjoy when he gets growly like this.

Drake Williams is many things: a smooth talker, charismatic, insecure in a lot of ways, and a wonderful father. But when it comes to the women in his life, aka Mom and me, he’s a protective beast.

I believe him when he says anyone who tried to get in my face would find themselves missing in the desert. Drake is a fire lieutenant with Las Vegas Fire and Rescue, and Hudson is a white-collar crimes detective. No doubt between the two of them, they’ve met more than their fair share of shady people and could have help with it.

Sasha chuckles. “Don’t worry about that snobby Carina. Let’s get this done so we can get out of here.”

Right on cue, the blare of my phone alarm goes off. A warning we're inching toward the deadline. Some people can simply look at a clock and know they're running behind. I get distracted enough, it's better to have alarms running my life.

A grin twists over my lips. "I appreciate you all coming to help. I plan to pay you back with the most epic bachelorette party, Sash."

Sasha wiggles her shoulders. Every time I bring up her approaching wedding, it's as if she can hardly keep her excitement tamed. The heat in Hudson's stare when he looks at her gives off the same vibes.

Envy is there, but honestly, anyone would be envious of these two.

It doesn't help that my work schedule is frantic enough the only people I have time to meet also work for Haven. James, one of the structural engineers, has taken me out a few times. He's decent enough, but asks a lot of questions about the past that leaves me uncomfortable because he always gives that look of pity I hate so much.

One thing he doesn't do is send my stomach rolling in the fluttery, delicious ways that make me want to devour him.

For a few years I've considered the notion that I'm defective. Unable to fall for anyone again. Too ashamed to bring up a past anyone who wasn't there might not understand. James is nice, but I have a feeling he's not looking for complicated, and I might as well have the word printed on my welcome mat.

"Looks like we have a major Kings fan," Sasha says when Hudson opens a box of Vegas Kings stuff.

"This is Carina we're talking about. I doubt they're just fans." Hudson removes a black and white picture of a cluster of four Kings in their jerseys. "What was the client name, Ava?"

"Marks. I only get the last name, no details. All she said was treat the house like it's made of gold. She wants to

impress a family member more than the client. I guess someone's dad is a gazillionaire casino tycoon."

Hudson's eyes pop. "Avie, you're designing Griffin Marks's house. The catcher for the Kings."

He places the black and white photo on top of a glossy, black end table and points to a tall guy in the middle. Handsome, a massive white smile, with a catcher's mask pulled up on top of his head.

But my gaze doesn't stay long on Griffin. It drifts to the face to the left of him. The half-smile, like he's desperate not to release the true, sweetly shy happiness that lives deep, *deep* inside.

Drake and I share a burdened glance.

He must've noticed the same thing. Ryder Huntington is close with the guy who lives here. Unbidden, my job has brought both of us closer to Ryder than we've been in years. The closest we've come to baseball, really.

Baseball makes me gag. The Vegas Kings make my brother clam up and go pale.

No mistake, our reasons are different, but they all revolve around Ryder. A person I wish we could forget. A person I still think about almost every day when I pass Burton Field on the way to the office and see his stupidly sexy face hanging from a twenty-foot banner on the side of the stadium.

Could I find a different route? Sure. Will I? Highly doubtful.

Focus. I'm not here to think about Ryder Huntington.

I'm here to work. Ryder will never know how close the Williams siblings came to one of his teammates, and it's for the better. He can't hurt us out there in his obliviousness.

"Well, if they're as prominent as all that, we better not let Carina down or she might drop me off the top of her penthouse," I say, clapping my hands together. "Hudson has an early shift, and Drake will have a superhero pouncing on his gut before the sun rises."

Drake laughs. “I got the kid to sleep in until six yesterday.”

“Progress.”

“Tell us where to go, boss,” Hudson says.

I start giving directions for the finishing touches. The house looks beautiful. I know it’s a surprise for the bride. A gift from her new husband. They bought the house, got married, and Carina was told to organize their life before they returned from the honeymoon.

Then, Carina passed everything onto me. Her least favorite employee. Doesn’t matter. I want to learn from her; this is a stepping-stone in the plan to reach the ultimate dream.

Designing houses isn’t exactly my dream job. I do love it. There is a heady satisfaction when I can find a purpose for a worthless bit of empty space. However, my dream is to create safe havens someday. A place where kids without a soft place to fall can have a bit of beauty.

What that looks like, I don’t know, but I’ll figure out a way somehow. Maybe the non-profit route?

“Um, Ava.” Sasha’s voice stirs me from my daydream. “I, uh, I don’t think we’re leaving anytime soon.”

“Why? What’s going on?”

“Hudson!” Sasha cries out before I even get a solid look at the brilliant, flashing lights in a kaleidoscope of red and blue.

I let out a shriek in surprise when a heavy-handed knock pounds on the front door. Sasha and I cling to each other. Hudson and Drake storm into the room, confused and on edge.

Then, my shriek turns into a full-out scream when the door bursts open and dirty, red-sand coated police boots storm over my newly placed rug, guns raised.

For a fleeting moment I think there might be some fugitive hiding out in the backyard, until an officer points his Glock at me—*me*—and shouts for me to put my hands where he can see them, the same way they do on *Law and Order*.

The next thing I know, a cop is shouting at me for my name and demanding I give up every reason I'm in the house.

Ava



STRESS MAKES ME CRY MORE THAN FUNERALS. I'M TALKING big, ugly hiccups, and snot running over my lips like a mucous liner.

This. Is. Mortifying.

“Do they always leave captives sequestered like this?” I murmur and huddle closer to Sasha while we watch Hudson have words with the officer who'd been placed with us. “Don't they take us to ... I don't know, the brig?”

“The brig?” Sasha snickers. “Hon, we're not planning on setting sail anytime soon.”

I close my eyes, a wave of mortifying heat washes over me. Serves me right for reading a pirate fantasy romance all weekend. I have [Captain Stone](#) on the mind.

Sasha sighs. “They call it the cage in the central booking area.”

My mouth drops. “That's worse!”

The officer who's been questioning me and Sasha looks a little sheepish now that Hudson has explained the entire situation and flashed his badge more than once. But there is still the take no prisoners attitude when he gives a slight nod and moves aside.

“I have complaints, Hudson,” Sasha says after we're finally given the okay to go. “Why, tell me why, Ava and I were shoved into an impromptu interrogation and not you or Drake?”

“They were questioning us. But we had our creds on us.”

“And it took them this long to read a fire and police badge? Don’t they know you?”

“I know you think I’m a famous cop, baby, but I’m not even in the same division.” Hudson is obviously trying not to smile as he wraps an arm around Sasha’s shoulders, looking at both of us. “You all right? It gets a little chaotic sometimes.”

“The only reason I’m letting it go is because you’re a cop, and I bet you were overzealous when you first started,” Sasha snaps.

Hudson laughs, but after a minute he gives me a sympathetic look. “Sorry about this, Avie. Sort of put a damper on something awesome.”

“Carina is going to kill me.” I clamp my hands over my burning cheeks. “You know they’ll call her with a police report since her name is on the sign-in.”

Hudson doesn’t deny it, and simply rests a hand on my shoulder. “She can’t get mad when this wasn’t your fault.”

Oh, that’s hilarious. Carina will find a way to blame this on me. I close my eyes and try to calm the rush of blood to my head, the pound of my pulse in the back of my throat. “Why did the cops think we were breaking in?”

Hudson lets out a long sigh. “Someone called. A neighbor, probably. I was going to ask after I checked on you two. People likely know the couple is out of town, so they just reacted.”

Knowing it was all a misunderstanding doesn’t slow my pulse. It felt like the entire bomb squad was bursting through the door. The longer I take to look around, the more I realize there are only three cop cars and a total of six police officers.

Still, I would’ve liked to not have fallen into a puddle of ugly crying in front of so many people. It’s a reaction to high stress. My therapist once told me, due to things I experienced so young in life, I’ve developed wailing as my defense mechanism. Some people fight, some people flee, some people freeze. I burst into uncontrollable sobs.

Awesome.

I barely hear Hudson and his sweet promises that soon we're going to laugh about this, and step out into the entryway of the house. Dusty footprints mark the front entry, the kitchen, and the front of the living room.

Looks like I'll be here until the wee hours. I'm not allowing the newlyweds to come home to such a mess.

"Hey." Drake steps next to my side, hands in his pockets. His jaw pulses with irritation.

Drake towers over me at his six three to my petite five four, but I use my shoulder to nudge his. "Hey."

Funny, but his frustration eases mine. Always the protector. I know my brother enough to know he's not frustrated his night was uprooted; he's angry on my behalf. I love the guy, but he's going to get an ulcer worrying someday.

It's what he's always done, I guess.

"I'm going to stick around and help you clean up," Drake says.

"D, no." I place a hand on his shoulder. "You have Charlie and work and—"

"I've already called Mom," he says. "She offered to get him to school, and I'm off tomorrow, remember?"

I give my brother a soft smile, grateful he's here. Truth be told, I don't want to be alone when my nerves are still on fire and jittery.

Once the house is clear, we head back inside. Drake starts sweeping the tiles coated in red and brown dust footprints, and stares at the picture I place on the entryway table. No doubt he's looking exactly where I am.

"Think he ever wonders about us?" I whisper.

Drake dumps the dust into a plastic garbage sack. His face is coated in dark scruff, but I still catch the tension in his jaw.

"No." He speaks with such finality it's hard to argue. "I don't think we even cross his mind."

I turn back to Ryder's face in the front row of the picture. Dark eyes, chestnut hair, but he's stiff. I can't imagine the man in the picture tossing his head back and laughing at made up words to Broadway musicals, or painting toenails with such intense focus his tongue sticks out the side, or reading sexy fantasy romance books even though his face turns red at some of the scenes.

Drake seals off the garbage bag, and tells me he'll be in the back dumping the bags in the bin outside.

A few flashing lights draws my gaze out the window. Lingering officers talk with a guy next to a black Range Rover. He's wearing a ball cap, but there is a familiarity about him. Trim, yet meaty where muscles ought to be meaty, dark hair, and sweats that shouldn't be allowed to be out in public since they're too perfect for his lower body.

He reminds me of Ryder. The way he's standing casually but his fingers are flicking by his sides. Ryder always did that.

Wait. I squint. That ... that guy *is* Ryder.

It's an out of body experience. Like my consciousness is begging me to stay back, but my feet are moving forward.

Drake is in the backyard, far away since the house is massive, and I'm glad. He doesn't need to see this. I'm going to the past, and I'm going to let it have a piece of my mind.

"It was a misunderstanding." His raspy voice sears through my heart. Memories of that rough, rock salt sound against my ear fill my skull to the brim.

What am I doing? What am I going to say? It's been nearly a decade.

The cop at his side asks him another question. I think I hate the officer because it makes Ryder talk in that voice again. It makes me come to an awkward halt somewhere in the middle of the road.

"Look," Ryder says. His back is to me, fingers still twitching. "I thought someone was breaking in. Griffin forgets to lock his door all the time. I need to take care of his stupid cat."

He's become a solid brick of well-honed muscles beneath a black T-shirt and the kryptonite of womankind—gray sweatpants. He still has the same messy hazelnut hair and same subtle side-to-side sway he does when he's trying to stand still.

I can't do this. I cannot do this.

New tears burn my eyes as I whip around, desperate to look anywhere but at Ryder Huntington. Not tears of sadness. Not stress tears. These are hot from loss. From unforgettable feelings of being abandoned and tossed aside.

My fists clench until the curves of my fingernails carve half-moons into the meat of my palms.

This vitriol is a shield. Without it, I'd be looking at Ryder with longing and regret and a thousand questions of why. Why did he do the things he did? Why did he ghost me so many years ago? Why did he turn on my brother and break his heart?

“Ava?”

My quick sprint back to safety comes to a halt. Emotion stings behind my eyes, but I refuse to reveal even a glimmer of tears as I turn around. I will not break into hacking sobs, and I hate that my resolve is partly for his sake. Ryder hated when I cried, not because they were loud or annoying, but he always told me when I cried it felt like his chest was splitting in two.

I don't want to see him with the panicked look of helplessness, or worse—what if he stopped caring to the point my tears would leave him utterly indifferent?

I lift my chin, hugging my middle like a shield against whatever is about to happen.

Ryder's eyes widen when he takes me in from leggings, to oversized sweater, to the knot of scattered blonde hair on my head.

“This is the designer we mentioned,” the officer says.

Ryder's face pales. Good. He deserves it. He deserves all the bad karma, all the things. He deserves to ...

Ugh, my heart is a traitor. Here I am, desperate to spew my disdain, my resentment, and the more those rich, dark eyes soften as he looks at me, the more I want to fling my stupid arms around his neck and hold him close.

“I didn’t believe it was you,” I say thickly. “But ... I had to be sure.”

“Ava.” He says my name again, almost like he’s entered a dream.

“It’s fine.” I take a step back toward the house. “It’s fine.”

Ryder tilts his head. He needs to stop looking at me like that. Like there is this delicious wonder at the sight of me.

He left. Not me. Him. He didn’t want me, so I’d be a fool to think otherwise.

“Okay,” I say, rubbing my hands down my thighs. “Now that we have all this cleared up, I have work to do.”

“Wait.”

I don’t wait, I keep my quick pace toward the Marks’s home.

“Ava.”

“No,” I say. “I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“At least let me—”

“Drake is in there.” I wheel around, but know I’ve shot the good shot. Ryder stops at once. One of those classic, all Ryder scowls twists on his lip. I soften my voice. “Unless you want to tell me what happened, I doubt either of you two have plans to hug it out. Right?”

Ryder steps back, but I pretend I see a bit of torment in his eyes. I pretend he’s battling the same need to pull me close as I am with him.

But it seems his distaste for my brother wins out against anything he might’ve felt for me.

Ryder storms back toward the Range Rover. I ought to be used to the back of his head. It’s the last memory I have of the

man. This moment is big, astronomical, really. A greedy, broken part of me wants to chase after him, to merely touch him, even for a moment.

But I don't follow.

The heart can only take so much before it breaks forever.

The entryway is a little disheveled when I step back into the house.

"Where did you go?" Drake pokes his head around the corner, broom in hand.

"Signature for the police report." I lie so easily. But I'm really trying to be the neighborhood hero.

Facing off with Ryder is plenty of electric pain to my system I didn't expect. To watch two men I care about fall back into disdain and hatred ... I won't make it through that a second time.

Ryder



I SLURP A BOWL FILLED WITH BLAND CEREAL. MY PULSE hasn't stopped racing in my head since I saw her face in the dark.

Ava Williams.

It was a shot to the gut. A pain, a gift, a torment I'd buried deep inside until it all crashed to the surface. My head is spinning; my T-shirt feels too tight against my skin, even the cereal tastes rougher on my tongue.

Surprises are not my thing, but tonight's surprise wasn't horrible. Not entirely. Seeing Ava sliced open an old scar in my heart, made me want things I shouldn't want, and started the haze building in my head.

But it's not horrible because it's Ava. Soul mates are a fantasy, but she is the woman that'd make me believe in fairy tales. The same way the emotions of musicals bring tranquility, Ava Williams was a security blanket, a bit of serenity capable of chasing away worry, tension, fear, anything.

Parker saw the cops and had hurried down to meet me with Bridger Cole, his rockstar brother-in-law. I'd been anxious to disappear, and gave them both a brief explanation that I called because it looked like someone was inside the house, then explained nothing more.

Probably not the best way to leave it, since I'm sure both were worried about wives and kids and important people like that, but I had to go.

I slurp another bite.

I'd been wrong about Griffin's surprise for Wren. He hadn't hired deep cleaners—he'd hired a professional designer to make their new house beautiful for when they got back.

A knot of hot embarrassment balls in my chest, followed by an unnecessary bloom of pride. Ava did it. She'd wanted to become a designer, and she did it. Makes me wonder if cutting ties really had been best for her since she wouldn't have been here if we'd stayed together. I hate the thought, but, unbidden, it's there.

The job is perfect for her. She was always sketching, always trying to make simple things stunning.

I wish I hadn't been so hasty and added drama to her job, though. With a shake to my head, I toss the rest of my bland cereal in the sink and make plans to drift into mindless nothingness through music or maybe TV. I don't need to be embarrassed or ashamed. I'd hope my teammates would look out for my property the same way. Hard to tell from the outside if it's an innocent designer or a thief.

I keep telling myself that, but it doesn't do much to ease the tension under my ribs.

My phone dings on the counter. Heat floods my face as I read Griffin's text to the group with Parker, Dax, and me.

Griffin: *Hey, so I'm coming to you from my HONEYMOON, but did anyone send the cops to my house and get my Birdie's post-honeymoon surprise arrested? Not cool guys. Not cool.*

They're never going to let me live this down.



“Hey, pal.” My dad winks at me and holds up an iced coffee before setting it on my kitchen counter. Josh met me when I was three, but he's my dad in every way that matters. On the outside we're different. He's former military, a rancher, and

the life of the party. But we've always gotten along; he's never tried to make me someone I'm not.

"You're ten minutes early." I sip the coffee and reach for my shoes by the door. "Almost like you love running."

"I've got to throw you off at least once a week." He grips my shoulder and squeezes tightly, chuckling. "And I do enjoy running, but only with you. Any other time and I'll be cussing so much your mom will divorce me."

I grin. My mom is the epitome of kid-cussing. A lot of darnnits, goodness sakes, and the favorite—criminy—were the elect words. My dad is the opposite. He was a marine, but his mouth is the stereotype of a sailor.

My parents are oil and water, but they've been fascinating to watch create one of the best relationships I've ever seen. Dad has always been simple and straightforward. I'm not sure if he always was or became so for my benefit; a man who taught me to never accept obstacles as the end-all. He's the one who told me to make what others thought of as quirks or weaknesses into strengths.

"Want to push it today?" he asks as we stretch. "We can take the hillside route."

I like routine, but nod anyway.

The pressure of exercise in my lungs, the determination to reach a goal, the stimulation of burning my muscles, became a way to soothe anxiety and stress. Living on a ranch added to it. Chores like lifting hay bales, fixing heavy beams on fences, and digging too many trenches to count became a happy place.

The baseball season is my passion, but the off-season is always a respite I forget I need until it's here.

We don't say much while we run. We're silently competitive, always pushing each other to reach a new goal, a new milestone. By the time the route loops us back to my house, we're both gasping, drenched in sweat, and red in the face.

"Kid," my dad leans over his knees, his dark hair plastered to his forehead. "I lied."

“About ... about what?” I lace my fingers behind my head.

“You don’t keep me young. You kill me. What was that, Ryder?” He chuckles but leans back against the side of my house, eyes closed.

I scoff and lead the way into my house. Dad collapses onto one of my barstools. He gives me a nod when I hand him a chilled water bottle.

“Something on your mind, pal?”

A furrow gathers between my brows. “How do you do that?”

“What?”

“Get a sense of something from a run.”

“You’re my kid.” He uses the back of his hand to smack me in the gut as I come around to sit beside him. “It’s a gut feeling. You get them too.”

Sometimes I have knee-jerk reactions, I guess. Like when Skye was bullied by her ex over her brain injury, I jumped to her defense without overthinking. When Griffin had a confrontation with Wren’s former stepbrother, I had fists clenched, ready to throw a punch if he needed it.

I’m overprotective, but I don’t know if I could recognize if my dad were upset by the way he ran up a hill.

“Ryder.” Dad tilts his head. “What’s on your mind?”

A beautiful, twitchy woman who always saw the good in people. I twist the cap on my water, silent for a moment as I gather the words. “I screwed up.”

Not exactly how I planned to say it, but the truth is probably best.

“How so?”

I bite the inside of my cheek. I’m almost thirty and still hate the idea of disappointing my parents.

They never put off any sense they were disappointed, but words from others over the years have left me with a heady

fear I'm constantly on the verge of letting them down. I'm not outgoing like them. I wasn't the brainiac they could brag about. I'm good at baseball and working out.

My dad would argue my meager list of talents and probably add ten more, but he's biased.

On this, though, it could go either way. I'm leaning toward disappointment.

"Can it stay between us?" I ask.

He grunts. "You know how I feel about that."

No secrets. It's his hardline rule with my mom. He doesn't keep secrets, nor does she.

"I know," I tell him, "but I'm not comfortable having everyone talk about it. Mom will probably call, and I haven't figured out how I even feel yet."

My dad considers me for a pause. "All right. But if you tell me you're dying or getting traded or dating someone, I'm telling your mom."

A grin curls in the corner of my mouth. "None of the above."

With a deep breath, I tell him about the blunder over the weekend. I tell him how facing Ava after all these years shocked my system, and all I could say was her name a few times. I explain as best I can the conflict of wanting to run away and toward her at the same time.

He takes a drink of his water, but his lips keep twitching.

"Dad." I nudge his shoulder. "Are you laughing?"

"I'm sorry." He blurts out. "It's not funny."

"Then why are you laughing?"

"Because." He pinches his lips into a tight line. "Okay, it's *sort of* funny. You really called the cops?"

I rub a hand over my face. "Yes, and I wish I hadn't."

"Okay." He holds up a hand in surrender. "Okay, I'm sorry. I won't laugh, and I wasn't laughing that it was Ava, just that I

can imagine you thinking you're a hero, and it all blowing up. I would've enjoyed your face for a few minutes."

"My mouth was stuck open," I grumble. "I looked like a dead trout."

Dad has to pause again, probably trying not to laugh like he promised, but soon his expression sobers. "I'm sure it was difficult to see her after all this time."

I nod. Words aren't enough to describe the terror and elation at seeing her, so I don't try.

"Do you want to talk about what happened? You've never told me everything."

I shake my head. The shame from all that was said between two best friends eats me up when I allow myself time to think on it.

My mind drifts to the two voicemails on my phone. Why do I keep them? They're probably nothing more than Drake repeating everything he said once before.

"Maybe you should get in touch with her and apologize," he says.

"I wasn't being malicious."

"I know. But even good intentions can hurt."

"I don't know how to talk to her."

"You do." My dad gives me a smile. "Out of anyone in the world, I'd never doubt you know exactly how to be you around Ava Williams. It might take time and some getting used to, but this might be your sign to heal something that broke."

I'm not one for signs. I like lists and tangible things I can touch. But I can't deny there is a darkened piece of my heart that died when I cut Ava out of my life. I almost go down the path of agreeing with him, of considering opening old scars and letting her back in if she wanted.

Then, like a slap to the face, I recall what put those scars there.

“I think it’s best to keep a distance,” I say after a long pause. “It was an embarrassing mistake, that’s all.”

“I think it’s more than that.”

“It’s not.”

My dad takes another drink. He doesn’t agree with me, but I want to stop this conversation. It’s settling like a slab of iron in my stomach. I flick a few fingers, shake out my hands, and force a subject change. We talk about the upcoming design work on an after-school field house I’ve been working on with Dallas Anderson. I leave out that the design firm Ava works for is the one hired to complete the task.

I leave out anything to do with her or I’ll be forced to admit I can’t bring her back into my life because I can’t risk losing her again.

Ryder



I GLARE AT THE TEXT ON MY SCREEN. THE GUY IS GOING TO get the clue someday. How many messages is he going to send before he gets the hint I'm not writing back?

Mitch: *Ryder! Did you get my last message?*

Mitch: *You up for helping your cousin out this weekend? I have a client dinner and they are HUGE baseball fans. I'll buy if you'll supply tickets to the season opener. I'm being direct, you like direct, right?*

I'm not a petty person, but when I step into the clubhouse training room, a smile passes over my mouth.

Mitch can poke me all he wants. He doesn't have his own baseball card.

A week after the incident, my teammates have finally stopped mocking me for the police slip up. Griffin and Wren returned from the honeymoon in wedded bliss and let me know they were laughing at me behind my back in different ways. Griffin said it to my face. Wren is more subtle, always asking if we needed to call the cops, or if she invited her mom and aunt over would I have them in handcuffs.

Funny.

After speaking with Dad, every day I've looked at Ava's number. It might not even be the right one. Truth be told, I feel

like a coward. I've done nothing since I fumbled back into her life.

To avoid thoughts of her crystal blue eyes and full lips and the way she can be disheveled and utterly sexy all at once, I draw my focus back into the field house.

The place will welcome anyone from kindergarten to twelfth grade, but when I told Dallas I'd like a special focus for kids who deal with chronic illness, neurodivergent kids, homeless kids, or maybe those who simply don't know where they fit, Dallas loved it.

Being Skye's dad and knowing how out of place she felt for so many years after her accident, he wasn't a hard sell on the focus group.

We bought an old warehouse, it's been gutted and rebuilt inside, so what is the issue now?

At my sides, my fingers tap my thighs while I wait outside the board offices. I don't know why I haven't been invited in, but I'm starting to feel a lot like a kid in time out. My money is as good as anyone's, and I—

The door to the office swings open. Dallas offers his standard half grin that makes him look like he's mid-thirties instead of fifty.

“Ryder, come on in. Sorry for making you wait; Dean had some objections.” He enunciates the name and cuts a look at Dean McMann. An investor from the days when Dallas's old man owned the Kings.

Ah, the delay in letting me in makes a bit of sense now. McMann is a stickler when it comes to players mingling with business. To him, athletes are products of an industry. Pieces in a game of billionaires to shift and play as they see fit.

Dallas owns the team, but a few lingering people with vested interest in Burton Field are allowed their say.

I take a moment to shake the hands of the board members. Most are polite, they give me their jovial feedback on the season, crack a few jokes I don't find particularly funny, but still leave me feeling like a kid who doesn't know what he's

messing with. I have over half a million invested in this project.

Right now, I'm the biggest player at the table.

With a tug at my cuffs, I take in every eye.

"Ladies," I nod at the two sisters who are basically heiresses of the gold rush. Old money passed down from early railroad times. Lola, the older sister, gives me a wink. Her lilac hair is done up in a tight bun on the top of her head. If anyone is most like a loving grandma, it's going to be Lola. I face the men. "Gentlemen."

"Mr. Huntington," Dean says dryly.

The man is sagging skin on bones. I have a great deal of respect for the elders in my life. A lesson my mom pounded into my head when her parents lived with us until they both passed.

Dean is eighty-nine and works like he's forty-five without progressing his mind to a modern era. He can hardly stomach the fact that Lola and her sister have equal say on what goes on at Burton Field, or that Dallas put his sister in as an equal partner, a thing the late Mr. Anderson would've never done.

I take a seat in one of the padded office chairs and keep my expression impassive. "I hear there is a delay on the project."

"There is." Dallas sits next to me. "I'm afraid Haven has decided to cancel the contract."

"What?" I sit straighter. "Why?"

If I believed in fate, I'd think it was bound to toss me back into Ava's path after I talked with Griffin and he admitted he found the designers for his house because I'd hired the same company to work on the field house.

Like I said, it's almost like I was bound to stumble right in Ava's path no matter what.

Haven Aesthetic Architecture was the firm I'd hired to complete the interior of the Youth Field House. I'd been unsettled when I found out Ava worked for them, but buried

the issue through logic and a solid plan already in place long before last week's disaster.

Eventually, I accepted I could work with the same firm because I'd never *really* interact with the designers anyway.

But if they bail now, the field house will remain drywall and empty rooms.

It'll be delayed from opening. It'll change everything.

Already the disquiet from an abrupt shift in plans, in a carefully thought-out schedule, tightens in my gut.

"I'm afraid there was a more lucrative, time sensitive offer made," Dallas says. "Sea Wing Hotel chain is opening a new building in Henderson."

I don't care about a hotel.

"And," Dean goes on, "after the debacle the other night, they felt working with us now would not be in their best interest."

My chest gets tight, like a fist curls around my lungs. "I explained the situation."

"Carina Haven doesn't seem to care, sweetheart," Lola says. I assume she's trying to be sympathetic, but at least her voice is calmer than Dean.

"So we find a new designer." I ignore how Ava's face flashes in my head. She works for Haven, so I guess that gets rid of my fear of crashing into her again on the jobsite. Right?

I don't know why the thought of finding anyone else all at once feels like another betrayal at her expense. It's not. We don't owe each other anything.

Dean snorts his disgust. "And go through price negotiations again? No."

"I wasn't asking, sir." I grind my teeth for a few breaths, opting for logic. He'll respond to logic, surely. "I am the largest investor in this project—"

"But the name of Burton Field is on it," Dean snaps back.

I was wrong. He's not using logic; he wants to reclaim his power.

"You gave the money, but the organization will see it through for decades to come," Dean says. "Long after your retirement, Mr. Huntington."

I have no plans to retire. Not anytime soon, anyway.

"I'm sorry, Ryder," Dallas says. "I know you wanted to see this done before next season."

"There is a wait-list of kids," I say, voice rough. "Kids that expected to enroll next spring. Dallas, some don't have years."

Dallas's jaw pulses. "I wish there was more we could do, but finding a new designer will cut our timetable by a lot."

"What if I can get Haven to reconsider?"

"We don't have time for this," Dean says.

"We have time," I argue. "Let me get them to reconsider, and if they don't, I want to reserve the right to fund the interior design myself. With interest." I'm desperate, and I hate when I sound desperate. It adds to the feeling of chaos I despise so much.

Dallas considers what I'm saying for a total of ten seconds before he stands and shakes my hand. "Convince them to move forward, and you've got it. If you can't, then I'll see to it you're free to use your money how you want, Mr. Huntington."

A weight is lifted off my chest. I thank him, ignore the, no doubt, scathing glare from Dean, and turn to go.

"Ryder," Dallas says before I leave. "I wish you luck. Carina Haven is not an easy woman to negotiate with when money is on the line."

I'm not worried about Carina Haven. I'm worried about the designer working for her. I've avoided the fact that she reentered my life for good reason. Maybe it's a little cowardly, but I've had it in my head that staying away from Ava is for the best.

Odds are, I can work with one side of the company and Ava won't even know I've been there.

I tell myself the same lie for the entire drive.

Ava



“TELL ME, AGAIN, WHAT YOU WERE THINKING?” CARINA clicks her tongue. She crosses her ankles and taps one toe of her stilettos. The woman is the epitome of pizazz in her cerulean skirt with ruffles striking her mid-thigh, and a sequin top that slings off one shoulder.

This is the ultimate humiliation: To be seated in the center of Carina’s office like I’m on trial. Maybe in a way I am, but a prickle of nerves starts at the base of my spine and dances up to my scalp until I’m certain sweat will be dribbling down my temples any second.

Annika, Carina’s number two, is seated to my left. James is on my right. One sends me dagger eyes, the other gives me a smirk like we’ll laugh about this over the lattes Carlos brought when this is over.

I wish I shared James’s optimism.

If I thought last week was bad, this week is worse. Much worse. I blame Carlos, the king of lattes and Carina’s current lover.

I’ve lost track of Carina’s frequent fliers at this point. Usually they’re nameless, but I know Carlos’s name since he’s nice to us peasants and brings us coffee and carbs. However, the man is not my favorite today. He brought Carina back from their romantic getaway early and should’ve kept her away. Preferably until the new year. That would’ve been ideal.

I try to glare at the man from where he’s slouched on a rich, purple couch, his long legs extended, and his cell phone

in front of his face. As if he senses my scrutiny, Carlos lifts his dark eyes and winks.

Ugh. At least he's not talking. That Puerto Rican accent has the power to black out the mind and numb all reason.

"Do you plan on answering me, Ava?" Carina presses with a little shriek to her tone. "Or should I leave you alone with Carlos?"

Kill. Me. Now.

"Sorry. I ... I really don't know what you want me to say, Carina. Someone called the police, but it was resolved quickly." Lies. Ryder did not resolve quickly. The arrogant, sexy man has been stealing my thoughts all week. I thought of attempting the phone number I still keep tucked like a dirty secret in my contacts, but never did.

What would I say?

Hi, Ryder, great to see you over the weekend despite the circumstances. You know, I still cry over you. Oh, and sometimes I watch your games and hate you all over again. You suck. Oh, but I think my heart still wants to love you.

Yeah. I didn't call.

Carina narrows her eyes. "Resolved. And that is an adequate answer for you? You're satisfied? No thought for if there might've been any damage done to Haven's reputation?"

"Well, I—"

"No care that you had unauthorized people on the job site?"

"Carina, I only—"

"I don't want excuses." Carina holds up a finger, silencing me straightaway. With a heavy sigh, she steeples her fingers in front of her plump lips. "You are removed from the Sea Wing Hotel job."

My stomach sinks. Thuds, splatters, dissolves across the polished wood floors.

“Carina.” My voice is too rough. “Please, I already created the design boards.”

Carina announced her effort to land the bid on Sea Wing two months ago. It’s a big project and to fit it in alongside the others the firm already had would equal an enormous payday. Carina was desperate to win it. I was put to work on tentative designs straightaway, and I’ve spent the better part of six weeks organizing and strategizing the order of rooms and how best to utilize the unused space.

“Rina,” Carlos purrs like a Spanish prince. “So harsh, mi amor.”

Does she not have ears? Did she not hear the man speak? The smooth milk chocolate doused in vanilla then wrapped in velvet sound that just filled every crevice of this room? That voice?

Carina is made of stone. No other explanation. She doesn’t even flinch. “Turn over your design boards to Annika. You’ll work on securing new clients.”

“Why not let her take the youth field house, Carina?” James says.

My chest pinches. I only learned of the contract with Burton Field after the blowup at the Marks house. More baseball, more Vegas Kings. I don’t know anything more about the project other than it involves kids.

A definite plus in the favor of baseball.

Carina puffs out her lips. “Gag. The contract is canceled. Thankfully.”

“Why did we cancel again?” James asks.

“Branding.” She waves her hand dismissively. “We specialize in upper class clientele. Naturally, having the police show up to our site is bad branding and bad form. It gave me the perfect excuse.”

Ah. Got it. Now the debacle is for her benefit, but I’m still getting punished for someone else calling the police on me. Fabulous.

“The only reason I even considered it is for Dallas Anderson,” Carina says, wistfully. “He has deep pockets and connections. But ...” Carina chuckles like a villain in a fairy tale, “so does Matt Hansen of Sea Wing Hotels, but without the jobs involving dirty kids who steal and sell drugs.”

It’s a strike to the face, and she doesn’t even realize it, doesn’t even know how deeply the words ache.

How am I supposed to survive working for this woman any longer? She’s a horrid human, and I’m not sure using her as a steppingstone, no matter how impressive, is worth it as I try to build up my name in the world of design.

I scratch at the vicious itch blossoming across my scalp. A sign of nerves. The heat begins under my hair, then spreads like a thousand creeping things down my neck and spine, until my knees bounce and I try to cross my toes in my shoes.

“Annika.” Carina’s voice snaps me back to the moment. “Rearrange the schedule. Show Ava the ropes around the office.”

“Yes, Ms. Haven.” Annika scowls at me. Resentment for not setting her up with Drake during the summer turned a once amicable working relationship into something steely and cold.

Let her hate me. I’d do it all again. She’s said more than once how much she hates kids. Hard to date a man with a son when you think his offspring is a sticky urchin.

I return the look with a smile and cross my leg over one knee.

Carina leans back in her office chair and smiles. That wicked, evil-stepmother kind of smile. “I think I’ll like having two assistants.”

Her little jab even causes delectable Carlos to snicker. Ha. So, *so* funny. She’ll love having a second assistant, no doubt, since one has a salary with a smaller base pay, you know, because I earned commissions off *design* projects!

Mom and Dad would help, but I’ll never ask. Unfortunately for them, the two kids they raised were already stubbornly independent when we met. They encouraged it and

made it worse with all their support and “you’ve got this” attitudes. They have no one to blame but themselves.

That means I’ll handle this financial and professional setback another way. This isn’t a failure. It’s a lesson.

I’ll find another opportunity somehow.

With a dismissive wave, Carina shoos us out of her office.

Out in the hall, James tugs on my elbow. “You okay? That was a little brutal.”

He always acts like he cares. We’ve gone out twice, and I don’t know why I don’t take the plunge with James. He’s handsome, successful, and considerate. Something holds me back and I can’t pinpoint the reason.

Vulnerability is a big ick with people I don’t know. I mean, I know James, but only around five people *know* me. A handful of people who know all the deepest thoughts, richest emotions, darkest fears in my head. I’ve told James a few basic, need-to-know aspects about my life that I tell anyone by date two, but nothing deeper.

Like an instinct, I paste a sickly-sweet smile on my face. “I’ll be fine. Nothing I can’t handle.”

One corner of James’ mouth curls. “That’s what I like about you, Ava. Always a go-getter. Nothing fazes you.”

Praise from a man with scruff and a suit should send a swirl of heated butterflies whipping through my gut. I feel ... nothing. Officially, today is the day I declare my hormones are dusty and tired and broken.

I’m nearly twenty-nine and no one has sent my heart to my throat like ... someone else who I refuse to think about another second.

I’m about to thank James politely, in a professional way, when he blurts out, “Carlos will have Carina occupied for at least an hour in there. Want to get coffee?”

My grin falters. It never gets any easier letting someone down. James is such a nice guy, and he ticks all my boxes except that measly, annoying box called passion.

“She doesn’t have time for a coffee.” Annika marches into the front office like a harbinger of bad omens. She slips on her headset and folds into her chair. “Sit, Ava. We have a lot of paperwork to get through, thanks to your disaster.”

James gives my forearm a reassuring squeeze, mouths he’ll text me later, and makes his way back to his spacious office with the IT manager and social media guru, who never comes up for air from behind her computer. He will be at peace doing all his engineering, structural viability magic that keeps the foundation of this company running.

The instant he’s gone, Annika wheels on me. “You screwed up royally.”

“I did not. In fact, from the review online, the Marks family is very pleased with the work I did.”

Annika scoffs. “You had the SWAT team barge into a client’s home.”

“SWAT was never there.”

“Not to mention unapproved people on the jobsite.”

“Annika, I’m not the first one to bring help to a job. I needed help with larger items and made sure the job was done.” I take a deep breath, bringing my tone back to a professional level. “Now, what will I be doing in the office?”

I’m certain she mutters something like *wasting my time* under her breath, but I don’t really care to push the envelope. She can pout all she wants. I’m still not setting her up with my brother.

An hour later and it looks like my duties in the office include: making copies, answering Annika’s phone, ensuring schedules align, oh, and bringing coffee to the command center in the front.

I’m a designer with a degree in interior architecture, and I have a feeling I’ll be here for the next eighteen months at least.

Branch out.

The thought always creeps in whenever rotten days at work become tough to bear. I shake it away at once.

I'm bold and confident in a lot of things, but the fear of failure on one of my dreams is a little much to stomach right now. With players like Carina Haven in the design market, and with my dreams more focused on places like hospital wings and group homes, I'm not even positive the market is there.

Each step on the return trip down from the coffee machine is slow, almost lazy. Not my typical attitude at the office. I pride myself on keeping busy and productive. Today, I think I'd saunter for an hour if it kept me away from Annika, who is desperately trying to manifest her inner Carina.

Voices in the front slow my steps even more. A deep rasp is there. Not James, not Carlos.

I'm mishearing. I have to be.

Carina has her pitchy voice on. The one she uses when she flirts with male clients, since she thinks a woman's best weapon in the arsenal is her sexuality. Maybe it works on some, but it's not working on this guy.

There is something wholly satisfying that it doesn't.

"As I said," Carina says, more like a purr than an actual human voice. "I have no spare designers to assist you. I would love to help Dallas, I really would, but we are going to decline."

I'd pick out the rock salt rasp that follows from a crowd anywhere. To be honest, it's giving Carlos's satin voice a run for its money.

"Ms. Haven, I'm going to be blunt. This project is designed to help not only at-risk and neurodiverse youth, but also kids who have auto-immune and terminal diseases. Some of these kids can't wait."

Knife. To. The. Heart.

"As I said, there is no one to spare," Carina says flippantly. "I know a few other firms I can recommend to assist you. Do send Dallas my best."

She's dismissive and probably made of metal instead of flesh and bone.

My tongue swipes over my bottom lip. I swore an oath to despise baseball, but I had no clue this field house was designed for more than after school programs. My blood tingles in my fingertips. My pulse throbs in my neck. The adrenaline that comes before doing something bold, something reckless, floods my veins.

Am I doing this?

Oh, I'm doing this.

Mug in hand, I round the corner. Carina stands with one hip popped, her arms crossed over her chest with intention to draw the eye to her cleavage. I have no issue with women being proud of their figures, but Carina uses it like a weapon. Cornering men until they have no choice but to get close in order to escape.

Annika has a splash of pink on her cheeks, and she keeps fluttering her lashes. James leans against the corner wall, merely watching out of boredom probably.

The man in question has his back toward me, a fitted suit over his lean strength, and I hate myself a little for taking a few breaths to drink him all in.

Before I have time to lose my backbone, I clear my throat. "Excuse the interruption, but I couldn't help but hear you need an industrial designer. I'd be interested in the job."

Carina's mouth drops. Annika lets out a little gasp. James chuckles from the doorway. I don't blame them. No one defies Carina Haven, and here I am about to lose my job on the hope this guy wasn't all words, and actually will hire an independent designer.

He turns over his shoulder.

The backbone I fought so hard to keep dissolves into a fine powder. The patter of my heart comes to an abrupt halt, and I lose feeling in my toes from the shock of pure confusion and elation at the sight of his face.

I swallow loudly. "I'd be interested, Ryder."

Ryder



NOT ONCE IN MY LIFE HAVE I WONDERED WHAT IT FELT LIKE TO be buried alive beneath the concrete of a sidewalk. But my ribs are crushing in on my lungs, and I'm not sure my head is working right through the haze spinning around in my brain.

In the light of day, I can appreciate everything I left behind in the worst way.

Her face is still an ache to the chest. Once a hot knife that dulled to a simmer of pain.

Now, it is the reason my pulse won't stop thudding in my head.

Ten years hasn't dampened the shape of her slender face or the bright blue light in those eyes.

Even still, this Ava is vastly different from the last image I've kept in a dark, secret place in my memories. Her hair is long and smooth, her cheeks full and flushed, her body curvy and perfect. My throat tightens. The last time I saw her was in my rearview mirror with red, glassy eyes, and tears on those cheeks.

I've closed myself off to sentimentality and vulnerability. It does nothing but break hearts, but the memories of those tears ... those crush a piece of me I forgot existed.

I hate that there is an immediate softness toward her. One that brings me to a stop. One that keeps me planted here, gawking.

“I apologize,” Carina Haven says; her long fingers brush over my arm. Even in a suitcoat, the touch leaves an uncomfortable prickle on my skin. She points her scowl at Ava. “Miss Williams, this is wholly unprofessional. I need to speak with you in my office. Now.”

Ava drags her bottom lip between her teeth. My gaze drops to that mouth like a neon billboard, and I can’t look away.

With a hard swallow, she musters a touch of composure and ignores her boss entirely. “I ... can do the job, Mr. Huntington.”

My brain hasn’t moved on from the reality that we are standing here again. Obviously, the risk was there, but I’d convinced myself I could do this without disrupting her life again.

I’m an idiot. I’m pretty sure my mouth is half open as I barely hear her describe her qualifications.

The sharp tone of Carina Haven snaps me out of my daze.

“Get into my office.” The last word slips out of Carina’s teeth like a hiss.

What am I doing here? All at once a flood of memories, the beautiful, the horrible, the ugly, slams into my skull. I need to go. Now.

“Excuse me,” I mumble out, then spin on my heel and beeline it for the door.

My pace is aggressive; it’s intentional. To people strolling along the sidewalk, I’ve no doubt I look like a guy who is about to implode.

Ten steps from my Range Rover her voice stops me.

“Ryder.”

Ice floods my veins. My name. Her voice. It draws me to a swift stop, with a secretly needy desire to hear it again.

Ava hugs her middle, but she stands with the confidence of a queen. “I *am* qualified for this job. I have three years of experience in this sort of industrial building, along with office

spaces, designer homes—in fact, I designed the house of one of your teammates. You know, the one where you called the cops on me.”

My stomach backflips as I half listen, half slap myself in the back of the head. Guilt is one of those sour, sharp emotions I hate, and it’s only made worse when it hovers around anything to do with Ava.

I don’t know why I’m digging my heels in. Logically, she’s qualified; she’s perfect, and it changes ... nothing.

What good would it do to work together? Seeing her now doesn’t change the facts of what broke a long time ago.

The bright warmth that came upon seeing her shifts into a frigid cold. One filled to the brim with resentment and hardened emotions.

“Miss Williams,” I say, and the formality of it hits a nerve.

For Ava, it adds a bitter curl to her lip. “Yes, *Mr. Huntington?*”

Touché. I don’t like that. At all. I flick my fingers by my sides. Ava’s eyes drop to the movement, but she doesn’t say anything.

She used to call me Ride or Die. She said I gave everything my all. It’s a nice way of saying I get stuck and can’t get my attention off any one thing until I was satisfied. But Ava always made it sound like a talent, a strength, not something odd.

She was the one who told me I had the secret enthusiasm of hummingbird wings. In this moment, she’s looking at me like I’m the guy who hangs eviction notices.

“I don’t think your skill set is what I’m looking for,” I say. Not one word has any passion behind it.

“Oh really? By all means, tell me which qualification isn’t living up to your standards.”

My tongue weighs two pounds. Ava glances to the side, and I use the moment to really look at her after all this time. Pink cheeks, bright, curious eyes. She’s the same Ava in so

many ways. Powerful, stubborn, but there is a new heaviness on her shoulders. A pressure that curves her spine, one she probably doesn't want people to see.

I always saw her.

What burdens her now? What secrets does she keep that she'd send on pink lined paper with doodles in the margins if we passed notes today?

She has no idea what she's doing to me.

The thing is, we're not the same people anymore. We don't need to be friendly, not even acquaintances. In truth, I'd say distance is probably healthiest for everyone.

"I'm going to say no."

A furrow tugs her brows together. Worse than anything, she looks at me like I'm nothing more than a big dollop of disappointment laid at her feet.

"I see." Ava straightens her back and takes a step away from me. "Then, good luck on your project, Ryder."

"Ava ..." I let her name simmer and fade on my tongue. Why keep it going? What would I ask anyway? How are you? What has life been like the last decade? How do you feel about Phantom being removed from Broadway?

What is Drake like now?

There it is; the real reason I choose to keep a barbed wall in place. How is it possible to balance feelings for the sister when the brother hates me? When I hate him? I hate him so much because I loved him so much. The knife he rammed in my back might be gone, but the scars remain, and that makes me want to hate him even more.

"What is it, Ryder?" Ava asks. "I forgot that talking between us is always based on when you want. So, I'll stand here and wait until you say what you want to say."

The things I could say would take until the sun set. I say nothing. Simply stand there, jaw locked, fists shoved in the pockets of my slacks.

“Hmm.” Ava’s nose wrinkles. “If I had to guess, you’re still an oyster, so ...”

“I could live without the oyster lecture,” I blurt out without thinking. Heat teases the tops of my ears.

Ava cracks her thumb knuckle like she’s about to step into a fight ring. “Release the pearl, Ryder. Let it out. There is some glistening little gem of real words mixed with all those grunts and scowls.”

A smile is not happening. I will make my mouth bloody and shredded from biting my cheek to keep a smile buried and dead. There won’t be a greater challenge I’ll face today. Ava is miming cracking and digging into an oyster shell as she talks.

“Fine.” She tosses her hands in the air. “Stay in your ice cave. Wish I could say it was good to see you, but it honestly makes me want to cry.” Ava offers a condescending kind of curtsy. “Thank you for the opportunity to interview, Mr. Huntington.”

Then, she turns and heads toward the office again.

A little broken shard of me follows.

Once upon a time, she would’ve poked and prodded until she dug out my deepest thoughts, my private musings, no matter how strange. Outwardly, I’m aloof, unbothered. Inside, she’s leaving me in a tangle of barbs and briars, a mix of want and desire, and fear and resentment.

Part of me wants to call her back. But the greater part, the side of me I became after I walked away from the Williams family, wins out.

I turn my back on Ava, and once more drive away with her in the rearview mirror.

Ryder



“STILL NO LUCK WITH FINDING SOMEONE TO TAKE THIS ON, huh?” Parker crosses the dried grass, biting into half his protein bar at once.

I pop a shoulder in a lazy shrug. “Haven’t looked too hard.”

“Really? I thought since it fell through with Haven you’d be knocking on doors looking for a new company right away. Or you could go back and give the job to the Haven designer you shut down.”

I should never have admitted to that. Since leaving Ava two days ago, I’d progressed in nothing. Every time I tried to look up another commercial architect or industrial interior designer, that shadowed look of disappointment flashes in my head.

I’m being ridiculous. A woman I once knew shouldn’t have such an impact on my plans with the center. We’re nothing anymore. The thought alone leaves a sour residue in the back of my throat.

No matter how I want to look at it, bits of Ava Williams are speckled throughout this entire project. Subconsciously or consciously, I don’t want to try to puzzle it out, but it can’t be denied I’d let past memories and a forgotten emotion influence everything from the land to the purpose of this project.

Parker pauses to inspect some of the lines on the outer field. I’d imagined the area would be filled by spring. Fresh, white lines should be painted over the tilled red dirt. Right

now, it's dull and empty. It's a sad plot of land, doomed to sit in misuse for another year.

Multiple sports could be played here. I'll try to brainwash the kids toward baseball, obviously, but if they were into football or soccer or even pickle ball—it'll have the space. Or at least it was supposed to be a new extension for our youngest fans. Our neediest fans.

Outcasts, or the new guys, or kids who feel like they'll never be well enough to play competitively should fill this place. Kids who are too shy to talk to anyone, they were supposed to thrive here. Learn teamwork, athleticism; they were supposed to laugh until they couldn't anymore.

I've been staring at the brown and white brick building for the last hour. It's nothing but a shell of empty rooms and stairwells.

From Parker's truck, Dax and Griffin slide out, muttering about something before Griffin stops at the first sight of me and cuts a white smile over his face.

"I have something to say," he announces.

I frown. "You usually do."

"The world is a better place with the things I say."

"Debatable."

"Fine, my guy, if you don't want to know the best idea on how to get this place up and running by spring training, I'll sit here quietly."

As he says the words, Griffin forces himself to go stiff. It'll last five minutes. Already his lips are rubbing together like his tongue is dancing with a dozen words to spout off, but he has a competitive side too.

I'd like to build on this experiment. What will win out with Griffin Marks? His need to announce every thought in his head, or his drive to win? I hold his stare, daring him to break.

Griffin clears his throat. He shifts on his feet. I hold my ground, unblinking, and cross my arms over my chest in a

silent challenge. I know how to dig my heels in better than anyone I know.

Parker finishes his protein bar, eyes drifting back and forth between us. Dax sets a timer on his phone.

Twenty seconds is all it takes before Griffin blows out a long breath and gives me one of his rare glares. He doesn't like to lose, but if he has something to say, the man acts like he will actually melt if he doesn't get it out.

“You know what? I'm going to tell you anyway,” he says, exasperated as he digs out a business card from his pants pocket. “Want to know why? Because I care about this place, and you need some good works in your life. This is a good thing that has the power to make you smile. I'm concerned about your teeth, man. I'm surprised they aren't ground into stubs by now, and—”

“Griffin!” I fight a smile, a chuckle, something. He tries at least once a day to get me laughing. It's become a silent game by now. One I plan to win. “What do you want to show me?”

“Oh, it's nothing new. It's Haven.” He hands me the card. “But the designer who did my house. I totally have her business card.”

The heat in my chest is unwelcome. But I don't hate it either as my thumb runs over Ava's gold-embossed name on the black business card.

“No. I told you I chose not to hire her.”

“Oh, I heard you. I heard how the owner refused to budge, then I heard how you chose to walk away when a perfectly good—no, when an incredibly talented—designer was there for the picking.”

I narrow my eyes. “She's not a strawberry.”

“Basically. Strawberries are delicious and this woman is talented. Do I need to have you over for dinner to show off my house? I will, Birdie will insist, you know she will.” Griffin steps back, an arrogant smirk on his face. “Swallow some pride, my guy. Get over the fact that Haven offended you by taking another job, and hire the girl. Independently, because as

it turns out she no longer works for Haven. Which I realize now makes the card a little worthless.”

“What?” I snap my gaze off the card.

Griffin shrugs. “Yep. That’s why this is perfect. I wanted to double the tip after I realized she alphabetized my baseball history books in my office. That’s commitment to aesthetics, right there.”

“And she just ...” I swallow the annoying knot in my throat. “She just told you she didn’t work for Carina Haven anymore?”

“No. I never even spoke with her. I guess one of the detectives from the night you ordered a raid on my house—”

“I thought someone was breaking in!”

Griffin doesn’t pause; he hardly breathes as he barrels on, “Birdie and I went to the police station, because you know my girl, always wanting to bring people cookies now that she has a connection with my fam’s bakery. Anyway, when we went to grab a copy of the report, because records are good to have, we brought the cops some cookies. As it happens, a detective stopped to chat with us. We found out he wasn’t really on duty that night, but he was in the house with the designer. What are the odds?”

Why was a detective with Ava? A pang of something sharp, something like jealousy, prickles in my chest. I’m not jealous. There is no reason to be jealous. Ava Williams isn’t mine.

“Since he knows the designer personally,” Griffin went on, “I asked if he knew how to get in touch with her. She needed to get another tip, or a lunch, or something. More than the baseball books, she organized Birdie’s books by genre. If you want to get on my girl’s good side, you organize her books.”

“Griff.” Parker laughs. “Focus.”

“Right.” Griffin faces me again. “The guy let me know she didn’t work for Haven anymore. She’s cut ties and gone fully independent now. Oh, and I have an address. I must be

trustworthy looking because he told me where she lived, so we could send some delivery. She likes—”

“Pesto.”

Griffin pauses. “Hey, that’s exactly what he told me. Zoodles, specifically. Being half-Italian I’m not sure how I feel about zucchini for noodles, but to each their own. How’d you know?”

I don’t answer. If he really wanted to impress Ava, he’d get the pesto from Frazzelli’s since they slice cherry tomatoes and fry them up. She loves the fried tomatoes in her pasta.

At least she did.

When I’m silent, Griffin goes on, but with a new curiosity in his voice. “I was thinking we could deliver instead, and you could swallow that pride of yours and offer her the job. She’s exactly what you want—an independent designer who, if I had to guess, would be up for some work.”

I hear him and don’t at the same time.

Ava doesn’t work for Haven anymore, and I can’t help but feel like I had something to do with it. Not only did I call the cops on her, but I’ve now interfered with her career. It’s a fist to the gut. She ran after me, looking for a chance, an opportunity to keep working on the youth field house.

I’ve had two interactions with Carina Haven. The woman is pretentious and arrogant. No mistake, she’s a woman who would not take it well if one of her designers wanted to go rogue.

I drag my fingers through my hair, staring at the business card as if it might go up in flames any second.

“Ryd,” Parker says. “What’s going on?”

“He knows her,” Dax says. He doesn’t speak up much, but when he does, it’s usually to drive a point home. “Obviously. I’m just waiting for him to give us the story. What are we walking into here?”

“*We* are not walking into anything.” I start to pace.

I should open my mouth and fill them in. What harm would it do? Destroy any boundaries I've worked hard to build, bring me to the darkest point in my existence, shatter the shield and drop these guys into the pit of vulnerability.

Yeah, it'd do a lot to lay it all out there.

I'm not going down that road.

Parker wads up the protein bar wrapper and gives me a pointed look. "Should I ask—"

"No."

"Okay."

Griffin doesn't have the same respect for boundaries. He claps a big hand on my shoulder. "Come on, man. What's got you all flustered?"

"Nothing."

"Ryder." Griffin's voice isn't pushy, it's sincere, and I hate it.

These guys genuinely care. They were the three I drifted toward when I was drafted. I don't know why, all the guys on the team are decent men, but Parker reached out first, then Griffin, then Dax since we were drafted right after each other.

They are the closest people I've allowed myself to call friends since ... since I left friends behind, I guess. They're not going to judge me or offer advice. I've had their backs plenty of times before, and this is them simply having mine.

"I grew up with Ava's brother," I say in a long breath. "With Ava. They were ... basically my second home, then I had a falling out with her brother right before college."

My teeth grind together. The Williams were my family. I thought we were unbreakable.

Unnerving how one of them was the one to ram the sharpest knife in my spine.

"Has it been a long time since you've seen them?" Dax asks.

“Ten years.”

“Couldn’t have ended so terrible. Not if she wants to work with you.”

How little they know.

Drake is underhanded, but I’m no saint. I’m not sure I can forgive myself for hurting Ava the way I did. “I left when ... Ava was going through something pretty rough. She might want the job, but it’s because of what the center represents. Not because of me.”

“What happened between you two?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Why?”

Griffin catches it and gives me that arrogant smirk telling me he won. “You fell for your buddy’s sister, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t fall. We were together.” I shouldn’t have said that. It dips too close to the nuclear moment my life shifted. I didn’t fall for Ava Williams; I’d been entirely convinced I was going to marry her.

“I see. Got it.”

“You don’t get anything.”

“Look, it’s awkward dealing with exes. We all get it,” Griffin says. “Well, maybe not Dax.”

Dax frowns, but doesn’t say anything.

“Bottom line,” Griffin goes on, “can she do the job? This is important to you, my guy. Will she see your vision?”

He’s so dramatic. Griffin uses his hands as if painting the sky, and keeps altering his tone from breathless to firm.

I don’t care for his question because I can’t lie. Not when it comes to Ava. She’s a force against my vulnerability. One touch, apparently, one sighting, and I can barely keep the shields in place.

“She could do the job,” I admit. “Ava and Drake, her brother, they, uh, they were group home kids until they were

adopted. Our parents were best friends, so that's how we met."

Parker lifts a brow. "And you've come up with a youth house that is aimed at kids in the system."

"I guess it might've had a small influence." I clench my fists tight enough my fingernails dig into my palms.

"So, what happened between you two?"

"We just drifted apart." I could not have given a more shallow answer. The complicated, twisted, heartbreaking situation left a permanent hole of loss and longing I'd buried well enough. Until I saw Ava again. Turns out, the barrier over the past was nothing but chipped glass. "I had my scholarship to Washington and ... life wasn't good here anymore. I left and cut ties."

No. I'd left her alone, and I'm not sure I'll ever forgive myself for it. I'm not sure I'll ever forgive Drake for his part either.

No one speaks. Not even Griffin. They don't ask for more right away.

Maybe it's written in my face, the agony of knowing I abandoned Ava when she needed me most. I'm grateful they don't dig. Any further discussion and it might unravel all the anger, all the walls, all the bitterness I've kept like a body of sharp armor all these years.

And if I don't have that, what do I have left to keep the walls in place?

"What do you want to do?" Parker finally asks. "Put the youth house on hold, or do you want to give her the job? It sounds like she might have a lot of motivation to make this place as incredible as you want it to be."

He's right, and I don't want to be having this conversation anymore. "Whatever happened then, it doesn't matter now. It was ten years ago."

"Okay, then put things from ten years ago aside and do what's best for the youth house."

What's best for the youth house is to get it finished. Crashing back into the life of Ava is a problem. It's tossed me off-kilter, and she's unsettling me.

Still, sometimes facing the problem head on is the best way to deal with one. After a long pause, I take out my phone and say, "If we're bringing her take-out, it needs to come from Frazzeli's with fried tomatoes."

I'm stepping back into a past I tried to forget, but truth be told, I've never forgotten Ava. I've never forgotten Drake.

Meeting them changed me. For better or worse.

Ryder



Age ten

MY GAZE DROPS TO THE OLD, DIRTY BASEBALL. I DON'T WANT to be here at the edge of the long, gravel driveway, staring at an open, empty field of dry grass.

I'm not supposed to be here. Dan should've come over. We all should've packed gear and tin plates and sleeping bags. We should've gone to the lake to do guy stuff. Josh should've had the phone off speaker.

Maybe if all those should've had happened, I would think Dan still sort of likes me. It was cool to have an uncle when Josh married Mom. But all this time he's *hated* me.

Josh told him I got to go on their trip to the lake since Mitch, Dan's son, is going, but he got so mad about it. If I hadn't heard the call, I wouldn't know he hates that I'm Josh's stepson. I wouldn't have heard him say Josh shouldn't bring me around to *their* family stuff because I'm not really his.

I wouldn't have heard him call me stupid.

I already knew my head didn't think like Mom or like Josh. When the doctor told my mom about autism, Mitch, who stays with us from Washington while Uncle Dan worked the oil fields in the summers, laughed at me.

Mitch told me that makes me dumb. He said it means I have a broken brain.

My brain doesn't feel broken, but sometimes ... I get stuck.

I'm good at math. I'm too slow at reading, but only because I think too long about each line and wonder too much about what it would be like if something different happened. My stomach gets all sharp and twisty when I take a test.

I just never thought Dan would start to think the same.

He probably figured out I hate when Mitch stays with us. For the first few summers it was okay, until Mitch started laughing at me for how I played, or how I shiver when I get nervous, or flick my fingertips too much. Then, he wasn't like a cousin anymore. He got mean. He hit me. Teased me. When he found out I read lyrics to Mom's favorite Broadway songs, Mitch laughed at me.

It's not funny; it's the only way I like to read.

Mitch uses the p-word Grandma used to use for cat, but now I guess it's a bad word since Mom says I'm not allowed to say it. But Mitch told me if I listen to that kind of music, it makes me the p-word.

I glare at the baseball in my hand. I looked up what people mean when they use the word, and I'm not weak. I'm actually pretty strong. I practice ball every day until the sun sets, then help Josh on the ranch on Saturdays.

Maybe I ought to hit Mitch back. I bet I could make it hurt.

I close my eyes. No, I can't do that. He promised if I told Josh or Mom what he does, he'd make it so Josh would divorce my mom.

I don't know how that works, but Mitch is mean enough, he'd figure out a way. I know it.

I throw the ball. Hard. I watch it land in the field behind our house. Then, I hock my spit way back in my throat and let the loogie fly at the same time a stupid tear falls onto my cheek.

Maybe I am the p-word.

“Hey, pal.” Josh stands behind me with his hands in the pockets of his jeans. “I’m sorry you heard those mean words, Ryder.”

I turn around and point my glare at the ground, replaying Dan’s voice in my head.

“Why are you ruining it, Josh? The kid isn’t normal, and he’s not even yours. This is our family trip. Would you stop calling him yours, he’s not. I don’t know why you’d claim him anyway, he can’t even talk clearly. No, it’s not just because he doesn’t know us well. It’s more, and you know it. He’s going to be a burden on you his whole life. No, you know what, forget it. Stay home. I mean it; we don’t want him, so you choose.”

Now, Josh knows his own brother can’t stand me.

Great.

I wipe the snot from under my nose. Josh steps up to the wooden fence and leans over on his elbows. His forearms have a bunch of military tattoos from when he was a marine. I love that he was a soldier. He’s strong and tough and helps me keep things organized.

It’s not always true what they say about soldier guys. They’re not all about push-ups and tough love. Josh is nice. He laughs a lot and isn’t afraid to explain exactly what he wants me to do. Josh is the best at making lists with steps since he knows I like them.

All he asks is I never yell at my mom, and if he asks me to do something, like chores, he expects me to do them so we can hang out and have fun sooner.

“You upset?” he asks.

I shake my head briskly.

“It’s okay if you are, you know.” Josh plucks a stalk of long grass and pinches it between his teeth. I don’t want to pick one and copy him right away. That would be stupid. It’s like he reads my mind and plucks another one, handing it over. Josh rolls the grass in his teeth a few times before going on. “It’d even be okay if you were crying.”

No, it wouldn't. It'd be terrible. But when he says it, my stupid chin starts to shake.

Everything gets worse when Josh notices, wraps his arm around my shoulders, and pins me to his chest. He hugs me, and I start bawling.

Like a freaking baby.

Josh holds my head against his chest. His other arm squeezes me tightly the way I like to be squeezed.

He dips his chin, so his lips are sort of buried in my hair. "I need you to hear me, Ryder. Listen to me, okay? Sometimes grownups don't do right by kids. Sometimes grownups don't think much of themselves, so they say cruel things to the people who can't fight back. Usually kids. But you need to know, I love you."

That only makes me cry harder.

So, Josh squeezes me tighter. "I love you, kid. You're my boy, and you're always going to be enough for me. I'm telling you now, there's nothing you can do that will make me quit loving you. Got it?"

I squeeze his waist. Too many words are spilling through my head, I don't know how to spit them out. Josh doesn't tell me to say anything, though. He doesn't even make fun of me for crying or hiccupping a lot. He hugs me and keeps saying he loves me. Funny thing is, when I finally start to pull back, I sort of believe him.

With the heel of my hand, I wipe my eyes.

Josh leans over his knees, so we're nose to nose. "Feel better?"

I nod.

"Good," he says. "Do you feel up to going to the party at Marianne's and Jack's?"

I wrinkle my nose, but I'm not going to tell him I don't want to go. Mom and Josh are best friends with Marianne and Jack Williams. I don't really get it, but the Williams now have kids living with them.

I guess a lot of neighbor kids are going over to meet them. Friends aren't really my thing, so I'm not sure what they expect me to do.

"Marianne bought those mini-corndogs you like," Josh says.

"Okay." I toss the long grass and fall into step behind him. At the edge of our gravel driveway, I pause. "Josh?"

"Yeah, pal?"

My throat feels like I swallowed a rock, but I've got to know. "Remember when ... when you said you could make it so you're my real dad?"

"The adoption talk we had?"

I nod, swallowing the thick goop that keeps trying to close my throat. "I think ... I think I like that idea now. Would it ... would it bug you if I started to call you Dad?"

He pauses, and I feel like I might throw up. Why did I ask? What if he says I can't? What if he changed his mind and it does bug him?

Then I realize Josh's eyes look wet. Almost like—*holy cow*—almost like he's trying not to cry. Josh doesn't cry. He was a *marine*.

"No." His voice is weird. Sort of rough. He ruffles my hair. "It wouldn't bug me, pal. I'd love that."

My shoulders don't feel as heavy, and the words Uncle Dan said don't ache as bad. They hurt, but I don't know, there is something awesome knowing Josh wants to be my real dad. I already use his last name since Mom does and it doesn't make a lot of sense not to use the same name as the rest of my family.

Mom told me once that it wasn't that my real dad didn't want me, they were just really young and he had other plans.

I get it. I don't like changes in my plans either. I'm glad Mom kept me in her plans, though, because she's my favorite. I love Mom even more than my art teacher who brings caramel filled chocolates on Fridays.

That's why I'm glad she met Josh. He's always been around for as long as I can remember, but I always knew he was only my stepdad. Kids at school told me that means he doesn't even *have to* love me. He just needs to love my mom and deal with me.

But I believe him tonight. He wants to be my real dad.

I smile and let him keep an arm around my shoulders as we walk inside the house. I'm happy enough I don't even mind if I have to go to a weird party.



I changed my mind. Parties with this many people are the worst. It's noisy and busy and cramped.

I only breathe when I sneak out to the backyard with a plate of mini-corndogs. All the kids from school were shoved in the massive game rooms upstairs.

Marianne and Jack are rich. Their house is huge, but now the whole upstairs has things like air hockey and ping pong tables. They bought a big TV with a game system, and a mini fridge with real drinks inside. The coolest thing was the nerf gun arsenal.

Rows of hooks with all kinds of different guns and foam bullets.

A bunch of kids from my class at school started the war. I hesitated long enough I only had the choice of a tiny pistol. It was too wild and loud, so I snuck out to the in-ground trampoline to eat alone.

I turn on the iPod I got for my birthday, pop in one earbud, and let the mix of musicals fill my brain.

It's calm out here. The sun is starting to set, the breeze isn't like an oven, and Marianne *did* buy the exact corndogs I like. She's the best. I wonder if she'll be different now that she and Jack took in kids.

Kids whose heads I've only seen from the back so far. I lost track of them when we went to the game room. No one else seemed interested in the new kids, more that they finally got to go inside the Williams mansion.

Mom says I need to stop calling it a mansion, but what else am I supposed to call it? The place is huge.

Maybe I'm a little jealous the Williams have kids now. Since they're friends with my parents, they've always kind of spoiled me. Now what happens?

"I like that song."

Since I'm sitting on the trampoline, when I jump in surprise, the net bounces and tosses my paper plate of corndogs so the little nuggets roll all over the black mat. A girl with blonde braids and freckles on her nose snickers. Then, she steps onto the mat and picks up a corndog and pops it right into her mouth.

Like she's not even worried about dirt being on it.

She drops into a sit, sending the rest of the spilled corndogs bouncing around like popcorn.

"Hi," she says.

"Hi."

"Why aren't you inside?"

"I don't want to be."

"Why?"

"Cuz."

"But there's a lot of stuff."

"Yeah, and a lot of noise."

She smiles. "You aren't here just for the stuff?"

I lift a brow. "No."

She seems to take my one word as a good enough answer and points to my iPod. "I like that song."

“You know *Fiddler on the Roof*?” I’m not sure I believe her until the girl starts humming *If I Were a Rich Man* perfectly. I lick my lips and reach for my second ear bud. “Want to listen?”

I try not to think about the p-word. Josh told me I’m not one just because I like musicals.

The girl’s eyes brighten as she takes the bud and puts it in her ear. “I saw this movie once, and I liked the way he danced during this song.”

“Me too.” I liked the dancing and the tune. Mom asked me what the songs made me feel once, and I had no idea what she meant. I just liked it. What else was there to say?

She giggles. “I’m Ava.”

“Um, I’m Ryder.”

“You’re really not here because of the stuff?”

“I’m here because I’m supposed to meet some new kids,” I admit.

“You just met one,” she says a little glumly.

Makes sense. I didn’t recognize her. “Figured.”

“Ava.” A sharp whisper-hiss comes from the place behind the shed. “I found a way out.”

Another kid who looks a lot like Ava steps out of the shadows. His hair is cut short, and dirt smudges his fingernails. When he sees me, he glares like Mitch always does right before he pushes me. “Who are you?”

“This is Ryder,” Ava says, then jabs a thumb at the other kid. “This is Drake, my brother.”

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“None of your business.”

I shrug. He’s right. It isn’t my business.

“Come on, Ava,” Drake says. “I found a way out.”

“I’m listening to music with Ryder,” she says. “Give me a second.”

Drake frowns. “He’s going to start asking you to show him around.”

“Nope.” She closes her eyes and sways when the chorus picks up again. “Ryder’s been here before. He doesn’t like it upstairs, just like us.”

“He’s lying.”

“No I’m not,” I say.

“No he’s not,” Ava adds at the same time. “Besides, I’m the one who found him out here all alone.”

Drake looks at me like he doesn’t believe her. “Why are you out here alone?”

I hurry and explain the same thing I did to his sister, then laugh a little when Ava squeals as the song shifts to the theme song of *Phantom of the Opera*.

“I love this one. I like the drums.”

Me too! I can pick out things I like about each song like this girl does. Mom cries over some songs because she says they touch her heart, but how can music touch a heart when it’s buried in bones?

This girl seems to get the connection to the sounds and how it’s just awesome.

I offer the other earbud to her because to get the full impact of this song, you need both. I start to pick up the corndogs, and glance at Drake. “Why are you trying to leave?”

“Because they’re just going to get rid of us anyway,” he snaps. “Or use us. I don’t know, but something is going to happen. It’s why they bought all that stuff. They want us to feel comfortable. I’m not letting them trick us. We’re out of here.”

I laugh. Not to be mean, but it’s ridiculous the way he’s talking about Jack and Marianne. “They’re not going to trick you. I’ve known them since I was three. Jack is cool. He helps my step—” I clear my throat, a little grin in the corner of my mouth. “He always helps my *dad* fix our fences. And

Marianne buys the best birthday presents ever. They're really nice."

Drake studies me like I'm a big, fat liar. "They're rich people who picked two kids who aren't babies. Everyone wants babies."

"Maybe they don't."

"They're showing us off to look like they're good people then."

"My mom said Marianne planned this party because she wants you guys to make friends."

"Drake thinks they're going to sell us or something," Ava says. "I'm not so sure."

"Why are you out here?" Drake asks again.

I roll my eyes. "I told you. I don't like when everything gets crazy like it did inside."

"All those kids are here to play with all the stuff." Finally, Drake sits in a huff. "They'll want to be friends with us because of the stuff. I've seen it a million times."

I snort a laugh. He acts like he's a thousand years old.

"But Ryder won't," Ava says, handing me back the earbud now that the song is over. "He doesn't care about all that stuff, right Ryder?"

"I like stuff," I say. "But I don't really hang out with anyone up there."

The twins go quiet until Drake points at my shirt. "You like baseball?"

I glance down at the fiery ball shooting across my red T-shirt and nod. "Yeah, I play."

The smallest of smiles twists in the corner of his mouth. "I like baseball too. But I'm better at basketball."

Ava hooks an arm around my neck, then her brother's. The way she tugs me against her makes my stomach feel weird. Sort of squirmy and tight.

“He listens to fun music, likes being outside, and baseball. I think we found a friend who’s like us, D.”

Drake isn’t glaring anymore. He even smiles a little as he says, “We’ll see, Avie. I guess we’ll see.”

Ava



WHAT HAPPENS WHEN ONE FINDS THEMSELVES JOBLESS? THEY rearrange their cottage. I stand in the middle of my living room, and it looks like a bomb went off. I love this place. A simple two bedroom, but if the Vegas area had lush forests and babbling brooks, the small, stucco and stone cottage would fit right in.

I call it my little piece of wonderland in the sand.

There are some impressive palms outside, and brilliant orange mariposa lilies across the front of the house. Dad and Drake helped me build a stone fountain out back last spring, and in the evenings, I sit beneath a pergola wrapped in fairy lights and listen to the trickle of water over the pink rocks.

I'm rather proud of my little refuge.

The trouble is, now I need to find a way to keep the bills paid for my plot of adulthood.

Naturally, to deal with the unexpected turn of events in my life, I've torn down my shades and considered what shutters would look like instead. My loveseat and sofa have been moved three times, and now I've torn half the stylish wallpaper off one wall by my bookshelves. I'll paint the wall now. It needed something new, something fresh.

Sasha chomps into a veggie straw and lets out another sigh.

"What?" She's not subtle about when she wants me to ask her what's on her mind

“Nothing. Except this ...” She points a spinach straw at the mess. “This has Ryder written all over it.”

I frown. “It does not. And what was the rule when I texted you?”

“No talking about Ryder.” She bites into another straw with a snort. “Like I’d follow that one. Do you not know me at all?”

Sasha is one of a few people who know the anguish-lined details of my whirlwind love affair with Ryder. She went to different schools, but as my best girlfriend, she knew my best guy friend turned love-of-my-teenage-life. But she’s loyal and never blabs about it to anyone.

She’s never brought up Ryder. Not even when she told Hudson we technically have connections to another celebrity. The drummer in the local rock band, Perfectly Broken, had a stint in the same group home as Drake and me. But he was several years older and fostered pretty quickly.

Although, right before Drake and I were adopted, Tate Hawkins came back a few times to help teach music. He was a young teenager, and I was only ten last time I saw him. He wouldn’t know me. I’d forgotten about him until I saw a billboard of the band and asked Sasha’s mom if he was the same kid.

Sasha tosses the bag of veggie straws onto my sofa and brushes the crumbs off her hands. “So, are you going to tell Drake?”

“Tell Drake what?” Like we summoned him, Drake rounds the corner of the entryway, Hudson a step behind him.

Drake’s got his cocky smirk in place, and chose to dress in his fire T-shirt with gray sweats. He does that on purpose, since it is a common belief amongst the firefighters that once they’re out of their turnouts and in sweats, women will flock to them like mosquitos around water.

My brother scratches his head, taking in the chaos of the room. “Um, what’s going on here?”

“Redecorating.” I turn my back on him and nudge the arm of my loveseat toward the corner.

“Ava quit her job,” Sasha says and pecks Hudson’s lips.

“What?” Drake snaps his gaze to mine. “Ava, what happened? Did Cruella do something, or—”

“I didn’t quit, exactly. More like I was highly encouraged to part ways with the company.” I let out a breath and prop my fists on my hips. How do I do this without dragging Drake down the dreary memory lane? “Carina found out I was looking for another job, and she takes personal insult to things like that. Apparently, I joined a cult, and no one is allowed to leave once you’re hired.”

Hudson chuckles. “She was a piece of work. I’m glad you’re out of there.”

“Agreed.” Drake nods at Hudson. “But it helps to have another job set up, you know what I’m saying?”

“D, do I need to remind you that you are, in fact, a total of six minutes older than me? I know how to be a grown up about as well as you do.” I chuckle and nudge his shoulder. “I’ll be fine. Both Mom and Dad have offered me a job. In fact, I worked the register today.”

That appeases him a bit.

Our mom is a successful patent attorney. I would die a slow death doing what she does, but she thrives on contracts and paperwork. An opportunity for office work is always up for grabs with her firm. Our dad owns a busy hardware store and helps run his dad’s small farm with our two uncles a couple days a week.

There will always be a place behind a register or in a pigpen where I can find work.

Maybe it would be better to get away for a little while. Go back home, work with my uncle and cousins. It might rid me of the constant feed of Ryder memories since the jerk walked back into my life.

“You’ll find a design job,” Sasha says. She gives my arm a reassuring squeeze.

“Yeah.” Hudson gives me a smile. “Did I tell you I spoke with Griffin Marks? He and his wife are blown away with your work.”

“You talked to Griffin? Why?”

“Came in for a copy of the report. Seems like a cool guy. Expect an extra tip.” Hudson winks. “He didn’t feel like you were given enough.”

“Oh. Well, that’s sweet of him.” My throat tightens. Why? I don’t know. It isn’t like Griffin would know of my connection with Ryder, or like Hudson even realizes how unsettled I am to be so close to the Vegas Kings.

True, I tried to get hired by them, but Ryder is a block of chilled steel. He’s not the same man I knew, so it’s probably a good thing he shut me out. The last thing I want to do is confuse any feelings.

I jump when a rapid knock bangs on the door.

If I were alone, I wouldn’t even bother answering. My sweater is thin, but oversized, and hangs off one shoulder. I pulled my hair back with two braids, but flyaway hairs are poking out from my furious rearranging. I’m not one to care a lot about my public image, but the sweat and paint stains on the tight yoga pants aren’t appealing to anyone.

I leave the others and hurry to the front door. Once it’s open, a little squeak of surprise slips out.

A massive guy with messy brown hair is on my porch. He lifts a plastic bag of Frazzeli’s takeout, and his smile is absolutely contagious.

“Well, hello there,” he says like a muscular ball of joy.

In the next instant, my hands are filled with the bags of hot takeout. “Um ...”

“Listen, I know cash pays the bills, and it’s coming, but I have it on good authority you like Frazzeli’s fried tomato zoodles. That’s a whole lot of vegetables, but I kind of like

that. Sort of counters the pesto sauce. Not that you need to counter it. I ordered some for myself, even though my Italian Nona is probably rolling over in her grave right now.”

He rambles without blinking. It’s fast, intense, yet simple to follow at the same time. He’s vibrant and attractive. Scruff on his chin, biceps anatomy books would be proud of, and he looks a little familiar. I’m embarrassed. This man brought me dinner, and I don’t even recall from where I’m supposed to know him.

“I’m Griffin, by the way.” He juts his hand out.

I chuckle nervously, more at ease as I take his hand. “Oh. It’s so good to meet you. We were literally just talking about you.”

“I bet it was an epic conversation. Anyway, Birdie, my wife ...” He pauses, a wry smile curling over his mouth. “I love saying that—my wife. She’s *my wife* now. How amazing is that?”

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

“Um, I don’t mean this to be rude, but how did you know where I lived?”

“I have friends in high places.” He wiggles his brows. “Kidding. I told your cop friend we were going to deliver something to you as a thank you.”

“And my cop friend,” I say a little louder, hoping Hudson hears, “gave up my address?”

“He made sure to let me know he’d be close if I tried to do anything shady.”

“He’s in the back.” I jabbed my thumb over my shoulder.

“Good. Then we’ve got no problems.” Griffin winks. “But I do have one of those trustworthy faces. Don’t worry, I am trustworthy, but if I wasn’t, you could ruin my entire career by blasting me if I did something bad.”

“Unless you murdered me.”

“Oh, we’re going dark.” Griffin’s eyes brighten. “You’re kind of like my Birdie. She writes hot romance, sometimes they’re dark and we spar with ideas.”

I grin. Falling into such natural conversation with people isn’t always easy, but he’s right, there’s something easy to trust about Griffin Marks.

“Listen, I know the job had some bumps, but I’m hoping this stuff—” Griffin points at the food. “Might be enough to soften you up to the Vegas Kings for a little longer.”

A groove gathers between my brows. “I don’t understand.”

“For the new job. Remember how much fun and how nice I am before you talk to him again.” Griffin leans forward and whispers. “He’s grumpy with everyone, but we love him anyway.”

“Mr. Marks—”

“Whoa, I’m going to stop you right there. Griffin, please.” He holds a hand to his chest as if he might vomit.

I think I’ve made a new best friend. “Griffin, sorry. I really don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Griffin steps off my porch. “Ryder. He wants to interview you again for the job. We hear he wasn’t exactly polite last time, and he’d like a redo.”

My face pales. Griffin must notice, because his tone softens, he speaks slower. “I understand there is a history, but between you and me, this youth field house has been something he’s been trying to get approved for two years. He’ll never admit how much it matters to him, but it really does. Up for it?”

Griffin opens his arm as if ushering me forward. I swallow thickly, and peek around the post on my front porch.

Three more guys are at the end of my curved driveway. One is probably taller than Griffin. One stares at his phone, facing the truck in my driveway. But between them is Ryder.

A cruel bite of pain gnaws at my heart. He’s horribly wonderful to look at. He was never hard on the eyes. But

Ryder, as a man, is a new delight.

He's dressed more casually than he was two days ago. I can't decide if the tight tee works better or the black suit and tie.

Simple—they both work too well. He could wear button up pajamas and would still look like he belonged on the front of a magazine.

He's the worst.

“What do you say?”

The takeout nearly flies out of my hands when I jump. I'd almost forgotten Griffin was standing beside me. I close the front door, desperate to keep Drake from storming out here, then hand the bags back to Griffin. “Mind holding these?”

“I'll hold them as long as you want.”

I glide my hands down my wrinkled sweater, as if it will do any good, lift my chin, and step off my porch.

The two guys next to Ryder take obvious steps back, giving us room to face-off in the middle of my driveway.

A muscle in Ryder's jaw pulses. He swallows, and, unbidden, I follow the movement of his throat.

“Is there something I can do for you, Mr. Huntington?”

He frowns. “I don't like that, Ava.”

“Oh, I thought I was supposed to pretend to be a mere acquaintance and not someone you've known since fourth grade. Not someone who ended up—”

“*Ava.*” Ryder's eyes widen, a silent warning to shut up.

I cough, swallowing my rant back down. What is wrong with me? I've packed in so much angst, so much hurt, and after all these years he's causing me to lose all my good sense. I need to watch what I say. If I had to guess, all these men are Vegas Kings, and I don't know how much they know.

“What are you doing here?”

“The designer job.”

He takes a step closer. For a moment there is a bit of light in his dark eyes. A speck of warmth, maybe the same kind of pain I'm trying to hide. If only I could find a way to gauge what was going on in his head. Did he struggle standing in front of me the same as I struggled in front of him? Was it because he couldn't stand to be here, or because it pained him not to touch?

I was a traitor to all the tears and heartache he left in his wake, because with him two steps away, all I can think about is slipping my fingers through his and squeezing. Like I used to when he was nervous.

"What about the job?"

"I was too hasty the other day." Ryder looks to the ground. "And surprised to see you."

"I could say the same thing."

"I know. I apologize if I reacted poorly."

"Poorly?" I snorted. "Sure, let's call it that. Ryder, I know being taken off guard is your least favorite thing, but I'm not going to even consider working for this project if you look at me like I'm the plague. I'm sorry, I've left a job that delivered much the same on the daily. I'm not in a rush to go back to the same thing."

His eyes narrow. "Haven mistreated you?"

Oh. That grumbly, touch-her-and-die rasp is bad for my heart.

No. Stop. I'm being ridiculous. He isn't protective of me. Not anymore. I'd be wise to stop reading into every twitch of his brow, every shift of his body. He's not fighting an urge to stand closer. He's not desperate to touch my skin. He's only here because he needs something.

"It was tolerable," I say. "Until it wasn't."

Ryder rubs his chin, eyes on me, almost like he's debating on whether I'm being sincere or not.

Well, I'm not his problem to deal with anymore.

After a long pause, he says, “If you’re still interested, I think your expertise would be valuable for the field house.”

“Will you micromanage?”

“No. I have a vision, but I’m out of my element with aesthetics.”

“Will you question every idea I have?”

“Only if I’d like to understand more about it.”

I almost smile. He’ll ask a thousand questions. The man, if he’s still the same, was relentlessly curious.

Ryder’s face softens. I wish it wouldn’t. He looks too familiar with the secret smile in the corner of his mouth. I like to think of him as an overbearing, grumbly boar. Makes the knife in my heart less noticeable.

“It’s a three-month project,” he says. “You would be overseen by me, but Dallas Anderson will be the final word on everything. If you’re comfortable with that, I would like to offer you the position.”

Three months of solid work. Three months of not shoveling pig poop or filing busywork in a cubicle. Three months of Ryder.

The last one is almost enough to bring me to say no. I don’t trust myself. After everything, the sight of his face sends my heart into a frenzy. Unfinished business hangs between us like a two-ton weight.

I wonder which of us will break first?

Heart racing, I hold out my hand. “I’ll do it.”

Ryder hesitates, then slowly, he takes my hand. A hateful burn of tears builds behind my eyes. Not swift enough he’d notice, but an ache jumps to the center of my chest. A longing I forgot existed.

I’ve signed myself up for three months of misery.

Ryder pulls back in a hurry. “I’ll have the forms and contract sent to you as soon as possible. Oh, if you agreed, Dallas Anderson would like to meet you at the All-Star game

next week. I'll make sure to send over the passes to the suite." He digs into his pocket and pulls out his phone. "I, um, I should get your number. Griffin had your card, but it's your office number—"

"It's the same." I'm testing him. Stupid, I know, but I want to see if he ever deleted the contact. I still have his old cellphone number in my phone even a decade later.

My heart jumps when he nods and returns his phone back to his pocket. "I'll be in touch then."

"Ava? We were—" Drake's voice chokes off when my brother comes around the curve in the drive. His face pales, his mouth parts when he sees his former best friend. "Ryder?"

Ryder steps back like I've tazed him. The two guys near the truck bolt into action. They stand at either one of Ryder's shoulders like his personal bodyguards. His gaze takes in my brother, but in no time the dark scowl deepens to something like hate. "Drake."

Ryder's gaze falls to me. His face is riddled in pain, in anger, and turmoil. Without a word, he wheels around and storms toward the truck.

"I think that's our cue." Griffin appears at my side. He gives my brother a cautious look. I don't think Drake even sees. He's too busy glaring his eyes into slits at Ryder's back. Griffin hands me the bags of food. "I'm looking forward to getting to know you. The ladies of the Kings will want to meet you too. They're nosy, so get ready for the questions."

Griffin leaves with a wave. I can't find the energy to do the same.

All at once, Drake shoves past me, storming after Ryder.

"Drake!" I call after him. "Don't."

My brother ignores me. This is a disaster.

"Hey." Sasha spills out onto the porch, a worried wrinkle to her nose. "Oh my gosh. Is that—"

I nod, unable to speak.

Hudson joins the meltdown next. “Stay here,” he says, in what Sasha calls his cop voice.

Sasha takes my hand. “Sorry, Aves.”

My heart dissolves into nothing but a bloody pulp of hurt. Two men who’ve held my heart for different reasons still hate each other.

It’ll never change.

Ryder



“RYDER.”

The hair raises on my arms. I can't look at him. Old wounds split open and ooze the anger, the hurt I buried deep inside a long time ago.

Drake stops a few steps away. Either I need to leave or stay. I slowly turn around.

Older, broader, but beneath that beard is the face of the guy I once considered a brother. I don't want to look at him, don't want to see the arrogance, the satisfaction, or worse—remorse. If there is regret in his eyes, it will be a battering ram against the hardened steel I've carefully wrapped around my heart. Mistrust and resentment have been crucial pieces in shaping the man I am today. If those crumble, then what? I'm not sure I even know how to truly allow someone inside anymore.

Then again, if he's not sorry, if he'd still rather I didn't exist, I'll be worse off than before.

Another guy steps next to him. “You're Ryder Huntington, right? Your name was on the police report from the other ...” His voice trails off when he catches his slip.

I curse under my breath. So much for anonymous.

The damage is done. Drake tilts his head. “You're the one who called the cops? Is that what this is about?”

“Hey.” Griffin whistles, drawing attention his way. People can say what they want about Griffin Marks, he might think life is a lollipop land filled with puppies, but come at his

people and he's a bulldog. "That was a misunderstanding. I've spoken with the cops. My guy was looking out for my house."

"Drake," the cop says. "I really don't believe it was personal. Not like this seems to be."

He turns his glare back to me. Drake follows.

The driveway is long and curved, but Ava's slowly meandering toward us. Is that Sasha McMaster? If Griffin is what people call my bulldog, Sasha is Ava's.

Keep it together.

Drake's face softens a bit. "Look, if you did that to Ava because of me—"

"I didn't even see her before I called the cops." My body trembles in tension. "Don't flatter yourself. I don't think of *you* enough to scheme up a way to hurt your sister."

Drake flinches. He shoves his hands in his pockets and takes a step back. "Got it."

We stand there in the sounds of wretched silence.

"Maybe we should go," Parker mutters.

"Yeah." My voice is nothing but a growl. "Maybe we should."

"Ryder," Drake finally breaks. "What are you doing here? What do you want?"

"He came to give me a job." Ava pushes her way through, shoving her brother in the chest. "So if you could back off for a second and not screw this up for me with your transformation to brother bear, that would be great."

I ignore the shudder that rushes down my spine when those glassy blue eyes lock with mine again. "I want to add a clause to this new working arrangement. No punching my brother."

I look back to Ava, a sneer curls on my lips. "It won't be a problem."

"I'm not sure I believe that."

"Why would it?"

“There’s ... history.” Ava bites her bottom lip, and I hate how my gaze follows, how my mind conjures up a dozen things I’d like to see those lips do instead.

I ignore the rush of desire and force my expression into something indifferent.

A lesson I learned a long time ago was apathy kept the heart less bruised and battered. Guard up, build defenses, and there’s less pain. Crack the ribs and leave the heart exposed, it’s likely to get struck with a heavy blow.

“I moved on from the past a long time ago.”

What I would do to take the words back. I’d expected maybe a frown, an eyeroll, perhaps, but I didn’t anticipate the spark of hurt across her face. She’s one person whose expressions I catch with ease. Whether she is uneasy, excited, or hurt like now, I can tell. In this moment, I wish I couldn’t.

Ava gives me a quick nod. Her voice is steady, but it’s a battle. “Good. I’ll wait for the paperwork then. For the job. Great. Let’s go.”

“Good to meet you! Enjoy the zoodles,” Griffin says, his grin back in place.

It works. Ava offers a gentle wave. “Thank you, Mr... Griffin, I mean. That was thoughtful.”

Ava turns around swiftly without another look at me. She pinches Drake’s arm, then strides with confidence back toward her house.

Sasha approaches, a thousand insults probably loaded on her tongue. “I’m calling BS on you, Ryder,” she whispers. “All that crap about being over it. Be a jerk, whatever, but you hurt her again, and I’ll find you. This time, I know where you are.”

Ah. So, it’s true—they’re getting one side. They think I wanted to leave. They made me the villain. Fine. Let Drake Williams be the freaking knight in shining armor. As long as this project gets finished before training, I’ll be satisfied.

That’s all that needs to matter.

Sasha grabs the cop's hand, pulling him close. There is a touch of relief that comes from her loving grip on the man. I don't need to wonder anymore if he's with Ava. Clearly, he's Sasha's.

"Let's go, man," Parker says, a protective hand on my shoulder. He points a narrowed look at Drake.

The rush of affection for the guy is unwanted. I'd rather be numb to everything in this moment. But maybe, just maybe, I needed to admit the Kings are a bit like my family. They're loyal. They have my back.

Like Drake used to. Then again, I'd better be cautious, even with the Kings. Last time I trusted without question, it blew up in my face.

"Ryder," Drake says. "Maybe, for Ava's sake, we should meet and—"

"No." The word scrapes between my teeth. No room for argument. No question about my stance. The fury behind it is enough to get me moving. There are some words that can never be taken back, some actions that leave too deep a scar.

Without another word, I yank open the passenger door in Parker's truck and slam the door behind me.

One by one my teammates follow.

Dax clears his throat, then surprises us all by rolling down his window and holding a hand out toward Drake. "Hey. Dax Sage."

What is he doing?

Drake lifts his annoyingly somber eyes, almost like he does feel a touch of remorse, and shakes Dax's outstretched hand. I'm riled at the thought and make the quick, heated decision I'd rather him be the hot-headed douche he was all those years ago.

Mature and regretful Drake sucks.

"Ryder mentioned it to your sister, but there is an All-Star game next week and Dallas Anderson is providing passes for the whole family."

“Dax,” I grit out. Drake has nothing to do with this.

“The game is Friday night.” Dax ignores me.

Drake hesitates. “Thanks for the heads up.”

He glances at me. Not that I see him do it, but I can *feel* his gaze. I refuse to accept that it’s guilt, or any sort of nudge to offer an olive branch. He doesn’t deserve it.

Dax mutters a farewell, then finally, Parker drives away.

“Why did you do that, Sage?” I ask when we’re blocks down the road.

Dax stares out the window. “Because I’ve never seen you look at anyone the way you looked at them. They mattered to you, Ryder. She did. He did. You’ll thank me later.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m never talking to you again.”

“That’s okay. I don’t talk much anyway.”

He says it so matter-of-factly I can’t help but chuckle.

Dax might mean well, all these guys might mean well, but if they knew the truth, I’m not sure they’d be keen to see Drake.

Honestly, I’m not sure they’d want to know me either.

Ava



THERE ARE THINGS IN THIS LIFE I'LL NEVER UNDERSTAND. MY brother's lockjaw is one of them. After Drake came face to face with Ryder, I expected we might talk about it. The way my brother chased after him, had tense words on the driveway, I don't know, I sort of thought he'd come back inside and we'd finally be open about what went so wrong all those years ago.

But here we are, a week after the nuclear moment, and we've said maybe two words. A simple acknowledgment that it did happen, and no, we're not talking about it.

Men.

The only words said when he grumbled his way back inside last week were that I should expect an email with tickets to some sort of charity scrimmage with the Kings.

An interview at the ballfield. This is a new one. Are we supposed to talk shop over hotdogs and popcorn, and pause if the Kings make a good play?

Not to mention the kicker—the tickets are a family pack. For the upper suite seats. I'm supposed to chat with a Las Vegas billionaire surrounded by the loved ones of the Kings and my family.

Mom has a meeting, Drake is on the fence, the only thing causing him to consider coming is Charlie. My nephew is begging to go to Burton Field like he always does with Pops.

Oh yeah. Such a simple statement unveiled a dark family secret.

Turns out my father, my happy-go-lucky, honest to the bone father, has been hiding a fun fact. He has season tickets to Burton Field. Drake about popped a blood vessel when he found out Charlie and Pops bonded in the summer over baseball and root beer.

“I’m not apologizing for making memories with my grandson,” Dad shot at Drake when he’d been confronted.

“Then why’d you keep it a secret?” Drake shot back.

“Because you’re unapproachable on the subject.”

“Gee, Dad, I wonder why?”

Dad stood from his recliner at that point, and I will go down to my grave believing my brother, a grown man, a father himself, gulped as if our dad was about to transform into the Hulk.

Dad’s voice went low, stern, but loving. A depth of understanding was there. “I do wonder, D,” he’d said. “I wonder a lot of things, and I will keep wondering until you are ready to fill in the blanks.”

In the end, Drake agreed Charlie could join us, but he’d slipped into a stoic wall of non-verbal gestures ever since.

I adjust the cute, oversized belt on the grey pencil skirt, and inspect the back hem of my blouse in the floor-length mirror. Odd outfit to wear to a ballpark, I suppose, but since it’s technically an interview, and Dallas Anderson is the most eligible billionaire in Vegas, I felt as though a T-shirt and jeans wouldn’t cut it.

The prickly cluster of nerves thickens in the back of my throat. I’m not sure if I’m more nervous about spilling on my shirt or facing Ryder again.

I’ve spent the last six nights on YouTube watching clips from hundreds of fan videos of the best of Ryder Huntington.

He’s lithe and sexy, and when he lunges for a ball at short—even if he’s belly flopping—it’s as if he can snap back up and have the ball back into play in a millisecond. It turns my stomach in both agony and a trickle of pleasure.

Giggles come from upstairs. A smile plays with the corner of my mouth; Charlie is so excited.

With a sigh, I knock on the frame of the office door. Drake sits at the long, mahogany desk, using our parents' computer to study for an EMT course.

"You're already here, I think you should come," I say.

Drake lifts his gaze. "I need to get this done."

"Charlie sounds excited."

"Yeah."

My throat goes dry. "D, if you can't do this, truly, if me taking this job is bothering you this much, tell me now."

My brother leans back in the tall, leather chair and sways the swivel seat side to side a few times. "Sorry, Avie. I'm happy for you, really. This is your first independent design job, and I don't want you to think of anything else but killing it. I'm good."

"But you won't come to a baseball game with your son."

"Ava," he warns. "Don't push this."

"Why?" I lean over my fingertips on the desk. "Why can't I push it? This started because of me, or have you forgotten? Have you forgotten that this all was only about *me* and *him*. Until somehow it became about you and him."

Tears burn behind my eyes. I force them down. I refuse, *refuse*, to cry before my interview. Puffy, swollen eyes are not a good look. Especially when I turn into a dying cat when the tears come.

"We're not doing this," he says as he stands. "Do your interview, show them what you can do, and be careful. Don't fall for—"

"Stop." I hold up a hand. "First, you don't get a say on who I do or do not fall for. Second, I'm sorry you felt betrayed or let down or whatever by what happened, but Drake ... it's been ten years. Maybe it's time to move forward."

Maybe I'm saying this for me more than him, but I'm right. It's time to let go of broken hearts and face a new partnership with the man who did the damage.

Professional. Amicable. Yes. My heart lightens a bit. This could be where true healing begins. Where old hurts are finally gone, and we simply move forward.

I look back at my brother. "It isn't fair that you hate him for what happened, but you don't hate me."

Drake's eyes darken. "Why don't you just trust me that there are things you don't know? I'm staying here tonight. You all go have fun. Full stop, Avie."

He full stopped me. It's what we used to say as kids. Our group home counselor was from the UK and always said full stop when she was trying to make a point. Whenever we didn't want to talk about something, we'd say *full stop* to each other. Our own little code to shut up.

I close the office door and leave him to his own thoughts.

There are times when I can't tell if Drake hates Ryder or hates himself. The thing is, he couldn't protect me from what happened.

No one could.

"Sweetie, hi!" My mom strides into the kitchen wearing a power pantsuit and adjusting one of her silver earrings. "You look beautiful."

"Thanks. The interview is today."

"I know. I can hardly wait to hear all about it. Feels so casual to have it at a ballgame, but I've met Dallas Anderson a few times at corporate events. He seems like a very grounded man. Genuine, you know?"

"Good, because I'm pretty sure I'm going to gross him out with all the sweat stains I'll leave on my skirt from wiping my hands so much."

My mom grins, leaning against the granite countertop. I've always thought my mother was superwoman in disguise. A woman with a lucrative career, a heart of gold, and an

addiction to her children and grandson. She is devoted to her family, even though some people thought Mom and Dad were nuts for adopting two prepubescent kids with trust issues.

I'm glad they didn't listen. In truth, I couldn't design better parents. They never quit on us, they love us unconditionally, and rarely do I even think about the fact that we don't share the same blood.

"Did you come by for a pep talk?" Mom asks as she pours a cup of coffee. "I have at least five on standby for you and your brother, and at least twenty cute ones for Charlie boy. If he asks, Nana one hundred percent believes he will be the first man to live on the moon."

Another giggle from upstairs causes us both to snicker.

I accept a mug from my mom, even though I've already had a cup.

"I'm just waiting for Space King to be ready. Dad gave him a new Kings get up. I tried to talk Oscar the Grouch into coming, but he's dug in his heels."

"Want me to talk Drake into it? I'm persuasive."

"He won't come, and you know why."

Mom's smile fades a bit. She sips her coffee, a distant look in her gaze. "On that subject I wish I could give a little bit of advice. Afraid I've got nothing to go on, Tweety."

"Like the rest of us."

"Will *you* be okay?" Mom gives me a side hug.

"I'll be fine."

All at once, the kitchen is invaded with a drum roll on the wall, and my dad steps into the kitchen. Sasha calls Jack Williams a silver fox. Peppery hair that is messy over his ears, a silver-tinged beard, and a form like a lumberjack. He's intimidating to behold until you get to know him, then he becomes the gentlest man in the world.

Like Mom, he's addicted to his kids and Charlie. I wonder if their inability to have kids is why they love so big. I'd never

say they were perfect, we had plenty of teenage spats, but they were the softest of places to fall growing up. I never doubted they truly loved me as if they brought me into the world themselves.

“Everyone, we’ve got a true sports fan!” Dad steps aside, beaming, and Charlie bursts in, decked with gold and black Kings logos from head to foot. A neon green glove dons his hand. My mom gushes with my dad over how adorable he looks, how sporty, how smart. A thousand compliments rain over my nephew.

No doubt, by the time he’s in first grade, he’ll have the most inflated ego in the school.

Charlie squeals in delight when Drake appears at his back, scoops him up, and flips him over his shoulder. “You look like you could walk right out on the field, buddy,” he says, kissing his cheek.

“Daddy!” Charlie squeals again when Drake runs his scruffy cheek against his neck. “Put me down.”

Drake complies and kisses the top of his head. Underneath, messy locks of golden hair stick out in all directions. Nothing can tame that kid’s head of thick, wavy hair.

“Shoes tied?” Drake bops Charlie’s nose.

“Yep.”

“Sunscreen?”

Charlie wiggles his nose as if his dad can still see the white paste slathered across his pale skin.

“You’re going to listen to Pops and Auntie A?”

“Nope.”

Drake laughs and smashes him against his legs in a low hug. “Smart mouth.”

“You comin’, Daddy?”

My brother’s smile falls, and I know my twin well enough to know he’s avoiding my sharp look. “Sorry, buddy. I’ve got to study.”

“To get smarter about the truck?”

He laughs and taps the brim of Charlie’s hat. “Exactly. You know Chief Frank doesn’t want anyone dumb on the truck. But take a good picture for me, okay?”

Charlie makes a circle with his thumb and index finger in the symbol for OK before begging my dad to get us to the field.

Without taking a sip of my coffee, I set down my mug and let out a long sigh. “Well, wish me luck.”

“I thought you already had the job, sweetheart,” Dad says.

“Basically, unless Dallas decides I’m no good for the Kings’ organization.”

My mom pulls me into a tight hug. “You’ve got this, my girl.”

Drake’s smile is forced but he hugs me too. “Good luck, Avie.”

“Come on, Auntie A!” Charlie tugs on my dad’s hand, urging him toward the garage door.

“I’m coming, dude.”

I snag my purse off the counter and blow out a nervous breath. Here it goes.

At the door leading to the garage, my mom stops me. “Avie,” she says, voice low. “If you talk to him again, you tell him we miss him.”

I close my eyes when she squeezes me tighter. I don’t need to ask who *him* is. There is a Ryder shaped hole in the Williams family.

And I think it makes me hate him a little.

Ava



BURTON FIELD IS DECKED FOR THE APPROACHING HOLIDAY. Black and orange striped ribbons wrap the iron lampposts and great pumpkin archways mark the entrance. I keep my shoulders back as I file through the line.

Charlie gawks at everything. He points out the massive banners of the players. Dad picks my nephew up and points out Parker Knight, explaining he's the one who pitches the ball.

It's a little surreal when I recognize his chiseled face as one of the guys on my lawn last week.

While Charlie bursts out of his skin with excited questions about curveballs and fastballs, I dare to look at Ryder's banner. His face is as stone, his jaw taut, and one hand is punched into his glove.

He's delicious and awful and I miss him.

My chin drops to my chest. This opportunity is impossible to pass up, but I wish it didn't come with Ryder on the side. How am I ever going to get him out of my head if he becomes a constant, stern presence?

"Avie." Dad gestures for me to catch up at a side door near the ticket stand.

The VIP tickets provide us with our own usher to lead us toward the upper suite.

Popcorn, butter, and grease fill my lungs with each breath, and the energy is contagious. Massive flags and posters line

the corridors near the concessions for the All-Star foundation. This is the final game, according to a big, black and gold banner, and the one played between the Kings and the Scorpions, their sister team from California.

I've heard of the foundation and the celebrity games played to raise money for children across the country who never get the chance to play competitive sports.

It's a tug on my heart. Then again, anything with kids from harsher circumstances tugs at my heart. To make a child's life a little better should be, in my loud and proud opinion, the goal of everyone.

The usher stops outside a door, knocks once, then opens the door for us.

"Can we see the field up here, Pop?" Charlie cranes his neck, a worried look on his freckled face. Right now, the field is blocked by poles and signs.

"We've got the best seats, kiddo." My dad gives me a smile. "Go on in first, sweetie. We're behind you."

I mutter a quick thank you to the usher, and step inside the box suite.

Seated in a row of padded seats is a woman with an infant sleeping in her arms, a woman with glasses and a ponytail, and another one with a rose gold pixie cut. The woman in glasses is seated beside a handsome guy in a suit with salt and pepper grays in his dark hair. He's grinning at the field, chatting about the pitcher's form.

Silence is a killer when you're out of your element. Awkwardness is my kryptonite and causes heart palpitations. I'd rather not pass out in front of these people.

I'm grateful when the usher clears his throat. "Mr. Anderson, Miss Williams is here to see you."

Every eye seems to whip around at once and latch onto me in the doorway. If I could melt between the cracks, I would.

"Oh, you must be Ava." The woman with the baby hops to her feet, too lithe for someone with added cargo. The baby

doesn't even stir.

She hurries around the wide seats and takes my hand in one of hers while cradling the baby in the other arm. "I'm Skye Knight. Parker told me so much about you."

"Oh, you're his—"

"Wife and baby mama." She snickers. "I'm usually on the field as the trainer, but—" She uses her chin to point at the fuzzy baby head. "Technically I'm on maternity leave."

"Congratulations."

"Thank you." Skye grins. "I should clarify when I say Parker told me so much about you, all he's really told me is he's seen you, that you are human, and you make a certain someone nervous."

She lowers her voice on the last part, talking through her teeth, even though everyone can hear. I don't know what to say. How much does she know about my history with Ryder?

I'm saved from digging up a coherent answer by the four-year-old.

"Hi. You have a big stomach." Charlie is the definition of social butterfly mingled with a hefty dose of blunt.

"Oh, I'm sorry," I'm quick to say, but stop when Skye bursts out laughing.

She gives Charlie a high-five. "I do have a big stomach. I just had a baby. And who are you, little man? You look like the best Kings fan ever."

Charlie beams and puffs out his chest. "Pops takes me to the games. I like the fastball thrower."

"Pitcher," Dad whispers. "He means the pitcher."

Skye lifts her brows. "Ohhh, a boy after my own heart. I like the fastball thrower too. A lot, actually."

I make the decision to like Skye Knight. She speaks to Charlie like she appreciates his boldness. Anyone who shows tenderness and love to my nephew gets a gold star in my book.

“This is Charlie, my nephew,” I tell her. “And this is my dad, Jack.”

“Grateful for the house seats,” Dad says, shaking Skye’s hand.

“Oh, of course.” She uses her thumb to point over her shoulder. “The old guy over there insists anyone who works for Burton Field has to experience at least one game from the suite. Good thing the All-Star game was still on the schedule.”

“I know my own daughter didn’t call me old.” The man in a suit stands, buttoning the center button.

My eyes pop. He’s Skye’s father?

He strides with the confidence of the king of the universe and holds out his hand. “Dallas Anderson. Ava, I’m so glad to meet you.”

“You too, sir.” Dallas has a charming smile, it’s welcoming and powerful all at once. It puts me at ease to the point I’m not afraid I’m about to burst into braying sobs or anything.

“Wren and Griffin have been bragging about your work since they got back. When you meet Griffin Marks, you’ll understand that’s a lot of praise.”

The woman with the glasses snickers and comes to Dallas’s side, but holds out her hand to me. “Griff and Ava have already met. He dropped about ten meals of takeout on her porch last week.” Dallas scoffs like it isn’t surprising. She smiles back at me. “I’m Wren Marks, Griffin’s wife.”

I swallow and hope my smile is less serial killer clown and more normal businesswoman as I stick my hand out to shake hers. “Mrs. Marks. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Wren is softer spoken than Skye, but she surprises me and pulls me into a quick hug. “I am not a hugger, but you deserve one. I love what you did to my house. My mom told me all you were given was that Griff loved baseball, a box of Kings stuff, and that I read a lot.”

I chuckle nervously when she releases me. “Believe it or not, that’s more than I’ve gotten for other jobs. We did a

corporate event once where the assistant told us to make it look like the color taupe. That was the theme. Taupe.”

They don’t need to know this. I have a nasty habit of chatting when the nerves hit, and I’d do well to remember I’m here on business. Still, it eases the tension when everyone chuckles.

“Is those hot dogs?” Charlie interrupts the introductions and points at a long table in the back of the suite.

Stacked from one end to the other are platters of snacks: Hot dogs, bags of old-fashioned popcorn, kettle corn drizzled in caramel, fat juicy dill pickles in wrappers, and hot churros coated in fragrant cinnamon and chunky sugar crystals.

Dallas laughs. “Want one, kiddo?”

“Yes.” Charlie rocks on his toes and tugs on my dad’s hand.

But before Dad takes a step, Dallas holds out his big hand. “Come on, let’s let your grandpa and aunt have a seat. I’ll make sure you get all the treats you want.”

Charlie was born with an inherent love of all people who have kind faces and big smiles. It causes all kinds of stress for my brother when they’re out in public, but here, no one flinches when Dallas takes my nephew’s hand. He’s patient and allows Charlie to chatter all about his favorite way to spread ketchup over hotdogs.

“Come on,” Skye says. “The game’s starting.”

It takes a severe case of willpower not to immediately look at the spot between second and third. I force myself to take in the outfield, then the pitcher’s mound, then I allow my gaze to drift to Ryder.

A poor choice. Admittedly, I’ve watched a few Kings games on TV when I’m feeling particularly intent to torture myself, but to see him here on the field, his glove tucked under his arm as he speaks with the third baseman and looks to be putting earplugs in, is an unwelcome delight.

The girlish love I once had for the man was as real as the heat of the sun, but this attraction now that he's dropped back into my life is agitating. I chock it up to being a woman, and him, a man with sex-appeal.

Nothing to be ashamed about.

The tug to gawk at his muscles, or the way he stretches his arms, or lunges side to side to work the hamstrings, is merely natural attraction to the opposite sex.

Still, I'm grateful when Dallas and Charlie return and engage the lot of us in conversation once the game begins.

Mom was right, Dallas is a genuine guy who knows his business. Athletics and the people who love them are his specialty. He has numerous investments outside of Burton Field, but this is clearly where the man's heart lies.

"I might not always take Griffin's word for things, but when Wren spoke about your good work, I had to meet you." Dallas leans back and wipes his hands after eating some of the popcorn. "You were given the employment details, right?"

"I was. I've reviewed the vision for the youth field house, and I'm impressed."

I don't even need to stretch the truth. The project is incredible and will be a positive beacon in the community.

I try not to read into the details that the field house is centered around the group home Drake and I lived in for two years. If Ryder's project was inspired by his past relationships, I'll start to think he *didn't* peel us out of his heart like an unwanted virus.

I might be forced to accept I was never the same after him.

Dallas leans back in his seat when the teams switch positions. "Your technique with not only aesthetics but industrial, functional design is what we're looking for. I do want to warn you, though, the board of Burton Field is not entirely convinced this is a project we need."

I tilt my head. "Any particular reasons for their objections?"

“Money.” Dallas gives me a small grin. “When I bought this team, I was more interested in community outreach than selling our suite tickets with the highest price tag. Don’t get me wrong, I want to do both, but some feel we can skip the community outreach piece.”

“With all due respect to the board, cultivating trust and safe spaces for the youngest fans will create generational audiences who will keep coming to Burton Field long after they’re grown. It’s purely long-game marketing.”

With a laugh, Dallas nods. “Agreed.”

My chest grows tight. The disdain some people carry for at-risk youth, the same attitude Carina held about this project, rubs me wrong.

Common sense dictates, if children have a place to go, they will have a stronger foundation than if they are left to the wilds of the world where abusers, predators, and manipulators can find them, mold them away from their potential, and rip their foundation out from under their feet.

“I look forward to proving the point that this will benefit the whole of Burton Field, Mr. Anderson,” I say with conviction.

From the corner of my eye, I see Dad give me a little smile before he’s forced to help Charlie with his root beer cap.

Dallas gives me another approving nod, then finishes the game by including me in conversation with the others. Skye and Wren point out important faces in the crowd. The seats behind home plate are occupied by Skye’s sister-in-law. I smile when she points out a woman standing with a little boy perched on her hip.

“They always sit there,” Skye says. “It’s tradition for the whole band.”

“Band?”

“Perfectly Broken. Bridger, our brother-in-law, he’s the singer, but Parker grew up with all the guys in the band. They’re usually the worst hecklers by far.” Skye sighs. “It’ll

be strange when Park retires, but they've promised we can sit by them and join in the heckling."

I scan the seats again and pick up on the line of men with tattoos, women at their sides, a few kids in the mix. What a small world. Connections everywhere seem to tie me to this team. I almost tell her I have a slight tie to the drummer through the group home, but hesitate. How much of a tragic backstory is appropriate when people first meet, after all?

As the game wraps up, my knee isn't bouncing anymore, I haven't choked on a cheese fry, and I've even begun to initiate conversations as if I've known these people forever.

The crowd begins to disperse after Griffin and Parker thank the crowd for supporting their All-Star foundation. They announce a charity banquet in a few weeks, then the Kings give a final look at their field they won't touch for the next few months, and head for the clubhouse.

Dallas stands and looks at me. "Well, are you ready to meet everyone involved in the project?"

Unexpected. I guess this means I *do* have the job, but I didn't realize there were more faces to meet and impress. I bury the sudden jolt of sharp anxiety and stand, brushing the wrinkles from my skirt. "Absolutely."

Skye and Wren and Alice, the woman with the pixie cut, tell me they'll be giving Dad and Charlie a tour of the clubhouse while I'm in the conference room.

Only once I'm halfway down a corridor heading to the offices in the clubhouse do I realize that by sitting at the table with everyone involved means Ryder Huntington.

Ryder



THERE IS SOMETHING I'LL NEVER ADMIT TO THESE THREE guys: moments like this, where we're sprawled out on our backs in the dressing area of the clubhouse, are my favorite.

It's still here. Calm and steady. A thick scent of butter and fried grease and too much woody cologne lives in these halls. But when it's quiet like this, and only the occasional gulps of sports drink are heard, I can breathe easier.

Here, with Parker, Griffin, and Dax, I can take a moment to simply ... be.

The rest of the team showered and fled for an after party. Most years, I don't attend. Sometimes these guys don't either, but we never miss this ritual of passing drinks back and forth, staring at the ceiling, as we recount memorable moments from the season.

The All-Star game is always the last moment of glory before our attention shifts to holidays and rest and family.

Future All-Stars is the foundation run by Griff and Parker. The final game for the charity is always played by the Kings and the Scorps post-season, and it is the final wave farewell to Burton Field for the winter months.

"Gah, I hate to say goodbye, my guys." Griffin rolls his head to the side, a somber expression on his face. "It's been an honor to serve beside you."

I fight a grin. "You say that every year."

“Doesn’t make it less true, buddy.” Griffin sighs and looks around the room.

I close my eyes and breathe in the leather and dirt from shoes and dirty baseballs. I don’t even let myself think of Ava sitting in the big suite the entire game. It was a nagging thought I kept in the back of my head through every play, every run.

Part of me wanted to know if she cursed at me like she used to when I fumbled on an out. Another part wanted to hold the heart symbol over my chest whenever I took the field. But the greater piece of me, the cynic who took up residence years ago, grumbled about the distraction.

She’s signed the contract. She’s working for the Kings. Ava Williams is back in my life, and I put her there. Only time will tell if I made a blunder or the best move of my life. Either way it leaves me feeling a great deal like a snake coiled in the corner with nothing else to do but strike anyone who comes too close.

“You’re growling, man.” Dax taps the rim of his drink bottle to mine.

“M’not,” I grumble.

“Like a bear.” Dax chuckles. He might be antisocial and completely content to hole up in his house the entire off-season, but Dax doesn’t shy away when we need to be smacked upside the head.

“Want to talk about it?” Parker asks without looking away from the ceiling.

“Nope.”

Griffin sits up and looks at me. “First rule in relationships: no secrets.”

“Shut up,” I say. “You’ve been married for two seconds. You’re not the relationship god.”

Griffin laughs and reaches out one of his abnormally long legs to kick my ankle. “Try nineteen days and—” He checks his phone. “Eight hours.”

“Come on, you know the time to the hour?” Dax scoffs. “Griff, you’ve got it bad.”

“So bad, Daxton. And I’m basically the foremost expert on winning women over who don’t particularly want to be won.” Griffin turns his big eyes to me, like I might pour out my soul any second. All he needs is a yellow notepad and glasses on the bridge of his stupid nose and he’d be a therapist. “How are you going to handle this? What are we walking into?”

“*We’re* not handling anything.” I glance at my athletic watch. “In fact, I need to go. *We’re* meeting.”

“Let it out,” Griffin says. “*We’re* here for you.”

How do I explain she clawed into me, believed in me, cracked my ribs, and stole pieces of my heart, then I never asked for them back?

A soft buzz causes Parker to startle. He pulls his phone out of his pocket and groans his way into sitting. “Skye is warning us we’d better have pants on; she and Wren are on their way with a few people on a tour of the clubhouse.”

Griffin pops up and rams his nose under his pit. “Do I smell?”

“Yes,” I say to spite him.

He shoves me against my chest, chuckling, then skips putting on his shirt, and goes to wait by the door, again, like a puppy.



Outside the conference room door, a woman with bright purple hair wrestles with a busy toddler with cornsilk curls. Mason stands by them, arguing with Micah, his eleven-year-old sister, on who gets to hold their little cousin first.

But when the toddler girl sees me, she squeals and babbles a sound that almost sounds like Ryder. Almost. I’m going with it though.

“Hey, Morgie.” I tickle the little girl’s chin before giving her mom a side hug. “Hey, Elle.”

Mason gets a hair ruffle since he hates it so much.

“D-Dude,” he stammers. “I’ve got a date later.”

“With Geeeerrrtie.” Micah makes a kissy face.

“Yeah, and guess who’s doubling with us?” Mason snaps back. “Lucas.”

Micah glares at him. “So? I don’t care. Why would I care?”

“Oh, I think we know why, Mikey. Should I tell him you think he’s cute? Or was it hot that you said?”

Micah lets out a shriek of frustration. Ellie snickers and turns to me while the two siblings go at it. “Good game, Ryder. Almost looked like you were trying to impress someone.”

My face sets like a hard stone. “Parker has the biggest mouth.”

Doesn’t help that Ellie starts laughing, but it gets worse when the door to the men’s room opens and her husband, Tate Hawkins, the drummer of Perfectly Broken, stalks out with a smirk. “Ryder, Ryder, Ryder, you know how his sister is. Alexis is relentless when she wants information, and at our dinner on Sunday she wanted the dirty details.”

Tate is tall and lean, even though the man is constantly eating. Sure enough, he pulls out a chocolate granola bar and bites into it. When his daughter whimpers and holds her arms out, he breaks off a piece and hands it to her, giving her cheeks a few kisses.

“You okay with all this?” Tate asks, something like concern in his voice. I’m not close to the rock stars like Parker, but they’re all good guys. Mason and Micah’s dad is the producer for the band, Ellie is their aunt, and Parker is their brother by extension.

Somehow along the way they adopted a few baseball players.

“I’m ready for this field house to be running.”

“Fair enough.”

“I appreciate you coming to give some feedback.”

“Always.” Tate takes another bite of his granola bar, but gives the last piece to Morgan. “It’s going to be a partnership with HYFC, right?”

“That’s the hope.”

Tate and Ellie opened Hawkins Youth and Family Center last year. A new building where at-risk and homeless youth can participate in various after-school programs. When they found out I was working to open an athletic center, they jumped on board to help me.

Truth be told, the Hawkins have been critical in bringing this about. To partner with them and start working with the kids they’re already helping is amazing. Tate promises Micah and Mason they can both have parties at his house if they help Ellie with Morgan while he’s in the meeting, then follows me into the room.

A small gasp hits me the second I’m inside. Ice floods my veins. Ava stands two feet away, at a stand-still with one hand on a chair. As if she were about to sit down and stopped at the sight of me.

I preen a bit that I still have an effect on her, but school my face into something hard and unapproachable.

Tate glances back and forth between us once, then subtly steps forward, holding out his hand for Ava. “Tate Hawkins. I hear you’re the one who’s going to make the shell of this place pretty to look at.”

Ava’s cheeks flush with a splatter of pink, and all at once I want to push Tate away from her. Jealousy is stupid. Tate is happily married, but he’s a freaking rock star. Most women probably flush at the sight of them. A lot don’t care that the man is married either.

“Hawkins,” Ava whispers, a quiver to her voice. “I recognize you.”

Tate might be a rock star, but he doesn't always like to be front and center. He shrugs. "Yeah, that billboard next to the stadium is a little in your face, I think, but—"

"No." Ava chuckles softly. "No, I don't mean from the band, I ... well, I don't want to embarrass you or bring up a bad time, but for a couple years I lived at the same group home as you. I remember you came back and taught music classes."

Pressure clamps over my lungs. Ava rarely talks about her time in the system before she and Drake were adopted. Only to me. I knew Tate had a rough childhood, the reason he opened the Hawkins Family Center, but I didn't expect they'd have a similar tie.

Tate's face goes soft. "Are you serious?"

Ava nods, a sparkle in her eyes I can't stop staring at. "You probably don't remember me, but you taught me how to play *Jingle Bells* on the piano. I can't tell you how wonderful it is to see what you've done with your life."

Tate's smile widens. "It looks like you've made something of yourself too. I can't wait to hear what you've got planned for this guy."

I'm drawn back to her attention. She gives me a small smile, and I realize I'm smiling too.

The break in my defenses is a mistake I can't afford again. I clear my throat, frown, and point at the table. "Let's get started."

My frown deepens as the meeting progresses. The board is rough to deal with on normal days, but the way they come at Ava's design ideas with words like *frivolous spending* and *unnecessary items*, makes me want to grab them each by the collar and leave their lips so pulpy and fat they can't talk anymore.

Tate was a wise addition. He might be a multi-millionaire, but he is the cheapest famous person I know.

He comes to her aid with ways to pinch pennies, then drops bombs like improved grades, family life, and motivation

from statistics of the kids at the Hawkins center. I tack on studies about exercise, team sports, and general athletics in behavior for struggling youth, and after about an hour of arguing, they finally start to listen.

Ava's ideas are convincing, practical, and the way she describes the general design, while pointing to the blueprints of the field house, paints a beautiful picture in my head. She's always been a creative, always sketching things, but she has a true talent on seeing an ugly, useless space and pulling out the potential.

"I love the idea of these buddy benches," Dallas says. "A small touch that encapsulates the whole idea of the field house."

Ava beams. "I'm not an athlete, but I love the mission statement of everyone having a place. This way if no one has found a team, or their people, you could say, they can sit on the bench. A sort of signal to other kids that someone is still alone. I've read reports that these benches placed in schoolyards have decreased reports of bullying by twelve percent, and increased student productivity in grades first through sixth by a significant amount."

"Buddy benches." Tate looks over a drawing with the written report next to it. "I like this. Would've been nice to have in school."

"Thoughts, Ryder?"

Dallas is looking at me. Everyone is, as if I might spout some dollop of wisdom, as if I can add to Ava's solid plan. I have no thoughts since all my focus has unwittingly been placed on her for the better part of nearly two hours.

Unbidden, I've gotten lost all over again. Ava wouldn't be so hard to shake if she wasn't such a collision of soft eyes, bubblegum lips, and that dimple on her right cheek. Always there, taunting me, like she knows a secret but won't tell me.

I try to maintain my composure. "I think we have a budget, a plan, and we don't need to be wasting time going over silly

details like if red paint for the checkered floor is more expensive than white.”

I shoot a glare at Dean. The man puckers his thin lips.

“Anything else?” Dallas presses, almost like he’s trying to get me to say something specific.

Even Tate looks at me, one brow arched.

I’m missing something, but have no idea what it is. “I, uh, I don’t have anything else.”

Dallas sighs, but recovers quickly and smiles at Ava. “Well, *I* would like to thank you for all this, Miss Williams. You have a beautiful plan laid out for us, and the effort you’ve already put in with this portfolio is worth noting.” He looks at me again.

I stare at my hands on the table.

“Thank you, Mr. Anderson,” Ava says, standing as she shakes Dallas’s hand. “I appreciate that, it means a lot.”

The board breaks up the meeting, and while Ava is locked in conversation with Dallas and a few of the members, Tate leans over to whisper to me. “You know, I was totally oblivious when I was first with Ellie.”

“What are you talking about?”

Tate glances toward Ava. “My advice, this job will go much smoother if you stop acting like all her ideas are insignificant. She’s talented, but she wants you on board with her like everyone else.”

Did I act like her ideas were insignificant? “I am. I hired her.”

“And also glared at her the entire time, and grunted when she made a suggestion or offered a solution to a problem.”

In my mind, I was straightforward. Professional. Exactly what I needed to be. “Do I need to release balloons every time she has a good idea?”

“No.”

“Then what more do I do?”

Tate chuckles and takes out a package of baked potato chips. Where he got them, I don't know, but he tears into the bag. “You'll figure it out. Remember, we're around if you need anything else. This is a good project, Ryder. The kids will love it.”

Tate winks and slips into the hallway to rejoin his family who are now mingled in a growing crowd. The second Tate emerges, Ellie's eyes light up like her world just got a little better. A simple thing, but today it packs a punch. Envy grips my throat.

Mason is lost in conversation with Dax about the outlook for the high school varsity team next spring. Skye hugs Parker's big bicep and gushes over his performance during the All-Star game. Griffin has his mouth against Wren's neck, whispering sickly sweet things and kissing her like we're not here.

Ava catches my stare, chin lifted, shoulders back.

I narrow my gaze, trying to decipher the emotions on her countenance. I'm out of practice with her, and in another breath realize I don't like that I am.

I give up after a moment and ask, “Are you irritated?”

“Not yet.” She flicks her brows, a definite implication that she could become so soon.

I go out on a limb and assume she means if there is an irritant, then I will be it.

All at once, Drake's face fills my mind. Not because I have a particular inclination to think of my former best friend, but because there is a mousy little boy who looks unnervingly like the man coming right at me.

Next thing I know, the kid is wrapped around my thighs, hugging me too tightly. “I got your picture!”

My eyes pop, hands fly in the air away from the kid. I look around the hallway, desperate for someone to rescue me.

No one comes but Ava.

“Charlie,” she says, “come here. Remember, we talked about hugging strangers.”

She finagles the kid off my legs, and I try to ignore the spark of heat on my chest from the place her palm naturally went to brace as she pulls him back.

Her eyes lift to mine. “Sorry. He’s affectionate.”

“Ah, Ryder could use it,” Griffin says, laughing.

I fight the urge to flip him off. There are little kids around, but I give him a sharp look that hopefully tells him exactly what I planned to do.

It only makes him laugh harder.

Ava blows a lock of hair out of her eyes and holds the boy against her legs. “This is Charlie. My nephew.”

Drake’s kid. *This is Drake’s kid.* I didn’t know he had a son.

“I got your picture.” The kid beams at me, shifting on his feet.

“He means he has your baseball card.” A gruff voice draws my attention down the hall.

The hallway goes silent. Maybe I imagine it, maybe people are still chattering, I don’t know, all my focus is on the man in a black Kings hoodie and ballcap.

My jaw pulses. My heart stutters. All at once I’m an eighteen-year-old kid confessing how badly I screwed up in the small, cluttered office of the hardware store. I’m the boy who cried in front of a grown man while he popped the top off two lemonades, one normal, one hard, and told me life would work out.

I brace for the sneer, a snarl, anything, but the same soft expression is on Jack Williams’s face when he looks at me now.

“Ryder.” He holds out his hand.

I’m pathetic, but I hope he can’t see how mine trembles when I shake his. “Sir.”

“Charlie has your baseball card,” Jack says. “He’s a big Kings fan.”

I force myself into my learned meet-and-greet mode and crouch in front of Charlie. “A Kings’ fan, huh? Who’s your favorite player?”

The little boy’s eyes drift down the hall, a look of awe on his face as he whispers with a bit of a lisp, “The fastball thrower.”

I peek over my shoulder when Parker shoots his arms in the air and whoops.

My smile grows when I look at Charlie again. “Kid, we need to work on your life choices. Did anyone sign your glove?”

Charlie glances at Jack, then Ava. She points at his green glove. “Do you want the baseball players to sign it for you?”

“Yeah,” he says in a breathy whisper.

Together, Griffin, Dax, Parker, and I sign the glove. Parker pauses for a picture with him and hands him a small jersey and hat Dallas snuck in from the storage room.

I drift off to the side, but after a few minutes, Charlie tugs on my hand. My chest cramps when I look at him. There is a bit of Ava in his face, and it makes me wonder what it would have been like if we’d never lost ...

No. I’m not going there, and swallow the thought away.

“I’mma tell my daddy about today,” Charlie says. “He watches you on the teebee!”

The bottom of my gut falls out, like the final brick in a tumbling tower, and is promptly replaced with bitterness.

I give Charlie a stiff nod and back away.

“Ryder,” Dallas says, lowering his cell from his ear. When he is concerned or distressed, his lips tighten into a bloodless line. They’re bloodless now. “He’s here again.”

I stiffen. Dallas doesn’t need to tell me who showed up. He’s been showing up after events, too cheap to buy a ticket,

and expects to simply be allowed entrance. Last season I added his name to the security list of people I *didn't* want to see.

Like a cruel twist of fate, I've collided with the people I thought I'd love forever, and now another man who played a role in me believing I'd never be worthy of them.

"Tell him I'm still not available."

Dallas gives me a sympathetic look. The guys always stare when this happens, like they want to ask, but know I'll give them nothing.

"Tell Mr. Huntington to leave the premises," Dallas mutters. He tries to be discreet and say it as he moves away from others, but the name echoes.

"Huntington?" Ava cocks a brow. "Josh?"

I shake my head.

Her eyes darken. "*Mitch?*"

She looks particularly feral, and I wish it didn't send a rush of blood through my veins. I recognize this expression, one where she's on the attack, and it lights a fire that shoots up my spine.

The hint of a grin tugs at my mouth at the memory of the first time the Williams twins revealed how quickly they turned into guard dogs over people who mattered. Over me. It was when I knew I'd found people I'd always be with.

The memory is there, but the outcome is not what I thought.

"Ryder." Ava moves like she might want to reach for me, a look of concern furrowed in her brow.

If she touches me, then I'm undone. With a wide step back, I harden my expression. "Material orders are going to be delivered on Monday. We'll need to go through them and see what else is needed. I'll see you then."

I don't wait for her to say a word, I don't say goodbye to Jack, I don't say anything before I cut down a cross hall

leading to the dressing room.

Ava



Age Twelve

THIS FEELS LIKE WE'RE IN THE HORROR MOVIE WE LIED ABOUT watching last weekend and we're running from a crazed killer. I don't know why we crouched in the toolshed, we should've stuck it out and finished the job, but when Ryder said run at the sight of the bright blue car on the lane, we ran.

My smile looks stupid and big with my braces, but I can't help it. It's pretty exciting.

Maybe I get why Mom is starting to worry about my fascination with scary movies.

"I can't believe you hit him. He totally deserved it, but man, Ride-or-freaking-Die for the win!" I whisper and thread my arm through Ryder's, then Drake's when he settles on my other side.

It's how we always sit. Dad always jokes and tells us to 'assume the position' on movie nights. I'm safe here. I've always been pretty good with feelings and trusting my gut. And the first night I met Ryder, I knew he'd always be a safe place, different from Drake, but still safe.

I'm smiling ... until I notice Ryder isn't. He looks sick, to be honest. White and sweaty, his hands over his ears. And is he ... I unthread my arm from his and rest my palm on his back. He's trembling, even though it's a hundred and one degrees outside.

I'm pretty sure if we stay in this shed too long, we'll bake.

"Hey," I whisper. "You okay?"

"Don't believe him." He lifts his gaze, practically begging me.

Drake gives me a strange look. He's confused too.

I lean in once more. "Believe who?"

Ryder doesn't have time to answer before shouting begins. I tense. I've always hated shouting and yelling, especially when it's men. I lucked out with Dad, he rarely raises his voice.

But that's ... *Josh*. He's losing it. Josh is the nicest guy ever. Why is he so mad?

"We're done here," Josh shouts. "I'm not tolerating this crap anymore, Dan."

"He broke his nose." The other guy barks. It's the best way I can describe it, he sounds like an angry dog.

Josh scoffs. "Ryder was defending himself. I caught what Mitchell was doing, and based on what I saw, it's been happening for quite some time. He apologizes, or he's not coming back, you get me?"

"What are you doing, Josh?" The other guy shouts. "You do this, that means you're cutting out your family."

"My family is right here."

"You're going to pick him? Josh, open your eyes, he can hardly talk. I told you not to marry her; I knew the kid would be a burden on you, and it's tearing—"

"Shut up!" Josh shouts. "You talk about *my son* like that again, and I'm breaking your jaw."

I flipping hope Josh does break this guy's jaw. I can't even see anything, but I wouldn't mind hearing it go down.

"I didn't say anything," Ryder mutters. He clutches his head again. "I didn't say anything."

He doesn't like yelling either.

I hug his shoulders and squeeze. He likes to be touched and hugged by certain people, and I'm happy to be one of them. I like it too, so it works. "Mitch deserved it. He totally deserved it."

"I-I shouldn't have hit him."

Drake blows out his lips. "Yeah, you should've. It was a good hit too."

"My dad's gonna hate me if Uncle Dan hates him."

"Well, I'mma 'bout to go hit your uncle."

"D," I say, glaring at my brother. "Shhh."

Ryder doesn't need to feel worse, but Drake has a temper. He better watch it.

"You coddle him," Ryder's uncle says. "He's off, but maybe if you'd be a man and teach him something, he might be normal."

Ryder stiffens. I rest my head against his shoulder and say without thinking, "Normal's boring."

For a second, I think he laughs, sort of. It's a sound from his nose that is like a laugh started, then he changed his mind.

"Get off my property, Dan. And stay off."

"Seriously?"

Ryder presses his fists into his eyes. "They're brothers, and I ruined it."

"Nope." I shake my head. "Take it from me, since I have a brother, if D was being a jerk like this guy, I'd tell him to leave too. Josh is freaking Superman."

"He's a ... he's a rancher," Ryder says like he can't help it.

I smile. Sometimes he just doesn't get my jokes, but it's okay.

"I haven't been mean to him," Mitch whines like a wimpy baby. "I swear. I just didn't want to play with those other kids. They're the ones who are mean."

Ryder shakes his head and buries his face in his knees.

“There are bruises all over him,” Josh says. “Old ones he says he’s gotten from ball practice, but you know what I’m thinking? I’m thinking he’s been taking beatings for a long time. Today, he finally fought back. How’s that make you feel, Dan?”

“Boys will be boys,” Dan shouts back. “They fight.”

“Has he been hittin’ you, Ryd?” Drake asks.

Ryder doesn’t answer, but I think it’s more he can’t. He’s told me sometimes when he gets upset or excited words don’t come out, they sort of get stuck.

I’ve got this.

With one hand, I start to knead his palm. It’s deep, like I’m really rolling out cookie dough or something.

Ryder closes his eyes and straightens his fingers, inviting me to keep going.

“I said I wouldn’t tell,” Ryder says. “But I couldn’t do it anymore.”

Drake looks like he ate a hundred hot tamales. His fists ball up. “He’s not going to touch you again. Right, Avie?”

I nod, rubbing Ryder’s hand a little more. “Right.”

I arch my neck, peeking through a gap in the wood walls. Josh stands in the center of the driveway, fists clenched, while a tall guy who looks like he’d make the perfect scarecrow gets into the bright blue car.

Dan looks over Josh’s shoulder to Laura who’s on the porch. “You ruined my brother. You and your messed up kid.”

Drake is on his feet in the next second. Drake means dragon, and my brother can turn into a dragon when he feels like someone he loves is being bullied.

“He’s dead,” is all Drake says before he bursts out of the shed.

“Drake, no!” Ryder calls after him. He’s still trembling, but now we’re both watching with a bit of horror as Drake sprints for the guy getting in the car.

He's going to hit him or get hit.

I don't dare leave Ryder's side, but I'm screaming for Drake to stop being an idiot.

"Hey!" Drake says. "Say that again, and—*oof*."

Drake half falls to the ground and half falls against Josh's big chest when Josh snags the back of his shirt.

"Reel it in, big guy," Josh says.

Ryder's uncle and Mitch drive away in a cloud of dust and gravel.

Josh has an arm around Drake's shoulders while my brother swears more than once at the taillights. Josh doesn't tell him to stop, maybe he doesn't care right now. My heart is racing, and my stomach feels like I might throw up.

Ryder is still pale, but he's on his feet now.

I stand next to him and slip my hand into his sweaty palm. "Hey."

He takes a few seconds, but eventually looks at me.

"Don't even say it." I shake my head. I know what he's thinking, it's written all over his face. "You're exactly how I like you, Ryd. If he thinks that means you're different, then poo on him."

"I do think different sometimes." He flicks his fingertips. "But I only notice it when Mitch is around. I don't know why my mom and Josh don't mind it, but everyone else does. Do you mind it?"

"Nope." I hug his arm, letting my head fall to his shoulder. He shot up this summer and is half a head taller than me now. "And just wait until you're a pro-ball player. He won't be thinking you're weird then."

"Those are called dreams, Tweets. Not real."

"You will because you're ride or die in everything. If you want it, you'll get it." I lift my gaze back to his. "And you want to know how else I know you're not worthless?"

“How?”

“You’re my best friend,” I say softly. “And my friends are worth a lot.”

Ryder



I'M BARELY AT MY CUBBY SPACE IN THE CLUBHOUSE DRESSING room when the door clicks open and shuts again.

“Is this how it’s going to be?” Ava crosses her arms over her chest.

“You’re not supposed to be in here.”

“Ask me how much I care.”

I shoot her a glare and start stuffing what little gear I have left in my space into a black duffel bag.

“I’m serious, Ryder. Is this how it’s going to be?”

“How what will be?”

She sighs. “You pouting and stomping around, letting what happened turn you into this ... this ogre. *You hired me*, but I’m not sure it’s worth it if you can’t even stand to look at me.”

I sling the bag over my shoulder and do my best not to stomp across the room. Wouldn’t want to prove her right. Our faces are close when I stop. Too close. Her warm breath brushes over my lips. Her body is a mere tug away from pressing against mine. I ignore it all.

“I’m here to do a job, not worry about your disapproval of my personality.”

“This isn’t you.”

“Afraid it is. Sorry to disappoint.”

“Liar.” Ava holds my stare with the same ferocity that used to knock me off my feet. “I think if we’re going to do this, we should meet. Maybe work out some ... some things that happened. Closure, you know?”

A thousand curses rage in my head. Her voice is so sweet, and beneath it all is something like a plea. I understand the desperation, but I can’t do it. There is no surviving it if I break the barrier and let her back in only to disappoint and lose her again later.

Ava lets out a little gasp when I draw closer, hovering my lips over hers. Crossing into personal space was never a problem with Ava. Truth be told, growing too comfortable stepping over the line too often *became* our problem.

“That might be helpful if I needed closure on anything.” I’m tossing out rusty knives with every word. “But I don’t. Nothing in the past impacts my present. None of it matters.”

A splotchy red rash blooms up Ava’s neck and my heart breaks. That was one of her signals when she was trying not to cry. If she’s trying not to cry, it means she either wants to murder me, or I’ve slashed up her heart good and thorough.

“*None* of it matters?” She shakes her head. “Got it. Message delivered, loud and clear.”

I’m an idiot. “Ava—”

She’s already gone.

I slam my palm against the wall and lean my forehead against the cool cinderblocks. Why did I say that? Out of anything I could’ve—out of anything I should’ve said—why did I cut her where it would hurt?

I close my eyes. For years I’ve convinced myself I’d let go of the Williams twins. I’d let go of Ava. That lie fell apart the second I saw her last week. I’ve never let her go. No, instead, I’ve built a barbed, poisonous wall around this thing in my chest, desperate to keep everyone else at a safe distance because I *couldn’t* let her go.

People say you always remember your first love, but no one talks about what happens when you don’t only remember

your first, you cling to them because they still hold your heart.

But they're not yours anymore.

Fear of losing another Drake, or another Ava has kept me pushing back against those who want to get closer. My teammates accept me, and I've unfairly pushed back. They don't know the reason, but if Ava Williams is back with her beautiful whirlwind, I've no doubt they'll see more than I want them to soon enough.

"Hey, kid."

I jump. Jack Williams leans against the doorway.

Seeing Jack isn't as shocking as seeing Ava. In truth, I've seen Jack more than once over the years. Hard to cut ties completely when Jack and Marianne remain close friends with my parents. I also know Jack attends the games. We keep it quick, shallow, never bringing up his kids or the past, but today feels different.

He always had a certain look in his eyes when he meant business.

"Mr. Williams."

"Oh come on, Ryder," he says.

"Sorry." I hold up a hand, almost smiling. "Jack."

"So." He steps into the room, looking around. "You still love being some hot shot famous guy?"

I chuckle. Reluctantly. "Not sure about the famous part—"

"You have posters and baseball cards. That's famous in my book."

I sit on one of the benches in the center of the room. "I love the game still. Not so much everyone trying to get in my business, but I've gotten pretty good at hiding in my house."

"The money helps, I'm sure." Jack wiggles his brows.

"One of the perks, I guess."

With a sound somewhere between a grunt and sigh, Jack sits next to me. "I saw Ava run out of here all red in the face. I

take it you two went at it.”

My smile fades; I stare at the ground. “I, uh, I said some things I shouldn’t have said.”

“I see.” Jack’s jaw pulses twice. “Listen, Ryder. I’m not being biased when I say you’ve made a good choice involving Ava. She’s extremely talented, and I’ve been waiting for her to have an opportunity away from Haven. But she’s not going to be able to pretend nothing ever happened.”

I stare at the ground, uncomfortable with meeting his gaze right now. “I know.”

“Okay then.” Jack hesitates, then gently claps my shoulder before standing. “You never lost your place with us, Ryder. I don’t know all the details, and I’ll never force anyone to give them up, but you never lost your place.”

Such a simple statement tosses me into the spiral of a thousand words that ought to be said, yet I can’t sound out a single one.

The day I drove away from Ava was the day I became displaced in the world. Never belonging, in my head, anywhere. Not really.

Jack gives me a kind smile when I’m silent. “You were a bunch of kids who had to deal with some big things. Didn’t mean we ever stopped caring.” He steps toward the door, but pauses before he leaves. “I’m looking forward to seeing the end result of this field house. I know your folks are real proud of this project. We are too.”

Jack slaps the doorframe a few times, then disappears into the corridor.

Alone, the silence swallows me. A sharp ache burns in my chest as I slide down the wall until I’m on the floor. After what happened, I always thought Jack would hate me. But he never did. He was there, a calm voice in a storm of fear and uncertainty for a couple of eighteen-year-olds once.

And I let Ava think none of it mattered.

It will always matter.

My forearms drape over the tops of my knees. From under my T-shirt sleeve, the hint of black ink peeks out. I blink and a hot swell fills my vision.

I pull up my sleeve, rubbing a thumb over the tattooed date of a birthday that never came.

Ava



“LET ME DRIVE YOU,” DRAKE SAYS, SNAGGING AN OLD DONUT hole out of the plastic container and popping it onto his tongue. “It’s on the way.”

“I’m good.”

“Your car belongs in a junkyard.”

“Rude.” I poke him in the chest as I walk by. Where is my purse?

“I’m right. I don’t know what weird attachment you have to the thing, but it’s time to get a new one.”

“Hush. The window is open and she can hear you.” I hurry past him in the hall into the living area, lifting pillows and blankets on my sofa. Purse is *where*?

“I’m driving you.”

On my way back toward the kitchen, I notice the black strap of my purse jutting out of my small laundry room. I practically squeal when I snag it. Another weekend of nervous rearranging has left pictures and shelves, furniture and rugs, moved in new places throughout my cottage.

I need to channel my nervous energy elsewhere. If this upheaval is going to happen every time I see Ryder’s face, it’s going to be a long three months.

“D, I’m fine. Go to work,” I say.

“I don’t like you driving that thing.”

“Be honest.” I give him a pointed look as I grab an unpeeled orange from a bowl on the counter. “You want to drive me because a) you want to see him and threaten him with your eyes again, or b) you want to talk about him because you secretly want to know everything but don’t want to admit it.”

My brother glares at me. He was always better at the glare. His blue eyes darken, and he gets a deeper groove between his eyes that makes him look like a bull about to gore something.

He can scowl all he wants. I’m right on this.

Charlie hasn’t stopped talking about the ‘Begas Kings’ since the game, and has shown off the picture of him and Parker at least a dozen times. The thing is, I caught Drake staring at the signatures on the neon green baseball glove more than once. He was staring at one name in particular.

I might be a mistake in Ryder’s eyes, but he wasn’t only mine. Drake and Ryder were inseparable once. True brothers. Drake knew when Ryder needed to drive out into the empty fields and have silence, and Ryder knew when Drake was too locked in anger or his hot temper and needed to play video games until he was laughing again.

To know I’m an afterthought to Ryder Huntington snaps my heart and melts it down into nothing but liquid agony, but I wouldn’t stand in the way of Drake and him mending burned bridges.

I grab my keys and look at my brother again. “I’m right. Maybe you should stop being hot-headed teenagers and call each other. Work it out. Or don’t. Either way, I’m driving myself.”

I’m halfway out the door when Drake says, “I have reached out.”

My blush pink stilettos come to a screeching halt. “What?”

Drake fills my front doorway, hands in his pockets. “I have reached out to Ryder. Got nothing back.”

“When?”

Drake scratches the back of his neck. “When I ... when Ronnie and I were getting married. I ... I wanted him there.”

My chest cramps. Drake never talks about Veronica. He should, but he doesn't.

“Then—” Drake closes his eyes. “I called again after the accident, I sort of lost it. I was spiraling, and the only person I could think of was him. I have no idea why.”

“Because he was your best friend,” I whisper. “Drake, what happened between you two?”

For the first time in a decade, I think my brother might open his stubborn mouth and tell me. But like all tragedies, something ruins the moment. The alarm on my cell phone dings in a disruptive warning that I am late.

“I've got to go,” I tell him softly.

“Go.” Drake's smile is forced. “But don't complain to me when the car blows up in the parking lot.”

My laugh is just as forced as I slide behind the steering wheel.

Someday we're going to address the secrets we keep. Someday we're going to be honest about a fracture in our past, because the more he avoids it, the more I'm convinced Drake Williams knows a lot more about why the guy I'd planned to uproot everything for and marry left us all behind instead.

The youth field house is a quarter mile away from Burton Field. During the season, this place will be close enough the boom of the announcer's voice will rumble the pavement even here. The kids will love it.

I park beneath a tree and study the new, brown brick building. Gold and black splashes of color paint the lampposts, rims of doors, and windowsills. It's a nice place. Small, but it's not off-putting at all. The Kings want every kid to feel welcome here. There are banners of tennis balls, basketballs, footballs, even hockey pucks and golf balls.

It's an athletic center. Half-courts of various sports are inside. Eventually, the plan is to place a full track and field out

back, and possibly a swimming pool.

I enjoy athletics but favor the arts. Still, there is something beautiful about this idea of creating a place filled with teamwork, support, and found family. A bloom of warmth spreads through my chest.

This is a good thing. Even with the aches and pains, I'm grateful to be part of it.

I sling my bag over my shoulder and head inside, passing two guys dressed in blue collared shirts with the delivery logo. I wave and hurry up the stairs toward the main rec room. I've spent an embarrassing amount of time memorizing the blueprints. Pretty sure I know where every nook and alcove sits in this place.

The upper level is open and sprawling. Boxes of supplies mark the wall, and natural sunlight spills in through the massive windowpanes.

I grin at the carpet. There are areas where hopscotch and shuffle boards are printed into the threads. Snack machines are scattered about in random areas; boxes with images of futons and bean bag chairs are stacked like blocks; baskets painted in bright colors will soon be filled with athletic equipment; whiteboards and blackboards where schedules and motivation will be printed in big block letters lie in disarray on the ground.

All of it is a chaotic mess of something beautiful. In my head, ideas swirl around until I start to piece the puzzle together, until a vision of something exciting and safe takes shape.

From the shadows of the back room, soft, brown eyes meet mine. My insides flip upside down. A kind of visceral betrayal to my own sensibilities. My body does not know how to stand united in disinterest.

She, in fact, remains terribly interested in this man to unseemly levels.

Ryder pauses for a few breaths, giving the traitorous woman inside a chance to gawk, to enjoy, to simply drink all

of him up in a delightful gulp. His hair is mussed, his sweats are perfectly shaped to his strong legs, and that black T-shirt stretches seductively over his chest.

He's delicious and has a horrid grip on me. I don't like him right now. At all.

"You made it," he says.

"Did you doubt me?"

"Never."

Ah. Good to know his one-worded answers will be the death of me. What is it with this man and my independent womanhood? It's like he steps from his lair of villainy and my body waves the white flag, giving up the good fight, and begs him to take us.

Stay professional. He set the stage. Respect it.

I drop my bag and place my hands on my hips. "Well, I'm going to get started."

"I'd like to help."

I lift one brow. "Why?"

Ryder hesitates. "I always liked watching your brain work."

I'm either going to murder him or kiss him. What is he thinking talking like this? He's the one who made it clear where he stood.

But I know better. I know Ryder front and back, left and right.

This is the guy who sets up shop in dark crevices of his mind. Those dreary places where he tells himself he's not worth a whole lot and it would be better to face life without too many attachments.

Took a little bit to break him of those thoughts. Separated for so long, I wonder if he went back a few steps.

I know there is no one who builds walls like Ryder. He always has. I took a bit of pride knowing I broke through them

once. Even before Drake. Ryder let me see the most vulnerable moments. The trick is to get him one on one, in a place where he feels free, like for example, an athletic house he's helping to create. In those places, the soft, gentle, wonderful pieces of the guy I wanted forever start to bleed through.

“Okay,” I say softly. “Well, I think we should start first by categorizing what equipment we have, then we'll block out a basic plan on where we want everything to go for optimal access and efficiency.”

“Sounds good.”

“Is anyone else coming?”

Ryder shakes his head. “Not today. It's just us.”

I cover the disquiet with a stiff smile, but inside, my heart is tap-dancing against my ribs. Turns out, I'm not defective, everything simply froze after Ryder left. Now, he's here, and it's as if something inside is beginning to thaw.

Ryder



I DON'T KNOW HOW LONG WE'VE BEEN HERE, BUT TIME HAS sort of become an insignificant thing anyway. Ava has a magic to her. She always has. No mistake, I'd forgotten—or allowed myself to forget—her ability to get me to embrace calmness.

For the last two hours, my shoulders have been at ease. My jaw isn't sore from clenching. When we first began organizing and taking inventory on the supplies we had delivered, we skirted around each other with a heavy dose of awkward.

Until, bit by bit, the ice started chipping away. We started moving in a forgotten dance, almost knowing what the other planned to do before it was done.

Ava would point to a box, and before she said the room she wanted to put it in, I'd suggest the same space.

“Stop it.” She smacks my shoulder, grinning. “You’re stealing the thunder of my brilliance.”

“Sorry. Great minds.”

She smiles and whispers the same, “Great minds.”

My chest squeezes as a memory of blankets and beers we stole from my parents' fridge, driving out to the empty field, and looking at the stars, fills my head...

The campground near the random slope in the center of the field had become our place. Once we'd come here the first time, the way we'd kissed and touched, it was hard to think of anything else but coming back again and again.

“Great minds,” Ava whispered as she’d nuzzled my neck.
“They think alike. Probably why I love you so much.”

I’d been stunned into silence. We’d never said that word before. I’d wanted to a thousand times, but couldn’t spit it out. She must’ve gotten sick of waiting.

Ava had flipped me onto my back, hands on my chest, her eyes locked on mine. “Too much? Want me to take it back and pretend like I didn’t say it? Because I can, but it’ll be a lie.”

I shook my head, spinning like a storm took hold of my brain.
“No. Don’t take it back.”

“Good.” She’d kissed me, then hovered her mouth just above mine. “Anything to say, Ride or Die? No pressure or anything.”

I’d started to breathe harder, tongue tied. “I have a lot to say, but ...”

“I know you do.” Ava smiled and settled over the top of me.
“You have a lot to say, but you don’t always need words, Ryder. I get this.” She’d stroked a finger down the side of my head. “I get you. Great minds. I know you’re saying all kinds of mushy things in that head, right?”

I nodded and wrapped my palm around the back of her neck, tugging her closer. “So many.”

Then I’d kissed her, hard and deep and lasting. I’d never been a man blessed with sweet words, but I’d tried hard that night to show Ava Williams, I didn’t just love her—I’d fallen over the edge and cut the rope. I was never coming back over.

I take a pause, the smile organic and sincere as the passion of those moments flood back. We were young, only teenagers, but Ava wasn’t stretching the truth. She did get me then, and frankly, she gets me now.

She’s been patient, but also diabolical. The woman knows what she’s doing. She’s said all the things she knew I’d need to get me to ease up and not only see the strategic side of this project, but also the joy it’ll bring.

Now, I'm laughing as she stands in front of me, desperate to get me to see her side of things.

"No, no, seriously. Picture it," Ava says, holding her hands up. When she gets like this, she's animated and her eyes brighten like they're made of fire trapped within glass.

I have a range of emotions I feel for Ava, but the fiercest truth is ... I miss her.

I've missed her from the last day I saw her. And I have no idea what I'm supposed to do with that. We're a decade older. Professionals. We walk different paths, in different lives. Then, there is the problem that her brother, the person she loves the most, despises me.

I glance at my cell phone and think of those two untouched voicemails on my phone. Both from Drake Williams.

I never wanted to listen to them.

Until now.

"Ryder." Ava's voice snaps my gaze away from my phone. She chuckles. "Are you listening? Don't lie, I can see it if you lie."

"No you can't."

One of her brows wiggles independently of the other. "You wish. You're an open book."

"I'm not a book, and if I were, I'd be one with a lock on it."

She snorts. "To other people, maybe. To me? You're like one of those pop-up children's books I read to Charlie."

I smile. "But you read those because you secretly love them."

"Why do you need to sound all judgmental?"

"Did I sound judgmental? I was stating a fact."

Ava huffs. "Look, I know they aren't literature, but they're the epitome of entertainment. Flaps, secret windows, pictures in 3-D. Come on."

I help her stack a few more boxes, the question on the tip of my tongue until I finally break. “Charlie is ...”

“Drake’s. Yes. Hence, my nephew.” Her mouth tightens and she stacks one of the smaller boxes with a bit more fire.

“And that makes you mad because ...”

“Not mad.” Ava snaps her gaze to mine. “It just reminds me of how much I’m surrounded by stubborn men, and I don’t want Charlie to be an idiot like them.”

“I have a feeling I’m in trouble and don’t know why.”

“Your status depends.” Ava puts her hands on her hips. “Want to tell me why you and Drake went from bromancers to enemies instantly?”

Bile burns the back of my throat. I turn away and lift a rolled rug to move it into the corner. “No.”

“Figures.”

The subject needs to change, but I keep us hovering dangerously close to the memories of the past. “So, Charlie, he’s what? Three or four?”

“Four.”

The same timeframe I received the last voicemail from Drake. I shake my head, refusing to make any connections with the guy.

“Sounds like you have a question, but I didn’t hear one.”

I roll my eyes. This woman and her life mission to get me to spit out the things in my head.

“Fine. I might be the smallest bit curious about Charlie’s mom. I didn’t know Drake was married, or whatever they are.”

Ava pauses. “He’s not.”

“Divorced? Separated?” Why do I care?

“None of the above.” Ava busies over another box as she talks. “Charlie is a bright place after ... well, he came after the worst storm. Not a literal storm, I mean an emotional one,” she clarifies, her voice cracking.

She wipes at new tears in her eyes.

“Ava.” I lose my mind and cover her hand with mine. Tears drip onto her cheeks, and I hate that my stupid questions put them there.

“Drake’s wife, Veronica, she was in an accident when she was thirty-five weeks pregnant, and ... Ronnie, she ... she didn’t make it.”

It’s a sucker punch to the gut.

Drake was married.

He’s a *widower*?

I don’t want to feel sympathy. We’re supposed to hate each other. I should hate him. I want to hate him. But there is a horrible, jagged piece of regret that pierces through the indifference. More than I want to hate him right now, I wish I’d been there.

I can only imagine what that moment in his life was like.

“I didn’t mean to get so heavy,” Ava says, “but to be fair, you did ask, and I’m not going to lie about the crappy parts of life if you ask. But that doesn’t mean you get to be an oyster again.”

“I’m not an oyster.” My voice is gruff, but a hidden smile starts to tug at my lips.

“You are. There you went, drifting away in some silent thought process without sharing those pearls with the class.”

It’s unnerving how she can still pick up on my tics after all these years.

“I wasn’t thinking anything.”

“Liar.”

I stand from the sofa. My eyes narrow. “What did you call me?”

“I called you a liar.”

“I don’t think you know me as well as you think you do.”

Her eyes brighten with a new kind of heat. “Try again. I still know how to pull those thoughts out.”

“Doubtful.”

“You’ll see,” she tells me in a whisper. “I just haven’t busted out the big guns yet.”

A wry grin spreads over my face. “You want to play this game? You think you’re the only one who knows how to dig into secrets?”

“Ryder, wait—”

Her voice cuts off when I step against her. I don’t stop when she draws in a sharp breath at my nearness; I don’t stop when those soft lips part as I lean my face close to hers.

What am I doing? She’s a spiraling storm and I’m lost in the heart of it all. Some things don’t change. Ava will always suck me into her vibrant whirlwind.

“Where are those tough words now?” I whisper. “You look nervous.”

“Because a big, broody baseball player is pressing his big, bulky body against mine.”

“That’s a lot of ‘B’ words.”

“Clever, don’t you think?”

I grin and flatten a palm on the wall beside her head. “I think a lot of things.”

“I know,” she whispers. A shadow passes over her eyes and her hand pushes against my heart. “But ... I’m not a game to play.”

My brow furrows. “What?”

Ava nudges me away, gently, but firm enough it draws my attention to how close I truly came. I practically had her caged against the wall.

“You said this was a game, but it’s not to me. To you, sure. Because none of it matters, right?” A crack of emotion splits in her voice. “That’s what you said.”

“Ava, I—”

“Hunt!” Mason’s voice echoes up the stairs.

I jump, stepping back at least three feet from Ava at the same time Mason pokes his head in the upper room. Lucas McKenzie, Mason’s best friend, is at his back, a pungent beef stick in his hand.

“Oh, hey,” Mason says, his eyes drifting toward Ava. “Sorry if we were interrupting.”

The two teens smirk at each other like they know something.

They don’t.

I force my expression into steel again and glare at the two boys. “What do you want?”

Mason takes a beef stick from Lucas and points it at me. “Parker asked us to d-d-drop off his old baseball shelves. Guess you said you wanted them.”

Right. “Yeah. Leave them downstairs.”

“That was nice of them to drop them off all the way out here,” Ava says, eyes on me. Her voice is slower, and if it’s the same cue as it once was, she wants me to clue in on something. “Wasn’t it?”

I pinch my mouth, cluing in, and face Mason. “Thank you.”

“Yeah, no problem.” Mason flicks his gaze between Ava and me, his smirk widening to a full grin. “Cool. We’ll get out of your hair.”

“Wait.” Ava smiles at Mason. “You were outside at the meeting. Are you part of the team?”

Mason’s eyes light up like she told him he’s the greatest ball player in history. “Someday I w-will be.”

“This is Mason Walker and his buddy, Lucas McKenzie. Mase has been training with us for a few years now.” I glance at the kid. “You sent in your applications for college, right?”

“Crap.” He snaps his fingers. “No. I forgot one of the most important steps in m-my life.”

Lucas laughs, the hint Mason is being ironic, so I grip him by the back of the neck. “Watch what you say, kid. I have pull with Anderson.”

“Yeah ... but I’m b-basically ...” Mason grunts when I headlock him against my chest. “Related to P-Parker.”

“You are not.”

“Tell that t-t-to his sister.”

Ava’s laughter sends my pulse racing, and lucky for Mason it’s enough to let him go.

I free his head and step back, looking to Ava. “Mason’s dad is the producer for Perfectly Broken.”

“Oh, Tate’s band,” she says.

“Tate’s my uncle,” Mason says proudly.

“Really?”

He nods. “Ellie is my dad’s sister.” The kid spins his narrowed stare to me. “And listen to how this all works: Lex says the band is family. I’m a band kid, so since she is Parker’s sister, guess that means I’m related to him.”

I laugh. “Way to find a loophole.”

“If loopholes get me perks, heck yes.”

Mason isn’t the biological son of Finn, the producer. I think that’s why he’s been open with me since I told him my dad adopted me, too, but he’s not lying about being in a big, loud randomly selected family. Even before he was adopted, just like she puts pumpkin lights on my railing, Parker’s sister pulled Mason into their band family.

“So I’m looking at a future MLB star?” Ava asks.

At the genuine tone of the question, Mason’s face turns a little red. “That’s the hope.”

“I can see this guy being a King someday.” I don’t say it lightly, but I mean it. Mason has the ambition, talent, and the

advantage of training with current players.

“Hey, do you guys need help?” Mason scans the scattered boxes.

I’m about to say no, maybe a little anxious to return to the close proximity Ava and I had before teenagers ruined it, but she claps her hands together. “Yes. The more hands the better.”

I stand back, giving her room to spout off her orders, but this time I’m the one who forgets to breathe when she walks past me and subtly gives two of my fingers a gentle squeeze.

Ava



I'VE ALWAYS HAD A BAD ATTITUDE ABOUT TEENAGERS. I WAS one once, after all. But Mason and Lucas are hilarious, respectful, and helpful.

They stick it out with us, unpacking supplies, helping assemble game tables and equipment, and offering suggestions from their perspective for what they'd want in an athletic house. Not once have they mocked the numerous alarms going off on my phone to keep me focused. I work well in sprints—hard focused chunks, and when the alarm blares, I can take a mental and physical break.

We all have our routines and systems. Ryder already knew mine, but it's nice that the two boys start to turn my alarm system into a competition. They race each other during the focus time, desperate to see who can unpack more boxes, or take the stairs from the lobby to the loft fastest with new supplies before the alarm sounds.

Lucas even says he's going to give it a try with his homework.

We make a lot of progress, and most of the rooms are blocked off, planned out, and those that aren't at least have the beginnings of an organized setup. The sun is nothing but a thin splash of bloody red as it fades over the mountains by the time we call it a day. I wave at the boys from the front door as they pull out of the parking lot.

When the red glow of taillights strikes my face, the back of my neck prickles. Ryder's stare is a physical entity all on its

own. One felt to the bones before it sears into the blood and leaves a delightful shiver of goosebumps all over the arms.

I peek over my shoulder. Ryder holds my stare for half a breath too long, then tosses a stack of trash from a greasy lunch of burgers and fries.

He brushes his palms together and picks up my bag next to my feet. "I'll walk you to your car."

"Okay."

Breathe. Take a step. Breathe. Step. I'm being dramatic, but walking this close, the occasional brush of his shoulder against mine has my head chanting each movement I need to make, as though my brain is about to short circuit.

I'm on dangerous ground here. No wonder Drake felt the need to give me a warning. How many years have I been lost in the casual dating pool? Like James. We had worked together, he was a successful guy, but when I looked forward, he wasn't in my vision.

No one ever has been. Except Ryder Huntington.

I think that's what makes the knife to my heart so sharp and lasting. I once believed I was one of those lucky ones who found her second half before high school graduation.

Love at eighteen is considered puppy love, but in my case, it was no less real than mature, adult love of another human.

I've never found it since. Truth be told, I'm not sure I've wanted to. And there is the problem. My heart is a glutton for punishment by hanging onto memories of a different time, a different man.

Ryder made it clear he didn't need any strings hanging off him when he cut ties. Meeting again hasn't changed anything. He needs me for a reason. He's not back in my life by choice. I'd be doing my scarred heart a favor by remembering that.

"This is me." I point to the Civic.

"I know," he says.

"You did not."

“Well, since it is the only other car, it wasn’t hard.” Ryder looks at the empty lot, and I’d like to bury my head in the ground. I stopped using brain cells somewhere between that moment he had me pinned to the wall and the cheeseburgers. He opens one of the back doors and puts my bag inside. “But the Tweety sticker gave it away. That thing is old.”

Embarrassment warms my face. “Only about a decade.”

“I never saw it placed.”

“Well, you left before I got Celia the Civic.” I pretend to take too long to dig out my key from my jacket pocket. Ryder saw the Tweety sticker at one of his baseball tournaments our senior year and bought it. He was already gone to Washington by the time I had my own car. Still, I couldn’t find the will to toss it.

When I can’t pretend my key is stuck any longer, I open the driver’s door, reluctant and desperate to leave in the same breath.

“I saw it that night at Griffin’s,” Ryder whispers. “Made me think of you right away.”

“Right before you called the cops?”

Ryder glares. “I’m never going to live that down, am I?”

A laugh snorts in a garbled noise through both my nose and throat. Utterly unattractive, but the sounds I make through laughter or tears are never pretty. “You’ll never live it down. It was horrible in the moment, but now, looking back, I think it’s safe to say you made the biggest, most hilarious blunder of all time. You should make yourself a pin.”

“I’ll think about it.” He smiles. *Oh, no.* It’s a full, bright white Ryder smile. One with the power to melt my stomach, speed my pulse, and knock me off my feet. A thing so rare, I used to think they were only saved for me. My own diamond in the rough.

I need to leave.

“Well, this was a productive day.” I slip behind the wheel. Ryder is silent, watching me fumble around my front seat. I try

to start the engine; it revs and stalls. A nervous chuckle scrapes out of my throat. “She’s an old girl.”

His smile is replaced with a sexy kind of scowl as I try to start the car again. And again. On the fifth time, the engine doesn’t even try to start. It merely clicks.

I let my forehead fall to the steering wheel. Should’ve had Drake drive me.

The back door opens. Ryder takes my bag out of the seat.

“What are you doing?”

He nods his head toward the glossy Range Rover. “Come on. I’m driving.”

“No, it’s okay. I can call—”

“Ava.” His voice is sharp, demanding, delicious. Unbidden, I lick my lips, enjoying his bossy tone too much. He holds open the door. “Come on. I’ll take you home.”

“Okay.” My voice is a whisper on the wind. Too breathless. Too wanting.

Maybe Ryder knows how risky this move is as much as me. His eyes have darkened, and he swallows loud enough I catch it.

It’s only a ride home with a guy I used to know. Nothing more.



“You can’t be serious.” I’m going to blow a gasket. “Ryder, I will never forgive you if you say that again.”

He laughs. “I’m sorry, but it’s the truth.”

I spin in the passenger seat, eyes narrowed, and try to level with his lunacy. “There is no comparison. The tone, the setting, and the *feel* of the two are completely different.”

“What are you talking about?” He looks at me like I’ve betrayed him. “First, they’re both set in Paris, so try again on

the setting. Second, they're both iconic classics based on novels. Third, they both address the intricacies of the human mind and emotion. How far can one be manipulated in one, the other is fanaticism and religious overstep."

"*Les Misérables* is entirely more complex. It spans a range of twenty years and shows a true transformation of the heart. Not to mention, the resilience of the human spirit."

"I'm not disagreeing," he says, turning down the confrontation between Jean Valjean and Inspector Javert in the original Broadway soundtrack. "I'm saying *Phantom of the Opera* also addresses a complexity of obsession, the line between insanity and unselfish love."

"What!" I sigh and lean back in my seat. "He manipulates her for years, then murders—"

"And Jean Valjean is a fugitive who lies to his adopted daughter about his past for a decade."

"Oh-ho, tread carefully sir. Tread carefully."

Ryder laughs. The second time since we started driving. I've missed him.

We used to do this all the time. Analyze musicals. At first, Ryder was self-conscious, admitting he didn't understand the feelings associated with the stories, but over the years, he dug out unique perspectives I never would've considered on numerous plays.

But the moment ends too soon.

He pulls into my driveway and lets out a long sigh. I think silence will stumble our heated debate, maybe toss us back to our warring sides of who can play the best acquaintance again, but Ryder grips his steering wheel and looks off at the glow of my front porch light.

"No one on the team knows I like musicals."

I tilt my head. "How is that possible? Your misguided obsession for the wrong musicals is a personality flaw that can't be missed."

His gaze flicks to mine. “I’ve never told them. Never opened enough, I guess.”

“I thought you were close to your teammates. You’re in a lot of pictures in Griffin’s house.”

“We are close.” He hesitates. “Well, they get close to me, but I keep them on the surface.”

This moment seems different. A vulnerable Ryder is my top favorite thing. Pieces of that icy shell are scraping off the surface, and I am here for it.

“You have those oyster shells up.”

He nods, not denying it, not needing to explain more. I know this man feels a great deal, but has always struggled letting others see the sharper edges.

He should. Those edges come with a bite, but it’s worth it.

“They, um, they don’t know a lot of things about me.” He holds my stare, as if desperate for me to read between the lines of his statement.

I think I get it. He’s never shared how his mind works with the Kings. A real shame. To me, it is a unique piece of him that made him stand out in a crowd.

“Want to know my opinion?” I ask softly, taking a bold move and resting my hand on his thigh. Ryder’s eyes track my movement and stare at the forbidden touch over the line I wish we never drew. “I think you should let them see beyond the shells, Ryder. They’re going to like what they find.”

His eyes lock with mine. “You’re the only one who did.”

This man. He knows how to take a hammer to the heart. “That’s not true. But even if it were, it only proves I know what I’m talking about.”

He doesn’t say anything, simply considers what I said. Silence fills the front seat of his car, but it’s not uncomfortable. This silence is almost warm; a familiar sound I missed more than I let on. Moments when I’d close my eyes, his arms around me, as we listened to musicals or stared at the sky.

But it can't last. Bits of the old Ryder are there, but he made it clear he does not want to remember what we lost. And I can't forget. I won't forget. There is a hole in my heart that will always be there.

It hurts that he doesn't have one in the same way.

"I better go," I say, and am halfway out the door before he speaks.

"Ava."

"Yeah?"

"I'm heading to the ranch tomorrow to help my dad and get a few things for the field house. Would you want to come and have a look with me?"

The same familiar warmth wraps around my shoulders. "I'd love to. It's been a while since I've been out there."

His smile is small, but it's there. Beautifully reserved and wonderfully Ryder.

"I'll be here around ten."

"I'll be ready by ten thirty, then."

I close the door, holding tightly to the last laugh he freed before I hurried inside.

Ryder



THE BREEZE WHIPS AVA'S HAIR AROUND HER FACE. DRY AIR, red dirt, and a hint of sage fills the car. I can't remember the last time I was so ... relaxed.

I keep stealing glances at her. She's free out here. She's the girl who wasn't afraid of anything, not even breaking into the walls of a shy kid who didn't think much of himself. If I dared let myself, I'd probably admit I just fell in love a little.

Or I'd admit I never fell out of love.

At the next bend, I slow my speed and cut off onto a long gravel road until the farmhouse comes into view.

The driveway needs to be redone. Cracks and missing pieces of cement mar the roundabout in front of the desert pink stucco house. If my dad wasn't so stubborn, he'd let me cover the expense.

One of these days I'm just going to do it and he'll need to get over it or pout in the corner. People say I'm a grouch; they've never met my dad. We stop in front of the family of clay pots and succulents.

Ava sighs. "I haven't been here all summer."

"You still come around?"

"I know you don't want to talk about it, but just because you left me doesn't mean I left them." She hurries out of the car, leaving me slashed and bleeding.

My parents never mentioned they still saw Ava. I'm not sure whether it makes me angry or want to kiss the woman

that she cares enough to keep my family in her life. I'm all they have. My parents tried to have more kids, but it never took.

Dad told me I was always his, even before he legally adopted me and gave me his last name. But I knew they wanted to fill these six acres with a couple more Huntingtons. I'm gone most of the year. To know they aren't alone, I don't know, it eases a sliver of guilt.

Ava stands patiently on the top step of the porch. A thousand memories of her in that exact spot reel through my head. Her vibrant laugh filled this place every day. The wooden porch swing to her left, how many nights were spent there, dreaming big and holding each other close? How many times did we chase my mom's stupid goat, Lucille, trying to get the escape artist back in her pen?

"Earth to Ryder." Ava snaps her fingers.

I hurry up the steps and hold the front door open, ushering Ava inside first.

My parents live forty miles outside of Vegas, but still try to make it to as many games as they can. If they aren't in the stands, they're watching it on TV.

Their alarm system beeps, announcing someone has entered. My dad's gruff, "Who's there?" echoes down the hallway.

A smile creeps over my mouth when a wall of rich spice hits my nose. "Enchiladas again?"

Something metal clangs in the kitchen. Quick patters of steps slap over the tile until my mom's face peeks into the entryway.

"Ryder! Oh, get in here." My mom opens her slender arms wide and wraps me up. "You didn't tell us you were coming."

"I texted Dad." I give her a quick squeeze. "I'm going to help him move some bales, then I'm taking some of his vintage baseball posters."

My mom tucks a lock of her ice-pale hair behind her ear, and notices Ava for the first time. “Avie.”

Then, it hits.

My mom’s eyes widen, and she looks between the two of us. Awe, wonder, horror? I’m not positive what’s going on in her head, but she clears her throat, loops an arm through Ava’s, and strides back down the hallway. “I just ran into your mom. We were in a rush, but I want to hear all about life.”

And I’m left behind.

I shake my head. It’s how it always was. I was my mom’s blood, but she roped Ava and ... Drake ... in as her second and third kids with ease.

Tension gathers in my chest. If Ava is still around, then maybe Drake comes around too. The same collision of both annoyance and gratitude tangles in my gut.

I don’t want Drake being the one to help Dad with the fences. I don’t want Drake making my mom laugh. I don’t want Drake around at all. Yet, if he’s here for my parents when I can’t be it helps with one or two worries I have from being away so much.

I sidestep into the front room. My dad’s head is visible from the back of his recliner.

“Josh,” mom calls from the kitchen.

He doesn’t move.

A small pause follows, then my mom groans in the next room. “Get your hearing aids in. Ryder’s here.”

Dad leans forward in the chair. “I don’t need hearing aids. I was on the phone.”

I’m pretty sure my mom mutters something about Matthew McConaughey waiting for her.

“You weren’t on the phone.”

My dad whips around, a smile instantly spreading over his face. He kicks in the footrest of his recliner and stands, holding out a hand for me to take. “Hey, pal.”

We do the typical handshake, then he pulls me against him, clapping my back.

“Mom still hasn’t figured out your selective hearing yet?”

“She knows.” He laughs. “She just needs to make stuff up to yell at me about since I’m the perfect husband.”

Walls are thin here. My mom snorts and mutters more about perfect and something about Hawaii.

“Oh, I’m taking you,” my dad calls into the kitchen. “If you’d just wait until a certain day of gift giving, for crying out loud.”

“Yeah, keep it up Joshua,” she retorts, “and see what you get under the tree.”

This is my life. Back and forth, love-tinged teasing, and I’ve missed it all season.

Dad chuckles, then grips my shoulder. “Ready to sweat?”

“Always.”



I’m shirtless within an hour. Sweat drips down the sides of my head as I slam a haybale on top of another. There aren’t many bales or we’d be using the tractor. But we’ve mingled moving bales with lifting fence beams.

Muscles in my back, shoulders, and arms tremble from the exertion. It’s peaceful, it’s home. I’ve been out here with my dad since he married Mom, and I never plan to stop. The movement, routine, the challenge, is perfect.

“So.” Dad says in a gasp as he wipes his forehead. “Gotta say I’m glad you wised up and hired the girl.”

I strip the dirty leather gloves off my hands and shove them in my back pocket. “She was the best choice.”

“That all?”

I study his face, trying to break apart what he means.

He steps a little closer. “I’m asking if her skill set is the only thing you’re thinking about. How are you doing?”

I flick my middle fingers and meet his eyes. “It’s easy.”

“Why do you say it like that’s the worst thing?”

Because it terrifies me. I don’t say all that, merely, “The risk.”

My dad nods, understanding. “The hurt?”

“I don’t want to feel anything like it again.”

He grips my shoulder, giving a good amount of pressure to his squeeze. “If I can give you some advice, it’s good to be cautious, but don’t close off to what you feel right here.” He gently pounds a fist over my heart. “One afternoon, and I already see glimpses of the old Ryder.”

“What does that mean?” I understand he’s trying to say I’ve changed somehow, but I can’t see it.

“I mean you seem relaxed. You’re smiling more than you aren’t. That’s how my son used to be.”

These conversations are difficult. I’m one person with a few sides, but I can never read if he prefers one version over the other. “You wish I was like I used to be?”

He tightens his grip, smiling. “No. I want you exactly as you are; I’m saying when I see you happy, it makes me happy too. You’re happier than you were last month, last year, the last decade. It’s something to think about.”

If he knew how much I do think about it he’d be shocked.

Ava comes around the tall, wooden shed. She’s wearing rubber boots, a wide-brimmed hat on her head, and she’s carrying a bucket. When she catches my gaze, she stumbles. “Oh. Nope. I draw the line at no shirt.”

I scan my bare chest. “It’s hot.”

“Oh, that it is, sir. In more than one way,” she says. “But if you can do this, then you’ll need to be cool if I take off my shirt. You know, see how you like it.”

Dad chuckles, but I'm positive my face erupted into flames. "No. I'm not good with that. At least, not in front of my dad."

"Ryder." Now Ava flushes. "Did you crack a joke?"

I feel as if I've won the day that she caught my sarcasm, and attempt to push it a little more. "I might be joking. I might be totally serious. Guess we'll find out when he goes inside."

"Oh my ... stop." Ava drops her bucket and hops onto one of the fence beams beside me. She was never shy around me, and it seems like some habits will never change. Ava takes hold of my left arm and squeezes. She moans.

I wish she wouldn't because my mind did not stay out of the hypothetical gutter. Not at all.

"Seriously? You should be in a museum. Feel this."

"I feel my own biceps every day. They're literally attached to my body."

"Lucky." She gives my arm a squeeze again. "Well, I forgot why I came out here now since your basketball arms distracted me."

"Ah, girl, I've missed you," my dad mutters.

"Miss you all the time, Pops." She winks.

"Why do you have boots on?" I ask and slip a finger in the top of one, tugging a little.

Ava snaps her fingers. "That's what I was going to say. I was helping Laura with Lucille since the goat loves me, and your mom wanted me to let you guys know dinner is ready. But I highly suggest you shower. You're all sweaty and glistening and ... I need to stop now."

I grin when she doesn't hide the fact that she's scanning my body.

"Tweets," I whisper. "Keep your thoughts to yourself."

"Nope. You don't like to wonder what people are thinking, so I plan to be very, *very* obvious about everything going on

up here.” She waves her hands around the side of her head. “It’s better to keep everything open. Keeps me honest.”

I laugh. Maybe Dad is right. This is easy. I am relaxed.

I’m happier when she’s around. Always was.



“I’ve got this, Mom,” I say when she starts cleaning up the dishes.

“How about I clear, you wash.” She gives me a wink and shoos my dad out of the room before he stumbles with a handful of dishes.

“I’ll clear,” Ava says. “You both go away.”

My mom is notorious for refusing anyone to lift a finger. Funny, but today she doesn’t even argue, simply sets the plate on the table, and goes outside to sit on the porch with my dad. Almost like she wants Ava and me to be alone.

At first, we clean up in silence, but soon Ava laughs softly. “They’re hilarious. Do you hear them outside?”

I pause to listen. My mom and dad are teasing each other over some date they went on the other night, and she tried to manhandle the clutch in his old truck. My mother’s laughter is still one of my favorite sounds.

“He makes her laugh,” I say before thinking. “I think that’s why I liked him right away.”

“He loved you right away too. At least that’s what he always says.” Ava lowers her voice to a terrible version of my dad. “Saw the kid and felt like I had a long-lost son I didn’t know about.”

I laugh because it’s not even close to what he sounds like, but it is exactly what he always told people who tried to call me his stepson. He always claimed me as his son, his kid, his pal, his boy, and made sure people knew it.

I stack the baking dish, then lean my back against the counter's edge. "I've never brought my teammates out here."

Ava stops reaching for the water glasses and glances at me. "Just like they don't know you have an obsession for Broadway?"

I scoff, a flush of embarrassment fills my face. "Yeah. I guess. A lot of the guys have family close to Vegas. Dax Sage actually played against our high school. I didn't even realize it until two years ago."

"Huh. Small world." She looks at me like I need to get to the point or I'm going to lose her.

I don't know what my point is, but the words keep tumbling out of my mouth. "I've gone to a lot of barbecues at Griffin's mom's place and Parker's sister's house. I get backstage passes to Perfectly Broken concerts since Parker has known them since they were in kindergarten, so they automatically include the Kings like they've known us just as long."

"That's ... cool?"

I turn away and start scrubbing the pan with a little too much umph. "You being here, it's just making me realize I've gone into their personal space, but I never bring them into mine."

"Why not? There's no way you're embarrassed by your parents."

I give her a look. "You know I'm not."

"Then why?"

"Pretty sure I do it on purpose."

Ava tilts her head. "Why do you keep them at such a distance?"

Because of you. Because of Drake. The truth is there, but more silence builds in the kitchen.

I don't know what I'm doing bringing this up. It's as if I want to ask for help wading through the difficult thoughts, but

don't want to dig too deep and disturb all the sleeping pain and remorse.

Ava is annoyingly perceptive. She never was one who let me crawl into my shell. She crosses her arms over her chest. "You block them out because of whatever happened with Drake ... and me, don't you?"

I pause my scrubbing. Over the years, I never realized how much losing Ava and Drake impacted the other relationships I made through college and the MLB. But she's right. It did.

"Ryder," Ava whispers. She rests a hand on my forearm. "They want to know you because you're worth knowing."

I clear my throat. "So are you."

Our eyes lock for a few breaths. Is she thinking the same things? Is she hating how it fell apart? When she sees me, does she see what we lost? Does she wonder what might've been if we hadn't?

"I'm glad you still come see my parents," I admit and start washing the pan again. "I'm gone a lot. It's nice to know they aren't alone the whole time."

"I wish I could come out here more," she says. "But I meant what I said. Your parents were second parents to me. I couldn't leave them even if ..."

"I left," I finish for her.

"Right."

"I'm not sure how we've never crossed paths."

She snickers. "I've been rather strategic and only come when I know you're on the ballfield far, far away."

I want to ask if Drake joins her, but don't. "They never mentioned you came over."

"Yeah." Ava sighs. "Just like my dad never told us he has season tickets to the Kings."

I drop a spoon into the sudsy water. "What? I mean, I've seen him at a few games, but season tickets?"

“Yep. It’s the dirty family secret that just imploded. My dad has been there watching since you were drafted, apparently. Why do you look like you’re about to be sick?”

“It’s sort of surprising since I’d convinced myself Jack hated me.” I scoff like the idea is ridiculous. “Then he talked to me after the meeting with the board. He told me I still had a place.”

“Why would my dad hate you? Oh, because you got his daughter pregnant? Or do you think it’s because you left after she had surgery to cut out ovarian cancer after she found out she wasn’t pregnant anymore, and was incredibly depressed?”

Now, I *am* going to throw up.

“Way to put it all out there,” I whisper.

Ava’s smile fades. “Better than letting words unspoken keep being unsaid. I can’t breathe sometimes; I just want to spit it all out and talk to you about what happened.” Ava studies the countertop. “I don’t hate you, Ryder. I never did. And my dad doesn’t hate you, either. He’s known you longer than he’s known me. My parents miss you too.”

If they miss me *too*, then that implies other people miss me. Like her.

Ava hurries back to the table to finish clearing the last of the dishes. I shouldn’t, but I like the idea of her missing me. Makes the pain of missing her a little more bearable to think it wasn’t unrequited.

The Williams, in my head, have always hated me. I knew my mom and Marianne still saw each other. I was secretly grateful my issues with their kids hadn’t wrecked a solid friendship. No mistake, my parents probably wanted to ask as much as I did, but the circumstances were too painful, too complicated, but the conversation is always boiling beneath the surface in my house, and Ava opened the door to the past that shaped us.

A tragic love story about a boy who loved a girl, how they created something, then lost it all.

Ryder



Age Eighteen

HER TEARS SOAK MY T-SHIRT. AVA SNIFFLES, HER HEAD ON MY shoulder in the backseat of my car. We've been silent since leaving the doctor.

My head still hasn't caught up. It was only a few weeks ago we were both freaking out as we sat down and told everyone about the pregnancy. Now ...

I don't know how this happens. All people keep saying is sometimes it does, but I want to know *why*.

How can a heartbeat go from being so strong, so powerful, to just gone? I didn't think it would hurt like this, but I haven't taken a full breath since they couldn't find that sound again.

Then, how can a healthy eighteen-year-old have cancer?

It isn't fair.

They say the baby probably saved Ava's life. Without doing the ultrasound, they wouldn't have seen the tumor for months. They caught it early, they said words like 'looks isolated to ovaries', and 'likely hasn't spread', but Marianne was still crying so hard when they found it.

She was terrified like me.

Today, they confirmed it all. I wanted to believe it was some nightmare, but we were all awake. It isn't. It's real. Ava

is scheduled for a surgery, and now I know for sure there isn't a baby anymore.

I can't show the fear to Ava, though. She needs me to be the rock. But too close to the surface there are these vicious thoughts of what if ... what if I lose her?

Ava closes her eyes and the tears that fall onto her face break another hole in my chest. She lets out another choked sob. "I ... bought a first outfit because I didn't want to think it was real. I sort of hoped when they looked again ..."

She doesn't finish, but I think I know what she means. I hoped too.

This is why I love Ava. She's not even thinking about what is about to happen to her. She's in love with the baby we lost, and her tender heart is her glowing feature.

My jaw clenches. I ache the same for a life we'll never get to meet. We're young, but it's not like this loss is some relief. It cuts like a freaking knife, and I'm reeling from everything we had tossed at us today. But my fears at the moment are for her.

I feel sick.

"Does it hurt?" I whisper.

She nods. I hold her tighter against my side, wishing I could take it all away, wishing I could shoulder some of the aches and sorrows for her. Ava's heart is too good to break this way. We'll make it through, I've no doubt. Life without her would be ... dreary.

Our plans will remain the same in most ways.

Doctors say it'll be a quick surgery. They have high hopes there won't be any lingering cells, but they'll want to watch. The good news is there is an awesome cancer center in Seattle.

We'll move to Washington when she's feeling better. Ava will study architecture. I'll play ball and major in business, then I'm going to marry her.

Those plans won't change. I won't accept anything else.

But there is a new loss we'll take with us that we'll never shake.

I don't know how long we sit out in the car before she finally says she wants to go rest. I help her to her room. I kiss her, good and thorough, then wipe a few more tears from her cheeks. Once she's nestled under her comforter, I slip out before her parents get home. They told us to go ahead of them after the appointment, and I don't want to see anyone right now.

Before I leave her room, though, I write a simple note on her pink stationary like we always do.

“There's only us, There's only this. Forget
regret—or life is yours to miss.”

Never regretted a day with you, Tweets. Never
will.

I love you.

This summer, Ava took a liking to the musical *Rent*. I think it'll make her smile.

That's all I want to see right now. Her smile.

Ava



I DON'T KNOW WHY I'M NERVOUS. WE'VE BEEN WORKING FOR two weeks now, but after visiting Josh and Laura a few days ago, there has been a shift between us. More of the Ryder I used to know keeps slipping out of the scowly mask he tries to wear.

“Why are we doing this?” Drake hisses in my ear.

Ah, yes. This is why I'm nervous. As a contracted employee of Burton Field, I get to attend the family and friends Halloween party, and my family is here.

Everyone.

A brother, who is Ryder's nemesis, had to come since Charlie insisted on trick-or-treating at the field, and how can he say no? He's not on the schedule tonight, and one thing my brother isn't is a disengaged dad. He was working last Halloween; he's not missing this one.

But he wasn't happy when his kid decided the baseball players were exactly who deserved to hand him his candy.

Drake tried for a solid hour to convince Charlie their neighborhood was perfect. My nephew told him they'd go to the houses later, but the field came first.

Honestly, the kid picked right.

All around us kids squeal in delight, dressed head to foot in costumes of their favorite heroes, or villains, or movie characters.

Charlie is dressed like Thor, his favorite superhero, and my mom has taken at least a hundred pictures so far.

“How long are we staying?” Drake whines.

“As long as the kid wants, you big baby.” I smack his arm and lead us through the first stands near the field gates. Bags of candy corn, fun-size candy bars, even a baseball shaped sugar cookie wrapped with spider rings and vampire teeth are stuffed into Charlie’s bag by the end of the row.

“Ava!”

I whip around. Skye Knight has baby Ever tethered to her chest. The baby is dressed in a tiger costume, and her little nose is painted black. I’m not sure I’ve seen anything cuter.

“Hi.” I step up to her, Charlie’s hand in mine. With my index finger, I tap Ever’s nose. “She is adorable.”

A little hand grips my leg. I look down and meet the big eyes of a little boy, maybe two at most. He’s bundled in a fuzzy frog costume with googly eyes on top of his head.

“Hi,” I say. The kid doesn’t look anywhere but at the baby. He reaches his pudgy hands up and grunts.

“Jude? Oh, there he is.” A guy with black and red dyed hair, and tattoos all along his arms steps behind the little frog. He doesn’t speak to the boy, but signs something with his fingers. His eyes fall to me. “Sorry about that. He has an addiction to Ever.”

Skye laughs and tickles the little frog’s chin. “Jude and Ever have an arranged marriage planned, I already told you, Rees.” She glances at me. “Ava this is Rees Hayden, the bassist in Perfectly Broken.”

At the introduction, more tattoos and colorful hair step around us. Skye introduces me to the entire band. My pulse races a bit. I’m not a huge rock fan, but I’m not oblivious to their level of fame. Unbidden, I’m a little starstruck to be here talking to famous rock stars and their families like we just came from the neighborhood barbecue.

I wave at Mason when he steps up behind the group, holding the hands of two little girls.

“Hey, how’s the f-field house coming?” he asks.

“Wait. Stop. Field house?” A woman shoves through, dragging a boy dressed up like a Vegas King—Parker’s number. She’s pretty, and has a frenzied look in her eyes, but a smile on her face. “You’re the one who’s tripping up Ryder? I have questions, and I need answers. The man is a grump, but the kind where you know there is the squishiest sweetheart underneath. Parker mentioned there was a history here, then told me to keep my nose out of it. Like he doesn’t know me at all. I’m Alexis, by the way.”

The next thing I know, her hand is outstretched, and I’m still reeling through the cyclone she brought with her.

Skye chuckles. “Ava, this is Parker’s sister. She’s our female Griffin.”

Ah, makes sense.

“Hi.” I shake Alexis’s hand. “Ava Williams. And yeah, I grew up with Ryder.”

“I’m not going to force any details, obviously, I’m not that impolite,” she says. “But Parker says he’s been a little different. In a good way. I’m so glad to meet you. Oh, and Tate—” She bends backward and grabs someone’s arm. In the next breath, Tate Hawkins is dragged to the front.

“Geez, Lex,” he says, until he catches my eye. “Oh, hi again.”

“I think it is such a small world that you know Tate and you *both* got involved in things with kids,” Alexis says. “What are the odds?”

Tate chuckles. “Small City Las Vegas, right?”

I grin. “Right.”

It doesn’t take long before I’m at ease. I’m still trapped in a carousel of rockstars, their wives, and my family, but I like it. I like them all. They’re kind and funny. I try not to stare at

Alexis's husband too much, but I've always had a thing for tattoos. Like Rees, he has delightfully inked arms.

I add Drake to the conversation. He talks with Tate about life in the group home, then Bridger Cole joins in once he finds out my brother is a fireman.

"My crew and I have come to a few of your first responder concerts," Drake says a little shyly. Maybe he's spinning by being surrounded by these people like I am.

Bridger smiles at Charlie. "You need to bring the whole family. We keep it pretty tame for those ones since kids are in the crowd."

"Bridger's dad was a fireman," Skye whispers. "They always do concerts honoring first responders."

"That's awesome," I say, a knot in my throat. I worry about my brother, and sirens have now become a sound that instantly sets my pulse racing.

While their dads talk, Charlie makes a new friend in Bridger and Alexis's son, Garrett. He's younger than Charlie but speaks like he's ten.

"I'm Uncle Parker," Garrett says, puffing out his skinny chest, showing off his jersey. "But I like Thor."

The boys laugh and trade accessories. Now, Thor has a plastic baseball bat, and the tiny Parker Knight has a hammer.

For a second, Drake's annoyance at being near Burton Field is forgotten. Until we end up in the line where the players are handing out king-sized candy bars.

Griffin practically skips around, tossing candy and letting his youngest fans take pictures with him. Wren is the cameraman and laughs along with him. Every few minutes, Griffin takes a breath to kiss her, long and hard.

Parker is between Dax Sage and—my breath catches—Ryder.

Ryder crouches in front of a little girl in a witch's costume and gives her one of his bright, carefree smiles when she puts her headband, complete with a tiny witch hat, on his head. He

laughs, calls her by name, and lets her mom take a picture with them.

I fall in love a little ... again.

Drake curses at my side when he finally catches up.

“Be nice.” I elbow his ribs. “This is for Charlie.”

My brother glares at me, but gives me my nephew’s hand. I don’t care if Drake hangs back, but I won’t have him cussing or being antagonistic toward Ryder in front of a bunch of kids. Charlie tugs on my hand and tries to keep up with Garrett.

My mom sneaks to my other side, phone at the ready to snap more pictures. “I’m doing my best, Avie, but I’m going to embarrass him.”

“Mom,” I say through my teeth. “Why?”

“I just need to hug him.”

Oh. That’s not so bad. “Make sure it’s tight.”

“I know, I know.”

Well, I thought it wouldn’t be so bad, but my mother, my idol, my example, my soft place to fall for all things womanly, shoves through us and practically sobs as she yanks Ryder into not a hug, oh no, this is a chokehold.

At least it’s tight.

“I know we’ve chatted a few times, sweetie,” my mom gurgles out, “but it is so, *so* fun to see you here in action. I always knew you’d make it, but you knew that, right?” she says. Ryder still hasn’t registered he’s being accosted, and has his arms out to his sides, eyes wide with a bit of horror. My mom pats his back and pulls away, a hand on his cheek. “I always told your mom you’d be playing ball on the TV.”

“Hi, Marianne,” he says, voice rough. Ryder catches my gaze over the heads of kids.

I mouth a quick *sorry*, but when he freezes, I take it as a sign he needs to be rescued.

“Mom,” I say. “Have you met Parker? Charlie loves him.”

At last, she releases Ryder and makes the introductions to the other Kings.

I step next to Ryder and whisper, “Overwhelmed?”

“Understatement,” he whispers back.

“What’s getting you the most? The party? The company? The fact that figures of authority are forcing you to be here and it goes against your rebellious nature?”

“All of it,” Ryder admits. “Ten years apart, then—”

“We all came crashing back.”

“Exactly.”

My stomach knots in tension when I hold his stare. “Hold on a little longer. Soon the job will be done, then we can scurry back out.”

That’s the conundrum I never saw coming: how am I supposed to step away now that I’ve stepped back into Ryder’s path?

He hesitates for a long pause. “I never wanted you to scurry out in the first place.”

A bite of emotion stings my eyes. I open my mouth, doubtless to confess that I’ve missed him, terribly, but it’s put on hold when a little voice interjects in the middle.

“I sawed you at the game.”

Ryder blinks away and meets the big, glassy eyes of Charlie. My nephew holds his homemade trick-or-treat bag. His smile is one capable of melting the insides.

Ryder is reserved, maybe a little guarded, but he crouches in front of Charlie and shows him a king size chocolate bar. “I sawed you too. Can I tell you something?”

“Yep.”

“Thor is my favorite superhero.”

Charlie’s mouth drops like he’s astonished. “Mine too.”

Ryder holds up his palm and waits for Charlie to give him a high five, then follows it with the candy bar.

“Daddy!” Charlie squeals as he leans against me, trying to keep his balance while he lifts the chocolate like a badge of honor. “Look what he gave me!”

Ryder straightens again and instantly stiffens. Drake stands no more than ten steps away, and for the first time in his life, I think my brother ignores his son. His focus is wholly locked in a dark showdown with Ryder Huntington.

My mom’s eyes dart between them. She looks like she’s either going to go full mom-mode and tell them to stop being stupid, or cry. I’m with her. The frustration with these two men is impossible to ignore.

All those years ago, Drake was upset by what happened, but he was supportive. He loved Ryder like a brother, and he didn’t have a problem with him being my boyfriend. I don’t know what the tipping point was, but I wish, so badly do I wish, we could go back and change the way our lives splintered from each other.

There is a horrid pressure that seems to gather around us, a suffocating cloud of secrets, hatred, and what I hope is a bit of regret at wasting ten years of friendship.

“Daddy, did you see?”

Leave it to the innocence of children to shake away the stupidity of adults. Drake looks down at his son and smiles. “That’s awesome, buddy.”

Ryder takes a step away, but his hand falls to the small of my back. I’m ridiculous. A simple, innocent touch should not be sending bolts of heat dancing up my spine, but here we are.

“I’m going to head over to the field house to finish painting the team room,” he whispers.

I study his face and understand the subtle furrow between his brows, the barely noticeable shift on his feet. He’s overwhelmed and wants to escape for a second. It’s mid-way through the party, but packed enough I doubt anyone will notice if he fades into the night.

I give him a nod of understanding when Drake peels his attention back to his son and joins my family in admiring

Charlie's haul.

Ryder leans closer, his lips against my ear. "When you're done here, if you want to help, that's where I'll be."

There is an underlying meaning in his tone. At least, I hope there is, because if he keeps talking to me in that rocky rasp, low and close to my skin, I'd meet him in the darkest, shadiest, alley anytime.

"Okay," is all I manage to get out.

Then, he's gone. Swallowed by the crowds.

Only when I turn and catch Griffin's wink, do I breathe again.

Ava



MY PALMS GROW SWEATY THE LONGER I CLING TO THE steering wheel. The instant Charlie told Drake he was finished trick-or-treating and my brother went home so they could watch the cartoon version of *Sleepy Hollow*, I drove to the field house lot.

I'm not sure how long I've been out here. A minute, ten? I keep staring at the lone light in the upper window, a few shadows cascading across the window are the only hints there is life inside.

This tension is going to break me.

Either I need to confess that having Ryder back is confusing, intoxicating, and roll with it, or I need to put distance between us.

I've never cut the ties to him. It's my fault, really. I kept the relationships with his parents, I casually found excuses to go to sports bars for dinner on baseball nights. I was the one who told Charlie about the sport. Drake doesn't need to know, but I'm wondering if it's always been because I've wanted this. I've wanted our paths to collide again, I've wanted to keep the connection as a way to find our way back.

The trouble is, Ryder has had the same amount of time away from me. I think he feels something, but the depth of his feelings, I don't know.

I swallow hard, lift my chin, and release the steering wheel. Whatever he's feeling doesn't really matter right now. I

need to see this job through. I've been hired to do something incredible, and I plan to do it the best way I can.

Outside, the air is crisp and perfect. I lock my mom's car, since Celia is still in the shop, and hurry into the field house.

The moment I step through the door, I laugh.

He's friends with a metal rock band, but blasting through the hallways is Idina Menzel as she belts *Gravity* from *Wicked*.

I love his connection with musicals. I love how no one really knows except his parents, me, and Drake. It's like a piece of him he trusted me with, and I've always cherished those layers he gave to so few.

I've kept them close, never giving any away to anyone else, like a secret badge of honor.

The upper room is still under construction, but the walls are free for painting since baseboards and carpeting are being installed in a couple days. Right now, it's nothing but plywood floors and empty walls.

But I take a moment to appreciate the man in the room. His tight T-shirt shows off his shoulders and back muscles to a level of perfection that only exists in fantasy. The movement of rolling the paint on the walls doesn't make my desire to gawk at his body any easier. Like a cliché, I'm pretty sure I lick my lips when his back flexes as the roller goes up ... then down.

A prickle of heat teases my cheeks. I've never been one to objectify another human, but Ryder is practically edible. It's not my fault.

His hair is messy and he's barefoot; he's free to simply be Ryder here.

I pick up an extra roller, then slip next to him. He's focused enough he doesn't notice me until I start rolling paint on the wall.

"Whoa. I didn't see you." Ryder jumps back, and a splatter of paint falls from his roller to the edge of my shirtsleeve. He

curses and inspects the stain. “Sorry. Great, that’s going to stain.”

I laugh and roll up my sleeve. “I’m a master at stain removal; it’s fine.”

His face flushes a bit, but before he can go on an apologetic rant like he always used to do, I take a sponge paintbrush and dab it onto his cheek.

Ryder’s eyes widen. On instinct, he lifts his fingers to his cheek, smearing the paint and making it much worse. “What —”

He doesn’t get another chance to speak before I do it again. A strike to his arm, then his underarms when he tries to use them as shields.

A laugh breaks out of my throat when Ryder growls. Like a freaking bear, something deep in his chest emerges. His eyes are dark when he looks at me, paint splattered on his arms and cheek, then in another breath he’s on the attack.

I shriek when he snags one of my wrists, tugging me closer, and using a thick sponge brush, he starts attacking my hair, my face, my neck. The more I struggle, swatting at him, ducking his brush, the tighter his grip grows on my arms.

I get a few good hits in. His dark hair now looks like he spilled beige frosting over his head. The tattered T-shirt has a few marks. My black shirt is now forever a painting shirt. My thighs, knees, even my ears have paint.

Somewhere in the fight, Ryder managed to snatch the roller again and holds it close to my face.

“Ryder!” I shriek, laughing and pulling away from him.

His smile is unburdened, white, and beautiful, as he pulls me against his chest. “You started something, I’m going to finish it.”

I wiggle in his arms. The roller inches closer. My head falls back and I laugh. But when the paint should be covering my face, it doesn’t.

I crack one eye and catch Ryder's gaze. My smile fades. A dark desire simmers in those beautiful eyes. One of his callused palms drifts up the side of my neck. I shudder. He holds the side of my face. Our noses are close, nearly touching, and his lips hover over mine, so I can feel the minty warmth of his breath on my skin.

"Ava," he whispers my name like it's sacred. Like it's something to be cherished.

"I've missed you," I blurt out. My fingers curl around his shirt. I tug him a little closer, so our hips, our chests, our bodies collide. All this time I never realized how much I craved touch like this. Not any touch—*his* touch.

Then, something shifts. Ryder drops the paint roller and scoops under my thighs, lifting me. A gasp scrapes over my tongue when he presses my back against the wall, holding me there. I trap his face in my palms, our breaths are heavy as he leans closer.

"For ten years I've thought of you," he rasps. "I haven't just missed you. I've *craved* you."

Ryder crushes his lips to mine. Like a burst of fireworks, every cell, every nerve ending in my system ignites in a sensual celebration! It. Is. About. Time.

I cling to his neck, holding him against me as his weight pins me against the wall. My ankles cross behind his waist. I tangle my fingers in his hair. I hold him like he's the only way to keep living.

Ryder smiles against my mouth when a soft groan slips out of me. A repressed sound of pleasure I've held onto until now. This is what I nearly forgot I was missing. This is how a man kisses a woman. Slow and patient. Gentle and seductive.

I part my lips, allowing Ryder a taste. My skin raises, wanting more when he grips my hair, angling my mouth. He breaks after a moment and drifts his kiss down to the curve of my neck. I close my eyes as he reacquaints himself with my jaw, my skin, my mouth.

My mind is whirling.

“This,” I say in a gasp. “This is what I’ve thought of since you left.”

Ryder pauses. His eyes burn with something deep and fierce. If I’d known it would’ve stopped his lips from working their magic, I would’ve kept my mouth shut.

“Leaving you broke me,” he says. “All of it did.”

I blink against the surprise swell of tears. “Then why leave? You made me think ... that since it would be hard for me to have kids, that you didn’t want me anymore.”

“No.” He presses a desperate kiss to my lips. It’s rough and powerful. “No, Ava. Is that what you thought? That because of your surgery, I wouldn’t want you?”

“What was I supposed to think? You said you weren’t sure if we were going to work anymore. For a broken-hearted girl who just had a pretty life-changing surgery, yeah, that’s where my head went.”

“I hate the idiot who made you think that.”

I snort a wet laugh. Ryder kisses my neck, my jaw; he slowly shakes his head and allows me to slide back to my feet.

“Your ability to have kids would never change how I feel about you. I ... I found out about your acceptance to the design program here, and back then I felt selfish for dragging you to *my* school when you could be reaching your goals here.”

I’m a little stunned. “I never told you about the program.”

“I know.”

“Ryder, I was looking at design programs in Washington.”

His eyes darken. “You never said—”

“I know, but we were going through some stuff at the time.” My heart thuds against my ribs. “Do you really think you were a disruption? Do you think that’s all I thought about you?” My voice cracks. “I wanted a life with you, Ryder! I wanted everything with you. I know you said it didn’t matter to you, but losing our—”

Ryder backs me against the wall again before I can finish, a furious look on his face. He yanks up his sleeve and shows me the tattoo of a date.

My heart snaps in two. “You ... that’s the due date.”

“Everything mattered to me.” Ryder grips my jaw gently; his thumb brushes over my bottom lip. “I wanted our baby. I wanted you.”

A tear drips down my cheek. He brushes it away. “Then why would you think I didn’t ...” My voice trails off for a few breaths.

Memories of the day my life seemed to fall apart pound in my skull. The way I watched him drive away with his assurance we’d try the long-distance thing, then the phone call four weeks later telling me it was over.

Back then, I’d convinced myself his reasons for changing our plans to attend school together were because he was relieved that I wasn’t shackling him down anymore. My broken heart had been so certain he wanted to greet the great, big world a single man, and when we lost the pregnancy, it was his opportunity.

But now, I’m not so sure I had my facts straight. And I think I know who is behind it.

“What happened with Drake, Ryder?” My eyes narrow. “Something happened that pushed you away, and I deserve to know.”

He looks down. “Ava ... his side needs to come from him, but I played a part. I shouldn’t have been so weak to just leave. If I could go back, I would’ve handled everything differently. We were so young; we’d dealt with something awful. My head was only focused on making your life better, and I ... I started to believe I wasn’t going to be able to do that for you.”

I hold his stubbled cheek. “So ... it mattered?”

Ryder lets out a rough breath and drops his forehead to mine. “All of it *still* matters.”

He kisses me again.

There is something greedy, almost desperate about the kiss. I don't know what happened to pull Ryder away from me, but for now I plan to hold tightly to him.

Because he's back.

The man I fell in love with so many years ago is back.

Ava



RYDER'S STUBBLED CHEEK BRUSHES AGAINST MINE; HIS FEET are pointed the opposite direction where we're sprawled out on his living room rug.

"Like it?" I ask.

His eyes open and he rolls his head so he's looking at me. "It's ... different."

The back of my hand swings up and smacks his chest. "It's amazing, you big snob."

"I'm a purist," he says, looking up at the ceiling again and closing his eyes. "The classics are where it's at."

"And who determines the classics? You?"

"Yes."

I press a wet kiss to his cheek. "You're stuck in your ways, sir. *Hamilton* is incredible."

Ryder chuckles and brings one of his hands back to play with my hair. We fall into the same silence we've been in for the last thirty minutes as we share earbuds and listen to the full playlist. It's new and the same all at once. We used to do things like this before, but it feels different this time. Almost deeper. Time apart shaped us in new ways, and now that we've clawed our way back to each other, the connection is almost indescribable.

I'm not sure how I lived without it, but I'm also not sure I'd change anything if the end result brought this same passion

in my chest, the same furious beat of my heart every time this man looks my way.

Flutters and jitters and attraction were always there. I loved him as much as a teenage girl can love a teenage boy, but the feelings now are palpable, they're deep, and made of iron. Like the heart has been to battle and back and knows the cost of letting go.

We're cautious, even a week after our hot night in the field house, but there is a piece of me that feels complete now that Ryder is back in my life.

As though another half of me returned.

"Anyway," I say after a song finishes playing. "This wasn't here for your critique, it was purely for distraction purposes. Are you feeling better?"

Ryder lets out a long breath. "I am."

He adjusts enough, so he can press a kiss to the top of my head, then curls up until he's on his feet.

I hug my knees to my chest and grin. "You've got this."

Ryder grabs his jacket, then mine. "Are *you* ready is the better question?"

I stand and let him help me with my jacket. A shudder trickles down my spine when his fingers brush over my neck when he tugs my hair from under my neckline. "I'm pretty sure Skye and Griffin are already my best friends. And Parker's sister texted me, did I tell you that?"

He arches a brow. "Why?"

I pinch his chest, reveling for half a breath the way it draws out his laugh. "Because I am awesome."

Ryder snakes an arm around my waist and pulls me tightly against his hard body. Oh, the way the simplest touches from this man make my head spin. If it wasn't frowned upon, I might spend my whole day breathing him in, full-on sniffing his deliciousness, like he might disappear any second.

"You are," he says, his mouth close to mine.

My fingertips trace the line of his jaw; my eyes bounce between his. “Don’t forget it.”

There is meaning in my words. A meaning Ryder doesn’t miss. Between his brows a groove shapes. He kisses the tip of my nose. “I never did. Now, let’s get going before I change my mind and make you stay inside all night.”

I snicker, threading our fingers together as we head to the door. “Griffin wouldn’t let you.”

From what I’ve learned about Griffin Marks, he is a golden retriever who wants everyone to sing love songs around a campfire. If there is one man who will not let Ryder scowl his life away, it’s him.

Tonight is our first night out as an official couple. I’m more nervous than I let on. Even if Ryder is convinced he hasn’t let his teammates in completely, I want them to like me. He has his walls, but they’re more his family than he realizes.

Since I have no intention of letting my grouchy baseball player go a second time, that means the Vegas Kings are stuck with me. It would help if we were friends.



“To the newest Kings Lady!” Griffin holds up his beer bottle for the second time. No mistake, he’s forgetting he made the toast at the beginning of the night. I think he gets excited enough his mind sort of circles back around to all the ideas he might’ve had.

I think they like me. The entire evening has been one conversation after the next. I’ve learned the love stories of both Parker and Griffin. I’ve snuggled Ever Knight and chatted with Wren Marks about her upcoming book release.

Griffin made sure to let me know he’d been helping her act out the love scenes.

I’m not sure what made me laugh more, the way Wren smacked her husband in the chest or the bright red flush that

filled Dax Sage's face when Griffin purposefully started describing parts of the scenes.

"Daxy," Griffin says, kicking his teammate under the table. "Quit texting and lift your glass."

Dax lifts his eyes from his phone he keeps hiding under the table. He's not rude, and participates in the conversations, but there is certainly someone holding his attention on his phone. Still, he complies and raises his beer. He's the only one without a date tonight, but doesn't seem too torn up about it.

"Ryder." Griffin says, eyes narrowed. "I'm waiting."

"We've made five of your toasts tonight. Now we're just repeating them."

Griffin looks affronted. "This is for your *woman*. I'm embarrassed for you."

"I'm not indulging your weirdness."

"I'll count to ten."

"Marks," Ryder says. "If you don't put that drink down in three seconds—"

"Then Ryder will have to be the one who makes the toast," I interrupt.

Ryder gapes at me and mouths *traitor*.

I hold up my lemonade, mostly because Griffin looks at me like I've told him the Kings just won the series.

Muttering under his breath, Ryder gives in and lifts his beer. Together we laugh and toast my inauguration into an official lady of the Vegas Kings.

Of course, Ryder doesn't play fair. He pays me back by settling his big palm indecently high on my leg, forcing me to make a useless attempt at a straight face all through dessert.

Outside, we stroll the Vegas Strip, the flash of casinos, shows, and billboards lighting up our faces. I walk a few paces ahead of Ryder with Skye and Wren on either side of me.

“So,” Skye says, linking her arm with mine after she passes Ever off to Parker. There is something adorable about a brick-wall of an athlete with a tiny baby strapped to his chest. Skye tugs my arm, urging me to walk a little faster. “How is the reignited love going?”

“I’m literally writing a second-chance romance as we speak,” Wren says. “I’m *living* for this.”

A smile splits over my face. “It’s a whirlwind.”

“I love whirlwinds,” Skye says with a sigh, almost like her mind went somewhere else.

“It’s almost like he never left,” I say. “But it’s different too. We’re different.”

“A decade will do that to people.”

The connection returned naturally, but it’s like we’re clinging tightly to each other more than before, as if we’re afraid any second it will all disappear again.

How am I supposed to put into words how the second half of my heart started beating again?

“Well, at least his face isn’t going to age early from the frown lines,” Skye says with a laugh. “Seriously, I was about to spike his water with uppers during training pretty soon.”

“Skye,” Wren says, trying not to laugh.

“Too blunt? I mean, I’m only half serious,” Skye says. “I’d never really drug someone, but with Ryder, I’m just saying ... I’ve thought about it.”

“I’ve never thought he was grumpy, more guarded,” Wren says. “Layered.”

“That’s exactly how I’d describe him.” I steal a glance over my shoulder. Ryder is wearing his reserved smile while Parker teases Dax about something, but he’s at ease. I’m not sure he even realizes it, but his teammates are a safe place, and I can only be grateful he found it while we were apart.

I look back at Wren. “He’s always been layered. Quiet and aloof on the outside, but get beyond the first few layers and

you get the beautiful heart.”

Skye sighs again. “I’ve always wondered what made him stand to the side. He’s loyal as they come, and the guy has stood up for me in the best ways, but there’s always been something keeping him at a distance. I should’ve known it was over a lost lover.”

“More like a friend,” I say before I think better of it.

“Your brother,” Skye whispers.

“I know as much as you, but something happened,” I’m quick to say, a little desperate to change the subject.

I need to learn to keep my mouth shut. Ryder doesn’t talk about Drake, and my brother doesn’t talk about Ryder. The last thing either would want is me blabbing about the mystery of best friends to anyone who’ll hear it.

Skye and Wren must read my face. They steal a glance at each other and don’t press, and start into ideas for Wren’s book.

By the time we reach the end of the Strip, the guys have joined in the spicy conversation, and I’m laughing hard enough that any second a rib might snap. Somewhere along the way, Ryder took my hand, holding onto me like his tether in a storm.

I’m not sure when the last time was that I was this content, but there remains a shadow. One we need to face sooner or later.

The ride home is filled with easy conversation and comfortable pauses between us. Sometimes we stop to listen to music, sometimes we talk about the field house and how far along we’ve come in so short a time.

But in one of the lulls, I find the guts to broach the subject I can’t pretend doesn’t exist. “I, um, I told my mom about us.”

Ryder’s eyes widen. “And?”

“She’s planning the wedding.” I chuckle. If anyone loves Ryder Huntington, it’s Marianne Williams. “But it has me thinking.”

“Careful, Tweets.”

I try to pinch him, but he swats me away. “I’m serious. Ryd, you are this big, enormous piece of my heart.”

He offers me a sexy half-grin and brings the back of my hand to his lips.

With a sigh, I go on, “But the other piece is my family. It’s Drake.”

A somber shadow crosses over his face. “Ava, we talked about this. I’m not going to talk to him. Yet.”

I tilt my head. “Oh, did I hear a *yet*? That’s progress.”

“Only you would think that’s progress.”

“I’m desperate here, you big grump. Neither of you will talk to each other, even though it’s obvious you both want to ___”

“Untrue.”

“Try again. It’s very true. I see it.” I gesture to the whole of my face. “Drake looks like a kicked puppy behind the frown, and you look like someone took your favorite mitt.”

“Glove.”

I roll my eyes. “I will call it a baseball mitt as much as I want.”

“Okay, but remember, you just barely won over a group of MLB players, and if they find out you’re betraying them like this, it won’t go over well. Griffin—who has the true mitt—will be offended.”

“He’s not capable of getting offended.”

“Oh, he is, and he pouts worse than me.” Ryder grins, and I’m pretty sure my insides melt a little. “And the rest of the guys will ban you from the field.”

I laugh and start to stare out the window before I snap back to attention. “Nope, we aren’t done.” Ryder groans like his brilliant plan fell apart. “Don’t think your little baseball tangent distracted me from what we were talking about. I’m

trying to tell you that I'm feeling torn. Drake has no idea what's going on with us, and I sort of feel like I'm lying to him."

Ryder rests a hand on my knee. "Then tell him. We're adults who want to be together, and I don't care what he thinks. I don't care what he says. You're mine, Ava."

Well, well. How deliciously alpha. The feminist in me wants to curl over and die at the idea of being 'claimed', but the seductive growl of his voice is overpowering everything. At this point, I'm positive if he tattooed his name on my forehead, I'd be cool with it as long as he keeps talking like that.

Ryder drags his thumb across my knee in small circles. "You've always been who I wanted, Tweets. I never could completely let you go. You're the reason I am where I am."

"Meaning?"

He hesitates. "When I told you to stay back from Washington, it was partly because ..."

"Ryder." I squeeze his hands when he pauses. "You can tell me."

"I truly believed I needed to be more than I was before I could deserve you. I still don't think I deserve you." He laughs. "But back then, I really didn't think I did."

"Why? We'd been together for two years at that point."

His jaw tightens. A tell-tale sign he's avoiding something. I have every suspicion the fallout with Drake has something to do with it.

"After everything, I convinced myself you could do better," he says, covering whatever blank space in the story he has yet to tell me. "But when I got to school, I was reeling without you. I made the mistake of reaching out to Mitch."

The groan slips out involuntarily. "You didn't. Why?"

He shakes his head. "I think I was desperate to find a new foundation. Mitch still lived in Washington. You can imagine how it went. We were adults, but he still liked to get into my

head. It made everything *I* was thinking about me, about us, get worse. I hated the idea of you ... settling.”

A rush of anger floods my chest. I could go my entire life and never hear about Ryder’s bully of a cousin again.

“Why was it not enough to know what I thought of you?”

“I was spiraling,” he admits. “After everything, it felt like my heart had been burned. You get it, right?”

I nod. I knew the dark places I went; the worries I had, the feelings of inadequacy after we went through the loss we did, then the treatment for my ovarian cancer left me worried if I’d ever get another chance. I’d been depressed, and it had taken a solid year of therapy to help me work through the intensity of my feelings.

“I didn’t do anything but train and study,” Ryder says. “I wanted to get here, to the MLB. In my head, it was the only way I could prove I’d made something of myself.”

My brow furrows. “I would’ve taken you any way you’d have let me.”

“I couldn’t see that,” he says. “I got locked in this obsession to be great, to be the best. Distractions weren’t part of the plan, so I didn’t get close to people. Didn’t dare, because I couldn’t stomach losing anyone like I lost you and ...” He catches himself, but I know the stubborn man was about to say Drake.

Exactly like with my brother, love is still there. I have a feeling if they would step down off their massive boxes of too much pride, Ryder and Drake would be able to untangle the bitterness of the last ten years.

Ryder pulls into his driveway, turns off his ignition, but makes no move to leave the car. I lean my head on his shoulder and let the quiet surround us.

“Back to your concern,” he says softly. “If Drake can’t accept that I’m still completely in love with you, then it’s on him.”

My heart stalls in my chest. I lift my head. Ryder's eyes are glassy in the darkened car. He doesn't look away, doesn't blink. I lied earlier, this isn't a whirlwind, this is a beautiful collision, a speeding train aimed at something amazing at the end.

How is it not even a month ago, the broken pieces of my heart were barely glued together, and now they're faded and nearly forgotten?

I place one palm on the side of his face and pull his mouth to mine. I kiss him like I should've kissed him when he left all those years ago. I kiss him so he knows, so he'll *always* know, I want each tomorrow with him, each goodnight, each moment.

Our breaths tangle as he kisses me deeper. He grips my hair. A furrow to his brow tells me he's feeling more than he can say. I curl my arms around his neck and hold him tighter against me. Only once we pull back to catch a breath do I realize my cheeks are wet with tears.

Ryder kisses them away. "Why are you crying?"

"Because." I trap his face in my hands and press our brows together. "If you ever doubt what I feel for you again, I want you to remember this. I can't keep in how much I love you, Ryder Huntington. Look." I point to the tears, laughing. "It just spills out! I've loved you since I was ten years old. You've known every good and every dark piece of me, and you're the only one who has. Don't you ever use words like settling ever again. You are not someone I'd settle for; you are my dream."

He smiles and kisses me again. He kisses me until we can't see outside anymore. Then, once we're inside, he kisses me even more.

Ava



“I’M HYPERVENTILATING.” SASHA TAKES A GULP OF WINE AND takes in the whole room.

“You’ll be fine.” I laugh and thread my arm through hers.

“Are you kidding? Avie, I’m about to walk into a room with *famous* people. A lot of famous people.”

I shake my head, but understand where she’s coming from. It took some getting used to for me, knowing Ryder’s close circle consisted of a hefty amount of celebrities. Truth be told, everyone I’ve met is down to earth, kind, and easy to get along with.

Sasha will get used to it.

Something has shifted within Ryder. Where he was withdrawn and slightly on the outskirts with his teammates, he’s, perhaps unknowingly, letting them all in.

The day after Thanksgiving, Ryder was the one who suggested we do a little something extra since we’d both gone with family the day before.

So, after I picked myself up from falling off my chair that *he* was the brains behind the idea, my little cottage filled up with the Knights, the Marks, Dax, and even Bridger and Alexis Cole stopped over for a second dessert party. In the end, everyone in Perfectly Broken showed up, including Mason Walker and his family, and a guy named Quinn, who does security for the band.

If anyone looked stern it was Quinn. But I'm pretty sure I won him over with my pumpkin pie.

Now, a week into December, Ryder once again surprised the greater area of Las Vegas and invited people to his house.

His. Not mine. Not Parker's. His. Home.

He almost canceled three hours ago, but it is a particularly satisfying thing knowing I'm once more here, at his side, hopefully being the small voice in his ear that tells him he's got this. He can let people into his tight-knit, amazingly wonderful heart.

"I don't know how to entertain," he'd said, a touch of panic in his voice as he helped me rearrange the furniture.

"Where is Ride or Die?"

"He chose option two and died."

I laughed and kissed him long enough his muscles relaxed, and he became a delicious putty to mold how I saw fit.

"You've got this," I whispered as I kneaded his palm like I always used to do. "You don't need to entertain. These people like you, they're your friends. It's too late anyway."

"Why?"

"Because Griffin and Alexis are both coming, and you know better than me, unless you're sick with the bubonic plague, you won't be able to tell them to stay away. Alexis already made her homemade tamales."

Ryder's mouth pinched in a tight line. "I do like her tamales."

"There you go. No worries." I kissed him again, swatted his finely toned backside, and sent him on the way to arrange the sofa and loveseat so there was room for people to move freely.

I'd never say I told him so, but I absolutely did. Ryder doesn't need to entertain anyone. They're all enjoying themselves. Adults dressed in ugly sweaters spread out around the front room, eating, drinking, laughing.

I wince when Sasha digs her claws into my arm. “Is that Rees Hayden?”

I glance over to where the bassist and his wife, Vienna, talk with Parker and Skye. “Yes.”

“How is it possible a guy can look so good while wearing a sweater with gold tassels?”

I nudge her ribs. “Well, looks like Hudson likes him too.”

She pales when she realizes Hudson is in the huddle, laughing along with Ellie Hawkins, Mason’s parents, and Noah Hayden, Rees’s twin brother, who is making a splash in Hollywood with his TV series.

“Go on.” I give her shoulders a little push.

“I can’t. I’m stuck. I’ll be weird. Avie, I teach children all day. I use a lot of adverbs.”

“Sash, I promise they’re nice. Hudson is right there.”

“He’s used to talking with all kinds of people.”

“Yeah, while he’s arresting them.”

“You’ll be fine.”

Hudson must have a direct link to his fiancée’s distress signals. After a second nudge from me, he catches sight of Sasha and comes over, takes her hand, and pulls her back to the conversation. She clings to Hudson’s hand, but she’s at ease almost immediately.

Guess that happens when you find your safe person.

Maybe Ryder has a connection to me when I’m thinking of him. Two heartbeats later, his arms curl around my waist and he nuzzles the crook of my neck. “Sasha isn’t going to puke anymore?”

I laugh and spin around in his arms until we’re chest to chest. “Nope, she’s good.”

“I considered it a plus that she hasn’t killed me yet.” He glances at my friend mingled with his friends. “He didn’t think much of me at first, but her fiancé is a pretty cool guy.”

“Hudson is perfect for Sasha,” I say. “He’s a good guy.”

My heart tightens a bit. Hudson is good friends with Drake. Once upon a time my brother would be here, he’d be at Ryder’s side like his unofficial bodyguard.

For the first time, I admit there is an ache that two men I love hate each other.

“Your face dropped,” Ryder says, studying me. “You okay?”

I smile. Now is not the time to be a downer. One palm on his face, I peck his lips. “I’m glad I’m here. With you.”

Ryder rests his forehead to mine. “I wish we could go back in time.”

“Sometimes I do too. But maybe we had things to learn along the way that will make us even stronger.”

Right on cue, his phone buzzes. Ryder glances at the screen, rolls his eyes, and shoves it back into his pocket.

“What is it?”

“Mitch.”

No one brings a rush of anger, a fierce touch-my-guy-and-you-die vibe, faster than Mitchell. “What does he want now?”

“Christmas. That’s what he wants. He says my dad and I should spend Christmas with him and Dan. They’re thinking a destination Christmas.”

“Oh, and your mom is supposed to what? Hang out by herself?”

Ryder’s brow furrows, like the realization of the implication was lost on him before. “We’d never leave her by herself.”

“Exactly. He can’t be serious.”

“Sounds like he is, but it’s hard to know for sure in a text.” Ryder picks up a glass of some spiced holiday drink from the table.

“You get what they want, right?” Sarcasm and tone have never been Ryder’s strong suit.

“I get it,” he says. “They want me to foot the bill.”

I’d like nothing more than to reach through that stupid text message and wring the man’s neck. “He’s so obvious. Does he think you’re that oblivious you wouldn’t see what he’s doing?”

“I’m sure he does.” Ryder’s face hardens. “You know as well as me, Tweets, I’m his autistic cousin who can’t think right.”

“Ryder,” I say softly. “I should’ve worded that differently. I didn’t mean to bring those memories out.”

He presses a kiss to my knuckles. “You didn’t. They’re always there.”

I bite my lip. “Have you, um, have you ever considered talking with someone about it?”

“I am talking to someone. I’m talking to you.”

“No, like a professional.”

“A therapist?”

I nod. “I had a lot of therapy to deal with my trust issues and everything that happened to us. It can be helpful to have an objective person sort of show you a path through some of the darker thoughts.”

He shrugs and takes another drink. “I’ve gone to therapy, Tweets. Sensory therapy. Playing college ball was harder with the larger crowds. But I wanted to get to the MLB, right? I figured stadiums and reporters would get overwhelming sometimes.”

“Look at you, being so prepared.” I wrinkle my nose. “But what about this sort of stuff? The words that get you down, I mean.”

“Having you back has helped me not care so much. They hurt sometimes, but I haven’t gotten too stuck.” Ryder chuckles. “He hasn’t said anything cruel since I made it to the MLB anyway.”

Well, give the guy a sticker.

Ryder is a pro at pushing things down inside. Always was. He's burying words and thoughts planted in his head by Mitch deep inside. Simply because they are not always in the forefront doesn't mean they aren't there, poisoning the beautiful things he might want to believe about himself.

"Oh, didn't you want to talk with Tate and Ellie about your idea?" He places his drink back on the table and takes my hand, cutting off any more talk about therapy and past hurts.

Parker has known Tate since they were in kindergarten, and said if we ever need to find Tate Hawkins, follow the food.

Sure enough, he's standing at the long table, a grinch hat on his head, filling a plate with crackers and fancy cheeses.

"Hey, Tate." Ryder taps his shoulder.

He spins around, one cheek looks filled with food. He laughs a bit, chewing and swallowing. "Hey. Just so you know, I'm taking all your food."

"Good," I tell him. "Helps with clean up."

Tate taps the side of his head. "I thought the same thing. I'm not always one for parties, but this has been fun. Yours are safe, though. Not so alcohol-ish like some we see on the road."

"Eh, who wants a bunch of drunk guys sleeping on their couches all night?" Ryder says.

"True. We're more fun sober anyway." Tate gives a quick glance over his shoulder to where Bridger and Alexis Cole are laughing with Griffin, Wren, and Dax.

Ryder already filled me in that Bridger is a recovering addict, so we kept drinks light, but it warms my little heart to see the utter concern Tate has for his bandmate. Reminds me of the Kings and how they back each other for better or worse.

"So, Ava has an idea she wants to run by you to see if you're interested," Ryder says.

Nerves gather in my stomach when Tate points his attention my way.

I don't know why I'm nervous, it's something he could help brainstorm through, and truth be told, he'll probably like the idea. I start to cringe at the notion of something I see as personal passion being rejected. The exact reason I stuck with cougar Carina for so long, believing my ideas would be mocked or dismissed. I promised myself when I left Haven, I'd be bolder. I'd truly try to create the passions living deep in my bones.

This one tops the list.

"Well, you have experience with charities for after school programs, right?" I ask.

"I do." Tate shoves a cracker in his mouth and starts to explain the government tax filings they went through to fund the Hawkins Youth and Family Center.

"Since working on the field house and seeing how your center is highly focused on music and the arts, it got me thinking."

"Oh, I'm already liking this." Another cracker goes into his mouth, his unblinking gaze on me.

I laugh. I've said literally nothing, and he already seems on board. With Ryder's hand on my back in silent support, I vomit out my ideas, the connections I want to make, a potential partnership with the Vegas Kings and Enigma Records. I tell him a vision I've only shared with my design notebooks and Ryder Huntington.

Tate listens intently, asking a few questions, offering a few points of view I hadn't thought of before. He adds his wife halfway through, and Ellie gives me a breakdown of statistics with their center, staffing needs they didn't think of before they built their place, and a few hiccups they needed to resolve.

By the end, Tate has a new plate of crackers in his hand and he's hurriedly texting the owner of Enigma Records.

"I think this could be incredible," Ellie tells me.

“That’s what I told her,” Ryder adds. His smile sends a rush of heat through my middle. I nearly forgot how much Ryder’s proud grin matters to me. I try not to be a people pleaser at the expense of my own happiness and all that, but there is something about knowing I’ve added a notch of pride to the man that leaves my head in a delightful fog.

“I mean, imagine the widespread influence,” Ellie goes on. Her bright pink hair is pulled up into a cone on top of her head, decorated in mini-ornaments, and her sweater matches the hair Christmas tree. Every time she speaks, she gets more animated, so the tiny bells keep tinkling on her head.

Tate tucks his phone away and grins as he tugs Ellie against his side. “Pops wants to meet with Ava.” His gaze flicks to Ryder. “Think you can get Dallas on board?”

“Parker can.”

“Pays to be the son-in-law of a billionaire.”

Ellie smacks his chest. “Excuse me, you are the son-in-law of a thespian.”

Tate laughs, kissing her temple. “Even better, princess.”

A thousand tiny sparks float in my veins as excitement builds. This could be a real possibility. To think, if I’d kept my mouth shut, if I’d stuck with Carina and let her bark orders at me. I can hardly keep it all in.

I look at Ryder as he starts talking about future tours for the band. I wouldn’t have had this opportunity without him.

My head falls to his shoulder. I slip my fingers in with his, simply wanting to be closer.

He gives my palm a few squeezes.

This man changed my life all those years ago, but he’s still here, changing everything for the better like he never left.



“Oh, wow.” I drop my purse and look around the lower-level game room. “It looks amazing.”

There are sofas with thick throw pillows. Foosball, ping pong, air hockey, even a vintage pin ball machine fill the space. Dax insisted there be intellectual games, so I arranged for chess corners and a small virtual reality corner where kids can do virtual escape rooms and active digital games.

I’d expected to help arrange most of the room, but my dad, Josh, and Ryder nearly have it finished.

“Hey.” Ryder pops out of an alcove leading to the kitchen area. He pecks my lips. “I wasn’t sure you were coming.” He glances at a wall clock.

“Sorry, I forgot to let you know about my appointment.” I pinch his chin and tug on his bottom lip a bit. “I’m still getting used to sharing everyday things with you again.”

“Get used to it, Tweets.” He picks up another box of the marble chess boards and follows me toward the back of the room. “Everything good, though?”

“Oh, yeah, it was a cancer check-up. I’m down to going around every three years.”

Ryder comes to a stop, his face pales a little. “And?”

There is a wash of deeply rooted fear in his eyes, and I’m a terrible person for thinking his stark concern is endearing.

“Still clear. I’m doing all I can to make sure it stays that way, Ryd.”

He clears his throat and nods. “I ... I mean if you ever want, I’d come to those appointments with you.”

I grab a bag of foam pads that will be placed around each game table to help avoid issues from standing on the hard tile in this room. “Yeah? You didn’t handle the first one all that well.”

“Cut me some slack,” he says. “They made it sound like they were cutting out all your organs.”

I shove his shoulder, laughing. “They did not.”

“To me, that’s what it sounded like.”

I smile, uncertain if the memory is a good or bad thought. More like bittersweet. Ryder had gone to my pre-op appointment—well, he’d waited in the waiting room and heard the information secondhand from my dad as my mom texted him from the appointment room.

Odds are my dad described the surgery to remove my cancerous ovary in a convoluted way, leaving Ryder to assume my intestines were being cut out. Scan after scan, test after test, affirmed it was the best choice, but my heart broke when it was shown the second ovary seemed to barely function, but at least it could stay put under close supervision.

Being so young and talking about freezing eggs, fertility prognosis, and the risks of not doing the surgery were knives to my heart. I’d barely begun to live, and I felt like a huge piece of my future was teetering on the line.

“You basically choked me when you saw me come out of the office,” I say.

“No, I hugged you.”

“Oh, that’s what it’s called.”

Ryder sets a chess set box on top of one of the square tables and starts placing pieces. “I was scared a lot back then. I calmed down after you explained things.”

“True.” My shoulders slump as the bitter parts of that day, of that whole time in life, add pressure to my spine.

Ryder must notice. He pinches my chin between his finger and thumb and draws my mouth close to his. He holds me there, suffering, while I wait for him to finish the job and kiss me.

“And not once,” he whispers, “did I think I didn’t want you because of what had to happen, and how it might make having kids harder.”

“I wish we’d had these conversations back then.”

“We were kids, Tweets, trying to figure out what was going on. Not sure we could’ve thought things through like

this.”

I hold his face in my hands and pull him in for a kiss. Longer than I'd planned, but I'm not complaining. Ryder abandons the box of chess pieces and parts my lips, tasting me, holding me closer.

“Ugh.” A deep grunt snaps us apart. “I didn't realize I'd be dealing with catching you two all over again.”

I laugh when Josh and my dad stand in the doorway, tool belts on, drywall in their hair.

I squeeze Ryder around the waist. It's as if all the missing pieces to our puzzle are fitting back in place.

All but one.

Ryder



“YOU OKAY?” I TAKE AVA IN WHEN I STEP THROUGH THE doorway into her small entryway.

I will always think Ava is beautiful. She could dress in a Mumu and I’d think she was the sexiest woman on the planet. I’m just saying she seems ... ruffled, and we have a reservation in twenty minutes.

“Didn’t you get my text?” She tugs on my hand until I’m all the way inside, then closes the door at my back.

I pull out my phone and notice a message. “Sorry, my phone locks when I’m driving.”

She smiles and kisses the side of my neck. “Safe of you, Mr. Huntington.”

“I’m basically a hero.”

She slips her fingers through mine and pulls me toward the front of her house. “Um, we’re going to need to order in.”

“Are you sick?” She doesn’t need to answer. When I round the corner, a small body slams into me, and two little arms try to wrap around my legs.

“Hi. Wanna play wif us?” Charlie tilts his head back and beams at me.

Ava holds out her arms, like she’s presenting a prize. “Emergency babysitting duty. My dad had an issue at the store, so my mom is manning the registers for him while he works it out. Lucky me.” She tickles her nephew until he giggles, then

gives me a cautious look. “I know you don’t care for abrupt changes in plans, so we can reschedule ... or you could stay.”

I want to stay anywhere Ava is, but I keep my expression neutral. Once Charlie bolts around the sofa and settles in front of a game of *Chutes and Ladders*, I lean into her. “I don’t know if Drake would want me around his kid.”

“He hasn’t said that. Not once.” She glares at me. “You’re not a disease, Ryder.”

Funny choice of words. Her brother used the exact word once, but in a very different way.

“Wanna play?” Charlie’s small voice pipes up. He holds a character piece from the game, a hopeful gleam in his eyes.

I face Ava and lift one shoulder. “Pizza?”

The smile on her face gives me too much credit. She looks at me like I brought about world peace. I step past her and grunt like every bone in my body aches—it makes Charlie laugh, so I’d do it again—as I sit next to the kid.

I’m not a kid person. True, I’m an unnamed guardian of baby Ever, but it’s not like I’m swaddling her or holding her a lot. It’s not that I don’t like kids, they’re some of my favorite fans, it’s more that I’ve not had much one-on-one experience with them.

But Charlie pats the space beside him and says with all the innocence in the world, “Bet it’ll make you smile if you play.”

Ava tosses her head back and laughs. “I think he’s saying you need to turn your frown upside down.”

I shoot her a glare. “I’ll play. But I’ve got to warn you, kid, I’m amazing at this game.”

“You are?” I could say anything and Charlie would look at me with wonder and awe. “So you make the good desi-zons?”

I’m trying to figure out the word he’s attempting when Ava rests a hand on my shoulder. “Ryder makes excellent decisions.”

She gives my shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

I look at Charlie. “I’ve got to admit, it’s more fun going down the slides.”

He giggles and squishes himself between me and Ava once she joins the game. Within fifteen minutes our strategic board game turns into a battle for who can run their game piece down the big chute the most and make the best noises while they do it.

When the pizza arrives, Charlie follows me into the kitchen. Ava stays behind to clean up the gameboard and pillow fort the kid started to build. He’s a tiny tornado.

Charlie pulls himself onto one of Ava’s high-back chairs while I rummage through the cabinets to find plates.

“Was you always good at baseball?”

“Um, no.” I put a plate in front of him. “I had to practice. A lot.”

“My Pops likes baseball.” He kicks his legs and scratches his head. “So does my daddy. But he’s reeeeeaaaally good at dwiving his truck too.”

The slice of cheese pizza plops onto his plate. “Your dad likes baseball?”

Charlie takes a nibble, almost like he doesn’t trust the pizza yet, and nods. “Yup. He’s got your picture.”

“My picture?”

“Yup.” He kicks his legs some more and looks around. “Like me.”

“Your dad ... has my baseball card?”

“Yup. Do you like Christmas? Nan says I’m gonna get too much again.” He giggles and shakes his head like the next thing he’s about to say is utterly ridiculous. “She says that every year.”

My head is reeling a little. First, Drake has my baseball card. Second, I don’t know why I like that he does.

Ava joins us and we continue the chatter about the upcoming holidays. Charlie admits he wants a football, then

quickly adds he wouldn't mind a baseball too. Pretty sure he said that to spare my feelings. He informs me his dad never asks for anything except a drawing from him, but this year Charlie is upping his game and making a clay ornament with Marianne. Then, he describes in intricate detail all the ways he's going to paint the rims and ladder on the firetruck cutout. He already has the cookie cutter, after all.

For the first time in a decade, Drake Williams is part of a conversation and I'm not transformed into sharp edges and bared teeth.

"Do you kiss Aunti A?" Charlie says midbite.

I cough after inhaling a gulp of water down the wrong tube. "What?"

Charlie gnaws at his pizza crust; his face is splattered in red sauce. "Do you kiss Auntie A?"

I spare a look at Ava. She's red in the face, trying not to laugh. I'm pretty sure I look like I don't have any blood left in my head. "Um, yes."

"Why'd you ask that, kiddo?" Ava ruffles his hair.

"Nan said she thinks a lady wants to kiss daddy." He grimaces and adds with a whisper. "On the *wips*."

"And this right here is why I love babysitting my brother's child." Ava props her chin on her fists. "Charlie man, tell me what lady wants to kiss your daddy on the lips."

"The one at the station."

"Oh-ho, the new receptionist?"

I hide my smile behind another drink. This is a glimpse at the old Ava, always looking for dirt to hold over her brother's head.

He grimaces again. "Nan says she isn't nice."

"Nana said that?"

"To Pops." Charlie leans forward as if he might share a secret. "They didn't know I could hear 'em."

“You sneak.” Ava tickles his neck.

Once he stops giggling he goes on, “Nan said the lady asked what days I went to see my mom.” He scoffs. “I can’t go to heaven.”

This kid ... I think I’d be content to hang out with him all the time. Weird, since I don’t like to hang out with anyone. Besides Ava. And the guys. I can practically hear Griffin laughing at me as the realization that I might enjoy people more than I let on hits me in the chest.

“She probably didn’t know your mommy is an angel,” Ava says. “And she probably wanted to know what days she could hang out with you most.”

“Nah.” He shakes his head. “Nan said she wants daddy alone because she only wants one thing.”

“What thing?”

He shrugs. “Prob-ly his firetruck.”

I can’t help it. The laugh takes me from behind, scraping up my throat and bursting out. I hide my face, shoulders shuddering. Ava elbows me, but she’s just as bad, trying to hide her own laugh behind a greasy piece of pizza.

“Yeah, kid,” I say once I catch my breath. “I bet she’s after his firetruck.”

In the same lightning speed, Charlie changes the subject to his new favorite TV show. I know two songs from the show by heart by the time he follows me outside to throw away the pizza boxes in the trash.

“... and I’m gonna sleep in my Darth Vader tent in daddy’s room so I don’t see Santa.”

We’re back on Christmas again.

“That sounds like fun,” I say, tossing in the boxes. “I loved tents when I was younger too.”

“Yup.” Charlie swings his hands as we turn back for the door, but my breath catches when one of his hands reaches up and snags mine.

A knot tightens in my chest. Not in a bad way. Sort of like warmth blooms from my center to my limbs.

Until it ends.

“Charlie.” Drake stands on the walkway leading to the front door when we come around the house. He’s still in his fire shirt, and there is fatigue written all over his face.

He says his son’s name, but his eyes are locked on me, then slowly, *painfully slow*, his attention drops to the way his kid is clinging to my hand.

If Charlie senses the sudden shift in mood, he doesn’t show it.

“Daddy!” He releases me and sprints as fast as he can over to Drake.

For a second, Drake forgets to be a jerk and crouches so he can hug his son. “Hey, buddy. I missed you. Did you have fun with Auntie A?”

“Yup. And Ryder got me peetha.”

Drake gives his son a smile, but when he lifts his eyes, there is little love in them for me. I cross my arms over my chest. I meant what I said to Ava. If he can’t handle this, that’s on him. He’s not chasing me off. Again.

“Why don’t you go get your stuff,” he says to Charlie.

The kid doesn’t even argue. He hurries away like he can’t wait to go home and hang out with his dad. Sign of a good father, I guess.

“What are you doing here?” Drake asks the second the door closes.

“Not really your business.”

“When my kid is involved, it is.”

Okay, fair. “Ava and I had plans tonight before she found out she needed to watch him. They asked me to stay. I did. Are we done here?”

I make a move to head for the house.

“Did you get my calls?”

I stop. My eyes close for a heartbeat, but I don’t answer.

Drake takes a step closer. “Did you? Did you even listen to my voicemails? Or did you see my name and delete them?”

I should tell him those two messages are still there, unheard, taunting me. I should say it, but I don’t. “Why would I ever answer a call or keep a message from you? Call me crazy, but I wasn’t in the mood to hear what a disease I am, or how no one really wants me, or how I was—what was it you told me—oh, I was a convenient friend. But you never really liked me.”

Drake drops his chin. “Ryder, I said a lot of things and—”

“But did you say *those* things?”

We both spin around. Ava is on the porch, blue fire in her eyes when she looks at her brother.

“Avie—”

“I asked you a question, Drake. Did you say those things? After everything we’d been through, you said *those* things to him?” Tears line her bottom lashes, but not from sadness. If I had to guess, these tears come from anger.

“There was a lot going on and—”

“Oh, was there?” Her voice sounds more like a snarl than anything. “I forgot how drastically *your* life changed.”

I didn’t come here to build a divide between a brother and sister. I have my issues with Drake, but I know how close these two will always be. They were all each other had for a lot of years, and no matter what is going on with me, I wouldn’t want to mess that up.

Drake’s jaw pulses, and he stares at the red and pink and white rocks lining Ava’s walk. Ava starts to say something, but I hold up a hand. “Tweets.” I make a nod to the space behind her.

Ava looks over her shoulder as Charlie prances onto the porch, a small *Paw Patrol* backpack on his shoulders, totally

oblivious to the wall of bitterness growing between the adults.

“I’m going to go,” I tell Ava.

“Bye, Ryder!” Charlie says.

I smile. It isn’t even forced. I like the kid, and he’s a bright spot. I fist one hand. “Bye, little man.”

Drake doesn’t make a move to stop me when I bump knuckles with his son. He doesn’t say anything. Frankly, it looks like he’s shut off into some deep place in his head.

I almost wish he’d rage and say something stupid and hot-headed. It would make it easier to dismiss him; it’d make it easier to paint him as a scumbag who doesn’t deserve a second thought. But the truth is, Drake pretended like he had it all together back then. He tried to be the tough guy. I couldn’t see through the hurt of our last interaction for years, but looking back, if I try hard enough, I can see angry words came from a brother afraid for his sister.

I just don’t know if too much time has passed to ever fix what we lost.

Ryder



Age Eighteen

THERE ARE PARTS OF THIS PLACE I'M READY TO LEAVE. I THINK it'll be good for me and Ava to have a fresh start somewhere else. Things haven't been the same. My mom tells me Ava needs time, and I get it. Sometimes, when I'm alone, all I can think of are the what if's and what could've been's.

A small grin tugs at the corner of my mouth. I'm going to propose to Ava before the semester starts. We'd talked about going to college engaged, but now I plan to make it a reality. I figure we'll wait to get married, but I want Ava to know I want her. She's made a few comments since her surgery, about how things will be harder for her, and weird things about how that's something guys wouldn't want in a partner.

I'm not sure what decade she's living in, but I want her for her. Exactly as she is.

I'll never stop wanting her.

It's a thought that has me anxious to leave, to get to Washington, to start our new lives, but nights like this, just the guys, I'll miss.

I shut off the ignition and step out of my dad's old, beater truck.

Drake and I haven't been quite the same either. He's been quiet a lot, insists it's just because he's been working full time

at the hardware store. I don't know, maybe everyone was more rattled by the miscarriage than I give them credit for.

We're all off, but this feels normal. Us meeting out back, just to chill.

"Hey." I smack Drake's shoulder before I sit on the back porch swing. He stares at me for a few seconds, then stands in a hurry. *Okay.*

"I gotta talk to you." His voice sounds like my dad's when he's upset at something.

"Figured we'd talk. Like we usually do."

Drake shoves his hands inside his pockets. "This'll be quick."

"What's up?" A prickle of unease heats the back of my neck.

Drake turns away from me, like he's talking to the dry grass. "I want you to go to Washington, but without Ava."

Like a fist grips my throat, I can't find any shape of a response. What is he talking about?

Drake starts to pace. "You say you love her, right?"

"Are you serious?"

"Do you?"

"You know I do."

His eyes darken. Drake and Ava are twins, but they don't look a lot alike. Where he's sharp, she's soft. His hair is more like copper, hers is like sunlight. But I see the same pain in his eyes as I saw in hers after we lost our baby.

"If you love her, then you'll leave her alone."

"Leave her alone? Why would I do that? She's my girlfriend."

"Yeah, and you're ruining her life!" Drake takes an aggressive step closer. I've seen him upset, but it's never once been aimed at me.

I don't know what to say. There is something about anger and rage that shuts me down.

"She's giving up everything she wanted to do to follow you," Drake says.

"That's not true." Each word slices through my teeth.

"Really?" Drake scoffs bitterly. "Did you know she was accepted into an industrial interior design program at Whisper Ridge College? That's local. She could live here and save buckets of money. Graduate without debt. Be around her family. But she's not even considering it because *you* got her pregnant, and that found her cancer, so she thinks she owes you something. She's giving up her wants so you can chase your stupid baseball dream."

A lump hardens in my throat. Ava never said anything about going to school here. And the only thing negative she's ever said about Washington is she'll miss her family. We both will, but it's not like we're across the country. We're a few states away.

My tongue is locked. Anger holds the words behind my teeth. Hurt chokes them back down to the pit of my gut.

Drake shakes his head. "You didn't even know she applied, did you?"

I didn't, and I don't know why she wouldn't tell me.

"What does that say?" he barrels on. "She wanted a way out. She wanted to get away *from you*."

No. That's not true. But his words are sharpened blades to the chest. I ball my fists against the ache.

"Face it, Ryder. At first, she was following you because she didn't want a broken home for her kid. But now, that's not an issue. Now, she has options."

I shoot to my feet and butt my chest to his. Drake is taller, but I'm stronger. Working on a ranch, playing ball, that helped a lot more than stacking shelves of screwdrivers. "I don't know where this is coming from, but if you talk about my kid

again like they were some kind of mistake, I'm going to break your nose."

Drake has the decency to hold his tongue. For a second. "She wants to go to this program; she wants to be a designer, not an architect."

"And she can be!" I say, tossing my hands in the air. "I'd never stand in her way—"

"But you are," he tosses back. "You made her a statistic, exactly like our mom. I won't watch Ava waste away."

Is that where this is coming from? My head is hazy, but it makes a bit of sense. His experiences as a kid would naturally give him certain fears, right?

Their parents were young when Ava and Drake were born. They both struggled for four years until turning to drugs and alcohol, leaving the twins in and out of foster care until they both relinquished their parental rights before their kids' seventh birthday.

"I'd never hurt her like that, Drake."

"You don't get it. She's *settling*. She's been settling all this time."

"What are you talking about? We've been together for two years."

"Wake up. You were convenient. For both of us. We didn't have to make friends when you were just there. It was easier than dealing with the other jerks at school. You're familiar, but someday we were going to part ways with you, Ryder."

Why is he saying this? I know it's not true. I take a long breath. "Did something else happen? Drake, we've been friends for eight years."

We've been basically inseparable.

"You've been friends with us. Not the other way around. Like I said, you're familiar to Ava, you're convenient. Me, I couldn't care less what you do with your life from here on out."

I shove him. “What is with you?”

“You think I want to see my sister tied to a guy like you?” He shoves me back. “You think I want to see her give up everything she’s worked toward, to what? Watch you try to make yourself worth something while she pops out your babies, drops out of school, and is miserable? You’ve already made her miserable. I listen to her cry every night. Every. Night.”

“She wants me as much as I want her. You used to be okay with that.”

“Yeah.” He scoffs, glaring at me. “Until I really thought about it. Why would I want her with you? You’ve been a disease for her. What should’ve been her best year is ruined, thanks to you. And you actually think you’re good for her. You actually think you can make her happy. You actually think you’ll make it to the big leagues. You don’t even try to see how selfish you’ve been, showing her off like she’s freaking arm candy while you never, not once, asked her if this is what she really wants or needs.”

We are going to Washington State because of me. I have a baseball scholarship. I’m not an excellent student, and it was a shot to have school paid for. I took it. Ava didn’t even question, simply said she’d find something she loved up there.

No wonder she kept the acceptance to another school a secret. She’s always put me first. I’ve tried to do the same, but maybe he’s right. Maybe I fell short here.

“Even if we go to Washington first, once I graduate, I can support her in her program,” I say, almost like a peace offering.

“That’s four years from now. She’ll be four years behind everyone else.” Drake’s face flushes in a hot, angry red. “If you care about her, let her live without you. Let her reach something for herself.”

“That’s up to her,” I say. “She doesn’t need you to make her choices.”

“I know my sister, d-bag. And I know she needs to live life without you for a bit. She latched onto you as a scared little kid and thinks she can’t do this without you. Like I said, she thinks she owes you something.”

“She doesn’t.” I blink, embarrassed when emotion starts to billow behind my eyes. His words hurt, but maybe there is truth to them. If Ava’s dream program is here, then she deserves to do it.

“Leave her alone, Ryder,” Drake says. “She deserves better than you. I mean, not even Josh’s family wanted you, right?”

I can’t breathe. My gaze lifts to Drake’s, stunned and broken. He looks away, sort of like he might regret what he said. That’s the thing about words, once they’re out, there’s no taking them back.

He knew what shot to take to cut me at the knees, and he hit it straight on. I wish the words Mitch has said in the past didn’t grate on me, I wish they still didn’t make me wonder if there is some truth to them after all this time.

Ava deserves so much more than me. She deserves everything.

I step back, locked in my head.

“What are you going to do, Ryder?” Drake says. I think there is a tremble in his voice. Maybe regret is buried in there somewhere.

I’m fooling myself; he wants me gone. I say nothing and start heading back to the truck.

“We’re done, Ryder,” he says. There is definitely a tremble in his voice. There is definitely pain. “If you really care about her, you’ll ... you’ll let her go and do what she truly wants to do.”

We are done. How do friends come back from such harsh truths?

I trusted Drake with everything. My insecurities, my struggles in school, my dreams with baseball.

He's taken it all and molded it into a cruel blade, then stabbed me right in the center of my back. But he's not wrong. Ava is better than both of us times a hundred. I did alter her life in a huge way. She has been different, sadder, since it all happened. I hate knowing I played such a huge part in her misery.

I wanted her to revel in my dreams, thought we'd start a new chapter, but I never considered she might have different plans.

I slam the door to the truck and peel out of the Williams's drive. Drake watches me, his jaw tight, a sunken look on his face.

I'm glad he's too far away to see the stupid, worthless tear drip onto my cheek.

No more. I'm done with people who say they love me, who say they care, then turn on me and hate every flaw.

Ava's is the last face I see before I decide to cut ties with this place completely.

Ava



HIS STEPS ARE HEAVY ON THE STAIRS AS HE RETURNS FROM putting Charlie to bed. I cling to the mug of tea in my hands. By now it's probably cold, but I haven't taken a sip. I'm too locked in a maddening fury to move.

Drake didn't have the option to return to his townhouse without me.

After those things I overheard at my house, the cruel things that I suspect were fired at a vulnerable, teenage Ryder Huntington, a few last words he said to me before leaving for college make a lot more sense.

Honestly, a few things he's said recently make sense too.

Drake steps into the kitchen. He looks terrified. Good.

"He asleep?" I ask, voice terse.

Drake rubs the back of his neck. "Yeah."

"Good." I tip my head toward the chair across his small table. "Sit."

Drake grew a brain in the last few hours and doesn't argue. He sits and laces his fingers over the table.

I'm strategically remaining silent. Let the pressure build, let him squirm. It doesn't take long.

Drake lets out a sigh. He drags his fingers through his messy, wheat-golden hair. "You're going to hate me."

"Probably. But I also have this annoying thing called shared DNA, so I sort of love you by default too."

“I hate myself for the things I said to him. I knew he would take everything literal, and I said them anyway.” He picks at a small sliver on his table.

“You wanted him to go, didn’t you?”

“At the time, yes. But it didn’t last long.”

My skin heats with frustration. “Did you know I’ve spent all this time believing he decided to leave because I might not be able to have kids? I really convinced myself he thought I was *defective* or something.”

Drake’s eyes widen in a kind of horror. “Ava.”

“Don’t worry, *he* quickly corrected me when we *got back together*.” I enunciate each word. “And we are together, Drake. Because there are some connections that can’t be broken, and mine never broke from Ryder. So, you’re going to tell me what role you had to play in splitting all of us up.”

It takes a moment for him to speak again, but when he does, his voice is rough and low. “I’m not trying to say I was struggling as much as you, Avie, but please try to understand ... watching you go through all that, it was a living hell.”

My heart softens. A little. “I know, Drake. I needed you, but I needed Ryder too. What did you say to him?”

He hesitates. “I’m the one who told him about the design program here.”

“Why? I told you I was going to Washington.”

“Because you wanted to do design. I thought you were giving up everything you wanted to do all to please Ryder.”

“Do you know me at all?” I rub my temples, gathering my words. “I made the plans *with* him. I *wanted* to be with him. I was already looking at a design program at another school in Washington, architecture was my backup plan.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Because you chose not to ask me. You thought you knew best, right?”

“I freaked, Avie.” Drake looks horribly despondent. He covers his face, a crack of emotion in his voice. “For those few months, I thought ...” He shakes his head. “I thought you could die, okay? Your doctor was here, and in my immature head, I was convinced if you left, the cancer would come back.”

“Drake ...”

“No, I know it’s stupid. I know there are oncologists in other states, obviously. But I couldn’t reason that out in my head. I was too scared to lose you. But with the pregnancy on top of it all, I don’t know, I convinced myself you were going to end up like our mom. Messed up, alone all the time, and with kids you resented.”

My heart doesn’t soften. It breaks. I rest a hand on his forearm. “How could I have ended up that way? We *have* amazing parents now. We have each other. We ... we had Ryder who would’ve given up every single dream he had if he believed I was unhappy. You know that.”

Drake has tears in his eyes. I haven’t seen my brother get so emotional since the night my sister-in-law died.

“I know.” He sniffs. “I’ve regretted what I did for years. *Years.*”

“And you’ve just held onto this.” I tighten my grip on his arm. “D, that sort of stuff eats you up.”

“Yeah, well, I deserve it.” He slumps in his chair, covering his face with his hands again. “I look at Charlie, and he thinks I’m the best guy in the universe. I’m not.”

“You were still a kid back then.”

“Eighteen, Ava; I knew right and wrong. I also knew what things to say to mess with Ryder. I knew exactly what would stick in his head and never let go. And I said them. I wanted him to go, to leave you alone because I’d convinced myself it would kill you if you left. I pushed away the only real friend—apart from you and Ronnie—I’ve ever had out of fear. That’s not something people want to go around sharing.”

“I don’t understand why you’re still so mad at him then.”

“I’m not mad at him, more myself, but seeing him is a reminder of how badly I screwed up. I told you I tried to reach out to him.” Drake pauses. “I wanted him in my wedding. Remember how I didn’t make Ronnie’s brother my Best Man, ever wonder why? It belonged to Ryder. I hoped he’d show. To the last minute, I hoped.”

Drake lets his head fall onto his hands. He still talks, but he was never one who showed his emotions easily. I rest a palm on the back of his head as we spend the next half hour talking about the past, how Drake realized the damage done, how he muted feelings about losing Ryder’s friendship all the while tracking his career in the shadows.

It’s a heartbreaking tale.

What might’ve been crosses my mind more than once. The thing is, there were traumas in all our lives, and they reared their ugly heads in those few months all those years ago.

“I hope you guys find a way back to each other,” I say softly when silence stretches on too long.

Drake’s eyes are red and wet. He nods and studies the table again. “I’m happy you’re together again. Really. And I’ll always be sorry for pushing you two apart.”

“I appreciate the apology,” I say. “But Ryder could’ve talked with me, and I could’ve chased after him. We all had lessons to learn and dealt with things in our own ways. I still love you, idiot that you are.”

He laughs and grabs my hand, squeezing my fingers.

We go forward from here. I’m not going to demand two grown men make amends. I hope they will, because it’ll make for awkward family dinners if they don’t since I’m not letting either one of them go.

We go forward. No more looking back.

Ryder



THE NEXT DAY, THE ONLY THING I'VE HEARD FROM AVA IS SHE is ditching me since she has a date with our moms. Not a word about anything related to Drake. The way she looked ready to murder him, I thought they might've hashed it out.

I want to ask, but hold back.

The problem with her impromptu dinner date is for the first time in ... forever, I don't want to be alone.

Griffin sounds like he's going to burst into tears when I call him first, but they had plans with Wren's brothers. Seriously, I think he wanted to cry and made me promise we could have a raincheck.

Parker and Skye took Ever to her first Perfectly Broken holiday concert in Arizona. So, they're out. He sent me a picture of the baby beaming at a stage coated in brilliant lights. Parker insists in the text that she's squealing for Bridger, and I don't have the heart to tell him she probably is more fascinated with the lights and can't recognize her uncle with all his eyeliner and stage makeup.

Dax isn't answering. Not a surprise.

Alone, I go to the field house. The interior is painted, carpet is installed. The bones are done, now Ava is working on the aesthetic look of the place.

I smile at the cool pillows she picked for the black couches in the first lounge room. Tempered glass desks are waiting to be set up so kids who want to focus on schoolwork or the arts can take a breather from the athletics. Impressive black

canvases with anatomy graphs of different sporting balls lean against the wall in the dining area, waiting to be hung.

She's taken the ideas I had first imagined for this place and made it into something stunning. Kids will have a safe place to find unity and teammates and support.

A bloom of pride swells in my chest.

I can't wait for her family to see the work she's done. Charlie will never want to leave when he sees the rack of neon footballs.

Thoughts of Charlie bring me to thoughts of Drake.

Slowly, I slide down one of the walls until I'm sitting on the floor. From my pocket, I take out my phone and pull up my unheard voicemails before I can reconsider, but when it comes to clicking on the first one, I hesitate.

Why should I give him the time?

For Ava.

The answer is immediate. I want to be with her. No walking away ever again, but she loves Drake, and rightly so. For her sake, I can try to stitch a few broken pieces together. I might not be able to promise all of them, but I can try.

A thick swallow. A deep breath. I click the first voicemail.



+1 (856) 839-6759

Las Vegas, Nevada

“Ryder, hey. Uh, it’s Drake. Look, I know it’s been a few years, but I’m—you know what, I need to back up. I, um, I want to apologize. Truly, man. Those things I said, I didn’t mean them. It’s no excuse, but I freaked myself out about Ava’s health and ... I took it out on you. I’m sorry. I’ve never regretted anything so much as those things I said.”

There is a pause, something rustles in the background, like he's shifting positions. After a second, Drake clears his throat and goes on.

"I know this is out of the blue, but I wanted you to know I'm getting married."

I can practically hear the smile in his voice.

"Yeah, I can hardly believe it myself, but you'd love Veronica. She puts me in my place." He laughs. "I have no right to ask this, but I want you there, Ryder. I ... I need you there. Despite what I said, you're my best friend, man. Always were."

Another pause. I pinch the bridge of my nose, since Drake's voice shifts to something thicker, more emotional.

"Anyway, the ceremony is at the house on March eighth. I, um, I hope you'll call me back. I really hope you'll come. Okay, well, bye."

He hurries off the phone and there is a new pressure in my chest that wasn't there before. I'm not sure if I'm cursing Drake or myself for not listening to the stupid message years ago. Knowing the outcome of that marriage ... I take no less than ten breaths before I listen to the next one.

His voice is broken, filled with heavy emotion. My eyes close; my hand covers my mouth, as I struggle to understand Drake speak through his agony.

+1 (856) 839-6759

Las Vegas, Nevada

"Ryder ..."

A sob breaks from his throat.

"I don't ... I don't even know why I'm calling, but I just ... thought of you. Will you call me back?"

Another sob. It's loud and laced in anguish.

“I was supposed to p-protect her, you know? I’m trained to save people, and I couldn’t—”

Drake’s voice breaks, it sounds as if he might be trying to muffle another burst of tears. He sniffs and lets out a trembling breath, voice hardly more than a whisper.

“I couldn’t save my own wife. Ronnie, she’s ... gone, and our baby ... he’s in the NICU because he’s so early. I don’t know why I’m calling, I really don’t, but I can’t stop spinning.”

He curses, and it sounds as if glass shatters. When he speaks again, his voice is rough and low. But there is a wretched numbness in his tone, like he’s slipped into something adrift, almost catatonic.

“Weird, isn’t it? When something like this happens we ... we sort of reflect on those who matter most to us. I, um, I just needed someone outside my family tonight, I guess. I-I needed a friend. I don’t know if you’ll hear this, but I didn’t know what else to do. I never should’ve interfered with you and Ava. If you felt even half of what this feels like ... I’m sorry.”

He ends the call with a rough, throaty apology.

I drop my phone and cover my face with my hands, elbows on my knees. Images of a broken Drake on the floor, in shambles, desperate for a friend to pull him off a ledge, rampage against my skull. I could’ve—I would’ve—been there for him. Nothing could’ve kept me from being there. No anger, no cruel past, no moment in time with two eighteen-year-old boys who were hurting could’ve kept me from being there.

I wipe at my eyes, ashamed of myself. We were all so hurt, so lost in our own pain we let so much go.

Never again.

I refuse to keep people who matter at a distance. Griffin will get his freaking wish, I’m his friend till the day he skips to his grave. Parker and Skye, I’ll be so chatty they won’t know what to do with me. Dax, well, Dax is going to need to come out of his shell. I’ll make him. We both will step into the light of day with smiles on.

The Kings are my family, and I'm done not trusting them completely. I'm not going to risk missing out on moments because I want to think everyone has it out for me.

I blink until the wet glare starts to fade and lift my phone again. It's blurry, but I start to pull up our small group chat. I don't know what I'm going to say, profess my undying bromance to these guys, maybe?

Once I do that, I'm calling Drake.

My typing is interrupted by a phone call. Speaking of friends.

"Hey, Park," I say, my voice is too hoarse. I don't care.

"Ryder," Parker snaps. He never snaps like this unless ... something is wrong. A hundred scenarios cross my mind. Most have something to do with Ever or Skye, none of them are good.

"What's going on?"

"There's been an accident," Parker says.

I'm numb. Cold. I hardly know I'm moving as I listen to him explain everything he knows.

"I'm on my way." I hang up and sprint outside. Pays to be one of the fastest on the team. Within sixty seconds I'm pulling onto the main road, praying my new-found ambition to not miss a moment with my teammates didn't come too late.

Ava



“LAURA, YOU’RE GOING TO MAKE ME CRY.” I LAUGH AND TAKE a bite of my salad when I catch Ryder’s mom looking at me again with her big, glassy eyes.

“I can’t help it,” she says. My mom snorts into her soup. Laura nudges her, but smiles at me. “I always hoped you’d find your way back to each other and now you really have. Do you know how long it’s been since that scowly son of mine has smiled so easily?”

“A decade?” I shrug. “Just tossing numbers out there.”

Laura grins. “He never was an outgoing kid, but you sparked something in him and it’s back, Tweety Bird.”

Laura was the first one to call me Tweety since she found out my love for the funny little bird. She gives me the full title, and like Ryder calling me Tweets, I’ve always felt like I was sort of her family too.

“How are you going to handle the MLB schedule?” Mom asks.

Ryder is on the road seven months out of the year. But I’m not about to let a wild schedule come between us. If my plans for my own organization go through, I can run a lot of it from a laptop if necessary.

“Working on the field house has reminded me what I always wanted to do,” I say. “So, I’ve started working on something. I actually have a meeting with Dallas Anderson and some big potential partners.”

My mom stops lifting her spoon halfway to her mouth. “Partners? For what?”

“I want to start a program where we partner with more professional athletes, or celebrities even, and create places for homeless or at-risk kids. Like the field house.”

“You want to make more field houses?”

“Well, sort of. I’ve been talking with Tate and Ellie Hawkins, he’s in Perfectly Broken—”

“The rock band with the billboards all over?”

“Yeah. He has his own youth center, and it’s heavily focused on the arts. It gave me the idea of making an organization that turns abandoned spaces into themed houses. For the arts, athletics, whatever partnerships we can form will determine what the theme is. Maybe it’s a clubhouse for young actors, maybe we’ll have skateparks where kids can play street hockey, or skateboard, or bike. Or, like ours, sports in general.”

“Wait,” Laura says. “And you already have partners for this business?”

“I think it would be more like an organization, but that’s a detail we’ll have to work out. And yes. I’m meeting with the owner of Enigma records, Dallas Anderson, *and* the Perfectly Broken bassist has a brother who is a big actor. They’re going to reach out to him to see if anyone on the Hollywood side would be interested and—”

“Sweetie.” My mom interrupts, a look of awe on her face. Laura too. Her hands are covering her face and she looks like she still wants to cry. My mom covers my hand. “Ava, this isn’t just an idea. You’ve already dropped the stone in the water, and *it is* rippling. This is amazing, and ... it’s going to help a lot of kids whose situation you understand all too well.”

I flush under the look of pride in her eyes. “That’s the hope. I want to help design them. But think of it, if we can get partnerships with musicians and athletes across the country, think of what it could do. Ryder thinks the NFL will want to get involved, possibly the NHL. It’s a lot of work, but I have

all these ideas on how to set them up that makes sense financially and can satisfy the needs of each center.”

“And you’d want them individualized for each organization?”

“I think that could be really great,” I say. “That way kids can get involved in programs they resonate with. Not everyone wants to be a baseball player. Maybe they want to do theatre, or paint. I don’t know, I just think of how important it was for Drake and me to find connections with kids who shared our interests.” A small smile crosses my lips. “I think that’s why Ryder fit with us so well.”

I explain how the different homes would be arranged, but how each partner would decide the theme of the house. It’s a massive project, but if I can have a good foundation board, with some more designers to help me, I think we might be able to start something incredible.

Their interest adds a bit more confidence that this might really work.

My phone buzzes in my purse, the vibration rattles my ankle. While my mom and Laura go on about the potential of each youth house, I glance at my phone.

I curse in my head. I missed two calls from Ryder, but it was the text that finally caught my attention.

Drake: *I’m probably breaking a few laws by saying this, but you need to get to the hospital. Someone involved with the Kings was in an accident. NOT RYDER. But I think you should be here for him.*

My stomach splatters out of the bottom of my feet. I jump up.

“Ava?” My mom arches a brow.

“Drake responded to an accident ... it’s, uh, it’s a King. I’ve got to go.”

“Ryder?” Laura jolts to her feet.

“He says it’s not Ryder.” I snag my purse. “I’ll call you!”

“Wait, Ava!”

I don't know which one calls after me. My heart is racing. I feel like I should've handled that a thousand times better, especially with Ryder's mom probably spinning with scenarios on how he might be involved, but Drake wouldn't do this unless ... it was bad.

Twenty minutes later, I pull into a parking stall, forget to lock my car door, and sprint through the ER doors.

It's chaotic. To be expected, I guess, but the bustle and monitors and hurried voices do nothing for the speed of my pulse. I scan the tops of heads, trying to catch sight of anyone I recognize. Of Ryder.

Why is this hospital so enormous!

“Ava.”

I spin around. Drake steps out of an alcove where people can wait near a vending machine. He's in his turnouts, his red suspenders sloughed off his shoulders and draped around his waist. His face is smudged from sweat mingled in red dirt.

I rush over and hug him. “What are you still doing here?”

“I was off shift. Chief said I could stay.”

“You were on the call then?”

He nods, jaw tight. “Someone ran a red light.” Drake points toward another door. “I think I saw Ryder go that way.”

“You talked with him?”

“No. I just ... I didn't want to leave, but I didn't think he'd want to see me.”

He wants to be here for Ryder, even if Ryder never knows. I blink against a burn of tears, squeeze his hand, and race for the other door.

I don't know who is hurt, I don't care. Any of the guys on the team can't get hurt. I won't let them. Parker is a new father, Griffin a new husband, Dax is simply too nice and gentle.

My breaths are heavy when I push through the door. This side is as strenuous and active as the other, but almost straightaway I find Ryder's backward ballcap, his arm on the tall, gentle giant beside him. Wren has a hand on Griffin's other shoulder while he slumps over, his face in his palms.

"Ryder." I cut through people. "Ryder!"

He spins around. At the sight of me, his shoulders visibly slump in relief. Ryder abandons Griffin and races to me. I collide with his chest, and he swallows me in his arms.

"You're okay." I whisper, my hands trace his chest as if I might find a gaping, fatal wound.

"I'm fine." He kisses my forehead. "I wasn't sure you'd get my voicemail."

I didn't, but I don't take the time to explain how I found out there'd been an accident.

"What happened? Who's hurt?"

Ryder's face clenches. He closes his eyes. "It's Dax."

Ryder



“Dax got T-boned, I don’t know all the details, but Dallas said his car is jacked. They had to peel him out. His arm was trapped between the seat and the door.”

I’VE REPLAYED PARKER’S DESCRIPTION OF THE ACCIDENT A thousand times since he called. Griffin made it here before me, but the man has a deep fear of hospitals. Tack on a car accident—one similar to the accident that killed his dad—and he’s not thinking right.

I’ve never been so glad the team golden retriever got married than I am tonight. Wren has a magic touch. She’s kept Griffin from turning into an impenetrable block of stone, she’s kept him from pacing, she’s kept him from losing his sense with worry.

If I doubted how much these guys mean to me, this moment wipes all doubts, all hesitation aside. The thought of Dax not being around, quiet as he is, causes bile to burn in the back of my throat.

Ava squeezes my waist. I press a kiss to the top of her head. A lot like Wren is keeping Griffin steady, Ava is an anchor keeping me grounded.

The door swings open. Loud demands for answers, a few choked sobs burst into the room. Dax’s four sisters. Scarlett, the oldest of the girls, hurries to the desk. Her eyes are red, and she has a hand on her tiny baby bump. She’s the only one married amongst the Sage kids. Odds are her husband is on a

shift. He'll be losing it, no doubt. Dax is close with his brother-in-law.

Emmaline is the youngest, not quite fifteen, and cries against Hazel, the second oldest. Isabelle is the middle girl, and going through what Dax says is her dark phase. She's dressed in black from her lips to her combat boots, but the thick eyeliner around her eyes is smeared from tears on her cheeks.

I don't want to let go of Ava, but Dax has basically raised his sisters. They need someone they recognize.

"Those are Dax's sisters." I hold up a hand and leverage Ava around, so I can take hold of her palm. "Scar!"

Scarlett snaps her head up from a clipboard with paperwork. "Ryder." She lets out a sob and hurries over to us. In the next breath, she chokes me in a crushing hug. "I-I ... they said he's in surgery ... but no one will tell me for what."

Ava jumps into action. She gathers the three younger sisters and gets them settled on the seats, muttering reassurances while I talk to Scarlett.

"His arm was pinned when the door was smashed," I say. "They're doing surgery on his wrist and ... his hand."

Scarlett's eyes widen. She's thinking the same thing we all did. "His throwing hand?"

I nod. Her chin quivers, but she takes a deep breath, keeping her emotions tapped down. "All I've been told is a fireman EMT had to squeeze into the car and keep ... he had to keep his head from moving in case his spine is injured. What if he has brain damage, Ryder? Or his back is broken?"

I start to tell her he's going to be all right, but I don't know. She's right, we don't have much to go on.

She pulls back when her phone rings. "It's Brian."

I release her to talk with her husband and go to stand with the younger Sage girls. Griffin has an arm around Emmaline's shoulders. Wren is squeezing Isa's hand, and Ava is listening as Hazel cries her worries softly.

Waiting for an update is torture. I pace, then sit, and end up pacing all over again.

Dallas shows up ten minutes after the Sage family, then our manager, aka our coach, and his daughter. Unexpected. Blake is in her final year of graduate school, and where once she was a constant face at Burton Field, now she's a bit of a ghost. She ducks her face and huddles in the corner, eyes red.

Is she close with Dax?

Ava takes hold of my hand. "How are you doing?"

I shake my head. "Can't say." She lets out a sigh and rests her head on my shoulder. I lift my gaze to the ceiling. "I never really told Dax how much I value him as a teammate and ... a friend."

Ava rubs her hand up and down my arm. "Never too late to start, you know. These people, Ryd, they care about you, and you care about them. Maybe it's time to let them in all the way."

"I decided I was going to tonight, right before Parker called."

She doesn't say anything, simply kisses my shoulder and clings to my arm a little tighter.

Five minutes later, a surgeon steps into the space, still in blue scrubs. Dax's sisters suffocate any space between them and the doctor, pleading for their update.

"Oh." Scarlett, presses a hand on her forehead. "He's awake. He's okay."

Coach and Dallas both release deep sighs. Dallas instantly puts his phone to his ear. No doubt updating Skye and Parker. Coach pinches his lips, hanging his head. Blake turns out from the corner, she wipes at her eyes, and her shoulders slump, like a weight slid off her spine.

Griffin practically collapses in a chair; he tugs at the ends of his hair, too silent.

"He'll need a lot of physical and occupational therapy for his hand," the surgeon explains. "But the CTs came back

clean, and there weren't any fractures on the spine. He's awake now. You're welcome to go see him."

The surgeon ushers all four sisters back. I'm envious. I get it, but I'm envious. I'm not sure I breathe as the rest of us wait. Honestly, I don't even know if Dax will want everyone invading his space. It's basically his worst nightmare. But when Scarlett comes out, she points at me. "Ryder, he wants to talk to you. Griff," she says gently. "You're next."

Griffin nods, but doesn't lift his head.

I press a kiss to Ava's palm, then hurry through the door. It's a bit of a maze to find the recovery room. Once I finally see Dax awake, breathing, bandaged, and bruised, I'm forced to press a hand against my chest when relief hits like a fist.

"Hey, Ryd," he croaks.

I cross the room in four strides. I don't pause to think if it'll freak him out, I don't consider his reluctance to have people invade his space, I say nothing and hook an arm around his neck. I hug him, gently as I can, and drop my forehead to the top of his.

"Don't you freaking do that again," I say through clenched teeth.

With his good hand, Dax pats my back. "I'll try."

I pull back, a little embarrassed by the thick lump in my throat. "You're going to be good, they say. Extra sessions with Skye, probably."

Dax looks exhausted. He drops his head back. "Could be the end."

"No." I pull a narrow chair to the bedside, sit, and lean over my knees. "Don't go there. Not yet."

Dax blinks a few times, but nods. "Not yet."

"You're a good friend, Dax." I blurt it out before I change my mind. He looks at me with a bit of shock. "I mean it. I don't tell you guys enough, and this is a rude wake up call."

“Don’t tell Griffin,” he says, wincing when a laugh scrapes out. “He’ll tattoo your name on his chest or something.”

We both laugh. Dax holds his chest, but for a solid minute we can’t stop. Call it emotions, or a new openness, I don’t know. I’m simply glad we’re here.

“You’re a good friend, too, Ryder,” Dax says. “You never push me to be someone I’m not. I’ve always respected you, and I think I’m starting to understand you a little more.”

“How’s that?”

“Something happened with Ava, something big. I think it changed you and made you reserved. I get that.”

“You get it, huh?” I steeple my fingers in front of my mouth. I feel like he’s trying to hint he is reserved for a reason, but I’m not entirely sure. “Because something made you the same way?”

“You could say that. I started pulling back after we lost our parents and I became the caregiver for my sisters so young. I started realizing the world can suck. I’d rather be away from it. You guys have helped me want to be ... a little more open, I guess.” He chuckles. “What’s your reason?”

I hesitate for a few breaths, then tell him. Start to finish, I tell him everything. Another piece of tension snaps, as though finally expressing the hurt frees something inside.

“That’s a lot,” he says. “You know, you could’ve told us about autism. It doesn’t change what I think of you, but it might’ve helped me be clearer if you needed me to be.”

“I’m not good at getting too personal with other people.”

“I can understand that too.” Dax sighs. “I’m sorry you lost so much.”

“Thanks.” I clap his uninjured shoulder gently a few times.

“Ava makes you happy. Keep her this time.”

“I plan to.”

Dax studies me, then says, “And you don’t need to wonder if Ava’s brother was a real friend.”

I've already decided to talk with Drake, but it's random for Dax to bring him up. "What makes you say that?"

"He's the one who sat with me in the car." Dax pauses, as if giving me time to process the words.

"What?"

"He stayed with me the entire time. Must've recognized me since he started telling me things to keep me distracted. Things about dumb stuff you did together so I could make fun of you later. I don't know if that's standard, but all I'm saying is without him holding my freaking hand, I probably would've lost it."

"Drake Williams." My jaw hinges on a strange stun. "He was the one with you?"

"Every second." Dax smirks. "A nurse said he's still out there. If I had to guess, he's making sure we're *all* okay." I stand abruptly. Dax laughs, wincing again. "Good. Go. Send Griffin in before he melts."

My head is a fog, but I manage to tell Griffin it's his turn. The man barrels through the doors so fast Wren can barely keep up. I scan the room. Drake isn't here.

"How is he?" Ava's small voice grabs my focus for a few breaths.

I only manage to mumble out, "Is Drake here?"

Ava's face answers me before her mouth. "Um, he ... he's just worried."

"Where?"

"Ryder, he only—"

I rest a palm on the side of her face, silencing her. "Where is he, Tweets?"

She swallows and points at the door that leads to another waiting area. "By the vending machines."

I'm there in a few swift strides. I don't know if Ava is following. The sound of Drake's broken voice on his messages sticks with me. Memories of laughing and sneaking my dad's

beers, or driving his truck out in the fields, or talking about life filter through my head.

Drake has my baseball card.

Drake wanted me to be there for him at the darkest point of his life.

Drake was the one to push me away. The words hurt. I held onto them for years, analyzing each sentence, each possible scenario. It was torture. But I also have a bit of clarity now. He was a scared kid who had old, fear-riddled hackles triggered when he thought his sister might get hurt.

He might've been a catalyst for me leaving without my girlfriend, but when I told him I was afraid to be a father, he was the first one to tell me I'd be the best.

"You've got this, buddy. I can already think of a thousand ways we'll corrupt the kid, but you know what they're not going to wonder? If they're loved. Not the way we've wondered. I'll love them more, obviously, but you'll be a close second."

It's a conversation I must've pushed to the deep, dark bottom of my heart, and when I find him sitting with his fists against his mouth, staring at the wall, those words are the ones I'm replaying. Not the last conversation. Not the one led by fear in a kid who'd always been his sister's defender.

He looks a little more broken tonight.

Drake turns toward my heavy steps. He shoots to his feet. "Ryder—"

He grunts, choking on his words when I wrap my arms around him. Drake is stiff at first; it takes him a few seconds to catch up, but soon he returns the embrace. His hand slaps my back a few times.

"Thank you," I tell him, voice hoarse, "for helping him."

Drake clears his throat. "It's my job."

"This isn't part of your job." I glance around the space.

With a shrug he looks away. “I didn’t want you to lose another friend.”

“Did I ever lose a friend?” I ask. “I finally listened to your messages.”

His eyes widen as he lifts his gaze. “You kept them?”

My throat grows tight. It’s thick, as if I swallowed honey. “I’m sorry.”

“Ryder, don’t—”

“No, I should’ve been there. I would’ve, Drake. I would’ve been there if I hadn’t been an idiot and ignored them.”

“I don’t hold it against you. It was my fault.” He blinks, a glassy gleam in his eyes. “I’ll never be able to apologize enough for the things I said to you.”

I pull him in for another loud, back-slapping hug. “You can make it up to me by being cool with the idea that I’m going to marry your sister someday.”

Drake laughs, it’s a little wet. “I’m good with that.”

For the first time in ten years, I laugh, unhindered, with Drake Williams.

Ava



DRAKE GROANS IN FRUSTRATION. HE SMACKS THE TIP OF THE metal bat against a dusty, rubber plate. “Are you a professional ball player or not?”

“The problem is not me!” Ryder shouts back. “If you could just hit a stupid ball. I’m about to get the tee for you to use.”

Charlie giggles and punches his fist into his small glove, mimicking Ryder.

“I could hit it,” Drake goes on, “if the pitcher was any good. Seriously, *you* get millions a year. You? Can you believe this guy, Charlie?”

“He’s short, daddy.”

Drake barks a laugh, jabbing the bat in the air at Ryder. “He is short.”

“He means shortstop!” Ryder says. “I’m one inch, *an inch*, shorter than you.”

“Still shorter.” Drake flicks his brows and bends his knees, setting up to take another swing.

Charlie snickers and dances around the infield, not really at a position, but loving the day anyway.

My nephew has been all giggles. He’s fascinated with the constant teasing between his dad and Ryder. It’s a new side of Drake he’s probably never seen. Much like Ryder, Drake was never one to get close with friends outside our family, so close friends like this, I doubt Charlie has ever experienced it with his dad.

Veronica stole my brother's heart because she wouldn't let him close off. I wish she could see this side of Drake too. Where he's at ease, at last, with the people he cares about the most.

Vegas has perfect winter weather, but even today is unusually warm for January, and we took advantage. My secret, underlying plot for a day with family, baseball, and food, is to distract Ryder from checking his phone a thousand times.

Dax has an evaluation with Skye and the other trainers on the team today. They need to ensure his hand can endure the season. His therapy has been intensive. Skye hasn't let him off easy, but his fingers don't stiffen as much anymore, and he's tolerated throwing a baseball long enough Skye is at least breathing easier.

There is a risk of permanent damage to his nerves or shape of his hand if he injures it again.

The guys have all been on edge, and Ryder kept refreshing his messages this morning as if he might've missed one. I called in the cavalry. Seems to be working. He's only checked his phone twice since coming to the park.

I've looked at mine a few more times. Still no word.

The clink of leather against the metal bat draws me back to the amateur game.

"Oh, come on."

Drake lets out a curse when his grand hit only hobbles weakly toward the pitcher's mound. Then, he shouts at Charlie never to say that word as he sprints to first.

"Here! Throw it here!" Laura holds out her old, tattered glove, shouting at Ryder to throw her the ball.

He lobs it, laughing as his mom fumbles with it, so the throw rolls into right field.

"Dad!" I scream. Leave it to Jack Williams to start chatting over the fence with someone he knows in the middle of a baseball game.

My dad turns around and notices the ball at his feet, then Drake as he sprints around first, toward second. My mom screeches at him to throw it to Charlie. She's holding my nephew's gloved hand up in the air at third base.

Dad gives the ball a toss. Ryder snatches it out of the air like stretching that way is natural. Drake races for third. Ryder gently tosses it to Charlie. He misses.

"Home!" I scream from behind the plate. Ryder said I needed to be catcher so I could use the word mitt all I wanted.

Charlie tosses the ball. It makes it halfway down the line of third and home. Drake is laughing too hard he almost falls when Josh slips out of the dugout and taps the ball with his toe, so it rolls off the line.

"Dad!" Ryder yells and gestures toward Charlie. "You're teaching him to cheat."

"I did nothing," Josh insists, swinging the only other bat we have. It's built for a kid.

"I can't wait to get away from you people," Ryder grumbles as he runs for the ball again and lobs it at me. Too late. Drake jumps on top of home plate before the ball touches my mitt.

"Home run on a stupid hit! Tell the Kings to hire me; I'll take it from here, Ryd." Drake shoves Ryder's shoulder before Charlie pounces into his dad's arms to celebrate.

Ryder drags his fingers through his hair. "You're all a disgrace to the game. Except you, Charlie man."

He fist bumps my nephew.

"Excuse me." I flip my ballcap backward and glare at him.

Ryder flicks his brows and puts on his best predatory grin. Oh, the man is devious. One look and he has me frozen in anticipation for what he might do when he comes close enough. One arm slides around my waist; he pulls me close and draws his lips close to my ear. "And you. You'd never be a disgrace to the game. Have I told you it's insanely sexy when you squat into catcher's pose?"

“Yeah? Maybe I’ll sit like that during all your games.”

“Then I’ll never get a renewed contract because I won’t be focused on anything but the stands.”

I laugh when he nuzzles his face against my neck, scratching my skin with his scruff. To be back together, all of us again, is all I could want.

“I think that better be the game,” Laura says, glancing at her wristwatch. “Or we’re all going to be late for the party.”

It’s unfortunate Dax’s evaluation fell on today. He tried to move it because he’s a good friend, but it was in the timeframe needed. We all assured him the result wouldn’t take away from tonight either way.

The field house is done.

It’s beautiful. The grand opening for the public will be next week, but tonight is an intimate first glimpse banquet for potential investors and staff of Burton Field.

A formal dinner with Ryder in a suit, no complaints here.

All month we’ve done local interviews about the field house. Most are with Dallas, the Kings manager, or Ryder and a few of the players. But I’ve been in two, one was with Tate and Ellie since their house will be partnering with the Achieve Life Foundation.

I want to squeal my excitement. Enigma Records partnered with the Vegas Kings, two NHL teams, and Noah Hayden, to create small, after school youth houses focused on the arts and athletics in three states.

It’s happening.

We’re only at the beginning, but in the last few weeks I’ve learned a great deal about running a charitable business. Dallas has been gracious with his knowledge of money management, Tate and Ellie have supplied lists of contacts to help us get off the ground, and my mom nearly passed out when I introduced her to Noah Hayden when he flew in for our trademark meeting.

Helps to have a skilled attorney in the family.

“You ready for this?” Ryder asks, pressing a kiss to the back of my hand.

“No.” He laughs when a squeak slips out, as if I can’t contain the thrill of it all. “But I also can’t wait until it opens to the kids. You’ve done something amazing, Ryder.”

“I got the idea started, but you’ve made it something safe, Tweets,” he says. “You made it better than I could ever dream up alone.”

My face heats. The things that have changed since the night he called the police spin around in my head. I wouldn’t have Ryder back, I wouldn’t be partnering in a new venture where I’m free to design and put my own experiences into something big, something that might make a difference for other kids like me.

Not everyone will get a Jack and Marianne Williams, but maybe we can give them a soft place to fall. Maybe we can give them friendship, support, and what I hope is love and a whole lot of fun.

Charlie starts to complain about starving to death when Drake swings him over his shoulder.

Ryder and I gather the bat bags. He glances at his phone, and half a breath later lets out a loud whoop. He holds up his phone. “He’s cleared! Dax is cleared to go to Spring Training.”

Relief strikes me, hard and swift. I shouldn’t be surprised, but I guess I didn’t realize how important the Kings have become to me. I bounce on my toes and fling my arms around his neck, holding Ryder close as I read the text for myself.

He’s under intense supervision, but if he sticks to Skye’s program, his surgeon gave him the green light to play.

I kiss Ryder on the cheek, the bright grin on his face shredding my heart in the most beautiful ways. He cares deeply, even if he isn’t skilled at showing it, but the truth is written all over his face. The way his eyes are bright, the way his smile crosses the whole of his face, the way he keeps re-reading the text over and over.

My fingers play with the ends of his hair. “I love you.”

Ryder looks at me, his smile softens into the shy grin he saves for me. “I love you, Tweets. Always have.”

Ava



“No.” I PUT MY HANDS ON MY HIPS. “I AM NOT TAKING YOU out if you’re wearing that.”

Ryder stops in his bedroom doorway. One hand is frozen, buttoning his dress shirt sleeve around his wrist. The black fitted suit is too much.

He scans his delightful figure, confusion written all over his face. “What’s wrong with it?”

“I refuse to have my man dressing like an aphrodisiac.”

“Are you trying to control what I wear?” He laughs and pins me to his chest. “Switching the stereotypes?” His eyes scan my little red dress that clings to my curves pretty perfectly too. I spent an entire afternoon with Skye and Wren, trying to find the perfect dress for tonight’s dinner. He presses a greedy kiss to my neck. “I could say the same thing about my girl, but I happen to enjoy the view because it’s mine.”

He tightens his hold around my waist, dissolving the final sliver of space between us. I never knew *mine* was my thing, but from Ryder, he can stake his claim all he wants.

“Keep talking, sir, and I’ll make you late.”

“I hope you do.”

He kisses me, smiling against my mouth as we slowly stagger toward the front door, because the banquet is one hundred percent required to attend.

Somehow we manage to arrive on time to the field house. Gold fairy lights bring a brilliant, mystical glow to the front

entrance. There is an open house before the dinner; a way to give guests a chance to see the finished product.

Ryder is mobbed almost immediately, but I get the opportunity to be the wallflower. I hold a flute of sparkling cider, keeping to the edges of the rooms as people marvel at the simplicity, yet functionality of the house. I've heard more than one compliment about how the house will be a kid's dream hangout.

That is all I want.

“Ava?”

I spin around. “James?”

James saunters in with—ugh—Annika at his side. The last thing I need is Carina's evil assistant to judge me tonight.

“What are you two doing here?” I ask.

James looks around. “We heard the place was finished, and I have a buddy who works with the analysts at the field. He hooked us up.”

I follow his gaze around the vintage posters of various athletes in sepia, to the old-fashioned popcorn cart, and study sections where kids can get tutoring after school. I'm not a flashy person, I don't enjoy a lot of the spotlight, but I can't help embracing a bit of pride at our work.

“It's amazing,” James says.

“Thank you.”

Annika sips champagne and has a slight wrinkle to her nose as she glances around. “There is a lot of white. With red dirt, I don't know, seems hard to keep clean.”

And like that I'm done over here. “Okay, well feel free to look around. The dinner will be starting soon.”

I turn to walk away and slam into a broad chest. “Hey.”

“Hello.” I tilt my chin, grinning at Ryder. We've been tugged and pulled in different directions all night. To be back in his arms, even for a second, is a delight.

A throat clears. I glance over my shoulder. James looks irritated, as if he doesn't like discovering I have a man in my life. Not sure why. After I left Haven, it's not like we kept in touch. But Annika is looking at Ryder like he's a slice of steak.

"Annika Thompson," she says holding out her hand like a regency lady looking to get her hand kissed by the duke. "This place is *beautiful*."

But what about all the white, Annika?

Ryder already looks uncomfortable by the assertive step she takes in his direction.

"It's all Ava's doing," he says, scooting closer to me.

Annika doesn't like the answer, but it's all she's going to get. I have plans to sit too close to be decent at the table with this man, and that plan is long overdue.

"Excuse us, guys," I say, taking Ryder's hand and urging him toward another room. "We need to double check on something upstairs."

I hurry us away and burst out in a laugh once we're around the corner.

"Why do those two look familiar?" Ryder asks, bemused.

"They work for Carina Haven."

Ryder grimaces. "Right. I remember now."

I rise on my toes and kiss the side of his neck. "You were a delicious excuse to leave, though. Thank you."

He wraps his arms around me and holds me close. "Always."

"How is it going for you?" Ryder's jaw flinches. I touch his cheek. "Hey, is everything good?"

He blinks his gaze to me. "It was fine, a little busy, until the security let me know Mitch showed up. He wanted to get in."

My stomach sinks. "He's starting to stalk you, Ryd."

He shakes his head. “I think it’s dumber than that. I mentioned the whole destination Christmas thing to my dad, and he told me Mitch is a pretty heavy gambler. I really think it’s as simple as he’s racked up some debts and is feeling a little desperate.”

I roll my eyes. “Well, he needs to work on his money habits and stop being such a creep.”

Ryder chuckles and takes my hand. “It’s fine. Let’s forget him and go eat, so I can put my hand too high on your leg again under the table.”

I swat his arm, laughing, but secretly hope he does exactly that.

The banquet is better than I pictured it would be. I imagined a stuffy, boring dinner with fancy plates and silverware in all different sizes. There are fancy plates, but a lot more laughter.

We’re stuffed around a large, round table with my parents and Ryder’s. Drake is seated between Dallas and Skye. Parker balances Ever on his knee while he laughs with Tate, who came as an investor, and Wren. Griffin is a mother hen to Dax and keeps asking if he needs help cutting his food.

I think Dax is going to stab him with the butter knife. Across the table is Ryder’s head coach with his wife and oldest daughter, who has stolen more than one look back to our side.

There is a short speech from Dallas and a few of the Burton Field board members. The crusty man who seemed less than enthusiastic about the project goes on about the wonder of the new youth field house.

Ryder and I look at each other at the same time and roll our eyes.

As Dean wraps up his speech, Ryder’s phone lights up from where it sits on top of the table.

He squints as he reads it, a furrow to his brow.

“What is it?” I whisper.

Without hesitation, Ryder slides his phone over to me, so I can read the text.

Mitch: *I really wish you would've responded. Probably could've saved yourself the headache coming your way. I can send you a weighted blanket if you need. I hear your type of people like those, right?*

He's disgusting. "What is this supposed to mean?"

Ryder's teeth are clenched and he taps his fingers nervously over his knees. He's unsettled, and probably has more than a few thoughts racing in his head.

I cover his hand on his leg with mine. "Don't let him ruin your night. You deserve this."

He holds my stare for a long pause, almost as though he's taking my confidence for his own. Ryder nods and kisses my knuckles, but he doesn't let go of my hand for the rest of the banquet.

Soon enough, the property is quieter. People have started to leave. Wren left with Skye and Ever, and Tate followed soon after, clearly anxious to get home to his own family. Parker, Drake, Griffin, and Dax are left, standing with us in front of the building.

The night is over, but I can't stop staring at the twinkling lights. A knot of emotion balls in my chest. It's beautiful, and next week it will be filled with kids who are yearning for a sense of community.

Drake grips Ryder's shoulder and gives him a fast shake. "You did good, man."

"Thanks." A satisfied smile settles on Ryder's face. He glances at his teammates. "Thanks to all of you for the help on this."

Parker tries to shove his head. "It's been awesome, my guy."

We take another twenty minutes to say goodbye and drive away from each other. I lean my head on Ryder's shoulder, sitting as close as possible the entire drive.

I wish the night would never end. The entire evening has been like floating on a cloud, whimsical and breathtaking. One of those nights that almost seem too good to be true.

I should've known with such a beautiful thing, something ugly would come and try to ruin it all.

The text comes in when I'm half asleep, staggering into my kitchen for coffee the next morning. I rub my face and squint at my phone.

Drake: *Dax sent this to me. I'm going to kill the guy. I really am.*

My heart goes still when I click on the link to a popular sports podcast hosted by a foul-mouthed, controversial guy that aired late last night. Blood turns to ice in my veins. I can't breathe. I can hardly register what I'm seeing as the clip plays.

The host leans forward in the microphone. "What I don't get is why you're speaking out now."

Mitch Huntington tilts his head. I press a hand to my mouth. There is a sunken look to his face. He's despicable, always looking out for himself, always using his connection to Ryder when it suits him. Ryder shut him out, he finally denied him power, and now here he is, retaliating.

"We used to be tight like brothers," he says into his mic. "He was bullied a lot for being autistic."

"Whoa, whoa." The host holds up his hands. "He's autistic? I thought people like that couldn't stand sounds or ... talk."

"Depends on the severity, I guess. I sort of became his protector."

"Liar," I whisper.

"But he's got some problems, and even if you love people, sometimes you've got to call them out on their bull. Especially when they struggle with stepping outside of themselves to see it."

They have a good laugh together, like they're the best of friends, and I hate them. I hate them so much.

The host goes on, “So you think this fancy charity house for messed up kids is what? Like a scam?”

Mitch sighs dramatically. “Look, it’s a great idea. But this is more about money than helping at-risk kids. If people send their kids, thinking it’s going to be this therapeutic place, think again. Guaranteed in a few months there will be a signup fee, or something that adds to his bottom line. Ryder isn’t good at —how should I say this—caring about other people, you know?”

“Seems like there are better ways to make a buck, you feel me? This probably cost a pretty penny.”

Mitch chuckles. “This is for the public eye. He wants to be a hero. I’m not perfect, not even close, but his mom cut our side of the family out. We only reconnected in college. I hate that he was raised in the manipulation because it was so different for me. He was raised to look out for number one.”

“What did you say about his early years in college?”

Mitch leans back, almost like he’s hesitating. If he decides to have a heart and think of his cousin, it’s too late.

“Okay, this is an example about how he can detach.” Mitch adjusts in front of his mic. “Ryder called me up freshman or sophomore year, wanting to reconnect since I lived in Washington state at the time, and he was there for school. We hadn’t spoken in a while, but started rebuilding. During one conversation he told me how he left a pregnant girlfriend behind. He wanted to succeed in baseball, and with autism, sometimes ideas stick so much he couldn’t think of anything else but playing ball. He cut ties with the girl.”

“That’s cold,” says the host. “What happened to the kid?”

Mitch shrugs. “Not sure if the mother kept it or not. He never brought it up again.”

I’m frozen. I’m furious. A thousand wretched emotions tumble through my head.

“So, what’s your point with this?”

I have the same question.

With a smirk, Mitch says, “I don’t know how else to reach him. He started this bright, shiny charity thing everyone keeps talking about, and I want him to fulfill everything he’s promised. He could do a lot of good if he’d look outside himself. But I also want people to know who they’re investing with. That’s all. I’m just trying to get through to him.”

Tears drip on my cheeks. I feel the same as my brother; I’d like to reach through the screen and throttle the man. The clip ends, but I scroll through some of the comments. How can people take this fool at face value? There are so few who are questioning, most who saw the clip are calling for investigations, or saying cruel things about Ryder, or calling for boycotts for the Kings.

I fumble with my phone and dial Ryder’s number. It goes straight to voicemail.

No. Not again. I want to vomit. No one can get into his head the way Mitch can.

He’s not going to pull away again. He won’t. *He won’t.*

I try to call him five more times before I hug my middle, close my eyes, and the first tear falls. A tear of anger, of hatred, of love for Ryder, and a tear for the heady fear of what happened once, will happen again.

Ryder



I'M NOT REALLY SURPRISED. PARKER WAS THE ONE WHO SENT me the clip, rightly confused about the things Mitch spewed. They deserve to know my side, but not yet. I need to gather my thoughts first.

The podcast is basically a sports tabloid. Of course, the extremes will be discussed on there, but I know it has nothing to do with gossip. This has everything to do with me ignoring Mitch, and him trying to knock me down a notch.

The words hurt. Part of me wants to crawl back into those familiar places where I believed the cruel things he used to say, but I hold off.

This is on him. He's cruel. He's angry. He's a man I don't respect.

I never did. And I hold no value for the opinion of a person I don't respect.

A notification signals. The sound for when one of my teammates does something online. We're alerted to each other when one of us posts on social media, a strategy we use so we can get into back and forth conversations promptly and engage more with fans.

First is a video from Griffin.

I blink through an annoying sting I'll never tell him about when I start to watch. He's disheveled, likely straight out of bed.

“Here’s the thing.” Griffin pauses, he scrubs his face. “We all play roles in each other’s lives. There are few men I consider my brothers. Ryder Huntington is one of them. I don’t care what some douche pickle says on some loud-mouthed ... what are those called, Birdie—”

“Podcasts,” Wren’s whispered voice comes off camera.

“Podcasts,” Griffin says. “I don’t care what they said. Ryder has been working on this house for two years, not to mention footing the bill with his own wallet. Like I said, we all play roles with each other. For me, Ryder is my steady place. A foundation that doesn’t move. He’s steady and freaking loyal as they come. You talk bad about him, then you don’t know him, and you’re an idiot. Just saying the facts.”

The next alert is Skye, using Parker’s account. I understand why when she goes on the live. Parker is pacing with Ever, but he’s angry. If there is a man who has no patience for manipulative men, it’s Parker Knight.

Skye wipes a tear and recounts a story about how she was bullied by her ex over the brain injury she suffered years ago. She explains how I didn’t know her well, she’d altered the training program and frustrated most of the team with her new methods, but I still befriended her.

She makes a plea with me personally about the way my head works. “I understand why people choose to keep things inside, Ryd,” she says with a smile. “But the same way you told me I was talented and powerful the way I am, I’m telling you the same. No fears, my friend. We’ve got your back.”

I press an open palm to my chest. Logically, I know my heart isn’t going to snap out, but emotionally I think it’s about to burst.

She turns the conversation back to her audience, “Without question, Ryder stepped up for me. He defended me against someone cruel once too. That guy talking about him better get his facts straight on that past girlfriend. That’s all I’m saying, it’s not my story to tell.” Skye pauses, then finishes with a soft. “We love you, Grouch.”

“Don’t you listen to it, Ryd,” Parker practically snarls.

While I’m watching Skye’s live, a notification for Dax pops up. His post is three long paragraphs listing all the ways I’ve given up my own time to help him. He talks about his stay at the hospital, how I was the first person he wanted to see after his family.

It’s the final line that strikes me in the center of the chest.

You don’t want a heartless person beside you when you’re facing a career-ending injury. Ryder might not say much publicly, but that makes him even more sincere. He doesn’t need the spotlight to be the good friend he is.

These are my people. My family. Took me long enough to realize it.

These guys will have my back forever. Just like Ava. I let my chin drop to my chest. She’s never faltered, and she’s never hidden what she thinks of me. How many years were wasted worrying about what other people thought, when those who cared to the deepest parts of their bones were screaming the opposite in my ear?

I drag my fingers through my hair and hurry to my bedroom. At the back of my top dresser drawer, I pull out the old wooden box, tuck it under my arm, and set to work.

As though in a fog, I start packing a small duffel bag. Matches, granola bars, a hoodie, and a few beers. I don’t know how long I plan to stay, but it’s better to be prepared.

Before I know it, I’m driving out to the campground. It’s concealed by a few rolling hills, and in the winter, like now, there is a pretty little pond at the base of one slope.

Wooden logs have been shaped into benches and are positioned in a circle beneath a few sparse mesquite trees. The fire pit is still covered in old ash and charcoal, and a few prickly desert flowers splash color throughout browns and dull yellows.

I sit on the bench, looking out over the property. It’s quiet here. Peaceful. A place where I can clear my head.

Halfway through my first beer, a car pulls up slowly. I squint against the glare of the sun, then smirk when Drake steps out. He looks a lot like Griffin did, dressed in a loose T-shirt and black sweats, hair on end. We're an hour from Vegas. No doubt he woke up and drove here not long after me.

"Guessing you saw," I say, tipping the bottle to my lips.

"Yeah." Drake accepts a beer and sits beside me on the bench.

"How did you know I'd be here?"

Drake pops the top. "Because I still know you. This is where we always go when we need to think. I came to the campground at least a hundred times after Ronnie died."

Like my teammates, Drake is part of my family. The people who know me best. Maybe we lost it for a bit, but falling back into it has been ... simple. It's a piece of security, a comfort I never allowed myself to truly feel outside of my parents. It's freeing to know there's no facing the world alone. Not anymore.

"I'm not going to ask you if you're okay," Drake says. "Who would be completely fine after that? But I am checking to make sure you're not up here considering shutting us out." He pauses. "Mostly Ava. Don't shut Ava out, Ryder. She doesn't even consider a single thing that guy says. She's been trying to call you."

"I forgot my phone," I admit. A first. It's still on my kitchen counter.

"Well, she's probably going to yell at you for it when you call her."

The corner of my mouth curls into a smile. "I'm not here to think about what he said." I lean over my knees. "Let Mitch say what he wants, I don't ... I don't care anymore."

Drake nods, but his face tells me he's not entirely convinced. "Did Daniel reach out?"

"I don't know. He doesn't ever really get involved. I doubt he will this time. But I'm glad Mitch said what he did," I say.

“It proved something I’ve known all along, but didn’t want to believe, I guess.”

“What’s that?”

“Mitch took his shots, but without fail, I had people taking immediate shots right back.” I tell him about the posts from the Kings. Drake informs me there’s been even more added. Parker’s sister commented on the post from Skye, expressing how over the years I’ve become an older brother she gets to take care of.

Tate Hawkins rarely gets on social media, but he did today to describe our partnership and my sincerity with the youth house. Then, he leaves a scathing paragraph aimed at Mitch about getting educated about mental health, since severe anxiety is a struggle for Tate.

“People don’t need ‘protectors’ like you,” Drake reads from Tate’s post, a wry grin on his face. “From where I’m standing, looks like the people you’re trying to bring down are doing just fine without you. I invite you to look up contract numbers for the Kings online.” Drake chuckles. “He literally linked the website, but posted a screenshot of your salary circled with a ‘haters gonna hate’ GIF. You’ve got people behind you, man.”

I smile. “Like you. You’re here when you probably want to be spending a morning with Charlie.”

Drake takes a drink from his bottle. “You’d do the same.” He sets his drink on the ground. “So, you came up here to pump up your ego about all the people who love you, or what?”

“No. I came here to plan the next steps. Look at this.”

I dig out the wooden box from my pack.

Drake’s eyes widen. He grins. “Really?”

“You up for helping me out?”

“Always.” He clasps his hand with mine and helps me off the bench. “Tell me what you need.”

I suppose I could thank Mitch. His vindictiveness broke the final sliver in my walls. There are a few roads to take: one alone, but it's dark and rather dreary to go on believing there is no one who wants to walk beside you. Or, take the one where there are people firing bullets on your behalf.

I choose the latter. And I'm done waiting. I'm done wasting another second.

Ava



“YOU’VE GOT TO HAVE A BIT MORE FAITH IN YOUR relationship, sweetheart,” Mom says, wiping my tears.

“*He’s not answering.*” I let my head flop forward, hiccups and death sobs slopping out all over the tops of my hands.

“Honey, he’ll call you. It was a surprise, and he needs time to process.”

I saw the stupid podcast two hours ago. I’ve fielded calls from Wren, Alexis, and Skye. No one has seen Ryder. No one has spoken to Ryder. All I want is to find him, hold him, and tell him a thousand times nothing that jerk ever says holds any weight.

Not with me.

A knock comes to the front door, but a moment later the hinges creak and someone comes inside.

“Marianne.” It’s Laura.

“In here, hon.”

Laura steps into my mom’s kitchen. Her eyes are red, and one look at me has her chin quivering. “Oh, Ava.”

She hugs me, and I fail miserably at keeping my emotions in. “Have you heard from him?”

“No.” Josh enters, a vicious glare on his face.

“Honey,” Laura says, pleading.

“What?” Josh snaps. He never snaps. “That sorry excuse of a man thinks he can bad mouth my son and expect to keep living? I don’t think so.”

I’ve always loved Josh.

Laura turns away from her husband and faces my mom. “Drake called. He asked us to meet him here. He’s not on duty is he? Because what if Ryder—”

“He’s not on duty.” My dad steps out of the garage. He gives Laura a side hug. “But he dropped Charlie off pretty early. Kid went right back to sleep upstairs.”

“Drake was here?” My mom asks.

“For a second.”

Does Drake know where Ryder went? My fingertips tingle. If I could even get a text from Ryder, I’d breathe easier.

“Looks like we don’t have to wait much longer.” My dad is smiling a wide, unnaturally gleeful smile for the present circumstances. “He’s here.”

Like an old sitcom, the lot of us scramble to the window and peek out.

A strangled squeak bursts from my throat. Ryder’s black Range Rover pulls up behind Drake’s car. The very sight of him has my pulse racing. I’m one quivering stack of nerves when I wheel around and burst out the front door.

“Hey, Avie,” Drake starts.

I ignore him and sprint straight for Ryder. He opens his arms, ready to catch me when I jump on him. Legs locked around his waist, arms around his neck, I have him in a boa constrictor chokehold.

“You can’t disappear like that.”

“Sorry,” he whispers, kissing my neck. “I left my phone behind. I didn’t mean to freak you out.”

I swat his back, burying my face into the top of his shoulder. “You did.”

“I had to go think.”

“Better not have thought a word about what that jerkoff said.”

“Nope,” he says. His big palm slides up and down my spine in reassuring circles. “I went to think about you.”

“I don’t know if that’s sweet or scary.” I lift my head.

“Only good things, Tweets.” He gives me one of his sexy half grins. “I was thinking of you because you know what I realized?”

“What?” I press my brow against his.

“There is one opinion that matters to me. Yours.” Gently, Ryder sets me on the ground.

My forehead wrinkles. I rest my hands on his waist, my brow on his.

His fingers trace the line of my jaw. “You loved me without conditions from the first day I met you. I’m not good at expressing words.” He tilts my chin so I look at him. “But I love you. I love you so much. You are the light in the dark. You are the one who matters; you taught me how to let people in. When I saw that today, it didn’t make me wonder if I was worth anything. For the first time, Mitch’s words were blotted out by a snarky, bossy woman whose voice is always in my head.”

“I’m not snarky.”

“You can be.”

“Maybe a little.”

Ryder grins. “I’m not ever going to be worthy of you, Ava. But I plan to spend every day trying. Instead of pushing you away, I’m running to you now. Because I don’t want to go another day without knowing you’re mine. I decided I want a wedding. With you.”

“Great, which chapel? Vegas has plenty.”

“You think I’m joking.” With slow movements, Ryder unravels from my clutches.

My smile fades when Ryder leverages onto one knee. At my back, someone gasps. I'm guessing my mom.

“Ryder, what ... Ryder—”

He kisses my palm. “I love hearing my name from your mouth, but are you good if I talk first? It'll just take a second.”

I nod vigorously and drag my bottom lip between my teeth, afraid the ugly sobs will start any second. No one wants to sound like a dying hippo when a man is down on one knee.

“Ava,” His voice cracks. “I planned to do this ten years ago.”

“Better late than never.” Words are tumbling out against my will.

Ryder grins, his cheeks red. “True. But life had different plans. One thing never changed, you're my every tomorrow. You always have been.”

Ryder digs into his pocket and pulls out a diamond ring. “I bought this before we graduated from high school. I've held onto it, and it's long past time to give it to you. Ava, you are my best friend. You are my heart, my soul, my reason for everything. Will you marry me?”

My knees give out, but Ryder hurries back to standing and wraps his arms around me, keeping me upright. I look at the ring. It's small and delicate and perfect.

“I will,” I whisper against his lips. “Even if your music tastes have changed to disappointing levels.”

“Debatable.”

“Not really.”

Ryder laughs, then kisses me, and kisses me, and kisses me until my head spins and my body melts into him. Behind us, our family claps.

“You knew, didn't you?” I hear my mom hiss-whisper to my dad.

“The kid's traditional. Called me on his way here,” Dad says.

“Sneak,” I say against Ryder’s lips.

“But you love it.”

I do. I love everything about this man. He holds every piece of my heart forever.



“You don’t need to do this,” I say, adjusting Ryder’s tie.

He kisses my forehead. “I know, but it feels like I should. Too much work and heart went into the field house. I need to stand up for it.”

I kiss him, slow and steady. “I’ll be right here.”

When Ryder steps back, I fiddle with the diamond ring on my finger, watching as he steps to the dais. Cameras and reporters gather around the Kings’ table, ready for an official statement. From Ryder they’re so rare, it’s like sharks with blood in the water. They came piling into Burton Field’s press room.

Only two days after Mitch’s cruel slander, we’re here. Ryder has hardly seemed ruffled, and I couldn’t be prouder of him. He’s embraced his teammates, even opened up to them about his autism, struggles he has, and how he’s made adaptations to get to where he is now.

He’s been honest about the baby we lost, our separation, and all it’s done is bring his teammates closer to him in deeper bonds and deeper friendship.

Griffin doesn’t take kindly to people hurting his friends. His feelings on the matter explain why he is so surly near the front of the dais.

Parker reminded Ryder of his own rough upbringing, and they connected on a different level than they had before. He stands next to Dax. Both glaring much like Griffin, both angry Ryder feels like he has to make such a statement in the first place.

I hold my breath when they flip his microphone on.

“Thank you all for coming today. I know a lot of you have seen or heard the allegations made by Mitchell Huntington.” Ryder lifts his eyes for the first time. He tugs on his collar. “Mr. Huntington is my father’s nephew. I was adopted by Josh Huntington when I was eleven, but Mitch is not my family, and blood has nothing to do with it. We were never close.”

Ryder pauses amidst a few clicks of cameras. He flashes a look toward me in the wings. I give him a nod and what I hope is an encouraging smile.

He glances down at his notes again. “While attending Washington State, I thought I could possibly try to have a friendship with Mitch. We were older, but it was soon clear, a relationship wouldn’t be possible. He does not have a place in my life.”

He’s a decent man and won’t give details why it didn’t work. The night he proposed, Ryder told me everything that happened in Washington. I’m not sure I’d be as decent as he’s being. I now know all about the ways Mitch put him down, the way he would take advantage of Ryder’s trust and trick him into going to strip clubs or frat parties simply to watch him shut down or panic.

Mitch never gave Ryder the respect human beings deserve. Ryder Huntington isn’t stupid, he isn’t less-than. He’s intelligent, filled with emotions and feelings, and a beautiful soul.

“Since signing with the Vegas Kings, Mitch has tried to reach out,” Ryder goes on. “I haven’t reciprocated. From my perspective, the desire to be in my life intensified only after I continually renewed contracts. Irony is often lost on me, but even I can guess the motivation.”

Ryder rubs his thumbs and fingers together, making a symbol for money.

A few chuckles fill the press room. I clasp my hands in front of my mouth, bursting at the seams. I love this man.

“Unfortunately, because of his interview, I felt the need to defend myself against his allegations about the Youth Field House.” Ryder’s jaw tightens. Under the table he flicks his fingers as he reads. “This has been a passion project for years. I have been heavily involved in its construction, and plan to continue with my involvement.

“Mitch Huntington knows nothing about me. Now, people are free to believe what they wish, but there are a couple more accusations he leveled against me.”

I hold my breath. We made the decision together to talk about this. It’s no one’s business but ours, but I couldn’t go on thinking people believed Ryder could be so callous and cold when he is the opposite.

He looks to me again, lowering his voice. “He accused me of abandoning a pregnant girlfriend. This is only partly true, and the unfeeling way he spoke of one of the most difficult times in my life deserves to be corrected. Not only for me, but for Ava.

“It’s true there was a pregnancy that unfortunately ended in a miscarriage. The experience was traumatizing for two kids who hadn’t truly experienced life yet. He said I left because I valued baseball more, and could not care about anything else because of a diagnosis of autism. Those comments are offensive to neurodivergent people everywhere, and I couldn’t stay quiet. Especially for our young fans who might have their own challenges. I couldn’t let words like that discourage them from trying to reach difficult goals.”

Ryder lifts his eyes, like he’s speaking right to any kids listening. “You can do what you set out to do. You can find the people who accept you for who you are. I was diagnosed, but that isn’t all I am. I’m a son, an athlete, a friend, and most recently became a fiancé.” A cunning smirk tugs at his mouth. He flicks his gaze back to me. “The girlfriend Mitch Huntington says I left behind agreed to marry me.”

Questions barrel at him at that. I don’t move from my hiding place. The spotlight sounds horrible, but I do keep my attention on Ryder as he eloquently answers a few questions.

Before leaving, he repeats that people can believe what they want, but he had to make a statement to set a few things straight.

Dallas steps out and handles the crowd, enough to let Ryder escape.

The second he's close enough, I trap his face in my palms. "How do you feel?"

"Unsteady. Overwhelmed. Relieved," he says in one breath. "I've never spoken against him. After all he's done, that was the first time I've ever really stood up for myself."

"You deserve respect, Ryder."

"How are you?" He tucks a lock of hair behind my ear. "I know it's not always easy to talk about."

"It's not," I agree. "But I'm okay. We're okay."

"We're perfect, Tweets." His eyes simmer in a dark heat, something rich and warm and safe. When he kisses me again, I know as messy, as chaotic, as passionate as this is—I'd never want anyone but this man.

I've always chosen him.

I always will.

Epilogue

RYDER



AVA IS BEING WEIRD.

I've known the woman since I was ten years old and have been married to her for four years. I know when she's off.

"Are you cleaning the table legs?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"They get dusty," Ava says, putting a little more oomph into her scrubbing.

"But ... you're cleaning the foot of the leg. It's on the floor. All the time. How—"

"Ryder." She lets out a sigh, then uses the arm of the sofa to stagger back to her feet. "Does my cleaning offend you?"

"When you're contorted in a weird position and it looks like you're going to snap in half, it does. Let me do it."

If the woman wants the hidden ends of her table scrubbed and polished, I will get on my hands and knees and polish them until they freaking sparkle.

"I'm fine. What you should be doing is figuring out what you plan to make for dinner. Your night, lover."

"It's three thirty."

She huffs and points to her round belly. "We're hungry at three thirty, would you like to argue the point?"

I hold up my hands in surrender. I tried to win an argument with pregnant Ava a couple months ago and learned my lesson straightaway. Bad idea. Stupid idea.

Ava picks up her old, tattered cloth and furniture polish when I take a step toward our kitchen.

Like I said, weird.

I step into the kitchen, and like it always does, a smile cuts across my face.

I'm greeted with one side of the refrigerator covered in pictures of the last few years together. There is one from a sports grill during Spring Training the year we got engaged. A picture snapped with Ava laughing—I can still hear the villainous tone of it—as we look at a text message on my phone.

It was from my dad. After the fallout from Mitch's retaliation, Marianne threatened to sue him for libel or slander or something very legal. The fallout against Mitch was severe enough it fell back onto his employer's reputation.

The text was telling us Mitch left the Vegas area since he was asked to resign. Ava had let me know that's a nice way to say he got his butt fired for the bad press and slanderous statements he kept trying to make after he was called out.

Last I heard he went somewhere in Florida. There is still a heap of gratification to know I stood up against a guy who bullied to get what he wanted.

It's a good lesson to use with the kids who flock to the original field house.

The picture next to it is from our engagement party. Then, the day Ava got the same tattoo as me, the one of our first baby's due date. A picture is tucked in the back from the double date with Drake and the woman who's now his fiancée. I grin at the one of our first kiss at our wedding, then all the random days in between.

Those memories are my favorite.

I touch the picture of Ava laughing with the three other Kings ladies and Alexis Cole at Parker's retirement party two years ago that also served as an engagement party for Dax. Alexis put it all together, and I had my doubts she could pull it off, but I still say it was one of the best parties I've ever been to.

The one next to it is the same crew at Wren's baby shower before Griff's boy was born. Beside it are a few more recent pictures. The day Mason Walker was officially signed as a Vegas King; Ava snapped a picture of me hugging him. But my favorite one is the surprise at *my* retirement party.

After a bad shoulder injury, we decided it was time to turn a new chapter. Fitting since the picture is from the moment Ava used the party to tell me we were going to be parents. Someone snapped the shot right before I kissed her, a little onesie in my hand.

We'd been trying for three years to get pregnant. It took a few specialists and a lot of disappointment, but we're at the finish line now.

I'm not sure I breathed until we made it out of the first trimester, but even still, every appointment I clench my fists, praying that steady beat will be strong and swift. Two weeks away, and I've merely decided I won't stop worrying until the baby is here.

According to our friends, we won't stop worrying ... ever.

Life will be different with a baby, but we're more settled than we were. Achieve Life is run by several people now, but Ava still holds the top seat. She just delegates more and signs off on the final designs of the houses when they pop up around the country.

The original field house for Burton Field is now managed and run by Dax. He joined on after life didn't go as planned, but he's perfect for the place and has grown the influence to incredible lengths.

I took a position as a bench coach for the Kings. It's strange being on the other side of the team, but in a way not

much has changed. Parker is still there as a pitching coach, and Skye is still the trainer. Griffin focuses on the All-Star Foundation full time now, but he's a box seat season pass holder.

A lot has changed, but some things never will. The people we keep close are always there. We're stuck with them, and I don't mind at all.

I dig through the fridge, wholly uninspired on what to make.

Ava hates certain smells and basically devours peanut butter, but bread makes her queasy, and sweet things make her gag. I could give her a spoonful of crunchy peanut butter and call it good. She'd probably love it.

My phone buzzes with a text from Drake.

Drake: *Hey, is everything good with Ava? Had a feeling something might be up.*

Twin radar. I let him know she's cleaning the feet on tables, and I'm about to spoon feed her peanut butter. I get a laughing GIF in response.

"Hey, Tweets," I say, stepping back into the front room, unsuccessful with husband-makes-dinner. "How do you feel about eating out? That Thai place had those peanut noodles—"

"Sure." She says, facing the wall. Her voice is clipped and short.

I narrow my gaze, one brow arched. She's not letting me read her face, and her tone is impossible to gauge. "Really?"

"Yep."

"Ava."

"Not really in the mood to talk; I'm trying to get these tables finished."

"Okay." I stride across the room. "What's up? You're being weird. And I mean that in the best way." I take her arm and tug her against me. Only then do I notice the wince that

crinkles her face. “Hey, what’s wrong? Don’t say ‘nothing’. Are you hurt?”

“No.” Her voice cracks.

All the alarm bells are going off in my head. “Hey, look at me. What’s hurting?”

“Labor!” She closes her eyes and presses her forehead against my chest. “I’m pretty sure I’ve been in labor all day and—”

“What! Ava ... *what?*”

“Focus, baby,” she whispers, holding my face in her hands.

I blow out a breath. Focus on her. Don’t panic. Focus here. I rest my hands on her belly and fight to keep my words coming. I need to communicate through this. She needs me tonight.

Ava shakes her head, clearly uneasy. “I didn’t think it was anything at first, so I tried to stay busy, then the aches kept coming, and coming, and I started freaking out. Is everything ready? Have I cleaned enough? Do I even have Chapstick in the hospital bag? How am I supposed to be a mom, Ryder!”

There it is. The real reason we’re having a mini meltdown in our living room.

I wrap my arms around her and press a kiss to the hinge of her jaw. “You are going to be the best mom.”

Her chin quivers. “You have to say that.”

“No, I don’t. But I believe it.” I kiss her forehead and gently ease us toward the door where the small suitcase has been ready and packed (with three sticks of lip balm) for a week. My checklist was incredibly thorough. “You know things about what a family means more than most people, Tweets. That’s how I know there are not going to be conditions for our kid. You’re going to love them without question, and they’re going to know it.”

“Ryder.” She lets out a sob and waves a hand over her eyes. “I think ... I think you’re going to be the best dad too.”

“Good.” I open our front door. “Now that we’ve established we are basically parents of the year, can we please go?”

“What if we’re too late?”

I help her into the passenger seat of the Range Rover. “How close are the contractions?”

She hesitates.

“Ava?”

“Um, maybe three minutes.”

“Okay, that’s ...” My brain short circuits when it actually sinks in. “Three min—” I curse and sprint to the driver’s side, peeling down the driveway. “Baby, the doctor said we needed to go in at seven to five minutes.”

“I’m going to have a baby in the car.” She clutches her face. “Ryder!”

“No.” I grab her hand. “No, you’re not having a baby in the car because let me tell you why: Drake is on duty tonight. You know he’ll answer the call because that’s our luck, and that means your brother will need to deliver the baby. I think that’s a boundary you don’t want to cross.”

She manages to laugh, sort of. “Good visual. That’s not happening. Not today.”

We don’t have the baby in the car, but by the time we’re loaded into a room, the nurses are readying to catch a baby since the doctor is still on the way.

“You’ve done this, right?” I ask.

The nurse on the stool looks like she’s fifteen.

“Loads of times,” she says. “Ready, Dad?”

No. I mean, if she’s sincerely asking, no I’m not. But now would be the worst time to lose my head. I swallow and stand next to Ava’s head, her hand in mine. I kiss her brow, whisper I love her, and my life changes.

Forever.

Our son is born seventeen minutes later. The doctor came in time to catch his shoulders, and part of me wants to demand the bill payment go to our baby-faced nurse. But those thoughts are chased away the instant our baby is laid out on Ava's chest.

I'm stunned. My throat is tight, and my hand trembles when I rest a palm on his dark head of hair.

"Oh, Ryd," Ava whispers. "He's perfect."

I blink a few times and kiss her, then the top of his head. I worried about what I'd feel when this moment came. Some fears that I'd be unable to connect were always there, lingering beneath the surface.

But the way my heart thuds, the instant need to protect and love this tiny person, I'll never understand how I couldn't love him.

I hardly know him, and I'd do anything for him.

The moments after are busy, but I'm captivated. I follow the nurses around like a puppy, watching as they weigh, measure, and examine my boy. He has strong lungs, but when he blinks his bleary eyes and looks at me for the first time, I almost break down sobbing right there.

"Want to give him a bath, Dad?"

I feel like a kid the way the nurses need to hold my hand the entire time, but after it's done, I settle in the bed next to Ava, our son asleep on my chest.

"Are we still thinking Will?" I whisper. We'd played with names and liked the idea of using her last name.

"William Josh, or should we do the full Joshua?" she asks, her voice soft.

"Josh would throw up if we did." She laughs and hugs my waist. I lean down and kiss Ava again. "I love you."

She beams up at me. "I love you. Always have."

Always will.



Hey lovely, Ava here. I'm so glad you came along for the bumpy ride with us. Life couldn't have turned out better. Well, what would make it better is if we could see our shy-guy Dax just as happy. He's acting strange ever since his accident, and I think there might be a story behind whoever he keeps texting. Keep on with the Vegas Kings in the Fastball [HERE](#)



Want more Ryder and Ava? Enjoy a free bonus scene with a look into their happily ever after right [HERE](#)



As always, for those lovelies who like some heat to their romances, the spicy bonus scene with Ava and Ryder can be found [HERE](#)

****remember this is a scene with on page sex. If you don't like spice, you're not going to like it****

Acknowledgments

Ryder and Ava took me for a ride. I was so nervous to tell a story with so many emotional layers, but it wouldn't leave me, and they told me to just be brave like Ryder and write the dang story.

My heart goes out to all my neurodivergent readers. As someone who deals with an OCD disorder and recent issues with ADHD I wanted to show that there doesn't have to be a 'normal' brain. There is beauty and value in everyone.

During research for this book, I was humbled to learn about so many real-life neurodivergent professional athletes in varying sports who are Olympians, MLB players, NHL etc and have reached these incredible goals. The sky is the limit, my friends!

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All the best,

Em