

PRAISE FOR **BROKEN BEAUTIFUL HEARTS**

“Something wonderful happened to me as I read this—I fell in love. **GENUINE, SHATTERING**, deep, heart-pounding love. Thank you, Kami Garcia, for Peyton and Owen. **WE NEED THEIR STORY.**”

—JENNIFER NIVEN,

New York Times bestselling author of *All the Bright Places* and *Holding Up the Universe*

“A slow burn that **SQUEEZES YOUR HEART SO TIGHTLY** you can’t breathe . . . until it explodes, and you’re left with a beautiful story that will draw you back again and again.”

—ABBI GLINES, #1 New York Times bestselling author
of the Field Party series and the Rosemary Beach novels

“Kami Garcia knows the **ANATOMY OF THE TEENAGE HEART**—what makes it race, what makes it break, and what makes it mend. Sexy, gritty, and romantic—*Broken Beautiful Hearts* is a **MUST-READ** for anyone whose heart has been broken and dared to love again.”

—DANIELLE PAIGE, New York Times bestselling author
of the Dorothy Must Die and Stealing Snow series

“A heartbreaking novel of shattered dreams, broken hearts, and finding new paths forward. *Broken Beautiful Hearts* is deliciously **SEXY, DANGEROUS**, and **HEARTFELT**. You’ll root for Peyton to open her heart, despite the risk, and try to get all the things she wants.

Kami Garcia has weaved a story that
LINGERS IN YOUR HEART long after it’s done.”

—DHONIELLE CLAYTON, coauthor of the Tiny Pretty Things series
and author of *The Belles*

“Kami Garcia never fails to impress with her amazing characters and **CAPTIVATING ROMANCE!**”

—CORA CARMACK, New York Times bestselling author of *Losing It*

ALSO BY KAMI GARCIA

The Lovely Reckless

The X-Files Origins: Agent of Chaos

Unbreakable

Unmarked

“Red Run”: A Short Story

“Improbable Futures”: A Short Story

BY KAMI GARCIA AND MARGARET STOHL

Beautiful Creatures

Beautiful Darkness

Beautiful Chaos

Beautiful Redemption

Dangerous Creatures

Dangerous Deception

Dream Dark: A Beautiful Creatures Story

Dangerous Dream: A Beautiful Creatures Story

The Mortal Heart

(Beautiful Creatures: The Untold Stories)

The Seer’s Spread

(Beautiful Creatures: The Untold Stories)

Before the Claiming

(Beautiful Creatures: The Untold Stories)

A Gatlin Wedding

(Beautiful Creatures: The Untold Stories)

BROKEN
beautiful
HEARTS

KAMI GARCIA

{Imprint}
MAKE YOUR MARK

NEW YORK

The shell must break before the bird can fly.

—ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON

CHAPTER 1

When the Stars Align

I **BELIEVE EVERYTHING** happens for a reason and usually the reason sucks. I also believe the laces from my eighth-grade soccer cleats are good luck, Adele is the most talented singer to ever walk the earth, and popcorn without butter is just corn.

But more than any of those things, I believe that if you're lucky—at least once in your life—you *might* have a perfect day. A day when all the stars in your personal universe align and your dreams seem possible.

The crazy part?

I think today might be mine.

Except Dad isn't here.

The thought bears down on me, but I push back against it.

Today might be the only perfect day I'll ever get. Dad wouldn't want me to waste it.

I pick up the letter on my desk and reread it for the tenth time since it arrived yesterday.

Dear Miss Rios,

After careful consideration, the women's soccer staff at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill believes that you have the qualities we are looking for in a student-athlete. As the head women's soccer coach at this university, I want to formally offer you early acceptance and an opportunity to play soccer for the team that has won 21 out of 35 NCAA national championships.

Please understand that this acceptance is contingent upon you:

maintaining the recommendation of your high school coach;

remaining in good academic standing;

continuing to demonstrate strong leadership and soccer skills; and

playing in your current position, center forward, next fall.

I've wanted this for as long as I can remember, but now that it's actually happening, it doesn't feel real.

"Peyton?" Mom calls from downstairs.

"Coming." I fold the letter and tuck it in my bag.

I gather my dark, wavy hair into a ponytail, pull it through an elastic, and take a quick look in the mirror. My wardrobe consists of a steady rotation of skinny jeans and cargos that show off my long legs, layered tanks and fitted henleys, and ankle boots. Today is no exception.

I do my standard two-minute make-up application—concealer under my eyes and berry-tinted lip balm that doubles as blush.

Now I just have to find my black ankle boots.

“You’re going to be late,” Mom yells.

“Coming!” I bend down and check under the bed—a pair of balled-up soccer socks; my elementary school yearbooks; a bottle of nail polish; old issues of *Soccer 360*; a Luna Bar that’s hard enough to use as a hammer; and . . . my boots.

Score.

I drag the boots out by the laces and put them on. Dad’s dog tags slide back and forth on the silver chain hanging around my neck. I never take them off. When I insisted on wearing them with the strapless dress I chose for the Spring Fling, Mom figured out how to pin the tags inside the dress so they wouldn’t be as noticeable. I would’ve worn them either way.

On the way out, I grab the black leather jacket draped over the chair next to my door, under a poster of my soccer idol, Alex Morgan. The jacket belonged to my dad. I slip it on. The sleeves hang past my fingertips and the leather is cracked, but I love it anyway.

I jog down the steps and walk into the kitchen.

Mom holds up a brown muffin. “Do you want one to take with you?”

“Not if it has oats, nuts, dried fruit, or seeds in it.”

She breaks the muffin in half, which takes some effort because it’s as dense as a hunk of fruitcake. Dad used to do all the cooking. He was Cuban and every morning started with café con leché—strong Cuban coffee with steamed milk—and thick toast with butter. After he died I took over the cooking, but I couldn’t bring myself to keep eating the same breakfast Dad used to make me. Now Mom is determined to learn to cook, too. Muffins are her latest experiment.

I rummage through the pantry. “Do we have any doughnuts?”

“Doughnuts are pure sugar. They don’t qualify as breakfast.” She pours me a cup of coffee and hands it to me.

I add milk and sugar. “Then why do doughnut shops open at five o’clock in the morning?”

“It’s one of life’s great mysteries.” Mom takes a bite of the muffin and scrunches up her nose when she thinks I’m not looking. “Have you told Tess yet?”

“Nope.”

“I’m surprised you held out this long.”

“I want to see the look on her face when I tell her.”

“What about Reed?” she asks.

I haven’t heard from my boyfriend yet this morning. “He worked late. He’s probably still asleep. And it will be more fun to tell people in person.”

I down the rest of my coffee and put the cup in the sink. “I’m taking off.”

“Drive carefully,” Mom says as I walk out the door.

I toss my bag in the back seat of my red Honda HR-V and slide behind the wheel. The road is carpeted with colorful fall leaves from the oaks and maples on my street. My neighborhood is only twenty minutes from downtown Washington, DC, and ten minutes from the outdated mid-rise apartment buildings in Tess’ complex. But you’d never know it.

My street looks like it belongs in a small town—the huge trees arching over the road, the Cape Cod–style homes, and the “tiny library” on the corner that reminds me of a pink dollhouse.

On the drive to Tess’, I try to come up with a cool way to tell her about UNC. But I’ve got nothing. We both know that colleges mailed

out early admission and athletic scholarship letters this week. If I show up at her door holding a folded piece of paper, it's too obvious. Not that it matters. Even if I don't surprise Tess, she'll still make a big deal about my news. That's what best friends do when something amazing happens to you.

I park next to Tess' building and I start to get out with the letter in my hand. But at the last minute, I drop it onto the passenger seat for her to find when she gets in. I jog up the concrete steps, avoiding the crumbling stair the city was supposed to repair two years ago. I punch in the security code for the front door.

I'm dying to tell Reed my news. A benefit of dating my best friend's brother is that when I come over to hang out with one of them, I get to see them both.

Seven months ago, Reed was just my best friend Tess' hot older brother—until a party, four games of beer pong, and a car ride changed everything. Tess and I weren't the only juniors who showed up at the epic spring break party at Chicken Johnson's house. But we *were* the only juniors stupid enough to play beer pong with Chicken and the wrestling team. The guys were all seniors like Reed, and they outweighed and outdrank us.

After I spent an hour in the bathroom holding Tess' hair while she puked, Reed carried her out to his car. He looked hotter than usual, in a pair of jeans that hung low on his hips and a gray 18TH STREET MIXED MARTIAL ARTS T-shirt that outlined his muscular chest. He wasn't over-the-top gorgeous. The combination of Reed's blue eyes, crooked nose, buzzed black hair, and brooding expression was more gladiator than pretty-boy.

But he had sexy nailed.

Tess passed out in the back seat, and I ended up riding shotgun. It

was a first. Tess always sat in the front, and I preferred it that way. I'd harbored a monster crush on Reed for years, but I didn't really know him—or do things like sit next to him in the car . . . or *talk* to him.

I didn't say a word until we got back to the apartment, except for the occasional “uh-huh” to make it seem as if I was participating in the conversation. Reed carried Tess to her room and deposited her on the bed as I stood in the doorway.

“Make sure she takes Advil when she wakes up,” he said as he walked toward the door—and me.

I froze, which was awkward because Reed had to squeeze by me to get through the door. He moved to his left and I moved to my right, and I ended up with my back against the doorjamb and my face inches from his collarbone.

He wrapped his arm around my waist and looked down at me. “You have really pretty eyes. They're sort of gold.”

People had complimented the color of my eyes before. From certain angles, the contrast between my light brown skin and dark hair made the hazel flecks in my brown eyes look gold.

“They're just brown.”

“Golden brown.” Reed brushed my hair over my shoulder and his fingers grazed the back of my neck. He kept his hand there and I bit my bottom lip to keep from gasping.

His eyes lingered on my mouth. “Do you know how sexy that is?”

At that moment, with my heart racing and Reed touching me and staring at my mouth, the only thing I knew was that I wanted him to kiss me. He ran his thumb across my bottom lip, and this time I gasped.

Reed tightened his hold on my waist and backed me out of Tess' room, pulling the door closed behind him. His hand slid down to my ass and he leaned into me. “I should've done this a long time ago.”

I had to remind myself to breathe.

When Reed finally kissed me his lips were rough from years of fighting. But I didn't care. His mouth kept finding mine—over and over and over.

“I want to kiss you again,” Reed whispered. “Tomorrow. And the next day. And the day after that. How does that sound?” He didn't wait for an answer.

He pulled back and flashed a cocky smile. “You want to get something to eat tomorrow night? I have a fight, but that won't take long.”

It took a moment for me to realize he was asking me out. With his battered good looks and scraped knuckles, Reed wasn't homecoming-kind material, but that didn't have a negative effect on his social life. He had a reputation for being protective, wild, cocky, and *fun*—something that had been seriously lacking in my life.

Girls stopped Tess in the halls at school to dig for information. Did her brother have a girlfriend? Where did he hang out? Would Tess put in a good word for them?

Reed Michaels—the object of their affection—had spent the last ten minutes kissing me, and now he was asking me out on a real date? How could I say no?

Why would I?

So I responded with the answer any girl would've given, with her lips still tingling from his kiss. “Yes.”

It's hard to believe that night was seven months ago.

I was stumbling through my life back then, trying to figure out how to keep going without my dad, and Reed helped me through some of the low points.

On the other side of the apartment door, something heavy hits the floor with a thud.

I knock and Tess yells, “Just a sec.”

She opens the door, holding her braids together behind her head with one hand. “I’m almost ready.”

“That’s what you say every day.” I follow her inside, dodging the binders and textbooks spilling out of her backpack onto the floor.

“I dropped it.” She kicks the bag and another book slides out. Tess huffs and finishes braiding her pale blond hair. It reaches past her shoulder blades, but she never wears it down. Right now she’s in a braiding phase. She secures the braids behind her head and rolls the rest of her hair around them to form what looks like a crown. I have no idea how she does it. I can barely make a neat ponytail.

I gesture at her hair. “This is new.”

“What do you think?” She tucks a few uncooperative strands behind her ears. “It’s kind of warrior-princess. Right?” Her delicate features look more princess than warrior, but there’s nothing prissy about Tess.

“I have no idea what that means, but it looks cool.” I peek down the hallway behind her. “Is Reed sleeping?”

“Yep.”

Reed knows how much I wanted to get into UNC. Maybe I should wake him up and tell him? Then he could go right back to sleep.

Or he could end up in an awful mood for the rest of the day.

I’ll let him sleep.

A few months ago I wouldn’t have thought twice about waking him, and I probably would’ve jumped on his bed to do it.

“Did he get home late last night?” I ask.

“Super late. And he looked like crap.” Tess looks away with a hint of guilt in her eyes. She bends down and collects the mountain of crumpled paper, pens, and textbooks. She tries to shove it all back into her bag, but it won’t fit the way she’s jamming it in there.

“Was he at an underground fight?”

“He didn’t say. But his hands were banged up when he came home, and he was walking around holding a bag of frozen peas against his jaw.”

Reed got involved in the underground fight scene two months ago. He figured out that he could make more money in one night’s worth of street fights than he could earn in two weeks training other fighters at the gym.

He dragged me along one night to watch him battle it out in a parking structure while people placed bets. Bloody and brutal, with no rules or referees, the fights barely resembled MMA—or any sport. And Reed loved every minute of it.

“I’m worried about him, Tess. He could get hurt.” She’s never seen an underground fight firsthand. “Whenever I try to talk to him about it, we end up arguing.”

She tugs on the zipper of her backpack, but it still won’t close. “Please don’t be mad at him. I don’t want him in those fights any more than you do. But my mom can’t cover the bills on her own.”

I take the bag from her and reorganize it so everything fits. “I’m not mad. Just worried. If he gets caught, he’ll get kicked out of the league.” And that will be the end of his dream of competing in the UFC professionally.

When we first started dating, Reed and I used to talk on the phone at night, dreaming out loud. He would climb the MMA ranks until a sponsor, or a high profile trainer, recognized his potential. I’d play soccer for a Division I college and get recruited to play professionally after I graduated.

“He’s doing it for me,” Tess says softly.

“You can’t blame yourself.” I work the zipper of her backpack until it closes. “Reed makes his own choices. No one tells him what to do.”

She smiles a little. “Like someone else I know.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Tess laughs and her blue eyes light up. She and Reed look nothing alike, but they have the same amazing blue eyes. Ocean blue—like the water in the photos of my grandparents on the beach in Cuba, before they immigrated to the US. I’ve never seen water that blue in real life.

On our way out, I notice a hole in the drywall behind the front door. “What happened? It looks like someone punched a hole in it.”

Her eyes dart to the damage. “Close. Reed and TJ were messing around in the hallway when Reed was opening the door. TJ slammed into him, and they hit the door so hard that it swung around and the knob went through the wall. My mom wasn’t happy. She’s making Reed fix it.”

There’s something weird about the hole, but I can’t figure it out.

Tess opens the door, and her mom is standing in the hallway, fumbling with her house keys.

Mrs. Michaels gasps. “I didn’t hear you coming out.”

The shadows around her eyes are darker than usual. She’s probably coming off a double shift at the café. Tess holds the door open for her mother.

“Thanks sweetheart.” Her mom wanders inside like she’s sleep-walking. She tries to hang her keys on the wall hook, but she misses and they drop on the floor.

I rush to pick them up.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.” Mrs. Michaels yawns.

“You worked eighteen hours straight and you’re exhausted,” Tess says, rushing to the kitchen.

Her mom smiles at me. “How’s everything going with you, Peyton?”

“Everything is good.” *Better than good.* And suddenly, I feel guilty about it.

Tess returns with a coffee mug and hands it her mom.

“Thank you.” Mrs. Michaels eases herself onto the sofa, takes a few sips of her coffee, and sets the mug on the end table.

“Do you need anything before I leave?” Tess asks.

“No, I’m fine.” Tess’ mom unties her apron and tosses it on the chair. “Go ahead to school.” She rests her head on the arm of the sofa and closes her eyes.

We tiptoe out of the apartment and Tess locks the door behind us. On the way to my car, she walks along the edge of the curb as if she’s on a tightrope, putting one scuffed brown boot directly in front of the other. It’s obvious she hasn’t heard from any colleges yet.

Now I wish I hadn’t left the letter on the passenger seat.

When we get to my car, I try to hop in first and grab it, but Tess is faster. She picks up the letter and flips it open.

“Wait—” I reach for it, but she’s already reading.

“Holy shit.” She looks over at me. “You got in! Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I wanted to tell you in person, but it didn’t seem like the right time.”

She closes the letter and places it on the dashboard. “Why? Because I’m feeling sorry for myself?”

“Tess . . .”

“Stop. This is the biggest thing *ever.*” She grabs me by the shoulders and shakes me. “You got into UNC! You’re going to be the next Alex Morgan!”

At the mention of my favorite soccer player, I break into a huge smile. “Doubtful, but don’t jinx it.”

“You can’t jinx the inevitable.” She looks away. “Before you ask, nothing came for me and I’m *fine*.”

“It’s okay to be worried.”

Tess leans her head against her window. “What if I don’t get offered a scholarship anywhere?”

“Letters only went out two days ago. Lots of people are still waiting,” I remind her. “And this is only the first round of academic scholarships. With your GPA and test scores, you’ll get one.” We both know a soccer scholarship is a long shot for her. Tess is a great player, but she doesn’t stand out on the field the way she does in the classroom.

She starts to say something, but I add, “And I’m *not* saying that just because you’re my best friend.”

“Grades and test scores might not be enough.”

“You’re also a member of chorus and the yearbook committee, which is impressive considering you’re a total lyrics slayer and the only decent photos you take are selfies.” The corner of her mouth turns up, so I keep talking. “Plus, you have twice as many community service hours as the rest of us.”

“Appearing well rounded is more work than an actual job.” Tess hugs her legs and rests her chin on her knee. She’s not snapping out it.

Time to shift into best-friend overdrive. “Didn’t you tell me that five percent of students who are offered scholarships turn them down?” I intentionally quote the wrong percentage.

“Nine percent. The article said most people pass because they get accepted to a school they like better or another college offers them a bigger scholarship.”

“And then . . . ?”

She realizes what I’m doing and rolls her eyes. “And *then* the scholarship committee moves to the next person on the list.”

“My work here is done.” I cut through the gas station that shares a parking lot with 7-Eleven, throw my Honda into reverse, and execute the smoothest parallel parking job of my life.

“That was impressive for a girl who failed her driver’s test twice.” Tess tries to keep a straight face.

“I only jumped the curb once.” When I hit the curb, the test administrator’s clipboard slipped out of his hands. He tried to grab it and whacked his forehead on the dashboard. Then he failed me on the spot. I picture his puffy cheeks and pinched red face and I burst out laughing—which makes Tess crack up, too.

We dissolve into hysterics until she gets the hiccups and I yell, “Side cramp.”

“Thanks for cheering me up,” Tess says between hiccups. “What would I do without you?”

I tilt my head toward a woman walking out of 7-Eleven holding a glazed doughnut. “You’d probably starve.”

On the way to school, we binge on sticky doughnuts and extra-rich hot chocolate. We manage to arrive on time, along with the second wave of students that skate in just before the bell everyday.

“Does Reed know about UNC?” Tess asks as we walk through the huge double doors. “I mean, did you text him or anything last night?”

I give her some serious side-eye. “And violate the code? I’m offended.”

We both smile and say it at the same time: “Best friends before boyfriends.”

CHAPTER 2

Perfect Day

THE FIRST THREE periods of the day go by without a hitch. In chemistry class, the teacher was out sick. She left our assignments on the board for the substitute, but one of the slackers erased them. The sub didn't have a hard copy, so the period turned into study hall. At Adams that means pop in your earbuds and listen to music or play games on your phone.

When I arrived at English, my teacher handed out pop quizzes as we walked into the classroom. I'm not great at recalling details about topics that don't interest me—like *The Metamorphosis*, the gross novella we're reading about a man who turns into a cockroach. But on today's quiz, I actually knew most of the answers.

Third period is always the easiest part of my day, aside from lunch. My art teacher, Mrs. Degan, encourages us to experiment and set our own artistic parameters. She says we could be one brushstroke away

from genius, the way her last name is only one letter away from *Degas*. I spent the class period working on my current work of genius, an attempt at a cubist self-portrait that makes me look like a Lego minifigure.

The letter from UNC feels like a good luck charm in my pocket.

For once, I'm not cursing the fact that I have first lunch—or *breakfast*, as most people would call a meal you eat at ten fifty-five in the morning.

On my way to meet Tess on the quad, I give Reed a call, but his phone goes straight to voice mail. I hang up without leaving a message. It's still early for him if he took some hard hits last night. He'll call me when he gets up. Reed can't go more than a few hours without calling or texting me, and he knows we're waiting for letters.

Maybe I'll ask him if he wants to skip the party tonight. Things have been off between us. Some alone time, just the two of us, is all we need to get back on track.



The diner is already packed when Tess and I get there. Seniors are allowed to eat lunch off campus, and this place quickly became our go-to spot. It's a huge step up from the vending machine selections we were stuck with last year, unless we wanted to risk eating the mystery meals in the cafeteria.

We squeeze past the people waiting for seats at the counter.

Tess points at a booth in the back corner. "Lucia and Gwen found a table."

They're leaning across the table talking, their faces obscured by

almost identical curtains of long, brown, spiral curls. They're the same height and body type, and from this angle they could pass for twins. But the similarities end with their hair.

Lucia is Afro-Latina, with Puerto Rican roots, and her skin is a rich coppery brown that makes Gwen's pale, rosy Irish complexion look pasty. Lucia's spiral curls are natural and Gwen uses a weird-looking curling iron to create hers.

Lucia is determined and outspoken, and her goals are more important to her than any guy. Gwen is always on the hunt for her next boyfriend and when she finds Mr. Right Now, she'll spend all her time with him. It drives me nuts because Gwen is actually smart—and pretty—but she doesn't see herself that way.

It gets me thinking and I turn to Tess. "You know how some people say it doesn't matter if you date jerks because every relationship is a learning experience?" I ask.

"By 'some people' I'm assuming you mean Gwen?"

"Do you think it's true?"

"No," Tess says immediately. "That's what people say when they know they're dating an asshole, but they don't want to walk away. Look at my mom. It only took one jerk to ruin her life."

Tess means her dad.

I'm not sure if I agree with her take, but I understand where she's coming from.

The moment we get to the table, Gwen pounces. "So . . . ?"

Tess sits next to Lucia, and I slide in beside Gwen.

"I didn't get anything," Tess says.

"Yet," Lucia says, swinging her dark hair over her shoulder.

Gwen tugs on the sleeves of her oversize hoodie. "I've got nothing to report, either."

“I got an offer from Stanford,” Lucia says, as if it’s no big deal. “They only gave me a partial ride, but they’re covering most of the tuition and my athletic expenses, so my parents can swing it.” She’s downplaying the acceptance because she doesn’t want to make anyone else feel bad.

Tess smiles. “I’m really happy for you.”

“Just don’t forget about us when you make new Ivy League friends,” I say.

Lucia laughs. “No chance. I’ve been trying to forget about you guys for years, and it hasn’t worked.”

“You deserve it.” I ball up a napkin and throw it at Lucia. “Even if you are a pain.”

“Just don’t bring it up around Lorenzo,” she says. “He’s acting like a huge baby because he wanted me to go somewhere close to Virginia Tech. Like that’s gonna happen.”

“You should be nicer to him,” Gwen says.

Lucia pops a fry in her mouth. “If it’s so important to him, he can find a college near Stanford.” She points a fry at me. “You’re up, Peyton.”

I slide Dad’s dog tags back and forth on the chain. “I didn’t get a scholarship. . . .” I try to play it cool, but a smile tugs at the corners of my mouth. “But one school offered me admission and a spot on the women’s soccer team.”

Gwen drums her palms against the tabletop. “Which school? Spill!”

“University of North Carolina.”

“No freaking way!” Lucia shouts.

The guys in a booth across from ours look over at us and smirk.

Lucia stares them down. “There’s nothing here for you,” she says, motioning between us girls. “So turn around and mind your business.”

One guy’s face reddens and the other two laugh, but they still turn around.

“What did Reed say when you told him about UNC?” Gwen asks. “He must be happy that it’s not too far away.”

“I haven’t had a chance to tell him yet. He worked late,” I say casually. Tess is the only one who knows about the underground fights. “He’s probably still sleeping.”

Gwen and Lucia exchange looks.

“It’s eleven thirty,” Gwen points out. “Must be nice to sleep all day.”

“Like you’ve never slept later than that,” Tess snaps. “He literally got home in the middle of the night.”

Tess is always the first person to defend her brother. With a deadbeat for a father, who took off before Reed and Tess started elementary school, Reed was the one who worked at the gym, at fourteen, to help out with the bills. He was the one who showed up at our soccer games to watch Tess play.

Gwen backpedals. “I didn’t mean anything by it.”

Tess stands up and grabs her bag.

“Where are you going?” I ask.

“I need some space.”

“Don’t leave, Tess,” Gwen pleads. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know your brother worked so late.”

“Now you do,” Tess says as she walks away.

Gwen puts her head down on the table. “Why did I say anything?”

“She’ll get over it,” Lucia says. “Just leave her alone until practice.”

I feel bad for Gwen, but she should know better. Nobody gets away with criticizing Reed in front of Tess. Not even me.

CHAPTER 3

Striker

AFTER SCHOOL, I'M the first person on the field for soccer practice. The letter makes me want to get out here and earn it. I stand in the center of the field, passing the ball from knee to knee. This is the place where I feel most at home—the most like me.

It doesn't hurt that soccer reminds me of Dad. He taught me how to play and I loved the game from the first kick. Mom says I would've slept with my kid-size soccer ball if she had let me. Dad had dreamed of going pro, too. It turned out he was a better Marine than a soccer player.

Losing him made me realize that we can't control everything that happens in life. The universe has its own plans and we don't get a vote.

But soccer has always been the one thing I could control—not whether my team wins or loses a game. That's out of my hands. But the way I play and the effort I put in—that part is my choice.

“I heard somebody on my team was accepted to the University of

North Carolina.” Coach Kim strolls toward me with a bag of balls slung over her shoulder. “You’ve worked so hard for this, Peyton. I’m proud of you.”

I step back and smile. “Thanks. I wasn’t sure if it was going to happen.”

She pulls the drawstring on the bag and dumps out the balls. “I was sure enough for both of us.”

“It’s not a done deal. I still have to maintain my grades, and I’ll need a recommendation letter from my coach at the end of the season.”

“That might be a problem.”

“And I have to train harder than ever so I’m ready to ‘start in my current position’ for UNC in the fall, or something like that. The letter looks like a contract.”

“That’s standard language. Coaches have a limited number of open spots on their teams. They have to make sure they’re offering those spots to athletes who will be ready to fill them nine months from now.” She tosses me a ball, and I head it back to her. “So go warm up.”

Lucia is the next person out of the locker room. “You always beat me out here.”

“What can I say? You’re slow.”

She blows out a puff of air. “Whatever. You wouldn’t win as many games without me.”

“I can’t argue with that.”

Lucia and I have been playing together on school and select teams since fourth grade. She’s the best goalkeeper in our high school division.

I lob the ball at the bottom right corner of the goal. Lucia isn’t ready and she almost misses it. But she dives for the ball and makes the save.

“I almost got that one by you.”

“Because I wasn’t ready,” she says, calling me on it.

The rest of our teammates trickle out of the locker room, and Coach Kim takes a few minutes to get updates from everyone. Then she splits us into two teams for a scrimmage. When she blows the whistle, everything except the game fades away.

I dribble the ball down the field and look for an opportunity to pass. I’m a center forward—a striker, like Alex Morgan. It’s my job to score goals and create opportunities for my teammates to score. It’s an offensive position that requires more than just soccer skills.

I hear Dad’s voice in the back of my mind. *A striker has to have guts and take risks. You have to know when to pass or when to take the shot. There will be shots that look impossible, but they aren’t. Sometimes the difference between winning and losing is taking that shot when you get the chance.*

“Peyton! On your left,” Imani, another forward on my team, shouts.

Gwen is coming up next to me on the outside. Lucia is playing goalkeeper for the other team, and she’ll stop any ball within her reach before it hits the net. The bottom corner of the net is my only chance. Gwen is right on top of me, her feet slipping into the spaces between mine as she attempts to steal the ball.

“Peyton, over here!” Imani raises her hand to let me know she’s still open. She doesn’t see Tess behind her.

Today still feels like my perfect day, and on your perfect day you have to take the shot. I kick the neon-green Umbro ball, and it rockets toward the bottom left-hand corner of the net.

Lucia realizes where the ball is going and dives for it. The green ball skims the fingertips on her glove and sails into the net. The other girls on my scrimmage team shout and clap. Scoring on Lucia doesn’t happen often, and it’s a high.

You have to know when to pass or when to take the shot.

After practice I check my phone. Reed still hasn't called or texted me. He never goes all day without sending me at least one text. I grab my bag and call Reed as I head out to my car. His phone rings six times.

Where the hell is he?

I'm about to hang up when he answers. "Hey. I was just about to call you."

"At five o'clock? Why not just wait until tomorrow? You're obviously busy since I haven't heard from you all day."

"My phone died. Why are you so mad?"

"Colleges sent out letters two days ago." Tess and I have only mentioned it twenty times in the last week.

"Yeah?" Reed asks as if he's hearing the information for the first time.

"*Yeah?* That's all you have to say?" I wait for an answer. In the background, voices mix with the familiar sound of weights hitting the gym's rubber floor mats. Someone asks Reed a question I can't make out.

"Reed?"

"Hold on, Peyton." Reed says something to the person in the background. I only catch bits and pieces of his end of the conversation. "He's early. . . . Did he bring everything? I'm coming. . . . Give me five."

I'll count to ten and then I'm hanging up.

I'm on six when Reed gets back on the line. "Sorry. I'm training a new guy. He doesn't have the drills down. So the letters went out? Are you worried you won't get one?"

"I already did." The excitement of telling him is completely gone. "Something my boyfriend should know."

"I *told* you my phone died." An edge creeps into Reed's voice.

"We should talk later."

"Don't hang up. I'm being an asshole." His tone has completely

changed, and now he sounds sweet. “I’m sorry. You said you got a letter. Where was it from?”

“University of North Carolina. The coach wants me to play on the women’s soccer team.” Part of me still can’t believe it.

“I knew you’d get in.” He sounds excited. “You can fill me in tonight and we’ll celebrate at the party. Meet me at my place at nine. But the guy I’m training is waiting. I’ve gotta go.”

“Reed—”

“I’ll see you at nine. Love you.” He hangs up without waiting for me to say it back.



I’m still annoyed when I get to Reed’s a few hours later, and I’m definitely not in the mood for a party. As I’m walking up to the building, my phone pings with a text from Tess. She already left for the party with Lucia.

sperm donor called. go easy on Reed.

Any chance of Reed having an epiphany about the state of our relationship is gone now. *The Sperm Donor* is how Tess refers to their father. He gets drunk and calls once or twice a year to lay into one of them—usually Reed.

The fighter, Reed “The Machine” Michaels, owes at least part of his success in the cage—and the underground fights—to his father. Reed has eighteen years’ worth of rage churning inside him, and his father’s calls fuel that fire. It’s hard for me to imagine how he feels. All the

memories I have of my dad are good, and the few memories Reed has of his father are terrible.

I take my time climbing the stairs to the apartment. Should I bring up the call if Reed doesn't? When I reach the third floor, I hear voices coming from inside an apartment. Reed's voice is one of them.

"I gave you all the extra money I had, like I do every month," he says.

"I know," his mom says. "And I wish you didn't have to."

"You sure about that?" Reed demands.

"Do you think I like asking you for help? It's the last thing I want. But I'm short on the rent."

"I just told you I don't have any more money. What the hell do you want from me?" He shouts so loud that it makes me jump.

I've never heard Reed yell at his mom or Tess. Even when I argue with him he always stays calm. Pissed off, but calm.

"Now you're gonna cry and make me feel like shit?" This time Reed doesn't yell, but his tone is intense. "I'm out of here."

I back away from the door just as it opens, and Reed charges out of the apartment. He almost walks into me but catches himself. He glances from the apartment to me and seems to calm down. "How long have you been out here?"

"A few minutes." My throat is so dry I barely get the words out.

He closes his eyes for a second and takes a deep breath. "I shouldn't have done that. Shit."

I touch his arm. "What happened? I've never heard you yell at your mom before."

"Because I don't." He turns away and paces the hall. "My piece-of-shit father called. He was drunk, as usual. Talking a bunch of shit about how we ruined his life. I said I don't know how we could've ruined his life when he never sees us."

“What did he say?”

“Not much. It pissed him off and he hung up.” He takes a deep breath. “Tess left for the party, and as soon as she was gone, my mom started complaining about how she can’t make rent. Asking if I could work extra hours when I’m already working as hard as I can. I just lost it.” Reed glances at the door as if he’s considering going back inside. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to apologize to your mom? I can wait out here.”

“Not now. She needs some space.” He takes my hand. “I’ll drive.”

I look back at the apartment door, imagining Mrs. Michaels crying on the other side. Why isn’t Reed going to apologize?

We get in Reed’s car and for a few minutes neither of us says a word. The houses get larger and more opulent the closer we get to the party.

Reed glances at me. “I’m sorry I didn’t call you earlier today.”

“It’s fine.”

“No, it isn’t.” He reaches over and rubs the back of my neck and smiles. “You got into UNC. That’s a big deal. I’m really proud of you.” His mood does a complete one-eighty, as if the scene back at the apartment never happened.

“Thanks.” I’m not sure how to react. Reed’s moods have been all over the place lately, but I’ve never seen him shake a bad one this fast.

“Like I said earlier, we’re gonna celebrate tonight.” He squeezes my shoulder, and I give him a weak smile.

“If you really want to celebrate, let’s go somewhere by ourselves. I’m not in the mood for a party.”

Reed frowns. “I feel like I need to get out of my head, you know?”

“And you can’t do that alone with me?”

“Sure. But sometimes it’s easier when there’s a lot going on. We can go out tomorrow night, though. Is that cool?”

It’s not cool. Not even a little.

But I’m not in the mood to argue. “Sure, whatever.”

“Don’t be mad.” He turns into Quail Landing, the wealthy neighborhood where high school students throw parties, and let strangers trash their homes, whenever their parents leave town.

“I’m not mad,” I lie. We talked about the offer from UNC for all of two minutes. My perfect day doesn’t feel so perfect anymore.

CHAPTER 4

Little Black Box

THE FACT THAT I asked Reed if we could spend time alone tonight and we ended up at a kegger sums up the current state of our relationship.

“You sure you don’t want a drink?” Reed holds out a plastic cup. “It’s your night. We should toast your acceptance.”

“But you’re not drinking,” I say. Reed never drinks the night before a fight.

“I’ll toast with this.” He holds up the can of Coke he’s drinking.

“That’s okay. We can celebrate next week at Bourbon Steak.” It’s our favorite restaurant downtown. We made a reservation weeks ago just in case I had college news to celebrate.

“Is that next week?”

I know what’s coming next. “Yes. On Thursday night. It will be nice to spend some time alone.”

He puts down the plastic cup and the soda can. “About Thursday. I’m working late. But you can pick another night.”

“It took weeks to get a reservation. You can skip one night at the gym.”

“I wish I could.”

He’s bailing on me. Again.

“Forget it. I don’t want to go anymore.” I’m not trying to guilt Reed into changing his schedule. I actually mean it.

“I thought you’d be in a better mood tonight,” he complains.

“I was until you bailed on me for the tenth time.”

“Hi, you two.” Tess enters the kitchen, her cheeks flushed and her hairline sweaty from dancing. She twists her hair into a knot and watches us. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” I cross my arms and watch a guy beer-bong a six-pack.

“Peyton is pissed off at me because I wanted to come to the party,” Reed says.

Was he paying any attention to our conversation?

“I’m *not* pissed.” *But I’m getting there.*

“You look pissed,” Tess says.

“I’m *annoyed*, and it has nothing to do with the party.”

“Right.” Reed exhales loudly. “Peyton is mad because I can’t go to dinner on Thursday. I’ve gotta work.”

“You didn’t even remember we had plans.” When did I become the girl who begs her boyfriend for attention? *And how fast can I get rid of her?*

“That’s not—” he says, but I cut him off.

“I don’t want to argue. It’s one stupid dinner. It doesn’t matter.”

Reed’s phone pings and he reads the incoming text. “Hold on.”

Sure. Why not? It’s not like we were having a conversation or anything.

Reed wanders away from us, focused on whatever he's typing. Without looking up, he holds up two fingers and says, "Give me two minutes."

"More like twenty," I say loud enough for him to hear.

If he was actually listening.

Tess nudges my shoulder with hers. "I know Reed is a pain in the ass sometimes, but tonight it's not his fault. He's always a little off after the Sperm Donor calls."

She's probably right, but over the last two months, making excuses for her brother has become Tess' full-time job.

"It's not about whether or not he loves me. Something is going on with him, and it's not just the phone call. Something changed. He's different." I didn't realize how much until I heard him yelling at his mom.

Tess stares at the floor.

"Whatever it is, go ahead and say it," I tell her.

"Maybe it's not Reed."

How can she play dumb with me? I've seen the way Tess tiptoes around him like she's navigating a minefield when he's in one of his moods.

"So you think I'm the problem?"

Tess shakes her head. "No. That came out wrong. I meant maybe it's things between you two that changed. You're upset because Reed is at the gym all the time, but he has to train more if he's going to fight in the middleweight division."

"It was his idea to move up a weight class," I remind her.

"I know. I tried to talk him out of it. But he thinks he has a better chance of making it into the UFC as a middleweight."

"It's more than that." We're missing something. I lean against the wall and watch a new beer bong competitor get into position.

This is not how I envisioned celebrating my big news. I reach for my phone to check the time, wondering if it's too early to head home. But it isn't in my pocket. Nothing but lip balm, house keys, and Reed's car keys. God forbid he carry anything except his phone. I pat down my coat. "I lost my phone."

"It's probably in the car, like the last three times you lost it. I need to run to the bathroom and then I'll help you find it."

The line for the bathroom is six people deep. I can't wait that long. "All my voice mails are on it."

Tess knows that by *all* I really mean *one*—the last message from my dad. It's the reason I've had the same phone for a year and a half, even though it barely holds a charge.

"I bet it's in the car," she says. "Don't worry."

"I'm just going to run out and check." I leave through the back door.

Outside, a stone retaining wall snakes down the hill beside the house. The wall separates a paved footpath from the long driveway. My arm scrapes against the rough rock as I rush toward the steps at the end of the walkway that lead down to the street.

Reed parked his car across from the steps, and I can't get it unlocked fast enough. I search for my phone in the front seat and between the crevices of the center console.

Nothing.

Think. Retrace your steps.

When we got in Reed's car I tossed my jacket in the back seat. My phone could've fallen out of the pocket. I lean between the front seats and grope around.

Come on. Please be here.

What if it's not?

My chest tightens. I can't lose Dad's message.

Reed's car is full of junk—hand wraps, sparring pads, sweaty T-shirts, and empty energy drinks. His smelly gym bag is open on the floor. I dig through it until my fingers hit something rectangular and smooth.

A box.

I take it out of the bag, expecting a cheap plastic box like one Reed uses as a first aid kit. But this box is glossy black cardboard, like a gift box.

But if it's a gift . . .

Reed doesn't do surprises, and he thinks presents are a waste of money. The only gift he has given me in the seven months we've been together was for my birthday. And Tess and Mrs. Michaels don't have birthdays anytime soon.

My stomach bottoms out.

All the time he's been spending at the gym . . .

What if Reed hasn't been there every night?

Things have been off between us for a while and I'm not a fan of his new moody personality, but I'd *never* cheat on him. That doesn't mean he wouldn't cheat.

I take a closer look at the box. It doesn't have a store name or logo printed on it, and it's a weird size—too big for a bracelet and too deep for a necklace. A watch, maybe?

I open the lid.

At first, I'm not sure what I'm looking at—small glass bottles and a folded sheet of paper? Then I lift the paper and see the slender objects tucked beside the bottles.

Syringes.

My hands shake and the bottles clink against one another. Most athletes who play at my level know about PEDs, performance-enhancing drugs. Using PEDs—or doping—gives athletes an edge. Strength,

speed, or stamina—the results depend on the cocktail. I turn on the dome light and examine the labels.

Reed's cocktail of choice? Steroids.

Even as I stare at the evidence, I can't wrap my mind around this. Reed has a fight record that most amateur fighters would kill for. Why would he risk his future in the sport he loves? And his life?

Why didn't I see the signs?

His short temper and unpredictable mood swings.

The underground street fights.

The way he yelled at his mom.

Even the fist-sized hole in the wall in Reed's apartment. Picturing it now, I realize why it looked strange. The hole was too high to have been made by the doorknob.

So many things haven't added up over the last two months, since Reed started participating in the underground fights. I should've realized what was going on. Why didn't I connect the dots?

I'm done wondering.

Reed is going to connect them for me.

I close the box and shove it into the huge pocket of Dad's leather jacket as I get out of the car. Something is glowing on the ground, next to the curb.

My phone.

A text from Reed illuminates the screen.

where are u?

I pocket my phone and head back to the house, feeling raw.

When I look up, Reed is standing at the top of the stone steps, craning

his neck as he scans the yard. He sees me and waits for me to catch up with him.

“Hey. I came out to find you,” he says as I walk up the steps. “Tess said you went out to the car.”

He’s smiling.

I’m not.

I look around. This isn’t a conversation I want to have in front of an audience, but I don’t see anyone nearby. A retaining wall separates the stairs from the driveway, and tall hedges block the view to the house.

Reed tries to put his arm around me, but I walk past him.

“Are you still pissed off about dinner on Thursday?” he asks.

“We need to talk.” I’m not ready for this conversation. It’s like standing on the edge of a swimming pool when you know the water is freezing. You just have to jump. “I found something in your car when I was looking for my phone.” I reach into my jacket pocket. Reed’s skin pales when he sees the box. I hold it out between us, resisting the urge to chuck it at him.

“That’s not mine.”

I wave the box in front of him. “It was in *your* bag.”

“TJ needed somewhere to put it.” Reed looks everywhere but at me. “It’s his.”

“If you’re going to lie, you should look the person in the eye when you’re doing it.”

“I’m not—”

“Don’t treat me like I’m stupid. Tell me the truth or I’m going to walk away and I will *never* speak to you again.” He opens his mouth to say something and I point at him. “*Never.*”

I pace in front of the retaining wall, toying with my dog tags. If I keep moving, maybe this shitty reality won't catch me.

Reed glances over his shoulder, checking to make sure no one is around. "I can explain."

This is really happening.

"I need to put on some muscle fast. The guy I'm fighting in a few weeks outweighs me by fourteen pounds. I was going to stop after the fight. But I need this win to make it into the tournaments coming up if I want to book bigger fights." He's talking fast and pleading with me with his big blue eyes. "And what if Tess doesn't get a scholarship? She'll need money for tuition. If I don't attract some attention and get a sponsor, I can't help her."

"Don't use Tess as an excuse. If you get caught, you'll be banned from competing altogether. How will that help her?"

"Nobody will find out." He sounds so casual about it, like I caught him with a beer.

"Really? What if they test you?" After a fighter was caught doping at a regional championship last year, the league instituted random drug testing.

"They never test at this level unless someone gets reported or caught on-site. And I'm careful."

I exhale dramatically. "Well, that changes everything. I didn't realize how much thought you had put into cheating and pumping your body full of poison. I feel soooo much better now."

Reed's jaw muscles twitch. "It's not really cheating. I still have to win in the cage."

"Keep telling yourself that." I shove the box against his chest. "Take this. I don't want to touch it for another second."

Reed crams the box in the pocket of his cargo jacket, as if I'll forget it exists if it's out of sight.

"You've been lying to me for . . . how long, Reed? Two months? Or longer?"

"I told you I'm gonna stop."

"When?"

He rubs his hands over his face. "Soon."

I expected him to say *now* and beg me to forgive him—or help him. "Not good enough."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"It means you have to choose right now. Me or the drugs." I watch him and wait for him to make the right choice. Wait for him to pick me. But the longer he doesn't say anything, the more my heart breaks. What happened to the boy who brought me mashed potatoes every day for a week after I had my wisdom teeth removed? The boy I gave every part of myself to?

It doesn't matter.

He's gone.

"I just need a little more time," he says finally.

"You made your choice. We're over." Saying the words hurts even though I'm the person saying them.

He presses his palms against his temples. "Okay. This is a lot for you to take in. But don't throw away the last seven months."

I jab my finger at his chest. "*You* threw them away."

"A couple of months. That's all I need. After the tournaments I've got coming up I'll stop. I swear."

A minute ago he said he'd stop in a few weeks. Now it's a couple of months?

“You don’t have to make me any promises, Reed. This relationship is over. I don’t want a boyfriend who chooses drugs over me.”

The color drains from his face. “You’re pissed and you need some time to think,” he says, in the soothing tone he uses when I lose a soccer game. “We should talk after you calm down. I’ll take you home.”

“There’s nothing left to talk about. I’ll get a ride from Lucia.”

I try to walk around him, but Reed steps in front of me. “Are you running away from me?”

The accusation pisses me off. “Running? I’m not even walking fast. You’re paranoid. That garbage is screwing with your head. And I don’t run from anyone. I’m *walking* away because there’s nothing left to talk about.”

His temper flares. “Why are you being such a bitch?”

He did not just call me a bitch.

“Excuse me? Who do you think you’re talking to? I’m not one of your fangirls begging you to hook up with me while you’re all sweaty after a fight.”

“I’m talking to you like you’re my girlfriend, who won’t cut me a break.” The muscles along the back of his neck bulge. When did they get so big?

“I’m not your girlfriend anymore.”

He bristles. “Stop saying that. We’re not breaking up.”

“Even if you hadn’t been lying to me—which you have—do you think I could stand by and watch you poison yourself? I care about you.”

“You *care* about me?” He jerks back as if I slapped him. “You’re supposed to *love* me, not *care* about me. Or was that bullshit?”

“It’s a figure of speech. Get a grip.” But he doesn’t have one anymore. I see that now. “This conversation isn’t going anywhere.”

I try to walk away, but Reed catches my arm. “We can leave together.”

“There is no *we* anymore.”

“You can’t break up with me because of this, Peyton.” His voice wavers. “I need you.”

“I’m sorry.” A knot forms in my throat. I turn toward the concrete walkway that leads up to the house. I can see it over his shoulder. But Reed tugs on my arm. “Let go.”

“Not until you say we’ll work this out. That you love me and we’re still together,” he pleads.

“I can’t.” I try to pull away, a little harder this time.

Reed’s grip tightens and his fingers dig into my skin.

“I’m not messing around anymore, Reed. Let go.” I jerk my arm and he pulls me toward him with so much force that I hit his chest. He releases my arm, but I can’t get past him. He’s too close.

His nostrils flare and he’s breathing fast. “Yesterday you were kissing me. And now you don’t want me to touch you?”

He jabs at my shoulder with his fingers and pushes me back a few steps.

“Now you’re pushing me? I don’t think so.” I try to slip past him, but no matter which way I go he’s right there blocking my path.

“You’re breaking my heart, Peyton. You know that, right? And you don’t even give a shit.” He pushes me again, harder this time. I glance over my shoulder. The stairs are right behind me.

“Stop it! The steps are right there!” I look around for help, but I can’t see past the hedges.

“After seven months, that’s all you have to say to me?” Reed’s mouth forms a hard line.

I catch a glimpse of Reed’s arm moving through the air. Rocketing toward me.

His palm slams against my chest and it knocks the wind out of me.

The ground seems to slide out from under my feet, and I fall backward. I swing my arms, trying to regain my balance. But it's too late.

I'm already falling. . . .

My stomach plummets.

There's no up or down.

Colors blur and sounds bleed together.

My shoulder hits the step first, absorbing some of the impact. I grab for the retaining wall, but I can't catch ahold of anything. I'm half rolling, half skidding down the remaining steps. I see the ground, and I put my hands out in front of me to break my fall. But my knee hits the ground first.

My kneecap smashes against the concrete.

A shot of pain hits the back of my knee and splinters up my leg. A scream rips from my throat, and I manage to roll onto my side.

Reed is standing at the top of the steps, with his arms crossed. He shifts in and out of focus. I blink hard, and my vision sharpens.

For the first time, I see something different in Reed's eyes when he looks at me.

Rage.

I try to process what's happening, but my thoughts are jumbled. All I want to do is get away from him. I shift my weight to try to move. Pain shoots down the back of my leg behind my knee. I cry out, but my voice sounds strange, like it belongs to someone else. Like I'm not crumpled in a heap at the bottom of the stairs, looking up at the person who put me here.

"Are you okay?" someone calls out.

I turn my head and see two people running toward me. That's when I realize that I'm lying on the sidewalk where the steps end. The retaining wall ended at the bottom of the steps, and now people can see me.

“A girl fell down the stairs,” someone shouts.

The pain shoots down the back of my knee again. Strangers crowd around me. At least I’m not alone with Reed.

He jogs down the steps, playing the concerned boyfriend.

If that asshole doesn’t stay away from me—

“Peyton? Oh my god!” It’s Tess.

Everything will be okay now.

Tess rushes over and kneels beside me. She brushes the hair out of my eyes. “What happened?”

“We were arguing,” Reed says. The rage is gone. Now he looks panicked. “Peyton shoved past me, and I guess she lost her balance.”

The words hit me like bricks.

“I tried to grab her arm, but I wasn’t fast enough.” Reed hesitates as if he can’t bear to say the next part.

“And she fell.”