

Prologue

“Hey, Beckham. Wanna drive home?”

My mother tosses her car keys to me with a bright smile, and I snatch them out of the air. “Mom, please,” I say with a slight eye-roll. “Beckham is so old-school.”

“Well, excuse me.” She opens her tailgate, and I pull a fresh t-shirt from my gym bag. As I strip out of my sweat-soaked jersey, Mom let’s out a soft groan. “Ooh, geez! Braden’s using my bladder as a soccer ball again.”

“Take it easy in there, little man,” I say, bending down to talk to my baby brother, nestled in the warm, safe cocoon of my mother’s belly. “Wait til you’re out here to practice goal kicks, okay? I’ll show you how it’s done.”

Mom rests a hand on my cheek, her eyes sparkling. “You’re going to be the best big brother, AJ — and an amazing dad.”

“I’m s—”

“Hey, none of that. You hear me? I love you bunches, doodlebug...”

Mom’s voice fades as a new one fills my mind, singing the Irish ballad my mother used to lull me to sleep with when I was little. Its words pierce me like a beacon, drawing my mind from the deep.

*Blackbird singing in the sycamore tree
He sings to the moon and he sings to me
He sings of the love I long to see—*

The melody cuts off, and a trembling voice, one that’s both mysterious and hauntingly familiar, takes its place. “I know you’re in

there, AJ,” she says, so close her breath warms my ear. “Open your eyes. *Please.*”

Her voice is so earnest it moves me to try, but my eyelids won’t even budge. A mechanical hiss fills the room as a rush of air expands my lungs. My ribcage fights the intrusion, and a high-pitched alarm starts clanging somewhere above my head.

My visitor gasps. “Somebody, help! He’s waking up!”

My throat tightens around something foreign and frightening, making panic rise in my chest. I reach up and grapple with the device taped over my mouth, but the girl pries my hands away. “No, sweetie, shh, you’re okay. They’ll get the tube out in a second.”

My lids flutter, but the light pierces my corneas like a thousand tiny daggers, and I clamp them shut again. Unseen hands strip the tape from my cheeks, then my throat burns as a tube is pulled from my mouth, dragging a moan out with it. The girl’s hand tightens on mine, and I clutch it with what little strength I have.

“AJ?” Pounding footsteps carry my father’s shout into the room, then his vise-like grip closes around my other hand. “Oh, thank you, God. Thank you.”

My need to see him overrides my serious distaste for pain, and I force my eyes open, squinting against the blinding light. Dad’s face hovers over me, love and worry etched in every crevice, his tight smile half-hidden by the bristly beard on his normally smooth chin.

I try to return it, but my lips twist into a grimace instead. “What...”

“There was an accident,” he says, choking on a sob. “I thought I was going to lose you, too. But you’re going to be okay. *We’re* going to be okay, little man. I promise.”

As his words swirl around me, I cling to them like a buoy in the sea of pain just beginning to crash over me. My mind starts to sink, but

a single thought pierces the darkness before it swallows me. “Where’s Mom?”

His mouth presses into a tight line, but his shattered eyes speak the truth his lips refuse to utter. I shake my head, and the movement sends shockwaves through my skull. I try to run, try to escape this nightmare, but my torso screams in protest and my leg is a lead weight. When my eyes dart down to it, my stomach lurches. My left leg — my indisputable passport to the pros — is encased in a rigid brace from hip to ankle.

A dark face fills my vision. “C’mon now, son.” The man pushes me back against the bed with a bear-like grip. “You got stitches everywhere, inside and out. We can’t have you popping them open.”

“Get off me!”

A sob erupts from behind him, from the girl with gentle hands and a voice like silk. Her tears claw at my conscience, but grief drowns my regret. As I thrash on the bed, the man calls over his shoulder, his tone urgent. “Fifty milligrams propofol, IV push.”

A woman rushes over and, moments later, a lead blanket settles over me like an Appalachian snow. When the man steps aside, my heart leaps as my eyes finally land on the girl.

It’s you.

My lips long to speak her name, but it’s buried somewhere inside my numb mind. All I can do is reach out to her. Her hands slide around mine and cradle it as her full lips press against my knuckles. My heart twists as tears slide down her cheeks. I wish I could brush them away, could promise her everything’s gonna be okay. But it won’t be, not ever again. Because Mom’s not okay and my brother’s not okay, and everything in me wants to follow them to wherever it is they’ve gone.

Everything but the part of me that belongs to her.

My heart aches at the thought of leaving her, but my body and my mind beg for death. As a mist draws in around the edges of my vision, I stare into her glistening honey-brown eyes, desperate to hang onto her til my very last breath. As the haze deepens, a hundred white spots dance before my eyes like fireflies.

My lungs seize as clarity and confusion clash in my mind. I don't know why, but I have to live. For her. For the firefly.

With my last ounce of strength, I squeeze her hand, and her lips pull into a sad, sweet smile. She kisses my thumb, then her voice, husky with emotion, fills my ears once again. As I sink into the gray, my mother's sweet Irish lullaby washes over me like a summer breeze.

*Mo chroí, mo chroí, buaileann sé duit
Mise, a ghrá, beidh go deo*

*My heart, my heart, it beats for thee
Yours, my love, it will forever be*

Chapter One

Life is a kaleidoscope, doodlebug.

My mom dropped that random bit of wisdom on me the day she told me I was gonna be a big brother, and the unexpected memory sends a shot of pain arcing through my skull. I glare at the sea of headstones through the cracked window of the caretaker's shed, but the residents of the Hale Valley Cemetery slumber on, oblivious to the bitter pill lodged in my throat.

A movement pulls my eye to the corner, and my teeth grit. It's the girl again. The first two times I saw her in the cemetery, she pulled on a pair of bright pink garden gloves and fussed with the plants around a headstone under the sycamore. Today, she just stands and talks to the black granite slab, her light brown hair fluttering in the breeze blowing over the hilltop. That peaceful little smile she has, the one that makes my insides boil, tiptoes onto her face, and my upper lip curls into a sneer.

"Yo, man." Rafi's soft Puerto Rican accent fills the little building. "You checkin' out that girl again?"

Kyle's scoff pulls my eyes to the opposite corner of the shed – our usual hangout when we skip school – where he sits next to Peyton on the thin mattress he smuggled in months ago. "Dude, make a move already," he says with a smirk. "I'm startin' to think your knee isn't the only thing that got busted south of the border."

I throw him my infamous Hertz the Hellhound glower. On the soccer field, my menacing glare was known to rattle even the best defenders, but here in this rickety old shed, it's a pretty ballsy move. Kyle Bradley's temperament has two settings — patient as the pope

and raging bull — and there’s a fine line between them. But waving red flags is kinda my thing these days.

He just cocks one brow, which is irritating as all hell. A yellowed bruise rings one eye and his shaggy sand-colored hair could use a good washing. His faded denim jacket is as grungy as his hair, and the hole in the side of his secondhand work boot offers a peek at the dingy sock inside. Everything about him validates his status as King of the Untouchables — everything but his eyes, which are the same celestial blue as the forget-me-nots in my mother’s butterfly garden. The irony of such angelic eyes belonging to a degenerate like Kyle Bradley never fails to astound me.

“Yeah, go for it, man,” Rafi says. “*Esta buena.*”

“You do know none of us speak Spanish, right, Raf?” I ask.

He shrugs. “You’ll learn. Osmosis, *chacho.*”

I plop into the aluminum beach chair next to the window and rest my elbows on my knees, turning the scar that treks down my left leg white from the pressure. The warm May sunshine plays on my arm, and I scowl at the riot of freckles splattered across it. The green eyes and dark copper hair I inherited from my mom have grown on me over the years, but I still haven’t made peace with the freckles that cover practically every square inch of my body. Mom used to tell me they were adorable, but come on, she was my mom. What else was she gonna say?

My eyes drift to the blackbird sketched on the plywood above Kyle’s head, and my gut twists. The image showed up out of the blue a few months ago, but even Kyle doesn’t know how it got there, and this shed’s become his home away from home. The bird, delicate yet somehow fierce, reminds me of my mother and not just because she was a powerhouse in a petite package. Because *Blackbird* – the old Irish lullaby, not the song by the Beatles – was her favorite song.

Mom used to sing *Blackbird* to me before bed every night while my father played along on his guitar. He always joked if it wasn't for that song, I never would've been born. When he and Mom met in college, she immediately filed him in the "friend" column. He was crushed, but he played it smart, gathering intel on her while they built a rock-solid friendship. Then one night, out of the blue, he pulled out his guitar and strummed her favorite song for her. Just like that, she was hooked...and before they could say "oops," she was pregnant with me.

So it was their song first, and then it was ours, and when my brother was born, it would've been his, too. And on nights when my brain is too tired to ward off the ghosts rattling around inside, that song runs through my head like a broken record. But it's not my mom's voice singing. This one is deeper, richer, but no matter how hard I wrack my brain, the face it belongs to stays hidden in the fog. And I can't help but wonder if *Blackbird* was our song, too.

Peyton turns her sea-green eyes to me. "Come on, AJ," she says, tucking her dark golden hair behind one ear. "Go out there and introduce yourself."

"As what? The emperor of Marble Land?" I pat the arms of the beach chair. "A gimp with a title *and* a throne. She'll be all over me."

A familiar *thrum, thrum, thrum* pulses in my brain. I pat the pocket of my shorts to be sure my prescription bottle is still there. I hate taking meds, but some days the pain's so bad I can't breathe. Today might be one of them. The jury's still out.

Kyle snorts. "Marble Land. That's a good one." He takes a swig from a pint of tequila then tucks it under the far corner of the mattress. "Y'know, it's kinda twisted that you hang out in a cemetery. Since your mom's dead and all."

“Kyle!” Peyton smacks him on the shoulder then mouths “sorry” to me, her brows pinched together.

A flash of white streaks across my vision. Jury’s in. I pop open the pill bottle and toss a migraine tablet into my mouth.

Rafi’s stomach rumbles. “I’m starving, man. You guys want to go to Molly’s?”

“I can’t,” Peyton says. “I have about eighty-two cents in the bank right now.”

“It’s okay, *cariño*. I’ll pay for you.”

She tips her head at him. “Raf. I already owe you, like, a hundred burgers.”

“Nah, you cook for me all the time,” he says, his cheeks flushed. “Besides, when you’re a famous chef, you’re gonna let me eat at your restaurant for free, right?”

She snickers, but Kyle cuts off her response. “Hey, you two go on ahead,” he says to me and Rafi as his eyes glide over to her. “We’ll catch up to you in a few.”

Peyton’s tsk morphs into a giggle as Kyle tickles her waist. Raf’s mouth goes tight, and he jumps up, banging his camp chair against the wall with a clatter. As he stalks out of the shed, I trudge after him with a sigh. When I step into the bright sunlight, my eyes dart over to the sycamore, but the girl is gone.

“See?” Rafi turns on me. “You lookin’ for that girl. Why don’t you just admit you got a thing for her, man?”

“Sure. As soon as *you* admit you got a thing for Peyton – instead of professing your undying love, one burger at a time.”

“Dude, shh.” His eyes flick back to the shed. “You think I’m stupid enough to make a move on Kyle’s girlfriend?”

I snort. “Girlfriend? Please. Their entire relationship is based on three things: S, E, and X. Come on, man. You’ve seen them. They’re not exactly lovey-dovey.”

With a throaty sigh, Rafi scurries over the low stone wall at the back of the cemetery. I follow, my left knee twinging with each step I take down the steep footpath through the woods. The trail spills out at the creek on Potter’s Mill Road, which sees less traffic than a synagogue on Easter Sunday, making it the perfect hideout for our cars when we ditch school. We jump from rock to rock across the creek then climb into Rafi’s aged Chevy pickup. I barely get my six foot one frame buckled in before he roars onto the narrow lane, splattering dirt onto Peyton’s bumper with his off-road tires.

Johnny Cash’s gravelly voice belts out a song about a boy named Sue, but for the first time in my admittedly sketchy memory, Rafi doesn’t make it a duet. These days, I prefer silence over small talk, but his misery makes my skin shrink. So I plunge into the void.

“Why don’t you just ask her out?”

“Nah, man,” he says. “I been friend-zoned since the day we met.”

“It’s a pretty short leap from friend to boyfriend.”

“You *loco*.”

He smacks me in the gut, and his fingers brush the scar running up the center of my abdomen. Instead of irritation, I feel a queer sense of gratitude. Raf’s the only person in my life who doesn’t treat me like I’m gonna shatter if you so much as breathe on me. Well, him and my physical therapist. But that guy’s a sadist.

“And why should I listen to you, anyway?” he asks. “You the fool who dumped Lexi Christopoulos, man.”

My lips tighten. “We were just friends.”

“Yeah, right. You can’t tell me you never had a thing for Sexy Lexi.”

I didn’t, but I don’t bother saying so.

He lets out a low wolf-whistle. “She was one of the hottest girls in school, man.”

A splinter of guilt pierces my chest at the word “was.” With a mane of wavy brown hair, curves for days, and the most stunning arctic blue eyes you’ll ever see, nearly every guy in the county between thirteen and thirty knew Lexi Christopoulos as Sexy Lexi. But after I bailed on her, she went from Barbie to bad-ass, with a spiked platinum faux hawk, a nose ring, and a wardrobe Alice Cooper would envy. And I’m pretty sure it’s my fault.

I glare out the window as I try to pull the splinter out, but that bad boy’s wedged in there tight. “Why do I even hang out with you?” I ask with a huff.

“You don’t have a choice, man. But you should be thanking me. I’m the best thing that’s happened to you since you committed social suicide.”

I grunt, but I gotta admit he’s right. After the crash, I was out of school for four months, and the social isolation that would have driven me nuts before became my sanctuary. I would’ve dropped school for good, but my father made me go back. So during that first couple of weeks back, I made it clear to one and all I am no longer the Hero of Hale Valley they’ve always known and loved. This AJ is Chernobyl in meltdown; best to just keep your distance. But Rafael Delgado’s not known for getting the memo. He latched onto me and wouldn’t let go no matter what I did. I finally quit trying to break away because he and Peyton and Kyle are the only ones at school who don’t treat me like I’m some kinda side show freak. And that’s because we’re all in this freak show together.

“That crash musta scrambled your brains, man,” Rafi says. “You went from hangin’ out on cloud nine with the Christopoulos triplets and their Gucci crew to bottom-feeding with us Untouchables. By *choice*.”

My jaw tightens. Lexi and Theo, two-thirds of the Christopoulos trio, were my best friends — until last September, anyway. After the crash, I shoved everyone out of my life and dove as deep underground as I could get. But when I jumped off one side of the social ladder, Theo and Lexi fell off the other. Now, cloud nine is a thing of the past for all three of us. And that’s totally my fault.

Most of the families in Hale Valley have lived here for generations, so the social circles at school were practically formed in the womb. This makes it nearly impossible for new kids to break into any of the established cliques. I lucked out because I wasn’t the only new kid in school the first day of third grade. The Christopoulos triplets – Lexi, Theo, and their sister, Lina – started the same day, and I clicked with Theo and Lexi instantly. Before long, their novelty as triplets, their good looks, and their father’s money rocketed them to the top rung of the social ladder, and they dragged me along with them.

Kyle and his little brother, Max, on the other hand, have spent their whole lives trapped on the bottom rung, but only those who were born here really get the gist of why. All I know is their father raised hell and burned bridges his entire life before roaring out of town on a stolen Harley, giving Hale Valley the finger all the way down Main Street as he left. As if the sins of the father weren’t enough, the Bradley family hasn’t had more than two nickels to rub together for generations. And at Hale Valley High, where your worth is determined by the emblem on your car and the tags on your clothes, being poor is a grievous sin.

With his big heart and ebullient personality, Rafi could've climbed his way up the ladder, at least halfway. But when he moved here in ninth grade, it didn't take long for him to pick up on the fact that Kyle was something of an outcast. So Raf did what his devoutly religious mamá taught him to do — he became Kyle's best friend.

Peyton Bell's debut at Hale Valley High was a whole different story. When she moved to town in the middle of tenth grade, the arrival of some fresh blood in a smokin' hot package threw the male population of our school into an all-out uproar. The female contingent...well, let's just say they weren't quite as welcoming. So Kyle and Rafi — and me, I guess — are her only real friends. And it chafes me almost as much as it does Raf to watch her fall for every guy who turns on the charm just long enough to lure her into bed. Which, as of a few weeks ago, includes Kyle.

I look over at Rafi as he parks in front of the diner. "I could talk to her for you."

His eyes go wide. "No, man. She don't see me like that. Besides, a beautiful girl like Peyton's never gonna fall for a short, fat dude like me."

At just five-five, there's no denying he's short, but fat's a bit of an overstatement. But once the "fat" label got tossed, it stuck to Raf like glue. And, boy, has it done a number on the guy's self-esteem.

I cock a brow at him. "Hey, next to Peyton, you're practically Shaquille O'Neal."

His rich chuckle fills the truck as his eyes shift out the windshield. "Speaking of beautiful girls," he says, his smile growing into a wide Delgado grin, "it's your lucky day, man."