

# Prologue

September

HEY, BECKHAM. WANNA DRIVE HOME?

My mother's muffled words drift through the shadowy corners of my mind. I try to open my eyes, but my entire body feels like lead. My own voice, distorted and far away, echoes in my head.

*Mom, please. Beckham is so old school.*

*Well, excuse me. Oof! Your little brother's using my bladder as a soccer ball again.*

*Hey, little man, wait 'til you're born to practice those goal kicks. I'll show you how it's done.*

Mom's face lights up the shadows in my mind, a broad smile on her lips as her coppery hair flaps in the breeze from the car window.

*You're going to be the best big brother, AJ . . . and an amazing dad.*

*Mom, I'm sor—*

*Hey, none of that. Do you hear me? I love you bunches, doodlebug. No matter what.*

A lilting voice overlaps my mother's, singing the Irish ballad she used to lull me to sleep with when I was little. Its familiar words pierce my mind like a beacon, drawing me up from the deep.

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

The melody cuts off, and a voice, mysterious yet hauntingly familiar, takes its place. “I know you’re in there, AJ,” she says, so close her breath warms my ear. “Open your eyes. Come back to us. *Please.*”

Her plea is so earnest it moves me to try, but my eyelids barely flutter. With a mechanical hiss, a rush of air expands my lungs. As my ribcage fights the intrusion, a high-pitched alarm clangs above my head.

She gasps. “AJ?” Her whisper becomes a shout. “Somebody help! I think he’s waking up!”

My throat tightens around something foreign and frightening. Panic rises in my chest as I claw at the device taped over my mouth.

“Don’t fight it, sweetie.” The girl wrestles my hands away. “The nurse is coming. He’ll get the tube out in a second.”

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

“AJ?” Pounding footsteps carry my father’s cry into the room, then his viselike grip closes around my other hand. “Oh God, thank you.”

My need to see him overrides my serious distaste for pain, so I force my eyes open, squinting against the light. Dad’s face hovers over me, love and worry etched in every crevice. His tight smile is half hidden by the bristly beard on his normally clean-shaven face. I try to return it, but my lips twist into a grimace instead. “What . . . what happened?”

“You were in an accident”—his voice cracks—“and I thought I was going to lose you too. But you’re going to be okay, little man. *We’re going to be okay.*”

I cling to his words 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. “Mom?”

His mouth presses into a tight line, but his shattered eyes speak the truth his lips refuse to utter. I shake my head, not willing to believe it, and the movement sends shockwaves through my skull. His throaty whisper—*I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry*—makes me want to run, want to escape this nightmare, but when I try to get up, my torso screams in protest and my leg refuses to budge. My eyes dart down to it, and my stomach lurches. My left leg—my golden ticket to the pros—is propped on a foam wedge, encased in a rigid brace from hip to ankle.

A dark face fills my vision. “C’mon now, son.” He pushes me back against the bed with a bearlike 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 tug at my conscience, but grief drowns my regret. As I thrash on the bed, the man hollers instructions over his shoulder. I scratch at his arms, but the adrenaline giving me false strength is fading fast. A woman rushes over with a syringe, and moments later a lead blanket settles over me like an Appalachian snow. When my hands drop, the man steps aside, giving me my first view of the girl. My heart leaps.

*It’s you.*

My lips long to speak her name, but it’s buried somewhere inside my fractured mind. I reach out, desperate for her touch, and her hands slide around mine and cradle it as her full lips press against my knuckles. As tears stream down her cheeks, my stomach twists. I wish I could brush them away, could hold

her tight and promise her everything's gonna be okay. But it won't be, not ever again, because Mom's not okay and my baby 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 the girl, but my body and my mind beg for death. As a mist draws in around the edges of my vision, I stare into her luminous honey-brown eyes, determined to hang on to her until my very last breath. As the haze deepens, a hundred white spots dance before my eyes like fireflies, and I welcome the darkness lurking behind them.

*You have to live, AJ.* My mom's voice, soft but firm, flows through my mind like a summer breeze. *For her. For the firefly.*

As her presence fades, my heart screams to follow her, but my conscience binds me to this world. Because my mother is—was—almost always right. So I know I'm needed here. I just don't know why. And even as my heart splinters into a million pieces, a sense of purpose settles over me.

I blink to clear my vision and find the girl hovering over me, panic in her eyes. With my last ounce of strength, I squeeze her hand and whisper, "Don't cry. I'm here."

Her lips pull into a sad, sweet smile. She kisses my thumb, then her voice, husky with emotion, fills my ears once again. As my mind sinks into the gray, my mother's sweet Irish lullaby ferries me into a dreamless sleep.

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

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

# Chapter One

## Eight Months Later

LIFE IS A KALEIDOSCOPE, DOODLEBUG.

My mom dropped that random bit of wisdom on me the day she told me she was pregnant again, and the unexpected memory sends a shot of pain arcing through my chest. 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. No matter how deeply or thoroughly they'd been loved, it hadn't saved any of them. And it hadn't saved her.

So what's the effing point of love anyway?

A movement pulls my eye to the far corner of the cemetery. My teeth grit. It's the girl again. The cemetery is usually deserted in the middle of the day, but this girl's been here the last couple of times we ditched school to hang out in the shed. Last time, she'd pulled on a pair of garden gloves a shocking color of pink and fussed with the plants around a headstone near the sycamore. Today, she just talks to the black granite slab, her golden-brown hair fluttering in the breeze blowing over the hilltop. When that peaceful smile she has, the one that makes my blood boil, tiptoes onto her face, my lips pull into a sneer. What kind of twisted headcase talks to a dead person—and *smiles* while she's doing it?

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

"Dude, make a move already." Kyle smirks at me from the tattered brown plaid loveseat in the corner, where he sits with

Peyton, the token girl in our little band of misfits. “You haven’t chased a single skirt all year. I’m startin’ to think you busted more than just your knee 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 threadbare 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 lowlife like Kyle Bradley never fails to astound me.

“Kyle’s right, man. *Ella es bonita.*”

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

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

I plop into the aluminum beach chair by the window and rest my elbows on my knees, turning the scar trekking 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 red hair I inherited from my mom have grown on me over the years, but I still haven’t made peace with the freckles covering 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. My gut clenches. 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 is 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 Irish ballad, not the Beatles hit—was her favorite song.

When I was little, Mom sang *Blackbird* to me every night while my father played along on his guitar. He always joked if it weren't for that song, I never would've been born. When he and Mom met in college, he fell head over heels right out of the gate, but she filed him in the friend column—until the night 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 on repeat. But it's not my mom's voice singing. This one is deeper, richer, but no matter how hard I rack 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.

"Come on, AJ." Peyton twirls a strand of her silky wheat-blond hair around one finger, her sea-green eyes sparkling. "Just go out there and introduce yourself."

"As what? The mayor of Marble Town?" 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 cargo 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. Jury's still out.

Kyle snorts. "Marble Town. That's a good one." He takes a swig from a pint of tequila, then tucks it under the cushion. "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.

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. "Yo, I'm starving. You guys want to go to Molly's?"

"Yeah, I could go for a milkshake," Kyle says. He shoots Peyton a sly sideways glance. "But you two go on ahead. We'll catch up in a few."

Peyton shakes her head with a little eye roll. She starts to rise, then giggles as he pulls her onto his lap and tickles her waist.

Rafi leaps up and stalks out of the shed, and I trudge after him, not eager for an eyeful. As I step through the door, my gaze drifts over to the sycamore, but the girl is gone.

"See? You lookin' for that girl again." Rafi folds a stick of gum into his mouth and talks around it. "Why don't you just admit you got a thing for her, man?"

"Sure. Soon as you admit you have a thing for Peyton."

"Bro!" His wide eyes flick back to the shed, and he lowers his voice to a harsh whisper. "You think I'm stupid enough to make a move on Kyle's girlfriend?"

I snort. "Girlfriend? Please. Their 'relationship' is built on just three things: s, e, and x. Why else would they hide it from everyone at school?"



Rafi's round face goes red, and he 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 path through the woods. The trail ends 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 skip school to hang out in the cemetery. Rafi and I jump from rock to rock across the creek, then climb into his aged red Chevy pickup. I barely get my six-foot-one frame buckled in before he roars onto the country lane, splattering dirt onto Peyton's bumper with his off-road tires.

Johnny Cash's gravelly voice fills the cab, belting 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. I been friend-zoned since the day we met."

"It's a pretty short leap from friend to boyfriend."

"You loco."

With a chuckle, he smacks me in the gut, and his fingertips 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 they 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."

I bite back a snarl. "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 whistle. "She was the hottest girl in school, man."

The word *was* drives a splinter of guilt into my chest. Thanks to her mane of wavy mahogany hair, curves for days, and the most stunning ice-blue eyes the world has ever seen, 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 badass, with a spiked platinum faux hawk, piercings in her nose and helix, and a wardrobe Marilyn Manson 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 tight. I turn my glare on Raf. "Why do I even hang out with you?"

"Hey, you should be thanking me, man. I'm the best thing that's happened to you since you committed social suicide."

I grunt, but I gotta admit he's right. Between the ICU and the rehab hospital, I was out of school for four months. Before the crash, the social isolation would have driven me out of my mind; ever since, it's been my preference. So my first week back, I made it clear to one and all I'm 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 on to me and wouldn't let go no matter what I did, and 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 sideshow freak. And that's because we're all in this freak show together.

"That crash musta scrambled your brains," Rafi says. "You went from hangin' on cloud nine with the Christopoulos triplets and their Gucci crew to bottom-feeding with us Untouchables—by *choice*."

I clench my jaw to keep from biting his head off. Theo and Lexi, two-thirds of the Christopoulos trio, have been my best friends for over half my life. Well, they were anyway. After the crash, I shoved everyone away and dove as deep underground as I could get. But when I took a swan dive off one side of the social ladder, Theo and Lexi fell off the other, and 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 really tough on new kids, who can linger on the fringes of society for years before being accepted into one of the established cliques. Lucky for me, I wasn't the only new kid on the first day of third grade. The Christopoulos triplets—Theo, Lexi, and Lina—were new in town, too, and I clicked with Theo and Lexi instantly. Before long, their novelty as triplets, their good looks, and their rich-kid status rocketed them to the top rung of the social ladder, and they dragged me along with them.

Kyle and his kid 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's never had more than two nickels to rub together, which is a grievous sin in our too-big-for-its-britches little school. So when Kyle had to repeat ninth grade, forcing him into our graduating class, one of our more cold-blooded classmates crowned him King of the Untouchables, a title he's never even tried to disprove.

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

Peyton Bell's debut on the social stage was a whole different story. When she moved to town with her mom a couple of years ago, 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 could talk to her for you," I tell Rafi as he parks in front of the diner.

"Nah, man, she don't see me like that. Besides, a 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 smirk. "Hey, next to Peyton, you're practically Shaquille O'Neal."

His rich chuckle fills the truck. When his eyes shift out the windshield, his smile grows into a wide Delgado grin. "Speaking of beautiful girls"—he hitches a thumb at the diner—"it's your lucky day."

Enjoyed this sample? Mark your calendar! *Life is a Kaleidoscope* will be released in paperback and ebook May 2023!