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# ERIC

JODY KAYE

Eric, The Kingsbrier Quintuplets #1  
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This book contains adult language and scenes. It is not recommended for readers under 18 years of age.

Cover Design Jody Kaye

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The Kingsbrier Quintuplets

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*Eric*  
*Brier*  
*Daveigh*  
*Miss Cavanaugh*  
*Cavanaugh*  
*Adam*  
*Colette*  
*Colton*

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## Who's Who at Kingsbrier

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\*\*This list was compiled and included in this book *by fan request*. It may contain spoilers. [Click here](#) to go to Chapter 1.\*\*

### [View the Family Tree](#)

**Adam Kingsbrier Cavanaugh** — Quint #1. Oldest son of Ross & Rose. Married to Temple. Father of Gracyn and Rhiannon. Secretly quit medical school and worked for the government. Currently works for Walsh Security.

**Alan Adair** — Divorced from Diana. Ginny's stepfather. Keely's father.

**Alcee Bennett** — Married to Contessa. Father of Journey. Executive at Kingsbrier's winery. Adam's high school friend.

**Benita** — Kingsbrier's cook & housekeeper when Rose was a child.

**Brier Rose (Cavanaugh) Newhouse** — Quint #2. Oldest daughter of Ross & Rose. Married to Drew. Mother of Lily, Roseanne, Dash, and Gatlin. Former Sheriff's Deputy. Founded charity for underprivileged children with Colette.

**Capote** — Dash's cat.

**Cassidy Cavanaugh** — Younger daughter of Colton & Keely. Half sister to Gracyn.

**Chip** — Dash and Kat's boss.

**Colton Cavanaugh** — Quint #5 (identical twin to Eric) Youngest son of Ross & Rose. Married to Keely. Stepfather of Gracyn. Father of Cassidy. Former Navy. Runs the commercial side of Cavanaugh Construction.

**Colette (Strand/Newhouse) Walsh** — Married to Devon. Mother of Cadence. Lily Anne & Rodger's adopted daughter. Drew's younger sister. A model. Founded charity for underprivileged children with Brier.

**Corey Cavanaugh** — Eric & Ginny's son. Older brother of Cricket.

**Cricket Cavanaugh** — Eric & Ginny's daughter. Younger sister of Corey Cavanaugh.

**Cris Sanchez** — Married to Daveigh. Father of Mateo and Cruz Sanchez. Former musician turned songwriter. Part owner of Kingsbrier's Winery and the Ranch & Vineyard Manager.

**Cruz Sanchez** — Second son of Cris & Daveigh. Mateo's younger brother.

**Dash Newhouse** — Drew & Brier's older son. Brother of Lily, Roseanne, and Gatlin. Dash is featured in Going Down.

**Daveigh "Davy" Joy (Cavanaugh) Sanchez** — Quint #4. Younger daughter of Ross & Rose. Married to Cris. Stepmother of Mateo. Mother of Cruz. Veterinarian.

**Diana Adair** — Ginny's mother. Keely's stepmother. A librarian.

**Devon Walsh** — Married to Colette. Father of Cadence. Phoebe's younger brother. Head of IT at Walsh Security. Works with Adam Cavanaugh.

**"Drew" Andrew Newhouse** — Married to Brier. Father of Lily, Roseanne, Dash, and Gatlin. Lily Anne & Rodger's son. Colette's older brother. Former professional football player. Adam Cavanaugh's childhood best friend. Raised alongside the quints.

**Eric Cavanaugh** — Quint #3 (identical twin to Colton). Middle son of Ross & Rose. Married to Ginny. Father of Corey and Cricket. Runs the residential side of Cavanaugh Construction.

**Eric Kingsbrier** — Married to "Miss Joy" Kingsbrier. Rose's father.

**Gatlin Newhouse** — Drew & Brier's younger son. Brother of Lily, Roseanne, and Dash.

**Ginny (Adair) Cavanaugh** — Married to Eric Cavanaugh. Mother of Corey and Cricket. Daughter of Diana. Stepsister of Keely. Designer at Cavanaugh Construction.

**Gracyn Adair/Cavanaugh** — Adam & Keely's daughter. Colton's stepdaughter. Half sister to Cassidy and Rhiannon.

**Gwen** — Dash & Kat's ski resort coworker.

**Jai Sethi** — Father of Kat. A Boston-based surgeon.

**Joe** — Sheriff's Deputy who attended the Academy with Brier.

**Journey Bennett** — Alcee & Tessa's daughter.

**"Miss Joy" Kingsbrier** — Married to Eric Kingsbrier. Rose's mother.

**"Kat" Katahdyn Sethi** — Daughter of Jai. Dash's girlfriend. A ski patrol medic.

**Keely (Adair) Cavanaugh** — Married to Colton. Mother of Gracyn and Cassidy. Ginny's stepsister. Alan's daughter. Diana's stepdaughter. A physical therapist.

**Lacey Tompkins** — Brier's frenemy. A flight attendant.

**Lily Newhouse** — The older of Drew & Brier's twin daughters. Sister to

Roseanne, Dash, and Gatlin.

**Lily Anne (Andrew) Newhouse** — Married to Rodger. Drew and Colette's mother. Rose's life-long friend.

**Liz Sanchez** — Cris Sanchez's first wife. Mother of Mateo.

**Mateo Sanchez** — Cris's son. Daveigh's stepson. Cruz's older brother.

**Monroe Walsh** — Devon and Phoebe's stepmother.

**Phoebe Walsh** — Devon's older sister. CEO of Walsh Security.

**Rhiannon Cavanaugh** — Younger daughter of Adam & Temple. Half sister to Gracyn.

**Rodger Newhouse** — Married to Lily Anne . Rose's distant cousin. Drew and Colette's father.

**Rose Kingsbrier-Cavanaugh** — Married to Ross. Mother of Adam, Brier, Eric, Daveigh, and Colton. A former wild-child. Headed Kingsbrier Holding company.

**Roseanne Newhouse** — The younger of Drew & Brier's twin daughters. Sister to Lily, Dash, and Gatlin.

**Ross Cavanaugh** — Married to Rose. Father of Adam, Brier, Eric, Daveigh, and Colton. Owns Cavanaugh Construction & Kingsbrier Wineries.

**“Tessa” Contessa (D’Amico) Bennett** — Married to Alcee. Mother of Journey Bennett. Temple's younger sister. Adam's high school lab partner.

**Temple (D’Amico) Cavanaugh** — Married to Adam. Stepmother of Gracyn. Mother of Rhiannon Tessa Bennett's older sister. A doctor.

**“Miss Thandie”** — Rose's executive assistant at Kingsbrier Holding company.



For my mom  
(1946-2013)

## Colton

Around town, they call us the Kingsbrier Quintuplets. On the technical side, we're not Kingsbriers. Our daddy, Ross, married the *incorrigible* Miss Rose Kingsbrier six years before we were born. It's only because we live on the plot of land that holds our momma's family name that we're not referred to as the Cavanaugh Quintuplets. Though, each of the five of us has had it pounded into our heads to answer to either name when it's called.

Daddy doesn't care one iota his progeny are better known by his wife's maiden name. I figure he's damn proud they don't call us anything worse—especially me since I have a knack for getting into scuffles at school and on the football field, back alleys, and I've thrown down in pasture or two. Lately, he's been nostalgic, remarking about the no-nonsense way Momma managed to raise five babies and giving all the credit to her.

Even I'm aware of when to mind my manners in public, and I'm smart enough to know Momma couldn't have done it on her own. It's not easy keeping five kites flying at once. Hold the string too tight and it flounders. Give the line too much slack and you never know where you'll be chasing off to trying to find it or what tree you'll climb to get the kite back unscathed. I'd like to see any other parents manage as well as mine did. We haven't made it easy on them.

Kingsbrier, the property, is a sprawling Texas ranch. The house is low on the horizon, cut into a rolling hill, so it looks to only be one story. Wide wings of

bedrooms flank either side of the Tudor home my grandfather built. An enormous pool hides behind the left wing. To the right, where our rooms lay, are immaculate gardens. Acres of green grass cut off where a grove of trees was planted long ago. A stable, several outbuildings for storage, and residences—once used to house occasional staff members—are spaced across the vast property.

This land was Rose's inheritance from her oil-rich father who passed when us quints were little. It was a windfall Ross had little need of as Daddy is a self-made man in the construction business. There was no silly prenuptial agreement. Ross simply told Granddaddy he was disinterested in Momma's fortune. The bulk falls to us when we turn twenty-five.

Determined to instill a work ethic in his kids, Ross is about to cut us off and we'll have to figure out life's hard knocks on our own. The five of us have always known about this, but for as down to earth as our parents made our upbringing, ask me how intimidating it is for a kid raised in a mansion? Over the next seven years, we'll either forge paths our own or fall and be trampled. I'm thinking he hopes we'll learn to pick ourselves up, brush the dust off, and keep going.

As cocky as it sounds, the Kingsbrier quints have been proving people wrong since the day we were born. Hell, it may be a family trait. Granddaddy wanted grandchildren to carry on his legacy. After years of trying, Rose and Ross agreed to fertility treatments, figuring maybe they'd wind up with twins.

What they got was a pair, a spare, and a spare, and yet another spare. Eric and I are a set of identical twin boys. Of the other three babies, only one was supposed to be a girl; my sister Brier. However, Daddy tells the tale that he'd already decided not to underestimate his children when our mother had managed to stay pregnant for so long with all those buns in the oven. So, when a second daughter—whom they'd spent months referring to as Davy—made a grand entrance as baby number four, displacing the birth order for Eric and me, and making me the youngest, he wasn't shocked.

Now, with five eighteen-year-olds ready to leave the nest, it's anyone's guess what'll happen. Or maybe not.

Plenty is predictable around this house. Like how Brier came home before curfew from the party we were at celebrating our high school graduation, which is this afternoon. She pretended to go to bed and then snuck back out for one last hoorah in case the discipline hammer falls on all of us. I'm pretty sure B knows what I've overheard this morning.

Cotton-mouthed from too many beers last night, I slunk down the stairs after the enormous wooden front door shut. Being hung-over in front of our mother is

not something I advise.

Momma is standing outside, inspecting the front garden. Judging by her demeanor, Mrs. Rose Kingsbrier-Cavanaugh believes the rumor is true.

“I’m too young for this, Ross.” She points a manicured finger at her long blonde hair. For as long as I can recall, it’s only ever down around her shoulders at daybreak. “The lot of them may give me white streaks, but this color is not from a bottle.”

Daddy kisses her and I spy a moment of solace passing between them. I should feel worse for spying on them from the dining room window. But I don’t. Neither looks as if they’ve slept a wink and if they did, it was fitful. The fact that only four of the five of us quints were in our rooms this morning when my parents awakened is the least of their problems.

Those big life lessons? From what I’ve garnered over the past few minutes, someone’s about to learn them. Thank fuck it’s not me.

Daddy heads for his truck and turns over the engine. Ross Cavanaugh isn’t one to abandon a situation, but he’d agreed to muck out the stalls and feed the horses in Daveigh’s absence this morning. Even I’ll admit the second of my sisters deserved a little time off. That girl is the single one of us everyone counts on. Had Daddy balked, asking Daveigh to do her part anyway, she would have put on her work boots and driven down the road without reservation. Even assured Daddy’s taking care of her chores, it surprised me Daveigh wasn’t up with the rooster, sitting in the kitchen to watch the sunrise when I popped in there to fill a mug with raw eggs for protein.

Momma shakes her head, touching her temple. Lord, I do not envy my twin brother this morning. Part of me considers warning him.

Upstairs, I turn on the shower and crack the door seam between the Jack and Jill bathroom connecting Eric’s room to mine.

“I’m going to miss you.” Ginny, his girlfriend, pulls Eric’s arm over her.

She’s nestled in his bed. Eric plays with her long, dark blonde locks fanning in halo against his pillow. Ginny should have left at least an hour ago so our mother doesn’t find her there. None of the rest of us quints are quite so clueless to consider barging into the room without knocking first. But today morbid curiosity fascinates me about their relationship instead of being envious he’s found the one person to make him happy.

At first, Ginny slept here nearly every weekend. Recently it’s become a lot more. Like a lot, a lot. She has a stepsister who lives in Maine and parents who believe she’s spending all these nights with friends. I keep my mouth shut because it’s fun to have something to hang over Ginny’s head. On a good day, I scare the bejesus out of her. What can I say? It’s something I enjoy doing and

keeps Ginny on her toes, reminding her I'm not Eric.

Before sliding the door shut, I spy his high school soccer trophies displayed on a bookshelf. Eric plans to stay at Kingsbrier after graduation. Those will have to go. His Nickelback and Evanescence posters hang on the wall over her collection of Toby Keith and Tim McGraw compact disks. Yup, those are staying. Although, we might wind up using them for target practice.

"What's the saying about loving someone more when they go away and come back? Besides, your college is an hour from here. We'll see each other all the time. We have the entire summer before you leave, right? Colton's out of here as soon as the ink dries on his diploma."

Tell it like it is, brother. I chuckle under my breath. The walls here are fucking paper thin, but I get it. He's my other half. The person who keeps me grounded. Little does Eric know he's about to get grounded for the next eighteen years. I doubt he'll have the chance to miss me.

"What's with the sad look all of a sudden, Sugar? Got something on your mind? No worries, okay. Someday I'm going to make you Mrs. Cavanaugh. After you go and get an accounting degree."

Or maybe sooner. Or maybe not at all.

My brother is a good guy and I'm a dick for wanting to see this play out.

"What if I didn't go? Or what if you came with me?" I hear Ginny's voice tremble with hope. She's about to lay it on the line.

"You have to go, and I'm right where I'm supposed to be. My daddy's construction business is my life. I've known it since I was a kid."

Damn, I can feel the adrenaline coursing through my veins. I want to keep listening, but I need a shower and if I don't get wet soon, I'll regret it when Brier drags her ass home and hogs all the hot water.

I jump into the tub, rubbing the soap between my palms. I scrub my face with the lather and use the fresh woodsy scent on my pits, and my cock, and what the hell, in my shaggy blond hair too since it gets the job done quicker.

"You up, Eric?" Momma calls through the locked door to his room. "I need to talk to you."

Ginny has no time to get dressed let alone shimmy out the low window. Instead, she wraps the top sheet around her. From behind the curtain, I see him shove her clothes underneath the bed while she flees into the bathroom. She presses her ear to the door, trying to catch what the voices were saying.

She shouldn't do that. It muffles them.

"It has been a long night, so let's cut to the chase, Eric. There is a rumor around town Ginny was at Richardson's Market this week—"

"Lotsa people go to the grocery store, Momma." The springs squeak as Eric

flops down on his bed.

Concentrating on the door, Ginny hasn't heard the shower cut off.

"What're you eavesdropping on, gorgeous?" I can't help myself and lean my body in, pinning Ginny to the wood, and blocking her in place with my meat hooks.

My mohawk shag of white-blond hair is dripping wet. I was nice enough to wrap a towel at my midsection. Otherwise, I'm bare-chested, peering down the gap between her breasts, and licking my lips with anticipation.

I catch Gin in a stare, making her wonder what my intentions are towards her. I mean, the way we're standing here with nothing but my twin brother's bedsheet separating us leaves little to the imagination. And I'd like to know what the hell she was thinking when she devised this plan.

## *Ginny*

I'm pinned against the bathroom door by Colton. He doesn't particularly like me. He doesn't seem to like anyone except his brothers and sisters. But that's the least of my many problems right now. Eric's mother is delivering the news I've been to chicken to give my boyfriend.

I love Eric and, for both of our sakes, I need to hear what's being discussed in my boyfriend's room. I'm not sure what Miss Rose actually knows. I do know it had been stupid going to a local store. Brier would have had a better plan. Brier always finds a way to make it look like she keeps her nose clean.

"I don't know who y'all think you are fooling. Ginny's tennis shoes are right there and I'll bet you the bright pink stain on the heel is from stepping on my azaleas." Rose notifies her son.

We've been found out. Moreover, I've been found out. I forgot I stepped on a fallen petal climbing through the window last night in my cheap white tennis shoes.

Planting a different bush under each window is how Miss Rose intended to catch every sneaky child in this house. It doesn't explain Brier's absence, but the rest of us went to bed sure that girl weaseled her way out, yet again, without using the front door.

Rose raises her voice, "Colton, for heaven's sake, let your brother's pregnant girlfriend be. Ginny, get your butt out here."

I let out a long-held breath. While Eric is built lean and muscular through construction work, his twin brother is massive from playing football and weight training. Being near Colton clothed is intimidating enough, I don't want to consider our proximity given the lack thereof.

My jaw drops. *Pregnant*. Eric knows I'm having a baby.

Colton's light eyebrows raise. He laughs menacingly under his breath, mocking, "I have no use for my brother's leftovers." Turning to walk toward his own space, he adjusts the towel, flashing me his ass. "You know he's broke, right? We don't see a penny until we turn twenty-five. Good luck raising that thing, cuz there ain't no changing my granddaddy's will."

Tears prick behind my eyes. I've only cried once so far because there is no sense in denying this situation is all my fault. If Colton's reaction is the ugliest of any I have to face, I'm glad for it to be over. Unfortunately, I wasn't the one to tell Eric, which makes me more upset and anxious. I've been trying to find a way to break the news to him. What I did was wrong.

The idea of being apart from Eric has been tearing me up for months. There had been times recently I'd fancied the two of us living in an off-campus apartment in Beaumont, with our collective things intertwined in the truest sense; His cowboy boots next to my Doc Martens. It had been fleeting. Eric intends to stay here. I never wanted to force him away from the life he saw himself living, but I am guilty of throwing it off track.

Eric doesn't need to leave town to find himself, he knows who he is. Come July, he's moving out of this gigantic house and paying rent to live in one of the stablehand apartments. He plans to work his way up in the family business. There are concepts he'll never acquire in a classroom, things Mr. Cavanaugh will teach Eric, and he's a capable learner. Eric isn't fool enough to believe he won't need some sort of higher education to round him out. He's taking a few courses here and there and it's why he's pushing me to go away without him.

Good men like Eric are hard to find. I would know. My Daddy had been one of those men. His death when I was eight hit the community hard. My mother's second husband plays to everyone's sympathy. His public face is a show, the private one enough to make my fingers curl into fists. Everyone thinks he's upstanding and that we live a lovely life. One similar to the kind the Cavanaugh's have, without the luxury. I could do without any extravagance if it allows me to regain some of the security I felt when my mother and real daddy had been married.

I've compared our love story to my parents'. Eric played dumb to get me to help him in math class. I was quick to unravel his scheme. A boy can't know how to read a blueprint with levels and not have an idea of geometry. Eric is the



quiet one who keeps to himself and it's doubtless I'd have fallen for his shy smile without him even placing designs on me. He's not watching the world pass him by; he's a keen observer with a soul older than his years.

All the girls in are aware a Kingsbrier son is a catch, but despite Colton's nasty remark, I'll love Eric when he's dirt poor. Maybe someday I'll forgive Colton for his harsh words too.

Other than the same blonde hair and green eyes, for twins they are no more alike than any of the other Kingsbrier siblings. Perhaps their bond is because they once were identical and it's why Eric talks more about Colton than their oldest brother, Adam, who is much nicer to everyone.

The truth about the baby hasn't left the tip of my tongue. I haven't swallowed it down or spit it out. Day after day keeping the secret from Eric burns regret into my soul. There have been countless times I've stumbled trying to tell Eric. I was almost there before his mother interrupted. Then he'd gone and done it again, making the situation all about his brother enlisting in the Navy.

In the end, it doesn't matter anymore why I lost my nerve. Why I snuggled down one last night into the softness of his sheets, lost in the sensation of our bodies moving together when I knew today I'd have to face the music. Eric deserved better than being lied to. That's what I've been doing since I realized the tests from Richardsons Market weren't lying and the disappointment in myself set in. I've sent both of our dreams up in smoke.

When I hadn't plucked up the courage to tell him this morning, I convinced myself it was only to wait until after graduation today. I don't want to burden Eric's shoulders with the weight I've been carrying all these months. I was giving him one last opportunity to enjoy a carefree life and reap the reward of his hard work.

Paralyzed in place since Colton shut the door to his room, my stomach churns and my hands shake. I put on the blue robe that smells like my boyfriend before opening the opposite door. I expect to find Rose Kingsbrier-Cavanaugh with her arms crossed and tapping her foot, waiting for an answer as to how I could have done this to her baby boy.

His momma's hospitality makes Kingsbrier feel much more like home than my own. It isn't the sprawling house, but the people in it. The way they act and interact with each other. The sibling squabbles, the noise, the lot of them in the kitchen, pitching in to make a meal. Each knowing his or her task and everyone chipping in. Sitting down to dinner and feeling like a family.

The house I was raised in wasn't warm or inviting, and my actions are more than a betrayal of Eric's trust. They take from the very idea of what it's like to be accepted by the Cavanaughs altogether.

Slowly, I close the bathroom door behind me, hesitating before I turn to face the matriarch of a family whose members once loved me. The room is empty except for Eric who sits on the bed with his hands cradling his head. His mother has gone and my boyfriend was the first to take the blame for the doubt I placed in Miss Rose's heart.

"I was about to tell you," I say softly, knowing it isn't necessarily true.

He looks across the room at me as if we're perfect strangers. "Were you?"

## *Brier*

“I think you are the worst of all the Kingsbriers.” Drew Newhouse runs his palm across the back of my pixie short hair, leaning over my back to whisper dirty words in my ear.

I’m face down on the blankets layering the grass. Condom wrappers litter the ground. I might be the worst of my siblings, but considering what’s happening at the house right about now, I’m also the smartest for getting the hell out of there. And for the number of times we’ve fucked, the most relaxed.

Now, if my Daddy were smart, he’d soundproof the house. The tile in the master bath creates an echo. Through the wall I can hear my parents talking even when I don’t try. Momma hadn’t needed to raise her voice yesterday for me to know how much trouble found its way to our doorstep. The upside is it doesn’t affect me in the least. If anything, it makes my teenage life of hormone-induced crime easier.

“You say the sweetest things,” I retort, bending my leg up to kick my heel into Drew’s bare ass. He’s got a great one. “Now get off of me. It’s way past sunrise. If my momma hasn’t already figured out I’m not home, she will soon enough.”

Drew pushes his body against mine, kissing my shoulder. I’m tiny in comparison to him. Heck, even my little sister, Daveigh has a good three inches on me. But I’m filled out in all the right places and Drew marvels at my athletic build when he’s undressing me.

Drew rolls over, disposes of the last rubber, and starts fumbling for his blue jeans. “I couldn’t let that happen or else I’d have to make an honest woman out of you.”

I twist on the blanket so my back meets the fabric and tempt him by touching my breasts. Yes, I am the same girl who just said we needed to leave. Everything about me is a paradox. I like the power rush of throwing Drew off his game. What good is it to screw your older brother’s best friend if you can’t hold shit over his head?

Drew and I have been sleeping together for close to two years now. I love every naked minute of his football player body against mine and the strategy these clandestine meetings take to get out of the house and back in without being caught.

In some respects, I also enjoyed hanging Adam’s man-whore reputation over Drew. Sometimes I prick at Drew, insinuating he’s guilty by association. I’m also certain if Adam ever found out Drew was shacking up with me—and no one else—then it would be Drew’s downfall in Adam’s eyes. Other times, when Drew’s gotten too sentimental for my liking, I remind him perhaps I have a few more oats to sew. To Drew’s chagrin, I get plenty of offers for dates. If he presses me too hard for a commitment, I’ll take Adam’s persona up myself. Boys are dumb. You can lead them around by the rings in their noses, especially the ones who drone on about how impressive Kingsbrier is.

“After Adam pummels you, I still have two more brothers who’ll want a shot at it. And I suppose after Ross puts a gun to your head for deflowering me, you still won’t realize you can’t handle me.”

“How can you be so sure? Handling your ass is one of my favorite things, B. And that smart mouth drives me nuts.”

Drew also confessed while we were drunk one night he likes how cunning I am and when I dare him to cross lines he wouldn’t have considered. Like sneaking right back out right after you’ve made curfew.

The admission was way more uncomfortable than the “L” word because; feelings.

The thing is, I’ve been with anyone else and the closer we get to graduation I’m realizing I don’t necessarily want to be. This is a huge problem. I’m adamant falling in love will hold me back. The last thing I want is to be a housewife like Drew’s mother or burping a gaggle of babies like my own. Nope, a conceal and carry permit with a cute little Lugar in a Coach bag won’t do for me. I want a badge and a sidearm.

“Stop arguing me to death and take what I’ll give you.” I taunt, pinching my nipples.

“Weren’t you the one bitching about being late? Put your clothes on.” Drew tosses a tank top at me, pissed the night is ending the same way it always does. “Christ, Brier, just once I’d like to take you out on an actual date and drop you off at Kingsbrier like normal people do instead of having a booty-call.”

His stomach growls. Poor boy, I’ve left him hungry again.

“Need something to eat?” Drew refuses to look at me, having a damn good idea I don’t mean anything he can get in a diner. He’s no fun right now. “I hate it when you get like this. I’ll be back. I need to use the loo before I find my clothes.”

I walk off to pee behind a tree. Then I put on tight gym shorts and layer a sports bra under the tank top he’d thrown at me. Nike’s finish the ensemble. Drew’s dressed too and sitting on the cracked leather driver’s seat behind the wheel of his car. He starts the engine as I slide into the seat beside him.

“Took you long enough. It’s a damn good thing I’m a patient man.”

I huff at his cheek. Drew will be forever waiting at this rate.

“You can drop me down the road. I need to work up enough of a sweat to make them think I really was running. Least it’s hot already. Phew!” I mock wipe perspiration from my brow.

Drew pulls off of the dirt road that intersects Kingsbrier pasture land onto the main county road. He knows the drill. A mile from here he’ll pull over, let me out, and swing back around towards his house to sleep off the rest of the day.

A familiar green truck approaches from the opposite direction towards Kingsbrier’s stable. I freeze with no time to react as my daddy passes by us, with a friendly wave.

“He’s seen us together. You gotta come in now.” I direct.

“If you were so worried, you could have ducked.” Drew’s acting like a jerk, but a look crosses his brow as if this may be the moment he’s been waiting for to force my hand.

Oh, no, it’s not. My life isn’t the center of attention today. Nothing we’ve done will come close to the trouble Eric is in.

“I’m not worried. No one is gonna question why you are even around. It’s our lucky day. There’s a showdown about to happen. Follow my lead.”

“And do what?”

“Lie, of course.”

I limp into the terracotta kitchen as Drew moseys behind me like the good little cowboy he is. Ginny has her back to us. She pours a scrambled egg mixture into a skillet and uses tongs to move around a few strips of bacon frying in the pan next to it. Momma looks up from flipping pancakes on the island griddle.

I try to stop my expression from flattening. Everyone is acting too normal for

my liking. “Hi Momma, I rolled my ankle running this morning. Drew picked me up and brought me home.”

“What were you doing out so early?” Rose directs the question at the young man, disbelieving. There are a few times I’m certain the outlandish stories about my mother in her youth are correct. Now is one of them. Nobody plants trees under windows as a deterrent without cause.

“I, uh, was hungry—Going to ask Adam if he wanted to go to the Grille. This smells good.” Drew hates lying to my momma, but he’s a sucker for her pancakes.

“There’s always plenty to go around. Give us another minute, Drew, and we can fix you a plate.” Rose smiles, returning to what she’d been doing.

My favorite fuck buddy and I exchange glances. I shrug my shoulders. My mother’s demeanor is as sweet as Lily Anne Newhouse’s peach pie. No one is upset. Hell, Ginny is acting normal, pitching in on preparing a meal. Something isn’t right.

The Sub-Zero next to us slams and Ginny jumps out of her skin. Now we’re getting somewhere. With a scowl on his face, Eric pops the top on a Red Bull, chugging half of it down. He keeps up the silent treatment, acting as if Ginny isn’t nearby, and makes his way to the French doors leading to the morning porch.

“Ginny’s parents will be here after breakfast. Don’t go running off,” Momma commands in a polite tone the five of us know better than to disregard.

The glass door swings hard, closing after my brother, rattling the heavy-duty panes, and causing the antique grandmother clock on the wall to chime faintly. Outside, Eric throws himself in a wrought iron porch chair facing the pond. The scraping sound of metal against composite wood is like nails down a chalkboard.

Ginny backs away from the stove as my mother dishes from skillet and the pans Eric’s girlfriend had been tending. She sets them before me and Drew. I slide half my portion onto his plate.

Back in the walking space between the counters, Ginny starts to cry. The silent red marks stream down her face now, screaming for attention, and visible for everyone to see. Momma takes Ginny in her arms as her body convulses, giving Ginny the chance to let out the emotions she’s been harboring alone.

Ginny looks up and even though my mother has had on her best poker face, disappointment etches heavy lines around Momma’s eyes.

All of a sudden, the waft of bacon and sweet smell of syrup hit Ginny. Her expression turns green, and I don’t mean with envy. Her gut is churning and I wonder how she’s been masking morning sickness when she wakes in my brother’s bed so many of them.

“Oh God, I think I’m going to be sick.” Ginny covers her mouth and dashes for the nearest bathroom. My mother gives her enough of a head start to be considerate.

My eyes narrow and I grin with pursed lips at Drew. “Told ya,” I say. I’m safe. Nobody cares about his little secret. Not today anyway.

It only takes a moment for Drew’s face to register what was happening.

## *Eric*

I swear my life is an episode of the Twilight Zone.

Waking up this morning, my girl was snuggled up next to me. We're talking about our future, college, and the graduation ceremony in a few hours.

Then BAM! My mother's pounding on the door. My girlfriend has hidden from me that she's pregnant...And the kicker?

After some lame excuse about "meaning to tell me" she tries to tag-team helping make the damn bed as if my whole fucking world hasn't one-eightied. In sixty seconds, I've gone from pole position to spin out on the racetrack.

I pulled up the blankets, but when she touched the sheets, I dropped them as far up the mattress as they'd gone, and I strode into the bathroom, locking the door behind me.

I heard her leave and hoped she'd had the sense to walk down the hall, descend the circular stairway, and kept on going out the front door. My silence should have spoken volumes. But where do I find Gin once I'm dressed? In the kitchen, acting as the extra set of hands my mother needs to make breakfast. And the woman—who should have booted Ginny from this house—informs me she's set up a family meeting so Ginny's patents didn't find out via the town gossip network the way she had.

I can't believe I'm stuck in the den listening to the things coming out of Ginny's stepfather's mouth.



Hell, I can't believe she's pregnant.

"...couldn't keep it in your pants..." Alan Adair has yet to use foul language, but the tongue lashing he's giving me is horrible. He's the type who stands up for his good name in public. And in private? Well, it's likely the things he's saying about my parents right now he'll use against his wife later on.

I get why Gin never wanted to be alone at her own house. The stories she confided about when his temper flared. I can't imagine living the rest of my life with someone beating their bible, acting holier than thou in public, and turning into a hypocrite in his own home.

Ginny's been upfront that the man who thrust his name on her was never her daddy. She's said everything about our relationship is the same way she recalls seeing it between her own parents before her real father died. At one point, she told me leaving for college was her great escape. And over the last month, I bought into her line that losing me, us giving up on one another and possibly not finding what we have together with anyone else, scared Ginny.

I held her hand, told her I'd drive her to Beaumont when she moved into the dorms and visit her every chance I got.

How stupid was I? I can't stand even looking at her. How did I get wrangled into this mess?

Her mother cries silently into her lap. It's obvious Gin's been crying too, though, I doubt given the way she's treated me that she gives two shits about anyone's opinion but her own.

"You think we're taking responsibility for his bastard, you got another thing coming." Her stepfather points a menacing finger at my dad. "You all got enough cash, it can be your goddamned job." Cue the cursing.

Great. Just. Fucking Great.

Then again, what had Ginny expected with this bombshell? It's not a far stretch to assume most fathers act upset learning their unmarried daughter is having a baby. So how had she reckoned this jerk was bound to react?

"The kids don't have any funds for years to come. I'm sure we can work this out, find a way to support them together, but in our own ways." My dad won't back down.

Us quints know Ross Cavanaugh's expectations. He was upfront our whole lives. There's no reprieve. This is not Monopoly. It's Life. My father doesn't hand out two-hundred dollars for passing go, let alone a get out of jail free card.

"I'm not giving one red cent to raise this kid. Ginny's not even my real daughter." Alan insinuates no connection between himself and the child of the woman he married six years ago. "Y'all live in a mansion for heaven's sake. Don't go telling me your kid is broke and can't live up to his responsibilities."

“Mr. Adair, it isn’t like we can break a legal trust. None of the quintuplets have access to the money,” Momma interjects. “I don’t think any of us want our children left high and dry considering the circumstances. Eric’s starting full time with the company and Ginny’s off to college in the next few months. What we’re speaking of right now is how best to assist them in the choices they’re faced with.”

My normally level headed mother is attempting to be logical, even though it looks as if her blood pressure is sky high. Momma doesn’t deal well with demanding men and it’s taking everything she’s got to remain a genteel southern lady.

Good luck with that method, Momma. This situation is out of our control. I’m a legal adult and I’m standing here being scolded like a child for something I hadn’t even known I’d done until two hours ago. Ginny took care of birth control so we didn’t have to worry about being caught with our pants down and, hey look! They’re around my ankles anyhow.

“If you think you’re going to college now, missy, you’re wrong. No way. No how. You got yourself into this mess, letting him talk his way between your legs.” Alan glares at Ginny, eyes full of hatred. I almost feel sorry for her until he lashes out in my direction again. “You know what I should do? I should sue for every penny you got coming to you. Ginny’s hardly been eighteen long enough. I could get you for statutory rape.”

*What the fuck?*

My mother gasps. “This conversation has gone downhill swiftly.”

I’m so pissed. Never once have my parents said an unkind word about Ginny, yet they also haven’t defended me against Mr. Adair’s tirade. It’s as if everyone believes this is all my fault. I’m pretty sure Gin was there or else how did she get pregnant?

I truly look at her for the first time since finding out. Her eyes are full of sorrow as her stepfather threatens more legal action. She’s scared.

I’m scared.

She’d put me in this position. She made everyone act hateful towards the one person she claimed to love. Me.

What do I know about babies?

I’m so angry with her. How am I supposed to raise a kid with Gin if I fucking hate her?

“Do you have nothing to say for yourself, boy?”

My tongue is bleeding between my clenched teeth, I have so much to say. None of it is nice. However, Ginny beats me to it.

“I stopped taking my pills,” she admits. An eerie silence fills the room when it

becomes obvious the whole situation is her fault. “I’m taking the blame. It won’t fix what’s happened. But Eric deserves honesty. It’s his reputation I ruined, not the other way around.”

“The pill?” her mother, Diana, utters the words as if her daughter taking birth control is shameful.

“Where did you get something like that?” Mr. Adair spits, striding towards her. “Give me that thing, you liar.” Alan wrenches Ginny’s arm forward and pulls a simple gold band with a CZ fleck on it off her finger, shoving the ring in his pocket. “Least I know my flesh and blood wouldn’t do something like this.” He says of his daughter, Keely.

“For the life of me, I do not understand why every parent is so sure a promise ring will work.” My mother rubs her temple, sick of the man’s insinuations, and apparently ready to defend someone. His treatment of Ginny happens to be the first opportunity for the incorrigible Miss Rose Kingsbrier to stop biting her tongue.

I get up and leave. It’s unfathomable my mother is sticking up for my whatever-the-hell-she-is. Having had enough herself, Ginny runs after me out of the study and down the hall.

“Don’t you step foot back in my house, you hear?” Adair yells after her.

“Eric, I’m sorry. It was one time. One month. I was scared and made a mistake. I don’t know what I was thinking,” she calls as I step into the light of the open foyer.

“You weren’t thinking, Ginny!” I turn and roar back at her. My voice echoes against the two-story walls and reverberates into my soul. “I don’t want this. We had a plan and it’s ruined. How am I supposed to trust you? You did this on purpose? Is it like he said, do you think all of this is yours now?” I wave a hand at the grand surroundings of my mother’s house and the things I’ve been instructed to never take for granted. Ginny was the one person I never thought I’d have to defend against on account of my family’s money.

“It was never about what you have, Eric. It was who you are.”

A shoulder pushes past her with a shove. “Don’t be thinking we’re showing our faces at the graduation ceremony this afternoon.” Mr. Adair informs his wife, treating Ginny as if she’s a ghost.

Mrs. Adair shoots a crestfallen glance in her daughter’s direction. “I’ll make sure you get the rest of your things,” Diana says, heartbroken.

Even with the kindness in her tone, Ginny understands her mother has taken sides. She closes her eyes, letting tears fall down her cheeks. I wipe mine away on my sleeve. When she opens them, I’m gone and Ginny’s all alone. If I feel this way, then she should too.

## *Adam*

Brier and Daveigh are sitting in the sunroom off of the kitchen listening to Daddy's baritone voice in the hallway. "Did you eat?"

"Yes, sir." Ginny chokes out.

I cock my head, wondering why she's upset. Though, I don't care enough to investigate.

"Okay then, Rose's figurin' where to put you for the interim."

Daveigh bites her lip, her expression betraying her naiveté before her mouth opens. She leans toward our sister and whispers, "Everyone will be talking about this at graduation. What are we supposed to say?"

"Grow up, Daveigh," Brier responds bitterly.

"Say about what?" I scare the bejesus out of them by sneaking up. Not the smartest idea since I've been sleeping off a hangover this morning and my sisters scream and throw decorative pillows at me. My head throbs. I need pain killers or more booze. Or the gross egg thing Colton swears by. I slump down in an oversized chair, holding my brain inside my skull.

"Drew's been 'round lookin' for ya," Brier says at the same time Daveigh remarks loud enough for anyone on the first floor to hear, "How could you sleep through it? Ginny's pregnant!"

I bolted upright as if the F-word flew out of ultra-conservative Daveigh's mouth.

Mortified our sister couldn't be the least bit discrete, Brier covers her eyes. All the while, I'm sure she's thanking her lucky stars for our sister's inexperience. Daveigh's behavior and inability to act like an adult serves Brier's purpose. Even if a baby seems like a one-way ticket on a roller coaster to hell, by letting Daveigh make a huge deal over Ginny's pregnancy, Brier's actions are less scrutinized. So are mine.

"Drew?" I ask, pretending to be unimpressed. Meanwhile, I'm freaking the fuck out.

"Your lame excuse for a bestie went home. You'll have to call him to make sure your outfits today are all matchy-matchy."

"Stop being a bitch, B. Where are the twins?"

"Eric took off outside and Colton followed." Waving me off, my sister goes back to flipping through a magazine.

I toss my chin at Daveigh who finishes filling me in on what I've missed. When she's done, I lurch through the kitchen toward the door to the morning porch trying to pretend I'm not chasing after my brothers.

"Is it too late to say good morning to your momma?" She has six graduation gowns folded over her arms. My pace slows and I walk over to kiss her cheek. She smells the latent whiskey on my breath and grips my chin. "I do not have time for this discussion today, you take my meaning?"

I nod, cursing myself for not showering or, at least, brushing my teeth before coming down.

"Brier, Ginny is up in the den. Make sure she is okay. Daveigh, I need help ironing these. Adam, when you find your brothers tell them to get back to the house so we aren't late."

"Yes, ma'am." I reach for the doorknob.

"And, Sugar, go easy on him."

Go easy on him. What is that supposed to mean?

But then I realize I'm angry with Eric. I depend on him to be...dependable. The middle brother is the one quint who doesn't need looking after, or so I'd thought. It is hard enough to keep up with Brier's lies, bad boys chasing Daveigh because she's too sweet for her own good to know any better, and keeping Colton out of trouble. Hell, I played four seasons of high school football, not to pal around with Drew, but to make sure that loose cannon brother of mine didn't get out of control on the field. It gave Eric a chance to have a life of his own without having to keep tabs on his twin.

I walk past the pond, noticing two figures in the meadow atop of a lone circular bale of hay remaining from last year's mowing. During my approach, I'm thinking of the ways I'd let Eric down by not focusing more on him. This is

the kind of big brotherly attention Eric never needed because the kid had everything figured out since the five of us were in utero. That's been the best part of being his brother; I could relax and not worry he'd make a dumb move.

"I'm still stunned she did it intentionally." Colton plays with the gauge in his left ear.

"I don't know what to do, C."

"Seems to me at this point your options are pretty limited. December is too close for her to, you know, take care of it."

All of a sudden, Colton goes flying off the hay, landing in a heap on the green grass. He doesn't take the time to brush himself off. His arm coils back, posturing from the distance below Eric.

"What the hell did you do that for? I should hit you, you stupid shit! Here I am trying to be all supportive. How the hell was I supposed to know you had a thing against someone getting rid of a baby?"

"It's not that!" Eric yells. "I'm just not ready to be anybody's daddy..." His voice softens and trails off.

"Maybe nobody is?" I interject, understanding Ginny's blindsided Eric. My anger turns to sympathy as Momma's advice sinks in. "Ever wonder how Daddy must've felt when he found out about us?"

"The situation is completely different. He and momma knew what they were doin'." Colton remains defensive.

"Okay, so Daddy thought he was getting the two of you lousy pinheads and wound up with me, Daveigh, and Brier."

"Daveigh's an angel," Eric comments.

"And Brier more than makes up for that." I remind them. "S'not like Daddy had the chance to say they should wait for a more convenient time for the rest of us to be born. Not like you have a choice in the matter anymore. So use the time to get ready. How hard could one baby be?"

"Brier, dumbass," Colton remarks, forsaking he's not much better.

"Fuck, is it too soon to hope against hope some of Daveigh's genes get passed on to the kid?" Eric turns his sights to the sky.

I toss my chin at Colton. "Well, only the two of you were—and are—terrors. At least, you've got the odds on your side, Eric."

My youngest brother's lip curls, but he agrees with the last statement.

"Momma's looking for you, by the way. We gotta get back to the house and get ready."

Eric jumps off the hay bale, landing nose to nose with me.

"She's gonna be lookin' to take pictures today, so put on your happy face." I slap Eric playfully on the cheek. He tries to pull away, but I fist the back of his

head, forcing our forehead together so Eric will look at me. “You need anything, little brother, I’m right here for you. Hear me?”

“I got it.” We hug and Colton places a hand on Eric’s shoulder to give him added strength.

The moment doesn’t last long. Sentimental ones between us never do. Although, they reinforce we’ll do whatever it takes to have each other’s backs.

“Come on ladies,” Colton saunters across the field, “the woman doesn’t need another reason to whoop our asses today.”

## *Ginny*

Eric won't acknowledge my existence, yet I haven't been left alone in this house. After Alan's embarrassing tirade where he asked for restitution, the Cavanaughs probably think I'll steal some Kingsbrier heirloom to pawn.

It's getting late in the day. We have to be at the high school auditorium soon. I'm hardly in the mood for a celebration. One by one, Miss Rose helps us into our black robes. Brier is first. Then Daveigh and finally me.

"You girls look lovely." Rose tucks a lock of my blonde hair behind my ear.

She's wistful. Although, I'm not sure if it's more at the idea of her children graduating in a few hours or that she's about to be a grandmother. Her eyes linger on my middle.

"You're such a slight girl. No doubt you'll be showing soon."

I guess it's hard to believe no one had figured it out on their own.

"Miss Rose, I don't know why you are being so kind to me, but thank you."

Behind me, Daveigh glowers toward our image in the mirror's reflection. Brier never stops putting on her strappy white heeled sandals. Nothing affects her.

Rose sighs. "Everyone's being angry out loud. Mine's just silent. Don't doubt it's there, Ginny. You won't ever win my trust again until you regain Eric's and that won't be easy. I've simply had a bit more time to process this than everyone else, to think about it, and understand it is senseless to vilify you based on one



mistake. No matter how bad it is, maybe it came at the right time for me. I have to let go, not try and live my children's lives for them. 'Sink or swim' that's what Ross says about the next few years. Perhaps this is my first lesson in stepping back, relinquishing whatever control I thought I still had on you kids." She glances at her daughters. "It's not something I relish. Knowing someone, no matter what their intentions were, set out to hurt one of my children doesn't sit well with any mother. You'll figure out for yourself soon enough because this baby will be like your heart living outside your body. Who was protecting you, though, I ask? And who is making sure my grandchild grows up happy and healthy, knowing they are loved, if I'm not the first one to set the example?"

Ross Cavanaugh clears his throat. If this was an agreed upon parenting tactic so their five children all hear the same speech as I do, it was well choreographed. His sons have filtered in the room. The boys wear their caps and gowns over shirts and ties similar to the one their father has under his suit jacket.

"Dayum, y'all look fine." Brier pipes up, winking at her daddy so as not to be told to watch her mouth.

Ross shakes his head. "Give you an inch, girl, and you take a mile. Although, if I hadn't hated hearing the word 'no' at your age there'd be no business for you kids to take over," he says. "Let's get a move on. Half the graduating class is standing here. We'll be lucky if we can fit everyone in two cars."

"What about buying one of those old conversion vans with carpeting on the walls?" Colton suggests. He dances out of the room shaking his moneymaker and singing, "Bow-chicka-wow-wow."

"Ew, gross!" Daveigh joins the procession, pushing her baby brother out of the way. I hear her whisper she's riding with her father so she doesn't wind up sitting in the back of her mother's Lexus. With me.

My feet won't budge and I'm left standing alone with Eric who studies the nap of the carpet.

Never once did I figure he'd be overjoyed to hear I was pregnant. Of course, if we'd waited until after marriage, his reaction would have been different. If I could go back and change the choices I made I would. I've replayed in my mind the image of an older Eric, secure in his smile and with a blush on his cheeks as he realizes we've made a baby together. It's such a fallacy. So was thinking Eric would be a little accepting and over time become a lot happier?

Tipping my hand and admitting I'd gotten pregnant so we'd always be together hadn't occurred to me until my stepfather became irrational toward Eric. Alan blames him for getting us into this situation. In reality, it was my own awful way of trying to hang onto the only thing that's filled my life with any joy. I hadn't done it with malice, nor had I thought through the consequences until it

was too late to change my mind. Having already ruined the long-term, exposing myself to ridicule justifies my loathsome actions. If Eric hates me, he should know what he's hating me for.

"The last thing you want to do is hear me out, but if you're standing here, then maybe I have the chance to tell you I'd already changed my mind. I was sure the double lines on the first test I bought were wrong. Petrified, I went back to Richardson's Market to purchase two more before accepting the truth. I've single-handedly ruined our lives and I didn't have the courage to tell you. I accept you'll never believe I loved you at all, but please, Eric, don't throw us away."

"I'm mad. I can't even describe how mad I am. I feel like a fool. I don't trust you and I'm scared shitless. Leaving this all to my momma to fix, turning a blind eye to my responsibilities, ain't right by me, Ginny. I don't want to stop loving you, but I can't find it right now." His voice becomes hoarse. "Don't ask me to."

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In the two years Eric and I have been together, I've come to realize going anywhere with the quints is a spectacle of sorts. However, most of the time, Brier has the limelight and I fade into the background. Not today. I'd be front and center even if the audience gathered wasn't expecting my belly to inflate at any second. The curious glances ramp my anxiety. I'm timid as a mouse approaching the stage.

My hands shake as I place the final copy of my valedictory speech on the podium. Thank goodness I wrote it last week in the kitchen while my mom cooked dinner. She'd encouraged me to practice aloud. Though, I wouldn't. And she kept asking for an idea of what it was about. But I'd wanted to wait to see my mother's reaction in the crowd hearing the address for the first time at commencement. So much for that. I'd worked so hard on it, the same as I had my grades all throughout school. This wasn't only about making my mother proud; I'd hoped if my daddy looks down from heaven he'd be smiling too.

The graduates are lined up in alphabetical order, seated in the rows in front of their parents. My seat is empty. When I was sitting with my classmates, I'd tried to stop peering over my shoulder. It was useless. I hadn't been able to convince myself that my own mother wasn't attending my high school graduation. Diana Adair must be tucked up in the audience somewhere?

It is more than fine if my stepfather didn't show. The sentiment would be the

same with or without his outburst this morning. But the kind face I'd relied on as a child and never considered missing it isn't here. Looking back, I'll be able to pinpoint the last moment my mom was proud of me and chose me first.

Gazing back at the crowd, I'm glad the dark-stained oak stand covers my lower half. Miss Rose got her information secondhand, which means the town social network is ready to pounce. They'll read into whatever statements I make, twisting and manipulating the words of my commencement address to fit whatever nastiness the current opinion of the Adair girl being knocked-up by a Kingsbrier is.

Some of them, like Eric's momma, are probably right. How could I claim to love a boy and ruin his future? The insidious words Alan Adair spoke creep into my head. I've always known I'm not good enough to have been Eric Cavanaugh's girlfriend.

I begin reading the lines on the printed paper. They fuzz together as I greet the high school staff, parents, and fellow graduates. Taking a deep breath, I vow not to let my emotions overwhelm me. If being valedictorian is my finest hour, I refuse to hand over the last of my self-worth.

There have to be other students in Texas, let alone the rest of the country, who were first in their class who are enduring the same thing. Well, not trying to deliver a speech and disguise a pregnancy, more standing up here with no one in the audience who has known them their entire life taking pride in the accomplishment. It was so much work to maintain my grades and not slip into the second spot. This is one of the few glimmers of things I can tell my baby I did right.

Starting at Z, I take the time to look at each of the classmates I've spent the last four years with and recite the words laid on the page. Despite being the middle born of the quints, Eric's face is the first Cavanaugh I come upon. His brow is furrowed, he's gazing at me with intent like he's trying to parse each sentence into digestible chunks. Colton distracts an openly angry Daveigh by nudging her. His own face blank as a slate and unreadable. Brier picks her nails at first, then purses her lips into a polite flat smile. Adam's arm is around his sister. I don't feel a part of them the way I have these past few years. I'm as empty as my seat at the head of the alphabetized line.

With two paragraphs left, my focus is failing. There's nothing rooting me to the ground. My head feels floaty like a balloon flying out of a child's hand. Stares from the audience bore through me. They all have to know about the baby. They all must realize my parents abandoned me today. How could someone so smart do something so stupid?

Darkness blurs my vision and sparkling hints of white crackle as I close my

eyes, hoping to regain some composure. I can't pass out. Not now.

A slight movement fights for my attention and a figure in the crowd stands. Miss Rose is perfectly coiffed in her elegant suit and high heels. A fierce and determined look makes it abundantly clear Mrs. Cavanaugh will run, if not climb, through the seats to my aid.

I clutch the side of the podium. My lungs move hot breaths in and out of my body through my parched mouth. I swallow and nod to Eric's momma, who relaxes back into her seat.

There are six more hypocritical sentences left about being the best person you can be, reaching for your dreams, and fulfilling the goals the graduates are setting for themselves on the path to adulthood. The crowd claps.

With shaky knees, I return to my seat. Bored by my diatribe, Colton slaps his hands together a few times when I pass by. I look at the first paragraph on the crumpled page, not remembering speaking it at all. My nervousness made me miss the most important day of my life. Clutching my stomach, I realize I won't have a story to tell my baby. The girl next to me from my homeroom has to prompt me when it's time to receive our diplomas. A day that should stand out in my memory is nothing but a blur of angry voices and disappointment.

I'm holding my cap in my hand while my peers search for the ones they've thrown. Parents who have separated from their children for the past hour, swirl in the crowd trying to capture those last precious moments. Meanwhile, I don't even remember how the rolled paper with the school color's ribbons tied to it got into my hand.

"We did it!" Brier bumps into me, talking to the rest of her friends in the Senior class.

Mr. Cavanaugh makes the rounds of his children from oldest to youngest. The pride on Ross's face falters when he gets to Eric. I planted the seed that made his daddy think less of him. How awful.

Mr. Cavanaugh turns, seeing me wince. He offers a conciliatory hug.

"Please don't think less of him," I beg in a whisper.

Upon hearing this, Ross grips me with both arms, steadying my still swaying feet. "We're getting through this as a family," he replies.

Miss Rose places a hand on my back. "You should be real proud of yourself. It was a lovely speech." Another woman approaches her, asking if they can speak in private. "I'd be glad to talk to you tomorrow." Rose takes in the six young faces as if we're her priority and the gossipier walks away satisfied. It's the most graceful and polite blow-off I've ever witnessed.

"Momma, everyone's headed to the creek later?" Brier poses the question as if she's asking permission and won't sneak away and go.

“No, Sugar, I made it clear today was for family. You had your fun last night.”

“Bu—” The tiny girl pretends to be crestfallen.

“Don’t argue. It won’t change my mind.”

“What good is being an adult, if we can’t do what we want?”

“Oh, you can do what you want, but not so long as you girls live under my roof.” She regards Brier, me, and Daveigh—whose upper lip has curled into Colton’s trademark snarl. “Let’s go start dinner. Boys, don’t be running off. Your daddy will need help with the grill and I don’t need to remind you if...”

“...you don’t do your part in the kitchen, you can find your own food.” The quintts chant in unison.

A boy from our class leans in to say something in Eric’s ear. His soccer teammates have been doing this since we arrived. Eric’s head is already down. He shakes it, ignoring the rest of what the young man asks, and moves through the crowd to the exit.

“Come on Gin, you’re riding back to Kingsbrier with me, Daveigh, and Momma.” Brier tugs at my black gown. “Got everything? Where’s your diploma and the nice plaque they gave you for bein’ so smart?”

“I must have lost it.”

## *Eric*

There are five of us, so we're used to compromising and working toward the common good. For this stupid graduation dinner, it took us a week to decide what we were having. I was looking forward to it. Now, the juicy steak crumbles like sawdust in my mouth. The sour cream topping the baked potatoes spoils with each bite. It's the worst meal I've ever eaten.

When it was only me and Gin in Brier's room before leaving for the ceremony, I hadn't been able to process much of the day's events, let alone someone handing us a baby sometime in the next six months. It's surreal because Ginny doesn't look pregnant. My parents are upset, but I wanted to take the high road, the way they're doing.

Our situation became very real when us quints entered the auditorium and the first player from my soccer team approached me, musing, "Heard Ginny's got a bun in the oven."

The words prickled over my skin like being roasted over a spit. My friends carried on without a filter. Hell, one had even congratulated me on my conquest. It chapped my hide on so many levels, including how I hadn't a fucking clue this was possible. Scratch that. I knew it was possible, but we were taking precautions. Or so Gin led me to believe.

She played me for a fool.

"Did you find your plaque?" Adam asks Ginny. He's sitting across from her. I

fill the spot next to hers. I don't want to be near her, but at least I don't have to face her while we eat.

"Mr. Hamilton brought it to her as we were leaving," Brier speaks up. Ginny's hardly opened her mouth since we got back.

It's apparent I'm oozing hatred and am not interested in her effort to make amends. When all those people spoke in my ear it was as if the magnitude of the problem struck me in the jaw. I'm used to the doubtful truths people try to pass about the five of us, but this afternoon, the other graduates leered at us. The mothers looked their noses down at mine while searching the crowd to do the same to Ginny's. We're Kingsbriers, and I've sullied my family's reputation.

"May I be excused?" I ask. The day has been too long and emotional. I want my bed, to sleep, and to not wake up.

"Bus your plate," Momma says with a graceful smile.

"I get his slice of cake." Colton pulls another T-Bone from the serving platter. His appetite is notorious.

"Save my piece." Daddy pushes his chair back and refills his drink. "And don't let that boy near the rest of my dinner. If I pay for the food around here, I damn well get a chance to eat it."

"He got you," Daveigh teases.

Colton reaches boarding-house style, removing a warm bun from the basket with one hand while his fork stabs the last broccoli spear on her plate.

"Hey!"

"Setyourselfupforthatone." Adam wipes his full mouth with a napkin.

Trailing down the hall, I overhear the remnants of the conversation at the table.

"Eric," Dad calls, gesturing to the study.

I understand his meaning. Flopping down on the couch, I lean all the way back, hoping it swallows me whole. My head rests on a cushion and I close my eyes.

My father enters the room on my heels. Ross says nothing for a long time, giving me the chance to lead the conversation. I won't. I'm tired and confused. Angry. Hurt. Heartbroken.

"What do you think is worse, getting the girl you love pregnant or everyone knowing you couldn't get the girl you love pregnant?"

My head flies up. Growing up, pretty much everything about 'the talk' Daddy handled as part of animal husbandry. It's impossible to live on a farm without knowing where babies come from.

"Are you worried about people's comments today? Not lying, I heard them too. Consider for a second the gum flapping that went on around here before you

were born.”

“Whatever,” I remark flippantly.

We are the Kingsbrier Quintuplets. Multiples were out of the ordinary at the time we came around. Magazines highlighted our cherub faces, heralded the technologies allowing such miracles to exist, and lauded the neighbors who delivered casseroles to the overburdened parents. *Overburdened my ass. They just wanted to go on TV.* News agencies camped out on the front lawn not only because the simultaneous birth of five was unusual, so was the *inheritance that someday will make each of those babies rich!*

“Before you were born, there was as much speculation about every single one of you turning out as feisty as your older sister—if not more—and how we’d maintain order, as there was as to how and why your momma couldn’t have a single baby on her own. It was my fault. I was less of a man. It was her burden. She was less of a woman. No one had the real story. None of those people were flies on the wall during the endless appointments and heartache your mother endured. None of those people saw her cry beforehand, but many of them made her cry after she was finally carrying. Don’t be worrying yourself over if I care what is said about you and Ginny. Old men develop thick hides. You will too someday...For argument’s sake, your mother also tells me I have a thick head. You’ll get one of those by the time you are my age as well.” Ross solidly grips my knee. “Did you love that girl this morning, before all of this happened?”

“Why are you taking her side?” I scoff.

“There ain’t no sides anymore, Eric. There are choices. You can be determined to love her or to leave her. You can set the course for the life this child leads as its parents. You can listen to what people who don’t know you have to say and allow it to influence what kind of man you’ll be.

“I think, if you honest-to-God believed you loved her, you’ll eventually see Ginny regrets the choice she made. You need to make yours, but doing it filled with hatred leads to more of the same.”

“Yeah, sorry to disappoint you—”

“You haven’t disappointed me.”

“So why are you looking at me like that?”

“It’s called concern, son.”

“There are moments I think I hate her.”

“Fair enough. She didn’t have to come clean, though. I doubt anyone would be the wiser. Think about that. Ginny came to your defense when she had everything to lose by doing so. There’s a flicker of a sensible girl still in there somewhere. And Lord knows we need a few more of those around here to balance things out.”



## *Brier*

I don't ease my pace until I'm up the front granite steps and in the cool house. Maintaining an enigma is hard work. I've been up since six and ran the two miles up the county road to Kingsbrier's stable to see Daveigh. There's no point being deceitful if no one can provide me an alibi.

Despite being fit, I nearly passed out from the humidity and have been parched since the half-way point on the way back. Yes, runners carry water bottles. But I am not a runner. I'm a gymnast who pretends to run to provide cover for cat burglar-like activities. It's all about consistency. What if someone questions why some days I hydrate and others I don't? What if one of my siblings gets smart to Drew showing up on days I "run"? The less I have to lie about, the better the half-truths I'm able to pass off.

I slow at the kitchen cabinet, reaching for a glass, and fill it to the brim with tap water before taking big gulps. All the while, telling myself to slow down so I don't double over with a cramp.

The pool cleaning company is outside and I'm considering jumping straight in fully dressed to cool off.

An arm comes from behind me, grabbing my waist. Images from self-defense class pass through my head, searching for the best way to attack an intruder. Choking, we're lucky the glass doesn't shatter as it drops to the sink.

"Relax, it's just me and no one is awake yet."

Drew's voice tickles my ear and my mind calms immediately. I shrug my shoulders and shimmy away. Hopping onto the island counter and swinging my legs back-and-forth like a little girl acting innocent, I wink. "I told you, tonight."

"It's like I can't see you unless it's two am."

"That's not true. You are here all the time. You're here now."

Drew has spent most nights since graduation camped out with Adam in one room or another. I heckled him the night he crashed in Adam's bed, right next to my brother, dead drunk. They both gave me twenty bucks cash they'd earned working this summer to delete the picture of them spooning together from my phone and made me promise not to post it to social media. Little do they know, I have a back-up copy on my laptop.

"I'm thinking about moving in at Kingsbrier like Ginny." Drew refills my glass and sips.

I roll my eyes.

Ginny, D, and I spent the first two weeks after graduating as indentured laborers. Momma forced us to help clean out the old apartments by the stable. Daddy has hired some guy from California to tend to the ranch. He needs a place to stay. Eric and Gin have already moved out there.

The former servant quarters predating when my old-coot Granddaddy purchased this land were a fun place to explore when you were six. However, twelve years of us quints not using the building as a fort, and twenty years unoccupied by farmhands left dust and mold, and lots of petrified vermin stuck to ancient mousetraps. It was disgusting.

Once our regular chores and shifts for summer jobs were fit in, it seemed as if we worked from dawn till dusk. And it was so gosh darn humid in there we dripped with sweat. Wilting on the hottest day, Momma insisted there was no way Daddy could lease the larger of the apartments to his new ranch manager as a job perk without installing air conditioning, let alone allow Eric and Ginny to live in the smaller one.

The four of us swept, scrubbed, and painted till our limbs ached. The two apartments are now spanking clean and, once again, ready to be occupied by human inhabitants. Seeing the difference a little elbow grease made, I almost kicked myself for not tidying one up sooner. Drew and I could have used it. Grass stains are a bitch to get out of silk.

When we hung the lace curtains in the front window of the one-bedroom Eric and Ginny moved into, I had to admit the process was worthwhile. As June drew to a close, Daveigh's animosity towards Ginny waned and she started asking more questions. We started talking about if Gin thought the baby might be a boy or a girl and it made everything a little more real, instead of this phantom-like

quandary Eric and Ginny have found themselves in.

At first, I only cared the primary focus was off of me and Ginny and Daveigh were getting along because I need them in my corner. But I'm looking forward to the impending event—though, not eagerly as I am to leave for Texas State come August.

I'm also curious if cleaning the apartments was a con job on Momma's part to get us to depend on one another again. A girl doesn't grow up hearing "you think she's bad, you should've seen her mother" without taking notice. I doubt Momma was as horrible as the stories make her out to be, or else there's no way Drew's mother, Miss Lily Anne, would be her lifelong best friend. People don't stick around if they don't like you.

In any event, I was in the barnyard early yesterday morning, dropping off Daveigh and picking up Ginny for an early shift we were both scheduled for at the Super Target. Daveigh got out of the car right away and headed straight for the stable. I honked the horn, but it was taking Ginny extra long, so I went in the unlocked door to investigate.

In the main room a comforter was piled in a heap on the couch. They have a camp-style kitchen to the side with a tiny four-burner stove and enough counter space for a toaster. The refrigerator holds no more than a case of beer. It's a good thing Eric lives off of energy drinks so they don't have to waste the space on a coffee pot. It's also a far cry from the grand kitchen up at the main house.

"That you, Brier?"

"Of course, it is. Who else would it be?" My skin prickled. "Have you considered not securing the doors, even on a private ranch, is pretty darn stupid?"

"I'll be right out." Gin ignored my flippant remark. She understands I'd bang down a locked door.

I strode into the bedroom. There's not much floor space. The bed takes up most of it. The blankets are only turned down on one side, making it obvious Eric's the one sleeping on the couch. Given Colton's snide comment while they were still living under our parents' roof that Ginny couldn't get any more pregnant—so it made little sense to him why she stayed on the pull-out in the den—not sharing a bed seems strange to me.

Ginny's sleek dirty-blond ponytail reached down her back. She held the button and buttonhole of her khaki pants apart.

"These fit yesterday. Now I can hardly get them zipped up." The teeth veed apart and Ginny's polka dot panties peeked through.

With some quick thinking, I took one of Ginny's hair elastics, looped it through the hole, and over the button. "Leave your shirt untucked. We'll look on

the clearance rack at break time and see what they have.”

“With what money? Eric paid your daddy the first month’s rent. Trying to budget for food, when I can’t stop eating, is killer. On my next day off, I need to borrow the car and sign up for the county’s nutrition program.”

I guess I never realized how expensive babies are. Eric works forty hours a week at Cavanaugh Construction. Ginny works twenty at Target and another ten on the weekends scooping at the local ice cream stand—a job she’s hesitant to give up. It’s unfathomable there isn’t enough money to go around.

Mid-morning, Gin and I had side-by-side registers. It was during a slow point in the day when the mothers and children had come and gone, but the workers hadn’t snuck out early for lunch when a familiar face appeared in Ginny’s lane. Diana Adair paid for the items in her cart. Then she chose a baby carriage gift card from the stacks near the gum and candy bars, noting she wanted fifty dollars added to it.

“Are you feeling okay?” Diana asked, settling her debt.

Ginny nodded, acting like her mother was any other customer needing to be rung through. She gave her momma a receipt with the loaded gift card, told her to have a nice day, and moved to the next customer’s items on the conveyor belt.

“I want you to have this.” Diana handed back the gift card in a white envelope.

“I don’t want anything from you, let alone your money.” Ginny didn’t bother to look at her mother. The scanner beeped over and over as she loaded groceries into the white sacks, making sure nothing got crushed.

Diana frowned and walked over to me holding out her peace offering, “Give this to your momma, please?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I tucked it into my back pocket.

Later on, I gave it to Eric instead. “Are y’all okay? Do you need anything?”

“Yeah, we need to not be having a baby,” Eric responded, rubbing his forehead as if he had a headache. He knew they’d need the money eventually, but I think Ginny’s refusal to take it made him respect her a little bit more given the way her family treated them in the study on graduation day.

I can’t imagine being hated by everyone just for being caught in one false move. Probably because I’ve made so many of them. I honestly do like Ginny and I feel bad for my brother.

Eric was up frying eggs and drinking his over-caffeinated beverage when I walked into their little apartment on my “run” this morning. He offered me some, but I’d rather die of thirst. So I stood before their new AC unit and used it to cool off with.

“Gin took the truck to work already. She snagged seven-to-eleven when

someone asked for the day off.” Eric sounded proud of her for working on a Saturday when he had the weekend off.

I remain tight-lipped that Ginny is covering my shift. I’d spaced how busy today was liable to get, and she volunteered to cover after the manager posted the schedule. “We have to use the car to get food for the party. Maybe you and Daveigh can take Momma’s Lexus for anything else?”

“Sounds fine to me.” He smiles.

I look past Eric to the bedroom where it’s obvious two bodies have slept in the bed the night before. “Thanks for letting me cool off.”

“No problem. Thanks for bringing me the gift card yesterday. I uh, I think maybe I’ll put it to groceries in a few weeks. But, Brier, is there a store for clothes and stuff when someone is, you know?” his voice trailed.

Ooh, my brother is dealing with a gray, shady area. Ginny’s lying upset him and he doesn’t want her to accuse him of the same thing by keeping the fifty dollars from her. He’s planning to spend it on Gin without her knowing where it came from.

“A ’corse there is, silly.” I pretend he’s dumb as a rock, but it’s useless. A little of me has rubbed off on him and it’s sweet.

“Can maybe you and Daveigh go with her and...”

“I’m not sure how far fifty bucks will go, but yeah, we will.”

“I’ll bet you fifty bucks Adam doesn’t drag himself outta bed till the party,” Drew says, offhandedly.

“Huh?” I shake myself back to the present.

“Damn girl, do you ever listen to a word I say, or is my job to just look good?”

“You do a good job of that.” I tousle my fingers through Drew’s thick blond hair. The humidity has tightened its curl. The exact reason I keep mine short. If I didn’t I’d resemble a towheaded version of Daveigh.

Drew stops my legs from beating against the lower cabinet by standing against them. I lean to see if anyone might be in the hall or hear if they’re coming down the staircase. Assured the coast is clear, I press my lips to his gently. “I hear everything you tell me when we are out driving alone.”

It’s the truth. I can tell you the difference between the way Nick Saban coached at LSU in comparison to the way Bobby Bowden handled his team because I’d been listening when Drew was trying to make his final decision on attending Florida State. I know he still hates hot dogs since throwing them up when he was sick after a family barbecue when we were twelve. I could even tell someone if they asked how many pairs of jeans Drew has from Abercrombie & Fitch versus the GAP.

The light glints off the solid gold cross he’s wearing and I smile. I got the

chain for him this past Christmas to replace one he'd lost when I dared him to drive me to Gator Country and back before dawn the night of homecoming. He made me giggle over the idea of an alligator wearing a big gold crucifix and praying someone might fall in the pen to be his dinner.

Forgetting we're better off discrete, I wrap my arms around his neck. It's rare, and rather nice, to not crane my neck to look up at Drew. "Did your letter say when you have to report to campus?"

"First week of August." He curls his finger around my sprite-size ear. "These are your old ones." He notes the diamonds in my lobes aren't the new earrings Momma gave me and Daveigh at graduation, but the cheap ones he'd picked up for my birthday. "You drive me mad trying to figure out where I stand, do you know that?"

I sigh. "This summer's not gonna be nearly long enough. We'll make tonight count." I've cooled down enough to consider taking a shower and am also wondering how bad my stinky pits have smelled hanging on to Drew with my arms up in the air. I pushed on his solid pec and hop off of the counter.

"Go get my brothers' butts outta bed so we can get back from errands. I want Colton's farewell party to start on time." I tap my watch. My parents said, "Wait till the weekend before your brother leaves to have everyone over," which I will deny was a genius idea on principle. But these few weeks are too long to go without having a party at Kingsbrier.

"Waking Colton this early in the morning is no different than volunteering to get mauled by a bear." Drew crosses his arms over his broad chest. "Seriously, B. It's like you want me to get pissed at you for sending me to poke a rabid animal." He shakes his head. "What gives with us?"

I can't give a straight answer. Drew has to stick to being the person he's always been. The only child of my mother's best friend. The one who rounds out the numbers at Kingsbrier so we have even teams. The other pea in the pod so Adam had a playmate and our parents could reminisce about how close they were as children.

"Get a move on. It's hotter than blazes out there already and I want to get my suit on soon to swim."

My final comment gets Drew's ass in motion. He chases me up the staircase, trying to grab my butt. I make it to my room before he can goose me, slamming the door as he barrels past into Colton's room.

He won't try anything while the others are around, so it's safe to come out once he's passed. I watch as Drew jumps onto the bed, towering over Colton's form and starts yelling at him at the top of his lungs like a drill sergeant.

"What the hell are you doing?" My baby brother bolts upright at the barking.

“Get used to it pretty boy. As of Monday, you aren’t sleeping in again. Think they’ll let you post before and after pictures when the strip of dead grass gets mowed off your head?”

I laugh. I love my brother’s mohawk. It fits him. Adam sidles up beside me and his shirtless chest rumbles. He scratches his neck, taking in the reason for all the commotion.

“What are you laughing at, ROTC?” Colton moans to Adam. He grabs Drew by the knees, toppling him over. “Payback’s a bitch, Newhouse.”

## *Eric*

When only our closest friends remain at the bon voyage party we've thrown, the gaggle of kids elect Brier to tell Momma we're leaving to go into town. She's the best for the job because she never breaks under pressure.

Our mother quizzes my sister with veiled skepticism. It doesn't matter that we're of age. She wants to know where we're going and when my parents should expect us back.

Suitably placated by my sister's tale and assurances no one has stolen from the liquor cabinet, Momma agrees we're allowed to take the vehicles. "But Brier, understand that if y'all get caught doing anything illegal and the sheriff is called, it's all over for you."

"I know Momma," she responds sweetly.

There won't be a reason to call the authorities because the group is congregating where we always go, on Kingsbrier property—not even in the direction of town like Brier told our mother.

"Did she buy it?" Colton confirms the cover story is solid.

"Of course she did. I'm an expert at this." Brier tosses a set of car keys to our younger brother so he can drive.

"Shotgun." Adam jumps into the passenger seat of the old convertible we share. Brier climbs in the back, placing her feet on the seat and butt on the trunk like she's a Bowl Queen. Several of her friends pile in after her. Ginny and I take



the truck, driving Daveigh and more classmates down the road to the stables in its bed. Drew trails behind us in a baby-blue Cadillac, also a convertible, with longhorns on the grill.

“I can’t believe you drive this hunk of junk,” Brier taunts as we pull up to the barn. Feeling wicked after getting away with lying, she lunges off the rear of the car, forcing Drew to catch her as she intentionally lands too close.

“Just because my grandpappy didn’t make as much off of cattle as yours did on oil doesn’t make him any less of a man. He used to drive me around in this car when I was a kid. I’m proud to call it my own. Besides, if you haven’t noticed, yours ain’t much newer and I don’t have to share mine.”

Brier’s eyes narrow. She’s lost, but she never cedes to him. Instead, she walks by Drew, sets the dial on his radio, and turns the music up. One by one each, vehicle begins thumping with a simultaneous beat.

Drew gives up easily on an apology. I never understand why considering he’s been around B as long as we have, and the four of us will force her to say, “sorry” if only to prove her lips can form the words. He helps Adam kick the dirt and gather rocks. Meanwhile, Colton and I collect wood for a bonfire. One last car pulls in and pops its trunk, revealing what amounts to as a well-stocked bar.

As the whiskey and beer bottles get passed around, the most frequent comment heard over the din is “None for you,” as everyone jokes with Ginny that her drinking days are over. She shrugs and sways her hips to the music, pretending she’s not bothered when I know deep down she is.

The song changes and every one of the girls let out an ear-piercing shriek. They scramble to stand on barrels and bales of hay we use as seats and the hoods of the cars, all chanting the lyrics in unison.

I hold Ginny’s hand as she balances on her pedestal. She smiles at me and sings along to an old-school Reba anthem. They’ve been doing this for as long as we’ve been hiding out here at night drinking. And like the song says, it’s the summer we’ve turned eighteen, which makes the girls even wilder in their antics.

I move my hands to Gin’s waist and my grip tightens. Her middle isn’t as slim as it was a few weeks ago when we moved into the stable apartment. Somehow the laughter and lightheartedness of the performance become lost on me as I listen.

I’d gotten wrapped up in the fun today. After this, my siblings are leaving. The paths Adam, Brier, Daveigh, and Colton have laid out for their lives are as shiny as a new penny. But I’ll still be here and it’s only been the past few hours’ distractions that have stopped my pondering over how Gin and I are supposed to raise a child when we’re just starting out.

This is a human being we’re bringing into the world with thoughts, and

feelings, and needs I'm unsure of how to manage. What if this kid hates me? Are we messing with its life since me and Ginny can't provide for it the same way we could've if we'd waited a few years?

I think about the dirty little kids I see all over town whose parents don't give a shit about them. They drag them by the elbow in and out of stores while the other hand tucks a cigarette butt back into their mouths. Kids in those situations could evaporate like the smoke billowing out of their parents' mouths and those men and women wouldn't care less. They are the type of parent I've never considered being; the one who put my own needs first.

This song is getting to me. The girls had always glorified it as a woman who gets everything after getting dealt a bad hand. I can't imagine selling out a child for anyone's own good.

We've already fallen so far down this rabbit hole, yet now it seems there's so much further we go messing up a kid. I don't want to be anything less than the kind of father I have.

I yelled at Ginny for not giving me a choice. At the time, I felt as innocent as the flesh and blood we've created together. Now? Looking back is agony and it's because last night was closer to normal for us. I told her about my day when she asked instead of saying it was "good". I'd complimented her on being pretty when she mentioned her clothes had stopped fitting. We'd even slept in the same bed in our new place for the first time. And while we're not having sex, when the alarm went off I woke with my arm over her, holding a palm to her belly, making slow circles. It was the first time in weeks I felt any love pass between us.

This morning things seemed a little brighter and cheerier with the party coming up. Gin impressed me by taking another shift at work, and again when I found out she'd filled in for Brier when my sister shirked her responsibilities.

I've been a jerk to her trying to process my own feelings. The Gin I fell for was perfect. She didn't make mistakes. She was strait-laced, with a personality more like mine than my siblings have, and getting pregnant shattered my perspective of her. I've been unwilling to see the effort she's putting in to make things right between us.

I frown and Ginny stops singing. She places her palms on my shoulders and I guide her down, placing her feet on the ground.

"It's a person, Gin," I say.

The enormity of those four words strike us both. It isn't about our relationship anymore, soon we'll be responsible for the survival of a living thing. For as angry as I've been, never once have I considered not having this baby *with* her.

All around us the chorus line keeps shouting out lines from the song. The boys

on the ground whistle and cat-call as they stare up in awe of the cabaret, each girl shaking and shimmying in a combination of cut-offs, boots, hats, and cropped tops. Meanwhile, Ginny wraps her arms around my neck and we dance to a lullaby only we can hear.

## Brier

In my peripheral vision, I see Daveigh walk off with Bud Green toward the stable. Daveigh looks over her shoulder and I nod, acknowledging I'll come check on her sooner rather than later. It's part of a system we have all worked out.

Everyone considers her the best of the quintts. And she is because she's got the quietest soul of us all. However, my poor baby sister also has limited experience with men. She thinks Bud is cute, but she certainly isn't ready for the kid of relationship he wants. That doesn't mean Daveigh shouldn't have a few moments alone with a boy to figure out when she will be.

"Hey." Drew pops his Stetson on my head. It's my favorite and I take it from him to wear when we're alone. He leans too close so only I can hear his words. "I like you in my hat. It's like seeing my ring on your finger. Come with me."

My spine stiffens. I pull the hat off and thrust it back against his chest. Drew's attention is unwanted right now despite the performance I put on for his benefit while he pretended not to watch me singing *Fancy*.

"I'm not going anywhere with you," I hiss.

"You are, even if I have to lift you up and carry you back into those woods. You owe me, Brier. So either you follow me or I follow you."

"You are ridiculous."

Drew's boots are toe-to-toe with my sandals. The tips of my white-blonde hair

hardly reach midway up his chest. The bulge in his cargo shorts presses into my stomach. But as he hovers over me, my green eyes flash, picking up sparks from the light of the bonfire and letting him know I won't ever back down.

"Apparently, we're doin' this the hard way." Drew steps forward, forcing me to take as many steps back.

"Leave me alone," I seethe. "We can do this later. I need to rescue Daveigh before she gets herself into trouble."

"I'm tired of being put off."

"Well, you'll have to deal with it."

"Not anymore...Hey, Adam!" Drew yells.

"You wouldn't dare!" *Oh crap, he's calling my bluff.*

"What the fuck, man, back off." Colton storms over, shoving Drew.

"This is not between us, C. Go away."

The least of Drew's fears is taking a punch from Colton or even Eric. Adam is his best friend. They've done everything together from pee-wee football to winning the county championship three years in a row.

Adam leaves a bimbo sitting by the fire and saunters up. "What the fuck did you do to Drew this time, B?" He thinks the first letter of my name is appropriate. "Knock it off. The two of you are forever pissing at each other."

"I didn't do anything!"

Drew's gaze never leaves mine when he responds to Adam. "She made me fall in love with her."

He dips his chin, catching me by surprise and kissing me in front of everyone. Used to the comfort of his arms, it takes every ounce of willpower to hold my lips still.

He pulls away and tears spill down my cheeks. It's not supposed to be like this. I hate hearing he loves me. That this wasn't a game to him anymore or a silly teenage dalliance. My heart breaks because now we'll have to give one another up. Not because I don't want Drew to love me, but because I've never wanted any reason to love him back.

In an instant, Drew's sorrowful expression mirrors our reality. I've broken something inside of him. I hate myself for not standing up to Adam with him. If I wanted to defend Drew, all three of my brothers would be crying uncle.

Gone is the light in Drew's smile the way it shines in the darkness when we travel back roads late at night. He'd taken the chance that we could be together for these last few weeks left in the summer.

Adam laughs in Drew's face and slaps him on the back, thinking what he's witnessed is nothing but a bad joke. "Points for making Brier cry. But going after one of my sisters, really? Why would you think Brier wouldn't give you the

blow off?”

“Who the hell did you think she’s been with all this time in the fucking middle of the night?” Drew shakes his head, kicking the ground he’ll soon be planted in, and then stares directly at his best friend. “Your sister’s been the one blowing me since I popped her cherry when we were sixteen.”

Adam’s now crossed arms fall to the side, his fists clench, and he stops chuckling. Drew divides his attention between my two brothers. Colton takes off like a freight train. It takes so little to give him a reason to start something and he’s hell-bent on tackling Drew for the kiss. Drew hunches over, bending at his middle, ready for the fight. Adam’s fist cracks Drew in the jaw. For all the scraps I’ve witnessed Drew in, this is the first time he hasn’t fought back, taking punches one after the other. The bruises Adam and Colton leave on the outside will match the invisible ones I’ve left on the inside. He has nothing left to lose.

My fight-or-flight response kicks in. The coward I am, I run off towards the front of the barn to the stable to find Daveigh.

## Daveigh

“Get the fuck off of me!” I yell. My head is swimming and I’m scared.

“I think you heard the lady.” There’s a man in a well-worn baseball cap with a frayed rim standing over us.

The click of a safety being released stills the boy I’ve been fighting to get out from under. The pistol is right at his temple.

“Don’t fucking shoot. It isn’t what you think,” Bud stammers as if he’s about to crap himself.

“Whether it’s what I think or not, you’re pulling this shit on a bench outside my kid’s bedroom. That’s not okay by me. So why don’t you get your sorry ass up and go back to the party?” He directs the barrel of the gun towards the light emanating from the bonfire behind the barn. “Or better yet, find your way home. Unless you’d like me to call the cops?”

Bud scampers to his feet and takes off running towards the barn. I’m still panting when the tires on his late-model Toyota skid on the gravel, making his escape from the property.

I stand, trying to assess the damage to my rumpled clothes. All the while, I’m aware everyone will place the blame on me because the car carrying the booze for the night is gone.

“You can come in and clean up if you’d like. I’m Cris, the new manager here.” The dark stranger introduces himself.

“Daveigh Cavanaugh.” I hold out a shaky hand, trying to be polite. “You can’t call the sheriff, my sister will be in so much—”

Not realizing the signs of shock, my legs go out from under me. Cris grabs my arms, lowering me back to the bench.

“Um, thanks?” I feel like a fool.

“How much have you had to drink?”

“Enough...enough to forget this was a really bad idea.” Candor is a downfall of mine. “Are you calling our parents?”

“I figured it was you and yours who were out there. Circumstances aside, it’s nice to meet you.” He sits down next to me. “Don’t worry, I won’t say anything if you agree to use the restroom to clean yourself up and go let your friends know the party is over.”

“Why are you being so kind?”

“Did you ask for what he was about to do?”

“No!”

“Well, I didn’t ask for a bunch of drunk teenagers to be partying in my backyard at midnight. So if I call the cops, I’m forced to stay up later, and I won’t have the energy for the kid in there.” Cris tosses a thumb over his shoulder. “I also think you know as well as I do, if not better, how early Violette is up. Can a horse make any more noise?”

My fingertips meet my lips, stifling a childish grin. Violette is my favorite. We’re both early risers. I ride her every morning at daybreak.

“So you’re the ranch manager hired to replace me?”

Daddy’s new man arrived at the stable a few days ago. I haven’t gone out of my way to meet him for two reasons. First, Momma mentioned he’s been busy trying to find someone to watch his toddler while moving into the larger of the two apartments, which make up the triangle of outbuildings in the barnyard. Second? Even though I’m about to pursue my dream, I’m not sure how I feel about being replaced.

“Are you the daughter headed to College Station?”

“Yes.”

“Then I guess I am. Though, you take care of all of this yourself?”

“I’m responsible for the few animals we have. I feed the chickens and sheep and muck out horse stalls. My brother, Colton, mows. If I’m lucky, the others help.”

“Lucky? Your father doesn’t seem like a man who considers himself above working his own land. I figured he’d have the same firm expectation of his kids.”

“They do their part. The boys work at the construction sites.” I shrug.



We sit in silence for a moment.

“Got your sea legs and feel confident enough to make it to the restroom? You probably know it is.”

Confidence isn't my strong suit, but I fake it and nod. Cris stands and I follow him into the stable apartment. My long brown curls bounce down my back as I disappear into the bathroom. I try not to be too loud so Cris's son doesn't wake.

“I hope the lid was down. It's just me and Mateo,” he remarks. “If I remember correctly, women were pretty particular about a clean commode.”

“It was. Thank you, ag—” I stop in my tracks like a deer caught in headlights.

Cris has taken off his baseball cap. The left side has a molten appearance. Redness cascades down his neck, disappearing under his T-shirt. I hate that I'm staring as much at his pecs as I am wondering how far the discoloration goes. I can't tell if he's been burned since the skin isn't misshapen. The opposite side of his face is perfect. He has rich brown eyes, olive skin, inky hair, and his body puts to shame any of the boys from school. I swallow hard.

Cris averts his eyes, noticing my reaction and casually removing his hat from where it lays on a table. He pulls it down over his brow and asks if I'm okay to go back outside.

“I am.”

“See you around. Until you leave, that is.”

“Yeah, bye.” I stumble out of the apartment, my heart pounding in my chest.

“D, where have you been? I've been looking everywhere for you!” Brier grabs me by the hand. “We gotta get moving. People are fighting and Bud said the cops are on their way.” There's an air of melodrama to my sister's voice, but she wants to leave, and I'm still so stunned that I let her lead me home.

*Adam*

“You’re a goddamn liar.” I spit blood on the rusty dirt, making it shine.

Whether it was over a broken toy, a cuss word, or a girl, Drew and I have fought before. I never anticipated a girl we scuffled over might be one of my sisters. We all grew up as one big unit.

“Nah, I’m not. Like everyone else, B’s had me wrapped around her little finger,” Drew says as if it’s the God’s honest truth. He stands, offering me a hand up.

He took the beating almost as if he wanted it. And his response isn’t a bullshit line to make him look better. I’m stupid for not realizing what’s been happening under my nose. Under everyone’s noses. But that’s Brier for you. The rest of us quints have used our sister for years to help us get what we want or get out of trouble. Why hadn’t I considered Brier had tricks up her sleeve she hesitated to share?

B hightailing it out of here proves Drew isn’t lying.

My best friend gets in his horn-grilled Caddy and drives away before Bud Green warns us about the cops. They never show. Brier and D steal the convertible and I drive home alone in the clunky old green truck, leaving Eric to deal with Colton.

An hour passes. Everyone goes to bed before Momma sees what a wreck we are.

Moonlight falls through the pane of the dark room. I touch the tenderness near my right eye. By accident, Colton hit me hard enough that I'm sure to have a shiner.

I'm having a tough time sleeping. Pacing my floor, part of me believes what's happened is absurd. I stop and move the curtain back, looking outside.

The arc of the back of the house gives me an exterior view of my sister's bedroom. The window is closed and Brier's nimble form crouches on the sill. She catapults herself into an aerial somersault, avoiding the flowering bush beneath. There is no sound as Brier lands in the grass outside her bedroom window. It's like watching her dismount from the vault. Her strong legs never waver supporting her frame.

I've always wondered how she avoided detection sneaking out. The imprint of her feet will fade by the time anyone's the wiser.

Brier looks back, reassuring herself no one has spotted her and runs at full speed across the lawn towards a line of trees. She's wearing a black silk camisole that bares her midriff and matching shorts. Not an outfit someone wears fishing or hiking. Or drinking, which is a more likely reason to sneak out of the house. We've already done that tonight, though, haven't we?

A figure emerges from the darkness between the trees wearing a Stetson. Brier hesitates, standing in the dew-soaked grass, looking at the bloody pulp we've made of Drew's face.

The pussy has no pride. He shouldn't have even shown. If Brier were any other girl, I'd be certain leaving her standing alone at the edge of the wood waiting for him was what she deserved. But it's hard to prove you care about someone if you refuse to look past their stubbornness.

Drew holds his arms open for her and she bolts to the warmth of his skin, pressing her head into his chest.

Fuck, he really does love her.

The next morning Eric is lounging on the retaining wall along the front steps, sipping his silver can of caffeine while watching Colton whittle a stick he's torn from a sapling in the front garden. He's making nothing in particular except a mess of wood scraps.

None of us want to engage in conversation after the tongue lashing we got from Momma over the bruises and scrapes Colton and I are sporting. She hates fighting and didn't believe a damn word out of anyone's mouth, which is smart of her because we'd lied through our teeth yet again about Brier's disappearance.

It's eight o'clock on the nose when Drew's Cadillac pulls into the circular drive.

I lean against the jamb and fold my arms. The first thing I note is Brier is

wearing navy cropped yoga pants and a white sweatshirt that zips up the front, not the half-naked outfit she ran off in last night. Instead of bare feet, she has on socks and her running shoes.

Drew doesn't watch her get out of his car and Brier won't look back. I try to touch her arm as she passes expressionless through the threshold into the cool of the foyer, but Brier recoils.

The door is wide open. I hear Momma's shoes clip against the marble floor, becoming muffled against the carpeting on the steps. "I said, 'where have you been', Brier Rose. I know you've been gone all night."

Peering inside, I see Brier stall on the staircase and turn toward our mother. "Please, Momma, please don't use that name. Don't make it sound like I am supposed to be as sweet and good as Daveigh. We all know I'm not." My sister's exterior shell crumbles.

"You know I never compare my children. You are all unique and special. No one knows you better than I do." She cups Brier's chin with both hands, wiping the tears away with her thumbs the way she'd done when we were little.

"I'm sorry, Momma. I'll never do it again."

"I believe you, Sugar." Momma glances outside. "I won't pry. But don't cheat yourself by sneaking around with a good man all the while trying to convince yourself he's otherwise."

A rumble from the driveway distracts me.

Colton has thrown his stick down, hulked around the front of Drew's car, and slammed his hands down on the hood. Eric has followed. Not as much to intimidate, but to reign in the intimidator.

"Looking for a repeat of last night? I'm not in the mood." Drew speaks to the dashboard. "And you're not in any position to talk, Eric."

"Leave Ginny out of this." Eric snarls.

My boots scrape the granite as I saunter down the steps. "Why'd you say it?"

Drew turns in his seat. "That I love her? Apparently, to make myself look like an idiot."

"I mean the shit you talked about our sister. You were an intentional ass about being with her to start a fight."

"It was like you needed us to knock some sense into you." Colton bends the raised Cadillac emblem, letting the tension on the wire pull it back upright.

"Nah, Brier did that all by herself."

My sister waylaying him by showing her true colors was not what Drew had expected at all. He must've figured B was like any other girl and by now she'd be clamoring for him to take her on a date. It was stupid of him. Brier is all about protecting herself from herself.

I open the passenger door, sitting down on the old leather, shocking the shit out of Drew.

Colton and Eric back off from the car.

“The fuck?” Drew growls.

“I haven’t had breakfast. Head to the Grille.” I hide how miserable I feel for the guy getting played. It’s hard enough taking a knock from Brier when you only love her like a brother. “After we eat, you’ve got shit to show me.”

Drew sulks throughout the meal. The two of them have it bad for one another. It’s fucking awful. But he says he’s done. Last night he ended it with Brier. Although, that isn’t what it looked like to me.

I pay our tab and Drew drops me off down the road, directing me where her stash is. I have to admit, Brier’s technique is masterful. I wander the wood, using a branch to reach the three bullseye bags I find. She’s placed them in inconspicuous spots; limbs high enough that no one sees them and only Brier is daring enough to shimmy up the tree to get. One holds an outfit almost identical to the one Brier had on this morning, including the shoes. At first, I thought the other two were trash since both contained maxi pad boxes. When I opened the first box, I found her black camisole set. My sister comes and goes, buying and returning items. We’ve merely thought she’s making honest exchanges. None of us the wiser, she’s been swapping out the contents of the bags.

I enter Brier’s room from the bathroom adjoining hers to Daveigh’s. I’m the only one who isn’t forced to share a Jack and Jill. It’s one of the few privileges making my rank as the oldest obvious.

Brier’s face is blotchy and her eyes are red-rimmed. She pulls a white sheet up over her head. We had a lot to drink last night. If my skull was pounding, the hammering on her brain must be even worse.

I toss the plastic sacks on her floor and lay down on her bed. Crossing my legs, I fluff the only pillow she isn’t using to rest my back on.

“You coulda said something. He took those hits for you.” I scrub my face. My sister turned me into a moron. I should’ve been able to read the signs. Brier’s limited interest in the guys who chase her. Drew in the kitchen early on a weekend morning, when any normal person would have still been dead asleep. “B, you get why he doesn’t want to see you anymore, right?”

She stays silent.

“God, you’re stubborn. I brought your stuff in. Smart. There are three bags there. If I find more, I’ll let you know.”

The sheets shift again as I turn to leave.

“When you’re done with the silent treatment maybe you’ll tell me about how you got back in without anyone figuring it out.” I huff. “Mark my words, baby

sister, you're going to be a damned good cop one day. You have better tricks than some of those bad guys.”

## Daveigh

“Do you have your shoes on?” Cris asks the most adorable little boy I’ve seen in my life.

Playing in the dirt, Mateo holds his sneakers up in the air, wiggling them about. “Tengo que hacer pipí.”

“Well, go inside and pee so we can get a move on. Those horses aren’t feeding themselves, kiddo.”

He scrambles up. Short, swift legs carry the toddler back into the apartment. A minute later he reappears, asking in Spanish for Cris to snap the button on his pants. Cris pulls the soft shirt with the yellow dog on it. Mateo pats his tubby belly and darts toward the farmyard. Cris chases his son, catching him from behind and tossing the little boy onto his shoulders.

“It’s done,” I say, making a spectacle with a wild motion to the bottle in my hand. “I was about to feed the lamb.”

“Miss Cavanaugh, you are up early. Did you ride Violette yet?”

“No. I wanted to say thank you for, well, not narking on us last night. I know we were loud and kept you up. I thought it would be...”

“That was nice of you. I appreciate it. But don’t worry. I was eighteen about eight years ago and am not too long in the tooth yet to have forgotten the months surrounding my high school graduation. Plus, after being a closet country fan living in LA for the better part of six years, I appreciate your taste in music.”

“Cordero.” Mateo wiggles on his shoulders and Cris sets him down.

“He likes to help out. I won’t let him into the horse stalls yet. He watches from an upturned bucket. Though, after all the diapers I changed, I’m looking forward to the day Mateo has to muck a stable. Can we take the bottle? Feeding the lamb is his favorite job.”

I hand it to the little boy. His chubby hands hold the milk close to his body like it’s a treasure.

“Can I ask you a question?” I bite my glossy lips. The rest of my face is untouched by makeup. I’ve gotten a light tan since the summer began. It’s highlighted a smattering of freckles across the bridge of my nose. Momma tells me it makes the vivid green eyes we all inherited from my Daddy startling and bright against the deep rich color of my brown hair.

I twist the long fresh-washed curls up off of my neck into a bun, securing it to stay put without a tie or clip. Normally, I’d wear a hat to keep the sun out of my face. Normally, I wouldn’t care that Momma tells me my eyes are my best feature. Normally, I’d fail to notice how Cris shook himself when his stare lingered.

Cris pulls down his hat and grips his chin between his thumb and index finger. “It’s been a long time since I’ve grown a beard, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“Um, I like it? The stubble. Way better than my brothers’ facial hair.”

“Relax, Miss Cavanaugh.” He grins. “It’s a port-wine birthmark. I was born with it. It covers this side of my face, neck, and parts of my upper torso. About the time I realized the way people stared at me should be bothersome, I was wrapped up being a boy; wiping my nose with the back of my palm, playing in the dirt, and sweating up a stink in the blistering Texas sun near San Antonio. After a while, I accepted anyone’s first reaction is tense.”

“And that changed?”

“When I met my wife, Liz. I knew I wanted to be the one for her. But I was shy around girls and hid behind a baseball cap. The first time she ran her fingers through my hair and trailed them across only the left side of my face, I realized what I looked like didn’t matter to her.”

Cris is watching me intently. My nipples pebble and I’m glad he’s unaware. Or is he? I almost feel like it’s me touching him, making him self-conscious over his appearance. What’s more, my daddy is his boss and I’m considerably younger than Cris.

“So I went to shave this morning.” Cris continues, miming the actions. “Had my razor poised in the mirror. Face full of foam. Red-brown showed above the layer of cream, near my forehead, eye, and cheekbone. It was a gruesome



sundae, like those dipped cones when the ice cream melts from under the candy coating.” He pauses, showing me he’s comfortable with his appearance. “And I thought two things. One I haven’t grown a beard. New life, new look...and also Mateo has never been to DQ for a treat before.”

“There’s a Dairy Queen in town.” My words rush out. The whole time Cris has been talking, I’ve been trying to imagine his handsome face covered. The redness doesn’t bother me. I’d only wanted to understand what caused it.

“Maybe you can give me directions?”

“I can show you?” *Stupid. Stupid Daveigh. He’s a widower, not a teenage boy.* This man isn’t asking for a date.

“Great...Ross mentioned you want to be a veterinarian. You have a lot of schooling ahead of you.”

“Don’t tell anyone I kind of planned it that way,” I confide in a total stranger. “If I stay in school past seven years when I graduate, my inheritance will pay my student loans.”

“A kid from this family with student loans?” Cris looks from the apartments to the stable and then past the barn to the pasture land. Kingsbrier has a few rolls in the landscape, but this land is still East Texas flat. The rooftop of the main house in the distance is visible if you squint.

“We’re cut off. The only money the five of us have to our names right now is what we make. My daddy is a fair man. I’ll get paid this summer to keep up my chores. Can you imagine paying for five kids to go to college at once? That’d send any family to the poor house. It’s why we have to figure it out on our own, not squander what the last generation made of Kingsbrier.”

“Awfully mature sentiment for someone so young, or are you repeating what’s been told to you?”

“I get tired of people underestimating me, Mr. Sanchez. I am who I was raised to be. Everyone is so sure Brier is the cunning one, Colton is the fighter, Adam protects us, and Eric has wisdom beyond his years. I’m just gullible and trusting Daveigh. No one ever figures maybe some of that other stuff has rubbed off on me.”

“I’m sure you’re capable of holding your own out in the big wide world. Though, I’m still glad to have been of service last night.” I’m not a fan of his condensing tone. Fortunately, it turns friendly. “You wanna stay and talk me through the dailies around here? I get up each day intending to earn my keep, but with Cavanaugh’s kids around, I haven’t done much other than move in and toss some oats to the horses late in the afternoon.”

He doesn’t call us Kingsbrier.

“My daddy didn’t go over the list with you?”

“Something tells me you know it better than he does. Besides, I could use adult company.”

His little boy is feeding Colton’s lamb. The milk bottle is almost empty, but it’s still heavy and he’s having a hard time holding it up. A good amount dribbles on the ground, but the lamb has had his fair share.

“Better watch out or he’ll put you out of a job, too,” I remark.

“Ross has plans once you are gone. There will be plenty of chores to go around.”

“Like what? I know he won’t get into cattle. It’s too volatile. Rodger Newhouse sold him a tract of land, at least a dozen years ago, to build a new housing development on. The entire property Drew’s granddaddy had filled with steer when my momma was a girl.”

“It’s in the planning stages. Ross has sworn me to secrecy.” Cris is tight-lipped.

“What did you do before this?” I know so little about the person I’m trusting to tend the farm animals I hold dear. I’ll miss them as much as the ones who sleep in the rooms surrounding mine.

“I was a vet tech with an animal hospital in Southern California. Horses, big dogs, house pets. We did some rehab and worked with a local zoo.” He notices my face light up.

“Feeling better that we may have something in common? Don’t worry. I’ll keep Violette safe.” He smiles and clears his throat. “That’s, uh, how I met my wife. She was a tech too. Loved snakes, not my thing.” Cris holds up his palms, indicating he’d rather not touch slithering reptiles.

“Momma told me she passed. I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Yeah, in a car accident when Mateo was about six months old.”

“How old is he now?”

“With his independent streak? Going on twenty-five,” Cris jokes, watching his son pull handfuls of chicken feed out of a sack and scatter it to the birds. “He just turned two. Your mother helped me get him into the church nursery school. Watching him now, I think he’ll go kicking and screaming.”

“He does seem to be in his element. He’ll come around once he’s there every day,” I reassure the single dad. “So what do you want to know?”

“Everything.”

“Then let’s get started.”

## *Colton*

I tuck my back against the stable where two exterior walls create a corner. The lamb has curled at my side like a puppy. Its head rests on my outstretched leg while enjoying having its velvety ears scratched. The silence of the barnyard is only broken by the occasional chuffing of a horse or a cackle of a hen. Otherwise the solace is welcome. I stroke between the lamb's eyes and down the bridge of its nose. The animal sighs. It longs for the closeness of its mother.

The difference between me and the sheep is attitude. I'm no good at behaving or following the crowd, which has me concerned about this whole joining the Navy thing. What happens when I step a foot out of line? Something I have a reputation for doing when a red flag waves in my face.

Maybe I'm a bull in sheep's clothing?

My mother has always been there when I needed her. The more I acted out, the more effort she made to sit with me, not asking questions, not demanding explanations. She hardly had an hour left in the day to split between five kids, but she still made it a priority, taking from the trough she should have used to rejuvenate.

Maybe those moments with Momma did put new life into the woman. This comfortable and soundless time with the lamb does that for me. Here I'm not angry. I don't keep up with older siblings, or try to jockey for a position with greater attention in the pack. I'm just me.

And this is the last time I'll find this kind of peace. The upcoming weeks are a proving ground. I'm confident enough in my abilities to make it through basic training. Not that it'll be a breeze, but I have the stamina. I've been part of a group that's worked as a team. Maybe a team of miscreants, but Rose insisted we learn respect. Or feign it.

Not that I liked it. None of us did.

I've held it together whenever I've thought about leaving Kingsbrier. The Navy doesn't scare me. It's what I want. Failing scares me. Not being here for my family does too.

I wipe my nose on the back of my hand, snuffing. I refuse to crack. But watching the lamb yawn, full of the milk I've fed it, my eyes burn.

I rub the imaginary dust away. My mind wanders to Eric, Ginny, and their new baby on the way. I should have beaten Ginny's stepfather for the things he'd said about my twin. I should have taken the lead when Adam forgave Drew for messing with Brier. Although, if I'd defended her honor sooner, nothing would have happened with Newhouse. B's been a wreck the past twenty-four hours, making my imminent departure this afternoon a tough pill to swallow. Hell, what kind of trouble will find its way to Daveigh considering the problems the other two have?

My brothers and sisters need me and I'm leaving them behind.

The lamb's ears perk and his head lifts from the warm spot where it's been resting. A little boy enters the paddock alone. He stalls seeing me and looks the way he came. A set of boots behind him and a voice encourages the child to keep going.

The happy lamb greets the new company in its enclosure. I stay put, watching the two interact before the animal trots halfway back. The sheep pauses long enough to make it seem like it wants to make introductions. Then it snuggles back into my leg in the shade.

Daddy's new hire, Cris, appears at the fence. "Tell him your name." He expects his son to ignore my ragged hair and intimidating appearance and follow along.

"Me llamo Mateo." He kneels down to pet the lamb. It eats up the attention.

"Colton." I kick my chin up. "Esta es mi cordero. This is my lamb." I stroke its soft coat, speaking low to the little boy. "Mi hermana dice que te hará cargo de él por mí. My sister says you will take care of him for me."

Daveigh had mentioned Mateo is enamored by the lamb and loves to feed it. She also mentioned he only responded in Spanish, no matter what language you spoke to him in. It seems a boy without a mother is the best to take my place rearing a lamb who has lost its lifeline as well. "Confío en ti. I'm trusting you." I

get up and dust off.

“You the youngest?” Cris asks as I approach the gate.

“Easy to figure out?” The runt of the litter fights harder to survive and oftentimes winds up the biggest. While I was never the smallest, I was born last. No thanks to D.

“I noticed a long time ago that some kids with older siblings are good with children. They have more empathy. Thank you, by the way. Mateo loves that animal.”

“Consider it his now. I won’t be back to care for it, so staking a claim that it will always be mine is...It won’t even remember me by the time I get home again.”

I open the gate, exchanging places with Cris.

“Best of luck.”

I thank him and walk past the stable, apartments, and behind the barn. Trudging across the pasture land one last time, the sense of relief that my lamb—and probably my whole family—will be okay is overcome by a sadness that they won’t need me anymore.

I stall at the pond, staring at the manor house I grew up in. The gables, the pool, the sheer wealth my grandfather amassed before I was born is surreal.

My father steps off the morning porch, striding across the lawn.

“You’ll be back,” he says when he gets to me. Stuffing his hands in the front pockets of his jeans, Ross stares into the water. “I’m proud of you.”

“Do we all get this speech?” Like the old glass bottles we’ve used for target practice, I’m ready to shatter.

“Yes, but the fact that I’m giving it to you first is a big deal.”

“Why’s that?” I grunt, figuring Daddy polishing the delivery on me gives my father a chance to work out the kinks before Adam and the girls leave.

“My youngest son is the first to leave. That’s darn impressive. Don’t get me started on the fact that you’re dedicating your life to serve our country. I think that makes you the most selfless of all my children.”

He studies my profile in the rippling water. “We saw you, Colton. We know you. You aren’t just an appendage of a larger child known as Kingsbrier. You’re my son and I love you.”

## *Brier*

“I don’t think you should go out there.” Daveigh uses her entire body to block the door handle to the morning porch.

It’s a clear day without a cloud in the sky and the humidity hasn’t yet crept up to make the late-July morning unbearable. I put a gray towel against one hip and my palm on the other revealing a white string bikini over tanned skin. “What’s the point of having the day off if I can’t sit by the pool?”

“Do you have sunscreen? I have a whole new bottle in my room. Maybe we can go get it while I change? Ooh, want to go swim in the pond instead like we did when we were little?”

“In the mucky water? No thanks.” I attempt to hedge by my sister, but Daveigh flattens against the glass doors. “What gives, D?” I throw up my arms.

Daveigh doesn’t have a chance to respond. She’s pushed forward by Adam forcing the doors open. He and Drew, sopping wet from the pool, drag towels over their torsos.

“Sir, yes, sir!” Drew laughs at the joke Adam’s cracking about how funny C looks with his mohawk shaved off.

I’m still trying to get over Colton missing the Fourth. It’s his favorite holiday next to April Fools’. He acts as childish on those days as any kid and forgets the things he’s angry over.

“Can you imagine the first time he gets chewed out?” Adam bites a knuckle.

I miss my baby brother.

I miss the trouble the lot of us got into.

I keep telling myself I don't miss Drew because you can't miss anyone who didn't mean that much to you. What we had wasn't love. So it's supposed to be easy to wash my hands of him and enjoy the rest of the summer. The emptiness is easy to attribute to Colton's absence. He can't even call and it's killing the four of us as much as our parents not to have heard from him.

Okay, maybe not Adam. But me and D and Eric.

I try to look past Drew to the empty pool deck. The water laps at the sides from the boys cannon-balling minutes earlier. It washes up over the dry blue tile, making it glossy. His stance shifts and my eyes wander to Drew's pec, moving down to his flat stomach, long swim trunks, and calf muscles to his bare feet on the terracotta floor. A shadow brings my line of vision back to his arms. My mouth goes dry.

"Daveigh!" Adam yells.

"Who, huh?"

"I gotta show you something."

"What?"

Adam grits his teeth and she finally understands there's nothing to show. He wants her to leave with him. God, I'd like to be that naive.

"Brier—" Drew starts, as if unsure he has anything else to say besides what he brought up the night of Colton's party.

I tap my nails on the island countertop to stop from reaching toward him. I can't think about the way we said goodbye or the number of times he brought me to the peak, reminding me of what being his meant.

"You've been avoiding me...Anyhow," I babble, trying to act the way I had when we were pretending to be friends, and failing miserably. "I got my letter. You know the one sayin' who your roommate is and when to arrive on campus. I talked to her, she seems real nice. Momma and Daddy will have a hard time dividing themselves into three. Between getting Adam to the airport on time and..."

"That's good." He shuts me down with a disinterested sigh, looking down the hall, wishing Adam hadn't left him. "I report for training camp in Tallahassee at the end of the month."

I want him to hold me and tell me everything is going to be okay. All the scary things in my head; moving away, living with someone new, not having the other quintos to rely on. I long for the reassurances Drew whispered to me. The way he was positive I'd be a top-notch recruit applying to a department. How he made me believe, even when my faith wavered, that any sheriff would be a fool

passing up sending me to the academy in four years' time. But most of all, I want to be the one Drew calls when he scores a touchdown. When he's homesick. When he needs someone to depend on. But I'm no good at being that kind of person.

"We could meet up before you go."

"No, we can't... Listen, we've known each other our whole lives. I love you, Brier, and I'm sure you love me too. I don't see it ever changing. Your inability to admit it's the problem makes this worse." His voice cracks. "If I don't put my foot down now, we'll keep doing this night after night, year after year. I won't ever get a chance to live, or, at least, try to love someone else. I'll always be waiting for you, anticipating the next time we'll be together. I can't keep letting you take me for granted. I can't see you anymore. I don't want to. So yeah, I've been avoiding you."

"You self-serving—" My jade eyes flash.

"If you were in my shoes, you'd call it self-preservation." Wet footprints leave a trail as Drew exits the kitchen.

"I'm so sorry." I murmur, staring at the floor and comprehending how right he is.



## *Eric*

GIN scampers down the rectory stairs, her feet light with anticipation. I'm close on her heels, watching her hold onto her belly.

"Slow down! I don't want you tripping."

She's gained weight and her equilibrium is off. But today she's lighter than air.

"You made it!" The Sunday School Director meets us at the door to a classroom, handing Ginny a list from her clipboard with the names of six six-year-olds. Three of whom Ginny's babysat for at one point or another. Another is the son of a teacher at our former high school who'd prompted the director to make the last-minute call. "The church service begins in ten minutes. None of this is too difficult if you recall. Coloring, reading a bible verse."

I stop listening. We have a lot going against us and Ginny's happy face seems heavenly.

She gushed on the way over about her excitement to help out with the littluns while their parents listened to the homily. Afterward, she's going to the coffee hour that follows for a chance to see some of the girls she knows before they leave this fall.

"If I'd only known you were shorthanded sooner. I can be here every week, at least until..." Ginny looks down at the bump in her pink t-shirt. She has on her newest store khakis and a pair of black slip-ons. It was the best she could manage to dress up in. Everyone says God doesn't care what anyone wears to

church. And while it may be true, Ginny takes pride in her appearance.

At this point, everyone for three counties has heard the shocking news that there's a Kingsbrier baby on the way. Being gossiped about has been difficult to endure, but Ginny's held her head high, unwilling to subject my family to any further embarrassment by causing a scene.

The other thing I've noticed is Gin doesn't complain. I have to help her off the sofa now and she hadn't let on how much her stomach muscles hurt until I asked her why she rubbed her lower belly so much. She won't ask me for money and only keeps a small part of her paycheck. We agreed upon saving for when the baby gets here and Gin can't work. The one time I said I felt bad about how small the apartment was Gin reminded me she didn't grow up in a mansion and our cozy place was perfect. The further away we get from the spring, the more I recognize why Ginny preferred escaping from her home to mine. Her wants are few: for us to love one another and our child.

"You are welcome here anytime. We've missed seeing you." The way the director lays a comforting hand on Ginny is if our child is cherished and I'm as welcome. "Are you staying, Eric?"

"No ma'am. Just making sure Gin got here safe and sound." I kiss her temple, saying goodbye, and jog back up the flight of stairs.

Outside in the truck, I wait to let a family cross and drive down the lane. Near the last stop sign to leave the parish parking lot, Diana Adair is locking her car.

I'd forewarned Gin of the possibility she'd run into her parents. The family attends church every week. I want to respect that. My family goes to a different church down the road a handful of times in a season and every holiday. Someone once joked that when the Kingsbriers didn't show on any given Sunday there are enough pews for the rest of the congregation. It didn't sit well, though, I doubt it has any bearing on why we're infrequent visitors.

"Mrs. Adair," I call through the open window. I'm not looking to cause a fight, but she's bound to run into Ginny and, "I wanted to say thank you, ma'am. My sister, she gave me the—"

"Do you need more?" Struck to see me, Diana rushes over to the truck, grasping my forearm.

"No ma'am, we don't. We're making do with what we have."

Her eyes search my face.

"She's doing fine. Baby's growing. Healthy." I don't know what other information Diana wants. I also didn't want to talk out of turn about our personal business when Ginny's not on good terms with her mother. Trust is earned and lost easily. We've been working to rebuild it in our relationship. I don't see confiding in a woman who Ginny doesn't particularly care for right now as

holding up my end of the bargain.

Loud footsteps on the pavement attract our attention. Ginny's mother hedges back several paces, clutching her purse. Her expression is void of the emotional inquiry from before.

"What's he doing here?"

"I don't know," Diana Adair replies to her husband.

I keep my mouth shut.

"Bad enough they let that girl of yours into the Sunday School today." He leads Diana away by the elbow. "I'm not sitting there with a bunch of sanctimonious prigs acting like there is nothing wrong with putting a teenage girl with no morals in charge of a class filled with impressionable young children."

"But we need to go in. We'll miss the sermon!" Diana's ready to run into the church. Not just for the chance to take part in the service, but also for the opportunity to be close to her daughter.

I feel poorly for her and as Alan Adair reverses his car, using the parking lot's entrance as an exit, I make a vow to support Gin when she's ready to mend fences.

The truck idles for a moment and I change my mind about how I'm spending my morning, taking the last vacant spot.

From beyond the threshold in the corridor, I watch Gin talk in hushed tones with the tiny kids in the classroom. They all seemed attracted to her smile. Gosh, Gin is beautiful sitting there with a round belly in the too-small chair. The sunlight streams in the window, highlighting her golden hair. One little girl gives her a hug when all Ginny had done was hand the child a piece of construction paper to color on. When she cracks the book of children's bible verses open, I step into the classroom.

"What are you doing here? You've hardly been gone ten minutes."

"I wanted" *to be near you*. I don't finish my sentence. Instead, I take the heavy tome out of her lap and sit down in another tiny chair. I'm cautious my weight will break it and I'll wind up with my legs in the air and butt on the ground like on the television's funniest videos show, but not worried enough to stop from doing it.

"What's everyone going to think when you don't show up at the pasture to help your Daddy and Cris?" Ginny asks.

"One tractor, three extra sets of hands. I'm sure they'll manage for an hour or two without me. Where are you starting at?" I flip open to a page marked with a light blue ribbon. Ginny's nail trails down the words, stopping at the verse the children are learning about. I squeeze her hand, pressing it to my lips, and begin reading.

I wish the moment lasted longer.

In the space of the afternoon, Ginny becomes silent as she moves about in the apartment. She prepares oven baked fried chicken with green beans and potatoes for dinner, leaving the majority of her portion untouched on the kitchen table behind the sofa where she rests.

Her fingers splay out on the worn cabbage roses on the fabric, tracing the leaves. It's a nice pattern. We got the couch from a thrift shop along with the table and chairs, which were also in decent condition. My television and DVD player sit on crates across the room. Momma was kind enough to lend us the bed from the guest room next to Adam's. I don't think she expects it returned. The furniture store delivered a new one to the house the next week.

"You want to go lay down someplace more comfortable?" I run the water, scrubbing the last of the dishes.

She's told me the bed is the softest she's ever slept in. Something about giving away a perfectly good bed and replacing it also made her uneasy. Ginny didn't think it was full of bedbugs. She also doesn't find herself worthy of anyone's kindness and believes it was my mother's intention to give me the bed anyhow once I moved in the apartment.

"No thanks." She sighs, sounding abandoned.

I toss the dishtowel on the counter and amble over to recline on the couch. After unlacing and toeing my boots off, I snag Ginny around the middle so she stretches out next to me.

Ginny hadn't inquired after her parents, but I saw her sad brown eyes search the room for them at coffee hour.

"Spill." I direct, unaware she'll take it literally.

Gin starts crying. Even understanding this has something to do with church, her hormones are killer. One minute she is laughing and the next bawling. Some days I'm glad we're not living in my old room at the main house because the amount of fucking we do is probably keeping the neighbor awake. Okay, I can't lie, the sex has been one huge benefit.

It took me weeks after finding out Ginny was pregnant to touch her again. Then, once I'd gotten over the initial shock and sense of betrayal, it was hard not to treat her with kid gloves. Up until the first night we made love in the apartment, I'd felt like we were back to square one of dating all over again.

This Ginny resembles mine, but on the inside, it's as if she's a whole new woman. Still, it's comforting to find everything I'd fallen in love with her for hidden inside. I started caring about her differently, both in the knowledge she's having my child and for a polar opposite reason: Ginny's become wanton in her desires. I'd take her into the bedroom now if it solved any of her frustrations.

Shit like that only works in movies and the dirty novels hidden in Brier's nightstand.

"I just need you to hold me. To know you're here." Ginny snuggles down, sniffing.

I give her the comfort she's lacking, almost certain the issue root of the issue is her parents. Yet, she'd also been so excited to see her friends at church. They asked questions about the baby and Gin wanted to hear all about when they were leaving for school.

We're beginning to make our peace with what's coming around the bend and I'm not sure she had a regret in the world today over staying in town until one of the girls mentioned they could have been roommates. Reality cracked her swiftly across the face.

Ginny is supposed to be packing for college too. As Valedictorian, she was the one of our group destined to have gone off to college. She should be wearing a fluffy new college sweatshirt, corresponding with a roommate before orientation week, choosing classes, and electing out of Freshman math because she'd gotten AP credit during the last school year. The university suspended her scholarship because the baby is due before the end of the first term.

My siblings are conscientious about bringing up going away, even in front of me. The only time recently was when Adam announced Brier's roommate is a lesbian. He's been taunting our sister about how they'll get along famously since Brier has the haircut to match and the feminine wiles to go along with that pairing. B caught Adam with an uppercut and split his lip. Momma defended Brier, saying how disgusted she was at him for spouting ugliness. I think my brother is testing Brier to make sure she's toughened up after the Drew fiasco.

"I was told to put myself in your shoes." I begin. "I've got some big ass feet, so it's hard." I let out an uncomfortable chuckle. "So my right foot is saying it's about your momma, and my left that it's about you not going to school. I can't fix either of those things right now for you Gin. I'm here because this is where you wanted me to be. If you've changed your—"

"I haven't. I made us give up so much stuff I never thought would matter."

"And it does." It always has.

"Stupidity must run in my family. First, my mother falls for the worst kind of man and marries him. Then I fall for the best man and, afraid to lose his love, I get pregnant."

"We're making the best out of a bad situation." But lost out on everything our friends and my siblings are about to do. There will be no college parties. No new friendships.

Her lip trembles. "I'm sorry."

“For you or for me?”

“For all of us.” She smooths a hand over her belly. “This baby deserves so much more.”

“Your ability to say so means the baby is already getting better than you think.” I blow out a breath.

We’ve never discussed altruism. I’m not even sure I could go through with it. A piece of us would go missing. Yet, I rely on Gin and I have to offer for both their sakes’.

“Do you not want ‘em anymore, Ginny? Do we put the baby up for adoption?”

Panic sweeps across Ginny’s face and her entire body shakes. Her biggest fear is coming true. Even when I was furious with her, I hadn’t asked Ginny to give the baby away. Hell, I hit Colton when he told me Gin should get an abortion.

“Hey, hey—Look at me!” I blink back the wetness before it spills from my eyes. “Jesus, Gin, this is harder than I thought it would be. I’m giving you the choice.”

“Because I didn’t give you one?” she shouts.

“No, because most of the time I feel like we’re stumbling in the dark, getting it all wrong. No matter what I hear about the way I’m supposed to feel before becoming a daddy, I’m scared shitless.”

Ginny shatters at this admission. “Don’t ever think you aren’t good enough. You’re already an amazing father to this baby. You are everything in a man I’d planned on as a little girl, and more than I’d hoped for.” She touches my face with a trembling hand. I catch her palm, kissing it. “If anyone has anything to prove, it’s me. Everything I’ve done is selfish.”

I shake my head. If Gin saw herself the way I do she’d think otherwise.

“Don’t argue. I know all the things I did wrong. And I want to make them right again, for you, for us.”

“You’ve been doing that, Sugar.” I push Ginny’s hair back behind her ear and cradle her face. “I’ve watched you try. Days like today kill me. I want to be able to say you can go to school, but we can’t afford it. I want to say we can give the baby up, but I love you too much to risk letting either of you go.” My voice cracks. “I get it now. I understand why you did what you did.”

I’m not sure I’d risk watching her packed car drive away. Thinking maybe she’d meet someone else and find she loved them more is heartbreaking. I don’t want to live without her either.

## *Ginny*

I watch Eric's dissatisfaction rise while rinsing dinner dishes in the sink. "Would it bother you if I tried solving it?"

Eric's always been a whiz at math, so the simple equations when his online seminar in economics began were a breeze for him. As the course has intensified, he can't seem to find the correct answer compounding interest for a product. He's also beat from working this week at a Cavanaugh Construction site. The heat steaming off his neck is one part frustration and another the end result of days in the sun.

"Knock yourself out." Eric pushes back from the tiny table we eat dinner at, letting me take his place in front of the laptop and loose leaf paper he's chicken scratched all over.

He places his hands on the shoulders of my red work shirt, brushing my long blonde hair over my back, and watching me hunch over the "bump in the road" splitting my middle.

"It's not due till next week, so don't—"

"Got it. Right there. See?" I scoot the other chair over so Eric will sit down next while I explain the math.

"You should have still gone to school," he remarks when we're finished, proud of my teaching skills.

My brow arches and I poke my swollen belly. It's grown again in the past

week.

Given our current situation, there's no way it would have worked out for this semester anyhow. At this point, I'm resigned to asking customers if they are "saving five percent today" the same way anyone else inquires, "do you want fries with that?" I'm damn lucky to have a job with close to full-time hours since the summer help has disappeared. I get an additional discount on the things we have to buy and it's the icing on the cake I need nowadays.

"Fútbol!"

Eric and I locked eyes hearing the wail from the other side of the wall. Mateo is never loud.

"How about you watch the Quasimodo movie again instead?"

"NO! Fútbol!"

"Fine, I'll ask!" Cris shouts back, losing his patience.

A knock from outside follows. Eric walks across the room to answer the door. He's greeted by a glowering Cris and optimistic Mateo who holds a soccer ball.

"I'm sorry to interrupt." Cris puts a squirming Mateo down.

The hopeful toddler stands there rolling his lips to hide an adorable smile.

"I've tried everything, even playing soccer with him. But he thinks you are better than I am, so he won't play with me. Can you help me out for ten minutes?" Cris begs. "It's past bedtime and, at the rate Mateo's going, unless the kid burns off some energy, hitting the sack won't happen anytime soon."

"Sure." Eric squats down to Mateo's height, switching between English and Spanish. "Can I juego with you?"

Mateo hands the ball over and points to Eric's eyes.

"¿Dónde está Esmeralda?"

"Esmeralda?" Eric questions Cris, frowning.

"He misses your sister. Daveigh looks like the girl in the movie he keeps watching. I'm counting the days till she's back for Thanksgiving since her leaving for Texas State coincided with when the terrible twos kicked in." He scrubs his beard. Daveigh babysat a lot for Cris over the summer while they settled in at Kingsbrier.

"Esmeralda estará en casa pronto." Eric tells the little boy as if he's trying to convince himself she'll come home soon.

Saying goodbye to Colton in July was hard enough for Eric. However, the day his three other siblings left the nest was as if he'd been drawn and quartered. His right arm is stationed in Pensacola and his left is now in Virginia. His right leg went to College Station and the other on to San Marcos.

I finish the last of the dishes while they kick the ball in the stableyard and go to rest my swollen ankles. A half an hour later, Eric comes back into the



apartment. He shucks his jeans and clamors onto the bed like a kid, settling down on his elbows. Then he kisses my belly through my nightshirt.

“I’m exhausted,” he grunts.

It’s after eight at night. He’s worked all day, done homework, and played with the neighbor’s kid.

I touch his sweaty blonde locks. “Mateo is good practice.”

Eric leans his face against my stomach, getting poked in return by the baby’s shifting limb.

“It’s like you have Colton in there sometimes.” He jerks, pretending he’s been waylaid by his twin’s punch, making us laugh.

“Have you heard from him?”

“Not at all. Maybe it’s what is getting to me lately. Colton is like Adam, but different. Sort of the same way I love my sisters for being complete opposites. We looked after Colton for so long. Even though he left before they did it’s still weird not having to keep tabs on him. Knowing he is someone else’s problem is strange. What if that someone isn’t invested in making sure he doesn’t fuck up? All I know is without the four of them around, sometimes I feel like my head is about to explode.”

“Your brothers and sisters probably feel the same way. Besides, Colton hasn’t washed out of any program yet. Maybe he fits in the Navy like a round peg in a round hole and at Kingsbrier he was hammering himself into a square one. You know, like those mallet toys we had when we were kids.”

“Douche used to hit us all with that damn hammer. My momma took it away and he used his head to get the shapes through.”

“He did not!”

“Did too. Okay, maybe I’m exaggerating. We need to think positive, though.”

“That your brother is doing okay?”

“No, that the baby won’t turn out like him!”

“You’re worrying too much. Sometimes I feel like it’s all we do.” I snuggle down against the pillows. Eric shimmies up toward the headboard.

“Are you happy, Sugar?”

I frown, but my voice is light. “I am. I completely messed up our whole lives and at the end of the day when you fall asleep beside me, I couldn’t feel more blessed.”

“Me too.” His voice is soft. “I’m glad you’re still here.”

I doubt this spring, he’d felt the same way.

“Where else would I be? I love you.”

He won’t return the sentiment. Eric hasn’t told me he loves me in months. Attempting to let him keep his pride, I roll to the side and push my bottom

against his front.

A moan escapes me as Eric's hands roam up to my breasts. He slides my panties down and pulls my top leg up, burying himself inside of me. Because of my size, we're resorting to new positions. Blissful ones we should've tried before I was pregnant.

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The next morning, we lie in bed with the comforter tucked up to our noses, warding off the mid-September morning's chill. While we're getting ready for the day, Eric suggests I take a twenty from his wallet and use my employee discount to get a cozy blanket for the bed.

I stop to gander at the dog-eared calendar on the fridge, reminding him I have a doctor's appointment. However, Eric's so focused on checking to see if the apartments need added insulation, it slips his mind.

"Where have you been?" He's surprised I wasn't home when he got in.

"Miss Rose came with me to my appointment today." I'm on cloud nine, holding up a grainy picture the size of a playing card. "Wanna see?"

Eric snatches the ultrasound. "What on earth? This looks nothing like the pictures you've shown me before. You can't tell at all it's even a baby this time."

"That's because it's a close up and you aren't looking at its head."

"A close up of what?"

"When you figure it out, let me know." I squeeze his bicep. "Your momma is over the moon. She wants us up at the house for a big dinner."

Eric studies the black and white before it registers what part of his child he's looking at. His hands fall in disbelief and he has to catch the ultrasound image as it flies out of his hand.

His expression is priceless.

"Holy—a boy? We're having a baby boy? I thought we were waiting until the delivery? That was what you kept saying you wanted."

"His rump was in the air." I dash about, getting together the items I offered for us to contribute to the meal while describing how *his son* left us no way to unsee what was on the video screen.

Every step closer to the baby's birth makes him more of a person. More like Mateo, who is a cool little dude. Though, I'm unsure of how Cris manages raising his son alone, it gives me faith together Eric and I won't fail miserably.

"My son," he echoes. His knees give out and a sofa cushion softens the fall.

“Eric, Eric?” I stand before my stunned boyfriend. He doesn’t have a clue how he wound up on the couch. “We’ll be late if you don’t get a move on.”

“I need a minute.” He drags me to sit down next to him.

“I thought you’d be happy.” Now I’m concerned. We’d made a pact to keep the gender a secret, but it wasn’t like the kid gave us a choice. The happiness ebbs away and the full weight of what I’ve done by getting pregnant settles on my shoulders again. I blew it again. I’d promised we’d wait.

Fighting back tears, I wring my hands and pick a thick hangnail. If tears it will sting and bleed. “Are you mad at me?”

He has every right to be.

“I love you.” Eric breaks his silence, using the three words I haven’t heard in months and tips my chin up, kissing me.

## *Ginny*

This week alone, I've put on three shirts which no longer fit and I'm glad the days of wearing a bright red Coleman tent to work are coming to an end. Purchasing anything in a bigger size fills me with dread. My feet ache from standing behind the registers even though my shifts are shorter. I'm working part-time right as the store management hires for the holidays.

"Are you scheduled for Black Friday?" I asked Brier over the phone when Thanksgiving was a week away. Somehow I've been given time off on a day they need all hands on deck. I'm also unwilling to look a gift horse in the mouth.

"Nope. Not starting back until holiday break. I'll work through the middle of January. The manager told me they're short-staffed this winter since someone is having a baby right before Christmas. Can you imagine the nerve of that woman?"

"You're horrible."

"No, I'll be horrible if you give birth to my nephew before I get home to be there, though."

"We're not ready. He needs to stay put a little longer." I move, cracking my back, hoping to ease the discomfort.

Does any part of my body not hurt? What ever happened to glowing and all those happy pregnant women in advertisements? I bet none of them ever talked about placentas or postpartum depression outside of birthing class. The only one

enjoying my melon breasts—which are always in the way and nearly as big as my stomach—is Eric. My fingers look like cucumbers and grapes are hanging out of my...Let's not go there.

I'm a hormone-induced cornucopia of side effects and symptoms. However, whenever I think about grumbling, I remind myself I'm responsible for what's happening to my body. I also refuse to wish these last few weeks away.

During a hospital visit, we toured the neonatal intensive care nursery. Adding stress to our plates and making Eric worry if the baby comes too early isn't okay by me. When the time is right, it'll happen. I figure being uncomfortable now still beats middle of the night feedings.

I wound up wearing maternity jeans and an oversized sweater Thanksgiving dinner at Kingsbrier, resembling one of the guys, instead of being as coiffed as Miss Rose. It was embarrassing wondering what everyone else around the dinner table thought of my appearance, especially this morning as Eric holds up a printed maternity shirt. "I got you this. Well, Brier and Daveigh picked it out, but I paid for it."

"You should've waited to give me something so nice." I running my fingers over the soft fabric.

"Think of it as an early Christmas gift."

"We agreed on no gifts. You're trying to show me up for telling you the baby was a boy." The lilt in my voice is mixed with guilt and trepidation. I won't be wearing it much more than a month.

"Nope. I thought you might want to look as pretty today as you are to me every day."

I drape the shirt over my stomach, admiring the blue color in the mirror. We'll be seeing a lot of it in the coming year.

"It probably looks better on." He slips his arms around my middle, holding me tightly from behind.

"I love it, but there is no reason to wear it." It would have looked lovely yesterday.

"Sure there is." Eric lifts his wrist, showing me his watch. "I have a half hour to get you up to the house."

"Why?" Then it dawns on me why I have the busiest shopping day of the year off. "They aren't?"

"They are. I wasn't supposed to tell you, but then your momma—"

"What about her?" I pull away, cross.

My mother drives me nuts coming through my register line. The best days are the ones I watch the woman wait and my managers send me on a break as it's Diana's turn to check out.

“My mother invited her to the baby shower.”

My emotions go haywire. I’m beyond thrilled and surprised the Cavanaughs are throwing a party for Eric’s...I’m not using that hateful word. The way I already feel about our baby is indescribable. Someone insinuating he isn’t enough, when next to Eric, he’s just about the most amazing thing to ever happened to me, turns me into a raging monster.

My mother let her husband say things against our child. How could Miss Rose have included that sort of ugliness?

“Thank you, but I don’t think I’ll stay here.” I sit on the edge of the bed and crumple the shirt in my lap.

People giving gifts seems like charity. As much as a baby needs, the last thing I can bear is hearing I’ve accepted a handout.

The whispers continue in town accusing me of cheating Eric Cavanaugh out of his money. After our bills are paid each month there’s about enough left to splurge on Chinese takeout. That’s how *rich* we are right now. The rest gets saved for diapers and medical co-pays. All of those no-fun things add up; The stuff the smart senior class valedictorian hadn’t given a thought to when she became focused on losing the love of her life and wound up ruining his.

“My sisters gathered all your friends up there. Do you know what will happen to me if I don’t get you there on time?” He squeezes my knee. “Sugar, most people are excited for us now. For the life of me, I don’t understand it because from one day to the next I’m either okay with becoming a dad or terrified I don’t have it in me. But thumbing our noses at them? Saying they didn’t believe in us then, so why let them celebrate now? It’s harsh.”

“You believe in us?”

He puts an arm around me and kisses my temple. “For as mad as you made me, I never stopped. Don’t let one bad choice ruin your relationship with your mother for all time. Give her the benefit of the doubt and don’t judge her on your stepfather’s behavior. Gin, you asked me to find the grace to forgive you. Find it in yourself to do that for her.”

I cover my mouth stepping into the foyer of the main house. Blue streamers hang from the ceiling meeting at the chandelier. A tall stork with a blue bundle in his mouth directs guests to the formal living room and the smell of the food coming from the chafing dishes in the dining room makes my mouth water.

“I told you it’s perfect!” Daveigh pronounces to Eric seeing me in the blue shirt. She holds my arms out for the full effect and bends, giving instructions on proper behavior at a party to her nephew in utero. “Your dad and uncles are bad examples, even Brier I’d question, but basically, kiddo, today all you need to do today is stay right where you are.”

“I heard that!” Brier calls from beyond wide-hung double doors in the living room. “Get in here, y’all got to see all this amazing stuff!”

Stacks of gifts surrounded a mahogany stained crib with intricate scrollwork. It’s nothing like the one I’ve eyed in the baby department in the store. This is one of those pieces people lay their babies to sleep in generation after generation. It’s a stunning centerpiece.

“Your momma got the crib for you.” Rose rests a warm palm on my shoulder.

It can’t be true. My stepfather wouldn’t allow her to spend that amount of money.

As if by magic, my mother appears. She’s gaunt and older than I remember her being a year ago.

“I put a five or ten aside every week, thinking maybe there’d be enough to buy extra diapers. Each penny added up. When I counted what was there it was more than I expected. If you don’t like it, I could always see if I can get a ref—”

I pick my jaw up off the floor. It isn’t the extravagance of the gift I appreciate. It’s for as tall as the wall I constructed to keep my mother away, Diana continued to want to do something for the baby. “It’s beautiful, Momma. Thank you.”

“I told Alan he doesn’t have to be a part of this baby’s life. But I want to be. If you’ll let me.”

“I think we could figure out something,” I reach for the arms that once safely held me.

Momma winces as she pulls away from the hug. On her elbow is a fading bruise, shaded in black, blue, and purple. The edges are yellow with a summer green tint.

“It’s nothing, Darlin’,” she reassures me, but not before I spy a flash of regret. “A bookcase fell at work and clumsy me was in the way as it toppled over. It’ll be right as rain in no time, you’ll see.” She smiles and leads me across the room to open gifts.

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I scream as the next contraction hits and my mind does a funny thing. It wanders to Colton and wonders how much he’d charge to take a sledgehammer to the knees of the person who turned down my epidural. I’ve been pushing for an hour and I’ve transitioned from begging for the pain to stop and am at the point of plain being ticked off.

What the hell had I been thinking getting pregnant? Of course, it was coming

out the same way it got in—about three billion times the size bigger than it started out.

“You okay?” Eric needs to stop asking that. The baby is the baby crowning and I’m so.not.okay.

“No,” I grunt. “All this technology for laparoscopic surgery and no one has come up with a better idea on how to get a baby out of the human body?”

The nurse opposite Eric, whose hand I have in a death grip on, laughs. “You’re doing great.”

The OB on call from the practice I go to sits beyond the sheet draped across my waist. “Once more, Ginny. You can do this. He’s almost here.”

Almost is not good enough. This baby has to come out. And it’s going to take a whole lot of persuading on Eric’s part for me to ever let another one back in!

My eyes scrunch closed and my fist tightens over Eric’s so hard the bones in his palm must be crushing together. I’m even more afraid now to let him go than I’ve ever been. The idea that I hurt my boyfriend and he has to endure this makes me want to vomit.

About to give up, he holds on tighter.

I bare down, convinced everything inside of me is ripping its way out, my baby, my guts, my lungs, my heart.

Corey’s cries fill the room before I’ve taken my next full breath. The next thing I know my son is lying on my chest, being rubbed down with clean blankets. I can hardly see any of him but his bits of pink skin and tiny jangling limbs.

“Oh my God, Ginny.” Eric shakes as he goes to touch the baby.

There’s a split-second while watching tears fill Eric’s eyes when I’m convinced something is wrong with Corey. And then Eric opens his mouth and it all flows away.

“Sugar, he looks just like you.”

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It’s late in the afternoon. Eric leans against the doorjamb drinking Red Bull. He’s been up all night while I labored. When I was finally able to sleep, I’d woken to Eric holding Corey against his chest talking softly to our son. I listened in a haze as Corey’s daddy gave him a speech about soccer. It ended with him saying that even if our boy didn’t score one goal, we’ll still be his biggest fans. His sisters arrived at lunchtime to give us a run for our money.



“They might be blueish now, but those are Cavanaugh green eyes,” Brier makes the astute observation, snuggling her nephew. “His skin is soft, Gin, and he smells good.” She nuzzles his forehead.

“For someone who doesn’t like kids, you are a baby hog.” Daveigh takes Corey away, refolding his swaddle to keep him warm. She boots her big sister from the rocker in our hospital room.

“One week, little man, and we will be home for Christmas break to spoil you rotten. Oh, Brier’s right, Ginny, the dark rim around his iris is a sign. No doubt he is a Cavanaugh.”

“Daveigh!” Brier scolds. “She spoke out of turn, Gin. None of us believed Corey wouldn’t be...What I mean to say is, we’re sure you love our brother.”

“Thank you, Brier.” It’s still nice to hear.

“I wasn’t trying to be rude. I can’t believe he’s here and he’s ours.”

“You act like you’re his momma.” Brier moves back to where Daveigh is. She strokes Corey’s cheek.

“I get it.” My arms are empty waiting for the new aunties to get their fill of the baby. “I can’t believe he’s ours either.” I smile at Eric.

He sips his drink and winks. “Okay, y’all need to get the heck out of Dodge or you’re both going to miss getting back to school. Momma’s waiting in the hall to bring you to the bus station.”

Both of his sisters groan.

“I appreciate you coming.” I accept congratulatory hugs and the blue bundle of joy back from the girls who gather their things to go. *Only a little longer*, I reminded myself, feeling like my own sister has left the room. She’ll be in town for the holidays too.

Corey yawns. His hands come up to his face. He starts rooting around, catching fingers on his nose and his cheeks, trying to stick them in his mouth. Successful, his body burrows into mine, content.

I’m so distracted by how perfect he is I don’t hear Eric return. He snuggles in, putting one arm behind me and the other over Corey. “Your momma is in the waiting area. She only has a minute before she has to go.”

“She came?” Despite the beautiful crib she gave us, Diana is the last person I expected to see, figuring Alan intended to keep her away.

“You need some time?” Eric wipes wetness from my face I hadn’t known my eyes had shed. Until today, I hadn’t given much thought to the concept of happy tears.

“Not if she has to go soon.”

You’re supposed to spend days like this with your family. Miss Rose glowed seeing Corey for the first time. This baby needs to meet the other side of his

family. My mom and my sister—even if Keely is Alan’s daughter.

Eric tosses his can into a wastebasket and goes to fetch my mother.

“He’s the second most beautiful baby I’ve ever seen.” Diana rubs her finger against Corey’s cheek and it arches. “He has your dimple, right there.”

Eric had been correct. Corey is the spitting image of me as a baby.

“Oh, Darlin’, your daddy would have ecstatic if he were here today. He’s smiling down on you and this boy of yours.”

Corey fusses and his grandmother tries to soothe him. He’s hungry and wants me so my mother hands him back and the mewling stops.

“My goodness. You’re a momma now, baby.”

## *Eric*

I made several trips to load the car. Bags filled with plush bears hung off my shoulders. Bouquets of flowers from bouquets poked out my arms in every direction. From the blankets to the tips of the dyed carnations, everything is blue. There's even a tiny blue cooler bag the medical center filled with a premade meal for our first night home so we won't have to cook dinner this evening.

Hopefully, it'll get easier over time to haul everything Corey needs along. But today, I'm certain this little person travels with a lot of stuff.

On the way back to Gin's hospital room, I bring the car seat. Gin puts Corey in it. The car seat dwarfs all eight-pounds, two-ounces of the baby. I click the restraint on the infant carrier across his chest. The nurse double-checks the fit before allowing me to wrap a blanket around our son. Leaving to gather the final discharge papers, it's as if we've passed some sort of test.

"He's adorable." Gin giggles. With his knit cap falling over his eyebrows and the fleece pulled up around his chin, Corey resembles a hermit. "Do you think it's weird the nurse is letting two teenagers walk out of the hospital with a newborn?"

I shrug. We're a family now, me and Gin and Corey. I can't imagine anything separating us.

Another woman is being pushed down the hall in a wheelchair. Her husband walks next to her. The only thing the couple has on us is age. It's obvious they're

bringing their first baby home too. They've read the same books and been to the parenting classes and the dad seems just as bewildered as I am.

My girlfriend keeps talking to ease her nerves. "I supposed this must have been what it was like for my momma and daddy, but I can't wrap my brain around what it was like for your parents. They'd left every one of you in Houston."

There's something about Gin knowing our story, and her seeing me as a comfort to my brother, that makes my heart swell.

My siblings and I were brought home one by one over the span of the next few months. Colton had been the first and I've been told he howled until I showed up next to him a week later to share the bassinet. The neonatologist hadn't wanted me to leave because I'd done poorly that week, but he considered being without my twin might be the reason why. Thank goodness they'd been right since even back then Colton had a set of lungs on him loud enough to call the cows home.

"Y'all set to be sprung?" The nurse returns, bringing with her a wheelchair for Gin to sit in. She sets the carrier on Ginny's lap.

The way Ginny clings to it for dear life I understand she's as nervous as I am.

"Have you got your own place?" The woman in blue scrubs wheels Ginny towards the elevator and down to where the old convertible is parked.

I nod. The apartment is like a little slice of heaven. It's the right size for the three of us. Or so I'd thought before seeing the shower gifts. The haul from the hospital is going to be layered over the crib, swing, boxes of diapers, and clothes the baby has. Thank heaven the portable crib is at the main house along with the high chair and other items Corey isn't ready for. My old bedroom looks like the stockroom at a toy store.

"Figured you did, being a Kingsbrier and all," she responds, not unfriendly but assuming a great deal.

The wheelchair comes to rest by the car and the nurse pushes the handbrake, lifting the carrier. I open the door and place my son inside. Ginny settles into the seat next to the baby, clicking the seat into its base. She tucks Corey's blanket up a bit more and pulls his cap higher so a tuft of dirty-blond hair shows.

"Good luck to y'all." The nurse closes Ginny inside, waving goodbye to her through the window of the back seat.

I go up front and glance back through the rearview mirror, focusing on her. She's flawless and Corey is perfect in every way.

"What?" Ginny turns her head to see if she's forgotten to secure her seatbelt or if someone is in the way of me backing out.

"Your smile is beautiful." I put the key into the ignition. "We ready for this?"

"As ready as we'll ever be."

## *Ginny*

“Need some help?” Cris asks, taking the baby.

I don’t have the energy to fight him. Corey’s been crying for a solid hour. That is, if the five-minute reprieve he gave us counted as restarting the clock.

I’m ragged and worn. The bags under my eyes make it obvious I haven’t slept. It is a telltale sign of how fast you can get steamrolled and find yourself overwhelmed by a three-day-old.

It’s comical how something so small can affect your life so much. It seemed like we had it made when Corey was so easy to care for in the hospital. He slept, he ate, he pooped.

I cover my forehead and look at my sloppy clothes. We’re waiving the white flag.

“Don’t worry, Liz’s had the same expression after Mateo was born. I must’ve looked as bad as Eric during those first few sleepless nights as a new father.”

I take Cris’s comment to mean he’s not poking fun.

“What about Mateo?” I’m surprised I have the brainpower to be concerned.

“It’s three in the morning. He’s been out since eight o’clock last night.” Cris shifts his hip, directing my attention to the baby monitor attached to his belt. It will pick up any noise from the apartment next door.

Corey’s whole body fits between the crook of Cris’s elbow, where the baby’s head rests, and his broad forearm. His upturned palm holds Corey’s bum.

Spindly legs, covered in terry baby sleeper, hang down as he rests on his belly against the warmth of Cris's skin. Corey belches, spitting milk onto the floor.

"I swear I burped him." I scamper to fetch a cloth from the counter to wipe up the mess. All I find is a hospital blanket. At least, it's already dirty, so I don't feel worse about wiping up puke. Finding the time to get a load of wash done has proven impossible.

"It's fine. They don't come with instructions, you know."

"How'd you do that?" My son is now sound asleep like a drunken sailor. Cris must have a copy of the manual hidden somewhere.

"Practice," Cris responds like it's no big deal. "Where did Eric go?"

"Eric. He, ah..." I hold the blanket scrunched in my fist up to my forehead, regretting it when the whiff of curdled milk hits my nostrils. "Eric's cell is dead. He's driven up the road to ask Miss Rose for help. We didn't know what else to do."

A loud squishing sound emanates from the baby's nether region. I'm beyond embarrassed and am unsuccessful at taking the baby back.

"Hold up. The smell from a little diaper is nothing when you work with farm animals. Don't be changing Corey now. He's bound to go again as soon as you do, or you'll get a shower if he's not done. Mateo hit me real good a few times before he was toilet trained. Soaked my shirt. Make sure you keep his you-know-what covered."

"He peed on you?" I deadpan, suspending my disbelief when the baby farts.

Cris holds in a snicker. "There were a lot of times I was sure I was doing everything right and Mateo changed the rules."

It's finally quiet. We hear tires on the gravel outside.

"We're back," Eric mutters.

He has the energy level of a zombie and the manners of one too. Walking right by Cris, he goes into the bedroom and faceplants on the mattress. In the dark, the silhouette of Eric's body is a range of lumps created by the shaft of light glowing in the living space. He's snoring. Giving Corey over to his grandmother is tantamount to admitting defeat, but sweet lord, do I want to be lying there as well.

Free of her Texas wife warpaint, Miss Rose gives off an air of being well-rested. Quicker than Cris or I can acknowledge her presence, Eric's mother has a burp cloth on her shoulder. She beelines for the baby like Corey's a homing beacon. She's pleasant despite being woken at this ungodly hour, asking after Mateo and inviting them to Christmas dinner before thanking Cris, and sending him back to his apartment.

I'm in awe of how fast she has the baby changed and the diaper disposed of.

“You go on.” She directs me toward the bed. “It’s okay to ask for help when you need it, Ginny. I got more than my fair share.”

“You had five babies at once. This is only one.” My eyes are heavy. My entire body is sore. I want to lie down, but I’m stuck, too exhausted to do anything except stand there.

“Do you want me to wake you when he needs to feed?” Rose’s voice is gentle.

There’s a sample pack of formula on the counter. I’d been told not to use it by...someone...if I planned on nursing. My milk is coming in. Maybe Corey was fussing because he was hungry? Maybe isn’t getting enough. Or maybe there’s something wrong with the milk I’m producing. And, oh my goodness, what if there’s a serious problem and Corey is sick?

“Come on, Sugar.” Holding Corey to her chest only by his bum, Rose uses her other hand to guide me onto the mattress. “I’ll be back in an hour. Once you’ve slept, it won’t seem as bad. You can make your choice then.”

Rose closes the door. My eyes close as fast as my head hits the pillow. I don’t have the wherewithal to tell her how grateful I am to her for being there.

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The following day we start counting down until the rest of the family comes home. As of today, the baby is seven days old with only one more to go before he meets his uncles. Eric asked me if I wouldn’t mind him heading to Houston with Ross to pick up Adam and Colton at the airport this afternoon. I can’t deny him, not after all the late nights. He misses his brothers too much.

My days are becoming quiet and routine. I feed Corey while listening to the sounds of Cris getting ready. The acoustics aren’t as bad as what it was like when I snuck into Eric’s old room. However, this building is old and the pipes rattle when the shower goes on. About the time the wonderful smells waft through the vents I know Mateo’s up and most mornings I can gauge his excitement over what’s served for breakfast. That’s when Eric wakes and comes to sit next to me, drinking his Red Bull. Cris’s apartment door opens and closes. The sound of footsteps echo across the cold barnyard. Eric makes himself a bowl of cereal and slips back to the bedroom to get ready himself.

After he leaves for work, I do a few dishes. Change Corey and feed him again. The diaper pail is half-full by ten in the morning and, manufactures guarantee aside, I bringing out the trash before the stench gets overpowering.

Lunch is early, though, with nobody else to talk to, I joke with the baby it’s not

so early a meal if you've already been up six or seven hours. After eating, I gather Corey's things, bundle him up, and pack the stroller. We walk up the county road to the main house. I can't wait to take the shortcut through the fields when Corey can run on chubby legs the same way Mateo does towards the pond. But the carriage wheels won't make it across the grass and the exercise is nice.

At Kingsbrier, I feed the baby again while Miss Rose's clothes dryer finishes a quick load of laundry. Eric's momma holds the baby and coos at him while I fold.

Miss Lily Anne came over one afternoon. The woman has more funny stories of what it was like when the six kids were tiny.

Once, Miss Rose said, "Oh, Lil, I was so tired back then. If you hadn't just mentioned it, I would have never remembered that happened."

Miss Lily Anne, whose only child is Drew, agreed that in the beginning having a new baby is enough to turn a person into the walking dead. It made me relax a bit.

I bit my tongue before asking Miss Lily Anne why she never had any more babies, figuring it may be the same reason why Miss Rose wound up with so many. It's also none of my business and no reason to upset the applecart when Miss Rose is so welcoming.

My own momma dropped in today, so I missed out on doing the laundry. There's a pile of clothes heaped in a basket by the front door. I keep tossing one more thing onto it: A bib, Eric's work shirt from yesterday, and a plastic bag tied up with the outfit Corey pooped all over. My son has more wardrobe changes in a day than an actress and he's only slightly less demanding. And I can't help but love Corey more every time he pushes his lower lip out in a pout.

My mother left a while ago. I'm snuggled down on the floral sofa, reading Corey a board book with a bunch of farmyard characters on the front. Warm and cozy under his baby blanket, I fall asleep with the baby on my chest, startled it's five o'clock when Corey fusses.

He's hungry and so am I. The potatoes for dinner are still in the refrigerator, no closer to being peeled than they were all day.

Feeling guilty for napping, I unbutton my blouse to feed the baby. The one job I want to remain consistent about is dinner being on the table when Eric gets home. I'm not working for the next few months and we're sticking to a budget. We need to save every penny.

As I'm burping the baby, Corey spits up on my pants. The overwhelming feeling ratchets. So little of my wardrobe fits. Though I find it hard to believe, Eric tells me he still thinks I'm pretty the way he had driving home from the hospital. My hair and clothes are a constant ruffled mess.



I pitch the khakis on top of the pile of laundry and seek out another pair. Hopefully, the stain doesn't set by tomorrow. I'll have double the wash, but Daveigh and Brier will be at Kingsbrier by then to keep me company.

The clock on the microwave passes five-twenty. If Eric gets in early, dinner won't be ready and hunger is gnawing at me. I preheat the oven and pull the potatoes and vegetables from the fridge.

I'm ready to give up when Corey squirms in his bouncy seat. He scrunches up his face and I hear the familiar *wet pop-pop-pop* as he fills his diaper.

Yes, Cris advised me to wait, but this is another blowout waiting to happen. His pants are full and I'm not taking any chances. The time it's going to take to change the baby eats into cooking and—

“Ya gotta knock, stupid.”

“I don't gotta do anything,” Brier throws the apartment door open. Her nose scrunches. However, she's all over Corey. “Pee-You!” She tickles his fat belly.

“Hey, Gin!” Munching, Daveigh holds an open bag of Cool Ranch Doritos out to me as a consolation prize for letting them barge in. The smell is more off-putting than what's in Corey's pants.

“Hey, look who I found!” Eric closes the door pleased with himself.

“Actually, we found him on our way over here.” Daveigh pops another corn chip into her mouth.

I push past Brier, unsnapping Corey from the bouncer. Lifting him up, I feel the contents of his diaper push against my hand.

The baby squirms as we leave the room. I lay him on a changing pad covering the bed. We haven't got extra space for a dresser for him, so I shared a few small drawers of mine. The beautiful crib has been moved into an old tack closet we'd been using for storage.

Eric removes a fresh diaper from an open box across the room and asks me what's wrong.

I'm fuming over how I hadn't been smart enough to grab one before undressing the baby. “I haven't even started dinner,” I say, returning to the feeling like I can't do anything right.

“So, we'll order out.” He kneels at the side of the bed, nuzzling Corey's nose and making raspberry sounds in the folds of his neck. The baby opens his mouth, reacting to the stimuli. It seems easier to be the daddy. Even if the daddy works all day while we visited with company and sleep on the sofa. “Hey, don't cry.”

“I can't do anything right.”

“Because you didn't make dinner yet?”

“We can't feed everyone.”

His sisters mill about the living space. Someone's turned on the television. I

don't want to ask them to leave, but I've only planned for enough to eat for two. It's rude not to include Brier and Daveigh.

"This one time we can, Gin. My family has been good to us. If ordering a pizza as a way of saying thank you also lets you off the hook for dinner, it's okay." Eric rubs my leg.

"Finish changing the baby and pack his bag up. I'll put away the food that's out and we'll go up to the house tonight. C'mon."

"I did nothing all day," I protest, speaking sullenly into my lap. I'm ashamed I've let something so simple slip. "I wanted to have everything ready when you got home."

"Some days will be like this, Ginny. You've done plenty all week. Hell, if you are half as tired as I am right now, I'm surprised you got anything done at all." He turns the changing pad around and finishes getting Corey's new outfit snapped up. "Look at me," he pronounces with a hint of pride. "I'm getting better at the quick-change routine. Faster each time." He cradles our son, peering down at the tiny person scrunched against his chest. "My lil man ain't complaining either."

"He isn't now." I touch Corey's fuzzy head. His hair isn't as thick as it was a week ago.

"Don't forget pajamas. We can crash up there if it gets too late."

He takes my face in his palms. "All I want is to spend time with my family tonight. There's going to be a million nights to cook dinner, and probably a thousand reasons why dinner will be late getting to the table. It's Friday. Give yourself a break, Sugar. It's been a long week and you're doing a great job."

Eric scoops up the fresh, clean baby. "Give me some sugar." He leans forward, asking for the kiss he missed when he walked through the door. "You hungry?"

"Yes."

"Then let me take care of you."

*Eric*

“Know what’s creepy? If I had sex with your wife our kid would look exactly like this.”

If Colton weren’t holding Corey, and looking at him like he’s mesmerized by flames in a fireplace, I would have pitched something at him.

It’s Christmas Eve. The original baby of the Cavanaugh family has been home just enough time to put his Navy persona in his duffle and unpack the stone-cold guise and wise-ass lines.

“She’s not my wife. Girls like jewelry to prove they’re in that kind of relationship.”

“That there is your problem for not putting a ring on it, not mine.”

“Where do you think I’m finding the money for an engagement ring?”

“You could ask Momma, or you could borrow from someone.”

“Like who, Ed McMahan?”

“I got it.”

“You’ve got enough money for an engagement ring?”

“I take it back, I used to have money for a ring.” Colton tosses a blue velvet box in my direction. It sails over my head and I reach up like an outfielder to catch it.

Adam snatches the box first, letting out a low whistle when he flips the lid. “How’d you pull this off?”

Adam's filling his empty coiffures over break at Cavanaugh Construction alongside me. Colton is sitting on his ass. He gets a real vacation, not thirty days of cramming his pockets full of as much cash as he can manage to offset next semester's expenses.

"Unlike you two fools, I have a job and a paycheck at the end of the week that doesn't go towards buying school books or baby stuff." Corey fusses and Colton bounces him a bit. The baby starts sucking on its pacifier. "Gimme a pat on the back, I can do this dad thing too."

I doubt that. Colton lives on base in a cramped shoebox apartment. Sizewise, the way he describes it is not much than what we have. However, my brother has an aversion to the "shitload" of baby gear scattered here, there, and everywhere.

I inspect the ring, wondering what fuck Colton knows about jewelry besides it's shiny. Given the extent of my own knowledge on the subject, the diamond could be a piece of glass.

"I can't accept this." I put the ring back into the box.

The door to the apartment opens and I shove it in my pocket.

"It's a loan. I don't care when you pay me back." Colton mutters under his breath.

Walking in with her stepsister, Ginny is alarmed seeing Colton holding the baby. Even I'll admit, Colton's massive arms dwarf Corey.

I trust my brother, though, Gin's admitted she's having a rough time with my twin. She wants to respect his devotion to his job and country, but his menacing air has been kicked up a notch. Colton's vying for a spot in the SEAL training program. He's at a disadvantage and to even the playing field is putting his body through vigorous workouts. He's also started taking courses like I do toward a degree.

Sure, he still looks like a Cavanaugh, but with the skull trimmed hair and bulging muscles, what remained of my former mirror image before we went our separate ways is virtually nonexistent. Unfortunately, Colton—the boy who picked fights and said ugly things—left his mark when he crowded Ginny in the bathroom on graduation day. He can break a child with one false move and it makes her uneasy. And yet, the way Colton's looking at the newborn isn't the least bit intimidating.

Ginny lets out a ragged breath and Colton's brow furrows into a deep crease when her sister, Keely, takes the baby from him. He makes a face as Keely turns her back.

"Who let you barge in and take over?" he grumbles.

"How long have you been here, Keely?" Adam asks. My other brother gives her the once over, his manners marginally better, minus him staring at her ass.

Keely's classically pretty, with long blonde hair, much like Ginny's. Though, they aren't mistakable as true relations. A person couldn't even make assumptions the way they can that me and Colton are brothers because of our green eyes, despite the obvious differences in appearance.

"Long enough to know I'm never coming back. Thank you again for letting me hide out here. I can't stand the man."

Keely visits once a year at Christmas from Maine where she lives with her grandmother. She likes Alan less than Ginny does and is outspoken in her beliefs. In the past, Key's been upfront that the only thing making the trip south palatable was knowing Ginny lived at her father's house. Or rather, her stepmother's house. Alan's taken domain over it.

"Hang with us all you want," I offer. Ginny told Keely she could have our couch whenever she likes.

"The only thing I'm going to miss about this ridiculous trip is you," Keely coos to her nephew. She's looking forward to turning eighteen soon and never having to see Alan again.

"This has been fun, but I gotta go. I'm meeting up with Drew. The guy refuses to set foot at Kingsbrier." Adam pisses. He's tired after his shift is over and driving to Newgate cramps his style.

"This has been real, but I'm leaving, too." Colton snarls, grabbing his coat. He lets out a sardonic chuckle. "Ha-ha! Adam, you ever wonder how much time Newhouse spent here because of you when all he wanted was to get in Brier's pants?"

"You suck. Keep being an asshole and you're not coming with me."

"Shit, I'm stuck here all day with no one," he tries to get a rise out of Gin's sister, "I mean, nothing to do. You wouldn't bail on me?"

"You're such a pig." Keely squawks, patting the baby on the back.

His hulking form towers over her. "Soon to be SEAL. And you'll remember that when I save your ass."

"It doesn't need saving, but thanks. Why don't you go do something patriotic?" She flicks her hand dismissing him.

"Leave her alone, C." Adam prods the bull.

Colton storms out the door. Although, Colton acts similarly toward pretty much everyone when Adam takes on his role as protector, my older and younger brother don't get along well.

Yet, something else is eating at C besides Keely's presence. I have an uncanny feeling over the next ten days I'll be keeping the two of them separated from each other.

"Less than two hundred and forty hours or fourteen thousand four hundred

minutes till he's back on base." Adam—who also has it figured out down to the minute how long it is until our trust funds kick in—sighs before he leaves.

## *Brier*

Momma tosses flour on the cutting board before rolling the sugar cookie dough flat. Goodies, in various baked states, fill the counters and sideboard. Ginny opens the top door of the double oven, taking the cooked chocolate crackle ones with confectioners sugar out and placing a new tray of pinwheels in to cook.

“Just when you think it can’t smell any better in here,” Daveigh calls over her shoulder as she ices a gingerbread man.

“You gonna come help us, Sugar?” Momma shoots the veiled verbal warning across the room to where I’m sitting, holding her grandson.

None of us quints can get enough of the baby. However, it takes an act of will to get me to put Corey down. I’m entranced by Corey’s reactions to my silly faces and gestures the baby makes in return.

“You’re spoiling him. Gin will have a horrible time once y’all are back to school and gone.” The kitchen is full and bustling the way it customarily is on Christmas Eve. Yet, her mood parallels mine since being informed Drew and the boys are not coming back after helping decorate at the Newhouse’s this afternoon.

We’ve celebrated this night together since we were small, but it’ll be Rodger, Lily Anne joining them around at the table tonight. Momma granted us girls permission to take our plates to the den to watch movies. It only seems fair. Although, of all the things that have changed, losing this tradition is the hardest

pill for our mother to swallow.

It's probably for the best. From what I've heard, Miss Lily Anne was as shocked as anyone that her son would fall for one of Rose's girls. I'm positive had the thought crossed anyone's mind, they'd have bet on sweet Daveigh. Drew and I are oil and water. Vinegar, actually given my smart mouth.

I've hardly told anyone enough to piece together how the relationship ever came to be in the first place. And, other than wanting to clobber the boys for the lot of them lying about how they all got black eyes and busted knuckles for behaving like hooligans that night, Momma hasn't pried over how it fell apart. It's bad enough she knows. It piques her concern because she keeps catching me admiring Corey.

I see the way Ginny and Eric are together. Sometimes I feel like I'm missing out and others I know it's simply my heart still missing Drew.

"I'll be over in a minute to do the snickerdoodles." I concede.

I'm not stupid. If I had to be honest, I've always assumed my mother prepared for me to be the one to come home unmarried and pregnant. I've been forever acting up since I was knee-high to a grasshopper. In high school, I was intent on giving everyone the impression I went through boys like people used tissues, so her thinking wasn't too far off. It was probably more shocking Ginny, a girl who had her act together, gave my parents their first grandson.

Adam walks into the kitchen, stealing two cookies from Daveigh's tray of perfect red and green suited gingerbread men. She threatens him bodily harm and he laughs at her, plastering icing from a tub on the table across her nose. Then Adam kneels before me, peering at his nephews and snapping off a bit of cookie in his mouth. I give him a look of derision as crumbs tumble on Corey's head and brush them away.

Our matched green eyes meet.

"Don't go there, B," Adam says what Momma is thinking.

My anger softens, replaced by anguish. I feel silly for not understanding it had been Drew all that time. It'll always be him.

Six months later, it's obvious some fools rush in and others can't see the love shining right in front of them. I wouldn't be acting the way I am over this baby if my heart wasn't across town. And Drew wouldn't be sullen, refusing to come to Kingbrier while I'm here, and giving Lily Anne a run for her money if his pride wasn't damaged.

Although, the negative aspects of the current situation are a win. I mean, they keep my parents from having another grandbaby too soon. Right now, in defiance of any other emotion, my independent streak continues full speed ahead. I need a chance to spread my wings. If I got into *trouble*, I'll regret all of



the goals I set but never achieved.

Ginny relieves me of the baby to feed him. I shrink, sliding my palms over my empty lap before standing. I busy myself, sorting recipe cards and finding the cream of tartar, which gets lost in every kitchen come Christmas time.

“We gotta go!” Colton rushes the kitchen, taking three times more cookies than our eldest brother did, and slicing into the lemon loaf.

Lord, someone should warn Lily Anne he’s helping string outdoor Christmas lights. She’s going to need extra refreshments. He’s rock-solid muscle with a stomach. The boy has always eaten Momma out of house and home. However, this week alone she’s been to the grocery store three times for all the food he’s stuffed into his mouth.

“Come here, handsome, and kiss your momma before you leave.”

He gives her the sweetest peck on the cheek. Momma wipes away the stickiness left behind.

“I love you, Sugar,” she says, not expecting an identical response. C’s stingy with affection.

Colton gathers her up in a bear hug, lifting her toes up off the ground. He grins cockily at her, slicing a second piece of lemon loaf and snatches another cookie on his way out the door. “You’re the best, Momma.”

“Would it kill him to leave some for the rest of us?” Eric laughs, kissing Ginny before he grabs a napkin, filling it with snacks to eat on the way to Newgate.

Daddy’s keys jangle. He’s got an extension cord and gruff directive for the boys to get a move on. It’s not like him either.

“Wait!” Momma’s voice grabs the entire family’s attention. She gets flour on her nose when she touches it, sniffing.

“Please, Momma, don’t cry.” Guilt entices me to offer her comfort. It’s just this year the tradition is all screwy. Drew and I are bound to mature and get over it someday. “They’re all coming back.” Sometime.

“Nah, you’re stayin’ and it’s why she’s so upset,” Colton quips. The gleeful tone of his voice doesn’t match the look on his face. He’s the one breaking her heart.

“C, what’s going on?” Eric glances between his twin and our parents.

Colton studies the grommets in his black combat boots.

We’d told him joining the Navy wasn’t all fun and games. He hadn’t cared what we thought of his choice. He was too stubborn to listen when we asked him to consider how hard our parents might take it the first time he shipped out. That’s when the dots connect, and I get an inkling Momma and Daddy are aware of something the four of us are not.

Colton's eyes lock onto Daveigh first. He's thrown so many punches for her. Lots she doesn't even know about. He wouldn't let anyone close enough to her for it to be otherwise. Maybe if he'd let her develop a thicker skin like mine, Daveigh's tears wouldn't be the first to fall.

"I've got orders to Iraq."

The remaining pieces of my heart left intact in my chest crack.

## Daveigh

“We have everything set to take delivery early spring. The building materials based on the architect’s drawings were in the December req Eric placed. We’ll have wiggle room to add a few square feet here or there. I’ll resell whatever we don’t use to the company.”

I overhear Daddy talking to Cris in hushed tones in a corner. They’ve had a few glasses of wine.

“What about the CAT?” Cris accepts a cracker from Mateo. His son is sharing hors d’oeuvres from the silver tray on the coffee table. I get one next.

“I’ll have her brought over at the same time. You think you can run her? What about the plow?”

“The old plow is in service. Colton did a great job of keeping her running. I took her for a spin, but the grass back there is high enough we’ll need to get the mowing done early or there will be a heck of a mess once the soil is tilled.”

“You’ll have the tractor ready to go?”

“¿Mi papá va a comprar un gatito?” Mateo plays near the tree with Christmas toys he’s unwrapped.

His question gives me the opportunity to butt into the conversation. “What are you talking about that he thinks you are getting him a cat?”

“Business venture, Sugar. I’ll have all the details soon. You and your brother and sister will have plenty to keep busy with over spring break, that’s for sure.

We might need a real cat, though. Good idea, Mateo.”

A grin spreads from ear to ear and dimples appear in the little boy’s angelic cheeks.

“Miss Cavanaugh, do you have plans for New Year’s?” Cris ruffles his son’s hair. “I was hoping you could come over?”

“I’d love to.” I jump up from the carpet, straightening my gray slacks and red shirt with its flounce collar and brushing back a stray lock of hair that’s fallen from the clip holding onto my wild curls.

“Great! I’m not leaving till he’s in bed and swear I’ll get in as early as possible.”

“You’re going out?” I try to hide my disappointment. Meanwhile, a tiny voice belittles me for thinking he’d want me around for any other reason. I don’t attract male attention from boys my age. Why expect a grown man to pay me any mind?

Cris needing a babysitter makes perfect sense.

Mateo’s asleep in bed before I get to the stable apartment to watch him and Cris promises for a second time to be home early. He looks handsome in a button-down shirt and the cut of his dress pants is perfect. Some girl will have a magical beginning of the year with him by her side.

My boring evening is pathetic even by my standards. The last thing I remember is the ball drop on television before falling asleep curled up on Cris’s couch.

Is there a point any of this will change? Of course not. Even at college, I’m the last one included. What few friends I’ve made are more likely to say behind my back, “Oh, don’t forget Daveigh, so her feelings aren’t hurt” rather than, “We can’t do this without Daveigh. She’s so much fun”. Since my birth, life’s been a continual battle for attention; trying to push forward for recognition and failing. Perhaps it’s better to resign myself to come in behind the social pack.

I’ve tucked my legs to my chest and someone’s draped the afghan from the back of the sofa over me. Instead of opening my eyes to face the first day of the year, I pull the soft pillow over my head without wondering where it came from.

I’m an early bird. The kind who toils with little rest. Violette will be up soon and I planned ahead, tucking a bag of riding clothes in the stable. That’s me as well, ever prepared. Even the horses find me dependable. No wonder I spent the night in while my siblings were out whooping it up.

My body tenses and I smash the pillow down, smothering my face to block out the sun streaming through the lace curtains on the front windows. It smells like musk and man, unique to the owner, so it must be from Cris’s bed. I want to suffocate in the scent. There are worse ways to die. I grit my teeth, considering

screaming into the soft cotton, but opt to breathe the carbon monoxide in with big gulps. The mix of hot guy aroma and morning breath are sure to asphyxiate me.

My ears perk at a strumming sound. I turn my head to the side to look out of the open corner of the pillowcase. A small body plucks the strings on a guitar sitting propped against the coffee table. The chiming is sure to wake Cris. He's been out late. Well, at least later than midnight. I should continue to be the responsible one and let the guy sleep in. That's why he asked me over. I move the pillow, brushing static wisps of my curly brown hair from where they cling to my face and neck.

"Esmeralda!" Mateo jumps at me as if we haven't seen one another every day this week. He lands with his belly on mine, encircling my neck with his arms. I smile. No one but Mateo makes me feel like the only person in a room. It's sad I need reassurance from someone about to turn three, considering I'm quite literally the only other person in the room.

"Did you sleep well?" I hold on to him and sit up. The crocheted blanket falls to my lap, revealing the lavender t-shirt I wore yesterday because it offsets my green eyes.

"Sí. Mira, mi padre dejó su guitarra fuera!" He points with excitement to the guitar like it is Christmas Day all over again.

"This is Daddy's guitar?"

He nods, leaping back to the floor and picking the strings again. I wanted to tell him to stop, but he's so cute and I can tell he's thrilled seeing something he considers special. Mateo strums a few cords, dances, and strums again.

*As long as he's careful, I think.*

"Hey amenaza, you know better." Cris leans against the doorway to his room with one arm folded as the other brushes his hand across his short-clipped beard. A yawn turns into a broad grin. He's as happy to see the little menace trying to play as I am.

Cris's attention falls to me and I blush, self-conscious of my untamed hair and the wrinkles the pillow has left on my face.

He averts his gaze, croaking to his hairy feet, "I should go put on some clothes," when he realizes he's been standing in front of me in a tee and boxers.

Not that I minded his appearance one bit. Mine is the issue.

I whip an elastic from my jeans pocket and pull my errant locks into a ponytail, counting the seconds before making a break for the horse's stables. Violette always makes me feel better. Heck, I've spent half of this vacation out in the fields talking to the one person, er animal, who I can pour my heart out to.

"Want breakfast, Miss Cavanaugh?" Dressed, Cris watches me fold the

blanket and place it on the back of the couch.

“Avena. No, huevos.” Mateo hefts the guitar, handing it to his father.

“I can’t make oatmeal or eggs if you want me to play. Besides, you never said ‘thank you’ to Miss Cavanaugh for staying with you last night.”

“Gracias.” Mateo hugs my knees. I touch his head, loving the sweetness of his voice. It changes to a holler. “Now play!” Mateo demands in English.

My eyes widen and I bite down on my lip, trying not to find humor in the situation. The boy has only ever spoken Spanish in my presence.

“When did that start?”

“School. You were right. He loves it. Still speaks Spanish to me, unless he wants his way about something. I don’t mind it since Liz wanted for him to know both.” Cris sits down on the edge of a chair, retuning pegs Mateo has twisted. “What am I playing?”

“Anything,” I answer, antsy. Twenty minutes ago, I wasn’t aware Cris played an instrument. Now he’s performing for me. Um, for us.

In the first few chords, I recognized a Keith Urban song from the radio. But with Cris singing it, the melody is all his. Mateo moves closer to his dad, lost in the sound of his voice. I’m an intruder in their moment, curious what it’s like for them when no one else is around.

“This is what you did last night, isn’t it?” I clap when the song is over.

“Yeah, some buddies persuaded me to sit in with them. It’s been a long time since I’ve played in public. The bar was packed and it brought back so many memories of days gone by when the exhilaration of the crowd outpaces the exhaustion. I tried to get home earlier, but we were still onstage long after one o’clock. I’m sorry you were asleep when I got in. I was looking forward to having someone to talk to afterward,” he remarks. “You looked peaceful and I didn’t want to wake you.”

He put the afghan over me. He gave me his pillow.

I want to ignore his comment but instead read into his anticipation over seeing me on the drive home. My stupid brain lists all the ways I could have found to wait up for him. Then it admonishes me for coming up with an imaginary dialogue of what he’d wanted to say, entering the apartment with a triumphant smile, expecting me to turn towards him, and welcome him home.

There is nothing romantic about our friendship. I doubt he considers us friends. I’m the boss’s daughter and Cris wasn’t spinning fairy tales last night, thinking he’d sweep me off my feet, carry me to his room, and in the morning bring me coffee in bed. His place isn’t my place and my place isn’t next to him.

“You used to play? For real?” I envision him as part of a band in a big dance hall.

“When Mateo was a baby, before Liz died.”

“Why did you stop?”

“I needed to care for my son.”

“When I’m back over spring break you could—I mean, if you have something scheduled, arranged, Booked, that’s the correct word, right? I’ll watch Mateo again if you need me to.”

“The offer is very nice of you, Miss Cavanaugh, but I think your daddy has other plans for everyone over your next vacation.”

My lips flattened into a hard line. I despise the ‘Miss Cavanaugh’ routine. Can’t Cris call me by my name, even in the condescending way Brier does when she’s trying to prove how little I comprehend about the big wide world? Because apparently being like Brier and losing your virginity to a boy you’ve known since the dawn of time and then running off to college leaving him broken-hearted makes you worldly.

The quip about my father’s business plan—that only Eric’s allowed to be a part of right now—piques my jealousy. Everyone likes my siblings better. They trust them more.

“Are you okay?” Cris asks.

“Plan on telling me what’s so special about this spring?”

“No. But I’ll be glad to show you when you come home.”

Sure, *after* everyone else is in on the secret. “I’ve got to go. Violette is waiting.”

I bump his guitar moving past Cris and stride towards Mateo who has found a stool. He’s gotten into an oat canister and scooped out double what anyone could eat into small glass bowls.

“Muy caliente,” Mateo repeats twice over the uncooked oatmeal, blowing away pretend steam.

Cris searches the cluttered countertop and takes three folded twenties from his wallet. “Here.” His smile is beautiful enough to stop my heart. “I owe you for last night.”

“I don’t want your money, Mr. Sanchez.” All I want from anyone is a little respect.

*Adam*

“Come on, fucker, get up. Don’t be doing this to me. You agreed we’d meet at the range at one o’clock and it’s two-thirty. I should kill you for making me come over here and haul your ass out of bed,” Drew pisses.

I hardly stir. Last night was probably amazing. Wish I could remember it.

Dehydration glues my mouth shut and if I move, I might toss all over the carpet. Who the hell put the toilet so far away? The room spins behind my closed eyes. I feel like I’m on a cruise ship. I hate cruises. The one I’d been on for a family vacation made me feel like this, only without getting drunk first. So alcohol has its benefits.

“It might be New Year’s Day, but even Colton’s awake. How the fuck do I avoid Kingsbrier if you can’t make good on the deal? What if I can’t duck out of here without running into Brier?”

I groan, wishing Drew would leave.

I’m so sick of the sob story romance with my sister. She’s a wreck and he’s stoic and silent. However, it’s also as if Drew has something at the tip of his tongue but can’t spit it out. Like he wants to ask about her but is too much of a pussy. Dude plays football for one of the best teams in the nation. Can’t he get someone else to suck his dick?

“Gu wirout e.” My head throbs.

“I’m not going without you.” Drew’s oversized body collapses to the bed,



bouncing and making every muscle in my body ache. The kid had gone to college to play ball and came back the size of an elephant. “I’m not going at all now. Dude, you need a shower. I can smell the booze coming out of your pores. It’s hideous. Call me when you’re sober.”

His wicked smack to my head is intentional and I deserve it.

## Eric

I've taken the day off to drive Gin to her checkup at the obstetrician's office.

"It's called an IUD," she explains her options to me in the waiting area. "They last like three or four years. It puts us back on track, closer to the original plan?" Ginny regards me somewhat uncertain, fearful of talking to me about birth control options when her failings were so blatant this spring. "We'd have to decide to have it taken out earlier if we changed our minds."

"Why hadn't you considered it sooner?"

"The doctor says they're more for women who've already had a baby. There's other stuff, too. I mean, besides the pill."

Which Ginny proved was pretty ineffective if you didn't take it.

"Is this what you want?" Up until this conversation, sex hasn't been mentioned in so long I'm half hard. We've both been exhausted and wrapped up in the baby, I hadn't realized sex was missing.

A nurse calls Gin back to be seen by her doctor. My foot makes a gentle rocking motion, keeping the baby asleep in his carrier while she's gone.

The other nurses ask how old Corey is and flash coy grins when I respond, "Six weeks." Dolt that I am, it takes me half the time we're waiting to recognize they have precisely the same thought in their heads. *This guy can't wait to get laid.*

By the time I drop Ginny at Kingsbrier to ask my mother to watch Corey, it's

the exact opposite. I'm wondering how well Viagra works. I wasn't this nervous when Gin and I lost our virginity together or the first time I snuck her into the house.

With any luck, Momma will think I'm taking Gin on a simple date. It's bad enough the baby proves we've had sex. Fuck. Going out tonight makes our intentions obvious. My mother is going to think I'm a pervert.

I u-turn, heading to town to buy a bouquet before heading back to the apartment. Inside, I search for a glass pitcher and fill it with water, arranging the roses. I hope Ginny doesn't realize they're not in a real vase and console myself that at least it's not a cheap plastic cup. Crumpling the cellophane into a ball, I toss it in the trash only to dig it back out, trying to flatten it.

It might have been a better idea to present to Ginny the flowers in the neat and tidy way I purchased them from the florist. I'm going about this all wrong. Valentine's Day is a few weeks off and it seems we're light years from tonight being anything close to romantic.

I wipe my sweaty hands on my jeans and double-check there aren't any stains on my button-down shirt or the plain white T that's showing under it. I'm wearing something casual, but not so casual I look like a schlep.

My mind races to the ring at Christmas. I'm unready for that. Although, we have a kid, so what am I waiting on?

I sit, stand, and pace the small space. Knocking into the table, and jostling the roses, I right the pitcher as Ginny opens the front door.

"Hi." She sets her purse down.

"Hey."

I'm awkward, trying to help her take off her coat, and wind up in the way. It drops to the floor twice before I can get it hung on the peg the right way without the thin jacket falling. She's got on a skirt and a pretty new shirt she'd gotten after Corey was born and nothing fit.

"Is the baby okay?" *Did my mother figure it out?*

"He's fine." *Of course, she knows.* "Miss Rose says it's no problem and she'll take Corey again if we go out for Valentine's." She points to the mix of apricot-colored roses, dahlias, viburnum berries, and orchids. "Flowers?"

"They're for you. The baby gets so many presents I figured you'd like something special."

"That's lovely and unexpected. Thank you." My girlfriend presses her sweet lips to mine.

My left hand curls up into her long hair, the other starts out at Gin's waist, roaming to grab her behind, pulling her to me. The kiss deepens. Ginny clutches my shirt, but pulls away when I start to maul her.

“Eric, you need to slow down.”

I chuckle at my stupidity for pushing too fast since it isn't doing much for me either.

It isn't as if we have to make curfew or we've got a limited amount of time together. No one has a set time to be home because this is home. So if making love to Ginny doesn't happen tonight, what's the big deal?

I touch Ginny's dimple, taking the time to look at her. She rarely wears make-up anymore. She's beautiful without it and the blush pinking her cheeks takes my breath away.

“I'm nervous,” I admit, inhaling.

“It's only me. What's could go wrong?” She bites her lip, letting out a tiny huff reminding me we've already endured the worst-case scenario.

“I think you're amazing.”

“You told me that the day before you invited me out for the first time.”

My Adam's apple bobs reflexively. I can't believe the details she remembers. For me, Ginny had been the whole package. Telling her she was beautiful didn't seem to cover brilliant, kind, gentle, or any other word that defined her.

“I felt silly. I was a dumb schoolgirl, trying to act like I hadn't fallen for a Kingsbrier.” she admits her anxiety.

“I walked away that afternoon kicking myself because I couldn't get the words out. Took me all night and the whole next day to work up the courage to ask you to go to the Grille with me before the football game.”

“I'm glad you finally did.”

“So am I.”

It hadn't been anything stupendous, just burgers and fries before my brothers' first Friday night under the lights of our junior year. We stood in the stands, cheering alongside my sisters, and celebrated the home team's victory with friends behind the barn.

One and all gradually dissipated, leaving no one but us quints, Ginny, and Drew behind. We kicked dirt over the remains of the fire and stomped it down to smother the embers. Each of us played a part in making it look like the area hadn't been touched. Later, I drove Ginny home, hoping she'd had a good enough evening to agree to see me again.

When I kissed Ginny for the first time, I knew it was different. I couldn't fathom not being able to spend every Friday night with her, eating greasy burgers, drinking and dancing under the stars with my arms wrapped around her.

“Want to go to the Grille tonight?” I ask.

She deserves better, but perhaps I can entice the waitress to give us the table we sat at when we started out.

“I’d love to.”

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“I’m not hurting you?” I brush Ginny’s hair away from her face. It cascades down the pillow into the halo of blonde I love so much.

“No.” Her lips meet mine. She presses her pelvis up, encouraging me to keep going.

My head dips forward, unbelieving we’ve been too wrapped up in the baby and missed out on this. Okay, from a technical standpoint, we waited for the doctor to give us the green light.

We need to find a sitter and go to dinner more often. The next time we go on a date I’ll splurge on something better than a greasy spoon where everyone from town hangs out. The next time we have sex will be sooner than that.

Being out with Ginny at the restaurant brought me back to the way it was last spring when we had the world at our fingertips. She’d ordered her usual. I’d stolen her fries after mine were gone. Ginny joked I was taking food out of the baby’s mouth and she needed the calories. It was one of the few times between when the hostess seated us at the restaurant and coming back to the apartment when Corey’s come up. The rest of the evening has been about us.

It was better than the way it was. I’ll kiss her goodnight and Ginny will still be here in the morning.

Now, we have a kid with the world at his fingertips. Corey is safe with his Gran and I’m finally alone with the only other person who makes life worthwhile.

“You have to move.”

I’m hovering above her, hesitating. “It’s been too long.” I groan, feeling her push up against my hips. I’m not going to last, which is pathetic for a kid who hasn’t reached twenty yet. “Hell, Gin, ya gotta slow down.”

She arches her back, forcing my slight withdrawal.

“Have you forgotten how this is done?” she teases. Her back hits the mattress and the motion of her body coaxes me to meet her.

“You feel too good, sugar.” I bite at Ginny’s bottom lip, slow to build the friction between her legs.

“Please, Eric,” Ginny begs.

I let out a soft chuckle, thinking she sounds like an impatient guy when she needs to get off.

I created this demon, so I might as well surrender to it. There are worse fates than my girl wanting me.

I hitch up her leg and begin matching her rhythm. Ginny's hands smooth down my back, pulling me in as close as she can. With each stroke, I'm buried farther inside her. Her walls tighten. I fight to hold on until her cries let me know her release will be heightened by my own.

Ginny's orgasm rushes like the tide and her breasts harden to stone underneath the weight of my chest. She grimaces and I shift away, thinking she's in pain. My torso lifts and her nipples begin leaking. The milk makes a slow trail down her sides. Ginny reaches for her new top, ruining the fabric clutched to her chest.

"I needed a shower or the baby. Maybe both. I don't know how to relieve the pressure." She shies from me, embarrassed by her body's betrayal.

We've gone from romantic right back to the pitfalls of being a new parent in a split-second. I'm unfazed by the droplets of milk staining the sheets and wipe the mess away, tossing my shirt on the laundry pile.

"You okay?" My hand brushes a lump where her breast has grown a hard painful ridge.

"No one told me this would happen," she responds sheepishly.

"It doesn't bug me. I mean, it's not like it'll last forever, or happen every time. Right?"

Ginny fumbles for words. She's not sure. Wetness soaks her shirt beneath her hands. She lets it fall forward enough to peek but pushes it back into place as white beads slip onto her bare skin.

"We'll figure it out, Gin. Do you want to go get Corey?"

"No, I don't, Eric." Ginny loses her composure and her voice rises. "I—It's so wrong, but I don't want to be his momma tonight. For a little while, I want to be with you, and only you. I wanted to feel pretty and know maybe you still wanted me. I didn't think I'd have to worry about this." She motions to her torso.

"Everything was so perfect and I ruined it again."

"How could you think I wouldn't want you?"

"I just had a baby, Eric! I've been the size of a cow for the past nine months. Now everything is either misshapen or still enormous and there is nothing sexy about milk leaking everywhere. Why would you want me?"

I slide off the bed and rest on my knees in front of Ginny. "I've always thought you were beautiful. You are. You're incredible and totally sexy—"

"Eric." Air leaves her lungs through her nose and her shoulders sag.

"Let me finish, please?" I slip a hand up to rest on her hip. "When you were pregnant I was so turned on. It sounds weird saying it, but there was something about knowing you were having my baby and other guys knowing what we'd

done together. I swear to you, Gin, I was continually hard as a rock. It was one of the sexiest things I'd ever seen. I mean, you were. You still are. I watch you try to hide from me when you get dressed and damn, Sugar, you're back to tiny already with this enormous rack that I can't get my hands on because of the kid."

"You want to touch me? You hardly did at all when we made love."

"I was happy to look until touching became an option again. Now it's fucking killing me. If you didn't notice I was having a hard time trying not to make a fool of myself. You needed a chance to enjoy it. If I didn't touch you enough, I'm sorry."

The fabric of Ginny's soft shirt brushes against my hand as my palms rest on the upper part of her thighs. One thumb skims back and forth on her skin, dangerously close to the juncture of her legs.

"Do you still want to touch me now?" she asks with all seriousness, disgusted and unsure of her body.

"Damn, Gin. Yes, you're hurting, though. I can see it in your eyes."

"It can't get much worse than what just happened." Ginny looks away, unable to keep my gaze. The lamp on the nightstand draws out the shadows in stark relief. Her confidence is broken. "What if it's never like it was before?"

I won't allow Ginny's inhibitions to get the best of her.

Starting near her right ear, my lips feather lightly down her neck. I remove the shirt from one breast, continuing to kiss down her chest between her cleavage. My palm encircles the round over-full mound and my mouth closes around the peak of her nipple, tentative at first. The room is so quiet my swallows are audible.

Ginny's breath hitches, stifling a moan. "Eric, should you be doing that?"

"Do you want me to stop?"

"No. It feels amazing." The tenor of her words express *and yet so wrong*.

With each pull of my mouth, the softness of her skin returns and the bulging ridges recede.

I'm confident taking her second breast and assuredness replaces Ginny's caution. Her hand cups the back of my head as my lips tug and slowly suck, loosening the tension that's threaded its way into her mind. In an instant, what we're doing isn't foreign.

"It feels better," she whimpers when my fingers find her core.

"I need you again, Gin."

She scoots back on the soft mattress, making room for me.

Gin calls my name louder when I enter her for the second time. Her legs tremble when she climaxes. The sensation grabs me by the balls. I thrust harder, riding the wave higher. My short pants crush our torsos together and I have to

wait for stars to recede from my vision.

Gin's cheeks are flushed and it makes her so incredibly beautiful. She'll always be mine.

I swat her ass and she shoots a look over her shoulder on the way to the bathroom. The covers are draped low on my hips and a lazy smile plays on my lips. If anyone had told me I'd do to Ginny what we've done, I would have called their bluff. I'd never expected it to have the effect it did. We have to get Corey soon, but after he's tucked in his crib we can lie naked and perhaps could figure a way to have more of this.

The water turns on in the shower at the same time as my cell phone rings on the nightstand. I startle recognizing the number and pick up after the first ring.

"Don't worry. The baby fell asleep. He didn't even take the bottle Ginny left. Stay out. I'll call if we need you." Momma hangs up without a reply from me.

I check the clock, calculating how long until Corey's next feeding. With a grin, I toss the sheet off and go help Ginny clean up.



## *Eric*

Ginny's starting back at work part time until we can get into the swing of things. We need the money, but the cost of Corey's babysitter annihilates her pay. It already had us on edge. Gin spent last week getting Corey on a new schedule and switching him to a morning bottle. Then Corey woke up sick. Ginny couldn't blow off her shift. And no matter what the circumstances, we still owe the sitter who has held Corey's spot and is expecting him today.

"What about my momma?" I suggest.

"She's going to Houston with Miss Lily Anne. It's all she's talked about for weeks. I can't ask her to cancel." Ginny pats the baby on the back. He's moaning, half-crying because of a stuffy nose, and his cough sounds like a bark.

"You have to go soon," I remind her.

Leaving the baby at daycare was hard enough for Gin. She's overthought everything from missing Corey's smile to the way he reaches for her after a nap.

"I can't just take off on him, Eric. What are you going to do, bring Corey to work?" The vein in her neck quickens.

"There's too much to do on a Monday. Plus, I can't bring a baby to a construction site. Things are behind from the heavy rain. What about Cris?"

"We can't ask him. He had a full plate between getting Mateo to school and taking care of the animals before your daddy put him in charge of the deliveries." Ginny holds her head. The situation is giving her a headache.

We may pat ourselves on the back when we don't screw up too badly, however, we're thinking the same thing we do whenever parenting goes wrong: This is why teenagers shouldn't have babies. We've been muddling through since the night Cris and my mother bailed us out.

My siblings are back at their respective universities. The anxiety over the bomb Colton dropped has only been lessened by his frequent emails. Ginny's been trying to keep as much as she can tension-free. Something that's not exactly doable with an infant in the house.

Her cell rings, vibrating on the table. We're both ready to pitch it across the room to combat the stress level. If only that put us out of our misery.

She answers, putting the phone on speaker. "Hi, Momma."

"I wanted to wish you luck on your first day back. I know, it's corny. But it reminded me of your first day of school. Are you on your way now or already there?"

"I haven't even left yet."

"The first time is always the hardest. Every mother goes through it. He'll be fine. In a few hours, you'll be holding him again."

"Corey's sick," Gin squeaks. "The sitter won't take him. I can't stay unless I want to lose my job and Eric needs to leave."

There's silence on the other end of the line. Diana and Ginny are working on rebuilding their relationship. Yet, things are still unreliable given her stepfather's presence lurking in the background.

"Can I come over to help you out?" Her mother is timid with the inquiry.

"You'd do that?"

"Corey is my grandson. Let me watch him for the morning."

Ginny stares disbelieving at me. "She wants to come over." Ginny mouths.

I sigh, acknowledging it's the best plan we've got. I worry about her stepdad, but it's not like Diana is taking Corey to their house and Mr. Adair isn't welcome at Kingsbrier.

I'm the one who waits for Diana and am late pulling into the parking lot at Cavanaugh Construction.

Entering the building through the warehouse, beady eyes shift over to me. The other employees' disdain isn't unusual. I'm used to it. Before graduation, I hauled building materials at worksites and pounded nails. Since the fall, though, Daddy's had me learning the family business in and out of the office. I oversee schedules for employees and completion dates on homes, fill out material requisitions, and order and work with the reps from large equipment manufacturers. Last week, he brought me to a sales meeting with the real estate team that sells the lots. There isn't a facet of the business Ross doesn't want me

knee-deep in, with a complete understanding of the company from start to finish.

The grown men I worked with during high school—who wrote me off as the owner’s son—are now expected to take directions from a kid. I’ve tried to accept how hard it must be to go from joking around with a know-nothing to asking my permission. It bothers me too since it’s hard not to defer to the experience of guys who have been on Dad’s crew for longer than I’ve been alive. I do listen to them and bring suggestions to my father. Yet, I understand I can’t let them push me around or afford to be overridden when the order comes from the top. What am I supposed to say? “Gee, Dad, the guys had a better idea.”

In the corporate offices, Dad’s secretary turns to greet me. A foreman’s bugging Sally to see Ross. He’s been with the company give or take five years. A know-it-all, who cut corners and has had one too many accidents on his sites for the human resource department’s liking.

“This is what nepotism gets you,” he mumbles. “When’s Ross in?”

“He’s visiting a site on his way in, but I expect him anytime,” Sally says cheerily.

“Well, it’s important. This requisition doesn’t add up. I’ve got double the materials for the Johnson barn. The supplier won’t let us return the overage without a hauling fee, which eats up the discount, making the portion I do need cost more. All this crap is stuck at the site and my guys hardly have space to work in.” His calloused hands grip the edges of the dog-eared pink form.

“Can I see what you’ve got?” If the stapled paperwork is what I think, the answer is simple.

The foreman withholds what he has. “Your dad needs to look in on this one. It’s a big mistake for a kid to make.”

“If my name is on it, maybe—” I use a level tone.

“Morning, all.” Dad breezes in. “Sally, I’m expecting a call from Fred. I just left him at Davy’s Crossing, without a truck. So, Eric, I’ll need you to drive back out there with me later on this afternoon. What a swamp! We need the area to dry out. I give it three days and we’ll be moving earth again.” Ross gives his attention to the foreman. “Can you spare a tractor before you break ground at the Johnsons’?”

“We need to talk about the Johnsons.” He hands the requisition to Ross like it’s my death sentence.

Dad flips through the pages, grinning slyly. “Everything looks in order.”

“I’ve got double the materials than we need at the Johnson site.”

“When did it show? Who took delivery? I don’t see the supplier sign-off in any of these papers.”

“I did on Friday.”

Ross harrumphs. “You didn’t notice it says right here the additional materials were ordered for Kingsbrier? The transportation cost alone indicates the shipments were going to separate sites.” He points to the dollar amount right below the discount I’d managed to eke out of the supplier. “I’d never pay this much for a single haul. And the invoice shows payment’s been made from two separate accounts. The corporation’s and mine—if you are nosy enough to want to know what I spend my money on. So, your signature is on the delivery? That means it’s your oversight. Mistakes happen, but who is eating the cost of delivering my materials to Kingsbrier? I doubt you’d want me to dock your wages.”

“No one told me.” He glowers.

“I sent an email to anyone waiting for a portion of the supplies,” I say.

“This is construction. Who the hell reads email?”

Ross walks towards his office. “Eric, you will come with us for a moment?”

The foreman follows. I shut us in Dad’s office.

Ross tosses an embroidered Cavanaugh Construction jacket over the back of his chair and stands behind his desk, pushing his knuckles into the top. “You know I have five kids, right?”

The guy nods.

“Good. See, this is a private company. If I die tomorrow those nineteen-year-olds automatically become the bosses. Each of my boys has a vested interest in our success and has worked summers for this company longer than I’ve employed you. You’re damn lucky this is Eric you are dealing with. He’s responsible and level-headed, no matter what anyone out in the warehouse has tried to insinuate. My youngest son, on the other hand, isn’t as forgiving. He’d have your head on a platter.” He pauses to let the seriousness of the situation sink in. “Knowing my boy the way I do, I’m assuming you didn’t go to Eric but instead decided to escalate the issue. He could have shown you the same information you chose to ignore. Now, to me, it looks like you were trying to pull a fast one, make my kid look bad. It doesn’t sit well. Not one bit. You call the supplier and get them back to the Johnson’s to pick up and redeliver what belongs at Kingsbrier.”

“Okay, boss.” The guy’s line of vision bores into my dad. He’s flushed and angry over being put in his place.

“One more thing, I like to think of myself as fair. I’ve given you a damn lot of second chances. This is the last. The more slack I’ve cut you, the more you’ve used it to hang yourself. One more accident on a site, or I even get the slightest notion you’ve been talking shit about this situation, and you’re done. Own your responsibilities, don’t make others scapegoats in your faults. You want to start

looking for a new job now, it is fine by me. I'll keep you on the payroll until you find something, but don't bother to show your face around here if all you're going to do is continue screwing up." Ross doesn't allow a response or bother to watch him leave.

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Behind the wheel of the old truck that us quints have used, my mind is like a pinball machine. This residential site Dad asked me to drive him out to inspect is behind schedule because of the rain. How long it takes to dry out is out of our control. Ross lent his company truck to a foreman who was having car problems. My siblings will be back soon and we're back to five of us vying for two vehicles. I'm budgeting to get Gin and me a car of our own, but want to keep finances tight with the cost of the sitter because who knows how many more instances there's going to be when we're paying and Corey's under the weather.

"The baby doing okay?" Dad asks, breaking the silence as we head home together.

I'm borrowing a humidifier from Momma when I drop off Ross.

"The baby's fine or, rather, Ginny was fine once she got back to him after her shift." She left me a voicemail, sounding tired but relieved, and saying the pediatrician told her not to worry, babies get colds.

"Ever going to tell me why we need another barn?" I bring up the morning's fiasco.

"You like the Johnson plans? I hired the architect to make modifications."

I give a non-committal response. The dimensions of the Johnson's horse barn, meant to show off prize-winning stallions, are staggering. It's slated to have two stories plus a loft. The blueprints also include a patio and balcony off of the second floor. It's showy. A lot showier than what's needed at Kingsbrier, especially since pretty much no one rides the horses now that Daveigh is gone.

Cris has been marking off sections all around the area to till. The Kingsbrier barn will sit off the access road a bit further down the lane than the current barn and other structures, like the stable apartments.

"So what are you growing, Dad, magic beans?"

"In a sense. Remember when your mother and I went to Napa a few years back? I got to thinking we have all these empty acres of pastureland. Retirement is around the corner. Profits from the company are at an all-time high. So why not?"

“You’re planting grapes?” I tap the steering wheel, joking, “Brier will die when she finds out about this.”

“There’s a reason why I waited to get into winemaking until the lot of you were grown.”

“Hold it. What does Cris know about winemaking? He works with animals. You hired him as a caretaker.”

The young father had seen the advertisement when he was visiting Texas. Cris was looking to get away from LA, slow his life down, and focus on his son.

“Turns out Cris’s dad was a migrant worker near San Antonio. When he got his citizenship he was hired on at one of the vineyards. It’s a real bootstrap story. Before his death, he became a sommelier. I liked Cris and, knowing his roots, wasn’t letting the opportunity pass me by. What he isn’t already aware of from being raised by someone in the industry, we’re figuring out together as we go along. Though, initially he may have thought I was joking when I said I was opening a winery.”

“You’re starting a new business, at your age?”

“Construction is a young man’s game, Eric. Prime for you and your brothers to take on if that is what they want... Know what I wanted when I started out? To build my own house. It’s a buzz-kill when you marry a girl who comes with her own mansion. The new barn will be my house, a place to relax, kick up my feet, and have a drink. I think it is cool that I’ll be drinking my own ’shine. Do I sound like a coot? Don’t be telling your brothers and sisters I’m trying to reclaim my youth. Hell, don’t be telling them anything yet, so we’re sure to have all hands on deck for this barn raising.”

“We’re cool, Dad,” I respond, using the same word my father had. “Thanks for trusting me.”

Thanks for believing in me.

## *Eric*

“Who taught you to plow a field?” Brier kicks her heels up on the wheel of the tractor, reclining in its metal seat.

“Daddy, same as you.” Adam knocks her boots down.

“Well, you stink at it. Look at all those spots.” She cocks her head toward the field. A few areas could use another pass to even out the grassy mohawks in the churned dirt.

Daveigh walks out thirty feet, crumbles the dirt in her hands, and shakes the stalks of grass loose before tossing them aside. “I agree with Brier, Adam. Colton always had perfect lines. I almost expected him to make designs in the grass like crop circles or the way they mow at major league ballparks...Nothing seems right here without him.”

“Looks fine to me,” Adam responds after our youngest sister takes care of the last of the dirty work for the day. He jumps on the tractor, making a seat out of the front engine block and splaying his legs over the steering wheel.

The three of my siblings returned to Kingsbrier, expecting to rest. Daddy gave them a day to unwind and at daybreak, playing a rendition of Reveille, had them out here when the sun rose. Hours later, it’s beginning its descent below the horizon. We’ve managed to move over half of the earth we were told to.

I took the week off from Cavanaugh to bust my ass here, but I know the importance of this project for my family. Since this is spring break, Brier’s

positive she should be at the beach with a margarita in her hands, not sweaty and dusty. She's openly pondered where a bunch of nineteen-year-olds were scrounging beer from. I haven't let on any of what's happening tonight.

She looks at the remaining markers with orange ties stuck in the ground, marking off the sections left to. "He'd a had this done without us, you know?" she remarks wistfully. "Why'd things have to change?"

We're all missing Colton. He mowed the fields. Not because they needed cutting. And not because he was told to do so. The rest of us would hear the tractor's engine purring in the distance, and understand while he worked through whatever was on his mind, it was going to be a quiet day. It was his version of therapy.

"C was so peaceful out here. Made it a whole lot easier to play spring soccer knowing he wasn't gunning for a fight." The other three chuckle as I brush grime off my jeans.

Brier wipes at her eyes.

"Don't go all mushy on us. We have a whole week of chores to get done and one less person doing them." Adam rubs his nose and looks away.

"Colton sends Momma a message almost every day." I kick a clump off of the oversized tire.

"What's he say?" My older brother's envy is as green as his eyes.

"Stuff about his day, working out, what movies he watches."

"Nothing about what he does?"

"No, dumbass. I doubt the Navy wants a sailor to tell his mommy back in Texas about Iraqi insurgents and members of the Taliban shooting at you."

Daveigh's phone buzzes. Our hopes are dashed, thinking maybe it's our missing brother when Daveigh uses her best Pollyanna voice talking to our mother. She ends the call, stuffing the cell in her back pocket. "Everyone is waiting on us for dinner."

Daveigh tucks herself under my arm. I squeeze her and give her a peck on the temple.

Torn between missing out on my family and not making the limited time I have with my siblings count, I've left Ginny alone with Corey on a Sunday. My brother and sisters won out because they'll be gone again within the week to finish out the school year. Although, I've anticipated getting back to Gin all day.

Across the field, towards where Cavanaugh Construction is pouring the concrete foundation for the new barn, doors rattle, thumping shut. Daddy's truck turns over and heads towards the access road.

"He's making us walk, isn't he?" Adam says, sourly. He jumps down, offering Brier a hand.



“It’ll be worthwhile when we get there.” I stroll at the back of the pack, noting how the shafts of sunlight glisten off the pond water near the house. “Dad plans on finally letting y’all in on what’s happening.”

“I knew you knew!” Brier points an accusatory finger, heckling and berating me. “We’re supposed to be a team. How could you have kept a secret from the rest of us?”

I shut my mouth and turn my fingers, locking my mouth shut, and tossing the imaginary key toward the field. Our father wants tonight to be perfect and because of this, so do I.

“Does Colton know?” Adam asks.

“We’re Skyping with him tonight so he’s in on it too,” I say, watching their excitement rise.

“Nuh-uh!”

“We get to see him?”

“Why didn’t any of us think of this sooner?”

For once in the day, the overlapping voices don’t make me wish for earmuffs. We really are a raucous bunch.

Daveigh and Brier dash for the house at a near run, close enough at times to hold hands. My mix-matched sisters both have their strengths. As one darts forward a few paces, the other picks up speed. Reaching the pond, both girls slow, flipping cartwheels the way they did when we were children.

Adam and I watch the girls put their arms around each other’s backs, leading right then left like drunken sailors before Adam grabs the back of my neck for a little slap-play action. It quickly turns into the two of us throwing fake punches and slipping in and out of headlocks.

“It’ll go to B’s head, but she was right. Today we would have seen Colton at his best,” Adam concedes. “You still have the ring he gave you?”

“I do.” I put it in a safe spot in my old room at Kingsbrier so Gin wouldn’t stumble on it.

“What are you waiting for? You and Gin are doing good, right?”

“Better than I’d expected last summer. I can’t imagine his life without my son. But I don’t want Colton to miss it. I’m not sure I could go through with getting married without any of you here.”

“You can’t hold off on your life waiting for us to come home.”

I didn’t think I had been.

“He won’t think less of you for marrying her, anyway. Gin’s already family, ceremony, or not. Not everything has got to be planned out perfectly to go right. Thought you’d figured that out by now, little brother.”

We catch up to the girls and leave our muddy boots on the morning porch.

Skidding into the kitchen in stocking feet, Brier lets out a low whistle. There are bottles of wine lined up on the sideboard from almost every vineyard in Texas.

“D, how do you feel about sneaking a few of these bottles up to your room?”

“Why is your primary focus planting evidence in my room?”

“It’s not. I’ve got sore muscles and you’ve got that fluffy pink comforter. We can snuggle and use alcohol as an elixir to fall asleep faster.”

“Yeah, don’t use pretend smart words to sugar coat it. The answer is still, ‘no thanks’.” Daveigh disappears down the hall.

“We don’t give Daveigh enough credit, do we?” Adam asks, watching her hold her ground.

“Nope,” I respond with a chuckle, mulling over his words from outside.

“Oh, they’re back! Come here, girls, quick!” Momma calls. She ushers them into the den where Ginny sits in front of the computer with Corey on her lap. He’s reaching out, trying to touch Colton’s face. Colton’s babbling at his nephew, remarking to Ginny about how big he’s gotten. She’s less tense with the screen separating them.

Ginny gets up. Brier and Daveigh take her place, sharing the seat of the chair and talking at the same time, asking nearly the same questions.

“Oh, my gosh, we need to do this more often,” Brier gushes. “It feels like you’re right here.”

Adam’s turn next and I excuse myself. By the time I’m back, he’s adjusted the screen, clearing the static, and making sure Colton has a view of everyone. Brier is bouncing Corey while Gin and his other auntie make silly faces at him. It’s a perfect family moment.

“I haven’t seen Eric,” Colton comments.

“I’m right here.” I tug on Ginny’s hand, pulling her onto my lap. She kisses my dirty cheek, glad to see me. “Know what we talked about at Christmas, C?” I waggle the velvet box between my thumb and forefingers.

“Dude, you better make sure Momma is in the room.” Colton grins. “You will never hear the end of it otherwise.”

“Everyone who is supposed to be here is.” I flip open the box. Ginny’s expression goes from happy to startled.

I stare at her, uncertain if Ginny is breathing.

“You have to say it.” Colton prompts after a lengthy pause.

“Will you marry me?”

“There you go, bro. That’s how it’s done.” On the other side of the world, my brother claps for me.

I’m glad I’d been able to include him. For this, though, it would have been better if he were back at Kingsbrier.

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Ginny accepting my proposal was a perfect fit with Daddy's winery announcement. Although, there is a pang of guilt when we disconnect that Colton isn't here with us.

Cris joins us for dinner and the electricity in the room continues rising throughout the meal. The women are full of wedding planning ideas. Ross stands, clears his throat to regain the floor, and toasts the bride. I watch Ginny blush all over again. Then he expresses his appreciation to the four of us for our hard work today, announcing his plans for a Kingsbrier label wine.

Thrilled, Momma still eyes us with an air of concern as Cris and Daddy set out wine glasses and water pitchers and the multitude of wines.

"We're celebrating." Ross calms his wife by pouring her a large portion of a chocolate after dinner wine. He sets the bottle next to her as if it's her own private stash. The sweetness hits her palette and she relaxes. There isn't a treat Momma enjoys more than dark chocolate.

Her concerns aren't unfounded. Like a toddler needing her sippy cup refilled, Brier is much too much into the tasting. She polishes off the remnants of a bottle, thinking no one is the wiser. She giggles with Daveigh, who only takes the slightest sips from her glass. Within the hour, Daveigh is hiccuping and it's obvious my older sister can hold her liquor far better than the younger.

Daddy pops another cork. We're sampling wines from the bigger vineyards in the area, but he'd also sent for ones from El Paso, Amarillo, and way down the Gulf Coast. Grape growing conditions differ everywhere and so do the types of grapes grown. This tasting will give everyone an idea of what other small operations produce.

"Watch out, Daddy. Brier's liable to drink up all your profits." Adam's glass is the last to be poured this round. Hers is empty, again. She's got it held in the air, patiently waiting for a refill.

"He's makin' me sound like a lush."

"If the shoe fits—"

"You're cut off, Sugar. And if I find you left this house tonight, don't bother coming back in the morning."

Brier's face falls. While Daddy's distracted, she sticks her tongue out at Adam. He returns the sentiment and they're both cracking up by the time our father finishes pouring the next set of mouthfuls into the other glasses.

“You would not do something so unconscionable as lock me out of Kingsbrier!”

“I would if you’re not smart enough to realize the risk I’m taking by providing alcohol to minors. You want my respect, girl, you show some in return.”

All told, the small samples that have passed her lips aren’t more than a single glass or two. I’ve been there when Brier’s drunk far more.

However, Daddy’s attempting to build something at Kingsbrier to leave for the next generation. You’re not starting on the best foot creating a legacy when your kid gets picked up for driving under the influence.

“I understand.” Brier sets down the glass, surrendering. She’s ready to rebuild the broken from each time she’d snuck out. With a warm, genuine smile, she offers her soon to be sister-in-law to bring Corey up to bed. “If I’m done, there’s no sense spoiling your engagement party. No bride should have to miss her own soirée.”

“Eric set up the crib in his room. We’re staying here tonight, so everything the baby needs is in the duffle.” Ginny hands our fussing son over to his aunt. He sticks two fingers in his mouth, sucking them and snuggling into Brier.

“You got the touch,” Rose praises, kissing Corey’s cap of blonde. “Sleep well. We’ve got big plans for tomorrow.”

“If Daddy’ll let us off the ho—ok.” Daveigh hiccups.

“It’s unlikely I’ll help you get out of much since I’m working until lunchtime,” Gin says.

My youngest sister looks crestfallen. A true romantic, she was the first to ask when they could go browse the boutiques for wedding dresses. Cris’s son drops his favorite movie in her lap and the sparkle returns to her jade eyes.

“Want to go upstairs with me and Brier and watch this?”

“Sí.” He looks at her like she’s hung the moon.

## *Ginny*

Throughout dinner my heart had only stopped pounding when the conversation moved to the winery or what everyone was doing this week while they were home on vacation. As soon as someone brought up Eric and me marrying, the shakes, disbelief, and excitement were back full force.

Some say a wedding won't change anything. However, after what I've put us through, it meant so much to hear those four words from Eric.

I've picked up Corey at the sitter's after work and stopped at Richardson's Market for groceries. The parking lot is half full and the aisles are clear. Target is a zoo at this time of day. Shopping there also wouldn't allow enough time to get the items we need and make it to the sitter's without having to pay a late fee for keeping him longer.

I'm glad she mentioned Corey napped well. I'm never sure when he'll start crying in the middle of the store. It's hard enough being a teenage mother, being the mother of a Kingsbrier baby—the type of family who has notoriety and even if you don't know the Cavanaugh's personally—are enormous shoes to fill. Even if I'm learning to ignore it, I worry someday Corey will understand the condemnation in people's voices when they criticize my parenting.

I place the standard fare on the conveyor at the checkout; bread, milk, eggs, and some simple ingredients for a recipe Keely suggested over email I want to try out at dinner. A perk of not being married yet is Corey and I qualify for food

assistance, but I pay for the things Eric needs with household cash. His energy drinks go last and are separated by a divider. He's allowed a vice. Some husbands drink or smoke. My fiancé starts the day off with a lone slim silver can.

The bagger sticks the last plastic sack in the buggy. I say a quick "thanks", pushing our purchases out to the parking lot. It's raining and I pull the hood of Corey's carrier forward to shield him from the fat droplets, tucking his blanket around him. We lucked out with front row parking.

Two guys get out of the car parked next to mine. The passenger folds his collar up so the rain doesn't hit his neck and lets me walk by. I make sure to tell him I appreciate it.

Corey goes straight into the backseat. I transfer the groceries from the cart to the trunk. Daveigh and Brier are busy at the ranch, but they'll be home for the summer in a few short weeks. I don't know how all of us will manage shuffling the vehicles between us. Eric isn't interested in dipping into savings, even for a beater. My engagement ring must have set him back a pretty penny. I'm grateful Eric loves me and his family took me in. I'm sure if the quints figured it out, so will we.

I shut the trunk, careful not to startle Corey and peer through the back window. He's falling off to sleep again to the soothing pitter-pat of raindrops.

My foot hits something as I reach for the driver's door. I squat to find I've kicked a brown leather wallet under the next car over. Opening it, I recognize it belongs to the man who'd let me go by. He'll get to the register unable to pay. I've watched similar situations play out in my checkout line; The guy on the way home, or the mom juggling three kids who got to pull out their wallet to pay and it's not there. It breaks my heart every time.

Without thinking, I spare the few seconds and sprint the few paces to Richardson's Market's automatic doors. His license is in the card flap. About to hand it to the nearest cashier, I spy the guy reaching into his back pocket. He thanks me and offers me a twenty as a reward, which I politely decline. I'm happy to pay it forward to someone when others are kind to me.

I dash out of the store as fast as I'd gone in, with a spring in my step, only to falter and trip over the curb.

The back door of the convertible is wide open and Corey is missing.

I scream and customers come running out.

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My clothes are soaked and my extremities chilled despite the warmth of the spring rain. Water splatters off of the grocery store roof's overhang where the man from the next car over helped to move me to while the manager called the police. He suggests I'll stop shaking if I go inside. But I refuse to leave the parking lot and scrunch up next to the outer wall and the ice cooler. Leaving got me into this mess.

The three squad cars surround the convertible, the blue flashing lights on the one closest to me wail out my mistake for everyone to hear. My child's gone. The only evidence the police have found is Corey's diaper bag on the floor in the back seat. According to a stoic officer who keeps glancing at me sideways, pulling prints in the rain proves problematic.

Eric's momma is the first to arrive. She'd been right telling me Corey would be my heart living outside my body. My chest has an empty hole in it. Miss Rose shields me from the people entering the store who gawk at the sheriff's deputies.

Their voices shame and disdain me. *What should they have expected leaving a baby alone?...Tsk tsk, Teen parents...They got what they deserved...Not old enough to take care of themselves let alone a child...See Mary Sue, money does not solve your problems.* Customers make every nasty comment under the sun.

Rose tips my chin. "The only other person whose opinion matters is the man giving his statement to the police."

Right off the bat, he made it a point to mention I was a good person for doing what I had. The guy is sorry he's the cause of the trouble, saying I don't deserve the outcome.

Maybe I do. I left my baby alone. A baby I wasn't supposed to have.

## *Eric*

Against its own will, my leg furiously taps in the passenger seat. I have enough wherewithal to grab the oh shit handle as we take the final turn into the parking lot. The tires of Daddy's Cavanaugh truck squeal and we jerk to a stop.

There are officers everywhere and I still don't believe it. The cops have to be wrong. How could something like this happen? Who kidnapped our baby? It's surreal.

I push through a crowd, shoving one of our town's finest when his stance on letting me through is as impassive as his expression.

"It's my fucking kid!" My composure breaks.

He seems confused, maybe because of my age.

I run across the parking area. Spotting Ginny, my stomach bottoms out. Her arms are empty. My son is gone. She loves Corey too much to let anything happen to him.

I fall to the sidewalk and crawl toward Ginny. My pants are dingy from working in the field in the rain with my siblings. Sand grinds through a hole in the knee when I kneel. The puddles create big wet circles in the fabric.

Her mouth hangs open.

Speech leaves me.

I cry because she's crying. Convulsing into wracked sobs, unable to stem the way any last hope is pouring out, hollowing my soul. What the detective told me



over the phone about my son's disappearance is true.

Momma pulls me closer to her and Gin. Her lap was always big enough for more than one. The way she holds both Gin and me gives me the impression of when we were small. Rough and tumble, it was rare when only one of us at a time got a skinned knee. She can't put a bandage on this or kiss the hurt away, but she kisses our foreheads nonetheless.

Daddy stands to the side, speaking with the officer in charge.

"Mr. Cavanaugh, I'm Detective O'Banna. There isn't much more we can do here. Forensics is running the prints. There were at least a dozen. It's a waiting game now. We've got our best people out there looking for your grandson. If you don't mind, I'll follow you to Kingsbrier to talk to your son and daughter-in-law. We have more questions and there are things parents should be aware of."

"What about a reward?" Ross asks. The cop affords my father some respect because of his standing in the community, but I can't let my dad take the lead, functioning as the head of the family, while it's my family falling apart. I'm Corey's father and I refuse to crack any more under the pressure. This is as much my responsibility to bring my boy back.

I disengaged from my wallowing, loosening the death grip I have on Gin while refusing to let go of her touch.

"Will they ask for a ransom?" I don't know where I'll come up with cash. Air-tight or not, maybe I can borrow against my trust.

"Don't focus on money right now, son. Our first priority is finding your son. I mentioned Kingsbrier, but you may want to consider taking your fiancée to the hospital," Officer O'Banna suggests with discretion. "I think she may need to see a doctor."

I tuck my nose into Gin's damp hair, uncertain if moving her is the best option. Don't ask me how, but what if Corey comes back? It takes a few minutes to clear the fog in my head.

"We can't stay here any longer," I tell her.

I scoop Ginny up with my free arm, holding her by the midsection. Her toes hardly touch the ground and I brace the weight of her body against mine. Her head lolls on my shoulder. The fight is gone from her, but I can fight for us both.

Bending at the waist, Momma stretches to retrieve Ginny's purse as her phone rings. A deputy takes it, setting the cell on speakerphone. None of us are prepared to hear the voices on the other end of the line. Corey's soft whimpers are audible in the background.

Gin claws my hand, her eyes widening. O'Banna hits mute before she gasps aloud.

*Alan Adair*

The windshield wipers swish to-and-fro while I watch a young guy let my stepdaughter go by as if she's a lady and not some two-bit Kingsbrier whore.

Diana says she's gotten engaged. Stupid people shouldn't breed, let alone inherit millions of dollars for spreading their legs. Damn her. Ginny lives in the lap of luxury while I'm on the edge of bankruptcy.

The fucking bank has been up my ass for months. I texted a real estate broker. The agent came out, took a quick look around the flea-bitten hole Diana's dead husband left, and said it needs work to be in saleable condition. Even if I fix it, the price is far lower than I anticipated. I think the agent's low balling us for a quick turnaround.

As a last-ditch effort, I'd driven to Corpus Christie to try my hand at the slots. They'd always been lucky for me before last year. The boss found out and I got canned for calling in sick.

Diana thinks my hours have changed and requested I get a gallon of milk on my way home from work. She left the cash on the table this morning with a note. I crumpled up the note and pocketed the bills. It's enough for a scratcher. I've lost on every lottery ticket I've purchased recently. I'll be smart this time, double-check the rolls to see how many the store has sold, take my chances on where the best windfalls are at. Maybe split the money in my pocket on a one-dollar and a two-dollar card, if the payouts add up to something big.

The first time I played the lotto, I won enough cash to get out of Bangor. Drowning my sorrows at the slots in Atlantic City gave me the funds to get to East Texas. It was in the eighties and Dallas was big on television. Seemed to be easy strike-it-rich money to make. No one told me those people were like the Kingsbriers and had invested in oil land long before the popularity of the show. Well, at least I'd taken the chance. It was like the dozens of times I pulled the handle on the machine before it came up all cherries and tossed out those coins. Sometimes the stakes don't go your way. I'm feeling lucky today, thinking of all the stories you hear about the guy with only enough to his name for a quick-pick and being the sole beneficiary of millions by the end of the night.

What the hell is that girl dumb doing in the rain crouching beside the car and going back inside the store?

I should call the cops on her for child endangerment and make the damned Cavanaugh's pay a hefty price in the court of public opinion. They have enough of cash to make anything go away. Not one person in this county, utters the name Kingsbrier without dollar signs flashing in their eyes. The Cavanaugh's are loaded. People like them have lawyers to keep things quiet and deal with unsavory characters. Lawyers like the one in Houston I contacted after leaving the Cavanaugh's mansion last spring. Hell, the man was likely on the Kingsbrier payroll.

The ass wearing an expensive suit and sitting in his high-rise Houston office sent me a bill for three-hundred dollars...And all the shithead did for an hour was bicker at me about the statutory rape laws in what I now consider the not-so-great-state of Texas. My stepdaughter wasn't under seventeen when she made me the laughingstock of this town. Her slackass boyfriend was not over eighteen. The sheriff's office couldn't file charges against the Kingsbrier kid.

I'd hedged my bets, thinking this attorney would take the case based on those high-profile bastards, and I should have gone after the money-grubbing ambulance chaser instead.

I leave my car's ignition running. Raindrops roll down the side window of the convertible Ginny drives. Still, it's clear to anyone the kid is inside.

I open the back door and unlatch the seat belt from the carrier. Taking the whole contraption out, the handle wobbles, but the baby doesn't wake. I set it on the seat, press two red buttons, and click it into place. No sense hurting my insurance policy. Those Kingsbriers like nice things and won't pay top dollar for a defect. The carrier gets wedged in the backseat well before hightailing it out of the parking lot.

On the rural route home, I consider how much I can rake the Cavanaugh's over the coals for. Two, maybe three hundred thousand dollars? How much is the

Adair name worth?

Rumor has it those kids are getting millions, so why not up the ante? Make all five do-nothings pitch in part of the money they haven't raised a finger to earn. It serves them right when hardworking folk like myself have trouble making ends meet. I could get a million. It's a matter of how to go about making my demands.

The car turns and the carrier tips.

"Hush, baby." I use a soft tone when it cries. Babies liked quiet.

I always made Keely keep her mouth shut and she stayed quiet until her bitch of a grandmother took over raising the girl. She had social security garnish my wages when caught up with me two years after leaving Maine. What a pissar. I hadn't even seen the child, so why should I give Keely any money?

It was also Diana's ridiculous idea for Keely to visit. Thank god that's over. It was damn expensive to bring the girl clear across the country over the holidays. Diana insisted on equal gifts for the girls when I was still expected to provide child support during December. It wasn't as if her grandmother had an extra mouth to feed for ten days.

"I didn't know you had two daughters," the people around town say at Christmas to make me feel like a heel. Judgmental fools. They think no person has been more upstanding than Diana's first husband. No man will live up to the standard he set.

Everything got more expensive as the girls got older and the life insurance from Ginny's father petered away. I remortgaged the bungalow when I could only find employment working long hours at a factory. The State revoked my insurance sales license before I left the Northeast. It's not my fault my wife was dying at the time. Everyone likes to blame me for their problems. As much as I deserve a good job, someone was bound to pry, insinuating I had a questionable past and deeming me unworthy. People enjoy looking down on me.

That's why, until the afternoon in the study at Kingsbrier, I've never lost my cool in public. Given anyone a reason to turn their noses up. I'm an upstanding citizen, commendable. Diana's daughter sullied the Adair reputation in town. Dumping Ginny off on the Cavanaughs took the family down a few notches.

By the time I'm pulling at the driveway at the bungalow, the baby is fussing in earnest. I yank the carrier out of the well, forcing the open top where the baby is strapped into the paunch of my belly to hide the squirming brat. It has the added benefit of squelching its cries. I understand why people smother infants. You can't bitch-slap them the way you can a woman to get her to shut up.

I leave the kid by the couch and kick the seat so it rocks, hoping he'll fall back to sleep. The sound of him crying is like nails down a chalkboard.

The kitchen reeks from the crusted eggs left in the frying pan. Diana left my

breakfast in the pan before she left for her shift at the library. The stove needs a good shining and cleaning up the dishes will remind her. I just have to put up with the smell of uneaten grits cloying at my nostrils until she does. My second wife is a decent housekeeper. The first, Keely's mother, was a slob. She was always complaining her cancer treatments made her nauseous and never lifted a finger, expecting Keely's grandmother to take care of the chores instead.

But Diana was only kidding herself telling me county workers didn't get raises this year. I read the newspaper. She's selfish, stashing away the extra money and giving it to Ginny to help with the baby. It would have gone farther paying off our bills. Both those women are irresponsible. Least Diana didn't lie about seeing the bastard after it was born. I hate liars. The Kingsbrier kid has plenty of money. Who the hell do his parents think they're fooling saying Eric was cut off?

My hand skims across the table. The varnish has worn away after years of Diana scrubbing it so hard. Spots of light wood show through the oak finish. It's a piece of crap. I lift an envelope marked "final notice", tapping the edge on the wood and tearing it in half. The mail goes into the round file every other bill lately has found its way into. By the time the garbage collector comes, I'll be a mega million winner.

The kid is still squirming, so I pick it up to shut it up.

"I'm home. Did you get the—What's Corey doing here?" Diana cocks her head to the side and places her purse and a recent bestseller on the table. She says she reads to escape. I don't think she has a fucking clue what escaping means.

"Ginny dropped him off. Said she needed to go somewhere and there was no one to watch him." I hold her grandson off of my knee with the baby's feet dangling down. The kid's been too loud for me to think straight. It smells like shit and is fussing up a storm.

"I think he might need a change." Diana takes the baby. There's a sense of relief deep in my bones that I can formulate a plan for the highest payout, until she questions, "Where's his bag?"

"She didn't bring one."

"There's no way Ginny would leave the baby without a diaper bag. She's not irresponsible." Diana turns away, patting the baby's back, and swallowing.

"She got knocked-up, didn't she?" I lose my composure. Diana's getting on my last nerve. I don't know why she insists on fighting with me about this. Our scuffles have gotten worse each time she stands up for her daughter. I storm over. My fingers pinched around Diana's lips, holding her jaw tight. "Don't you be thinking I have to clean up her messes."

“I don’t.”

I let go of her face.

She begins telling me about her day. I respond with everything the baby’s done wrong since I’ve had it and inform her for the hundredth time exactly what I think of the Cavanaugh clan.

Diana smart to bite her tongue when I lay into Eric for not caring for Ginny properly. “Where is all this money? They must be keeping it from your daughter if they’re making her live in a pig pen by the stable. Fucking loose morals will get you nowhere. What a stupid girl she is.”

Diana dances a bit with her grandson, soothing him. She dumps her purse over and searches for a tissue, using it to wipe the kid’s snotty nose and ruddy face.

“I need a beer.”

“Did you get the milk?” she asks, hearing the fridge slam shut.

“No. I told you, your daughter dropped her kid here. When was I supposed to get to the store?”

I shake my head. My brain jostles for what to tell my wife later tonight when her daughter never comes back to get the baby. The easiest solution is to keep doing what I’ve done all those years to make her scared. Diana is into appearances, too. When I split her lip last summer, finding out she gave fifty bucks to that good-for-nothing, Diana had called into the library for a week feigning a flu bug. She didn’t want to let on to anyone that her new husband wasn’t as good as her old one.

I am better, and she needs a reminder of how lucky she was that I took her and her daughter in.

“Well, with no diapers or bottles, I’m not sure what we’re supposed to feed Corey.”

“Change it.”

“Him.”

“Him, change him.” I toss a dirty kitchen towel at her.

Outside, tires screech on the street lined with similar style houses. Diana closes her eyes and breathes out. “What am I supposed to do with this?”

“Make a fucking diaper out of it.” Is she stupid?

I walk towards the front window to catch a glimpse of what the neighbors are up to. I’m partway across the room when a clicking followed by beeps catches my attention. The display on Diana’s phone reads: lost signal.

Outside police cruisers surround my house.

“I should have put Ginny first,” she says, kicking her chin up in defiance.

“You stupid bitch!” I stormed back toward her as Diana hunches, covering the bastard’s body with hers.

I go for her face first.

## *Ginny*

I nearly throw up understanding who has taken my son. There is no evil like the devil you already know.

Alan berates my mother. His anger at her for the simplest things brings me back to the fights I listened to between them over the years when my mother backed down.

The line cuts out, leaving Eric and me once again unsure of our child's fate. Mirrored fear registers on our faces.

I'm lightheaded as if I'm not fully inside my body, or that I'm looking at this scene from above, until O'Banna confirms the officers who stormed the house have Corey. The next thing I know, we're in a cruiser with sirens and lights flashing on the road to meet the ambulances at the hospital. Minutes tick by like hours.

The EMTs arrive at the same time we do. They have Corey tethered to a small board. Secure straps pin his limbs down as he wriggles about. His cry is a defeated moan. The one he gets when he's inconsolable.

Eric holds me by the waist to stop me from rushing forward. The EMTs won't consider letting me near my baby and my heart shreds as they wheel Corey's stretcher past us. Whatever remains is decimated when Diana's gurney follows. My mother is still. Her neck is immobilized with a brace. Her face is bloodied



and bruised. Both arms are splinted.

Her husband did this to her, but when I left had I left her defenseless? I've made so many poor choices I'm not sure I'm capable of finding the answer through all the hurt and pain I've caused.

We wait for what seems like forever, pacing by the registration desks when finally a nurse calls us back into the core of the emergency room. Eric follows on my heels. No one is stopping either of us from getting to our child.

Passing the nurse's station, a deputy holds evidence bags. One includes Corey's clothes stained with blood. Eric grabs my hand, quickening the already rapid pace. Not knowing what we'll find entering the examination room, my grip on his tightens.

Unstrapped, Corey's feet are in the air. He's kicking and babbling at a nurse who baby-talks right back to him.

"So far everything's looking good. The doctor wants to run a few tests to make sure. He'll be in to talk to you about them so we can get fluids into this little guy as soon as possible. How about that? You want a bottle?" she coos.

"Gin nurses him." Eric keeps moving towards the baby.

He needs to touch his son and know this happy Corey is real and the baby in the ER parking lot, who could have been so hurt, was our worst fear playing out in our minds. He drops my hand and my knees give out. I fall to the floor in a shaky heap.

The hours of endless frustration, the way my insides have been ripped out and torn to bits trying to fight the idea I may never see my baby again overwhelms me.

All of this happened because I changed the course of our lives. Not only deciding we should have a baby, but not taking into consideration how dangerous it could be to leave him for a split second. I don't deserve Corey. He should have a better mother who takes better care of him. Someone like the kind nurse who scoops up Corey, holding him tight, and is dancing with him across the tile floor.

She squats in front of me. "It's okay. He's fine." She unfurls my arms and tucks Corey close to my chest.

The baby pops two fingers in his mouth and snuggles in. It's as if he's already forgotten what has happened. I can't. I won't. Today will live in my nightmares.

Eric's arms come around the two of us, helping me carry the weight in my arms. He's propping my body upright from behind. His legs splay around me and he tucks my head under his, sobbing. The relief of having Corey back affects us both as much as the pain when he was gone.

I'm apologizing to them over and over, unsure if I'm speaking or thinking my

pleas for forgiveness. No one will ever understand how sorry I am.

The doctor who comes in to examine Corey takes one look at my vacant expression and says I'm in shock. He doesn't make me put him back on the exam table. After giving Corey a clean bill of health, he suggests prescribing me a sedative. I refuse the medication and, while Eric tries to cajole me into taking the advice, he also doesn't force it on me. I remember why he's the boy I fell for. Why I'll never love another man the way I love Eric.

Other than when we're escorted back to Kingsbrier and Corey is buckled into a carrier, I don't let go of him.

At home, we get Corey ready for bed, dressing him in a fresh sleeper, and letting him rest with us. Neither of us has the energy left to change our clothes. Eric crawls onto the bed in his dirty pants, spooning his front to my back and rounding his hand over the baby's bottom the way he'd done before Cory was born and my belly was swollen.

Blissfully unaware, and more importantly, unscathed, Corey tugs at my long hair

I stare into the old tack closet sufficing as Corey's bedroom at the elegant crib.

"There's hardly enough room to close the folding door," I comment.

"It doesn't make a difference. I don't want Corey out of my sight," Eric replies.

My confidence wobbles before I speak, but putting Corey up for adoption is the right thing to do for our little boy. "We should've decided to let him go."

He should have gone to a family ready for children. A mother who knows what she's doing could still adopt him. The kind of woman who doesn't leave a child unattended, let alone sitting in an unlocked car. Not that locking the doors matters. A good parent wouldn't leave their child in a parking lot at all.

I wish I had the courage to make this decision before Corey was born, but wasn't strong enough to push Eric away. My boyfriend could have led the life he'd planned with no strings attached. Perhaps he hasn't lost the opportunity to find someone more worthy of his love than me.

My stepfather is being charged with kidnapping and two counts of aggravated assault. I alone take responsibility for my actions and won't blame Alan Adair for the problems I've created. However, I lived with the man for six years. It's unfathomable how that the ugliness I encountered at home hadn't rubbed off.

I berate myself, taking personal each insult anyone has thrown at me since the beginning. A decent woman doesn't trick a man into having a baby, no matter how in love they are. Corey and Eric are better off without me, so they have a chance at happiness.

## *Eric*

I bury my face into Ginny's hair. We're unwashed, wearing the same ragged clothes we had on during the long rainy afternoon in the dirty parking lot. Still, our bed smells of her shampoo and the fresh powder scent infused in everything of Corey's.

Laying down at night, this is a whiff of home, of safety, security, and everything that keeps my world spinning on its axis. What Ginny is suggesting is akin to febrezing their existence. The cloying stench of chemical gardenias and fake vanilla makes my throat close up tight. I'd truly begun thinking we could manage being the best parents to Corey.

I understand how much Ginny worries about being a good mother. I hadn't needed to know from the guy whose wallet she'd returned that Ginny was a good person. It's the reason I fell in love with her twice in the past few years. Okay, make it three times. I couldn't help but fall in love with Ginny again in December when Corey came into the world.

Looking back on the day my son was born, I never realized anything would hurt as much as watching Ginny giving birth. I'd been helpless to make her pain go away. Today was a thousand-fold worse. The uncertainty over whether or not the baby was okay this afternoon was the most horrible part of losing Corey.

Ginny's asking us to sacrifice our relationship for the sake of the baby, but I'd vowed in the parking lot if my boy came back I'd do everything in my power to

keep my family safe. It's selfish, but there's no way I'll give either of them up knowing there's a chance they'll be hurt and I won't be the one protecting them.

"I can't live without either of you. I'd die tryin'."

"You didn't deserve this. I can never make up for what I did."

A lone tear trails down, landing on the baby's terry cloth pajamas. I hold her tighter.

"I know your heart, Gin. Simply watching you try is enough for me. I don't want anyone else to be our baby's momma. I can't bear to consider coming home without you being here. I don't want to miss a single day of Corey growing up. Not after today. At some point, he'll leave us of his own accord. I need to know we're the ones who made him the person he'll become and that he's happy and healthy. I want my boy to see me still loving you so someday he'll love a girl as much and know they can get through anything together. When they are old and gray and their babies leave, I want Corey to have someone just like you to rely on and keep loving."

I want nothing more than what my parents have always had.

I shudder to think about what Gin must've lived through growing up in a house with Alan and the things she hadn't revealed he was capable of. While it may not justify her transgressions, it makes them make sense.

"Reliable and lovable are the last words to describe who I am." Gin judges herself.

"No, Sugar, those words are a perfect description of who you are. You are the only person who has kept me going since my brothers and sisters left. The only one to love me through it, and the sole focus keeping me sane today when our world came crashing down on us. I won't throw us away."

"How can you still love me after all the things I've done wrong?"

"Because everything you do right outweighs them."

"I'm so sorry, Eric."

"I know. Sleep now, Sugar, tomorrow is for us. No work. No leaving the apartment. You, me, and Corey. That's it. We will figure the rest out later."

Her breathing relaxes and I take my son from her arms, finding I can't put the baby in his crib the way I planned. I need to feel Corey's solid form against my chest to remind me he's real, and home.

I prop my back against the pillows and spread Corey's blanket over the two of them. Ginny rolls over, placing her left hand on top of Corey. I moved the diamond in her engagement ring so it stands upright.

At sixteen, I hadn't known the first thing about loving Ginny. At seventeen, making love to her was intimidating. When we were eighteen, I was clueless about how I'd manage as a parent. Now, at nineteen, I've done all those things

with the one person I was meant to spend my life with.

I rest my eyes, remaining vigilant and awake the rest of the night, grateful for the warmth surrounding me. I ponder where I've come from. Nothing has gone according to plan. Yet, this life is everything to me and the sense of loss, believing it could be over in the blink of an eye, was more than I'd ever considered possible. Being without Ginny or Corey isn't anything I'm willing to endure.

Maybe we hadn't needed a plan? Perhaps the sense of security I needed was as simple as remaining pointed in the right direction? Other than a split second of chance today, the path toward spending our lives together and raising a family has never wavered. Somehow, though, waiting any longer to get married doesn't make sense. Gin agreed to be my forever and I've decided forever starts now.

## *Eric*

“It’s my room.” I attempt pushing Brier out the door. For someone as diminutive as my sister, she’s solid.

“No, it’s not your room anymore. We will vacate, though, since Daveigh has a hair dryer in our bathroom we’ll need to make Gin beautiful.” Brier juts her hip. “What’re you doing in here that is so dang important anyhow?”

“Gin’s beautiful without you interfering and none of your business.” I fold a plastic dry cleaning bag with a pink dress in it over Brier’s shoulder and shove her makeup clutch at her. Ginny doesn’t need makeup and I’m afraid of what my sisters are turning her into for our wedding. I toss a curling iron on top of it all and push Brier the rest of the way out of the bedroom. “Get out and take all this girly crap with you.” I let the door hot Brier in the butt.

The phone rings on the nightstand and I jump into the air with my hands outstretched as if I’m blocking a goal from entering a soccer net. I land on the bed and grabbed for the phone on the nightstand, breathing heavily.

“You there?” Colton asks.

“Yeah.”

“Helps if you open your mouth and spit out a few words. You’re developing a bad habit, man.”

I’d like to blame it on Brier, yet it’s not worth the effort. My number one priority is marrying Ginny. The rest of the stuff we had to cross off the list has

made getting to the altar take an awfully long time and given me a case of the pre-wedding jitters. It's been two weeks of waiting for something to go wrong.

"You should be here."

"And leave my company to have all the fun without me?" He pauses, admitting the four of us are still a part of his team. "I should be there. Thanks for the recent batch of snapshots. It was good to see Corey is okay. I feel like I was MIA in your hour of need."

Colton threatened to break every bone in Alan Adair's body had he been anywhere near Texas. It was a good thing the asswipe pleaded no contest to the charges after hearing the mountain of evidence against him. He'll be rotting in a prison cell for the next twenty years. Diana has started divorce proceedings. It's going to take years to dig out from under the mountain of debt her husband got them into.

"I'll send more pictures tonight. Momma's got Corey decked out in a pink bow tie."

"Don't you dare. It's your wedding night. You aren't nervous, are you?"

"We live together and have a kid so no I'm not worried about the honeymoon." It's dumb to seek my twin's reassurance. It's not Ginny who gives me second thoughts. Colton isn't standing next to me today and there's a void without his presence. "You think I'm doing the right thing?"

"Since you pushed me off the damned haystack, yeah. Although, it kinda sounds like you are about to pass out. Unless you breathe this hard on the phone with Adam too?" Something in Colton's joking tone is older, wiser.

"Asshole...I miss you."

"The feeling's mutual."

"Coming home any time soon?" Like today. Today would be a good day to be here.

"Having more kids any time soon?"

His question is met with stunned silence.

"I thought not. E, I gotta tell you, this is where I belong. If I don't make it back—"

"Don't say—"

"Hear me out. The same way Gin and Corey are for you, this is my world. Make sure Momma knows if it ever comes up."

"It won't."

"From your mouth to God's ear, brother. Good luck today and kiss Ginny for me. Nah, nevermind. I'll kiss her myself."

I swear the twist of Colton's lips as he sneers is audible and I let out a few choice phrases while laughing. He'd never touch Ginny. The scary routine

ensured she didn't confuse one brother for another or think—like so many other teenage girls—any Kingsbrier would do.

“She's always been yours. That's how all this happened. Right or wrong, Ginny knew you were meant to be together,” he buoys before we hang up.

I wonder when Colton got so sentimental.

“I got two suits.” Adam barges in, laying the gray rental bags on the bed. “You okay?”

I mumble about something Colton said bothering me. Which covers everything because C has no filter.

Adam sits down, pulling off his athletic socks and sneakers, ready to listen.

“He talks to Momma all the time, but he told me to make sure she knew he was happy if—”

“Ef—” Adam blows out the syllable.

“I don't doubt Momma knows. It was more like Colton needed me to hear it.” I scrub my face. “Don't get me wrong, you're my brother and I love you.”

“I get that I'm your second choice for best man.” The way the admission rolls off Adam's tongue makes me feel shitty. Though, he follows it up with, “He's your twin. Don't worry, I'm not dumb. There's a connection between you two.”

“Thanks for understanding and for helping with C all those years, giving me a break when he was over the top.” He'd was like a wild mustang penned in on a Texas ranch.

“It's not a big deal. You needed the downtime and opportunity to figure out your own shit. Colton was like a caged animal at Kingsbrier. It took every one of us tending to him. Frankly, in the beginning, I didn't see Colton becoming successful in the Navy. But it was all there; the discipline and desire... Anyway, if Colton was around, it wouldn't phase me seeing him standing up for you. It's always been me and Drew against you and him whenever teams get picked.”

Adam unzips the bags, holding my pressed wedding attire out to me. I toss it in a lump on the bed.

“It is a huge fucking deal, A. If you weren't here standing in for me, I'd never have met Ginny. There wouldn't have been a chance to date her, let alone be marrying her.”

“Never thought of it that way. Will you blame having Corey on me someday? I mean, the past year was screwed up. You wouldn't be getting hitched if it weren't for the baby.”

“Maybe not this soon, but I'm good with it. The four-year plan seems stupid to me now, bro. I wanted everything laid out with no surprises.”

Life is full of them. Some are shocking and shitty. Others are eye-opening. And still more bowl you over. They turn your world upside down, make you



think, and are the very last thing you'd consider winding up amazing.

“I'm not saying I'd do it all the same if we could go back to last year. This parenting thing is tough. But Gin? I wouldn't have let her go, or maybe I would have followed her to Beaumont. I was so sure we were meant to be together I didn't allow myself the chance to see life isn't getting from one end-point to the next. She showed that to me. It may be fucked up, and on the days things are bad, I'm not sure I've fully forgiven her. But I know I love her and someday what she did won't matter anymore. Most days it doesn't.”

The day Corey disappeared, it hadn't.

## *Ginny*

Behind me, Miss Rose zips the back of my wedding dress and my mother adjusts my veil with her unbroken arm. The other rests against her torso, mending in a cast. She's smiling. Yet, the pang of regret over not being the one to help me on with my gown is apparent.

I trace my eyes over Diana's features. The same lines of regret mirror mine whenever I believe I should have done things differently.

"I'm glad you're here," I say, meaning it.

The corners of my mother's mouth perk. "Your daddy would be so proud of you right now," she whispers, overwhelmed.

In the hospital, Diana gave me permission to cut her out of our lives completely. Not only for Alan taking Corey, but also for bringing the man to our doorstep in the first place. There were so many years my mother felt she needed makeup for. She worried her presence stopped me from healing and that I'd be better off without her. I refused to walk away and brought the baby to visit her every day until she was released.

"No cryin'." Brier shoves a tissue in my hand. "You'll ruin the makeup job I did on you." She pulls another tissue from the box, wiping under her own eyes so her mascara doesn't run, pretending she's caught up in our family's sentimental moment.

And maybe she is, but perhaps her reaction has more to do with Drew being

one of the few invited guests at the ceremony. The way she loves him is the one secret Brier can't keep anymore. It's hard to believe they'll ever get over one another.

Brier steals her nephew away from Daveigh. Corey tests his lungs. It's a new thing for my six-month-old. He enjoys being loud to hear himself. The baby slaps his wet fingers against Brier's cheeks. She doesn't care he's ruining her makeup the way she'd been concerned over mine, or when Corey drools on the bodice of her pink a-line dress. She presses her nose to his, grateful for the distraction, and lets him shriek happily.

Miss Rose says they're ready for us and Daveigh holds my bouquet as we walk down the stairs, toward the morning porch.

Poolside, there are four round tables surrounded by white wooden folding chairs. Miss Rose's good china decorates the tabletops covered in white linen cloths. Short vases arranged with flowers from the bushes outside the quint's bedroom windows make the perfect floral centerpieces.

Eric's momma rented an arbor. It's covered in tulle and longer clippings from the garden. We've kept it small and elegant, pulling the quick wedding off on a shoestring budget because my mother doesn't have much left and it made Eric and I hesitant to let anyone pick up the tab.

Miss Lily Anne is chatting the pastor's ear off. She's like Miss Rose in that respect, always putting her best foot forward and acting gracious. Rodger Newhouse nods, agreeing with whatever they are saying. However, his furrowed brow makes it obvious he's distracted by his son. I feel poorly for putting Drew in an uncomfortable position, but Eric is lost without Colton and today he would have missed Drew's presence as well. He's a constant at Kingsbrier.

Drew dips his head and lays his jacket over a chair. Reaching up he cracks his neck. Eric and I aren't the only ones with a case of the jitters.

The sun is approaching its azimuth. The ceremony will over by noon so we can eat early. Eric wipes his brow and pulls at his tie. Adam slaps Eric's hand away and straightens his lapels, careful not to crush the flower on the left-hand side.

Miss Rose holds up her camera as her husband opens the French doors to the kitchen. "One last picture. The most important of them all. You and your mother on a day you'll never forget."

*Eric*

I haven't broken a sweat, but the heat radiating through the gray suit makes me long to take it off and roll up my sleeves the way Drew has. I bat Adam's hand away when he fiddles with my tie.

"The wait can't be much longer, can it?" I ask, getting impatient.

"I'll see what's taking them." Dad strolls toward the house.

I glance between Cris and Adam, my lone groomsmen in similar attire.

After an eternity, or maybe a few minutes, Daddy comes back out holding his grandson. Corey holds tight until he sees me and then baby flings himself out of Ross's arms with vigor.

I pull Corey to my hip and unfasten the velcro on his bib, wiping a string of drool from the baby's face before stuffing the wet cloth into my back pocket.

Adam sniggers. "You're such a dad."

No disagreeing with that. Wrapped up in my kid, my sisters are through the wrought iron gate and walking across the pool deck to the arbor when I look up to see Gin appear on the morning porch.

"Dayum, E." Adam lets out a groan. He has a penchant for blondes. "She's one of the most beautiful girls I've seen, E."

I'd tell him to shut up. But it's true.

Ginny's tea-length white gown sparkles at the top. Her long blonde hair cascades in waves over her shoulders and past the lushness of her breasts. The front of her veil blows in the soft spring breeze. My breath catches. She's an angel, which is perfect because this piece of Texas earth is heaven to me.

Corey lunges again. This time towards his mother, but this is one of the few moments I insist on having Ginny's full attention. I pass the baby back to the next set of waiting arms. Corey follows up his screeches with a squeal of delight.

Ginny's dimples grow as her cheeks pulled into a grin. I'm lost in her smile the way I'd been when I finally asked her out and Ginny said yes, and the morning that Corey was born, and the day I asked her to marry me.

The strangest pang of loss makes me wondering what this life would have been like if Ginny hadn't withdrawn from college and Corey wasn't ours. I'm filled with immense pride for what we've endured.

In four years when I come home at night, will Ginny have my daughter on her hip while Corey clings to her leg? I won't plan it out. We have too much to look forward to between now and then; like Corey walking and talking, and running through the pasture on the way to Kingsbrier, and the first harvest of grapes.

My mind is tracking what the pastor is preaching about life and love, God and family. We haven't given up on each other and I intend to take care of my family and make sure Gin doesn't give up on her dreams.

When it's my turn to speak, Adam's hand falls on my shoulder and the warmth of Colton's touch courses through me. None of this would have been possible if my twin and the other quintlets hadn't taught me about unconditional love.

This time, I don't forget or fumble the words when I say, "I do."

## Brier

“You’re a glutton for punishment.” I overhear Adam derail Drew’s train of thought.

He really is...And so am I.

Of the few invited wedding guests, the Newhouses are in attendance. Miss Lily Anne’s light blue dress matches Drew’s tie to a tee. The color offsets his eyes and the way his shoulders bunched as he took off his tan suit jacket broke my heart because I haven’t found comfort in another boy’s arms the way there had been in Drew’s.

He won’t stop staring at me.

I hate the silly, sappy part of my personality that refuses to ignore his presence too. I thought these feelings would go away and they aren’t.

Having Drew this close at Eric’s wedding is like a stab wound to my chest. I want to take the knife, cut my heart out, hand it to Drew, and walk away. No heart, no heartache. No subconscious worries he might be after what every other boy was—Granddaddy’s money.

For the most part, it takes minor effort to see through those who want a Kingsbrier for the notoriety. Drew isn’t that translucent, but he’s had years of honing his craft, pulling the wool over my eyes as Adam’s best friend.

*Someday I’ll see into your soul for what you are.* I think.

I’d given myself a pep talk before the guests arrived. Avoid conversation.

Don't let Drew draw you in. You'll only fight. God, I miss fighting with him and making up and everything else in between. All those stolen moments when nothing mattered before the sun came up but us. Those were the moments I was positive I meant more to Drew than even Adam had.

Daveigh takes Corey from my arms. I'm lost without my nephew as a distraction. Drew's gaze is still boring into me. Thank goodness Daveigh stands nearby, so it's easy to turn my attention and affections back on the baby. I keep the guise of polite conversation with Diana Adair until she and my sister walk away. D's taffeta skirt swishes behind her.

The cutesy matching spring pink dresses Gin chose for D and me to wear today are wholly nineteen-fifties. I've had Corey on my hip most of the afternoon. If let my hair grow a bit longer I'd provide the perfect image of domestic bliss.

I absently touch the tips of my pageboy. I haven't had long hair since I was a little girl. It was soft like Daveigh's with wild curls. But I wasn't demure, girly, or feminine. Or into baths, so I smelled as ripe as my brothers when they hit puberty.

"If you hadn't set Brier off course before, you won't accomplish it now. Don't wait forever on her." My brother knows I'm determined to get my Bachelor's in criminal justice.

"Nah, I'm not waiting. Your sister's too busy sampling the local cuisine to know when a real man is around. Tell me Brier, was one of those girls I met your roommate next fall? I mean, there's this rule about males and females cohabitating on campus, but no one seems to care that you are all licking each other's pussies."

Adam throws his head back with a gut-punch of laughter, doubling over. "YOU? God damn, Brier. I may joke, but the absolute last person I'd ever thought was a lesbian would be you. Hell, you've always liked making men drool. S'like you have a penchant for it. Not that I see what any of them are looking at." Adam talks loud enough to draw attention.

"You are a complete and utter asshole." I won't let my brother insult me. And, of anyone, Drew knows what team I play for. I'll eat crow before he gets away with talking about my roommate the way he is. "Don't be a pig," I hiss. "Rumor has it your coach handed you your ass for sneaking off on game day."

This shuts him up.

When FSU played at Texas State Drew found my dorm room and paid me a visit. There was an itty bitty part of me that had hoped he'd try, though, when he appeared it wasn't the consolation I'd expected. I should have admitted I wasn't over him. But, at my breaking point over missing him, I'd taken my true form

that afternoon.

It was the wrong move to make. I'm embarrassed by my actions. Drew got a rise out of me, which means he's aware he still has my attention—even though I kissed another woman as a ruse to be rid of him—and the vicious part of my personality that won't quit until it wins won't give up.

Strolling nonchalant between the boys, I give each a hard shove; Adam for taunting me and Drew for bringing up the way I acted last fall. Adam takes two steps back. The wrought iron fencing stops him from stumbling while my brother continues heckling me. Drew's heel gets stuck on the edge of the pool. He falls backward, landing in the chlorinated water with an enormous splash.

Surfacing, Drew spits and shakes the water from his ears. His blond hair spikes up and his blue eyes shoot venom at me. He grits his teeth, trodding to the side of the pool. Adam lends a hand, hauling him out. Drew's drenched suit creates a waterfall on the concrete decking.

My mouth is agape. The same firm palm that pushed him is now planted at the center of my chest. Everyone's eyes land on me. I'm mortified. What kind of sister ruins a wedding because she can't keep her emotions in check?

Tears prickle my eyes and I have an awful sensation in my gut I'll be spending a second summer in a row crying.

I turn tail, running through the morning porch doors, down the hall, and up the stairs in the foyer. My entire body slaps against the wall and I dare to glance out the front window before entering my room. A long pane of glass overlooks the driveway. Drew walks, dripping, to his old Cadillac. His head swivels up to where I stand still shaking from embarrassment and he stares right through me.

This time, I took it one step too far. I'll never see that old car again. It won't carry me home before the sun rises. I have to learn to live without Drew, not pretend I am.



## Daveigh

“Miss Cavanaugh?”

Oh crap. I’ve talked to everyone else at the small gathering except Cris and now I’m freaking out. He knows it’s personal since nothing he’s done trying to engage me in a conversation has worked.

In April, Daddy had assigned each of us vineyard tasks. I hadn’t once gone to see Cris at his apartment the whole week. I made a point of staying close to my sister and brothers, using them as safeguards. I didn’t ask after Mateo and my responses to Cris whenever we interacted were clipped. *Yes. No. I’ll find out.* later on, I’d one of my siblings to give him the correct answer.

Waiting for my response, Cris diverts his attention to Corey who is bouncing in my arms. I take my time wrapping up the conversation with Ginny’s mother, reassuring her Brier’s tough and she’ll be okay. Diana goes to spend a few last minutes with Gin before she and Eric leave for their honeymoon.

I glance at the concrete when I hear his toe tap. Either he’s impatient or I’m rude. Probably both. I’m giving Cris the cold shoulder without giving him a damn good reason why. Growing up, my daddy spanked me for using those kind of manners. Shit, now there’s an image a “sweet girl” like me needs to let go of. Ross won’t take kindly knowing I’m imagining his hired hand bending me over his knee.

Red blooms over my cheeks.

“Are you warm?”

I turn my attention to Cris, refusing to respond to his question. I’m the complete opposite of a withering flower.

Corey is inspecting his shirtsleeve and a shiny cufflink. “He’s a good baby,” Cris comments, trying to break the ice.

I suck in a breath and roll my eyes so Cris understands talking to him is a waste of my time. “Is there something I can do for you?”

“So that must be it.” He lets out a low chuckle and rubs his beard. “I’m sorry if I’ve offended you. The only women I’m around are your mother’s age and Liz had always been upfront with me about stuff like this. Made it easier to figure out what I’d done wrong.”

“Stuff like what?” I ask haughtily.

“When I’ve overstepped. I’m forever asking for your help. Liz said I wasn’t great at reading women.” Cris stops and clears his throat. “Ross, um, your daddy instructed me that you’d be splitting your time this summer between the ranch and the vineyard. I wanted to find out what your schedule was like. Where I could use you—Ah hell, there I go sticking my foot in it again.”

“I was told I had to pick up your morning chores for the summer and, when I finish, to have lunch and go straight to the winery,” I reply curtly.

“Will your sister be there?” He seems eager. “I could use additional workers to the handful Ross has me hiring”

“Why?” I scowl.

“You kids are driven. I watched the boys work themselves into the ground this spring.”

“I doubt it. Brier told me she doesn’t want to spend all of her time at Kingsbrier this summer, so she’s getting her job back at Target.” My acidic tone is in harsh contrast to the gentle sway of my hips as I rock the baby.

“What about you? You don’t mind being stuck at Kingsbrier all summer?”

“This is my home, Mr. Sanchez. And you hardly leave the ranch.” I goad him to get a life, broaden his horizons. Which is insane because Cris has seen more of the world than I have and I already know everything I need to be happy is on this plot of land. “Besides, I’m packing for Amarillo after the party is over.”

Cris snags my wrist as I turn away from him. My emerald green eyes flash at the audacity of his touch.

“Amarillo?” His fingers are warm against my pulse point and he hesitates letting go.

*Stop looking for something that isn’t there.* My conscience warns me. *You have no reason to.* “I’m visiting my boyfriend.”

“It’s good you have someone in your life. You’re young and should be

dating.” His eyes search my face, resigned, and not matching his words. “I’m going to find Mateo. I guess I’ll see you when you get back. Have a good trip.”

“I will,” I reply after he’s walked away. The sun’s rays are bright, but a breeze whips an icy chill over my skirt. I shiver and the hair on my arms stands on end.

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## epilogue

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*Eric*

“Hey, Kingsbrier, let me do this for you” I unclasp the pearls from around Ginny’s neck. She’s taken out her earrings. The satin heels are on the floor near the bed skirt. One standing, one askew on its side. The only thing left to remove is her dress. The zipper is halfway down before she turns, wrapping her arms around my neck, stopping the spaghetti straps from falling against her soft skin.

“Does the ring make that my official moniker?” She admires the simple gold band on her ring finger.

“Nah—you’ve been a Kingsbrier for way longer than a few hours.” I pull her close, working at the zipper.

“I could do without it...not being a Kingsbrier.” There’s a confidence in her voice, reminding me Gin’s intentions are pure. She wants me, not the notoriety of my family name.

I pull the top of her gown loose, exposing a strapless lacy baby blue bra. It’s nothing like the ones Gin normally wears. My pulse quickens, wondering what else is waiting underneath.

My light brow lifts. “Change of heart?” I tease, trailing kisses down her neck, unable to get a visual on the lingerie fast enough.

Ginny tips my chin, guiding my errant concentration back up to her bright smile. “Never. I only ever wanted to be Mrs. Cavanaugh, though, I didn’t think it would happen so soon.”

“Well, you’re stuck with all five of us rambunctious Kingsbriers now. Or does Corey make it six?” I add my son to the finger count of people in the family.

Everyone in attendance at the wedding were people I consider relations and our numbers have swelled since last June. Even Cris is turning into a brother of sorts. He’s teaching me the ropes with this parenting thing and stood with Adam during the ceremony. Seeing Cris there with the rest of the Cavanaughs impressed upon me the way it’s been between Adam and Drew all these years. Cris’s friendship means a lot. I can be as close to someone else as I am with my brothers. However, it doesn’t stop me from missing my twin any less, nor is it supposed to.

I must frown reflecting on it because Ginny looks at me with worry.

“Hey, Colton doesn’t want you to be sad, not today. Not ever. He’ll be back.”

I know this. C is too pigheaded not to make it home.

“I got something for you.”

Her brown eyes widen and it’s Gin’s turn to frown. Once again, we’ve agreed upon no gifts for each other. It was hard enough accepting token ones from our family at the wedding. For a honeymoon, we’ve splurged on a weekend away in San Antonio at a little bed and breakfast near the Riverwalk. We leave in a few hours and the baby is staying at Kingsbrier under the watchful eye of Brier.

“It’s not a big thing, you’ll probably be disappointed.” I reach for a folded slip of paper.

“This is the course schedule for the community college?” she questions in awe, unfolding it.

“Summer classes start a week after we get back.”

“Eric, we can’t afford this. I’m still only working part time.”

“Gin, you were meant to go to school. It was part of our old plan and we’re making it a part of whatever this new one turns out to be.” I smile slyly, not wanting to let on the rest.

Ross inquired if Gin had any interest in a job in Cavanaugh Construction’s accounts payable department. It is Daddy’s company and his place to offer her the job. I have confidence Gin can juggle school along with the rest of our responsibilities and want her to understand she’ll have my support. And if it doesn’t pan out? I’ll still find a way to make sure the new Mrs. Cavanaugh goes to college.

The biggest lesson my siblings taught me is Kingsbriers take care of their own.

\* \* \* \*

***Thank you for reading Eric!*** I hope you loved Eric and Ginny's story as much as I loved writing it—and rewriting it for that matter! The Kingsbrier Quintuplets continues in [Brier](#). Will these childhood sweethearts get a second chance? Read on and find out!

To find out more about new books, sign up for my newsletter.  
[www.jodykaye.com/newsletter](http://www.jodykaye.com/newsletter).

Did you know there's a slow-burn prequel to the Kingsbrier Quintuplets? Along with Ross you can get swept up in Rose Kingsbrier's antics in [Cavanaugh](#)!

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Turn the page for an excerpt from Brier...

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## Brier

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2007

Brier Rose Cavanaugh was anything but a princess. She left those duties up to her younger sister, Daveigh, who had the kind of heart that allowed one to commune with animals. Brier loved to be in the thick of it with the boys, so thank goodness she grew up with three brothers, too. Adam, Eric and Colton knew that no man was going to hold her back. She was not the girl who needed happily ever after because she was bound and determined to go it alone.

And that was exactly what she was at this very moment, sitting by herself on her bed in her dorm room...Alone.

She'd never admit to anyone that she was waiting for someone. Just as she'd never acknowledge that Drew, the person whom she hoped would show at her door, was more than just a childhood friend. When Texas State played FSU two seasons ago, Brier had given him plenty of reason to stay away.

*All the freshman girls on the floor gathered in Brier's room primping in their maroon and gold. It was hours before game time, but they planned on making it to Bobcat Stadium while tailgating was in full swing. A knock came and Brier, as well as all the other girls, turned their attention to the massive body that filled the threshold. He was less than conspicuously dressed in the opposing team's garnet color. One of her friends let out a low whistle. Another commented that Drew was in the wrong place and gave him directions to her room.*

*Brier hadn't seen Drew in months. He avoided her like the plague since the morning after the quint's farewell party for Colton over the summer. That night he'd told her he loved her and she couldn't bring herself to say the words back.*

*Brier was tiny to begin with but in Drew's presence she instantly felt smaller than she ever had. She wasn't ever going to be enough for Drew. Eventually, he would understand that. Her self-esteem nosedived back to where it had been when she let him go last summer. Her hand scooped towards her hip and she worried about how tight her jeans had become during her first semester. The freshman fifteen were nothing to Drew. He must have gained all of his weight in muscle. At this point, he didn't need the shoulder pads he'd worn playing high school football to look intimidating. Although looking into his blue eyes, she could still see the boy he once was.*

*"What are you doing here?" Brier took several steps forward before insisting her feet stop. She wouldn't miss him any less when he left a few hours from now to go back to Tallahassee. It would hurt more. She hadn't realized that was even possible until she saw him for the first time after they broke up. She told herself that the next time she caught a glimpse of him at a party back home, or in the Kingsbrier fields with her brothers, that it would get easier. It never did.*

*Drew moved into her dorm room touching his number on the jersey he wore. "It's not obvious?" he said with a friendly smile.*

*"Brier's got dibs. Girl, we're going to wait in the hall for you." Her roommate, Rochelle, ushered the coeds out to an echo of the unfairness of it all.*

*"Brier, are you? I—" He raked his hand through his tight-cropped blonde hair.*

*Don't tell me you miss me. Don't say you want to try again, she thought. Because she still fell asleep at night wanting the opposite to be true. It was a fantasy that they would ever make it as a couple. Half of what had kept them together for those two years was just getting carried away sneaking off under everyone's noses.*

*"We were just leaving. Aren't you going to be late for your game?" She cut him off, grabbed her keys, and punched the button on the doorknob so that it would lock after them. Then Brier beat feet down the short hallway to where her girls stood to wait for the elevator.*

*She looked away from Drew, straight at Rochelle's girlfriend, Angela, before pegging a stare at her roommate. Brier needed rescuing from herself and didn't know what else to do. She ran towards Angela smacking her full on the lips with her own and holding her body close until Angela responded in kind. When they parted, Brier returned her attention to Drew. "When you talk to Adam, tell him I said, 'Hey'." She left her eldest brother's best friend standing slack-jawed in the*



hall.

*The elevator bell dinged and as the girls got on they blocked Brier from view, smiling at Drew until the doors closed.*

*“Hell, Brier, if I knew you could kiss like that I would have chosen a different roommate.” Angela joked while looking lovingly at her partner. Rochelle took her hand and they laced their fingers together. Angela kissed Rochelle and then snorted. “The least you can do is say thanks for getting you away from that Seminole. I’m sure one of the other girls would have loved to have a go with him. You could have shared.” She looked back to see Brier back herself into a corner. Slumping down and bringing her head to meet her knees, she began to sob.*

*Rochelle kneeled down and lifted Brier’s face to the incandescent light. She took her thumbs and ran them under Brier’s eyes. “You’re going to ruin your makeup. No boy is worth crying over. We might not have been roommates long, but now I understand now why when any guy looks at you the way that boy just did, you fall apart. It’s going to be okay. I’ll keep this secret for you.” Rochelle pegged the others in the elevator with a stare that insisted that they do the same. “But don’t you ever touch my girlfriend again.”*

Two years later, both women continued to stand by her side. However, Brier still wasn’t sure she’d given Rochelle the apology she deserved. She hadn’t known what else to do. Drew was supposed to stay away, like he was today. She wouldn’t have expected him to repeat his performance *if...*

There were too many of those scenarios. If he’d never shown in the first place. If she couldn’t feel his eyes on her at a party back home. If she didn’t stop dead in her tracks seeing his rusty old Cadillac parked in the driveway. If it didn’t seem like her brother, Adam, wanted to apologize to her for having Drew as a life-long best friend.

Brier picked at the beds of her nails pushing her cuticles back to the point that they were ready to bleed. An itch made her scratch behind her ear as if she was tucking a nonexistent strand of long blonde hair back. She still preferred wearing it short, though some days for fun she’d spike it up. Today it was soft, the way Drew liked it. He always played with the wisps of white. For as much as her brothers mocked her for looking like a boy, when Drew touched the nape of her neck and pulled her close while staring into her emerald green eyes, Brier felt pretty.

The back of a lone small diamond stud that she wore through a cartilage piercing scraped her finger. Brier twisted the earring till it hurt to make sure it was secure. She’d lost the match to the pair and was ever so careful with the remaining one.

“Brier,” Bill poked his head in the door. She dated him casually. He was a nice Oklahoma boy who would make some girl very happy someday. “Everyone’s headed to the game. You coming?”

Brier looked at the clock. It was long past when Drew would have even been able to get over to her dorm. She’d been sitting there for hours. Bill held his hand out to her. She gratefully accepted. This was her penance; to have the attention of a great guy that she didn’t want.

Putting on her brave face, Brier became all about having a good time. She would be able to clearly pick out Drew’s number on the field and sought comfort in the fact that he would never be able to make out where she was in the stands.

He was the kid who got the press excited on college game day. His was the name that the announcers tossed around. Of course, Drew Newhouse wouldn’t be thinking about the dumb girl who broke his heart in high school. There were legions of female fans who would be glad to take Brier’s place. They likely already had. She had nothing to lose because she’d already lost by giving him up.

Brier paid for her beer and the cougar tattoo which Bill transferred to her face with a combination of suds and saliva. She cheered, hollered and tried to fit her heart back in the compartment that she’d put it in three years ago. After holding her ground for such a long time, Brier told herself that maintaining it was in everyone’s best interest, not just her own. No slip-ups or thinking that just once with him wouldn’t hurt her chances of becoming the person she wanted to be. Drew would hold her back. Just like any other man, he’d expect her to give up on her dream to become a cop and the criminal justice degree that she was spending her hard earned money on would be a waste.

What’s worse is that when her trust fund finally did kick in, Drew could be first in line holding out his palm for the green. Brier had seen the way other men, who were only interested in what the Kingsbrier name could do for them, treated her sister. Likewise, the floozies that her brothers brought home drove Brier up a wall. The only exception to those bleached blonde bimbos was her sister-in-law, Ginny. She’d married Brier’s younger brother, Eric, after high school and they lived on what they had.

Texas State was already up by three in the first when they scored again. It was an amazing play. Brier jumped into Bill’s arms. He caught her tiny frame, pressing it against him as she slunk down the front of him. With her breast pressed hard against his chest, they kissed before he let her feet hit the ground. She meant nothing romantic by it. Brier was just living in the moment. The crowd around them went wild as both of them realized that they’d been featured on the giant screens.

The line changed and so did the pace of the game when the junior Seminole quarterback took to the field again. Drew had been disgusted with the sloppiness shown by both himself and his teammates during the last play. And what he saw on the Jumbotron made his blood boil. It was as if Brier needed to rub his face in it every time he was near her.

With the next play, Drew threw a seventy-five yard touchdown strike to cut into Texas' lead, silencing the crowd in the once rowdy stadium. By half-time, they were leading. In the fourth quarter, it wasn't that Texas had given up, it was that Drew refused to give in.

Brier's heart was beating fast as they walked back into the dorms. She was desperate to pull up the game highlights on the internet and check the changes in Drew's stats from last week's game to this one. However, the throng of subdued fans who had been rooting for the home team was keeping her in check. Watching your team lose while your childhood friend played the best game so far of his college career was like attending a wedding and a funeral simultaneously.

Her mouth quirked several times as Bill commented on Drew's prowess. The more he used the f-word as a slur, the wetter Brier's panties became remembering what her high school years had been like in the back seat of Drew's car.

Angela and Rochelle arched their eyebrows as they sat down on the pushed-together beds they shared in the triple this year. Brier silently pleaded for them to keep what they knew to themselves.

It was easier said than done when a gruff voice growled, "Get out."

Drew towered over Bill. Behind him were two just as strapping men who had just showered and smelled delicious. They grabbed the boy by the shoulders and forced him out of the room. Then, after Rochelle and Angela made a hasty retreat, they stood with arms folded like sentries blocking anyone from entering.

"You should be gone by now," Brier stammered.

"Yeah, well, they probably would leave without one player, but three they'll hold the plane for. Besides, this isn't going to take long." Drew stalked towards Brier. She stumbled backward and he pinned her up against the wall on her side of the room. The baby blue eyes that she was so familiar with were filled with rage and anger instead of their usual kindness. Witnessing the kiss at the game in high definition—even if from her point of view it had been innocent—had pushed Drew too far. He was as pissed as she'd ever seen him.

"I'm not letting you get away with this again. You think you can push me away. You still haven't figured a damn thing out about us." He tipped up her face to his and bent his body to catch her mouth before she could explain or protest.

The kiss lasted forever and was over too soon. Brier was breathless, her whole body was on fire wanting Drew the way they'd been as teenagers.

Drew cocked an eyebrow and laughed, reassured that his visit had hit the mark he'd intended. Other than the one time he had underestimated her, Drew knew Brier inside and out. He didn't mind waiting for her, but he'd be damned if Brier was going to make him feel a fool until she was ready to admit what they had. Tonight was just a reminder that no one would ever come close to loving her the way he could.

"What was that for?" she asked, wide-eyed and unsure of herself. Part of her wanted to kiss Drew again. The other half wanted to rake her fingernails across his face for the scene he was creating. The war going on inside of her head was taking much space to even be able to orient herself in the room, let alone manage a cohesive thought or comeback.

"Because I know you'll never stop me." Drew walked out of the room and down the hall with his comrades-in-arms surrounding him. The whole floor had come alive hearing that members of the opposing team were there. Bill shouted obscenities at the trio as they marched towards the dorms bank of elevators. Angela and Rochelle were scurrying protectively back into the room to see if Brier was okay. She ran out, stopping to hold the doorframe for support. Her knees ready to give out.

"Fuck you, Drew Newhouse!" she yelled. In a flash, Brier became livid. How could he embarrass her in front of everyone by acting like a neanderthal? Who did he think he was? She was also totally turned on, which made it worse when Drew called over his shoulder not bothering to look back, "Anytime, sugar. I'm the only one who knows just the way you like it."

They both had a year and a half of college to go and, on top of that, Drew knew that until Brier had been to the police academy there was no way she'd back down. Supporting her dream sucked, but he was willing to do it.

[Need more? Brier is available now!](#)

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## Author Notes

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### **2020 update**

When I started writing this series, I knew it was going to have a round-robin character perspective. Looking to challenge myself, I opted to write the original version omniscient. What I hadn't known five years ago is that particular point of view is really a love it or hate it deal. So when the final Quintuplets books were published in rotating first person, I started toying with the idea of overhauling Eric. The story line is true to the original version with only a few minor details missing for Cris and Drew. I hope you enjoyed reading Eric in the quint's own words. —*Jody*

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Last year, I turned fortylicious. I've always disliked my birthday since most years it lands on Mother's Day weekend. It stinks to have to share "my" day with everyone. My husband has always been cognizant of this and goes out of his way to make it as special as it can be. It one of the many things that I love him for. In 2013—with a houseful of puking children—he went above and beyond when my mother was admitted to hospice on my birthday. She passed away four days later. My mom was a force. When Canvas broke the Amazon Top Free List in its category it was her voice that was missing among everyone's excitement.

"What do you think she'd say?" I asked him once.

"She'd be proud of you...except for chapter thirty-one," he said, hitting the nail on the head.

He knew I needed that laugh and, just so you know, this has been a really good year that has me looking forward to what is on the horizon.

MJA, when you challenged me to finish "just one" we were in such a good place. How did this craziness make it better? Thank you for the push to keep writing and not getting too upset when I not only dropped an almost complete draft in order to start Kingsbrier, but also spent our family vacation plotting and

scheming. I've decided that maybe you do for agreeing to support a wife whose hobby is more like a full-time job. Nope, I take that back, I still know you think you do. <3

Sarah, You've been my go-to person for so long now that I can't imagine any draft not going through you. Thank you for always checking in, putting up with my random rants and general whininess when things aren't going well. P.S. I'm waiting to hear you say, "Hey could you read this?"...and I saw the comment from the USA Today Best Selling Author on your Facebook that agreed with me!

Gretchen, Wow! All I needed was a few simple translations! I'm blown away by how much work you put into this book. Thank you for agreeing to this craziness with no idea what you were getting yourself into. I stand by my word, "You totally rock as a grown-up" ;)

Kerstie, Thank you so much for providing a voice of reason when the first two books were published and enduring my scattered brain since then.

Lisa, You are my favorite Type-A gal with the best amazingly prompt responses. It means so much being able to count on you. Thanks!

Michelle, You went totally above and beyond at the last minute. I can't thank you enough and hope you'll consider doing it again!

To my Aunties, Thanks for loving me through the past three years and reminding me that I'll always have someone to count on. You're the best kind of cheerleaders.

To the rest of my Review Team:—Hold it! I have a Review Team now? How cool is THAT!—Annie, Kara, Sue, Kerri, Sara & Allie, You will never know how much I appreciate the time that you put into reading this book, the encouragement, the reviews, and the shares. Thank you from the bottom of my heart! XO

\* \* \* \*

I love the personal messages readers send me requesting more stories and saying how much they've connected with a character. I wish I could share them because most of these e-mails are exactly what goes into a review.

Writers leave review reminders for one simple reason: The fewer reviews we have, the less retailers believe we're worthy of your precious time. They're quick to suggest someone else; an author with more reviews.

The amazing thing is that your favorite retailer makes it easy to rate and review when you get to the end of an ebook. The stars appear right in the app to

touch. Reviewing is simple. Just a sentence or two that tells other readers what you liked or that you'd recommend this book. You can also leave a review on [Goodreads](#) or [BookBub](#).

Reviews are the best way to help an author. I'd really appreciate a review this (or one of my other books) so that I can keep writing for you. Thanks!

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**Also by Jody Kaye**

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Shattered Hearts of Carolina

[\*Splinter of Hope\*](#)

[\*Shred of Decency\*](#)

[\*Sliver of Truth\*](#)

[\*Holding Onto Hope\*](#)

[\*Home Wrecker\*](#)

The Kingsbrier Legacy

[\*Gray Sin\*](#)

[\*Going Down\*](#)

The Kingsbrier Quintuplets

[\*Eric\*](#)

[\*Brier\*](#)

[\*Daveigh\*](#)

[\*Miss Cavanaugh\*](#)

[\*Cavanaugh\*](#)

[\*Adam\*](#)

[\*Colette\*](#)

[\*Colton\*](#)

The Canvas Duet

[\*Canvas\*](#)

[\*Imprint\*](#)



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## About the Author

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Jody's husband asked what she'd been doing all day. After five years she finally confessed, "When no one is around, I write."

Okay, it was more like a bunch of stammering and trying to get out of saying a thing. Jody's a writer. You want it pretty. Let's compromise.

"Just finish one," he said, challenging her to complete a story and share it. Little did he know that those words of encouragement meant they'd return from a family vacation with a wild and defiant set of quintuplets stumbling their way into adulthood. Wasn't raising their three sons enough?

A native of nowhere, Jody settled in New England for 17 years before agreeing to uproot her brood of boys and move to North Carolina. She's a part-time graphic designer and marketer with over twenty years' experience, and full-time writer. If Jody ever gets lost, you'll find her reading, all the while hoping that her ravenous children haven't eaten all the ingredients before she's cooked dinner.

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## Newsletter

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Please subscribe to Jody's newsletter for:

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**The Kingsbrier Quintuplets**

05.10.2021