

THESE ROYALS WILL RUIN YOU.

NUMBER 1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ERIN WATT

BROKEN PRINCE

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Broken Prince

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The Royals Series by Erin Watt

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Paper Princess
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To the fans who love this series as much as we do

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One

REED

THE HOUSE IS dark and silent when I let myself in through the mudroom off the kitchen. Nearly ten thousand square feet and no one is here. A grin splits my face. With my brothers scattered, the housekeeper gone, and my dad off who knows where, that means my girl and I have the Royal mansion all to ourselves.

Hell yeah.

I break into a light jog as I cross the kitchen and climb the back stairs. Hopefully Ella is waiting for me upstairs in her bed, looking all cute and sexy in one of my old T-shirts she's taken to sleeping in. It would be even better if that was *all* she was wearing . . . I speed up, bypassing my room, Easton's room, and Gid's old room until I'm outside Ella's door, which is disappointingly closed. A quick knock gets me no response. Frowning, I fish my phone out of my back pocket and shoot off a quick text.

Where RU, babe

She doesn't answer. I tap my phone against my leg. She's probably out with her friend Valerie tonight, which is kind of

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good, actually, because I could use a shower before I see her. The boys were smoking a shit ton of weed over at Wade's place tonight, and I don't want to stink up Ella's room.

New plan. Shower, shave, and then hunt my girl down. I pull off my T-shirt, wad it up in my hand, and shove open my bedroom door without bothering to turn on the light. I kick off my shoes and cross the carpet to my attached bath.

I smell her before I see her.

What the . . . ?

With the sickening scent of roses clinging to my nostrils, I swing toward the bed. "No way," I growl when I make out the shadowy figure on the mattress.

As a jolt of annoyance rips up my spine, I march back to the doorway and flick the light switch. Then I instantly regret it, because the pale yellow glow that fills the room reveals the naked curves of a woman I want nothing to do with.

"What the *hell* are you doing here?" I snap at my father's ex-girlfriend.

Brooke Davidson offers a coy smile. "I've missed you."

My jaw falls open. Is she fucking serious right now? I quickly swing my head out in the hall to make sure Ella's still gone. Then I head straight for the bed.

"Get out," I growl, grabbing one of her wrists to pull her off my bed. Shit, now I'm going to have to change the sheets, because if there's anything that stinks worse than old beer and weed, it's Brooke Davidson.

"Why? You never complained before." She licks her red lips in a way that I'm sure is supposed to look sexy, but that I find stomach turning. There're a lot of skeletons in my past that Ella doesn't know about. A lot that would make her downright sick. And the woman in front of me is one of them.

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"I distinctly remember telling you that I never wanted to touch your skank ass again."

Brooke's smug smile turns thin. "And I told you not to talk to me like that."

"I'll talk to you however I want," I spit out. I cast another glance at the door. Desperation is starting to make me sweat. Brooke can't be here when Ella comes home.

How the hell would I begin to explain this? My eyes fall on Brooke's clothes strewn across my floor—the skimpy minidress, the lacy underwear, a pair of stilettos.

My shoes happened to land by hers. This all looks like a hot mess.

I grab Brooke's heels off the floor and toss them at the bed. "Whatever you're selling, I'm not buying. Get the fuck out."

She throws the shoes back. One of the heels scratches my bare chest before they fall to the floor. "Make me."

I squeeze the back of my neck. Short of forcibly picking her up and tossing her out, I'm not sure what my options are. What the hell would I say now if Ella caught me hauling Brooke out of my bedroom?

Hey, baby, don't mind me. I'm taking out the trash. See, I slept with my dad's girlfriend a couple times, and now that they've broken up, I think she wants back in my pants. That's not sick or anything, right? Cue awkward chuckle.

I clench my fists to my side. Gideon always told me I was self-destructive, but man, this is self-destruction on a whole new level. *I* did this. I let my anger toward my father drive me into bed with this woman. I told myself that after what he did to Mom, he deserved to have me screw his girlfriend behind his back.

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Well, the joke's on me.

"Get your clothes on," I hiss out. "This conversation is over—" I halt at the sound of footsteps in the hall.

I hear my name called.

Brooke's head tilts. She hears it, too.

Oh fuck. Oh fuck. Oh *fuck*.

Ella's voice is right outside my door.

"Oh goodie, Ella's home," Brooke says as my blood pumps unsteadily in my ears. "I have some news I can share with both of you."

It's probably the dumbest thing I could ever do, but the only thought running through my mind is *fix this*. I need this woman *gone*.

So I drop everything and charge forward. I grab Brooke's arm to haul her off the mattress, but the bitch yanks me down. I try to avoid making contact with her naked body but end up losing my balance. She takes advantage and pushes herself up against my back. A soft laugh puffs in my ear as her store-bought tits burn against my skin.

I watch in panic as the doorknob turns.

Brooke whispers, "I'm pregnant and the baby is yours."

What?

My entire world lurches to a stop.

The door swings open. Ella's gorgeous face takes in mine. I watch her expression turn from joy to shock.

"Reed?"

I'm frozen in place, but my brain is working overtime, frantically trying to calculate the last time Brooke and I were together. It was St. Paddy's Day. Gid and I were hanging out by the pool. He got drunk. I got drunk. He was beyond upset about something. Dad. Say it ain't so, Steve. I didn't understand it all.

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I vaguely register the sound of Brooke giggling. I see Ella's face, but I'm not really seeing it. I should say something, but I don't. I'm busy. Busy panicking. Busy thinking.

St. Paddy's Day . . . I'd stumbled upstairs and crashed and woke up to wet, hot suction around my dick. I knew it wasn't Abby, because I'd already broken it off with her and she wasn't the type to creep into my bedroom anyway. And who am I to turn away a free BJ?

Ella's mouth falls open and she says something. I can't hear it. I'm caught in a tailspin of guilt and self-loathing, and I can't pull myself out of it. All I can do is stare at her. My girl. The most beautiful girl ever. I can't turn away from all that golden hair, those big blue eyes pleading at me to explain myself.

Say something, I order my uncooperative vocal cords.

My lips won't move. I feel a cold touch against my neck and flinch.

Say something, dammit. Don't let her walk away—

Too late. Ella flies out the door.

The loud slamming snaps me out of it. Sort of. I still can't move. I can barely breathe.

St. Paddy's Day . . . That was more than six months ago. I don't know much about pregnant women, but Brooke's barely got anything going on. There's no way.

No. Way.

No. Way. That. Baby. Is. Mine.

I shoot off the bed, ignoring the wild trembling of my hands as I lunge for the door.

"Really?" comes Brooke's amused voice. "You're going after her? How will you explain this to her, sweetie?"

I spin around in fury. "Swear to God, woman, if you don't get the hell out of my room, I'm throwing you out." Dad has

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always said that a man who raises a hand against a female lowers himself beneath her feet. So I've never hit a woman. Never had the urge to until I met Brooke Davidson.

She ignores the threat. Continues to taunt me, spelling out all my fears. "What lies will you tell her? That you never touched me? That you never wanted me? How do you think that girl will respond when she finds out you screwed your daddy's girlfriend? Do you think she'll still want you?"

I glance toward the now-empty doorway. I can hear muffled sounds coming from Ella's bedroom. I want to sprint across the hall, but I can't. Not when Brooke is still in this house. What if she runs out there, butt-ass naked, saying that she's pregnant with my kid? How do I explain that to Ella? How do I get her to believe me? Brooke needs to be gone before I face Ella.

"Get out." I turn all my frustrations on Brooke.

"Don't you want to know the sex of the baby first?"

"No. I don't." I take in her slender, naked body and see a slight mound on her belly. Bile fills my mouth. Brooke's not the type to get fat. Her looks are her only weapon. She's not lying about being pregnant.

But that kid isn't mine.

It might be my dad's, but it sure as hell is *not* mine.

I wrench the door open and run out. "Ella," I call. I don't know what I'll say to her, but it's better than saying nothing. I'm still cursing myself for freezing up like that. God, what a fuckup I am.

I skid to a stop outside her bedroom door. A quick survey nets me nothing. Then I hear it—the low, throaty sound of a sports-car engine being revved. With a burst of panic, I sprint down the front stairs, while Brooke cackles behind me like a witch on Halloween.

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I lunge at the front door, forgetting it's locked, and by the time I get it open, there's no sign of Ella outside. She must've raced down the driveway going at Mach speed. Shit.

The stones under my feet remind me I'm wearing jeans and nothing else. Spinning on my heel, I take the stairs three at a time, only to grind to a halt when Brooke steps onto the landing.

"There's no way that's my baby," I snarl. If it was really mine, Brooke would've played this card a long time ago instead of holding it tight until now. "I doubt it's my dad's, either, or you wouldn't stripping down like a cheap whore in my room."

"It's whoever's I say it is," she says coldly.

"Where's your proof?"

"I don't need proof. It's my word against yours, and by the time any paternity tests arrive, I'll already have a ring on my finger."

"Good luck with that."

She grabs my arm when I try to brush past her. "I don't need luck. I have you."

"No. You never had me." I shake her grip off. "I'm leaving to find Ella. You stay here as long as you want, Brooke. I'm done playing your games."

Her frosty voice stops me before I can reach my bedroom. "If you get Callum to propose to me, I'll tell everyone the child is his. Don't help me, and everyone will believe the child is yours."

I pause in the doorway. "The DNA test will show it's not mine."

"Maybe," she chirps, "but DNA will show it belongs to a Royal. Those tests don't always differentiate between relatives, particularly fathers and sons. It'll be enough to put doubt in Ella's mind. So I'm asking you, Reed, do you want me to tell the

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world—tell *Ella*—that you're going to be a daddy? Because I will. Or you can agree to my terms, and no one will ever know."

I hesitate.

"Do we have a deal?"

I grit my teeth. "If I do this, if I sell this—this"—I struggle to find the right word—"idea to my dad on your behalf, you'll leave Ella alone?"

"Whatever do you mean?"

I turn slowly. "I mean, you bitch, that none of your bullshit ever touches Ella. You don't speak to her, not even to explain this—" I wave my hand at her now clothed body. "You smile, you say hi, but no heart-to-hearts."

I don't trust this woman, but if I can bargain for Ella—and, yes, for me—then I'll do it. Dad's made his rotten bed. He can roll around in that filth again.

"Deal. You work on your father, and you and Ella can have your happily ever after." Brooke laughs as she bends to pick up her shoes. "*If* you can win her back."

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Two

TWO HOURS LATER, I'm freaking out. It's past midnight, and Ella isn't back.

Would she just come home and yell at me already? I need her to tell me that I'm an asshole who isn't worth her time. I need her in my face, spitting fire at me. I need her to scream at me, kick me, punch me.

I fucking need her.



I CHECK MY phone. It's been hours since she left.

I punch in her number, but it rings and rings.

Another call and I'm shuttled to voicemail.

I text, Where RU

No response.

Dad's worried

I type out the lie hoping that it gets a response, but my phone remains silent. Maybe she's blocked my number? The

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thought stings, but it's not totally crazy, so I run inside and go up to my brother's room. Ella can't have blocked us all.

It's just past five a.m. and Easton's still sleeping, but his phone is charging on his nightstand. I flick it on and type out another message. She likes Easton. She paid off his debt. She'd answer Easton, wouldn't she?

Hey. Reed told me something happened. U OK

Nothing.

Maybe she parked down the road and is walking on the shore? I pocket my brother's phone in case she decides to contact him and hurry downstairs toward the back patio.

The shoreline is completely empty, so I jog down to the Worthington estate, a property four houses down. She's not there, either.

I look around, down the rocky shoreline, out into the ocean, and see nothing. No person. No imprints in the sand. Nothing.

Frustration gives way to panic as I race back to the house and climb into my Range Rover. Finger on the start button, I rapidly tap my fist against the dashboard. Think. Think. *Think.*

Valerie's. She must be at Valerie's.

In less than ten minutes, I'm idling outside of Val's house, but there's no sign of Ella's sporty blue convertible on the street. Leaving the Rover's engine running, I hop out and hurry up the driveway. Ella's car isn't back there, either.

I glance at my phone again. More time has elapsed than I realized but still, no messages. None on Easton's, either. The display tells me I have football practice in twenty minutes, which means Ella's expected at the bakery where she works.

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We usually ride together. Even after she got her car—a gift from my dad—we rode together.

Ella said it was because she didn't like to drive. I told her it was dangerous to drive in the morning. We told each other lies. We lied to ourselves because neither of us was willing to admit the truth: we couldn't resist each other. At least that's the way it was for me. From the moment she walked in the door, all big eyes and guarded hope, I couldn't keep away.

My instincts had screamed at me that she was trouble. My instincts were wrong. She wasn't trouble. I was. Still am.

Reed the destroyer.

It'd be a cool nickname if it wasn't my life and hers that I'm taking down.

The bakery's parking lot is empty when I arrive. After five minutes of nonstop pounding on the door, the owner—Lucy, I think—appears with a frown.

"We don't open for another hour," she informs me.

"I'm Reed Royal, Ella's . . ." What am I? Her boyfriend? Her stepbrother? What? "Friend." Hell, I'm not even that. "Is she here? There's a family emergency."

"No, she hasn't shown up." Lucy's brow creases with worry. "I tried to contact her and she didn't answer. She's such a good employee, I thought maybe she was so sick she couldn't call."

My heart sinks. Ella's never missed a day at the bakery even though it requires her to get up at the ass-crack of dawn and work nearly three hours before classes start.

"Oh, okay, she must be home in bed," I mumble, backing away.

"Wait a minute," Lucy calls after me. "What's going on? Does your father know Ella is missing?"

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"She's not missing, ma'am," I call back, already halfway to my car. "She's at home. Like you said, sick. In bed."

I peel out of the parking lot and call Coach. "I'm not gonna make it to practice. Family emergency," I repeat.

I shut out the shouted expletives from Coach Lewis. He winds down after a few minutes. "All right, son. But I expect your ass to be in uniform bright and early tomorrow."

"Yessir."

Back home once again, I find our housekeeper, Sandra, has arrived to make breakfast.

"You see Ella?" I ask the plump brunette.

"Can't say that I have." Sandra checks the clock. "She's usually gone by now. So are you, for that matter. What's going on? Don't you have practice?"

"Coach had a family emergency," I lie. I'm so damn good at lying. It becomes almost second nature when you hide the truth every hour of every day.

Sandra tsks. "Hope it's nothing too serious."

"Me, too," I answer. "Me, too."

Upstairs, I enter the room I should have checked before racing off. Maybe she crept in while I was trying to find her. But Ella's bedroom is dead silent. Her bed is still made. The desk is spotless.

I check her bathroom, which also looks untouched. Ditto with the closet. All her stuff is hanging on matching wooden hangers. Her shoes are lined up in a neat row on the floor. There are unopened boxes and bags still stuffed with clothes that Brooke probably picked out for her.

Forcing myself not to feel bad about invading her privacy, I dig through her nightstand—empty. I flipped her room once, back when I still didn't trust her, and she always kept a book of

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poetry and a man's watch in the nightstand. The watch was an exact replica of my dad's. Hers had belonged to Dad's best friend Steve, Ella's bio-dad.

I pause in the middle of the room and look around. There's nothing here to indicate her presence. Not her phone. Not her book. Not her . . . Oh hell no, her backpack is gone.

I tear out of the room and down the hall to Easton's.

"East, wake up. East!" I say sharply.

"What?" He groans. "Is it time to get up?" His eyes flicker open and he squints. "Oh shit. I'm late for practice. Why aren't you there already?"

He shoots out of bed, but I grab his arm before he can dart off. "We're not going to practice. Coach knows."

"What? Why—"

"Forget that right now. How much was your debt?"

"My what?"

"How much did you owe the bookie?"

He blinks at me. "Eight grand. Why?"

I do some quick math. "That means Ella's got about two G's left, right?"

"Ella?" He frowns. "What about her?"

"I think she ran."

"Ran where?"

"Ran away. Ran off," I growl. I shove away from the bed and stalk to the window. "Dad paid her to stay here. Gave her ten grand. Think about it, East. He had to pay this orphan who was stripping for a living ten grand to come live with us. And he was probably gonna pay that to her every month."

"Why'd she leave?" he asks in confusion, still half-asleep.

I continue to stare out the window. Once his grogginess wears off, he'll put it together.

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"What did you do?"

Yep, here we go.

The floor creaks as he whips around the room. Behind me I can hear him muttering curses under his breath while he dresses.

"Doesn't matter," I say impatiently. Turning back, I give him the rundown of the places I've been. "Where do you think she is?"

"She's got enough for a plane ticket."

"But she's careful with her money. She hasn't spent hardly any of it while she's been here."

Easton nods thoughtfully. Then we lock eyes and speak in unison, almost as if we're the twins of the Royal household, instead of our brothers, Sawyer and Sebastian. "GPS."

We call the GPS service Atlantic Aviation owns and that my dad installs in every car he's ever bought. The helpful assistant tells us that the new Audi S5 is parked at the bus station.

We're out the door before she even starts to recite the address.



"SHE'S SEVENTEEN. ABOUT this tall." I hold my hand beneath my chin as I describe Ella to the ticket clerk. "Blond hair. Blue eyes." Eyes like the Atlantic. Stormy gray, cool blue, fathoms deep. I got lost in that gaze more than once. "She left her phone behind." I hold up my cell. "We need to get it to her."

The ticket clerk clicks her tongue. "Oh sure. She was in such a hurry to get away. She bought a ticket to Gainesville. Her grandmother died, you know."

Both East and I nod. "What time did the bus leave?"

"Oh, hours ago. She'd be there by now." The ticket lady shakes her head in dismay. "She was crying like her heart had

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been broken. You don't see that anymore—kids caring about old folks like that. It was sweet. Felt terrible for her."

East clenches his fists beside me. Anger radiates off of him in waves. If we were alone, one of those fists would be in my face.

"Thanks, ma'am."

"No problem, dear." She dismisses us with a nod.

We exit the building and stop at Ella's car. I hold out my hand and Easton slaps her spare keys into my palm.

Inside, I find her key fob in the middle console, along with her poetry book and what looks like the title for the car stuck between the pages. In the glove compartment, she stashed her phone, which still shows all my unread text messages.

She left everything behind. Everything associated with the Royals.

"We gotta get to Gainesville," Easton says flatly.

"I know."

"Are we telling Dad?"

Informing Callum Royal means we could take his plane. We'd be there in an hour. Otherwise it's a six-and-a-half-hour drive.

"I don't know." The urgency to find her has lessened. I know where she is now. I can get to her. I just need to figure out what angle I should take.

"What'd you do?" my brother demands again.

I'm not ready for the wave of hatred he's going to send my way, so I stay quiet.

"Reed."

"She caught me with Brooke," I say hoarsely.

His jaw falls open. "Brooke? Dad's Brooke?"

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"Yes." I force myself to face him.

"What the *hell*? How often have you been with Brooke?"

"A couple times," I admit. "Not recently, though. And definitely not last night. I didn't touch her, East."

His jaw clenches. He's dying to take a swing at me, but he won't. Not in public. He'd heard the same things from Mom. *Keep the Royal name clean, boys. It's easy to tear it down, so much harder to build it up.*

"You should be strung up by your nuts and hung out to dry." He spits at my feet. "If you don't find Ella and bring her back, I'll be first in line to see it done."

"That's fair." I try to stay calm. No point in getting upset. No point in tipping this car over. No point in roaring even though I'm dying to open my mouth and release all of my anger and self-loathing into the air.

"Fair?" He snorts with disgust. "So you don't give a shit that Ella's in some college town getting groped by drunks?"

"She's a survivor. I'm sure she's safe." The words sound so ridiculous I practically gag as they come out. Ella's a gorgeous girl, and she's all by herself. There's no telling what could happen to her. "You want to drive her car back home before we head to Gainesville?"

Easton gapes at me.

"Well?" I ask impatiently.

"Sure. Why not?" He rips the key fob from my hand. "I mean, who cares that she's a hot seventeen-year-old by herself, carrying almost two grand in cash?" My fingers curl into fists. "It's not like some junkie high on meth is gonna look at her and think, 'There's an easy mark. That five-foot-something chick who weighs less than my leg isn't gonna fight me off'"—it's becoming hard to breathe—"and I'm sure every dude she runs

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into has good intentions. None of them will drag her down a dark alley and run train on her until she's—"

"Shut the fuck up!" I roar.

"Finally." East throws up his hands.

"What do you mean?" I'm practically panting with rage. The pictures Easton painted with his words make me wish I could Hulk out and run to Gainesville, destroying everything in my path until I find her.

"You've been walking around like she's nothing to you. Maybe you're made of stone, but I like Ella. She . . . she was good for us." His grief is almost tangible.

"I know." The words are wrenched out of me. "I know, goddammit." My throat tightens to the point of pain. "But . . . *we* weren't good for her."

Gideon, our older brother, tried to tell me that from the beginning. *Stay the hell away from her. She doesn't need our kind of drama. Don't ruin her like I ruined—*

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"What it sounds like. We're poison, East. Every single one of us. I slept with Dad's girlfriend to get back at him for being a dick to Mom. The twins are involved in shit I don't even want to know about. Your gambling is out of control. Gideon is—" I stop. Gid's living in his own hellhole right now, but that's not something Easton needs to know about. "We're screwed in the head, man. Maybe she's better off without us."

"That's not true."

But I think it might be. We're no good for her. All Ella has ever wanted is to live a normal, regular life. She can't have that in the Royal household.

If I wasn't completely selfish, I'd walk away. I'd convince

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East that the best thing for Ella is to be as far away from us as possible.

Instead, I stay quiet and think of what I'm going to say to her when we find her.

"Let's go. I have an idea." I pivot and head toward the entrance.

"I thought we were going to Gainesville," East mutters from behind me.

"This'll save us the drive."

We make a beeline for the security office, where I slip a hundred bucks to the rent-a-cop and he gives us access to the camera footage from Gainesville. The guy rewinds the tape to the moment the bus from Bayview pulls in, and my heart seizes up as I scan the passengers. Then it drops to my stomach when I realize that none of those passengers is Ella.

"What the hell," East blurts out as we leave the bus station ten minutes later. "The ticket lady said Ella was on that bus."

My jaw is so tight I can barely get a word out. "Maybe she got off at a different stop."

We trudge back to the Rover and slide in. "Now what?" he asks, his eyes narrowed menacingly at me.

I rake a hand through my hair. We could drive to every bus station on the route, but I suspect that'd be a wild-goose chase. Ella's smart, and she's used to running, used to skipping town at a moment's notice and making a new life for herself. She learned it from her mother.

Another queasy feeling twists my gut as a thought occurs to me. Is she going to get a job at another strip club? I know Ella will do whatever she needs to do to survive, but the thought of her taking her clothes off for a bunch of skeezy perverts makes my blood boil.

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I have to find her. If something happened to her because I drove her away, I won't be able to live with myself.

"We go home," I announce.

My brother looks startled. "Why?"

"Dad has an investigator on retainer. He'll be able to find her a lot faster than we will."

"Dad's gonna lose his shit."

No kidding. And I'll deal with the fallout the best I can, but right now, finding Ella trumps everything.

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Three

AS EASTON PREDICTED, Dad is livid when we tell him Ella's missing. I haven't slept in over twenty-four hours and I'm exhausted, too exhausted to face off with him tonight.

"Why the *hell* didn't you call me earlier?" my father booms. He paces the massive living room in the mansion, his thousand-dollar wing tips slapping the gleaming hardwood floor.

"We figured we'd find her before it came down to that," I say tersely.

"I'm her legal guardian! I should have been informed." Dad's breathing grows labored. "What did you do, Reed?"

His furious gaze bores into me. He's not looking at East, or the twins, who are on the couch wearing identical looks of concern. I'm not surprised Dad's decided to lay the blame at my feet. He knows my brothers follow my lead, that the only Royal who could've driven Ella away is me.

I swallow. Shit. I don't want him to know that Ella and I got involved right under his nose. I want him to focus on finding her, not distract him with the news that his son is hooking up with his new ward.

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"It wasn't Reed."

Easton's quiet confession shocks the hell out of me. I glance at my brother, but his eyes are on Dad.

"I'm the reason she's gone. We had a run-in with my bookie the other night—I owed him some cash—and Ella got spooked. This dude's not the friendliest guy, if you know what I mean."

The vein in Dad's forehead looks like it might burst. "Your *bookie*? You're mixed up in that shit again?"

"I'm sorry." Easton shrugs.

"You're sorry? You dragged Ella into one of your messes and scared her so badly that she ran away!"

Dad advances on my brother, and I immediately step into his path.

"East made a mistake," I say firmly, avoiding my brother's eyes. I'll thank him later for taking the heat. Right now, we need to calm the old man down. "But it's done, over with, all right? We should be concentrating on finding her."

Dad's shoulders drop. "You're right." He nods, his expression hardening. "I'll call my PI."

He storms out of the living room without another word, his heavy footsteps echoing in the corridor. A moment later, we hear his study door slam shut.

"East," I start.

He turns with a deadly look. "I didn't do it for you. I did it for her."

My throat tightens. "I know."

"If Dad knew about . . ." He trails off, warily glancing at the twins, who hadn't said a word during the entire exchange. "It would distract him."

"You think the PI will find Ella?" Sawyer asks.

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"Yes," I answer with conviction I don't feel.

"If she uses her mom's ID, we can definitely find her," East assures our younger brother. "If she figures out how to get a fake ID . . ." His shoulders slump in defeat. "I don't know."

"She can't hide forever," Seb says helpfully.

Yeah, she can. She's the most resourceful person I've ever known. If Ella wants to stay hidden, then she will.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I eagerly grab it, but it's not the person I want to hear from. Bile coats my throat when I see Brooke's name.

> A little birdie told me your princess is missing

"Ella?" East says hopefully.

"Brooke." Her name burns my tongue.

"What does she want?"

"Nothing," I mutter, just as another message pops up.

> Callum must be beside himself. Poor man. He needs someone to comfort him

I grit my teeth. She ain't subtle, that's for sure.

In our mad search for Ella, I haven't allowed myself to think about Brooke's pregnancy and the deal I struck with her last night. Now I can't ignore it, because the messages keep coming.

> You have a job to do, Reed

> You made a promise

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Answer me, you little prick!

You want some baby mama drama? Is that it?

Jesus. I don't need this right now. I choke down my rage and force myself to respond. Relax. I'll talk to him

"What does she want?" Easton repeats angrily.

"Nothing," I say again. Then I leave him and the twins in the living room and drag myself to my father's study.

I don't want to do this. I really, really don't want to do this.

I knock on the door.

"What is it, Reed?"

"How did you know it's me?" I ask as I push the door open.

"Because with Gideon gone, you're the leader of your merry band of brothers." Dad throws back his tumbler full of Scotch while reaching for a refill. And I wonder why I can't get East off the bottle.

I heave a breath. "I think you should call Brooke."

Dad halts in the middle of stoppering the Scotch.

Yeah, you heard me, old man. And trust me, I'm as shocked as you are.

When he doesn't respond, I force myself to push forward. "When you bring Ella back, we're gonna need help. We need someone to provide a buffer." I gag on my next words. "A woman's touch, I guess. Ella was tight with her mom. Maybe if Brooke had been around more before, Ella wouldn't have left."

My father frowns at me. "I thought you hated Brooke."

"How many times do you want me to say I'm a dumbass?" I stretch a painful smile across my face.

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He remains unconvinced. "She wants a ring and I'm not ready for that."

Thank God. I guess the booze hasn't erased *all* his good judgment.

"You don't have to marry her. Just . . ." I lick my lips. This is effing hard, but I press on because I made this deal. I can't have Brooke telling people that demon spawn is mine. "Just know it's cool if you bring her back. I get it. We need people to care about. Who care about us."

That much is true, at least. Ella's love made me believe that I could be a better person.

"That's generous of you," Dad says dryly. "And hell, maybe you're right." He fingers the full glass. "We'll find her, Reed."

"I hope so."

He gives me a tight smile and I back out of the room. As the door is closing, I hear him pick up the phone and say, "Brooke, it's Callum. Got a minute?"

I quickly send her a text.

> It's done. Don't tell him about the baby. It'll just distract him

She sends me back a thumbs-up emoji. The thin metal casing bites into my fingers as I clench my phone, fighting back the urge to throw it at the wall.

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