

# THE OTHER BROTHER

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## CHAPTER ONE

I spot him as soon as I arrive at the party.

At first I think it's only someone who looks like Cody, because what the hell would he be doing at Jamie Anderson's birthday?

The Cody lookalike is sitting on the couch. I watch him out of the corner of my eye as I circle the room, doing the usual amount of backslapping and fist bumping with my friends.

The party is already in its middle stages. Most people greet me with boozzy grins and beer breath.

"Ryan, my man." Oz gives me the shoulder nudge and high five combo we perfected in eighth grade. A random girl sitting on the couch stares at us. I'm not sure if it's because she's admiring our awesomeness, or that with the same blond hair, brown eyes and swimmer's build, Oz could pretty much pass for my twin after a few beers. "Why are you so late?" he asks.

"I was surfing. Lost track of time."

"Catch any good waves?"

"Yeah, some."

"You know what they say about surfing?" Harvey butts in.

"What?"

"You should always take out insurance in case the waves start breaking."

Oz and I groan in unison. Harvey is always good for a bad pun.

I flick another glance at the couch.

The guy who has Cody's dark curls and lean build is facing away from me, his T-shirt riding up to show off a sliver of tan back. He turns to reach for the cup on the coffee table, giving me a glimpse of his narrow face and large eyes.

Crap. It is Cody.

A mixture of feelings bubbles up inside me. Competitiveness, rivalry, comradeship, familiarity, nostalgia, and lots of other stuff all rolled into one tight ball that lodges in my throat.

I need beer to wash it down. I head to the kitchen, weaving through the next round of people saying hello, and help myself to the haven of magnificence that is the keg.

When I come back into the living room, I can't help glancing back at the couch. It's not like we're friends or anything, but I'm curious about what Cody's doing here.

But he's not there anymore. My eyes dart around the room, searching. I finally locate him standing up against the wall by the stairs. Actually, standing is a far too active term for what he's doing—he's letting the wall prop him up.

Holy shit. He's drunk. I can tell by the looseness of his limbs and the way his gaze isn't fixed on anything. Despite the wall at his back, he's swaying slightly, like he's moving to some song inside his head.

I can't help staring. I've never seen Cody out of control before. He's usually one of those people who makes Hermione Granger look badly behaved. I grab my phone and tap out a message to Mel.

*Cody's drunk. Party at 87 Sylvian Street. He needs to go home.*

A small part of me—okay, okay, it's actually quite large—is happy as I press send. Because Mel's had to bail me out more than once, but I'm willing to bet this is the first time she's had to deal with a drunken Cody.

Yep, it appears pettiness is my mojo for the evening.

After that, I try to get into the swing of the party, shooting the shit with Harvey and Oz, but I keep tabs on Cody the whole time. Cody, who's still drinking. Or trying to. Only about half of what he attempts to get in his mouth actually makes it there. The rest slops down his front.

On the plus side, it's taking him longer to get more drunk than if his aim was perfect. Unfortunately, he's getting enough in to slide from being pretty drunk to really drunk.

I check my phone every few minutes, but Mel doesn't message back.

Eventually, I give up and call her. It goes straight to voicemail.

Shit.

In the meantime, Cody has staggered to the bottom of the stairs and slumped over, his head between his knees.

Damn. I'd been looking forward to cutting loose with my friends before summer vacation sends us sprawling in different directions. Now it looks like my night has encountered roadwork and is heading for a major detour.

I'm not his keeper. In fact, I'm about as far from Cody's keeper as I can be. But that doesn't change the fact I can't leave him here like this.

I stride over to the stairs.

"Cody." I shake his shoulder.

He stirs and lifts his head, opening one eye then the other. His gaze settles on me, and his eyes widen. Cody's eyes could trigger the least inspired person in the world to write poetry. They're bluey gray with dark blue flecks in them and a darker navy outline around the iris. Add dark curls, a straight strong nose, and the chiseled planes of his face, and he's an incredibly good-looking guy.

A flash of attraction shoots through me. It leaves a weird aftertaste in my mouth.

I'm an out and proud equal opportunities player when it comes to who I hook up with, so the moment isn't weird because he's a guy. It's weird because of who he is.

I run my hands through my hair.

"Ryan?" he slurs.

When we run into each other accidentally, we usually pretend we don't know each other. I'm sure I started it five years ago when we were twelve and saw each other at the movies. I remember his eyes lighting up, and he opened his mouth, but I turned away, ghosting him. It gave me a thrill at the time but ended up just adding another complicated layer between us.

"Yep, it's me. The one and only." Going for minimum contact, I tug his arm, trying to maneuver him into a sitting position.

"Why are you here?" he asks as I prop him up. He's not actively resisting me, but he's not doing anything to help.

"I should be the one asking you that. How do you know Jamie?"

Cody appears to think for a while. "Music camp," he finally says. The words come out sluggish, like his tongue is set on slow motion.

His answer makes a little bit of sense, although Jamie is in a heavy metal band, which isn't the sort of music I associate with Cody.

"It's time to go home," I tell him.

"Why?"

"Because you're a mess."

"Everything's a mess," he mumbles, his words coated in despair.

Shit. I definitely didn't sign up for the role of counselor tonight. That's taking it a step too far. A giant moon step too far.

"Come on."

As I try to lift him, I catch a whiff of his aftershave underlying the beer fumes. Cody lets me help him stand and does his best to get his feet to behave as if they've previously been acquainted and can work together. I support him with one arm as we cross the living room, ordering an Uber with my free hand.

I leave Cody propped up against the front door as I grab my jacket from the pile on the floor by the coatrack.

"Who's that guy?" Harvey saunters over, eyeing Cody curiously.

"Just someone I know."

I'm not about to explain who Cody is right now as it requires sitting down with pen and paper and sketching out some complex family trees. Once upon a time, before Cody and I were born, Cody's dad and my mom were married and produced my half-sisters Mel and Kate. But this is one story that definitely didn't end with a happily ever after. Instead, they had a bitter divorce before marrying other people. Cody's dad married his mom and they had him, while Mom met my dad and produced me. So Cody and I are connected by our half-sisters, along with the mutual hatred between our parents.

Harvey lifts an eyebrow suggestively, but I ignore it.

"You know what they say about alcohol?"

"What?"

"It might not solve all your problems, but it's worth a shot."

"Oh God, Harvey, that's bad. Even for you."

Harvey walks off grinning.

My phone informs me that Mitchell, my Uber driver, will pick me up in two minutes in a Toyota Prius.

Right, time to get outside.

The night is icy with a sharp wind. I shrug into my jacket.

Cody's standing there in a T-shirt with beer down the front. He begins to shiver. Shit. He probably brought a jacket with him, but there's no way I'm hunting it down now.

He sashes up against me as we stand on the curb. I'm not sure if it's for balance or warmth. I've never been this close to Cody before. His body is firm against mine, the hard planes of muscles causing me to swallow. Cody is an athlete, a nationally ranked tennis player, among his many other talents. His muscles are well earned.

But appreciating them is a worse idea than a Brussels sprout sandwich. Of all the people on the planet, Cody's reasonably high on the list of people I shouldn't be lusting after.

Our ride pulls up, and I'm relieved to put distance between us. Cody gets in first and fumbles with his seat belt. I end up leaning across and snapping him in.

"He okay?" Mitchell turns and eyes us suspiciously.

"He's fine."

"He barfs, you're paying for it," Mitchell says.

"He won't barf," I promise.

I lean across to Cody. "Don't barf," I instruct under my breath.

He obeys me until we leave the Uber, but two steps later he's puking in the gutter.

"Good timing."

"Shit." He wipes the back of his mouth with his hand and sinks down onto the edge of the sidewalk.

I tug on his arm. "Come on. We've got to get you inside."

I eye the porch of his house with trepidation. I've heard way too many stories about how strict his parents are. Sneaking him inside will be a fun mission.

We make it up the stairs to the porch without incident.

"Where are your keys?" I whisper.

"They're in..." He attempts to pat down his pockets, but he's got none. I take a wild leap of logic and guess his keys are in his jacket. Back at Jamie's house.

"I'm just taking a break..." He leans his head against the porch railing and closes his eyes.

Awesome. My night just gets better and better.

In desperation, I dial Kate. She's on the other side of the country, but at least she'll give me advice on the best way to handle this.

"Hey, Rhino, what's up?"

I loathe Kate's nickname for me, but I know that if I protest, she'll just double down on it. Although Mel and Kate are my half-sisters, they've never been halfhearted in their hassling of me. And despite them now technically being adults, with Kate twenty-three and Mel twenty-one, we haven't moved on from our habit of mocking each other ruthlessly at any opportunity.

"Yeah, I've got a bit of a situation here," I tell her. "I was at a party, and Cody was there, and he's totally out of it, and I thought I should get him home, but now I'm at his house and—"

"Cody's drunk?" she interrupts.

"Um... yeah."

"I thought he didn't drink."

Her words cause irritation to pound through my veins. It's part of the theme song that continuously plays in the background of my life. Cody the saint. Cody, the brilliant musician. Cody, the amazing brother.

I'm pretty sure I was permanently disqualified from the favorite brother race at age four when I gave military-spec crew cuts to Mel and Kate's Barbies, but even so, the knowledge that my sisters prefer their other half-brother always sits like undercooked meat in my stomach.

"If you like, I can send you strong photographic evidence that Cody does actually drink," I say.

"Okay, okay. Where are you now?"

"I'm by his front door. But he's lost his keys."

"There's a spare one hidden under the blue flowerpot."

Because my night color identification superpower is on the blink, I fumble around, lifting random pots before my fingers close over metal.

“Got it.”

“His room is the second door down the hallway on the left. Be quiet, Dad and Heather’s room is at the end.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

“Look after him, okay?”

“What do you think I’m doing?”

I hang up on Kate, and channeling my inner stealth skills, gently unlock the door.

But trying to be quiet when you’re escorting a drunk through a house you’re not familiar with is like trying to waltz with an uncoordinated giraffe.

At 6'1", I’ve got a few inches on Cody, and I’m bigger too, so I kind of half drag, half carry him down to his room.

I’ve never been in Cody’s room before. I leave the lights off, but there’s enough light coming in the window from a streetlamp that I can navigate my way around. It’s tidy, which helps. Of course he keeps his room tidy. I wouldn’t expect anything less. We stumble toward his bed, and I manage to haul him onto the mattress.

Cody immediately nestles into the pillows, his eyes closed.

I stand over him, looking down. I don’t want to undress him, because that’s taking this whole Ryan-rescue thing way too far. But I probably should at least take off his shoes.

I grab one of his Converse sneakers and tug. It sticks. I loosen the laces and try again.

It comes off just as light floods the room.

Blinking, I turn around, his shoe in my hand.

His mom stands in the doorway. My stomach hollows. She’s the lesser of the two evils, but not by much. I’ve heard a lot about Heather from Mel and Kate, who in their teenage years had a Cinderella complex toward their stepmother. She doesn’t

look much like an evil stepmother now, though; she looks like a middle-aged woman who's been woken unexpectedly. She's got curly hair like Cody, only her curls are gray and currently sticking out in all directions.

The light causes Cody to stir, and he opens his eyes and turns his head towards the door.

"Hey, Mom," he mumbles.

"Cody." I don't think more disapproval could be squeezed into one word. She stalks over to the bed and stands over him.

"Have you been drinking?"

"Just a... little." Cody's not helping his cause by trying to sit up against the headboard and failing.

She swings her gaze to me. "How did he get so drunk?"

Shit. She hasn't recognized me. It shows exactly how messed up things are between our families. Because this is a woman who has seen me lots at Mel and Kate's stuff over the years. Granted, I've probably spoken about twenty words to her in that time. And to be fair, the last time I saw her, my hair was still shoulder length, not short and spiky and bleached like now.

"I don't know. He was wasted before I got to the party. I'm not even a friend of his." I hold up my arms in a gesture of innocence, one hand still clutching Cody's shoe.

She fixes me with a suspicious glare. "If you're not one of his friends, then who are you?"

It's the million-dollar question. Who exactly am I in relation to Cody?

I take a deep breath before I answer her the simplest way I know how.

"Uh... I'm Ryan. Mel and Kate's other brother.

## CHAPTER TWO

I watch as the knowledge of who I am sinks in and recognition takes over Heather's face. I'm guessing she wasn't expecting to see the child of her husband's ex-wife tonight.

"I saw him at the party. I tried calling Mel, but she didn't answer. And I couldn't just leave him there..."

"Thank you." Her voice, now drained of anger, sounds tired. I get that tiredness. Families are complicated, especially broken ones like ours.

"He probably needs some water." I try to fill the awkward space. "He threw up before, he'll need to be rehydrated."

"Okay. Thanks."

She looks down at Cody then glances at me.

"How are you getting home?"

That's my dismissal. It feels abrupt. I don't know what I expected. It's not like I wanted to sit by Cody's bedside for the night making sure he's okay.

"I'll grab an Uber," I reply.

"Don't be silly. Frank will drive you."

"Seriously, it's no problem."

"Frank will drive you." Her words have a parental finality about them which I know not to fight. She heads for the door. I place Cody's shoe carefully on the floor before following her, sending one last glance back at Cody as I leave the room.

Heather walks down the hall to wake up her husband, while I lean against the wall, trying for a casual posture.

A few minutes later, I'm stuck in the world's most awkward car ride. Seriously, a dinner party with the ghosts of Hugh Hefner and Mother Teresa would be less awkward than this.

What do you say to someone who used to be married to your mom and had two kids with her before they split up? Who has then been engaged in bitter warfare with her for twenty years over the way to parent your two half-sisters?

If his relationship with Mom hadn't soured, she wouldn't have met my dad, and then I wouldn't have been born. So, I guess I owe him for being a first-class jerk.

I glance at his profile as he drives. I've only ever witnessed Frank looking immaculate, so it's mildly amusing to see his rumpled midnight look. He's pulled a sweater over his pajama top, but I notice the flannel bunched at the neckline, and his blond hair looks like it has been roughly finger-combed to hide his bald patch.

Frank's forehead is furrowed. I'm guessing he's trying hard to find something to say to break the silence.

"How's soccer going?" he finally asks.

"Good. We're in the semifinals."

"That's good."

"Yeah."

He switches on the indicator to turn right.

I only live about ten minutes from Cody. In a not quite as nice neighborhood, in a less appealing part of town. My life has always been a slightly crumpled version of Cody's.

"Do your parents know you were at a party tonight?" he asks before the next silence can settle.

Ah. That's the Frank I was expecting.

"Yeah, they know." I can't help turning the knife just a little. "They trust me to be responsible."

Frank's face sours. He and Heather were way stricter about stuff like parties for Mel and Kate than my mom and dad. It has been a major source of arguments over the years.

But given I've just delivered his baby boy home almost comatose while I'm sitting here relatively sober, I'm guessing there's not much wind propping up his sails right now.

He pulls up in front of our house.

"Thanks for the ride." I unclip my seatbelt.

"Say hi to your parents."

It's hilarious how they do this. Act like things are normal and civilized between them all. Like we've never witnessed the hissed conversations that happen when they're together, the yelling on the phone, Mel and Kate's tears over the years when they've been caught in the middle of whatever the current battleground is.

"Sure thing." I get out of the car.

He winds down the window to call after me. "Ryan?"

I thrust my hands into my jacket as I turn back to face him.

"Thanks for looking after Cody tonight," he says. His expression is so like Kate's used to be when she was forced to do something she didn't want to do that it almost makes me laugh.

"It was no problem," I reply.

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The next morning, I'm lying on my bed concentrating hard on ignoring the English assignment sitting on my desk that's due on Monday when my phone beeps.

*Hey, Mel gave me your number. Thanks for getting me home last night. Cody.*

I stare at the message for a second. Then pick up my phone to type my reply.

*No problemo. How much shit are you in today?*

My phone beeps immediately with his reply.

*It's fair to say that the shit is rating high on the shit-o-meter.*

I bite down a grin. Suppressing my smile is overkill given no one is watching me, but I've always tried not to give Cody the satisfaction of laughing at his jokes. He's got this dry sense of humor that comes out when you least expect it. But being the funny one is one of the few things I've ever had over him, and I refuse to relinquish ground on that front.

*Sorry. Tried to smuggle you in, but your mom caught me.*

*No worries. Appreciate that you tried.*

I stretch back on my pillow and think about Cody. About all the random stuff I know about him. He was obsessed with dinosaurs, Legos, and Star Wars when he was a kid. He loves cornflakes with sugar sprinkled on top. He's awesome at Battleship but hates Monopoly. He always picks raisins out of anything. Like, I've seen him remove every single raisin out of a slice of fruitcake. For the record, there's not much left behind from fruitcake once you've taken those bad boys out.

He's not my friend, has never been my friend, yet thanks to my sisters and the time I've spent with him over the years, I know more random stuff about him than I know about all my friends combined.

I grab my phone and stare at his unfamiliar number. Then I save it under my contacts. Just in case.

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Two weeks later, I see Cody again at Mel's flute showcase.

This is when we normally see each other. Birthdays. Graduations. Concerts. Our sisters are overachievers like him, so there are lots of celebrations we've both been dragged to over the years.

He sits with Frank and Heather two rows in front of me, so all I can see of him are his dark curls and tan neck. He seems intent on listening to the music, while I'm having to pinch my thigh to stay awake. Flutes must be the most boring instruments

on the planet. There's a reason all those Indian snake charmers use them to put serpents to sleep.

Finally, the torture is over and the after-concert supper is served.

The food is always fussy and pretentious at these things, but they serve alcohol. I toss up whether the bar staff will ID me but realize even if I get past that particular hurdle, I'll still have to dodge my parents and Mel. Not worth it. So, I order a Coke instead.

As I'm sipping on it, Cody walks up to the other end of the bar. He's dressed in a light blue button-down shirt with black pants.

I think back to the moment at the party and the momentary sizzle of attraction I had for him.

He does have incredible eyes. And based on the experience of having him pressed against me, he also has an incredible body.

But I can't lust after him. He's my nemesis. Okay, maybe not quite nemesis, because that would imply we're an equal matchup.

Cody and I were born two months apart. So, I guess it's natural we've always been compared to each other. Natural that our parents, who despise each other, would look to one-up the other when it comes to their nonshared offspring.

Unfortunately for my parents, Cody has always blown me out of the ballpark. He was reading by age four. Identified as a musical prodigy at age six. Not content to be simply intelligent and a brilliant musician, he also started playing tennis and turned out to be exceptional at that.

*Why can't you be more like Cody?*

Although my parents have never uttered those words, Mel and Kate have, plenty of times. Every time I pulled a normal little brother stunt like putting food coloring on their toothbrushes or balancing plastic cups filled with water over

doors. Because apparently, Cody wasn't that kind of little brother. Apparently, Cody was the type of brother who volunteered to take their turn loading the dishwasher if they had assignments they needed to finish. Me? Not so much.

I sidle over to the perfect brother now. "So, not getting into the beer then?"

He scowls, grabbing his glass of orange juice from the bartender. "Are you going to give me grief about that for ages?"

"Dude, I had to wash splashes of your vomit off my jeans. I think I deserve some mileage out of it."

The scowl fades from his face, and he shifts onto the other foot. "Yeah, sorry about that."

"No problem. We've all got to let loose now and again." I lean against the bar. "So, were you grounded?"

"Oh, yeah. A month."

"Tough shit," I sympathize.

"It's okay." His voice is soft, his gaze on the ground. "There are worse things than being grounded."

Here's the thing. I've always been envious of Cody. Not just for his talents, but for the fact he's so focused, so sure of his path in life. He wants to study at Juilliard and become a professional pianist.

Meanwhile, my parents give me crap about being directionless. I'm about to be a senior, I've got one more year to figure out what I want to do with my life. At this point, I have no idea. Bumming around surfing every day isn't a legitimate career option according to both my parents and my career counsellor.

But as Cody looks at the floor, his eyebrows draw together and his mouth pinches, and I realize maybe being Cody isn't as easy as it looks from the outside.

"Hey..." I begin, hesitant.

"What?" Those otherworldly blue eyes lift and skewer me. My heart speeds up.

“You were pretty cut up at Jamie’s party. And both Mel and Kate said you don’t normally drink. Everything okay?”

He swallows, looking away. “Just some shit I’m dealing with.”

“Well, everyone’s always telling me how smart you are, so I’m sure you’ve figured out drinking isn’t the best solution for dealing with shit.”

“Yeah, consider that lesson well learned.”

We share a wry smile, and for some reason I don’t want to move away. We stand in silence for a few minutes. Cody’s watching the crowd, an expression sliding onto his face that is both cynical and sad. A weird combination.

I follow his gaze and discover the reason. There’s drama unfolding. Awesome. Our family always picks the best time to have their little histrionics.

Mom is having an intense discussion with Mel, who then has an intense discussion with Frank and Heather. Annoyed faces are sprouting like poisonous toadstools.

I know from experience that it’s best to steer well clear of these types of conversations, so I stay put. Cody meets my eyes, and I know I have an identical look of resignation on my face. Should I say something to acknowledge how fucked up it is that our parents continue to haul their past into the present?

But before I have a chance to conjure the right words, one of the other flutists comes up and starts talking to Cody. She must be Mel’s age, but that doesn’t stop her gushing over him with all the accompanying hair twirling and eyelash batting. He laughs softly at one of her jokes.

A quick scan of the crowd reveals all the parental expressions are back into the normal zone now. Standing here listening to the girl flirt with Cody isn’t really doing it for me, so I head over to Mel.

“What was that about?” I ask.

Mel tucks a strand of her blonde hair that's straggled loose from her bun behind her ear. "Just the usual. Both parents wanting something from me that clashes with what the other wants. But I think we've found a compromise."

I idly pick up some weird pastry thing from a platter. "What's the issue?"

"I'd agreed to stay at the beach house so it can be painted while Dad and Heather are in Europe. But Mom wants me to stay at your house when her and Max go to Aunt Ethel's."

I narrow my eyes as my suspicion swells. "Why does Mom want you to stay at our house?"

"So I can babysit my itty-bitty brother." Mel tousles my hair, her eyes shining with suppressed laughter. At my expense.

"Like hell," I mutter.

I stalk over to my mother, Mel close on my heels. She'll never miss out on a chance to see me humiliated.

"I don't need Mel to babysit me," is my leading line.

Mom gives me a look. "We don't want a repeat of what happened when we went to the Caribbean."

"You've got a memory like an elephant," I say grumpily.

"It would take a lot to erase the memory of your friends' butts as you all skinny-dipped in the pool," Mom replies.

"If YouTube hadn't been invented, you'd have never known about it," I declare. "I blame the inventors of YouTube for my current predicament."

"Perhaps instead you should blame your propensity to disobey the rules and get naked at any opportunity."

"If God gives you a thing of beauty, it's your job to share it with the world."

"It's all organized now, Ryan. I don't want to argue with you too." Mom's voice is weary, her forehead creased. She's playing the I've-just-had-to-deal-with-my-bastard-ex-husband card. It's a powerful one.

"How has it been organized?" Suspicion coats my words.

“Frank and Heather have agreed you can stay with Mel out at the beach.”

Okay, I did not see that coming. I glance at Frank and Heather. I can't believe they've agreed to let me crash at their beach house. They've always seemed underwhelmed by me. Some stunts I pulled at family celebrations when I was younger may have left them with the impression that I'm an irresponsible mischief maker. Maybe my recent rescue of their precious son helped to soften their stance?

“Is Cody going to be there?” I ask Mel. Casually. Like, James Bond has nothing on how cool I manage to deliver that question.

“No. He's staying in the city for his piano lessons.”

So Cody doesn't need to be babysat when his parents are away, but I do. Slightly unfair, given recent events.

I open my mouth to protest, then shut it. Because three weeks at the beach isn't exactly reform school.

I've heard lots about the beach house which has been in Frank's family since his grandfather was a kid. I've always been jealous that my sisters get to trundle off to live at the beach every summer while I'm stuck in the city begging rides off people to go surfing.

There's awesome surf up that part of the coast. And although she likes to talk tough, Mel isn't a jailer. I'm certain I can convince her to let me invite some friends up to crash for a few nights.

Surfing every day and partying every night. Not a hard combination.

My gaze snags on Cody. There's always a possibility he could come up to the beach house during the weekends.

There's a flicker of something I can't identify in my stomach as I imagine spending time with Cody. A whispery shiver tickles its way down my spine.

My summer just became a whole lot more interesting.

## CHAPTER THREE

All those years when my sisters disappeared off to the beach house, I'm glad I didn't know where they were going. Because I would have exploded with jealousy if I'd realized what I was missing out on.

The house is hunkered down right on the beach. Although it's an old man compared to some of the flashy homes around it, inside it's been modernized with a newish kitchen and living space, yet still has a relaxed vibe.

The best thing is it's a mere fifty-foot stroll from the front door through the sand dunes down to the waves. I make that stroll within an hour of arriving. I paddle out on my board through the surf, the salty tang saturating the surrounding air. I catch the first wave as I try to relax into the zone. My only focus is riding the wave. Everything else slides off into insignificance.

Two hours later, I'm humming a happy tune as I head back to the house, sand caking my wet feet.

My smile fades when I open the back door to the kitchen and discover Mel's not alone. Cody is sitting at the breakfast bar.

What the hell?

He turns to look at me with those big blue eyes as I stand dripping in my wetsuit.

"Next time you should probably take your wetsuit off outside," he says. "Dad freaks out about water messing up the floorboards."

My shoulders stiffen. Is this Cody marking his territory, reminding me I'm a guest here? And not a particularly welcome one at that.

"What are you doing here?" The words sound too abrupt, but I can't take them back.

He raises an eyebrow. "My piano teacher broke her arm, so my lessons have been cancelled for the next few weeks. I thought I'd hang out here for a while."

"Lucky me. I get to spend time with both of my brothers," Mel says. She directs most of her smile at Cody.

"I'm having a shower," I mutter.

The warm water beats down on my sore muscles as I try to decide how I'm feeling about this recent development.

I'm a bit pissed off. With just Mel here, I didn't feel like an interloper. Now with Cody, I'm the outsider. But there's something else bubbling underneath the annoyance. Excitement at the idea of spending time with Cody.

Pissed off excitement. That's a new one.

Because I'm me, I haven't thought to bring any clean clothes into the bathroom. I grab a towel off the rail and wrap it around my waist. I push open the bathroom door to find Cody standing in the hallway. He looks me up and down. I brace myself for him to tell me I've used his grandfather's heirloom towel or something, but he simply swallows and continues to stare.

"Hey," I say, just at the point where the silence is about to tip over into an awkward zone.

Cody clears his throat. "Hey...I just wanted to say sorry for crashing your time here with Mel. I hope it won't be weird with me here."

Damn, do I have to add mind reading to my list of Cody's talents?

"Seriously, dude, it's your family's place. You don't need to apologize for being here."

“I don’t want to cramp your style.”

“Well, you might curtail all the hair braiding and making friendship bracelets that Mel and I had planned, but I’ll live.”

A faint blush creeps up his cheeks. He hesitates, then speaks again. “It might be good for us to get to know each other better. You know, since we’re both about to become uncles to the same kid.”

I haven’t even thought about Kate’s pregnancy in that light. When she first told us, I had to cope with Mom lurching between her disappointment at Kate getting knocked up unexpectedly, her being excited about becoming a grandmother, and her concern about whether Kate and her fiancé Chris knew what a big life change having a kid meant. But now I realize what it means for me. Uncle Ryan. Uncle Cody. Another arena for Cody to show me up in. Awesome.

Cody’s studying me, wearing a curious expression. I have no idea what he’s seeing on my face, but I quickly shutter it.

“I’m all for heart-to-hearts, but do you think we could continue this when I’m not standing here naked?”

He’s definitely blushing now. “Yeah, okay. Sorry.” He moves quickly to get out of my way.

I walk past him to my room. After I’ve chucked on some clothes, I unpack. I’m just shutting the closet door when I notice it’s painted a light purple. Mom’s favorite color. I guarantee she was the one who painted the door back when she and Frank were married and they used to come here together with Kate and Mel.

As I head downstairs, I wonder what other leftovers of Mom are in the house. It’s weird to think she once spent time here, before I existed.

Mel’s in the kitchen making dinner, so I start to help her. Earn my keep and all that. While I’m throwing together a salad, piano music trickles down from upstairs.

The music swells, and I swallow. I mean, I know Cody is an amazing musician. I'd heard details of his achievements over the years. I've never been a fan of classical music, despite how many of Kate and Mel's concerts I've been dragged to. But this. This is something different.

It's not just the incredible music, but it's the feelings the music causes to swell up inside me. Longing. Yearning. Melancholy. All combining into a weird kind of ache.

"Is there a piano here?" I ask the stupid question.

"In Cody's room. Heather and Dad put one there so he could practice here too."

"Cause it sounds like he needs the practice," I mutter.

Mel just stares at me. She has blue eyes like Cody, although they're a lighter blue similar to the pale part of a summer sky. But that blue is deceptive, because I'm all too aware of how they can turn thunderous in a moment. Like the time she discovered I'd shared the photo of her drooling in her sleep on all my social media accounts.

"It's good that Cody's here," she says finally as she goes back to cutting up potatoes.

"Good? In what way?"

"I think you guys hanging out together will benefit both of you."

"Benefit us?" It appears my role in this conversation is just to repeat Mel's words back to her. A well-trained parrot could sub in for me.

"Yeah, Cody's always been so intense, and you're so laid back you're almost horizontal. It might be good if you rub off on each other."

Because I can't resist taking it to that level, I raise an eyebrow. "Did you just encourage me to rub off your brother?"

She shoves me. "Don't corrupt him, okay?"

“Sweet, innocent Cody,” I mutter. “Aren’t you worried he might corrupt me?”

Mel just laughs at that.

“That song was amazing,” Mel gushes when Cody comes down and takes a seat at the table.

“Thanks.” He ducks his head.

There’s an awkward silence in the space where my compliment should be. Damn, I shouldn’t be this petty.

I huff out a small sigh. “Dude, that was insane.”

Cody meets my eyes, and a slight smile tracks its way across his face.

“Just something I’m working on,” he says.

“You wrote that?”

“Yeah.”

“Wow.” I don’t know what else to say. To be talented enough to even get a piano to produce that standard of music is one thing, but to have created the music out of nothing? It’s hard to comprehend.

“Dig in,” Mel says, nodding at the meal.

I never need a second invitation to eat. I pile my plate high.

As we eat, I notice Cody picking out every raisin from the salad I made.

“Still got your raisin vendetta, I see,” I say.

He meets my eyes. “I’d say it’s more of an enduring grudge than a vendetta.”

“I don’t get it. You like grapes, but you don’t like raisins?”

He leans back in his chair. “It’s more about the texture of raisins than the taste.”

“So, you’re biased against shriveled up old things?”

“Play nice, boys,” Mel warns.

I roll my eyes and look over to see Cody’s rolling his eyes too.

“It’s a bit rich, you lecturing us to play nice. Think of all the ways you tortured Kate over the years,” I say.

“I never tortured Kate.”

I snort. “What about the time you hacked her Facebook page and announced to the world she had a crush on Timmy Jones?”

“That’s because she’d just broken my hair straighteners. It was fair retaliation.”

“Remember when you set Kate’s alarm to go off at two am the night before prom?” Cody pipes up.

I whip my head around to look at him.

“I didn’t know that one,” I say, delight in my voice.

Cody smiles, and his face transforms.

“And you totally stole that idea from me, from what I did on the camping trip to Tahoe,” I say to Mel.

“I did not steal any idea from you,” Mel says stiffly.

“Oh, and now you’re pulling your Oscar the Grouch face!”

“Oscar the Grouch?” Cody’s eyebrow quirks. “I always thought of that face as her Grumpy Cat impression.”

I can’t help spluttering out a laugh, and Cody joins in. Our laughter intertwines while Mel continues to scowl.

Hmm.

All my life it’s been the Kate and Mel show. Not just the fact they’ve always done the big sister thing and ganged up on me. But so much in our family has always been based around them. Plans changing to fit with their schedules. Major holidays postponed until they can join us.

I flick a glance at Cody. Who’s still grinning. At me.

Maybe this summer it’s time to change the channel.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The next day I'm out surfing early. The waves are gentler today, and while the rides aren't as intense, it's awesome being out with the early sun glinting off the water and the fresh salt air giving my nostrils a spring clean.

I'm about to head in when I notice a lone runner on the beach. As the figure draws closer, I recognize the lean build and curly hair.

Okay, so maybe I time my exit from the water so I intercept him. But hey, it's a long, lonely fifty-foot walk back to the house. It's natural to want some company.

Cody stops at the start of the path, leaning forward to rest his hands on his legs as he recovers his breath. He's wearing a close-fitting T-shirt that shows off his biceps.

"Hey." Yep, I should win awards for the most original opening line. I stand there, dripping in my wetsuit, sand caking my feet.

"Hey," he pants. He straightens up and pulls up his T-shirt to wipe his forehead, giving me a view of his muscled, tanned stomach.

"Heading back to the house now?" I keep my voice casual.

"Yeah."

"I'll be your security detail if you want."

"Thanks, there are lots of bandits in the dunes," he says in such a deadpan voice that it takes me a few seconds to realize he's joking.

“Gotta watch out for those bandits.” My reply is a few seconds too late and a few levels too lame as I step into stride next to him. The sandy path cuts through the dunes.

“So, do you surf?” I ask.

“Nah, I’ve never learned.”

“You spend your summers here, and you’ve never learned to surf?”

“I bodyboard.”

I snort. Making sure as much derision as possible is contained in the snort.

Cody raises his eyebrow. “Bodyboarding doesn’t cut it with you?”

“Nah. It’s like saying Jimi Hendrix and Justin Bieber are both equal musicians. Or...like Mozart and whoever was the crappy but popular composer back in his time.”

“I get the Jimi Hendrix/Bieber comparison,” Cody says. “You don’t need to put it into classical music terms.”

“That’s good, because I don’t know shit about classical music,” I say. “You dig Hendrix?”

“I play a few songs of his. Mainly on the guitar.”

“You play guitar as well?”

“Yeah. You ever played an instrument?”

“Does the recorder in third grade count?”

He flashes me a smile. “Kind of like bodyboarding counts as surfing.”

“Fair point.”

We’ve reached the house now. The sun is hitting the front windows, turning them into gleaming gold pools of light. But the yard is still in shadows.

“Wetsuit off, right?” I say.

“Yeah, there’s a hose around here somewhere you can use to wash down.”

He rummages around by the side of the house and emerges holding a hose.

I strip my wetsuit off. If there's one thing it is impossible to look coordinated doing, it's removing a wetsuit. Luckily, I've got board shorts on underneath so I'm spared the indignity of having the concept of shrinkage on full display.

"Damn, that's cold." I spray myself with the frigid water.

Cody's standing there, immobile. He studies the ground, not looking at me.

Because I'm in control of the hose, I can't help flicking water in his direction. He raises his gaze to mine, his eyes narrowing.

"You looked like you needed to cool off," I say.

"Thanks," he replies dryly.

I turn off the hose.

"Race you for the first shower," I say, taking off through the door.

I'm not expecting Cody to engage, but then I hear footsteps on the floorboards behind me in the kitchen, and he's right on my tail as I streak through the living room.

We're side-by-side on the stairs, jostling each other with our elbows.

He gets ahead slightly when we reach the hallway, but I tackle him to slow his momentum, and we both crash into the bathroom door at the same time and slide down it, laughing through our panting.

"What's with all the noise?" Mel emerges from her room, squinting down at us. The front bit of her hair is tufted up like it's been in an electric storm.

I stand up, putting a hand down to help haul Cody to his feet. He accepts my hand, but let's go as soon as he's standing.

"Sorry we woke you," he says to Mel.

"Don't worry. I had to get up soon, anyway. The painters are arriving this morning. Have you been for a run?"

I can't help snorting at their interaction. What are we, in a remake of *The Brady Bunch*?

“Yeah, and Ryan’s been for a surf,” Cody says.

Mel eyes me with amusement. “Out of bed before midday? That’s impressive for you.”

I give her a withering glare in reply. Then I turn to Cody.

“So, I think it was a tie. Does that mean we have to shower together?” I raise an eyebrow suggestively.

“Uh... no...” Cody backs away from me.

I put my hands up, all innocent. “Just kidding.”

Mel rolls her eyes. “Don’t mind Ryan. He missed out on any social etiquette genes.”

“Nah, it’s okay. You can have the first shower.” Cody doesn’t meet my eyes.

I’m not going to argue. Goose bumps prickle my skin, and the floorboards are like ice under my feet. I go into the bathroom and strip my board shorts off quickly then jump under the sweet, sweet warmth.

While I’m soaping myself, I push away all thoughts about the way Cody’s body felt pressed up against mine. After his reaction to my joke about showering together, I’m guessing he’s straight. It shouldn’t matter to me either way, because as cute as he is, I will never go there with my sister’s other brother. But I can’t pretend I’m not curious. I’ve never heard Mel or Kate mention Cody having a girlfriend. Maybe I should just ask Mel casually if she knows what way he swings? Say I’m asking for a friend?

I can’t help snorting as I imagine Mel’s reaction to that. Mel and Kate barely blinked when I told them a few years ago I was into both guys and girls, but I can imagine their laidback attitude might change if they think I want to hook up with Cody.

As I get out of the shower, my mind moves on to how Cody apologized to Mel for waking her. Have I ever apologized to my sisters without being forced to by a parental unit? If it had just been me here, I would have come up with some smartass reply.

And Mel would have responded, and it would have descended into one of our usual brother/sister interactions that we excel at.

My mind runs through the conversation that would've happened in the alternative reality where Cody wasn't here.

*Mel: What's with all the noise?*

*Me: What's with the Wicked Witch of the West impression?*

*Mel: At least I'm not the brainless Scarecrow.*

There's a funny feeling in my stomach as I turn off the water. I mean, I've always known Cody has a better relationship with our sisters than I do. But it's still weird to observe it at close range.

After breakfast, Cody retreats into his room, and the sound of the piano drifts down the stairs. While I could probably spend my morning hovering in the hallway listening, it might disturb Cody to discover me there.

The painters turn up and start putting up scaffolding so they can paint the top level of the house. 'Cause I've got nothing else to do, I end up offering to help them.

Maybe I should consider house painting as a career option? You'd get to be outside lots, which is a big bonus. Although my parents would probably moan I'm not using my brain enough. And painting might get repetitive after a while.

When the painters take their morning break, I'm about to head inside for a snack, when I realize the piece of scaffolding they've just set up looks directly into Cody's room.

I climb it carefully, inching my way over to Cody's window. Then I do my best bullfrog impression, pressing my face up against the glass and puffing out my cheeks.

Cody's sitting at his piano. He's not playing, just studying the keys. Then he puts out one hand and plays a few haunting notes. He stops abruptly and reaches for a notepad, writing something down. Then he goes back and plays a few more keys.

I can't tear my eyes away. He's so intense, so absorbed in what he's doing. The look on his face, it's like everything else has melted away, and the only thing that matters is the piano and the sounds he's creating. He bites his lower lip in concentration, and a flash of...something swirls inside me. Have I ever been so focused on anything? Ever?

My cheeks begin to hurt. But I'm the person who once posed as a teapot from the "I'm A Little Teapot" song for over an hour on a dare, so I've had practice suffering for the sake of ridiculousness.

When Cody finally looks up and sees me a few minutes later, it's worth the sore cheeks. The look of surprise on his face is like a cartoon character—mouth falling open, eyes bulging.

I laugh so hard I almost fall off the scaffolding.

When I finally recover, Cody's trying for a glare, but his bottom lip is twitching.

I give him a cheery wave then climb down. Mission accomplished.

"So, you've got a thing for watching people through windows?" Cody asks when he comes into the kitchen at lunchtime. I'm just getting out some bread for the start of an epic sandwich-making operation.

"Yeah, I think I might stalk you permanently. Could be a fun hobby."

Cody pulls up at the counter, resting his elbows on the top as he looks at me. I have a sudden flashback to Cody and me when we were little. I think it was Kate's tenth birthday party, so Cody and I would've been around five. I'd scooped up a bowl of M&Ms and crawled under the dining room table where the long tablecloth hid me from view. Somehow Cody found me and wiggled his way in, and we sat there munching M&Ms together in a conspiracy of silence.

I remember his warm, chocolatey breath and the same intense stare.

“Do famous classical musicians get stalkers?” I ask, breaking eye contact to butter the bread.

“Sure. Nicola Benedetti had a stalker.”

“Who’s Nicola Benedetti?”

“A famous violinist.”

“Oh. Right.” I’ve already confessed to my complete ignorance of classical music, but I still feel stupid. “You want a sandwich?”

He blinks. “Um... sure.”

“Cheese and tomato?”

“Sounds great.”

As I turn to the fridge to grab the ingredients, an evil idea creeps into my brain. And like all evil ideas, this one deserves some indulgence.

Mel comes into the kitchen as I finish making Cody’s sandwich.

“Bon appetit,” I say, sliding the plate over.

“Thanks.” Cody flashes a genuine smile which gives me a pulse of guilt about what’s currently lurking in his sandwich.

I watch him out of the corner of my eye as he and Mel chat about some neighbors who’ve just arrived at the beach.

Cody’s chewing on his sandwich when his expression suddenly morphs into a frown. He slows his chewing, gulps something like he’s swallowing glass, and then whips the top off his sandwich to inspect it.

He flicks his gaze up to mine. “Did you put raisins in my sandwich?”

“Maybe.”

His eyebrows quirk. “Maybe?”

“You know what people say is the best treatment for phobias. What’s it called? Immersion therapy? Be thankful you’re not scared of spiders or snakes.”

He shakes his head, but I can see he's hiding a smile as he picks the rest of the raisins out and chucks them into the garbage disposal.

Mel's shaking her head too. "It's nice to see you don't just contain your torture to people who are related to you."

I shrug. "What can I say? I've got to share my talent around."

I head out surfing for the afternoon. The sun has changed its setting to baking, so when I come back, washing myself down with a cold hose is a relief.

I hang my wetsuit over the edge of the deck to dry (because trust me, nothing sucks more than having to pull on a damp wetsuit on a cold morning) and then duck inside.

Cody's on the couch in the living room reading a book.

"Where's Mel?" I ask.

"She's gone into town to get some groceries."

"I hope she remembers ice cream." With that thought, I grab my phone out of my pocket and send a quick message. I don't want to take any chances of her forgetting when the consequences are so dire.

When I glance up, Cody's ignoring his book in favor of watching me.

"You want a game of ping pong?" he asks.

"Do you have a ping pong table?" I scrunch up my face.

"No, I was just planning to play it by bouncing the balls off our heads."

I wrestle down the corners of my mouth. "That might be a thing at Appleton, but not in the real world."

Cody goes to a flash private school, and it's good to give him shit about it. Of course, I go to my local public school like the rest of the unentitled majority.

I'm sure he's biting down a grin himself. "You want to play or not?"

“Sure, I’m in.”

The ping pong table is in the garage, along with a dart board and a parked jet ski. They really have all the toys here.

I’m no slug at ping pong, having spent many hours honing my skills at Harvey’s place. But Cody slaughters me. Like my carcass is hanging off a meat hook in an abattoir kind of slaughter.

“Do you ever get sick of being so good at everything? I mean, it must get boring, right?” I ask after he aces me for the umpteenth time.

Cody serves again. I manage to get the edge of a paddle to it, but it ricochets off and bounces against the wall.

“Nope, not really.” His grin has a cheeky element to it. I fight the matching one that for some reason wants to plant itself on my face.

As if to emphasize my point, when we go back inside, Cody grabs a guitar in the living room and picks away at the strings. I recognize Neil Diamond’s “Sweet Caroline.”

I slump down on the couch opposite and watch him play. One of his curls hangs over his eye as he strums. He doesn’t sing but hums along instead.

“Can you teach me to play guitar?” I ask.

His eyebrows almost fly off his forehead.

I’m as surprised as he is at the words out of my mouth.

I’ve always wanted to learn to play the guitar, wanting to be one of those guys who can lead a sing-along around a beach campfire. But I’ve shied away from doing anything musical, because I don’t have the natural talent of my sisters or Cody, so it’s pointless bothering to compete.

But it strikes me now that maybe music doesn’t have to be something you do to compete with other people. It can be something you just do for yourself.

Cody continues to stare at me. I feel like our dog Jett when he rolls on his back and exposes his soft underbelly to the world.

“I’ll teach you the guitar if you teach me to surf,” he finally says.

Relief floods through me. “Deal.”

“Great,” Cody says.

Our gazes clash, and there’s something in his I can’t identify.

“You want to start now?” He brandishes the guitar towards me. I lean back like touching it might scorch me.

“Nah, my brain’s fried. We can start both lessons tomorrow.”

Cody shrugs. “Suits me.”

There’s a method to my madness. I like the idea of teaching Cody to surf first, before I expose my ineptitude on the guitar. Plus, I plan to spend a fair portion of tonight watching Guitar for Dummies YouTube clips so I have a head start.

I stand up. “Surfing lessons begin at six thirty tomorrow.” I waggle an eyebrow. “Don’t be late.”

**I hope you enjoyed this sample of *The Other Brother*.  
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