

## CHAPTER TWO



Wyatt dismissed the class and stuffed his textbook and papers into his backpack, hoping to make a quick exit. He would have to face Harper at some point, but he needed to get his wits about him. Seeing her here had shifted his world on its axis. He needed some time to right it before he dealt with this part of his past he had long ago shelved.

*Harper: Townsend.*

Of all the classrooms in all of Texas ...

It wasn't surprising to run into her here in Arlington, where they'd both grown up, but he would have never expected it to be *here*. In this world he'd built for himself, far from the angst of Conway High School. This place where he'd finally found himself, his purpose, his calling. He hadn't reserved a space for her as he'd moved on. Which had taken some doing, since she'd occupied a large part of his life, and his heart, for years. Before she turned away and never looked back.

Without bothering with the zipper, he tossed the bag over his shoulder and turned, coming to an abrupt stop in front of a foursome of girls. As they introduced themselves, he glanced over their heads to monitor Harper's progress. Good. She

appeared to be exchanging numbers with the young lady who'd been seated next to her — Shannon something?

After several giggles and awkward eyelash batting, the girls bid him a good day, and he took off toward the door, hoping to get lost in the shuffle of students.

"Wyatt." The voice behind him halted him, mere steps from making a clean getaway.

He hung his head and closed his eyes for a second before turning to look into the face he'd watched change from little girl to teenager to nearly a woman. "Harper."

"Or I guess I should say Dr. McCowan." She smiled that smile that used to send his heart rate soaring, back when he was a boy in love with a girl way out of his league. Before being kicked back to his place among the see-through kids.

She dipped her head, a curtain of chestnut waves falling over her shoulder, obscuring her face, but not before he noticed the pink blush that suffused her cheeks. When she brought her gaze back to him and swept her hair behind her ear with delicate fingers, she seemed almost ... shy. Uncertain. Nothing like the uber-confident, self-involved girl he remembered.

"Wyatt's fine." Her light fragrance wafted toward him, like wildflowers but with a hint of something ... spicy, if he had to describe it. "It's not like we haven't known each other since we were kids." He looked down at her left hand clutching the strap of her backpack. No wedding ring, and she'd registered for school under her maiden name. Hmm. "So you and Ellison ..."

She shook her head and waved her other hand in front of her. "Long story."

True. A story spanning ten years would, no doubt, be a long one. "I'm sorry. I hadn't heard."

She looked away for a moment, shrugging as she brought those emerald eyes back to his. Eyes he'd lost himself in too

many times to count. “No children involved, so a clean break. It’s been almost four years now.”

He nodded. Divorced four years ago, which meant she and Brett Ellison had been married five years? And no children? That was certainly news.

She glanced around before leaning toward him. “Listen, I know this was unexpected—”

“I’m sorry.” He glanced at his watch without really seeing it. “I need to be somewhere. Can we pick this up later?”

Her eyes widened, and she pulled her shoulders back. “Uh, sure. Yes. Of course. No problem.”

“Great. See you Wednesday.” He took the few steps to the door, escaping into the crowded hallway.

Once outside, he checked his watch again and released a long sigh. What was *that*? Totally not cool, that’s what it was. He didn’t have anywhere he needed to be until his eleven o’clock Intro to Psych class. But he’d been blindsided by all of those feelings, those memories he thought he’d left behind.

He stopped outside the Jackson Health Sciences building, one hand propped against his hip and the other clutching the strap over his shoulder as he stared down at the sidewalk. The late August sun beating down on him had nothing on the heat flooding his face. Hadn’t he just done to Harper what all those kids had done to him? Snubbing her like she wasn’t worth his time? That wasn’t who he was. Wasn’t anywhere near the man he wanted to be.

He spun around to go back the way he’d come and sent up a quick plea for forgiveness. Maybe he could still catch her, to apologize at the very least, and see if perhaps she had time for a coffee or a bottle of water, since the temperature here at mid-morning already topped ninety degrees. At Room 112, he peered inside, but Harper was nowhere in sight.

Disappointment mixed with relief. He wanted to do the right thing, but he also wanted to *say* the right thing. Giving it until Wednesday was probably better all around. At least he’d

be ready, unlike today's unexpected, if not unwelcome, reunion.

He slipped on his sunglasses as he exited the building for the short walk to the campus coffee shop. With his usual frappé in hand, he settled himself at a corner table to spend the next forty minutes preparing for his afternoon counseling sessions.

He pulled a file from his bag and read over his notes for a client he'd been seeing about three months. Thankfully, the boy's tuned-in parents had noticed the sometimes-subtle signs of a possible suicide in the making and brought him in for counseling. And not a moment too soon. The eighth-grader had been on the brink but now appeared to be finding his way back.

Wyatt's gut coiled. If only Glen had waited. If only he'd called that night. If only he'd listened ...

The *if-onlys* never got any easier. But when his best friend hung himself their senior year of high school, Wyatt swore he would honor Glen by living to make a difference every day. Show kids that their true value in who God made them to be far outweighed any hate or animosity others might have toward them, simply because they didn't look or act like the "cool" kids.

Cool kids like Harper Townsend and Brett Ellison. And the others they surrounded themselves with.

The cool kids who killed his best friend.