## AUTHOR OF THE INTERNATIONALLY ACCLAIMED, AWARD-WINNING MEMOIR. WHEN BROKEN GLASS FLOATS: GROWING UP UNDER THE KHMER ROUGE

# CHANRITHY HIM

"Cambodian lore, vampires, mysticism and the perfect dose of romance! A great read!"

No. 1 New York Times bestselling author Rachel Van Dyken

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A reincarnated nāga princess is destined to become a vampire queen, fulling a prophecy of the arb underworld.



# CHANRITHY HIM



PORTLAND

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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Summary: A blind man's vision: ancient royalty will reincarnate as a queen with supernatural gifts; her golden aura visible only to the spirit world.

JD Bophatip is a lucky girl. Abandoned as a baby in a basket near a Cambodian temple, she was adopted and taken to America. Now seventeen, JD decides to enter the Queen of Rosaria competition, part of the Portland Rose Festival. It's a decision that will change her life.

Enter Ryker Erickson: charming, enigmatic and irresistible. He is drawn to JD, captivated by her glowing aura. He's not the only one.

Ryker and his family belong to a powerful circle of vampires with a vested interest in the human realm. A prophecy foretells that a golden queen will come to rule the vampire underworld. While Ryker falls for JD, his clan is plotting her destruction.

> ISBN 978-0-9974191-0-8 (hardcover) ISBN 978-0-9974191-1-5 (paperback) ISBN 978-0-9974191-2-2 (e-book)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016910361

Moon Power Media www.moonpowermedia.com



IN DEDICATION TO

PA AND MAK,

I HONOR YOU.

### CHEA,

#### MY IDOL,

#### WHO ENRICHED MY LIFE.

# THA, AVY, VIN, BOSABA, AND DARARITH "ROCKY,"

### WHO WILL LIVE FOREVER

#### IN MY MEMORY,

I LOVE AND MISS YOU DEARLY.



# PREFACE

It is nighttime. Darkness has drawn its veil over a large lake that slides serenely through towering pine and fir trees. A glowing image reflects abstractly in the still black water—a fairy, flying. The reflection fades as wings ascend into the dark sky, then she changes course and gradually descends, closer to the water's surface.

She looks a young girl, a hauntingly beautiful creature but with crimson eyes. She does a double take over her own reflection, as if seeing it for the first time.

She wears an exotic outfit, gold, with an ornate crown and a necklace of glowing colored stones. On her arm is an armlet, on her ankles, decorative anklets. She stares cautiously at her luminescent hand as it touches her red, pounding heart. Blue lungs contract and expand. She can see her blood busily circulating life beneath her skin.

She trembles. Slowly, she embraces herself with both her luminescent arms, and then she stretches them out like wings and flies away, between mountains dense with tall trees, timber-flanked valleys, and cold, clear streams covered by the veil of darkness. Her long black hair flows to the rhythm of the wind.

Something touches me.

Strands of my hair brush against my face. I feel my heart beat in my chest and my arms stretched outward as if I'm flying.

A dream. Just a dream.



# CHAPTER ONE

Last night's dream has been overshadowed by a waking nightmare. Hayden is missing. He was supposed to have been here two hours ago, to be my escort through the voting assembly, but there is no trace of him. No phone call, no text, nor has he bothered to answer any of my anxious messages. His father hasn't answered my calls either.

Dressed in a formfitting white dress, I walk alone onto the South Pacific-decorated stage. My heart is pounding against my chest. Alone, I stand near Haley, who's wearing a blue dress, and her escort, standing right behind her. Alone, I brace for my turn to speak before Cleveland High School's fifteen hundred students. My best friend, Sam, is behind the microphone, delivering her speech. Kimberly, another finalist, has already spoken and been ushered backstage.

The audience watching from the dimly lit auditorium will decide our fate: Which of us will best represent Cleveland in the competition, among all Portland metro-area high schools, for the coveted title of Queen of Rosaria?

Since the age of four, I've dreamed of becoming Queen of Rosaria. This year, after two rigorous judging sessions, the 2017 Rose Festival judging panelists selected me, and three others, from the twenty-eight girls who tried out at my school. Now, at seventeen years old, I have earned a place as one of the four finalists from Cleveland for the Rose Festival Court. "Thank you, Princess Samantha!" Steve, the student body president, smiles at Sam from the podium.

Sam curtsies. Applause erupts. Sam's escort walks her backstage. My heart quickens as I anticipate Steve calling my name. I glance to my right, thinking I see Hayden hurrying toward me. But it is just my imagination. I breathe deeply and look toward Steve.

"Princess Haley Lea," Steve calls out, his gaze focused on Haley.

Haley is escorted to the microphone. I let out a breath. In four minutes I will be called to speak after her. Three minutes for the speech and one minute to answer the impromptu question. I'll be the last finalist to face about three thousand eyes, which will undoubtedly see me differently.

What will they think, when I walk to the microphone on my own, sans escort? Will they feel sorry for me? Will they be embarrassed for me?

My body releases a large flock of butterflies into my stomach. My chest rises and falls as I try to take deep breaths.

"Princess JD Bophatip." Steve turns toward me.

His voice seems strangely distant. I glance to my left and realize Haley has already been escorted backstage. I look confidently at Steve and the audience, and then I swiftly look down at the bottom of my long dress. "Please don't fall. Just breathe. Breathe," I tell myself. I smile.

As I take a step, a breeze touches me. "JD, please, allow me," a melodic male voice whispers near my ear.

A warm hand holds my arm. I smell the sweet fragrance of a cologne that arouses all my senses. I look at my escort and suck in my breath.

Gorgeous!

He's tall, with large, sparkling eyes, dark hair, and a porcelain complexion. My heart skips a beat. From nowhere he appears, with a smile that shines like the sun eager to warm the earth. I'm afraid I have lost my composure as I beam at the quirky way he tilts his head when our eyes first meet.

I hold his arm, and he cups his hand over mine as we proceed toward the microphone. Applause erupts again. I am so startled by this kind gesture that I smile, and hot tears well in the corners of my eyes. When we arrive at the microphone, we stand still in the spotlight. Soon the warm touch of his hand flees. It's too soon, I think to myself.

As if he can read my mind, he looks into my eyes, and whispers, "Good luck, JD."

Through the spotlights, I gaze at the audience for whom I've rehearsed my speech. This year's theme: "Portland's Party." My hands press together in Cambodian formality. I raise them to my chin, and I bow. Words tumble out of my mouth, effortlessly.

"Good morning, teachers, administrators, and fellow students. What a blessing for us to live in the City of Roses. In less than two months, we, Portlanders, will celebrate Portland's annual celebration the Rose Festival. Thanks go to the Portland Rose Festival Foundation, whose mission is to serve the community and promote patriotism, environmental responsibility, and our historic and floral heritage. Today, we play a small role in the part of their mission that welcomes the diversity of cultures in Portland.

"The Rose Festival is the heart of Portland that pumps energy and vitality into the participants and bystanders. The activities and events are infectious to those who join with their hearts open for fun and camaraderie.

"A number of years ago, my mom graduated from the University of Oregon, which makes her a Duck. But this Duck was willing to join Portland State University students and be a Viking for a night, so she rode on PSU's float. As requested, she wore a beautiful Cambodian classical dance costume, with her long black hair cascading to her waist. On that float, she was a kind of royalty, joining Portland's annual celebration in the Starlight Parade.

"People from the streets waved at her. Some reached out to touch her hand. As the night fell, the air became chilly. My mom got cold, but the cheers from the audience pumped life into her and warmed her heart. So, no matter what you are—a Duck, a Viking, or even a stranger—please come and celebrate Portland's Party.

"We owe our gratitude to the Rose Festival Foundation for planning the Rose Festival throughout the year. With the help of generous corporate sponsors and dedicated volunteers from all walks of life, for more than a week, we party in the streets of downtown Portland and at the Willamette River. We wave to our very own Rose Festival royals—the Queen of Rosaria, fourteen princesses, the Clown Prince, and the Royal Rosarians—and in return, they wave at us with cheers that touch our hearts.

"When I was four years old, my mom held me up during the Grand Floral Parade. I remember waving in any direction—every direction, to everyone. I fixated on the beautiful Queen of Rosaria, who waved back at me with the most joyful smile. In that moment, in my little mind, I told myself that someday I'd be like her. As I grew older, I realized that I wanted to make other children as happy as she did me.

"Now, at seventeen, I fully understand the role of the Queen of Rosaria. I have been successful in getting to this stage, and I am honored to stand before you today, as you decide whether that fouryear-old girl's character is worthy of your vote and worthy to represent you and compete for Queen of Rosaria.

"But whatever the outcome may be, we Portlanders will celebrate our Rose Festival. It has earned two awards as the best festival in the world. So please come to Portland's Party. Let's welcome strangers and make friends. Let's have fun. Let's enjoy life."

The audience applauds. I press my hands together, and I bow.

"Thank you, Princess JD, for your lovely speech." Steve looks at me. I nod. "Princess JD, what is the most important thing you have discovered about yourself in high school?" Steve asks.

The impromptu question comes quicker than I expected. Somehow I feel like I'm being ambushed. My thoughts race as I remember that this question is based on what I wrote in my biography for the Rose Festival application.

*But why would you be nervous, then?* I mentally chastise myself as I just stand there, as if I haven't given myself a hundred pep talks to prepare for this moment. When Steve looks up from his cue cards, I regard the audience.

"The most important thing I have discovered is the essence of who I am becoming," I say confidently. "How I've learned to accept the natural manifestations of who I am. For instance, every summer, for ten years since I was seven, I've visited Cambodia, a country that lends her heritage to my mom and me. Like my mother, who is a psychiatrist, I enjoy the beautiful tropical scenery there, and I volunteer with her in villages and at my uncle's orphanage. But during the school year, I am happy to be in Portland with my friends. I am blessed to have a sheltered life. As a girl, I can attain a better education in America than in Cambodia.

"I feel that I'm being embraced by both worlds, by some invisible forces. So the essence of who I am becoming is the most important thing I have discovered. I've learned to embrace who I am. This is what makes each of us unique individuals. Thank you very much."

Strangely, I feel the spotlight on me has intensified. My skin seems brighter, like a firefly. I look at the audience for the applause they gave Haley, Sam, and Kimberly, but there is no reaction. They stare at me as if in a trance. Even Steve hasn't said anything. Nothing. I step away from the microphone, and I curtsy.

I gaze at the mysterious, beautiful boy who magically appeared to escort me. As if he understands my dilemma, he walks toward me and begins to clap.

Steve shakes himself, as if awestruck, and then claps cheerfully. "Thank you, Princess JD."

The audience follows Steve's lead as if they are on the same frequency.

My handsome, enigmatic escort stands beside me. "That was beautiful," he whispers in his sweet-as-honey voice. "I'll be happy to assist you as long as you need me." He smiles at me.

"Did Hayden send you?" I ask, as we walk to the library for the postassembly reception for the finalists. I look up into his eyes.

"Perhaps," he answers casually, studying me.

I shake my head. I breathe to release the stress that has built up inside me. "I'm going to kill him for not calling me."

"Figuratively, I hope." He laughs softly.

"What's your name?"

"You will learn it in due course."

I shoot him a glare even as I make a mental note of the way he speaks. "I thought it was girls who were supposed to be reserved, not boys."

"Certainly, but I'm not just any boy. By the way," he says, and his eyes widen as he looks at me again, "did you know—"

Annoyed, I interrupt him. "You can ask me questions, but I can't ask your name?"

"You have a point," he acknowledges. "What I was trying to say is, did you know a golden aura radiates from your body?"

I stop in the hall. "What are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about." He squeezes my arms.

I stare at his right hand. He abruptly takes his hands off me. I think for a moment. "That spotlight on me was increased," I say.

He shakes his head. "No. You were glowing. It—I mean, the aura—intensified as you were concluding your answer to the impromptu question."

"No, the spotlight made my skin brighter."

He takes a deep breath. "Remember when nobody applauded?"

"Yes." I resume walking toward the library. "I thought I'd done something wrong."

He catches up to me. "They were transfixed by your aura. I couldn't believe it myself. I had to clap to wake them up."

"So you saved the day again. I suppose I need to thank you." I am still irritated that he won't tell me his name.

"Did I ask for it?" he responds. "Sorry, you're mad. But if I tell you my name, you'll ask even more questions."

"But you're a stranger to me. And I don't believe you, about the aura. I think the audience didn't like my answer to the impromptu question. It was obviously different, because *I* am different. I'm JD Bophatip. Not Sam, or Haley, or Kimberly."

"You're right. No average American teen has seen what you have in Cambodia—you've seen what the Khmer Rouge and world leaders have done there." Ryker speaks pensively.

"What do you know about Khmer history?" I ask.

"Let's just say that I've studied it recently. I'm sorry for what the US leaders did to Cambodia, or Kampuchea."

I make a mental note of how good he is at pronouncing "Kampuchea." "Kampuchea" is the direct transliteration to the Khmer pronunciation of my home country. "Cambodia" is the English transliteration, taken from the French "Cambodge." We call ourselves Khmer, but foreigners refer to us as Cambodians.

I hold his gaze, then ask, "Yes, and what else?"

He sighs. "President Nixon illegally ordered an invasion of Cambodia without consent from Congress."

I look away. I don't want to hear any more sad Cambodian history, especially today. I've already heard a lot from my *mak*, my mother, who survived those terrible times when she was a child.

He touches my arm. "Look, I'm sorry to bring up tragic history. All I want is to point out that you are different from Sam, and Haley, and Kimberly because of your background. But I am still awestruck by your aura. I can't wait to tell my father about it."

I scowl. "I don't believe you, whoever you are." I swish away from him, as fast as I can in my tight dress.

"JD, wait, please." He strides after me. "It's Ryker. Ryker Erickson."



# CHAPTER TWO

"I'm sorry," Ryker apologizes.

I raise my hand as I try to control my irritation. I keep walking toward the library, Ryker beside me. Hayden's no-show has already cut me. I don't need Ryker to add lime juice for the sting.

Last night, after I had rehearsed my speech many times in front of Mak and imaginary audiences in my bedroom, bathroom, and living room, a sudden attack of anxiety had overwhelmed me.

As if Mak could sense my emotions, she came to my room, where I was pacing like a maniac. She held my face in her hands and said, *"Koon*, don't worry. You're an intelligent girl. Believe in yourself."

"I do," I told her. But I couldn't explain. Believing in oneself doesn't mean having no doubts at all.

I am Khmer American. Every year during the Asian Week celebration, Cleveland High School has an assembly. Last month, I was decked out in a gold crown and classical dance costume with fresh flowers in my hair. I danced to the movements of blessings like an angel descending from heaven. People told me that I was beautiful.

Earlier today, while I waited backstage, Mr. Robbin, my drama teacher, told me that I sat like a princess. But a reporter from KOIN TV 6 said I looked like a queen.

I am just me.

I have a slender body and long black hair that falls past my waist. But Kimberly is a voluptuous blonde girl with white skin. Haley is a pretty, slender brunette, and Sam is a good-looking girl of mixed heritage—Mexican, African, and Italian—whose signature smile is infectious. These girls are smart as well. All three have both parents, but I have only Mak.

I wish I had a father, too. Sometimes I steal glances at happy kids with their fathers.

Mine supposedly left Mak after I was born. I know nothing about him. Mak always frowns at me and brushes me off when I ask about him. I usually pretend it doesn't really bother me that she doesn't answer my questions. Like many Khmer women and girls, even though I'm Khmer American, second generation, I've been taught to keep things to myself. As I've grown, I've stored my questions and emotions inside me. That's what a good Khmer girl is supposed to do.

But one Friday, four summers ago, I was full up. After Mak once again refused to tell me anything about my father, I yelled at her. "I'm tired of trying to protect you," I said. "And stop trying to protect me. You're a doctor and a shrink. Don't you see what's been bothering me?"

"Crazy kid," said Mak, and her face quivered.

"I'm not crazy, and you know it," I shouted again.

Mak stared at me. I knew she didn't mean that I was *crazy* crazy, but the way I'd burst out like that was very disrespectful, and I'm sure it shocked her. But what could she expect, after all these years I'd wanted to know about my father? I'd been a good girl, but the temperature in my body had risen like mercury.

"I wish I had a father to go fishing with, so I could get away from you," I said, and I bolted out of the kitchen.

Mak lamented out loud that Uncle Vinda, her only surviving brother, didn't live near us.

From the living room, I yelled, "But he doesn't. He's in Cambodia with his family." Then I slammed the front door behind me. For the rest of the day, I jogged and cried until I got so exhausted I went home.

The next day, Hayden's father, Mr. Jelani, came to my house and invited me to go fishing with him, Hayden, and Sam. Hayden knows

Sam from Cleveland High School. That's how I got to know them. Hayden and his father live across our backyard. Sam's company makes it more acceptable to Mak for me to go fishing with Hayden and his father. Every summer since then, Mr. Jelani has taken me fishing with them.

Fishing is fun and relaxing, so long as I don't have to touch the earthworms. That is Hayden's job, and our friend Tevy's. Unlike me, Tevy is not scared of earthworms, so one summer I invited her and her older brother, Nathan, to come along. So they, too, got to know Hayden, Sam, and Mr. Jelani. Mr. Jelani said that my friends were also his.

Tevy and Hayden like to have fun at my expense. They once chased me with two wiggling earthworms. I screamed and ran for my life. But my fears egged them on. When I realized, I stopped and faced the wiggling creatures. When my friends got close, I struck a praying mantis pose. Hayden and Tevy stopped abruptly. They knew I had a black belt in kung fu, so then *they* ran, and I chased them, with fast martial art moves. Anything I could think of. Sam, Nathan, and Mr. Jelani laughed.

"Go, girl. Get 'em!" Mr. Jelani cheered for me.

Mr. Jelani has been a father figure to me ever since. In return, Mak has been a mother to Hayden, since Mr. Jelani is divorced from Hayden's mom. Every year Mak invites them to go with us to the Khmer Buddhist temple and New Year celebration at PSU.

So Hayden and I have been close. He knows all the instructions that the Portland Rose Festival Foundation gives parents of girls who are trying out to be Rose Festival Princess. (I gave Mr. Jelani and Hayden a copy.) For instance, parents are supposed to answer phone calls and letters for us. The idea is to prevent princesses from any stress during the competition. Yet, Hayden's absence has created stress for me. Was he trying to sabotage my chances of reaching a goal that is important to me?

It was at a picnic last summer that I told Hayden I wanted to try out for the Rose Festival Princess. He stared at me and said, "JD, you don't need the scholarship money. Your mom is a doctor." I remember staring at his even white teeth, which glow in contrast with his chocolate skin. Hayden's really good-looking, and he works out and takes care of his body just like his father, who is a former US Navy SEAL.

"Of course I need money for college, silly." I told him. "College tuition isn't cheap. Besides, there is more to being Queen of Rosaria than getting a scholarship."

"Miss Independent . . . " Hayden started humming Ne-Yo's "Miss Independent" and smiled at me. "That's why I love her." He knows I love songs I can dance to.

I bopped my head, gracefully, to the melody playing in my head. We'd watched the video over and over on YouTube. Sensual songs like this move me. I swayed my hips like the African American dancers in the video, but with a touch of a figure eight, and then the belly dance chest movements. This egged Hayden on, and he sang and danced, mimicking Ne-Yo's mannerisms.

"Everyone! Look, free entertainment." Mak cheerfully alerted everyone to our dance movements. Sam, Nathan, and Tevy got up and danced along. A few of our Cambodian elders shook their heads, including Nathan and Tevy's mom, Aunt Cheng.

"Look at her, dancing in front of everybody," Aunt Cheng said. "Not embarrassed."

"Dancing is the language of the soul," Mak told Aunt Cheng, beaming. I learned all my sinuous hip movements from her.

Happy memories. And how could Hayden stand me up today?

Yesterday after school we rehearsed: First, he escorted me up to the stage. Then Steve announced my name, while a brief biography and six photos of me working at Uncle Vinda's orphanage in Cambodia were projected on the screen for the audience. Ten summers of my life summarized by six photos that were supposed to best represent me.

The rehearsal was nearly perfect. I was elated then, and I'd imagined today would be the same—but just as I've been told, nothing's constant but change.

What happened to Hayden?

In the library, the post-assembly tea has already begun. As Ryker and I walk in, I force a smile and wave at Sam, who flashes me a smile in return. Kimberly's head turns. She eyes Ryker from head to toe, while her mother, Ms. Nixon, the PTA president, watches us. Kimberly, Sam, and Haley are sitting with their parents. The principal, Mr. Richard Benninghoff, and other administrators are among them. Everyone is having tea, cake, and cookies.

Ms. Nixon and Mr. Benninghoff approach us, so I introduce Ryker to them. "Ryker, this is Ms. Nixon. She's the president of the PTA. She kindly hosts this reception today."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Nixon." Ryker shakes her hand.

"Welcome, Ryker," says Ms. Nixon with a smile.

"Thank you very much."

"And this is our principal, Mr. Benninghoff." I motion with my hand toward Mr. Benninghoff.

"We're glad to have you, Ryker." Mr. Benninghoff shakes Ryker's hand and looks at me. "JD, I'm sorry, but your mom was unable to join us."

"My cell phone is in my car. Did she say why?" I was asking Mr. Benninghoff, but he turns to Ms. Heintz, the Cleveland Rose Festival coordinator.

"Your mom had an emergency call," Ms. Heintz says, "so she had to turn around and go back to her clinic."

"Thanks, Ms. Heintz. I hope her patient is okay."

Mr. Benninghoff shakes Ryker's hand again. "Thanks, Ryker, for being here for JD."

"It's my pleasure and honor, sir," Ryker says and then leads me to a table far away from the others.

He pulls out a chair for me. I sense we're being watched, and sure enough, Kimberly is staring at us again. Sam is scowling at her. I meet Ryker's eyes. "Why didn't you want to tell me your name?"

"As I said, I feared if I answered that question, other questions would soon follow. Sorry." He turns away to get us tea and dessert.

He's right. Of course I have more questions. *Who is this boy? Where did Hayden find him?* 

When Mr. Benninghoff begins to speak, Ryker stops in his tracks, holding our tea and cookies. Mr. Benninghoff says that no matter who is chosen to represent Cleveland as princess, he's very proud of each of us. He gazes at each of the finalists and claps. Everyone joins him in applause, and then he leaves to attend to other business. The tea party resumes. Ryker sets our dessert down on the table.

He hands me the steaming tea. "Your tea, princess."

I grin, then I say, "You're too kind, commoner."

Ryker chuckles. I continue to grin as I sip my tea. But our playful exchange has attracted Kimberly's attention, and she's stealing curious glances at us again. Sam frowns at Kimberly and glances inquiringly at Ryker and me. Ryker looks at his suit breast pocket. It's vibrating.

"Excuse me." He takes the cell phone out of his jacket, scans the phone screen, then puts it back into his pocket. A few lines form on his forehead.

I gaze at him over the rim of my teacup. "Is something wrong?"

"I'm sorry. I should have turned my phone off. It's Hayden."

"Is he okay?" My voice sounds louder than I intended.

"He said he'd explain things to you." Ryker smiles as if to cheer me up.

"Look." I move closer to Ryker. "Hayden's no-show has been bothering me. Let's go. I can excuse us so we can talk privately," I say, but he stares past me.

"The way Kimberly's been eyeing us . . . I don't like it," he says. "What is her problem?"

Quickly, I look toward Kimberly, but she's pretending to talk cheerfully with her mother. I shrug, but I'm not surprised if she's been glaring at me.

"What happened between you two?" Ryker asks.

"Kimberly and I have a history. I stood up for a Vietnamese student Kimberly was bullying and made her look bad—and lose first place in badminton."

"That's the reason," he says, then he gets up.

"Let's go," I say again. "You owe me an explanation about Hayden."

As Ryker and I walk by, Sam winks at me. I know what that means. She wants to meet Ryker. "I'd like you to meet Sam," I say to him.

Sam smiles cheerfully. "You leaving already?" she asks.

I nod. "I feel awkward being here with Ryker and not with my mom." "Sorry," Ryker apologizes.

I introduce them. "So, Sam, this is Ryker, and Ryker, please meet Sam, my best friend."

Sam smiles brightly at Ryker and her body sways to the side a bit. "It's very nice to meet you, Ryker. Dr. Varman will be so grateful to you." She turns to me. "Do you know what happened to Hayden?"

I shake my head. Ryker offers no answer. Sam folds her arms and stares at Ryker. When Kimberly walks up to us, Sam, Ryker, and I turn to her.

"I'm Kimberly." She reaches to shake Ryker's hand, but Ryker just stares at it. "Where do you go to school?" Kimberly inquires.

"Catlin Gabel," he says politely.

"Wow, your parents must be rich," Kimberly says.

Ryker gives Kimberly a gentle nod, then gazes at me.

"Okay," Kimberly says. "Oh, did you try the chocolate cookies? I made them last night. Well, my mom and I did. We stayed up late, so we could bake more homemade cookies."

I say, "They're good, Kimberly, but we should go."

Now Ryker offers his hand in a handshake, which Kimber eagerly takes. "They were good, Kimberly. Thanks for making them. I'm Ryker Erickson."

Kimberly focuses intensely on Ryker. "You should come to our prom." Sam rolls her eyes. But Ryker hesitantly says, "I'd like to, if JD asks me." He looks at me and I at him.

"Uh . . . I'm—"

"She's going with Hayden," Kimberly interrupts me.

"Wow, Kimberly," I say. "You know a lot, don't you?"

Sam says, "I told her, because she wanted to ask Hayden to prom." She shrugs. "Sorry."

"I apologize, JD," Ryker says. "Forget what I said. Please don't mention it to Hayden. I should have guessed."

"And you already have a prom date, Kim." Sam stares at Kimberly. "Well, yeah," Kimberly says.

I shake my head. This is getting out of hand. It's not a tea party anymore, but a competition for prom dates. However, I'm glad that Sam has put Kimberly in her place. Haley comes to rescue us. "Ladies, did I miss something?"

"No, Haley. Ryker and I are just leaving." I hold Ryker's toned arm.

"Nothing important," Sam echoes. "JD just has to interrogate this handsome stranger here, because Hayden stood her up."

"Sorry, JD." Haley hugs me. "Hayden must have had a good reason." "Good luck next Friday, Haley," I say. "Good luck, Sam."

Haley thanks me. Sam and I exchange hugs. Kimberly stands awkwardly near Ryker. So I hug her, too, and wish her the best as well.

\*

Outside the dressing room in the auditorium, I put my hand on my hip and say, "So. Ryker. What's going on with Hayden? Why is he being so secretive?"

"He didn't want to stress you out."

"What do you mean?"

"Hayden had to take his father to the ER this morning." I grab Ryker's arm. "What happened to Mr. Jelani?"

"Heart attack." Ryker holds my hands.

"Oh my god. But why?" I pull away. "Mr. Jelani, he's very athletic. He used to be a Navy SEAL."

"I don't know, JD. Maybe . . . I don't know."

I stride toward the exit door. Ryker follows me. I stop and ask, "Will you take me to see him? I don't think I should drive. Please."

Ryker shakes his head. "You see, this is why I didn't want to answer your questions. Hayden was right. You shouldn't go to the ER. You have school, and you can't help his father right now."

"You're right, but I still want to see him. He's more important than my class."

Ryker steps back. "Sorry."

"Okay, then I'll drive myself to the ER." I turn away as I lift my backpack on my shoulder, then put it down to dig for my keys. I hurry toward the exit door.

Ryker runs after me. "JD!" He wraps his arms tightly around me. "See, Hayden told me you'd worry if he called you."

Hot tears burn the back of my eyes, but I let him hold me.