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## Chapter 1

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**R**iley McKenna awoke to the sound of the bus door being slammed shut. He instinctively rolled over to grip the padded metal bar surrounding the exterior bunks on the touring bus. He'd been thrown from a bunk many times in his lifetime. The bar was not there, and he smiled, realizing he was home. More to the point, he was at his parents' home in San Antonio temporarily.

His house, vehicles, and nearly everything he owned had exploded and gone up in flames. You wouldn't think a modern lighthouse-shaped tower built with a lot of concrete over a boathouse would burn, but it had. The voltage of a lightning bolt had destroyed his house, the boathouse under it, and the six boats housed there, along with his beloved Jeep and a nearly new truck. It had taken him almost a year to build his dream house. It had been reduced to ashes in less than thirty minutes. Lesson learned. When you lived forty miles from the nearest fire department, and a bolt of lightning hit your place, it was toast. As one of the roadies had said, and he'd quoted a few times. *'He was damn lucky he was on tour at the time. Otherwise, he would have been a roast.'*

The fire department had been able to keep the fire from spreading into the surrounding forests. The flames hadn't torched the nearby homes belonging to older brothers Micah and Sully.

His home, music studio, instruments, and vehicles were gone. Riley was still thanking the overall technology universe. Everything he wrote or created was stored on offsite servers and the mysterious *'cloud'*.

Physical belongings were replaceable, but the time he'd invested in designing and the actual construction wasn't. He'd been hands-on in building his home. From helping to pour concrete to installing the tin roof, he had enjoyed every part of the experience. Construction was different from the years he'd spent in academia. Riley still didn't know what to do with the degrees packed away in a safety deposit box. They didn't have a lot to do with the idea he'd been toying with and mentally rejecting for several years.

When he would find the time, or if he was going to replace his house, Riley had no idea. He was thankful no one had been hurt. He was also grateful for his habit of sending his awards to his parents. They enjoyed displaying the Grammys and Music Awards, won by himself and his brothers. They were all still loosely connected by their band I-35. They were more connected as brothers, tight, and only a phone call away. Careers, marriage, and growing families had a tendency to keep them apart.

Riley had bitched at the high cost of insurance, complained it was extortion, but he was glad now he'd paid the sky-high premiums. Or rather, his business manager had paid them. He showed little interest in his finances, except checking the balances and stopping at an ATM for cash. Most people thought he was careless about such matters. He wasn't. What they didn't know was he could balance the books, without the aid of calculators, spreadsheets, or programs, in

less time than it took to input the numbers into a computer. There was no way he would be ripped off by an *expert* cooking the books and trying to play dirty with his money. It had happened to far too many of his friends in the business.

He stretched his arms and legs to their full six-foot five-inch length and smiled at his feet hanging over the end of his childhood bed. He'd had a custom-built bed at his house to accommodate his height. It was gone. After the shock had worn off, he'd spent a couple of days staring out the window of the tour bus, wondering what was next. In his muddled thoughts, he kept asking himself, did it really matter?

Rolling from his bed and looking through the window, he saw one of his band's technical crew carrying a bucket and broom and heading toward the tour bus.

Easy Bishop was a roddie, who had worked for I-35 in its heyday, and now worked in his crew. Riley and Easy had arrived outside San Antonio the night before. They had rolled into the driveway of his parents' property long after midnight, but they had been welcomed with open arms.

Today, he and Easy would unload the bus. They would locate all the things hidden in every nook and cranny of the 48-foot touring bus. Promoting his third album in two years had exhausted everyone. Several days earlier, they'd dropped his backup musicians and technicians at the airport to return to their homes and families. Riley and Easy were the only ones left.

Once the bus was returned to the rental agency, Easy would head for the airport. Aging into the mid-fifties, Easy was the *old man* of the crew. When Easy wasn't checking mikes and wiring on tour, he was somewhere in the world where the waves were breaking high.

Riley looked around his old bedroom in his parents' house. Nothing had changed much since he had left home at nineteen. He had claimed, at the time, that living on campus made

it easier for his studies, but it hadn't been the truth. What he had needed was to cut the parental strings of his over-protective tight-knit family. He loved his family, all of them, but he required space. He'd witnessed his older brothers' struggles to break free to become adults. At nineteen, he had already charted a music career with his brothers. On top of his musical accomplishments, he'd earned two Bachelor's degrees. Before he'd hit the road again, Riley had been working toward his master's in a subject that wouldn't further his career, but he found it challenging.

His older brothers, Micah and Sully, had formed a band as young teens. He'd joined them at age nine when he'd discovered music made sense to him. He had been only twelve when their first album had hit the charts. Riley had been talented enough to be a member of the band. For the most part, though, he'd gone along to get along with his brothers. He loved music, but his interests were broad, scattered, and in some instances secret.

They had been the only children of Carole and Daniel McKenna when they had launched their careers. Several years later, his parents had adopted the four children of a distant cousin of his mother. All of his siblings were referred to as first-set, second-set. He was first-set, and he'd been the youngest when there was only one set. Teased by his older brothers, he'd been nicknamed Coyote, a name he'd loved as a kid but hadn't been able to shake as an adult. He'd released his first single album under his real name Riley, and he'd stuck with it since.

Riley had been filling stadiums for the last couple of years on his own, while his brothers' careers had continued to skyrocket in different creative and family venues. Oldest brother Micah had won an Oscar the previous year for a soundtrack in a blockbuster movie. He and his wife Tess had increased the size of their family to three kids. They were

waiting for the paperwork to adopt a baby girl. They'd only been married three years, but they weren't wasting time.

The second oldest, Sully, was cranking out movies and awards. Only six years older than Riley, Sully and his wife, Karina, were in the production of baby number six. Both of his brothers were deliriously happy as married men. By comparison, Riley felt like he was coasting or drifting. He could never tell which.

The McKenna I-35 hadn't disbanded. They simply couldn't align their schedules enough to write and release another album. He and both of his brothers were writers of music and song. Some people might assume the McKenna brothers had faded from the music scene. They had no idea how much of their music was still charting. Creating music was part of their DNA.

Riley had to admit the constant touring had lost its appeal, again. He was fully aware of his fan base. As a Texas boy, he'd been raised to be polite and well mannered. On-stage he was funny, loud, and professional. Off-stage he was quiet, and as he aged, had become more reserved and careful of his friends. Riley avoided conflicts of any kind. When a guy had his height and build, the blame would fall on him regardless of who started it.

Lately, Riley had been feeling empty, and it wasn't a feeling he liked. The guys in the band thought he needed to get laid, but it was far more than that. Women liked him, although not always for the right reasons. He liked women, but he had been raised to believe in monogamy and commitment. The women he met on the road wanted one-night, no strings attached, and bragging rights. Most men his age and most of his backup musicians and crew thought easy sex was a perk of being on the road.

Although the sex was usually enthusiastic and generous, all it did was scratch an itch and melt away a bit of lonesome

time. Then there was the guilt. Riley knew his prowess around women, but he hadn't been raised to be a man-whore.

It had been two-and-half years since Riley had taken a break, and he needed one. He was going to be off the radar for a while. Award shows, nominations, and wins had helped establish his solo career, but the music business was fickle. You had to stay on top to be on top. He'd lost his edge and his drive to strive for more. He'd reached those goals so many times already, in music and in academia. Still, there was a hole inside him, and he couldn't explain it. He hadn't found what he needed to fill it. He'd thought he had, but he'd been wrong, and that particular failure still hurt.

Riley dressed and went to help Easy. The pile of leftover stuff was boxed and separated by the owner. He would ship it to the guys.

Easy nudged Riley and nodded toward the gate. "She's back. Third time since I started cleaning the bus this morning."

Riley walked over to the entrance gate to the property. He didn't open the gate to her but walked over to the car.

"Do you need something, Leigh Ann?" he asked.

"I wanted to thank you for the donation," the woman said.

"I believe in your work," Riley said.

She nodded. "I know I went too far, but can't we take a step backward? We were good together."

Riley shook his head. "I can't be what you need. I won't become what you need."

"You could destroy me, my church, and my work," she said.

"I won't. I'll continue to support your efforts," Riley said. "All I ask is, you let me find what I need and leave me alone."

She swallowed hard, and nodded. "I had to try. I won't bother you again."

Riley returned to the garage, and he didn't look back at what he'd once thought would be part of his life and future.

"Is she the reason you've been living like a monk?" Easy asked.

"I haven't," Riley denied.

"Close enough," Easy said. "Are you going back to the studio, or are we done?"

"I don't know," Riley said honestly.

"When you figure it out, give me a call," Easy said. "I have expensive habits and ain't none of them illegal. We only live once, kid. A lot of people think I'm nuts because I live for the next big wave to break. If I die in the next big one, I'll die happy. You need to find what makes you tick. You've been looking for it for a while, but you haven't found it yet. You'll know when it's right. It usually hits like a lightning bolt, straight between the eyes."

"My life has already been hit by a bolt of lightning," Riley said.

"Hell, kid, that one missed you by a thousand miles. You'll know when the real one hits! Jump on it and ride it for all it's worth!" Easy slapped Riley on the back.

Riley watched as his friend drove away, and he knew one more phase of his life was ending. He didn't know what was going to replace it.

His parents, Carole and Daniel McKenna had called for his help, and he wasn't going to refuse. Several years earlier, a medical scare had shaken the entire McKenna family. There had been several misdiagnoses before Riley's mother, Carole, had been diagnosed with Hodgkin lymphoma. She'd been treated with chemotherapy, radiation, and finally a stem cell transplant. It had taken a long time for her to stabilize, but her doctors were currently claiming she was cancer-free.

Daniel had planned a three-month cruise to celebrate his wife's restored health. Daniel had known Riley was due to

finalize his tour, and one of the second-set kids was screwing with his father's plans.

Riley knew he had lived a charmed life so far. He wanted to milk it for every opportunity he was given. An end-of-tour vacation of wilderness camping, whitewater rafting, and rock climbing was now canceled. The next three months were about payback, and he owed his parents a lifetime of it.

Noah, the youngest and only brother of the second-set, was supposed to spend the summer with Riley on his vacation. Those plans were now shot to hell.

Juvenile irresponsibility, mixed with underage drinking, and teenage entitlement, had sent Daniel McKenna into a rarely seen wrath. His youngest son had been fined a thousand dollars, and he was on a year's probation to be monitored by his parents. Noah had celebrated his seventeenth birthday inappropriately and had spent the night in a juvenile facility. Daniel McKenna decided his son needed a lesson in real-life responsibility.

Riley's plans had been scuttled along with his younger brother's. Noah was being sent to their uncle's ranch outside of Yuma, Arizona.

"Why there?" Riley had asked his father.

"Why not? You and your brothers sent Noah to Frank's ranch when he needed a kick in the pants when he was nine, and your mother and I were in Europe. He was fine, and he got a taste of reality. I think he needs another dose. Frank called, and he's closed the Boy's Home temporarily. He's building an extension on his house, and he fell off a ladder. With a dislocated shoulder and three broken ribs, Frank needs help," Daniel explained. "I was planning on sending him money so he could hire additional help. Now, I'm sending the money and Noah. Your brother is going to learn there are consequences for his actions!"



"He screwed up," Riley agreed. "Other than hanging around with crappy kids, no one was hurt."

"He could have been injured or killed," Carole said with a worried tone in her voice.

"Could have," Riley interjected. "The only thing he's guilty of is using bad judgment in picking his friends."

"Son, I am not letting your brother get away with this kind of behavior," Daniel warned. "It's not going to hurt him to swing a hammer or muck out the barns! He's been there before. He should remember what is expected of him."

"He was only nine when he pulled that stunt," Riley said. "Uncle Frank is a tough old guy. He's gruff and opinionated. Without Aunt Katherine around to smooth out his rough edges, I imagine he's a bear to be around."

"My brother is tough. He has to be to maintain the kind of order he needs to run a foster home. He is also injured, and he needs help. It's a done deal. If the timing was different, I'd go myself, but I do not intend to disappoint your mother. I'll send Frank some money. He can always use it for the kids, but I'm also sending Noah. Frank needs someone who can do physical labor, and Noah needs to work off the fine."

"Dad, Noah could pay the fine by working one gig. During the summer months, there are a lot of bands who need backup drummers," Riley said.

Daniel McKenna gave his grown son a look that still made Riley feel like he was guilty of something. "You're missing the point. He could pay it out of his bank account now, but that's not going to teach him a lesson. Noah can either hate it or do what is right! I am not raising a spoiled brat!"

Riley didn't have a comeback. He'd heard those words before, and once his father decided on something, it was a done deal. Now, they would spend the summer in Dry Rock, Arizona, working on his uncle's ranch. Frank McKenna needed able-bodied muscle, and they were going to provide it.

"You aren't part of this," Daniel said. "This is about Noah learning responsibility for his actions. I'm fairly sure at this point in your life you're not making stupid decisions!"

Riley shrugged, and he wanted to retort, *Do you want to bet?* but he didn't. "It's not like I have a home to go home to. All I had to look forward to was a pile of ashes, and knowing Micah like I do, he's already had the mess cleaned up."

"Something is bothering you," Daniel said intuitively.

"Yeah, but I'm not ready to talk about it," Riley admitted, and both of his parents nodded. They knew he would talk to them when he was ready.

"Did you talk sense into Dad?" Noah demanded as soon as Riley entered his old bedroom. The kid was waiting for him.

Riley didn't answer. He went to his closet, and he came out holding an old pair of cowboy boots in his hand.

"No," he admitted to his younger brother. "You and I are going to spend the summer in Dry Rock, Arizona!"

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Jessica Harper pulled her car over to the curb. She looked in all directions carefully before using her remote for the garage opener. Before driving into the garage, she looked again and closed the door. Opening the backseat door to her older model Toyota Camry, Jessica unhooked Jake from his safety seat.

Jenna Harrison joined her on the other side of the car and released Jackson from his seat. As the twins scampered inside, she went to Jessica and gave her a hug. "Are you okay?" Jenna asked, giving the younger woman an inquiring look.

"I'm okay," Jessica said with a wan smile. "Take care of my boys."

"Like my life depends on it," Jenna said seriously.

"I'm counting on it," Jessica said. "I'm going to go to

Braxton's department store during my lunch hour. Star Wars sheets are on sale. I have a little bit of extra money since I have been working overtime. I want to treat the boys for their birthday."

"Mixing practical with what they really want," Jenna said with a smile. "I'm sending Dave over to the toy store to get them a few things. He's been into Star Wars since he was about eight-years-old, and he's still into it. He'll know what will interest the boys. I gave him a budget, but I don't know if he will stick to it. What is it with men and their toys? Dave is fifty. You would think he would be over it by now."

Jessica laughed. "If he buys too much, feel free to return whatever you think is excessive." She kissed her friend on the cheek. "If I get the opportunity for overtime, I'll call."

"Don't worry about it," Jenna exclaimed. "I enjoy the twins. I would still be coddling my boys, except they got this strange idea that just because they're grown men, they don't need their momma hovering over them anymore!"

Jessica left the house smiling. She didn't see a car parked behind a thick hedge. Even if she had, she would have never suspected he had rented a vehicle from a company called Rent-A-Wreck.

The driver of the 2000 silver sedan pulled into traffic several vehicles behind her. Like so many silver look-alike vehicles, he was able to blend into traffic. It was easy. His bitch of an ex-wife wasn't going to get away. She belonged to him.