

Managing the Matthews

HOLLYWOOD
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HALEIGH WENGER



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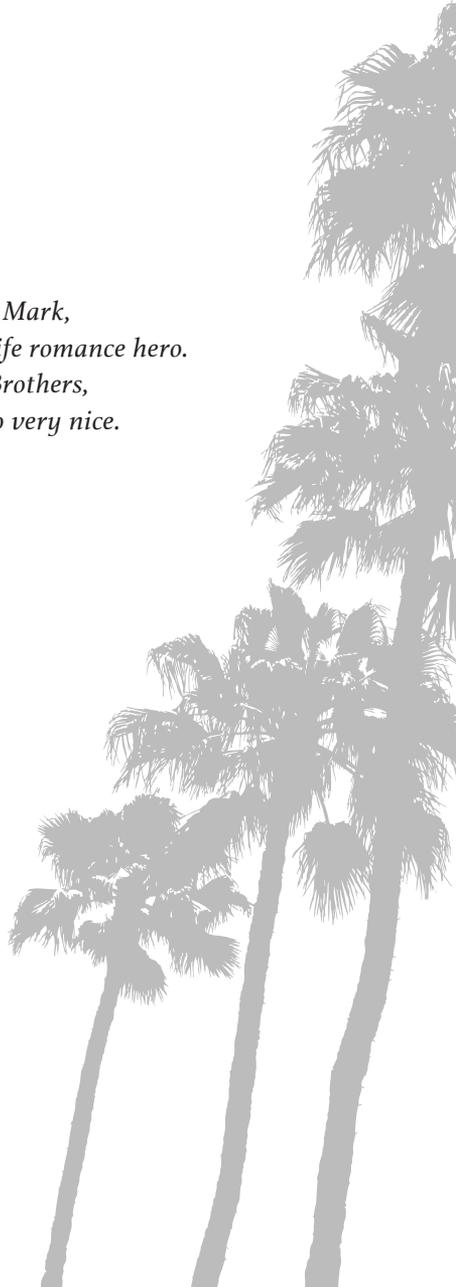
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*To my husband, Mark,
for always being my real-life romance hero.
And to the Jonas Brothers,
who I'm sure are also very nice.*







CHAPTER ONE

* * * * *

Kell

Being the manager for a trio of hot celebrity brothers sounds amazing until you're the one thing standing in the way of their sleep.

Between the three of them—Ash, Jonah, and Ryan—I don't get days off. Someone always ends up needing to be on set at eight a.m. sharp, no matter the day. Never mind that wake-up calls are most definitely not in my job description.

Today, I have the unparalleled pleasure of knocking loudly on Ash Matthew's bedroom door, waiting outside of it for an appropriate amount of time, and then beating on the door some more. It's a blast. "Ashley! I know you're in there! You have a photoshoot in fifteen! Fifteen min-utes!"

There's not a single sound from inside his room. When yelling doesn't work, I pull my cell phone from my purse and call him over and over and over. He doesn't answer. Instead, a banging sound comes from inside his bedroom and the door swings open.

Ash looks me over through half-open eyes and then flops back onto the enormous California King in the center of his room. I toss my phone back into the bag on my arm and follow him in. “I don’t have work today,” he says, his words obscured by the pillow he’s planted his face into. His dark brown hair splays out to the sides, curling slightly at the ends. I tried to talk him into a haircut a few months ago, but it turns out he was right. Annoying, but right, that the longer hair suits him.

I put a hand on my hip. “You do have work.”

Despite the text I received at two a.m. letting me know that he didn’t think he’d make it in, I’m not letting Ash off this easily. As his manager, it’s my job to keep on top of him about these kinds of things.

He grumbles something else unintelligible into his pillow. I sigh and lower myself to his bed, swaying slightly at the too-soft mattress underneath me. “You’re contracted. The movie is almost done. Just promo and then you’re off the hook for this one. And, come on, it wasn’t that bad. From what I saw of it, there were some really funny scenes.”

Ash lifts his head and glares at me, daring me to keep going with the lie. “I want out. I don’t want to be the romance guy anymore. Not for movies like this.”

“What if I promise to buy you pizza afterward?”

He scoffs. “Bribery doesn’t work on me anymore. I can buy my own pizza.”

I nudge his foot with my hand, but he swats at me. “It’s not gonna happen. I’m not doing the photo shoot.”

The dejection in his voice hits me, stalling me for a quick second. It sounds like he needs a vacation. I’ll have to check his calendar. Ash and I were friends in college, and when he told me that he was going into acting, it felt like fate: platonic, career-oriented fate. I was nearly done with my public relations degree and had a healthy obsession

with Hollywood. He got cast in a handful of quirky indie films, one of them took off, and he's scored half a dozen romantic comedy roles since then. But lately, something has shifted, and more and more often I find myself here, trying to talk him into putting on pants and getting his ass to work.

Things were simpler before fame.

I flip open my phone and scroll through the online calendar while I talk. "I don't know what to tell you, Ash. Ryan does action movies, you do romantic comedies, and Jonah does sports. I can put feelers out for more serious auditions, but for now—you signed the contract. You have to finish this out."

"You'll tell people I'm looking for different stuff?" He arches an eyebrow. He rolls to sitting and leans forward to balance on the edge of the bed. His gray eyes, just the tiniest tinge of blue at the edges, study me.

None of the producers we work with will be very happy with me, but I'll let them know. I'm not going to make him lose himself over movies he hates. When we first decided to work together, we agreed: friendship before business. It may not be a motto that works for everyone, but it's always served us well.

"Fine." He winces. "But I already told them I'm pulling out. I can't go to any more promo for this. It's humiliating."

I'm too late. "You already told them? You're supposed to leave the communicating to me. I could have . . ." I trail off at the look on his face.

Whatever. It's just one more Matthew mess to clean up. "Don't worry about it. I'll deal with it." I fake an unaffected shrug as I smooth one hand over his crumpled bed sheets. I bend to pick up a stray protein bar wrapper on the floor near my feet. There's no point in getting mad when I can get the other thing I came here for: information. "Tell me about last night. How did it go?"

"You should have been there."

I arch an eyebrow, smelling a tragedy. There's something about the way he says it: You *should have* been there because it is my job to know, after all. "What? What happened?"

Ash runs a hand over his face, messing up his hair even further. It only adds to his sex appeal, and I make a mental note to get him a new set of headshots featuring this longer, messier hairstyle. It'll kill with the casting directors, even the new ones he's looking to pursue.

He groans. "It's bad. You shouldn't hear it from me."

I almost stomp my foot with impatience. If it's as bad as his voice makes it sound, I'm surprised I haven't heard it already, no matter the early hour. "I need to hear it, period. I don't care who it comes from at this point. I'm here now, so spill." With every emergency comes a seemingly never-ending cycle of damage control, and if I've learned anything in the past five years of managing the brothers, it's that the sooner I start on fixing their mistakes, the better.

"Talk to Ryan." Ash finally meets my eyes, and I see something there I don't expect. Is that . . . pity?

Ryan's name kicks my chest into double-time, and I slap a palm over my sternum. Great. Just, honestly, great. Sure, I suspected that he was involved the moment Ash said something, but to have it confirmed sets my stomach on edge.

I grit my teeth. "Ash. Please. You're killing me here."

"We were out at the bar last night. After the fan meet and greet, remember?"

I nod. I remember because I was the one who facilitated the entire thing. Except, thanks to a major guilt trip on my parents' part, I couldn't be there. Instead, I spent the day with my GI doctor and the night hosting my visiting-from-out-of-town parents before they caught a late flight. I was forced to listen to Mom bemoan that fact that I work too much for the hundredth time.

"Ryan spent all night with this one fangirl. She was sitting in his lap, and they were all over each other. Out of nowhere, he proposed.

It was bizarre. I've never seen him act like that. I don't even think he'd had that many drinks. It was like he pulled a diamond ring from thin air."

I flinch but cover it as I stand. Maybe we can work out a deal if Ryan agrees to let her keep the ring. I lick my lips and half turn, nodding. "Thanks for the heads up. I'll go find the girl and take care of this. We probably should keep Ryan away from fans for the next few weeks, or they'll all be expecting proposals."

Ryan has done worse, like the bloody bar fight he got into with a fan's husband last month. I'm not supposed to get my feelings hurt about him going out and doing things like this. Still, as his manager, it's a nuisance.

But as just me, Kell, it feels like a betrayal.

Ash doesn't laugh at my dumb attempt at humor. The space between his eyebrows furrows, forming a sharp V. "I doubt they will. Now that, you know, he's engaged and all."

The room freezes around us. "What do you mean?"

Ash gives his head a slow shake. "I told you. He proposed to this girl at the thing last night. Which means . . . Ryan is engaged. He says they're getting married. Having an actual wedding. The whole big thing. He seems serious for once."

"Serious about some woman? Who even is she?" My body flushes hot and then cold as a mixture of emotions hits me at once. I stutter but nothing comes out. I'm completely out of words.

"Just some fan who he's been out with a few times. I don't think anyone saw this coming."

A hysterical laugh nearly chokes out of me. "This is ridiculous. Ryan wouldn't . . . Ryan's not . . ."

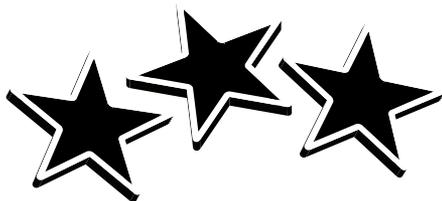
"I'm sorry, Kell." Ash's voice is soft but out of focus. "I don't know what he's thinking. But yeah, it seems real."

"How could it be real?" Somehow, I find the doorknob, and I prop myself up on it with one hand. I thought that this was another

one of Ryan's stunts. He does over-the-top public displays and then sends me in to clean up the ensuing chaos. None of the tabloid-worthy escapades are real, though. Not wedding-planning real.

The floor spins beneath me as I try to gather my thoughts because this can't be happening. Ryan getting engaged without so much as a heads up is a PR nightmare, but I will deal with it because I have no other choice.

Normally, I can deal with anything. But with Ryan, things are different, and there's no way I'm letting him do this without having a serious conversation for once. Given our history, it's way overdue.



CHAPTER TWO

* * * * *

Ash

After Kell leaves, I crawl from bed and look at my phone. It really sucked having to be the one to tell her about Ryan. Especially since I don't think I'm supposed to know, but—I know.

Kell isn't exactly subtle. Not about the way she gapes at my brother. I knew even before I walked in on them getting hot and heavy a few weeks back. Unfortunately, I've known for years. Never worried about it because I thought we had an unspoken agreement that Kell was off-limits. She's our manager, for crying out loud. But my brother wouldn't understand that. Nothing is off-limits to Ryan.

Seeing them together was something. Believe me, I *still* wish I could purge it from my mind. We'd just gotten back from going out to dinner. It was all of us, which is rare. Jonah took a call and started spouting football stats into the phone. I took a shower to scrub off the makeup they caked on me during filming. And Ryan and Kell stayed behind in the living room. Not out of the ordinary since Kell

is the one we all go to when we need someone to talk to. Just how it's always been. I figured that Ryan wanted to whine about his latest career drama. I came back to them sucking each other's faces off. I'd never wanted to un-see something so badly.

And now he's engaged to some fan he's met a handful of times. I could see right away that it hit Kell. But it's also none of my business.

I get out of bed and practically sleepwalk into the kitchen. Hunger wins out, or else I'd stay in my room all day since I don't have work. Might never work again after the way I blew off movie promo. I'm just about to open the fridge and stare at the contents when someone dashes past me. I turn just in time to see a flash of Kell's light brown hair swinging behind her. Her head is ducked and her face not visible, but I can tell from the sounds that she's crying. The back door bangs shut.

Damn it.

I slap a palm against the cool stainless steel of the fridge door. And then I go find Ryan. He's lounging on our leather couch, his legs outstretched and spread wide. He's not wearing a shirt.

"What did you say to her?"

He turns his head slowly to face me, his eyes wide. Oh yeah, here comes Ryan Matthew's famous innocent act. "What are you talking about? You mean Kell? I think she's stressed out, man. I didn't do anything. I didn't say a word."

He's serious. The three competing brain cells he's got left wouldn't see anything wrong with that, would they? Kell would though. Him ignoring her is the whole issue.

I glare at him until he scowls back and asks, "You got a problem, bro?"

Yeah, I have a problem. "The problem is you. You messed things up with Kell. Now you need to go fix it." I point to the door she rushed through seconds ago. She's most likely still outside trying not to cry. I've only seen her cry a handful of times in the years I've known her.

She's tough. Too tough to care about my boneheaded brother, but here we are.

Ryan gives me a cool look. "Lay off, man. Kell's a grown up. She knew what the deal was. I never promised her anything."

My finger is still outstretched so I step closer and jab it into his chest. "Go. Talk. To. Her. Now." I'm dangerously close to doing more than poking him. Maybe he can sense it because for once Ryan gives in. If I had to guess, I'd say it's the guilt. He knows what he did.

He holds up his hands. "Okay. We'll talk. Calm down, Hulk." Ryan laughs, knowing his use of my childhood nickname is the perfect revenge. I was a chubby kid with a propensity for temper tantrums. Call yourself the Hulk once and your older brother will never let you live it down.

I follow him to the back door. Slam it shut behind him before walking to the kitchen. On the counter I find a paper bag. The outside is labeled *muffins* in curly handwriting. Kell. I open it and am hit by the smell of warm blueberries.

Exhibit A in my reasoning of why she is too good for us. There's no polite way to tell her that she has to stop taking care of everyone in this house. No way that won't hurt her feelings. I reach for a muffin and stuff it into my mouth, sighing around the warm, buttery goodness. I'm going to kill my brother.

The back door swings open and Kell bursts in followed by Ryan. Her face is the shade of a tomato.

"Kell—"

Ryan reaches for her like he might try to hug her. But he stops short and pats her shoulder instead.

I should disappear or give them some space. Can't bring myself to do either, so I just stand here as unwitting witness to their drama once again.

She sniffs and looks up at him with watery eyes. "Please just tell me that this is some kind of stupid prank."

Ryan winces. His head ducks down. “You’d really like Samantha. I’ve already told her all about you.”

“Samantha.” Her mouth forms silently around the name. “I don’t understand how this happened. When did you even meet her?”

It can’t have been very long. They kissed sometime last month. Or maybe it was more than a kiss. I left as soon as I saw them on the couch. Whatever it was clearly led Kell to think something was happening.

Ryan glances at me like I’m supposed to help him. No way in hell am I getting involved in this. I have my brother’s back, but I draw the line at relationships. Especially when we both know he’s in the wrong.

“I don’t know. A few weeks.” He scratches his chin. “I think it was a month ago.”

The look on Kell’s face says it all. She makes a small choking noise and shakes her head. “I—I can’t do this right now.”

She pivots and turns down the hall where the front door slams shut seconds later.

Ryan sighs. “You happy?”

I set down the last bite of my muffin and resist the urge to throw it at him. “No.”

“Are you jealous or something? If you wanted to go for Kell you should have told me.” He cracks a half smile. “All those romantic movies are turning you soft.”

I grit my teeth so hard Ryan can probably hear the sound of bone on bone. Exactly the reaction he wants from me. “And you’re a jerk. Maybe all *your* movies are messing with your head. No one thinks you’re James Bond in real life. It’s not cool to play with people’s feelings like this.” If Dad were still alive, he’d lay into Ryan. But maybe he’d do the same to me. I haven’t been doing so hot lately either.

Ryan scoffs and reaches around me for a muffin. “Relax. Kell will get over it. It’s not like we were actually dating.” He stalks back to his spot on the couch with his muffin. “Blueberry. My fave.”

Ryan is either oblivious or heartless. Not sure which would be better. It makes hanging out with him that much harder when he's like this. What I should do is go find Kell and talk her down myself. But if I were her, I wouldn't want to see a Matthew brother face for at least a few good hours. Instead, I take a shower and get ready for the day. Then I wander down the long hall to Jonah's side of the house. As often as we piss each other off, I guess it says something that we all choose to live together.

Those movies I've grown sick of making pay well enough that I could have my own house far away from Ryan's exploits. Hell, I could probably have my own street. But there's something about living with both of my brothers that grounds me. I feel more like Ashley Matthew, middle child, than Ash Matthew, movie star. Not exactly great for my ego, but that's the point.

I knock once on his closed bedroom door. "It's Ash."

He's wearing gray sweatpants and a UCLA hoodie, but his muscles still show through. All the hours Ryan and I spend sleeping in, our youngest brother uses at the home gym set up in his spare bedroom. "Hey." He notices me looking around. "Jessie's at work."

I nod. His live-in girlfriend is often either gone at work or gone because they're in a fight. "So Ryan is going through with the engagement thing, apparently. Kell's upset." I don't say any more because I haven't told anyone, not even Jonah, about seeing Kell and Ryan together.

"I thought she might be," Jonah says thoughtfully. His phone buzzes and he picks it up. While he looks at the notification on his screen, my phone buzzes too.

A group text from Kell.

Kell: *Emergency meeting tonight at your place, seven. Someone order pizza.*

This has to be about Ryan. And based on how upset she was, it can only mean one thing. One thing I'm worried about anyway.

“You don’t think she’d quit on us?” Jonah’s eyes match the worry I’m starting to feel.

I know I’m always saying that we don’t deserve her, but that doesn’t mean I think I can make it for a second without her.

* * * * *

While we wait for Kell’s meeting, Jonah, Ryan, and I are in the home gym watching as Jonah goes for his personal record on the weight machine. He grunts out each rep and Jessie, who’s just gotten back, cheers him on after each one.

Ryan is holding an ice pack to each side of his face. He’s puffy and dotted with multicolored bruises from needles. Dermal fillers. Apparently, he spent half the day letting a plastic surgeon experiment on him with the newest technique for a toned facial structure.

Meanwhile, I’m trying to make sure we’re all on track for convincing Kell not to leave us high and dry at this surprise meeting she’s set up.

“Why are you so worried about this?” Ryan slaps me on the back and then winces with the movement. “You think Kell would ever leave us? She loves us, man.”

“Kell does love us,” Jonah agrees, but he’s only half listening. Half concentrating. He prefers to walk the thin line in between our disagreements. Likes waiting it out until things blow over. This time I wish he’d tell Ryan he’s being a dick. Coming from Jonah it might be harder to ignore. The way I see it, Kell’s love for us is the problem.

I shake my head at my brother. “If she does quit, it’s your fault. You know that, right? We’d lose all the connections she’s made for us. We’d be back at square one without Kell.”

Ryan shrugs and changes the subject. “We’re making her good money. I don’t see her complaining about that.”

I almost flick one of Jessie's resistance bands at his head. "Money isn't the problem."

Ryan rolls his eyes. "I'm going to call Judith and grab a fresh ice pack. I have auditions to prep for tomorrow."

Jonah grunts and sets down his barbell. "We ordered pizza. It's already on the way."

"I'll be quick." Ryan wanders off and Jonah gives me a look but goes back to his reps.

"Jonah. You've got to talk to him. Tell him to stay away from Kell until she cools off at least."

My younger brother doesn't look back as he focuses on the weights. "I tried last week," he says around heavy breaths. "Not about Kell. But his whole . . . thing. His attitude lately. Didn't listen."

"He's obsessed with taking on more projects," Jonah adds.

"Yeah, I've noticed." Last week when I tried to ask him how he had the time to star in a commercial for a brand deal and shoot two movies back to back, he almost bit my head off.

"He told me that he's not going to stop auditioning for stuff until he's the most recognizable name across the board. Not just movies. I don't know what set this off."

"Well, no one can control Ryan, but Kell deserves to be heard," Jessie says, looking at me. She keeps one eye on Jonah as he lifts. "Why don't you talk to her before the meeting? You're closest with her and it sounds like she might need someone to talk to."

"We don't talk about relationships," I say, exhaling. Our friendship has always been solid. No point in ruining things by bringing either of our love lives into it.

"Maybe you should start." Jessie raises her eyebrows at me pointedly.

She might be right.

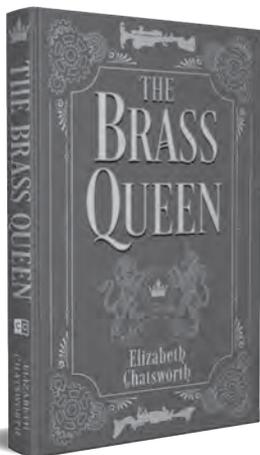
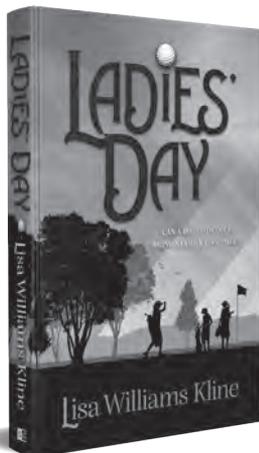
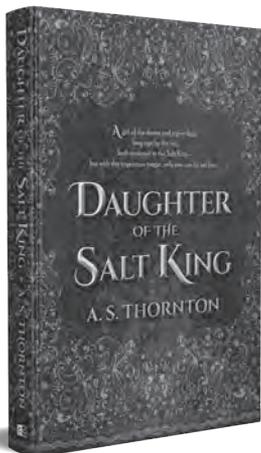
I'm capable of talking if that's what Kell needs to stay. Like I said—leaving might be what's best for her, but I'm going to have

to be selfish. I can't do my job without her. Especially not the new projects I'm pursuing. Yeah, we need to talk about it. Maybe I'll be the one to convince her that Ryan isn't worth her time. I hope so.

"I'll go call her before she gets here. Your girlfriend is smart," I tell Jonah. He looks up at her and they both smile. It's a private moment and I've disappeared to them. My gut twists and I don't even know why. Maybe because no one has ever looked at me like that. And all of this drama is messing with my head. I'm going to go ahead and blame that on Ryan too.

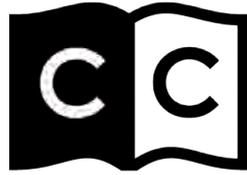


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Nothing's Real on Reality TV—Or is It?

Everyone knows Kell Simmons manages the Matthews brothers, the three hottest stars in Hollywood: action hero Ryan, romantic lead Ash, and sports star Jonah. But no one knows that she's hopelessly in love with one of them.

When Ryan's surprise engagement to a fan just about breaks Kell's heart, Ash, himself unhappily in love, lends his shoulder to cry on. All this is great fodder for a reality TV show, one for which the brothers sign on for, and soon the days of their lives are filled with scripted dates, fake drama, and real heartache—all in front of a camera.

As the brothers' popularity skyrockets into the stratosphere, Kell finds herself wondering how much, if any, of the spotlight she wants, if it means foregoing real love for fun and games on TV.



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