

# B & E Ever After

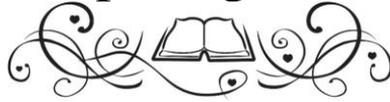


**Warning:** *The following excerpt is unedited. Typos and grammatical errors galore.*

**Double Warning:** *Since this is rough-draft material, the scene I'm sharing with you may or may not end up in the final book...if the story even makes it to publication.*

**Triple Warning:** *Sorry, I don't really have a third warning; I'm just a goofball who wanted to write "triple warning." It's so fun! Anyway, enjoy the excerpt!*

# prologue



HAYDEN

“Watch it, Broderick! You’re spilling them everywhere.”

I lifted my attention from the Game Boy I’d been playing to find my mother swiping a super-sized bag of Skittles away from my little brother.

“You’re such a mess.”

Brick frowned miserably as she spun him around until he was facing away from her so she could unzip the backpack he was wearing and stuff the Skittles inside, out of his reach. Then she gave an impatient huff and started away from us, muttering, “Well, come on. At this rate, the shopping center will close by the time we get there.”

Hanging his head, Brick dutifully trailed behind her, and I filed in behind him, returning my attention to my game. It was easy to keep track of him out of my peripheral vision; he wore a bright orange shirt. So I was able to beat a new record and advance a level without paying attention to where we were going, even though the foreign country we were in had some pretty cool sites.

Mother had decided to come to Monte Carlo to recover from breaking up with her last boyfriend. Turns out, he was already married, which hadn’t settled well with her. She hadn’t planned to bring Brick and I along on her recovery getaway. But Greta, our housekeeper, had to leave at the last minute because her husband had gotten into a car accident and was in the hospital, so Mother had sort of been forced to drag us along.

The place wasn’t exactly kid-friendly. I’d read the pamphlet at the hotel. It was all about car racing, gambling,

boxing, and Mother's reason for coming: Le Metropole Shopping Center.

"Do they have a candy store at the mall?" Brick asked, shading his eyes from the lowering sun so he could examine the outside of the Metropole from top to bottom.

"No, they—" She turned to us, only to stop talking abruptly and blink as if she'd never laid eyes on her two sons before.

"What about a food court?" Brick persisted, rubbing his stomach.

I swear, all he ever thought about was food.

"You know what," Mother murmured, her lips twitching with that fake smile she always gave us when she was about to lie. "I just remembered... you need to order tickets in advance to get into the Metropole, and I didn't plan on bringing you boys, so...you're going to have to wait out here. Okay?"

I'm not sure which part of that was the lie, but there was definitely one somewhere in there.

I blinked at her stonily, not amused by this turn of events. Even if I did have a game to keep me occupied, Brick didn't. He'd forgotten his Game Boy at home. He was going to be bored out his mind, sitting out here, waiting, and I'd be the one stuck listening to him.

I opened my mouth to argue my case, maybe even beg, but Mother was already waving her fingers at us. "I won't be gone long. There's a bench right over there. I'll meet you at it when I'm done."

And she hurried away from us toward the grand entrance of the shopping mall.

"Can you get me another bag of Skittles?" Brick called after her.

She made no sign of hearing us.

I rolled my eyes. "I doubt they have any Skittles in this country."

I wasn't even sure which country this was. Morocco or something. Maybe Monaco. Whatever it was, it didn't look like a Skittles kind of country.

Huffing out a depressed sound, Brick slumped his shoulders and mumbled, "I knew I should've brought my entire stash from home. I'll probably finish this one before the day's over."

He slung his backpack off his shoulders as he moved toward the bench where we were supposed to wait.

I watched our mom disappear inside, wondering how long not-long-at-all was going to be. The battery on my Game Boy was already down to forty percent.

"Dammit," Brick muttered as he dug inside his bag.

"Don't cuss," I said without any heat as I plopped onto the bench next to him and got comfortable.

He ignored me, wailing a panicked, "*Nooo*," as he frantically searched his bag.

"What?" I asked as he pulled up a crumpled Skittles bag that looked a lot thinner than it'd been when Mother had shoved it in his pack.

"All my Skittles fell out of their bag, and *fuck*, there's a hole in the bottom of my backpack."

His snack was gone.

The horror on his face was priceless. I had to laugh. "Whoops," I said. "Sucks to be you." With a satisfied sigh, I leaned back against the bench's backrest and logged back into my game.

A second later, Brick nudged my leg. "Hey. Did you bring anything to eat?"

"Nope." I had a Snickers stored away in my pocket for later.

"Damn," he breathed under his breath.

"Language," I sang as I powered up with a mushroom in my game.

I could feel my brother roll his eyes next to me.

A minute passed. Brick sighed. He shifted restlessly. He plopped his hands into his lap. “How long do you think she’s going to be?”

“A while,” was my guess.

“Damn,” he said again.

My thoughts exactly. Five minutes later, Brick had prowled around the bench and returned to me twice, both times when someone had tried to talk to him in a language neither of us understood.

“Hey, want to share your Game Boy?” he asked. “Take turns on it?”

I sent him a get-real glance. “No.”

“Come on. Please.”

Brick had said please. Shocking, but not shocking enough to convince me.

“They have, like, car races or something here, right? You think we could go watch a race while we wait?”

“No.” First of all, I didn’t know this city at all. I wasn’t about to go wandering around it with my no one but my little brother. Besides, “There’re not having any races today.”

“Oh.” He plopped back down beside me.

Ten minutes later, he’d driven me crazy enough that I handed over my Game Boy just to shut him up.

An hour after that, its battery died.

We both glanced toward the opening of the shopping center, watching people leave and enter.

“Maybe she forgot about us,” Brick finally said.

I huffed impatiently and rolled my eyes. “How could she forget about us? We’re her *sons*.”

Brick shrugged, because he didn’t have an answer.

Another hour passed. Both Brick and I had gotten up from the bench by this point and stretched our legs, though neither of us had strayed far from our meeting place.

Brick slumped down next to me after one short stroll. His stomach growled. He looked absolutely miserable.

Rolling my eyes, I sighed and pulled my snickers from my pocket. After unwrapping it and breaking it in two, I handed him the bigger portion. “Here.”

He glanced over glumly, only for his eyes to light up at the sight of chocolate. “You *did* have food,” he accused happily as we polished off the Snickers in seconds. But it didn’t appease much. Now *both* our stomachs were growling.

“Got anymore?” my brother asked hopefully.

When I shook my head, he sighed and glanced toward the shopping center. “She sure is buying a lot. That guy must’ve really broken her heart.”

I seriously doubted that, but I glanced toward the Metropole as well, thinking she was definitely taking her sweet time. She’d made us wait on her before outside places, so this wasn’t new. But today felt like she was taking longer than usual.

“You think she’s okay?” Brick asked. “What if she got hurt? Or she’s, like, dead?”

I shot him a dry glance for the question, even though it caused a little leap of fear in my stomach. “Grow up,” I said. “There’d be ambulances and police or something all over out here if someone inside got hurt.”

“Maybe she was kidnapped,” Brick guessed. “And no one saw him take her.”

I wrinkled my face as the fear grew stronger. But what I said to my brother was, “Who’d *want* her?” She wasn’t exactly nice.

“Well, what if someone takes *us*?” Brick said. He shivered and huddled closer to me.

I shoved him off me with a scowl. “What’re you doing? Get away.”

He hugged his chest and began to rub his arms vigorously. “I’m cold.”

I was too, come to think of it. I glanced up, becoming aware of the time. The sun was beginning to set, and with it, it took any

warmth that had been in the air. Brick was right; the temperature was dropping.

“She’ll probably be out soon,” I murmured, even though my eyebrows bunched with hesitation. I *hoped* she came out soon. I didn’t want to stick around out here too long in the dark.

“I think the mall closed,” Brick said abruptly.

I made a face and tsking sound, because that was a crazy idea. “That mall didn’t...” But when I glanced toward the entrance of the shopping center, no one was going in or coming out any longer. And... Did it look darker in there? It definitely looked darker in there.

Oh crap, had the mall closed?

I sprang to my feet, more uneasy than I wanted Brick to see. But he could tell I was freaking out. He surged up beside me. “It’s closed, isn’t it?”

I glanced around us, wanting to ask someone when the shopping center closed. Except none of the signs were in English. And no one around us was speaking English. Whatever they were saying to each other sounded...French? I don’t know. I just wanted to go home. This was beginning to scare me. Where was our mother?

“I’m going to go see if the doors are locked,” Brick announced.

But I grabbed his arm, staying him. “No. I don’t want you going that far away by yourself.”

He rolled his eyes. “Then come with me?”

“But what if she comes back, and we’re not here.”

He flung his hands in the air, fingers stretched wide with aggravation. “Well, what are we supposed to do? Just sit here all night?”

I chewed on my lip, indecisive. Wherever she was, she definitely should’ve come back for us by now.

“Maybe she forgot where she was supposed to meet us and she’s waiting back at the hotel.”

Brick nodded. “Okay. Cool. Let’s walk back to the hotel then.”

My stomach plummeted with worry. I hadn’t paid attention on our walk here. And it’d taken us a good ten to fifteen minutes to arrive. Our hotel could be anywhere.

I glanced at my brother, wincing because I already knew what his answer was going to be even as I asked, “Do you know how to get back?”

“*What do you mean?*” he cried, his eyes growing big with instant worry. “Don’t you?”

“I wasn’t paying attention,” I admitted defensively, trying to remain calm. I didn’t want to scare him as much as I was scaring myself. Besides, I was the big brother. I had to be the fearless one.

“Hey, do you know where our hotel is?” Brick asked a passing woman. He glanced at me. “What’s the name of it?”

I didn’t know if we should just tell anyone the name of the place where we were staying, but I wasn’t sure what else to do. So I said, “Eden Rock.” Or maybe that was just the name of the suite we were staying in. It had a lot of windows and a lot of fancy, old furniture. That’s all I remembered.

Brick repeated the name and the woman frowned as if confused before she babbled out a bunch of French. We both shied away from her, not sure if she was offering to give us a million dollars or explaining how she wanted to chop us up into a little pieces and feed us to her dog.

“Yeah, thanks anyway,” Brick told her with a wave and uneasy smile.

I took his arm, pulling him away from her and keeping him tightly against my side as I turned us away so we could walk in a different direction.

“Where’re we going?” he asked, rushing his steps to keep up with me.

“I don’t know,” I confessed. “Away.”

Breathing out a settled breath, he glanced back at the still babbling woman and faced forward again. “Good idea.”

I rolled my eyes. “Are you sure you don’t remember how we got here?”

“We could see the ocean,” he offered with a wince.

We could see the ocean now, so I wasn’t reassured by that.

Fear chilled my bones as the reality of what was happening took root in my brain. We were lost. We were lost in a foreign country and we didn’t even know how to start looking for our mother or even ask for help.

“Holy fuck,” I said under my breath.

Brick snickered. “Language, Hayden.”

For some reason, that calmed me. It didn’t matter what was happening, Brick was here. I had my brother beside me, and he was okay. I could deal with everything else.

“Shut it,” I muttered, even though I had to smile and shake my head as I spoke.

“No. You—hey, look.”

For some reason, I hadn’t let go of his arm yet, unreasonably afraid I’d lose him too. So when he plowed to a stop and pointed at something on the ground, it jerked me to a halt right next to him.

“One of my Skittles. *Sweet.*”

When he bent and reached for it as if he were actually going to pick the piece of candy up off the ground and eat it, I yanked him back. “What’re you *doing!* Don’t eat that, you idiot. It’s been on the ground all day. You want to go back home with some foreign disease?”

Brick blinked longingly at the abandoned Skittle. “But I’m hungry.”

“Oh my God, you’re hopeless.” I slapped my hand to my forehead only for a thought to strike. Suddenly, I was crying, “Oh my God, you’re a genius,” as I leapt forward and snagged the bright green piece of candy off the ground as if it were a lucky penny... which it might’ve just become.

Brick's eyes went huge as soon as I palmed it. "Hey, I saw it first," he cried, trying to take it from me.

I groaned and held it away. "I'm not trying to eat it, you moron. Just *look* at it." I held it out, my fingers open. "If this one really fell out of your bag, that means we're going in the right direction to get back to the hotel."

Brick gasped and took the Skittle from me, holding it up triumphantly. "You're right. *Yes!* We just need to follow the path back to the hotel."

I glanced around us, looking for more Skittles, but it'd gotten so dark, we couldn't see very far away. "We're going to need a light."

"I have a flashlight in my bag," Brick offered, already slinging the pack off his shoulders.

Yes! Thank you, God, for my junk-hoarding little brother. "Give it here," I said, holding out my hand.

Once he handed it over, I turned on the light, and we scanned the ground, spreading away from the site of the first Skittle in a circular pattern, until Brick cried, "There! There's another."

"Don't eat it," I instructed even as I hurried to him, and we started over again looking for the next skittle.

And that's how we found our way back to the hotel, one beacon of Skittle-colored hope at a time. It took us nearly an hour, my skin was ice cold, and it had to be way past bed time, but we made it.

"There," I said as soon as I saw something recognizable to me. "Isn't that the villa where we're staying?"

"Yes!" Brick shouted, racing forward to get reach it first.

For some reason, I hung back. Maybe I was worried Mother wouldn't be around, and the horror of our night was just beginning. Or maybe something in me already knew what I'd see when I paused to look in through the large glass window of our suite.

Because there sat the woman who'd given birth to us, lounging on a claw-footed sofa with her feet kicked up and crossed at the ankles as she sipped from a glass of wine, laughing at something she was watching on the television. It looked like a soap opera. She lifted a round chocolate bon-bon to her mouth and took a bite as if she didn't have a care in the world.

I stared in disbelief.

She *didn't* have a care in the world, certainly not a worry about either of her sons, anyway.

We had waited on her for hours, growing hungry and cold and scared, worried if she was okay, worried if *we* were going to be okay, wondering if we'd ever see her again or if we'd make it home alive. And she was here, watching television and laughing while she dined on chocolate and *wine*?

No fucking way.

In the next instant, Brick pounded on the door of the suite, and the woman inside jumped, cursing when she spilled a splash of wine on her lap.

"Mom!" Brick cried, knocking more vigorously. "Are you there? *Mom!* It's us." He jiggled the handle, but it was locked.

When she glanced toward the door, she met my gaze through the glass.

A second later, she perfected the look of a concerned mother and pressed a hand to her heart before springing from the couch and hurrying toward the door to let us in.

"Oh my God! Where *were* you?" she accused as soon as she flung the door open wide. Grabbing his arm, she yanked Brick inside and shook her finger at him. "I looked everywhere for you. I even called the authorities and they have men out searching for you *right now*. Are you two trying to give me a heart attack?"

"We were right where you left us," Brick swore, "Waiting for you to come back and meet us. It was so scary. No one talked English. We ran out of food. And it got dark and cold."

He went in for a hug, but she sniffed and held up a hand. “Honestly, Broderick, this is silk. You’ll wrinkle it. You already ruined my slacks.”

When she pointed out the wine spill, Brick mumbled, “Sorry,” and moved closer to me. I took his frozen fingers and squeezed supportively. “I just didn’t know if I was ever going see you again.”

With a harassed sigh, she rolled her eyes. “Of course you would. Do you think I’d just leave a foreign country without my children? Don’t be stupid.”

But she had that look, that look she always got when she lied. Her lips were pursing funnily again.

I stared at her, a deep cold clarity settling into my bones.

I wasn’t sure if she’d planned on leaving us there forever to fend for ourselves or if she’d just wanted the evening away from us, but whatever the case, she’d betrayed us. She’d left us—two underage little boys—with no money or anything, in a foreign place to take care of ourselves on purpose. *Anything* could’ve happened to us. Brick could’ve gotten hurt.

In that moment, something shifted inside me. A feeling. A new life resolve. I didn’t know what it was. But she hardened a place in me that felt as if it could never trust or soften again. I’d be stupid to let anyone in, to *rely* on anyone for anything. If my own mother could so easily discard me then why should I bother with anyone else?

From that point on, I never thought of the woman in front of me as mother again. To me, she’d only ever be Lana.