



the Right Move

LIZ TOMFORDE

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THE RIGHT MOVE

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To Marc, Allyson, Paige, and Camille-

*One of the themes in this book is finding friendships that fill your cup
instead of draining it.*

Thank you for being the people who fill mine.

CONTENT WARNING

Your mental health is important. For content warnings, [click here.](#)

PLAYLIST

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17. Try Me - Jason Derulo feat. Jennifer Lopez
18. Easy - Camila Cabello
19. Change Your Life - Kehlani feat. Jhené Aiko
20. Butterflies - ASTN

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RYAN

I'm not a dreamer. Not in the traditional sense, at least. My dreams are within reach, attainable moments in time, not romanticized notions of the impossible.

I Grown men fall to their knees and pray to their gods over these forty-eight minutes of basketball. Me? I don't glamorize fate or leave things to chance. I believe in hard work and dedication. My life has a plan. Opportunities are in my path because I've willed myself in their direction.

The rest of my teammates, however, have certainly romanticized the idea of a championship if they think they can walk into the first week of practice as out of shape as they are.

"Dom, you need to roll off that screen twice as fast. You're slow as fuck right now. What the hell were you doing all summer?"

"Living my life, Shay. You should try it sometime."

Dom Jackson, our big man, slumps over, his palms on his knees, trying to catch his breath along with every other guy I call my teammate.

I use my practice jersey to swipe sweat from my brow as one of the rookies passes me the ball at the top of the key.

"Let's run it again."

"Ryan, practice was over an hour ago. Some of us have wives and kids we need to go see." Ethan Jeong, our veteran shooting guard, stands with his hands on his hips in the corner of the court.

"Yeah, and some of us have dates with..." Dom looks over to one of the young guys on the sideline. "*What was her name?*" he silently mouths.

“Raquel! Some of us have dates with beautiful women named Raquel.”

My eyes wander around my teammates, everyone exhausted but me. “Fine,” I resign. “We’ll call it.”

“Thank God!” Dom turns around, throwing his hands up and slipping his sweat-soaked jersey over his head. The rest of the team quickly follows to the locker room.

“It’s still pre-season, Ryan.” Ethan puts a comforting hand on my shoulder. “They’ll get it together.”

“I’m tired of losing. We can’t even win a wildcard game to make the playoffs. I spent my entire summer running two-a-days to get in shape for this season. Everyone else needs to get on my level.”

“They’ll never be on your level. That’s why you’ll be one of the greats, but as a new captain, you need them to respect you, and I’m not referring to the way you play.” He backs away, following the rest of the team. “Besides, I don’t want you tiring yourself out too much. I need you to carry me on your back and get me a ring so I can retire.”

Ethan’s lips slide up in a smile before he ducks into the locker room.

He’s a good guy. Family man. Father of three children and long-time NBA vet. He was the team captain for the last seven years until he asked to step down this season, wanting to have a better work-life balance.

And as of last week, I earned the title and am now the newest captain of the Devils, Chicago’s NBA team.

I knew it’d happen one day. I just didn’t know it’d be when I was twenty-seven and before my fifth season in the league. I still have a lot to learn at this level, and now I have the weight of being the team leader, on and off the court.

The General Manager of the Devils was against the promotion, but that’s not how it works around here. Our captain is determined by a team vote, and after unanimous support by my teammates, I was given the title.

I want to be good for my guys, but I want respect for more than the way I play. I get plenty of it for my talent throughout the league. I’ve dedicated my life to my craft, sacrificed relationships and most of my twenties for this game and it shows.

Year after year, I've beat my own records on my path to greatness, not letting distractions get in the way of what I want—to be one of the best to ever play the game.

Though, I have quite the shoes to fill, seeing as my home court is the same as the GOAT himself. The championship banners that hang from the United Center remind me of the greatness that came before me and the gaps in years since we've had one, taunt me to earn my own.

I need my guys to take this game as seriously as I do. I need them to live, eat, and breathe it the way I do if we're going to have a shot this season, but how do I voice that without sounding like the controlling point guard they've come to know me as? Now, as the team leader, I need to figure out how to communicate with them in a way I haven't been able to before because *"listen to me, I'm the best player you've ever shared a court with,"* doesn't exactly work when you're the team captain.

I'm not particularly close with any of my teammates besides Ethan, so the vote was a bit surprising. My game has always spoken for me, and I got away with being domineering on the court, but now I have another title to wear and I'm not sure how to adjust.

"Casey!" I call out to one of the interns as he quickly scurries my way. "That's your name, right? Casey?"

"Yes, Mr. Shay."

I roll my eyes. "Call me Ryan or Shay or literally anything other than Mr. Shay. You got plans? I need someone to rebound for me."

"I uh...I...well, my mom..."

"You got plans or what?"

"Nope." He quickly shakes his head. "I can rebound for you, Mr. Shay." His eyes go wide. "Ryan! I can rebound for you, Ryan."

His nervous strides take him to the net where he stands underneath it, wearing a pair of khaki cargo shorts and a polo shirt with our team logo. He can't be older than eighteen or nineteen, but the staff has him dressing like he's in his mid-forties.

I take my spot at the free-throw line where I plan to stay until I get at least a hundred shots up, but by shot number seventy-six, the doors to our private practice get thrown open.

“Ry!” my sister calls out. “Practice was over two hours ago. I went by the apartment looking for you.”

“Hey, Vee!”

Shot number seventy-seven barely touches the net as it floats through the hoop. Casey cleans up the rebound and passes it back.

“You already worked out this morning. What are you doing?”

“Getting my free throws in.”

My twin sister stands a few feet away from me with a hand on her hip. I don’t look her way, but in my periphery, I can see her shaking her head at me, her curly hair bouncing with the movement.

“What’s your name?” She directs her attention to the intern.

“I’m Casey.”

“I’ll take over for you, Casey.” Stevie intercepts his pass to me and steals his spot under the net.

The intern’s nervous gaze bounces between my sister and me.

“Do you have a ride home? It’s late.” My twin is as sweet as can be, and unlike me, I didn’t even realize the kid might not have a ride home.

“Yeah. My mom is parked out back waiting for me.”

“Ryan!” Stevie scolds. “His mom has been waiting for him.”

“I didn’t know!” I throw my hands up. “Sorry, man.”

Casey quickly shakes his head. “It was an honor, Mr. Shay.”

My eyes narrow at him.

“Ryan, I mean. It was an honor, Ryan Shay. Anytime.” Casey awkwardly waves before scurrying out the main doors.

Stevie turns back to me, standing under the net. “His mother was waiting for him,” she laughs. “How fucking adorable is that?”

“Adorable,” I deadpan, clapping my hands together and asking for the basketball that’s resting on her hip.

“How many do you have left?” She passes the ball, perfectly nailing it in my shooter’s pocket.

After twenty-seven years together and her rebounding for me more times than I could count, my twin sister has it down.

Sinking another shot, I tell her, “Twenty-two.”

She passes it back.

“What’s up? Tired of Zanders already? You ready to move back in?”

“Ha-ha,” my sister says dryly. “Not a chance. I’m obsessed with that guy.”

My lips quirk in a proud smile. Evan Zanders, who I thought was going to be an absolute piece of shit, has turned out to be anything but. He plays professional hockey for Chicago, and my sister met him last year when she was a flight attendant on their team’s plane. Their relationship was under wraps until early this summer, and the past four months have been a nonstop public love fest between the two of them.

Stevie moved in with him, which is thankfully just across the street from my place, and as much as I like to be right, when it comes to Zanders, I’m happy I was completely wrong about the guy. He lights my sister up like I’ve never seen before, allowing her to own who she is with confidence. Hard to hate the guy when he’s the best thing to happen to your favorite person.

And I’m not going to lie, he’s become a good friend of mine as well.

“Well, I’d say he’s equally obsessed with you, if not more so.”

My sister rests the ball on her hip. “I know. Isn’t it great?”

Lightly laughing, I shake my head and clap my hands together, needing the ball back.

There’s no denying I’m a different guy around my sister. I’m the man I was before the fame and fortune. Money has never gone to my head in the way you’d expect it to for a young first-round draft pick, but it has made me more wary and paranoid than most people realize. Stevie is the only person I unequivocally trust with my life and having that freedom, not watching my every turn, allows me a moment to relax. To be myself.

“So, what’s up?” The ball slips through the net with another made shot. “What’s so urgent you had to come down here and rebound for me?”

Stevie doesn’t pass the ball back. Instead, she holds it in front of her with her arms across her chest. “I have a favor to ask.”

I hold my hands out for her pass, but she refuses.

“What is it?”

“Well, you remember how I moved out?”

“Yes, Vee. I’m pretty sure I remember I live alone now.”

“In your huge, beautiful, empty-when-you’re-on-the-road apartment.” Her eyes sparkle.

“And?”

“You know my friend, Indy, right? My old coworker.”

“The chick who showed up at our apartment and sobbed all night, then puked on my shoes in a bar the only other time I met her? Hard to forget.”

“Because she caught her long-term boyfriend with someone else,” she reminds me. “You see, her parents moved to Florida—”

“No.”

“Ryan,” Stevie protests. “I haven’t asked anything yet.”

“I know. And I’m stopping you before you do. You know I’m terrible at saying no to you, so I’m not going to let you even ask the question. She’s not moving in with me.”

“Ry, she has nowhere to go. She got promoted at work, and she’s going to have to give it up if she can’t find a place to live in the city. You know how little we make.”

“You make enough to pay for a place to live.”

“She’s...” My sister hesitates. “She’s going through some financial stuff and can’t afford to live alone here. Chicago is expensive.”

“Then she can find a friend to mooch off. I don’t even know her other than she got cheated on and can’t hold her liquor.”

“Ryan, don’t be like that. You have a huge apartment and you’re on the road for work half the time. Indy travels for work as much as you do. Hockey is the same season as basketball. You’ll barely see each other.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because it was one thing when you lived with me. You’re my sister and my best friend, but I don’t want a roommate. You know how sacred my time at home is. End of discussion.” I clap my hands together, needing to get the ball back from my twin so I can finish my daily shots.

Instead, Stevie’s shoulders drop in disappointment before she turns on her heel and heads to the exit, taking my basketball with her.

“Vee, what the hell? I need to finish shooting.”

“You can rebound for yourself then.” She continues towards the exit, not bothering to turn around.

“You can’t be mad at me for saying no.”

“Not mad. Just disappointed. Would it kill you to care about someone or something other than this orange ball?”

“I care about *you*,” I remind her, but she charges through the double doors leading towards the hallway, dropping the basketball in the corner before she goes.

Fuck.

I try not to give a shit if I disappoint people. Their standards are never as high as the ones I hold for myself. However, my twin sister? Her opinion is the only one I care about besides my own.

I jog after her.

“Vee,” I call out as I open the doors to the hallway. She’s almost to the exit but turns on her heel to face me. “Tell me why I have to do this. Are you really that upset? Why does this matter so much to you?”

“You don’t have to do anything, but she’s my friend. She was my *first* friend in this city. You know how hard it’s been for me to make friends that weren’t just looking for a way to get closer to you. Well, Indy has been that friend, and if she can’t find a place she can afford, then she’s going to move to Florida so she can stay with her parents. I don’t want her to leave Chicago, and I don’t know how else to help her. The guy she was planning to marry cheated on her and she was the one who had to move out. She needs a win.”

Why does my sister have to pull at my goddamn heartstrings all the time? Someone else could give me this same exact speech and I wouldn’t blink an eye, but with Stevie saying it, my resolve is crumbling, wanting to give her anything she asks for. I’m the reason my sister has had a hard time making real friends, and now she’s giving me an opportunity to make it up to her, even just a little bit.

“I trust her,” she continues. “You can too.”

I care about Stevie’s happiness far more than my own. In fact, I’ve given up on that idea for myself, which causes the next thing to slip out of my mouth.

“To make it clear, I don’t want to do this.”

“I know.”

“There needs to be a move-out date.”

Stevie’s lip twitches as her eyes begin to sparkle.

“I want some sort of makeshift leasing agreement, and she’s paying rent. This is not a free ride.”

“Of course, she will. But could you make it affordable? It’s not like you need the money.”

Here I am doing her a favor and she’s making special requests. “This is temporary. She’s not staying with me forever.”

“Got it.” Stevie’s smile is unable to hide. “Have I told you that you’re my favorite person in the entire world?”

“Yeah, yeah.” I turn back to the gym. “Come rebound for me. I have fifty free throws left.”

“You said you had twenty-something.”

I continue to the free-throw line, not bothering to turn around. “Looks like I lost count while I was letting my sister talk me into having a random chick move into my apartment.”

Stevie’s beaming smile radiates in her tone. “Fifty it is.”

