



RILEY'S REVEILLE

Standing Tall

A SNEAK PEEK

by K.C. Hart

The high school gym was huge, but the shadows stretching across the hardwood felt all too familiar.

Just a few months ago, I was standing in the center circle of the spring league finals, staring down the Westside Falcons. I'll never forget the feeling of stepping out onto the court that night and seeing *Oak Creek Knights* up on that giant electronic scoreboard, or looking up into the crowded stands to see Chloe and Sebastian waving that bright blue, glittery *Go Knights!!! #8* poster board right next to Mom, Grandma Brown, and Clark Bennett. We had won more than just a game that night.

But the real turning point was waiting for me back home from the beach that day, hidden safely beneath my pillow.

After we came back from the beach and I was finally alone, I went to my bedroom and pulled out the small, sealed package Grandma had given me before the game. My hands shook slightly as I tore the paper away. I had spent the car ride secretly wishing it was another letter from Dad, but what lay inside was something entirely different. It was a letter from my mom. Reading her words made me cry, and as I went to put the letter back in the envelope, I saw a gold chain necklace in it. It was beautiful. It spelled out my name, *Riley*. I unclasped it, determined to never take it off.

Now, freshman orientation at Oak Creek Regional High School was here, and the place was an absolute maze, so different from middle school.

Walking through the double doors alongside Chloe and Sebastian, the sheer scale of the school made my chest tighten. This wasn't just our old neighborhood anymore; "Regional" meant students from all over the district were packed into the corridors. I felt like a small fish in a big sea.

But there was no time to feel small. Varsity basketball tryouts were starting, and the stakes were higher than they had ever been.

As I laced up my sneakers and stepped onto the court, I caught the eyes of Carla and Rebecca.

We were reunited, but the atmosphere was entirely different from our spring league days. The upperclassmen were faster, stronger, and so good. The competition was fierce, pushing my "ape arms" to their absolute limit.

Looking up at the new, daunting scoreboard, I took a deep breath. I was a freshman now. It was time to **stand tall**.