



PLAYERS
BREAK
RULES

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JILLIAN QUINN

PLAYERS BREAK RULES

JILLIAN QUINN

Also by Jillian Quinn

Campus Players Series

Players Break Rules

Players Keep Score

Players Always Win

Players Break Hearts

Players Love Hard

Face-Off Series

Parker

Kane

Donovan

Jameson

Face-Off Elite Series

[The Player I Love to Hate](#)

[The Player I Want to Keep](#)

[The Player I Want to Date](#)

[The Player I Hate to Love](#)

For a complete list of books, updates, and new releases, visit

JillianQuinnBooks.com

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, both living or deceased, establishments, businesses, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2018 Jillian Quinn

All rights reserved.

JillianQuinnBooks.com

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Campus Players Series](#)

[Also by Jillian Quinn](#)

About the Author

Chapter One

The men's locker room is sacred for a reason, and now I know why. Keeping my eyes on the floor, I use my hair to block my face and haul ass down the center aisle toward my dad's office.

My dad has three rules.

No talking to his players.

No hanging out with his players.

No dating his players.

So why did he ask me to meet him after practice? For years, I have followed his rules and steered clear of his players... until today. I consider running out of the room, but once the players see me, I commit to my mission.

Players whistle as I move past them. One guy informs me I'm in the men's locker room—as if I need a reminder. Another jerk has the nerve to reach out and touch my leg.

I feel like I'm doing the world's longest walk of shame. Dozens of eyes are on me. The players whisper about me under their breaths. But once I'd stepped into the locker room, I wasn't turning back. So, here I am.

Go me and my walk of shame.

I glance up for a second to look for the door that leads to my dad's office... and I run head-first into a bare chest. Pushing out my palm, my fingers graze a wet, muscular

stomach. A few inches lower and I would have ripped the towel from his waist.

Blocked by a wall of muscle, I peek up at Preston Parker, all six feet four inches of him. Preston is even bigger close up and hotter too. If any player were ever off-limits to me, it's Preston.

The corner of his mouth turns up into a wicked smirk that produces an unusual reaction from me.

"Excuse me." I shove Preston, desperate to move him to the side, but he's a big guy. "You're in my way."

His fingers brush mine. "And you are in mine."

A rush of heat shoots through my fingertips and runs up my arm. Touching Preston shouldn't feel this good. He's my dad's favorite player and the best defenseman in the division. But most of all, he's out of my league.

Like way out of it.

On another planet.

I'm a scholarship kid. He's a rich athlete with the potential to go pro. We have nothing in common apart from our athleticism.

Preston touches my hand for a split second before I step back from him. "You have the wrong locker room." He runs his long fingers through his short, dark hair, pushing it off his forehead. Like the rest of him, it's wet.

He smiles, and my silly heart claws its way out of my chest. Water slides down the side of his face, and I have an immediate desire to lick it from his tanned skin.

Focus, Bex.

"No, I don't," I counter. "This is the right locker room. Just shitty timing."

He tilts his head to the side and studies my face long enough to make me feel self-conscious. "I know you. Right? You're Coach Bryant's daughter. You look different. Were you always so... tall?"

I'm five feet ten inches, which comes in handy when you play basketball. Preston still has six inches on me, though.

"I've been this tall since freshman year. And it's Bex."

He scratches the stubble along his angular jaw, still smirking at me. "Bex? What an unusual name."

"Okay, Peter Preston Parker. This from the guy who's named after Spider-Man."

He laughs. "You're a real smart ass, Bex Bryant."

"So I've been told."

His crooked smile and disgustingly good looks produce a strange reaction inside me. My physical reaction to Preston needs to fuck off. Like right now.

"Bex is short for Bexley," I add for clarification.

Not like he cares about my name. He's too busy staring down my basketball jersey at my boobs.

"Preston," he says. "Not Peter. No one calls me by my first name. But I'm sure you already knew that."

I roll my eyes at the arrogant jerk.

But I'm sure you already knew that.

Who does he think he is?

My dad will have a stroke if he sees me talking to one of his players, let alone his precious Preston. After winning the Frozen Four last year, my dad swears Preston will take them all the way again, especially after he won MVP. And from what I've heard, Mr. MVP has no problem doing the same with the girls on campus.

I can't be one of them.

I will never be one of them.

So, why do I want to be one of them?

"Nice meeting you, Bex," he says, and then struts—yes, fucking struts—down the aisle to his locker.

I look over my shoulder at him, still in shock. My lips part when he removes the towel from his waist and hangs it over the top of his locker door. With his back slightly turned to me, I can't see all of him. Although, I have an excellent view of his perfect ass.

My mouth is still open in horror. Shock. Curiosity. Take your pick. I blink a few times to make sure I'm not imagining him. Maybe all the steam from the showers is going to my head. Preston and his insanely gorgeous body could be a mirage. It has to be because a guy like Preston would never look at me the way he is right now.

He knows damn well what he's doing when he slips into his boxer briefs and winks at me. Preston sure can fill out a pair of underwear—like holy shit, he sure can.

And I'm still staring. It's like watching a train wreck, a spectacular one. I'm too stunned to move, which makes this even more embarrassing because I'm not supposed to be in here.

Every guy is now staring at me, some dressed, while others are shirtless and in boxers like Preston. Most of them don't seem to give a shit that a girl is standing in the middle of the locker room.

I bite my bottom lip, and Preston mimics me. He's the spitting image of his father when he was younger—the sexy smirks, the killer abs, all of it. My dad obsessed over Alex Parker while he was in the NHL. Now he's the head coach of the Philadelphia Flyers—my dad's favorite professional hockey team.

My dad is just as crazy over his son. And now, for obvious reasons, so am I. After an intense stare down, I shake my head at Preston, finally having enough sense to walk away.

What's wrong with me?

I've never acted so ridiculous around a boy before. Well, Preston isn't a boy. He's all man with his chiseled jaw, thick chest, muscular body, and sexy smirks.

I can't get any of it out of my head. I may never forget how good Preston looks almost naked. And now I wonder about the rest of him. This is so bad. Like the worst thing ever because I can't break my dad's rules.

At the end of the long hallway, I find my father's office. He stands in front of a flat-screen television with a remote in his hand. My dad loves two things—hockey and me. And when he can combine them, he's at his happiest. I love seeing him in his element.

I inch my way into the room. "Hey, Dad."

"Hey, honey." He hits pause on the game tape and drops the remote on the table. "I wasn't expecting you so soon. Your practice usually lasts until at least four-thirty."

"Coach Vaughn let us leave early."

"You should have stayed behind to get more time on the court."

My dad doesn't know the meaning of a break. All he does is work. When he's not coaching hockey, he studies it. He's obsessed to the point of madness. By extension, he thinks I should be as crazy about basketball, but it's not like I plan to make a career of it.

"Three hours was enough for me. Coach Vaughn had us running suicides for over an hour. My calves are screaming at me."

He laughs. "Just make sure you don't fall behind. You need to keep your position on the team." Dad turns to face me. "Did you come in through the side entrance?"

I nod. "Uh-huh."

Mental note—find the side entrance.

For the love of all that is holy, I don't want to run into more dicks or Preston. Or Preston and his dick. Why am I even thinking of him?

Damn him.

"How was your day?"

I almost laugh but keep a straight face. “Good. Nothing special. The usual practice and classes.”

I didn’t see a bunch of naked men on my way in here. I didn’t talk to his favorite player and break rule number one. Nope, not at all. That would make for an interesting conversation, one I never want to have with my dad.

“Are you coming to the game on Friday?”

He plops down on the couch in front of the television and pats the cushion next to him. I drop my gym bag on the floor and sink into the plush fabric.

“Yeah, I guess.”

He cocks an eyebrow at me. “You guess? It’s the first game of the season. Bring some of your teammates along.”

“What team are you playing?”

“Boston,” he says, and my blood runs cold.

I sit awkwardly still when I think about who plays for Boston College. Kellan Lehane. The asshole who ruined my life.

Dad notes the fear in my eyes. “I’m sorry, honey. I wasn’t thinking. It’s been so long since everything happened.” He places his hand over mine and holds it there. “You don’t have to come. It’s all right. Come to another game.”

I broke my dad’s rules with Kellan, and that ended horribly for me. Because of him, I no longer have the desire to date another athlete ever again. One rotten apple was enough to spoil the rest. So, why do I keep thinking about Preston?

“No, I can do this. The game is a big deal for you.”

He shakes his head. “It’s another year, a different season, same game. Nothing ever changes.”

“But this is your first season as the head coach of a college team.”

Until last season, my dad was an assistant coach at Strickland University.

“I was thinking we could grab a pizza from Gio’s before I have to get back to work.”

“But practice is over,” I point out.

“Coaching never ends, honey. I have a few hours of tapes to run through.”

I frown. “You work too much.”

He smiles. “Wanna eat with your old man before you head back to your dorm?”

“Sounds good. But only if we can get pepperoni.”

He holds out his hand for me to slap like I’m one of the guys. “Deal.”

Chapter Two

PRESTON

After my encounter in the locker room with Bex Bryant, I can't get her out of my head. But she's my coach's daughter and completely off-limits. So I have to push the image of her in a pair of tight spandex shorts out of mind. I have to forget about how good she looked in a basketball jersey.

I walk across campus with a few of my teammates, who I've known since we were babies.

Tucker Kane yells to a group of sorority girls and whistles at them.

"Didn't you hook up with them last year?" I ask him.

He runs his fingers through his spiky blond hair, confusion scrolling across his face. "I don't know. Did we?"

I laugh as Tucker speaks for both him and Trent. Compared to the Kane twins, the rest of us look like saints. They move on from girls faster than it takes to lace a pair of skates.

"I didn't," Drake Donovan chimes. "There's no reason we can't share, Prez," he says with a wink.

My closest friends call me Prez. Jamie started it when we were younger, and the mysterious 'z' that's not in my name somehow became my nickname. Almost no one calls me Preston, and no one who wants to live calls me Peter.

“Hard pass,” I tell Drake. “I don’t want Trent or Tucker’s sloppy seconds.”

Drake is the son of Carter Donovan. He’s one of the best goaltenders in the division. At six-foot-seven, Drake has a few inches on me. He’s built like his dad, a giant whose muscular body blocks the net.

Jamie laughs. “You better look for girls on another campus then.”

Our parents grew up together in foster care and raised us like brothers. My uncle Jameson is the reason I’m named after Spider-Man. He won a bet with my parents, and I got stuck being Peter Preston Parker. All of us grew up with skates on our feet and on the ice together, knowing what it’s like to have famous parents. It’s also what bonds us.

“Did Coach Bryant’s daughter look different to you?” I ask Jamie. “I didn’t recognize her at first.”

He shoves a hand through his short, brown hair. “That girl was Coach’s daughter? No way.”

I nod. “Yeah, that was Bex Bryant.”

“Damn,” Drake says. “What happened to her? The last time I saw her, she looked like a little girl.”

Trent scratches the light stubble along his jaw. “She has tits now. Nice ones.” He pauses for a second. “Why? You like her?”

I don’t respond at first.

Do I like her?

I shrug. “She’s hot. I’d fuck her.”

“She has nice legs,” Drake says.

“Nice tits,” Jamie comments with a lazy grin.

“But she’s Coach’s daughter,” I shoot back. “He would flip his shit if I went anywhere near her.”

“Right, right,” Trent says.

“You don’t want to get on his bad side,” Drake interjects. “We need all the playing time we can get this year if we want to get into the NHL.”

No girl is worth jeopardizing my future. Contrary to belief, I can’t make a pro team just because my dad had talent. I have to prove I can hack it, too. I have big shoes to fill, as do the rest of my friends.

“And let’s not forget about The Queen,” Trent adds. “She’s been looking for dirt on us. Don’t give her any, Prez.”

“She’s got it out for Tucker, not me.”

“Correction,” Tucker says with his hand raised. “She has it out for all of us. Or did you forget that when she put all of us on blast last week after the party at Delta Sig?”

Drake snorts. “How could we forget? She posted pictures of us half naked.”

“No, I was naked,” Tucker says with laughter in his tone. “Butt ass naked. Shame about the girl who got caught up in this mess.”

Drake laughs. “I’m sure getting caught with your dick in her mouth was the highlight of her year.”

“I heard her parents made her quit school,” Jamie says. “Way to go, Tuck.” He rolls his eyes at Tucker. “Did you really need to get a blowjob in the middle of a crowded hallway at a party? And why the fuck were you naked?” He shakes his head and frowns. “Fucking idiot.”

“You’re no fun.” Tucker smirks. “Take the stick out of your ass and live a little.”

“He’s too busy obsessing over Cece,” I teased.

“No, I’m not.” Jamie’s cheeks redden by the second. “I’m done with her.”

“That’s what you said last time,” Drake fires back.

“And the time before that,” I remind him. “We’re over the Cece saga. It’s time to move on, J.”

“When the fuck did this turn into a lecture about my dating life?” Jamie’s nostrils flare as he looks at Tucker. “I’m not the reason The Queen started posting about us.”

“Hey, it’s not my fault,” Tucker says in his defense.

“Stop getting fucking blow jobs in public.” Jamie slams his hand on Tucker’s back. “And we won’t have any more problems with The Queen.”

Tucker tips back his head, his laughter filling the air, making Jamie even more angry. “I would have been a fool not to let her wrap those pretty lips around me.”

Jamie groans, turning away from Tucker. He’s the serious one of the group, the cleanest, and the smartest. We all jokingly call him our house manager. Sometimes, we even call him Dad. He hates it, but we get a kick out of it.

Since the start of the year, a blogger who calls herself The Queen has been following us around and writing lies about all of us. She thinks she’s Gossip Girl, or some shit, like she has a duty to tell the student body about our dirty deeds because our parents are famous. Like we didn’t grow up with targets on our backs and know how to play the game.

It started with posts on Instagram about us. Then she created an app everyone on campus has installed on their cell phones. Every time I hear someone’s phone ding, I get a little jumpy. My parents don’t need any more drama from me, and I’d like to keep it that way for the rest of the school year. So that means no more thinking about Bex Bryant.

Drake taps my arm. “I’m hungry. Let’s get something to eat before we head home. We’re out of food.”

Tucker howls with laughter. “That’s because you ate it all.”

“Fuck you.” He rubs his hand over his stomach. “My mom says I’m a growing boy. And I want pizza from Gio’s.”

“Who the fuck are you kidding? You were full grown by the time you were five,” Tucker quips. “Didn’t you start shaving when we were in fourth grade?”

“Sixth,” Drake corrects. “You’re just jealous you didn’t hit a growth spurt until our sophomore year of high school.”

I turn to Drake. “Our first game of the season is three days from now, and you want to eat junk food already?”

He holds up his middle finger with a stupid look on his face. “Kiss my ass, Cap.”

He calls me that because I’m the captain of our team.

“Stop being such a hard ass, Prez,” Trent groans. “What’s one slice of pizza?”

“You take your captain duties way too serious,” Drake says. “If Trent and Tuck can have a beer every night, then I can eat pizza.”

“Fine,” I agree because there’s no point in arguing with them. “If we lose on Friday, or you look like shit on the ice, I’m blaming all of you. All you do is jerk off.”

“More like jerk each other off,” Jamie jokes.

Drake punches Jamie’s arm. “Don’t be a dick.”

Jamie flinches from the hard hit and returns his gesture. “Asshole.”

This is a typical day for us.

We live in the same house together, eat most meals together, work out and play hockey together. Our lives are so intertwined we never have much space. Some days, I want to beat the living shit out of all of them, so they’ll give me some room to breathe.

But they are family.

And family sticks together.

“One slice,” I tell Drake. “You were sluggish at practice.”

“Easy for you to say, Prez.” Drake gives me a nasty look. “You could eat ten pizzas and never lose an ounce of muscle.”

I ignore his comment. It’s not as easy for me to stay in game-ready shape as he thinks. I have to work my ass off. Living up to the Parker name is hard enough. Everyone

compares my hockey stats to my dad's. The pressure to be as good as him, or even better, is often suffocating.

We cross the street, headed toward Giovanni's Pizza.

"What were you talking to Coach's daughter about?" Trent asks. "It looked intense."

"Nothing."

"Yeah, right?" Trent nudges me in the arm with his elbow. "That didn't look like *nothing* to me."

"I told her she was in the wrong locker room... and that she had a weird name."

Jamie laughs. "Like you have room to talk about weird names, Spidey."

I punch him in the arm, almost knocking him off balance, but he manages to regain his footing. "Call me that again and watch what happens."

"Coach will rip your dick off if he catches you looking at his daughter," Trent says. "We all saw you eye-fucking the shit out of her."

I wink. "Good thing he didn't catch me."

"Coach loves him," Jamie counters. "He treats Prez like a son. I'm sure he'd give him a pass to hit that."

"Now, I really can't fuck his daughter... seeing as how that would make us related."

He laughs, opening the door to the crowded pizzeria for me. "I bet he wouldn't care. He'd make an exception for his team captain."

Would he, though?

Doubtful.

We step inside to wall-to-wall booths filled with college kids. Some people are sitting at the bar that runs along the right side, shoveling slices into their mouths. Gio's is the local hangout for most people on campus. The pizza shop is almost

always open, making it the perfect place to come when you're drunk and need a quick bite to eat.

"Great, nowhere to sit." Drake glances around the room and rubs his stomach. "Maybe we should get our pizza to go."

"Nah, we can stand and eat," I say.

Tucker points at a table of familiar girls. "I'm sure they would make room for us."

I shake my head. "Been there, done that. Stay away from the redhead. She's bat shit crazy."

"I'd hit that," Drake says.

Tucker makes a gagging sound. "Hard pass on Parker's sloppy seconds."

Jamie shrugs, unaffected. "Prez has good taste in women."

"It's called standards, something Tucker and Trent don't have."

We stroll to the counter about to order when I hear Coach Bryant call my name. I look over my shoulder. He's with his daughter in a booth by the window. She stares at me with a slice of half-eaten pepperoni pizza in her hand. Grease drips down the right side of her mouth. Most girls would have blushed by now and wiped their face.

Not Bex.

Zero fucks given.

I walk over to their table, flanked by Drake, Tucker, Trent, and Jamie. Bex bites into her pizza, now ignoring me.

Coach slaps the seat next to him. "Sit with us."

"Thanks for the invite, Coach." I wave him off. "But we don't want to crash your dinner."

"No, that's nonsense. I insist." He looks to his daughter for confirmation. "Honey, you don't mind, right?"

Bex shrugs and slides across the bench, moving her plate with her. She finishes her slice and then wipes her mouth with a napkin.

Beautiful without even trying, Bex is still in the same shorts and fitted jersey from earlier. Her blonde hair falls in messy waves over her breasts. Her face is free of makeup, her lips chapped with a minor cut on the right side. Bex doesn't seem to care what anyone thinks of her. She has just the right amount of sass and reminds me of... my mom. I was raised by a strong, stubborn woman who was on track to play basketball professionally until an injury ended her career.

“Have you guys met my daughter, Bex?”

“Not until she ran into me in the locker room earlier,” I admit.

Her eyes widen as if I said something wrong.

Coach cocks a curious eyebrow at her.

“I lied about coming in through the side entrance,” she says to clear up his confusion.

His cheeks flush once he realizes she walked through a crowded locker room full of naked men.

“It's okay, Dad. Nothing I haven't seen before.”

His eyes pop out of his head, but he keeps his cool in front of us and rebounds quickly. “We'll talk about this later, Bex.” His focus shifts from his daughter and back to me. “Join us.”

I squeeze Coach Bryant's shoulder. “That's all right, we were just grabbing a slice for the road.”

My friends are right about Coach Bryant treating me like a son. He has shown me special treatment since freshman year when he was still the assistant coach. He pulled me aside at the first tryout and told me I had something special and not to waste it on women or booze. Ever since, he's been more than a coach to me.

“We'll be back,” Tucker says to Coach and pulls me away from the table, lowering his voice. “Dude, you were staring at her a little too hard in front of Coach Bryant.”

We stop in front of the counter, and Tucker orders a slice for each of us. I pull out my wallet, assuming these cheap

fucks aren't paying. Not like they can't afford it. They have hefty trust funds, too.

I hand a twenty to the man behind the register, my body angled toward Tucker. "I wasn't staring. Would you fuck off about it?"

"She's trouble," Jamie says with a concerned expression on his face. "I can see it already."

"I'm not even going there," I spit back. "Coach's daughter is out of the question."

Drake laughs. "Yeah, but you never turn down a challenge."

He's right.

I learned that from my dad. If Bex were anyone other than my favorite coach's daughter, I would have been all over her. I love her attitude. No one ever challenges me, especially not women.

We grab our food from the counter and head back to Coach's table. Bex glances up at me, this time without a mouth full of food. Wide blue eyes stare back at me, a defiant smirk on her lips.

Fuck, I'm in trouble.

Jamie is spot-on about this girl.

"There's plenty of room on your side," Bex says to her dad. "No need to make a Bex sandwich. I wouldn't want to break one of your rules."

His rules?

Now, this I'm dying to know more about. Coach has rules for his daughter or his team? I make a mental note to find out whatever I can about Bex. I'm sure she has social media accounts. She also has friends and teammates who will give me dirt.

Realization sparks in Coach's eyes. "Tucker and Drake sit over here with me. Jamie and Trent pull up two chairs from

that table over there.” He points at a table with unused wooden stools.

We drop our plates to the table and get comfortable. Bex made everything so damn awkward, but leave it to Tucker to make small talk.

“So,” Tucker says to Bex. “You’re on the women’s basketball team? I hear you’re good.”

She nods. “I’m a shooting guard.”

I lift the greasy pizza from my plate. “Same position as my mom.”

“Bex has a little crush on your mom,” Coach says.

She swats at his hand, telling him to be quiet.

I turn to look at her, a smile on my face. Maybe this is my way into her closed-off world. “You have a thing for my mom?” I can’t even get out the words without laughing.

Bex shields the side of her face with her hand. “Dad, seriously, you’re so embarrassing.”

“What?” Coach Bryant seems unfazed. “It’s true. Bex has been studying your mom’s crossover for years. She was planning to go to Villanova, too, until I persuaded her to come along with me to Strick U.”

To the sports world, my mom is Coach, one of the best agents in the business. Her face has been on covers of magazines, her deals talked about for the past twenty-five years. She saved my father’s hockey career, and then she saved him, too.

“Do you want to meet her?” I offer because I’m not turning down the opportunity to hang out with Bex alone. “I help my mom coach a youth basketball team if you want to come along for the ride.”

Anything to get some alone time with this girl. I’ve never brought a girl home to meet my parents. My mom will go nuts over Bex. She’ll probably have my Aunt Sydney planning our wedding by the end of the month.

I don't care.

I'm used to people wanting to meet my parents. It comes with the territory of having a famous family.

Bex slowly lowers her hand from her face, and our eyes meet. "Um... I would love that.."

I remove my cell phone from my pocket and hand it to her. "Add your number."

She adds her number to my phone, then slides it across the table.

It's too easy.

I shove the last bite of pizza down my throat, needing to get out of here. The longer I sit next to Bex, the more I want to touch her again. Her bare legs are close to mine, her black shorts riding up her thighs. She's tall, built like a basketball player. I keep stealing glances down her top, wondering how her tits would look in my hockey jersey.

"You guys ready?" I ask my friends.

Drake licks the grease from the corner of his mouth and slides off the bench, giving Tucker some space to get up. Jamie follows suit, lifting our plates from the table. He's a neat freak, and the only reason our house isn't a total wreck.

"It's been real, Coach." Tucker waves. "Nice meeting you, Bex."

I tip my head. "Later, Coach."

"Practice bright and early tomorrow," he says.

I nod. "Bex, it's been a pleasure."

And then, I leave Gio's with a stupid smile on my face, all because of the tomboy with no filter.

Chapter Three

PRESTON

I'm in the exercise room, halfway into my routine, minding my own business when Jamie approaches my bench. He shoves a hand through his hair, tugging at the ends, and glances down at me.

"Want some company?" He sits on the open bench next to me and plays with the seam of his mesh shorts. "We could take turns spotting each other."

"Yeah, I guess." I push the bar above my body once more feeling the burn. "Think you can keep up? You looked like some washed-up has-been on the ice earlier."

Jamie rolls his eyes at me, and then helps me set the bar on the rack. "I just need to focus."

"It's all the drinking you've been doing with Tuck and Trent over at Delta Sig. They can get away with having a few beers, but you're not like them. Stay away from that shit during the week. If you guys spent as much time practicing as you do chasing around sorority chicks, you'd be giving me a run for my money at MVP this year."

He leans forward balancing himself on his elbows. "I'll be fine by the game on Friday. Stop worrying. You sound like my dad."

I shrug. "I'm the captain of the team for a reason. Someone has to keep your ass in line."

He holds out his hand to silence me. "Whatever. Don't start with me. I'm not in the mood. I had two hours of sleep

last night before I had to get up for practice.”

After I wipe my face with my towel, I sling it around my neck. “I’m only looking out for your career. We can’t make pro together if you’re too busy drinking and running around campus trying to get your dick wet.”

“Says that guy who has a crush on Coach Bryant’s daughter.”

I shake my head. “That’s never gonna happen.”

“She looked pretty into you last night. You could be tapping Bex right now. That eye-fucking I saw in Gio’s went both ways.”

Jamie follows me to a leg press machine. He stands beside me with his hands on his hips. “We should go watch Bex play sometime, maybe scout some of her teammates.” He winks at me. “We can always use new recruits.”

I fold my arms across my chest and smirk. “I was kind of hoping you would help me with Bex. I need you and the guys to make nice with some of her teammates, or better yet, her roommate. She said something to Coach about him having rules. I want to know what she means by that. It seemed like she was referring to his players and that being around us was somehow breaking those rules.”

“Why don’t you stalk her online like a normal person?”

I laugh at his ridiculous comment. “I looked last night. I couldn’t find her anywhere. I checked Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. It’s like she doesn’t exist.”

“Maybe she’s an android,” Jamie jokes.

“You’re such a nerd.”

He shrugs, unaffected, a silly expression on his face.

I never knew much about Coach’s daughter other than he had one. He kept her under his thumb, never letting any of us near her. Until last night.

Jamie shoves his hands into his shorts pockets. “I can take one for the team. I’m sure Tuck, Trent, and Drake will, too.

What do you want to know about her?"

I consider his question. "Find out if she has a boyfriend. Where she hangs out. Who she's friends with, other than her roommate. Whatever you can get out of her teammates."

"I don't think she has a boyfriend. I've seen her on campus before but never with any guys. She always hangs out with the same girl."

"Coach probably doesn't let her date."

"Nah, Bex didn't act like she'd just seen her first naked man. She seemed uncomfortable walking through the locker room, but she wasn't terrified of all the dicks hanging out. And you heard her. Nothing she hadn't seen before."

"I think that comment was meant for me."

He laughs. "Maybe. She doesn't seem to like you very much. What did you do to get under skin already?"

"Nothing. She's been like that with me from the second she crashed into me in the locker room."

"Yeah. But she's meeting your mom. She loosened up a lot after you offered to take her with you on Saturday. You forgot to mention the games last all day." He chuckles. "Wait until she finds out she's spending the entire day with your mom... and my dad."

"You should come, too." I lean over to grab a paper cup from the holder on the wall next to the water cooler and pour some for myself. "It's going to be a long day. Bex will need someone to talk to when I'm busy helping out with the kids."

I down the cup and fill it again before Jamie is at my side helping himself.

"Depends on how drunk I get on Friday night after the game."

I frown at his comment. "Dude, we just talked about this. For a smart guy, sometimes you're so dense. Stay in and play video games with me instead. Your dad's new game is pretty sick."

“Oh, I know. Right? I was playing *Mage Wars* last night, drunk off my ass. The graphics were insane and even better with a good buzz going.”

Jamie’s father is a video game developer. His company, Foxy Industries, is one of the largest tech companies in the world. He named the company Foxy after the nickname he calls Jamie’s mom. His parents have weird names for each other.

Once the leg machine is free, Jamie plops down on the seat before I have the chance. But he needs it more, so I let it slide. He removes the towel hanging from his pocket and wipes down the equipment.

“We should play later,” I say, and he peeks up at me with a wicked grin.

“Think you can keep up with me?”

I throw my hand out at him and laugh. “Please. More like... can you keep up with me? Seriously, though, you should stay in with me after the game, kill off a few levels with me, and come to the games on Saturday. If you’re there, Bex might lower her guard more. She’s probably thinking it’s a date or some shit.”

“I guess,” Jamie says after a long pause. “But I’m not leaving the house at the ass crack of dawn with you. I’ll meet you and Bex for the second half of the games. Maybe Bex has some hot friends she can bring along for me. And I’ll warm up to her... do some recon for you.”

I slap him on the back, and he groans. “I knew I could count on my wingman.”

He huffs. “You know, you could just ask Bex whatever you want to know. Stop acting like such a pussy.”

I let out a frustrated groan. “Whatever. I’m going to go hit the showers. I’ll catch you later.”

“I’m making dinner later,” he says, out of breath from lifting the bar. “Make sure you’re home.”

I narrow my eyes at him, confused as fuck. “You’re making dinner? In the microwave? You don’t know how to cook.”

“One of the girls I met last week is coming over after she’s done at work. Since she’s making dinner for me, by extension, she’s now cooking for the entire house.”

“Sounds good. Don’t do anything stupid. I don’t want my food poisoned.”

He laughs. “Nah, Shannon is cool. You should see the body on this chick. She’s a dancer.”

“Explains a lot. So, you’re paying a stripper to make us dinner? I think I’ll take my chances with the cafeteria.”

Jamie snorts. “I’m not pathetic. Give me some credit, Prez. She’s in some dance contest this weekend at The Sixth Floor. There’s a cash prize for the best female dance group. You should come.”

I raise a curious eyebrow at him. “I don’t know. A dance competition? Sounds kind of lame.”

“It’s at a nightclub.”

“I’ve been to The Sixth Floor before.”

He grunts after his last rep and straining himself to lift the bar. “Oh, right. We went there last year for a Thirsty Thursday special. Anyway, the contest is open to the public. Don’t tell me you’re going to turn down the chance to look at a bunch of half-naked girls working their way through college.”

“Anyone we know going?”

He sets the weights down with a loud grunt. “Some of the girls from Kappa will be there. It’s a sorority thing. I think.”

“Are Drake, Tuck, and Trent going?”

He shoots me a look as if I’m crazy. “Are you kidding? They’re all over it. You should be, too. A club full of drunk, horny girls? Who would want to miss that?”

“Why are you going with this chick who’s cooking us dinner? She’s going to cock-block the shit out of you, and

probably us, too.”

“Whatever,” he growls. “Shan’s pretty cool. You’ll like her. Her friends are hot.”

“Are they stripping? What kind of contest are we talking here?”

“Nope, I wish.” He licks his lips. “I’d pay good money to see that. There’s a five-hundred-dollar prize for the best group.”

“And it’s all girls?”

“Yeah, it’s kind of like *Coyote Ugly*, you know how they dance on bars in the movie? Shan said they have to dress up. Sounds hot. You should take out your tampon and come with us.”

I make a fist and tap his arm, not enough for it to hurt but for his stupid remark.

He laughs and shakes it off.

“Hot chicks and beer.” I wink at him, slinging my towel over my shoulder. “That was your sales pitch right there, and I’m sold. See ya at home.”

Jamie counts out a few reps. “Later.”

I walk toward the locker room wondering if I can convince Bex to come out with us on Saturday night. I have to find a way because Jamie is right about one thing—I have it bad for my coach’s daughter—and I can’t get her out of my head.

Chapter Four

“I still can’t believe you had dinner with Preston Parker,” Taylor shouts, her voice far too loud for those passing by us. “My ovaries would have exploded sitting next to him.”

“Would you keep it down?” I lower my voice to a more audible level, my feet moving faster to get away from any lingering ears. “I don’t think everyone heard you across campus.”

She fixes the strap of the gym bag slung over her shoulder matching my pace. “Shit. Sorry. I wasn’t thinking. But this is kind of a big deal for you. After obsessing over his mom for like... ever, how are you not as excited as I am about this? He talked to you. Preston sat next you.” She fans herself with her hand, a dreamy look falls over her face. “I would die if he even breathed in the same airspace as me.”

“Okay, that’s a bit dramatic, even for you. Don’t you think? He’s just a hockey player. Stop acting like a girl.”

“Must I remind you that I am a girl,” she counters. “And he’s the hottest guy on campus. Preston is taking you to meet his mom. Hello, that’s major. Wake up, Bex. You have a date with Preston Parker this weekend. I’m so jealous right now I almost hate you.”

I nudge her in the arm with my elbow and laugh. “You’re not allowed to hate me over boys. It’s in the roommate agreement.”

Dodging my second elbow, she snorts. “Roommate agreement?”

“Yeah, it’s like unspoken rules we both have to follow. No fighting over boys is one of them.”

I became friends with Taylor during freshman orientation. We were paired together, became fast friends, and even made the basketball team together.

“But he’s Preston Parker.”

“Will you stop saying his name like he’s a big deal?”

She gives me a perplexed look. “He is a big deal, silly. Did you fall down and bump your head? Just because you have more of a crush on his mom than him doesn’t make him any less yummy. Hey, if you don’t want him, I’ll be more than happy to be your substitute.”

On this campus, athletics reign supreme. Even my teammates and I are treated differently because of it. If anyone is deserving of god-like praise, it’s Preston Parker. There’s no debating that he’s the most athletically gifted player on the men’s ice hockey team. He’s broken most of the records set in previous years, putting other players to shame. My dad talks about him all the time. I never saw him so excited to coach a player until Preston.

“Does all your fangirling have a point?”

She scoffs. “Of course, it does. You have a shot with Preston. Take it, girl. This is your one chance. Girls like us don’t get these kinds of opportunities to date guys like him. They usually go for cheerleaders or sorority girls.”

“My dad has rules about his team. You know them well.”

“How can I forget? No talking to his players. No hanging out with his players. No dating his players.”

“Technically, I already broke one of them when I talked to Preston in the locker room.”

“Your dad broke his own rule by introducing you to his players. He shouldn’t have done that if he was going to be such a hard ass.”

She's right. His team was always off-limits to me. And for good reason.

"It's not just his rules," I admit. "After what happened with Kellan, I had no interest in dating, let alone his players. I still don't. Kellan left a lasting effect on my life, one I never want to repeat."

She frowns. "Yeah. I still can't believe you have to deal with everything that happened with him. It's been four years."

"Some mistakes can't be undone." I push back the tears that are fighting to escape.

I allowed Kellan to win for too long. He's not allowed to keep controlling my life when he's no longer in it.

She touches my shoulder to comfort me. "I'm sorry, babe."

I sigh at the thought of the boy who ruined my life in high school. The piece of shit who still somehow manages to fuck everything up for me.

"Kellan was—"

"An ass," Taylor finishes for me.

Once we reach the parking garage, I remove my dad's spare set of keys from my bag and click the remote to open his car. He'd called me after my last class and asked me to bring his wallet to the rink across campus. He must have been in a rush because he left it in the center console, right where anyone could see it.

I retrieve his wallet and hold it up for her to see. "I have to run this over to my dad. It won't take long. Do you want to tag along? We can grab something to eat from the cafeteria afterward."

Her nose wrinkles in disgust. "No, to cafeteria food. A definite hell yeah to sneaking a peek at the men's ice hockey practice."

"Awesome." I shut the door and lock the car. "I was hoping I wouldn't have to face the guys alone, especially not Preston."

“Are you kidding me? As if you even had to ask.”

I chuckle. “Don’t act like this around the guys. Their egos are big enough.”

“Gotcha,” she says. “Don’t feed the players. Duly noted.”

I shake my head, entertained by her stupidity.

Five minutes later, we reach the ice rink on the other side of campus. Taylor glows with delight. She fixes her black hair with her fingers and adds a thin layer of pink gloss to her lips, smacking them together loudly.

Taylor turns to me. “How do I look?”

“Fine. Stop worrying about your appearance. A guy should like you on your worse day. Otherwise, he’s not worth your time.”

“I wish I could be more like you, Bex. You never care what anyone thinks of you.”

I shrug. “It’s simple. People will either like you the way you are or hate you for it. You know what my dad says about opinions and assholes.”

She laughs as I pull open the door to where my dad holds practice. “I’ll try to find my inner Bex. Be like Bex,” she chants a few times under her breath, joking. “You’re the only girl I know who would show her face around a bunch of guys with a bloody lip and no makeup.”

I roll my eyes. “I haven’t worn makeup since my dad made me wipe it off my face in my sophomore year of high school. Anyway, who cares if my lip is busted open? I wear it like a badge of honor. I wasn’t about to let Stacey Weaver get to the net.”

“Instead, you guarded her so hard, she ended up dropping bows on you like you’re in the UFC.”

A rumble of laughter shakes through me. “Drop bows? You sound like a lunatic.”

“What? Haven’t you ever seen a spinning back elbow? It’s pretty sweet. That’s basically what Stacy did to your face.”

“I hustled my ass off to become a starter this year. I wasn’t about to punk out, allow her to make the easy layup, and show Coach Vaughn I wasn’t starting material.”

“It was just a scrimmage. You can ease up a little bit. What if Preston tries to kiss you on Saturday, and he tastes blood? That’s not sexy.”

“He’s a hockey player. I’m sure he’s used to the taste of blood in his mouth. And it’s not like I’m going to kiss him.”

Once we reach the outer edge of the ice, our conversation comes to a halt. Taylor’s eyes are as wide as her mouth, full on ogling the players. Her behavior is almost embarrassing. *Almost*. Because I’m doing the same thing after I spot Preston on the ice. He skates with such grace I can’t help but admire him in all of his glory.

A quick squabble ensues where two players fight for possession of the puck. In a blur of blue jerseys, I don’t have a good view, but someone takes a shot on goal. It hits the post and bounces to the left of the net. One of Preston’s teammates passes the puck to him, and then he’s gone. He moves so quickly down the ice I have to blink to refocus. Damn, he’s fast. My dad wasn’t kidding about Preston. He’s talented.

I walk closer to the Plexiglas stumbling over my high-top Chuck Taylors. Pressing my hand to the glass, I stare in awe as Preston scores for his team. I bite my lip accidentally digging into the fresh cut from practice. A metallic taste fills my mouth. But I don’t care. All I can think about is Preston.

Watching him play for the first time is... memorable. Similar to how I felt the first time I saw Coach, Preston’s mom, standing next to Dante Fisher. Dante was my favorite basketball player growing up. I idolized him for years because I wanted to be like Dante. And Charlotte “Coach” Coachman—now Parker—was the first female sports agent.

People took her seriously. Coach was a force to be reckoned with in the sports world. I couldn’t believe it when I saw her on *ESPN* with a big grin on her face next to Dante. She’d just closed a massive deal for him. Most of all, she gave

me hope. I've wanted to be like her ever since. That's my dream—to become a sports agent.

“You should get that to your dad,” Taylor says, whipping me out of my Preston-induced stupor.

“Right.” I make a beeline for my dad who's talking to a player in the box.

With his back to us, I catch a few glimpses of the scrimmage taking place before he angles his body enough to see us behind him. Dad holds up his hand suggesting I meet him on the other side.

Distracted by the players, I have to nudge Taylor to get her to follow me. She's mesmerized by them. A few of them take note of us. One waves, though I can't see his face. I return his gesture hoping he wasn't attached to one of the dicks I'd seen in the locker room.

My dad pushes open the door that leads to the ice, and I hand him the wallet.

He takes it from me with a closed-mouth smile. “Thanks, honey. You're a real lifesaver.” His gaze falls from me to Taylor. “Hey, I haven't seen you in a while. How have you been, Taylor?”

“I've been around. Busy with school and basketball.”

“Still working on your jump shot?”

She bobs her head. “Yep. I got it down pat now.”

He winks at her, and then turns to me, studying my face. “How was practice? Looks like you got a nice shiner forming on your cheek... and your lip. What happened? You look like you went a few rounds with Hopkins.”

I laugh at his boxing joke. “Practice was fine. Could have been better. But, at least I'll have a cool battle scar.”

My dad inspects the gash, shaking his head. “I wish you'd be more careful. You can be so rough.”

“Basketball is a rough sport,” I shoot back. “I'm not some delicate flower, Dad. I can take a punch, or in this case, an

elbow.”

“You were never delicate, that’s for sure.” He sighs as if he regrets turning me into a tomboy.

Before my mother left us, she had me prancing around in floral dresses and ballet flats. Yuck. I never liked ballet or dresses. Track pants and T-shirts are more my speed. My dad was right to raise me the way he did. If my mom had stuck around, I would have been pretending to be someone I wasn’t to make her happy. And I would have hated every second of it.

“Are you staying until practice is over?”

I shrug. “I guess we can hang around a little while longer. Not like we have anything better to do.”

“That’s the spirit.” He slaps me on the back like I’m one of the guys. “I could use another set of eyes on the team. This game is going to be tough for us.”

“I wouldn’t miss it.”

“Me neither,” Taylor adds.

Dad forces a smile and slides his hands to his hip. Biting the inside of his cheek, he seems nervous. More anxious than I’ve seen him in a long time. Glancing at the ice, his gaze travels between various players landing on no one in particular.

With the game a few days away, he’s on edge, even though he would never admit it. It’s the first home game of the season and his first as the new head coach. NCAA announcers will talk about his role whether they win or lose. And even more so if they lose.

I tap my dad on the shoulder. “Everything will work out. I have a good feeling about the game.”

Dad grins. “Me, too.”

We’re almost the same height, my dad maybe three inches taller, our eyes nearly level to one another. I might have gotten my looks from my mom, but I have his height and athleticism. It wasn’t easy being five feet ten inches in high school. Kids picked on me. Most of the guys were shorter than me.

I learned to develop a thick skin because of it. Class pictures were interesting. Teachers forced me to stand at the back of the line with the boys arranging us in order of height.

Dad blows the whistle around his neck signaling for the guys to come over to the bench. “I have to get going, honey. Take a seat over there.” He points to the first row of seats. “I’ll meet you there after we’re done. Maybe we can get dinner if you want. Taylor, you can come, too.”

“Yeah, that sounds good, Dad.” I push my hand out to shoo him away, and then he’s gone back to coaching his team.

I tug on Taylor’s arm to move her toward our seats.

“You have an admirer,” she informs me.

I glance over at the bench to see Preston staring at me. Hard. His gaze is intense, his deep blue eyes fixed on me. He winks. *Why did he have to do that?* I refuse to return his gesture or even acknowledge him. Last night I was rude and said whatever had come to mind. It was my way of keeping him at a distance.

A guy like Preston will be the death of me. I have no room in my life for players—both on and off the court. Or in Preston’s case, the ice. But I can’t help feeling something for him. He didn’t have to offer for me to meet his mom. Preston doesn’t owe me a damn thing. Maybe I can be a little bit nicer without breaking the rules.

“The way he’s looking at you is giving me chills,” Taylor says, entranced by Preston. “What I wouldn’t give to have someone look at me like that.”

She’s not wrong about him. When Preston looks at me, he undresses me with his eyes. My skin pricks with tiny bumps which spread down my arms. He glares at me like a piece of meat as if he’s a starved animal, and he wants to sink his teeth into me.

But there’s something else about his demeanor. I interest him. Other guys have given me the same look in the past. I’ve ignored them, no problem. *So, why can’t I do the same with*

Preston? Somehow, he has crawled under my skin, and I've allowed it even though I shouldn't give him another thought.

He removes his helmet. His hair sticks on end in little spikes protruding up in different directions from the sweat. So many dirty thoughts run through my mind. I can't stop them once they start.

He knows he has me. It's not just his looks that hold my attention. Preston plays with such grace for someone his size. The way he moved his hips was like a dance routine I memorized with each glide of his skates.

Practice ends with my father telling the players to hit the showers and me still drooling over Preston. Taylor does the same. She hasn't stopped gawking at Drake Donovan for the last five minutes. Tall and muscular, Drake has short, dark hair and a body so big and toned he makes you want to climb him. Drake is worth looking at, but no one compares to Preston.

Damn him.

"Where do you want to eat?" Taylor rubs her stomach. "I worked up an appetite watching these hockey hotties."

"I bet that's not the only appetite you worked up," I deadpan. "Don't think I missed you obsessively watching Drake. I don't blame you. I was doing the same to Preston."

Her eyes widen, and she clears her throat making a strange movement with her head to indicate someone is behind me. When I turn around, I come face to face with Preston. *Here, I thought all of the players were in the locker room.*

I have nowhere to run.

Nowhere to hide.

A wicked smirk turns up the right side of his mouth. An adorable dimple creases his cheek.

Fucking hell.

Chapter Five

PRESTON

All through practice I couldn't get Bex out of my mind. Every time I moved, it was as if she was there watching me. Maybe I imagined her blue eyes following me. Or maybe I wasn't crazy at all. Because when she spins around to face the ice, her eyes widen at the sight of me.

I smirk. "Funny meeting you here."

Speechless, she opens her mouth but nothing comes out. I overheard her conversation with her friend catching her in the act. At least now I know she wants me. Maybe she won't be as much of a challenge as I thought.

In a navy and white Strickland Senators' basketball uniform and Chucks, Bex has never looked hotter. Even though, I wish it were my jersey she has on and nothing else.

"Did you watch me play?"

Of course, she did.

Bex nods. "Uh-huh. My dad asked me to stay behind."

"Parker, stop bothering my daughter," Coach Bryant yells. "Time to hit the showers." He claps his hands together. "Let's go."

Bex lets out a sigh of relief. "Saved by the bell."

"For now." I wiggle my eyebrows. "Wait for me. Right here."

"And why would I do that?"

Sassy as ever, she drives me crazy with her mouth. Fuck, I love it. Way too much.

“Do you know how to skate?”

She snorts. “My dad is a hockey coach. I grew up at a rink. Are you serious?”

I shrug, unaffected. “Hey, you never know. You could be good on your feet and horrible on skates. My older brother can’t skate to save his life even with my dad teaching him.”

“Really?” Her eyebrows rise. “I find that hard to believe.”

“It’s true. JP is more like my mom in almost every way. He never took to hockey, at least not the way I did, and he hates the cold.”

She laughs. “That’s interesting. I would have thought hockey was a mandatory requirement in your family.”

“He’s the brains—”

“And you’re the beauty,” she finishes for me, laughing.

“No, that wasn’t what I was going to say. But thanks, I guess.”

I want more of Bex. More time. More of her mouth. My brain and body are in complete agreement with my body winning out. I need to see her again, preferably off-campus and away from her father. Saturday cannot come fast enough.

She stares at me biting her cut lip.

I strip the glove from my hand and touch her cheek, moving my thumb over her lip. “How did this happen?”

“I took one for the team,” she says with a straight face.

“Bex likes it rough,” her friend chimes.

I laugh, my mind now wandering to dirty places. Her friend’s comment makes me think of sex. Regardless of Bex’s cracked lip, I want to take it between my teeth so fucking bad. She taunts me without even realizing she’s doing it. *Fucking tease.*

A long pause ensues between us before Bex says, “You stink, Parker. Go take a shower.”

I laugh. “Is that a yes?”

“It’s not a no.”

My God, I love her mouth.

“What about your dad?” her friend asks.

“Oh, right. We’re supposed to have dinner with my dad. I can’t. But I’ll see you on Friday.”

“Can I call you?”

She dismisses the idea with a quick shake of her head. “No, I don’t like talking on the phone.”

“Texts, then?”

She shrugs. “Umm...” Bex looks at her friend for confirmation that this is okay which strikes me as odd.

Why does her friend give a shit if I text her?

“Yeah,” her friend says. “Text her later.”

I hold out my hand. “We haven’t met. I’m Preston Parker. And you are?”

“Taylor Bradshaw. Bex’s roommate.”

“You forgot teammate,” Bex says, now looking at me. “Taylor is also my best friend.”

“Nice to meet you, Taylor.” I shove the glove back on my hand. “Nice seeing you, Bex. I’ll text you later, okay?”

She nods.

I leave Bex and Taylor behind and head toward the locker room to catch up with the rest of my team.

“Parker.” Coach Bryant summons me with a stern look on his face. “Can I have a word?”

Shit.

“Yeah, Coach.”

“Stay away from Bex,” he growls. “She’s not like other girls.”

“That’s a good thing,” I admit.

It’s also the reason I have trouble staying away from her.

“I mean, she’s not like the girls you date... if you catch my drift.”

“I’m taking her to meet my mom on Saturday. Is that not okay?”

His expression softens, the corners of his mouth slowly turning up into a smile. “Yes, that’s fine and nice of you to arrange. Promise me you will keep it at that. Someday, you’ll be a star just like your dad. Bex won’t fit into that equation. She’s had enough disappointments in her life, she doesn’t need another one.” He pats me on the back. “You get what I’m saying, right?”

“Sure,” I mutter, somewhat annoyed. “I got it, Coach.”

Sitting on the edge of the mattress with my cell phone in hand, I call my mom.

On the first ring, her voice blares through the speaker. “You’ve got Coach.”

My mom is all business all the time.

“Hey, Mom.”

“Oh, hey sweetie. I didn’t realize it was you. I’m driving over the Brooklyn Bridge right now to see a client. I didn’t even look at the caller ID. Is everything okay?” She sounds worried. “How come you’re calling on my business line?”

“I didn’t even notice,” I confess. “I hit the first number on my speed dial.”

“So, what’s up? Everything okay at school?”

“Yeah, everything’s fine, Mom.” I lay back on my bed holding the phone to my ear. “I’m bringing someone with me on Saturday.”

“Who is it? Do I know him?”

“No. It’s a girl.”

“Ooh, this is great.” She can’t contain her excitement, her voice rising to a higher octave. “You’re finally letting me meet a girl you’re dating. About time.”

I laugh. “No, Mom, it’s nothing like that. You know I don’t date.”

She chuckles. “Like father, like son. Maybe this girl will be the one to change your mind. I did that for your dad.”

I make a gagging sound, and she laughs.

My parents are so sappy, still so madly in love after twenty-five years together. They showed me a love like theirs is possible, but I’m not ready for all of that. I have my career to worry about.

“She’s not the one, Mom. Her dad is my coach. Coach Bryant already gave me the lecture about dating his daughter. She plays basketball for Strick U. She’s a big fan of yours.”

“Well, I would love to meet Coach Bryant’s daughter. He’s doing an incredible job with you and the team.” I can almost hear the smile crossing her lips. “What’s her name?”

“Bex.”

“Bex? Is that a real name?”

I laugh. “I thought the same thing the first time I heard her name. It’s short for Bexley.”

“Ah, that’s cute. I lucked out and had all boys, so I didn’t have to think of crazy names for girls.”

“John and Peter,” I say. “How unoriginal could you get?”

“Hey,” she shoots back. “Your grandfather’s name was John. The name John Parker means something to hockey fans.”

“And yet you let Uncle Jameson name me after his favorite comic book character.”

“A bet is a bet, Peter Parker.” Even my mom mocks me. “Names build character.”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, thanks for that.”

“Hey, sweetie, I have a phone call beeping on the other line. Can I call you right back?”

“No, that’s okay. I have to get going anyway. Jamie’s new girl is making us dinner.”

“Jamie has a girlfriend?” She just about squeals.

“No, Mom, she’s some random chick. I’ll see you on Saturday.”

“Okay, love you, baby.”

“Love you, too, Mom.”

Then, the line goes dead.

Chapter Six

“Hey, dick,” Drake says to Jamie. “Would you stop feeding your girl with your fingers? The rest of us have to eat from that bowl.”

Jamie sets down the bowl of penne pasta on the marble island in the kitchen, his fingers covered in spaghetti sauce. He steps out from between Shannon’s legs and helps her down from the counter. She giggles when he whispers something into her ear.

“We were taste testing,” Jamie informs us with a cocky smirk on his face.

“Great,” Drake growls. “Now that your slobber is all over our food, I can’t wait to eat it.”

I sit at the kitchen table between Drake, Tucker, and Trent, my chair pushed back against the wall. “Give him a break,” I say to Drake, pointing at Jamie and his girl of the week. “Nerds don’t get as many chances to hook up with girls who look like that.”

With Shannon at his side, Jamie carries a few plates and bowls over to the table. “Hey, I can hear you, Spidey.”

I hate that fucking nickname.

The room erupts into laughter, but I don’t find it the least bit funny.

“Don’t call me that.”

Like I had a say in my name.

I cross my arms over my chest, irritated. “It’s your dad’s fault I got stuck with this name.”

“Your dad shouldn’t have bet mine that he would beat him at video games, of all things.” Jamie pulls out a chair for Shannon and then takes a seat at the table next to Tucker. “He should have known better.”

“What are you guys talking about?” Shannon flicks her dark locks over her right shoulder and cozies up to Jamie waiting for him to tell her the story.

“Our parents are best friends—” he starts, and Shannon interrupts.

“Wait, did you guys all grow up together?”

He nods. “Parker’s mom is my dad’s best friend. They’re kind of like brother and sister.”

“So, that makes you two like brothers.” She points between Jamie and me.

“Yeah,” Jamie says. “Sort of. We’re all family, like one really weird dysfunctional family.”

Drake snorts. “Speak for yourself.”

Shannon glances around the table at each of us. “That’s pretty cool. You guys all knew each other before you came to Strick U. It must make it easier for you to play hockey together.”

“I don’t know about all that,” Drake interrupts.

“It’s definitely an advantage we have over other teams,” I say. “Coaches have a hard enough time getting all the egos to play together.”

“We fight all the time,” Tucker says.

“True,” I counter. “But we don’t stay mad at each other for long.”

Drake laughs. “I just beat the bitchassness out of you.”

“You wish.” I motion my finger toward me. “Come at me, bro. Let’s see how tough you really are.”

He shakes his head, entertained.

Trent holds out his hand to silence Drake. “I’m hungry. Would you two stop measuring dicks until after we eat?”

“You guys are crazy.” Shannon laughs, filling a plate of pasta for each of us. “I hope all of you brought your appetite because I made tons of food. Jamie said you can eat an army under the table, so I kind of overdid it. There’s enough left for the rest of your teammates if you want to invite them.”

“Nah,” Jamie says. “They can fend for themselves. I’m saving the leftovers for us.”

Shannon stands up to pass plates of pasta and garlic bread around the table, and Jamie takes this as an opportunity to smack her ass. She has a nice ass, one I can’t help but lean back more to admire.

“Are you planning to make this a regular thing?” Tucker asks Shannon, shoveling a forkful of pasta in his mouth. “Because I could definitely get used to this.”

“Me, too,” the rest of us mutter in unison.

I wouldn’t mind having her hang out at the house. She’s easy on the eyes. Gets along with the guys. And doesn’t seem like a pain in the ass. Guaranteed dinner every night sounds good to me.

My dad always cooked for us when he was home. That was his thing. He catered to my mom when they were dating, and she hasn’t lifted a finger in the kitchen since. I wouldn’t trust my mom’s food, anyway. She’s better at ordering from a menu.

“Wanna play *Mage Wars* after we eat?” I ask Jamie. “I’m finally out of level twenty-five. That one was such a bitch.”

“Oh, I love that game,” Shannon says, surprising all of us.

The entire table’s focus shifts to her, our eyebrows raised as if to say *explain yourself, woman*.

“My younger brother is obsessed with it,” she elaborates. “I still live at home with my parents. At least for now. My brother makes me play with him. It’s the only way I can get

him to go to bed on time. We play *Mage Wars* for an hour and then bedtime. Seems to work.”

“My dad created *The Fallen* universe. *Mage Wars* is based on one of his earlier games,” Jamie tells her.

Over the years, there have been different versions of the original game that made his dad famous in the tech world. *The Fallen: Mage Wars* is his newest creation and by far the hardest of all of the games.

Her face brightens. “Are you kidding me? That is so cool.”

“R.E.G.A.N., the artificial intelligence in the game, is named after my mom,” he adds.

She holds her hand over her heart in awe of what Jamie’s telling her. “Really? That’s so cute. Your dad sounds like a keeper.”

“My mom thinks so,” Jamie jokes.

“Jamie is a genius,” I tell Shannon, and her smile widens. “A total nerd.”

I give Jamie a hard time about being a nerd all the time. He’s just like his dad—obsessed with computers, comic books, video games, and *Star Trek*. They even have the same name and similar features. But all the nerd jokes go out the window once we’re on the ice.

Jamie and I are both defensemen. We’ve been paired together for years, meaning we work in unison to stop the opposing team from scoring and create new opportunities for our team.

“I like nerds.” Shannon scoots her chair closer to Jamie’s, their elbows touching on the table. “Especially hot ones that can shoot a puck.” Her eyes are so wide and green they stand out against her soft features.

Jamie is getting laid tonight. No doubt about it. This girl is practically on her knees, ready and waiting. Her hand is under the table—maybe he’s already getting some action. Shannon is impressed with Jamie’s background. I guess there’s a first time

for everything. In my experience, girls don't have a clue about video games. Most of them only care about our trust funds.

Jamie hooks his arm around her back pulling her into his chest. He plants a kiss on her lips that turns into them going at it in front of us. Everyone at the table is used to women asking about our parents. Apart from Jamie, all of our dads are former NHL hockey players. Everyone on campus knows it. We don't keep it a secret, though we don't openly advertise it either.

Drake's mom is a famous romance author. She writes super taboo and dirty books that even make Drake blush. A lot of girls have the same reaction as Shannon when he tells them his mom is *the* Sydney Carroway. Tucker and Trent's mom owns *Sports Buzz*, an online newspaper all of us read. It's similar to *SBNation*. And with my mom being a legendary sports agent—the more I think about it—we have pretty awesome parents. We lucked out big time.

“You ready for the game?” Tucker asks me, ignoring Jamie and Shannon, who are now leaving the dining room with Shannon draped over Jamie's shoulder and him smacking her ass.

This is normal for us. We're so used to each other that none of us care about who's hooking up where. Even the dining room isn't sacred. Every inch of this house has been christened by one of us.

“Yeah, I guess,” I say. “I think this is going to be my best year.”

“Best year for the team, too.” Trent sinks his teeth into a slice of garlic bread speaking between bites. “We're winning again this year.”

Our team made it to the Frozen Four the last three years, but we've only won the NCAA Men's Ice Hockey Championship once. All of us want it. Bad. One final win before we leave college for the NHL.

“I wish the announcers would stop comparing us to your dads,” Tucker says.

“Oh, I know,” I say. “Like I need a fucking reminder of the ghost of Alex Parker.”

“It pisses me off.” Drake shakes his head. “My dad’s been retired for years.”

I grunt in acknowledgment. “Trying to live up to the legacy of Alex Parker ain’t easy.”

Tucker and Trent nod.

“These asshole announcers expect us to be *them*...” Tucker says, “... when all we’re trying to do is play as hard as we can to get NHL scouts to notice us. Sometimes, I feel like I’m living in the shadow of Tyler Kane. Our dad...” he says, pointing at Trent, “... retired over ten years ago. Get over him already.”

Tyler Kane is still part of the Philadelphia Flyers organization. He’s the general manager, and my dad is now the coach. Because of that, it only draws more attention to us.

“Right,” Drake says. “It’s fucking bullshit. My dad’s shutout against the Blackhawks in game seven has been in highlight reels since I was a kid.”

“They won the Cup, though,” Tucker says. “That game was pretty sick.”

The only people who understand what I go through are seated next to me at this table. We were bred to become hockey players, but expectations are a bitch. Measuring up to not only our father’s impossible standards, but also those in the hockey world, is no easy task.

We were born to do this. Hockey is in our DNA. So, why does it sometimes feel like we can never surpass the players who came before us?

“Suck it, troll,” I yell at the TV, beating the magician, who kind of looks like a troll in *Mage Wars*.

With Jamie and Shannon fucking on the other side of the wall, I need a distraction. They're louder than the sound effects the game makes when you find the hidden mage. But once I reach the dark tower, I have to answer a question. If I get it wrong, I have to start the level over.

I select the answer from a series of three possible choices. "No," I scream. "Stupid fucking troll."

The gray-bearded mage grows larger, towering over my player. "You are unworthy," he tells me while laughing, taunting me with his evil cackle. Then the images on the screen pixelate until they turn into melted lava. The screen flashes *Game Over*. I stare at it, unblinking.

I lost. Again. Dammit.

Angry, I throw the controller across my bedroom. It hits the door and lands on the carpet next to an open Bauer hockey bag, which reminds me I have shit to do for tomorrow. The game starts at seven. Less than twenty-four hours from now.

Pushing myself up from the floor, I let out an aggravated groan. I spent two hours working on that level, all for nothing. Lifting my phone from the bed, I consider calling Uncle Jameson to yell at him for making a game that's impossible to beat. Instead, I open my messages.

Preston: You evil troll, give me the answer to level 26.

Jameson: Not a chance, buddy.

Preston: I hate you right now.

Jameson: :(

Clutching my phone, I consider chucking it across the room. *Mage Wars* gets me so damn mad. But I'm addicted to it. Scrolling through my messages, I ignore those from girls I've hooked up with in the past. I need to focus for tomorrow.

I stop when I see Bex Bryant's name. For a second, I forget all about *Mage Wars*. Bex's ass in those tight shorts come to mind. And now, I'm even more frustrated.

Should I text her? I said I would.

But that was before her dad lectured me. He was right. I'll be out of here at the end of the year. There's no point forming attachments to girls when I might be living across the country next year. One-night stands are more my speed. No commitment. No feelings. Nothing to hold me back from my dreams.

I hover my finger over her name, torn by my predicament. Coach Bryant knows I'm taking Bex with me to meet my mom this weekend. It's not like we are hiding it from him.

I open a new message about to type what I normally would to a girl I like. But Bex isn't a random chick. So, what do I say?

I begin typing, *Hey, girl, what's up?* And then realize I sound like an asshole and erase it. Definitely not smooth. *What's wrong with me?*

With other girls, I would tell them to come over and be done with it. Easy. It works every time. I can't do that with Bex. She would never respond to my typical brand of assholery.

So, I think long and hard about everything I know about basketball. My mom is a fanatic. Her prized possession is a ball signed by Michael Jordan. She shows it off where everyone can see it—front and center on a table in our living room.

Nervous and overthinking everything, I tap the keys, hoping Bex doesn't tell me to fuck off.

Preston: There's something wrong with your jersey.

A few seconds later, a chat bubble appears.

Bex: Who is this?

I sigh, now realizing my attempt at sports humor was stupid. But I keep going.

Preston: Parker

Bex: Oh, hey. What's wrong with my jersey?

Preston: It's not on my floor.

Bex: OMG. You're an idiot. Remind me again why I gave you my number?

Preston: Because I'm taking you to meet my mom.

Preston: I can't believe I just typed that. You should feel special.

Bex: And why is that, Mr. MVP?

Preston: I've never introduced my mom to any of the girls I know.

Bex: I was already nervous. Now, I'm even more freaked out.

Preston: Don't sweat it.

Bex: I'll try.

A few minutes pass where I attempt to come up with something clever. Instead, I try being myself. With Bex, I can relax, lower my guard. There's something about her that sort of settles me despite how anxious I am about making the wrong move.

Bex: Did you want something other than to tell me you'd like to see me naked?

Preston: I never said I want to see you naked.

But I do.

Bex: Your message implied it. Was there a point to texting me this late at night?

Preston: Late at night? It's ten o'clock. What are you, 90? Sorry, Grams.

Bex: I'm tired from practice and school. You should be in bed too. Your big game is tomorrow. Good luck, by the way.

Preston: I'd love to get in bed with you.

Bex: Parker, Parker... Peter Parker. You're such a bad boy. Do you ever think with the right head?

I glance down at my growing erection and shake my head. *Nope.* Only the one that counts. I'm rock-hard from talking to her. All I can think about is being balls-deep in Bex.

Preston: I never think straight when it comes to you.

Bex: My dad has rules. We've already broken one of them. On Saturday, we will technically break another one.

Preston: How many rules does he have?

Bex: Three

Preston: Have you broken them for anyone else?

Bex: Not for a long time...

Preston: What are they?

Bex: No talking to his players. No hanging out with his players. No dating his players.

Preston: I can guarantee you'll never break the last one.

Dating is out of the question. I don't have time for drama. This year is all about winning the Frozen Four again and being drafted into the NHL. I play hockey almost every day, and when I'm not, I work out. If anyone understands a collegiate athlete's schedule, it's Bex.

Bex: Yep. That will never happen. All we can ever be is friends.

Preston: I've never had a friend who's a girl.

Bex: That's because guys like you objectify women.

Preston: Not true.

Bex: Look at the first few messages you sent me and then tell me I'm wrong.

I do as she asks, now realizing my mistake. Instead of a joke, my message reads like a dirty pickup line. I'm surprised she's even talking to me after what I said. *Idiot.*

Preston: You're right. Sorry, Bex. I thought it was funny. Guess not.

Bex: Oh, I thought it was funny. I expect it from you. You're all the same. This is why my dad has rules. To keep me away from guys like you.

Preston: I don't want to stay away from you.

I stare at the screen in horror.

Why did I write that?

Because it's true. I like Bex.

From the second she bumped into me in the locker room, I haven't been able to get her out of my head. Bex must be at a loss for words from my confession. Two minutes pass. Then another five. Still no response.

Shit. What did I just do?

Chapter Seven

The rink is packed. Not a seat left in the house. Almost everyone in the crowd is dressed in navy and white clothing—the colors of the Strickland Senators. Taylor sips from a Styrofoam cup of hot chocolate, cradling it between her hands.

“It’s freezing in here,” she whines. “How can you stand it?”

I glance down at my short-sleeved tee and jeans and shrug. “I’m used to it. The cold doesn’t bother me anymore.”

She snickers. “I’m so cold my nipples are poking a hole through my bra. I could hurt someone with these suckers.”

I shush her, looking over my shoulder to make sure no one can hear her. “Would you lower your voice? You have no filter in public.”

“Who cares? I don’t know anyone here.”

“Yeah, but I do. My dad’s the coach, remember?”

Taylor blows on her hands to warm them. “You’re nervous about tonight. Because of... you know who. I’m with you. It’ll be okay.”

She’s referring to Kellan Lehane. He’s down the ice from us practicing with his team. I haven’t been this close to him since high school. I’ve intentionally skipped the Boston College games for the past three years because of him.

“I’m fine,” I promise, even though I’m ready to jump out of my skin from being in the same building as that animal. “I can handle seeing him after all this time,” I lie. “This game is important to my dad. I didn’t want to miss his first game as head coach.”

I grind my teeth as I’m forced to watch Kellan’s cocky ass skate across the ice. He commits an illegal check without the refs noticing. *Asshole*. He got away with murder back in high school, and he still does. The sight of him makes me sick to my stomach. So, I do my best to ignore him, pretend he doesn’t exist.

My only saving grace is the line changes. Thank God for those. In hockey, the players skate for short periods of time expelling a lot of energy in a minute or two. Sometimes less. That keeps Kellan off the ice, making it easier to deal with the fact he’s here—back in our hometown.

When he moved to Boston for college, I was relieved. Not having to see him every day provided me some time to heal. Even if my dad didn’t have rules before Kellan came along, I would have made my own. Because I will never repeat the mistakes I made with him. Ever. Not even for someone as hot as Preston Parker.

“Your dad would have understood if you bailed tonight,” Taylor says, in a hushed tone. “I’m sure he knows how hard this is on you.”

“I’m fine,” I assure her. “I want to be here for moral support. He won’t say it out loud, but I know he’s nervous. I can’t even remember the last time he asked me to come to a game. It seemed like he needed me here.”

“The announcers will rip him a new one if they lose.” She gulps down the last of her hot chocolate and sets the empty cup on the floor next to her foot. “They’re so harsh when it comes to coaches. You saw what they did to Coach Vaughn last year when we lost to Villanova.”

“Yep.” I cross my fingers and hold them up for her to see. “That was pretty brutal. Let’s hope for a win. I have a good feeling.”

My dad made sure we had the best seats in the Strickland Skate Zone. We're in the lower bowl, right behind the goal and in the front row. Close to the action, I can see each of the players perfectly. The only drawback is trying to observe down the ice. It's nearly impossible to know who has possession of the puck.

"Yes," Taylor says, cheering along with the crowd.

I rise to my feet when I see Preston skating down the ice on a breakaway. For such a big guy, Preston is so graceful. He makes it appear effortless. Now I remember why I fell for a player once upon a time. Hockey players are sexy, like way too tempting. It's hard enough to play a sport on foot let alone on skates. And then Preston has to be so... Preston.

I place my hand on the Plexiglas, craning my neck to get a better look now that Preston is only a few feet away from me. He takes a shot. It's deflected by the goaltender's stick and bounces hitting Tucker in the leg. It drops to the ice, and Tucker draws back his stick. Deflected again.

Preston regains possession attempting to pass it. But no one has a clear shot. He takes a Hail Mary of a shot, and this time, the puck sails between the legs of the goaltender.

The horn sounds, and the crowd goes wild. My face hurts from smiling. With the cold, it might permanently freeze this way.

"They scored!" Taylor screams in my ear.

I chuckle. "I know."

We high-five each other as if we're on the court together and just scored the winning point. I'm so happy for Preston and the team. And, of course, my dad. I was on edge all day over the game.

"That was hot." Taylor lowers her voice. "Your man looks so good."

I shake my head. "He's not my man."

"But he can be. I read his texts, too. He definitely likes you." She smiles. "I'm sure he doesn't let his mom meet many

girls.”

“Don’t remind me. I’m already freaking out about meeting Coach. She’s a legend in the sports world. I mean, how often does something like this happen to normal people?”

“I wish I could come along for the ride. Could you imagine having her as your mom? That must be so awesome.”

“I know, right?”

“I would kill to meet her. She’s so badass.”

“I’m sure that could be arranged. I’ll ask Preston tomorrow. Let me see how it goes first.”

Taylor smiles. “She’ll love you.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. “I hope so.”

Taylor cups my shoulder with her hand diverting my attention from the ice to her. “Don’t sweat it. Once you’ve won her over, and I know you will, then I can meet her, too.”

Meeting my childhood idol is a big deal. *Why does she have to have such a hot son?* Ugh, Preston is too delicious for words. He doesn’t even have to do anything special to make me notice him. Or stop thinking about him. He just stands out. A guy like him, with his looks and talent, is seen by everyone.

After the Strickland Senators hit each other on the backs and do their usual hockey hugs, Preston turns around about to skate back to the bench when his eyes meet mine. My hand is already on the glass, and he taps the other side with his glove, shaking the layer between us. Electricity dances along my skin from the carnal look in his eyes. My throat just about closes up.

He takes out his mouth guard and smiles. I return his expression and mouth, *Nice shot*. As if he understands me, he winks. Then he skates away, leaving me with my dirty thoughts—ones that involve all the things I want him to do to me.

This is bad. So, so bad.

Chapter Eight

PRESTON

I'm nervous. This never happens to me. Raising my hand to knock on Bex's door, I choke back the bile rising from my stomach. Jefferson Hall, the senior dormitory, is deserted this early. Everyone sleeps in from the parties the night before. I never get that luxury with my hockey schedule.

Bex opens the door, her hand covering her mouth as she yawns. Dressed in black shorts and a tight matching tank top, she looks too good for just waking up. She has a body made for sin. Long, toned legs I want wrapped around me as I fuck her. Nice, perky tits that will fill my hands perfectly. Plump lips with a hint of pink gloss on them that I now want her to smear all over my cock.

I'm sporting a semi just looking at her. Fuck, I have to think of something else. Her hair is down, long layers of blonde hair stopping right above her breasts. I consider throwing her over my shoulder and locking us inside her bedroom. But we can't be late. My mom will kill me.

"Hey," I say. "You ready to go?"

"Yeah." She smiles. "Let me grab my bag."

Bex disappears for a second, and then she returns with a small gym bag slung over her shoulder.

After she locks the door, we walk side by side down the hall. Neither of us speak which makes the tension in the air thicker.

Say something, Prez.

I've never been this weird around a girl before.

"So," I start, thinking over what to say. "You're gonna meet my mom. And Uncle Jameson. Just ignore any stupid comments they make. They've never met any of the girls I... ugh, you know."

She laughs. "You mean dated?"

"No." I shake my head. "I've never really dated anyone in the traditional sense. Mostly just—"

"Hookups," she finishes for me.

"Yeah. Pretty much. I don't have time to date. Hockey takes up too much of my time."

"I hear ya," she lolls. "Basketball is my life, too, and I'm not even trying to make a career out of it like you. I can imagine the pressure you must be under with your dad."

I shrug. "Not so much my dad. It's more the pressure of living up to the Parker name."

"That must be hard." Her fingers brush against mine, and we both look at each other for a split second before our focus shifts to the stairs in front of us. "Does that make you work harder knowing people are comparing you to your dad?"

I nod. "My older brother followed in my mom's footsteps. He didn't want to be in the shadow of Alex Parker. Plus, he sucks at hockey. He's a total bender. You should see him skate. JP is awful. It's almost embarrassing to call him a Parker."

She chuckles. "You call your brother JP?"

"John Parker. People still call my mom Coach even though she hasn't been Charlotte Coachman in twenty-five years. One of John's first clients called him JP. Names stick in the sports world. I haven't called him John since I was in high school."

"How much older is he than you?"

"Five years. My parents didn't have me until they were thirty-five. I think my mom was trying to see how long she could make my dad wait for another kid."

“But she likes kids. I’ve read all the articles about how she basically raised Rico Serrano and nurtured his professional basketball career.”

“She did. Rico lived in the building my parents now own. She rented an apartment to Rico’s mom and coached his youth basketball league.”

“She also coached his college team,” she adds. “Your mom is so... amazing. You have no idea how lucky you are to have parents like yours.”

“I do know. Seeing how some people were raised in this city made me open my eyes to my unusual lifestyle. Listen to me, I’m complaining about living up to my dad’s legacy when I have it so—”

“Good,” she finishes. A beat passes between us, before she stops in her tracks. “Wait, where are we going? Where’s your car?” She looks both ways down the street, probably confused when she doesn’t see a luxury car in sight.

“We’re taking the subway,” I inform her. “Ever been on it?”

“Yeah, tons of times. But you’re rich. I didn’t expect you to ride with commoners.”

I laugh so hard it shakes through me. “Seriously? You have me pegged all wrong, girl. For someone who knows so much about my mom, you should know how she grew up.”

“Yeah, but you were raised with a silver spoon in your mouth. I guess I just assumed...”

“Never assume when it comes to me.” I hook my arm around her back, basking in the warmth of her body against mine. “I will surprise you every time.”

She locks onto me, her blue eyes piercing through me. “So far you have. Every time. You’re nothing like what I thought.”

“Ah, you expected me to be an asshole.” I release my loose grip on her, taking her hand in mine as we walk down the subway steps which lead to the underground train. “Am I right?”

“Yep. You have shattered all of my expectations of the legendary Peter Preston Parker.”

I roll my eyes at her.

“What?”

“I hate hearing my full name.”

“You never told me why your parents named you after Spider-Man.”

“Because I try to forget.”

“It’s actually a pretty cool name. I mean, how many people are named Peter Parker?”

“A lot. More than you’d think. There’s a lot of comic nerds out there.”

“Oh.” She seems surprised as if my parents were the only idiots to name their child after a superhero. “I guess there’s a bunch of Tony Stark’s running around, too. Huh?”

A smile turns up the corners of my mouth. “I’m wowed by your knowledge of *Marvel* characters. Jamie will love you. You better keep that to yourself, or I might lose you to him.”

She laughs. “Not a chance.”

“What else are you into? Are you a closet gamer, too?”

“Nah, not so much video games. The controllers hurt my knuckles.” She moves her hands out in front of her pretending as if she’s holding a basketball and then shoots the imaginary ball. “I can’t do anything to jeopardize my spot on the team. It’s hard to dribble or shoot when your hands are numb.”

“That’s why I only play on occasion. But my Uncle Jameson’s new game is too addictive to stop playing once I start. It’s like crack. This mage or wizard or whatever the fuck he is keeps kicking my ass.”

She laughs. “I can’t see you playing video games with magicians in them.”

“You have me figured out all wrong, sweetheart. Everything that comes out of your mouth is a stereotype, not

fact.”

After I swipe my subway pass, and we’re on the train headed toward South Philly, we settle into two chairs toward the back.

“Okay, so what are the facts about the closet gamer hockey stud sitting next to me?” She gives me a goofy look that makes a dimple I never noticed pop in her right cheek.

“What do you want to know?”

“Do you have any other secret nerd hobbies no one knows about?”

I laugh. “Nope, just video games. And I wouldn’t consider those nerdy, anyway. Jamie’s the one who’s obsessed with science fiction and a whole hell of a lot of geeky shit I don’t even understand.” I slide my arm along the top of her chair, my fingers grazing the nape of her neck. “Now that you know all of my secrets, what are you keeping from me?”

She stills from my touch and sucks in a deep breath. “I’m too boring to have secrets.”

“I doubt that. Everyone has something to hide.”

“My mom left my dad for his best friend right before I started high school. The entire school talked about it. Hell, the entire town gossiped about my mom sleeping around and running off with another hockey coach.”

“Ouch. I had no idea.”

She shrugs. “Dad never talks about the past. He likes it to stay there... where it belongs.”

“This is our stop,” I say as the train slows.

She glances over her shoulder at the doors opening to the underground terminal.

Five minutes later, we stroll into the gymnasium where my mom is standing at the center of the court. She clutches her whistle between her fingers and raises it to her mouth. The group of twelve-year-old boys gather around her. Their eyes are wide and hopeful.

“I can’t believe I’m meeting your mom. This feels so... I don’t know. Like we’re dating. I don’t want her to get the wrong idea.”

I pinch her elbow to reassure her and heat prickles my skin. My God, I love touching this girl, stealing quick exchanges whenever I can even though I should stay far, far away from her.

“You’ll be fine,” I promise. “She won’t bite you.”

Her cheeks flush as if she’s thinking she’d like me to bite her instead. Or maybe I’m reading too much into her every move. It’s hard not to study Bex when she’s in my presence. I have trouble taking my eyes off her.

We stop next to my mom, who spins around when I tap her on the shoulder. She pushes a few strands of caramel colored hair behind her ears, a big smile on her face. Her gaze shifts from me to Bex.

“Preston,” Mom says as she hugs me. “You’re here. And early for once.” She releases me and takes a step back appraising Bex for a second before she says, “And you must be Bex. Preston has told me so much about you.”

No, I haven’t.

Bex stands straighter, her expression unreadable. She must be nervous, though she’s hiding it well. “Yes, I’m Bex Bryant.”

“Coach,” Mom says. “Or Charlie, or Charlotte, or even Coach Parker, but never call me Mrs. Parker.”

“Mom thinks that makes her sound old,” I add for clarification.

Bex holds out her hand for my mom to shake, her smile so wide it reaches up to her eyes. “Nice to meet you, Coach. I’m sure Preston already told you I’m a big fan of yours.”

Instead of shaking her hand, my mom pulls Bex into her arms and squeezes the life out of her. “It’s nice to meet you, too, sweetie.”

“Mom, don’t hurt her,” I quip. “Jeez, could you loosen up a bit? I don’t think Bex can breathe.”

They both laugh.

I can see it already. Mom will want me to invite Bex over for dinner, so my dad can meet her too. And then suddenly, the entire family will be there, which means my parents’ friends and their kids will all be in attendance.

“What?” Mom moves away from Bex, giving her some room. “I want to savor the first time I get to meet a girl you like. Between you and your brother, I don’t know who’s worse.”

“Bex is my friend,” I tell her.

“Right.” Mom rolls her eyes at me. “If you say so. Now, John needs to find a decent girl, and my boys will be all set.”

“We’re just friends,” Bex chimes. “I only met Preston a few days ago. We barely know each other.”

“But you must be special, or you wouldn’t be here.”

Bex’s mouth snaps shut, her expression stoic.

“Mom, would you stop freaking Bex out, please? This is kind of embarrassing.”

The buzzer sounds throughout the gymnasium giving Bex and me a reprieve from my mother’s comments.

“Duty calls. You can sit the first half out,” Mom says to me, and then turns her back to us to rally up the team.

“I thought Jameson coaches with your mom,” Bex says.

I cup her shoulder with my hand and steer her toward the bleaches. “He’s usually here by now. Something must have come up. It must be important because I know he wouldn’t miss the opportunity to join my mom in tag-teaming me until they embarrass the shit out of me.”

Bex drags her fingers down my forearm, the sudden contact too much for me to stand. “Don’t worry about it. My dad would do the same thing.”

“Not if it were me.”

She shakes her head. “Definitely not for you. He loves you like a son and thinks you’re the best player he’s ever coached, but he would not be as nice as your mom if we were dating.”

“Good thing we don’t have to worry about breaking his last rule.”

But I want to.

“Too bad you have trouble staying away from me,” she jokes, now acknowledging the final text I sent her on Thursday night.

Which reminds me...

“What happened to you the other night?” I flex my jaw, irritated by her dismissal. “You ghosted me.”

Her noses scrunches in confusion. “What are you talking about? I came to your game last night. I’m here now. Your definition of ghosting must be different from mine.”

“You never texted me back.”

“Aww, look at Parker getting all butt-hurt over a girl he doesn’t even like. A girl who’s supposed to be his *friend*.”

“Shut it, smart ass.” I shake my head, smiling. She rips them out of me whenever she’s around. It’s hard not to feel something with Bex. “You know what I mean. You never answered my text.”

Bex removes her phone from her gym bag. An awkward silence passes between us, the loud cheers around us filling the void as she scrolls through her messages.

“Oh,” she says, her eyes slowly raising to meet mine. “I didn’t think you expected a reply to your last message. But clearly, it’s important to you. I’m not sure what you want me to say.”

“I like being around you,” I admit. “You’re nothing like the girls I know. It’s refreshing. Like I can be myself with you.”

She looks away from me, biting the inside of her cheek, her focus on the boys running down the court. “I like you, too. But I don’t see anything happening between us. Friends I can do... if you think you can handle being friends with a girl.”

Can I be her friend when all I can think about is ripping off her clothes? Not likely.

“I can try.” I lean into her side, pressing my lips to her earlobe. “If that’s what you want.”

She clears her throat, still watching the game play out before us. “Umm... yeah, that’s what I want.”

We’ll see about that.

If there’s one thing I’m good at, it’s changing girls’ minds. Bex will give in at some point. They always do.

“Okay,” I agree. “As you wish.”

Chapter Nine

I met my idol and didn't pass out. Coach was everything I thought she would be and more. Her strong personality, the one I'd heard about online, shined through. When she hugged me, I almost died. Like I could have died at that exact moment and been truly happy. One of my bucket list goals came true all because of Preston.

But what I loved most was seeing her with Preston—as a mom. Preston and Coach are so cute together I was a little jealous. It made me miss not having a mother. It also made me wish I were part of their family—which is a major problem—because I shouldn't want things I can't have, and Preston is one of them.

“They made it,” Preston says, pointing at his teammate, Jamie, and a middle-aged man who could pass as his older twin. *This must be Uncle Jameson.* The resemblance is uncanny. The same short, brown hair, straight nose, high cheekbones, and long lashes that would make any girl jealous.

It's the end of the third quarter when they stroll down the sidelines toward our bench. They stop in front of us, and Preston stands, towering over everyone, filling out every inch of the space around him.

“Before you start...” Preston says to Jameson, “... this is Bex. She's my friend. Nothing more. So, don't act all weird like Mom did. Okay?”

He studies Preston's face for a second to see if he's joking and then laughs. "Good one." Jameson slaps Preston on the back. "You had me going, buddy. For a second there, I thought you were serious about having a friend who's a girl."

"I am," Preston challenges.

"It's not in the Parker nature," he says under his breath, but still low enough so I can hear him.

This family is weird. Almost none of them are related by blood. All of them are good-looking. Like what the fuck? They clearly won the gene lottery. Even with a touch of gray in his hair, Jameson is one fine-ass man. A super-hot DILF. I'm surprised Preston's mom was able just to be friends with this man without jumping him.

Jameson introduces himself to me minus the hug I got from Coach.

I wave to Jamie, who clutches his cell phone, half looking at me. He types out a quick reply, and then smiles as if he's up to no good. "Any chance you know how to dance?"

I cock an eyebrow at him. "Huh? Are you talking to me?"

"Yeah. Who else would I be talking to?"

"I guess so. Why?"

"This girl I'm seeing, Shannon, she's in this dance contest tonight. Two of the girls in her sorority are puking their guts out. She thinks they have food poisoning. And now they're two girls short for tonight."

"That sucks."

He shrugs. "Yeah. Would you help her out?"

"I don't know anything about dancing professionally."

"All you have to do is shake your ass for one song. It's for charity. All of the sorority houses are doing it to raise money for CHOP, the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia."

"I would love to but dancing isn't really my thing. Can't they find someone else to do it?"

“I’ll be there,” Preston says. “Just pretend you’re on the bar dancing for me.”

I laugh. “You’re having a hard time accepting the friends part of our relationship, huh?”

“Nah, I get it.” He presses his palms to his thighs drawing my attention to his legs. “But that doesn’t mean I have to accept it.”

Oh. My. God.

His legs are so damn muscular I want to give them a squeeze, you know, to test out their... durability? But I stop myself even though it’s tempting.

“How about a little wager?”

I perk up at the mention of a bet. “What did you have in mind?”

“Play me in H-O-R-S-E,” Preston says. “If I win, you have to come tonight and dance in this contest with Jamie’s girl.”

“Okay.” *I’ve got this in the bag.* “And if I win, you have to wear a Spider-Man costume on campus for a day.”

Jamie laughs so hard he shakes the bench. “Aww, man, this is priceless.” He turns to Preston. “Sorry, bro, but I’m hoping your girl wins. What I wouldn’t do or pay to see you walk around in that costume.” Jamie glances at me. “I like how you think, Bex. You know, we should team up sometime. Teach Parker a lesson for being such a dick to me.”

“He’s joking,” Preston says. “I give him a hard time about being a nerd, but that’s about it.”

“You do it in front of Shannon.”

“It got you laid, did it not?” Preston challenges.

They share an intense moment that ends with them laughing.

Preston extends his hand to me. “What do you say, Bryant? Do we have a deal?”

I shake his hand. “You’re on, Parker.”

He gives me one of his boyish smirks.

I can't decide whether I want to slap it from his face or kiss it from his lips.

Kiss, definitely kiss him.

After the youth league games end, Jamie sticks around to judge the outcome of my bet with Preston.

Jamie hands the ball to me after I win the coin toss. "You're up, Bex."

I take the ball from him, palming it in my hand.

"You ready to do this?" I ask Preston.

Preston moves his hands to his narrow hips, pushing up his T-shirt enough for me to see the ridges of his well-defined abs, distracting me. *Damn him. Did he do that on purpose?* He licks his lips following my line of sight. He knows what he's doing. *Jerk.*

"Let's see what you've got," he says with a defiant smirk.

I take the ball through my legs, switching between hands, dribbling as I pass Preston on my way to the basket to make a layup. The ball goes into the basket with ease, and I hold up my hands, victorious.

"She scores," I say, passing the ball to Preston. "Think you can match it?"

H-O-R-S-E requires the second player to match the shot. If I had missed the layup, Preston could have taken any shot he wanted.

He waves me off, a smirk touching his lips. "Please, girl, I got this. I learned how to make a layup when I was still in diapers."

"You have to do a crossover, too," I remind him. "That's part of the shot."

He snickers. “You forget who you’re talking to.”

His mom made the *Coachman Crossover* popular when she played basketball for Villanova. I should have known better. He’s skilled with a ball, his talents apparent when he buzzes by me in a blur. Both of his parents have rubbed off on him. Preston is naturally athletic as if each fluid movement is programmed into his muscle memory, gifted to him at birth.

The ball hits the backboard and drops into the basket.

Jamie grabs it from beneath the net. “You two are both showoffs. At this rate, we’ll be here all day.”

“This will probably be the longest game of H-O-R-S-E in history,” I deadpan.

“Not if I can help it.” Preston grins at me like an idiot. “You’re going down, sweetheart. I never lose.”

I nudge him in the side with my elbow. “I wouldn’t speak so soon.”

“Would you guys kiss and get it over with already?”

I stare at Jamie, horrified. A silence passes between Preston and me.

Preston ignores him, pushing his hands out in front of him. “My turn. Pass the ball, Jamie.”

Preston starts at the top of the key, his eyes full of determination. He’s not used to losing. Neither am I.

In an unexpected turn of events, Preston dribbles stopping two feet from the basket and raises the ball to attempt a Skyhook. And the fucker actually sinks it.

“Oh, so now you think you’re Kareem?” I shake my head, annoyed. “You’re one dirty-ass player, Parker. Technically, trick shots are not allowed in H-O-R-S-E.”

“Are you punking out of our bet already?” He wiggles his eyebrows. “Or are you too intimidated to play me fair and square?”

I let out a puff of air. “No. Fancy shots like that are questionable.”

“It’s a hook shot. There’s nothing fancy about it,” he challenges.

“Fine, you win, Parker.”

He smiles. “I always win. Get used to it.”

The chances of me making this shot are slim. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar made this uncomfortable hook shot famous. It’s one of the hardest shots to make with any precision. Any time I’ve ever attempted to make one, my shoulder felt like it was coming out of its socket.

I follow Preston’s lead, hopeful when the ball hits the rim.

“The first H of the game,” Jamie says.

I growl in frustration turning to look at Preston. “How did you make that?”

He shrugs, a playful smile on his lips. “Skill.”

“I’m learning more about you every second we spend together,” I admit. “I never expected you to be good at basketball, too.”

“I’m good at everything I do.” He licks his lips. “You’ll find that out soon enough.”

My breath catches in my throat. There are no words to convey what I’m thinking. Only actions. And I don’t want to act upon how I feel right now. At least I shouldn’t leap into his arms and kiss him until I run out of air. Nope, that’s not going to happen.

Focus, Bex.

He stares me down as if I’m his last meal. I kind of wish he would devour me because every nerve ending in my body comes alive from the sexy look on his handsome face.

We continue our game, which never seems to end. Over an hour later, I’m about to lose to Preston. He has H-O-R, and I have H-O-R-S. One more missed shot and I have to go through with the bet. I don’t even know how to dance, at least not well enough to win a contest.

Preston chooses a three-pointer sinking it with equal ease and grace as the others. I hate that he's so good at basketball. *Isn't hockey enough?* I'm annoyed because I should be beating him—not the other way around.

I set up at the three-point line gripping the ball in my hands. The gym is eerily quiet. I can hear myself breathing. Jamie and Preston stare at me, the game on the line. My stomach churns, and I want to puke. I can't lose at my own sport to Preston.

The ball sails out of my hands, and I can tell by the way I released it that it's going to hit the backboard. And it does. There's still hope as it rolls around the rim of the basket for a split second before hitting the court.

"You lose." Preston points at me, a goofy expression crossing his face. "I can't wait for you to dance for me."

I throw my hands on my hips and stare him down. "I'm not dancing for you."

His blue eyes flicker, but he doesn't say anything. The wide grin stretching across his handsome face says it all. I'm his for the night. And after spending the day with him, I'm okay with this loss. I want more time with him.

"Sweet," Jamie says. "I'll call Shannon and let her know Bex is coming tonight."

"You said she needs two girls," I say to Jamie. "Right?"

He nods.

"I'm not doing this alone. My friend, Taylor, has to come with me. She won't mind getting up on a bar and making an ass of herself."

Jamie removes his phone from his pocket to text Shannon. "Even better."

Preston grabs my shoulder and spins me around. "Good game."

I force a smile. "You, too."

His eyes cut through me, his gaze so intense. I want to look away, but I can't. He weakens me with his firm grip. His hand feels good on my bare skin. I should push him away to create the space I need.

"C'mon." He offers his hand to me. "Let's get something to eat on our way back to campus. You have a big night ahead of you. You'll need your strength." He says the last part with an arrogant smirk that hardens my nipples.

How am I going to make it through the night with him? My willpower is already fleeting.

Rule number two is out the window.

How long until we break the last rule? The one that crushed me the last time I broke it.

Chapter Ten

I look like an ass. No amount of liquid courage will get me through this night. Staring in the mirror at the ridiculous outfit Taylor threw in my direction, I cringe.

Taylor comes up from behind me and cups my shoulders. “You look hot, babe. We’re going to own this dance contest.”

I look in the mirror and roll my eyes at her. “Remind me never to make deals with hot hockey players. I don’t know shit about dancing at a club. This is going to be so embarrassing. Why are you not upset I roped you into this?”

She shrugs, lining her lips with a light pink gloss. “I like dancing and money. I don’t see the problem. It’s not like we have to take off our clothes.”

I let out a breath of air. “I guess so. But look at what we have to wear. It’s ridiculous.”

She steps back from my chair to fix her short, tight tank top in the mirror. The shirt rides up her stomach exposing some of her flesh. So does mine.

Taylor shrugs. “They’re not so bad.”

I frown, unable to hide my disappointment. “Whoever ordered our outfits must have sized them for children. Black spandex shorts that barely cover my underwear are not okay around Preston. Neither is this top that scoops so low my nipples are practically hanging out. This shirt was not designed for D cups.”

She chuckles, staring at me. “But you look smoking. Preston is going to pop wood so fast you won’t be able to keep him away from you.”

“Ugh. That’s the problem. I can’t have Preston see me like this.” Wrapping my arms around myself, I cover my stomach. “He’s so touchy-feely. Being around him makes me want to break all of my dad’s rules. I would do it, too. If he wanted to.”

“You bet your ass Preston would. He obviously wants you. Anyone within a ten-mile radius of you two can feel the sexual tension. Your dad’s last rule applies to dating, but he never said you couldn’t have sex with his players.”

“No, not you, too. You’re just as bad as Preston. Look what happened the last time I had sex with one of his players. It almost ruined my life.”

“This time is different.”

“How so?”

“Because Preston is different. And girl, he’s like five-alarm fire hot. I don’t know how you can stand to be around him without keeping a change of panties in your pocket.”

I lift a pillow from the bed and throw it at her. “You’re so gross.”

Taylor catches it, and then chucks it back at me. “You know I’m right. Admit it, Bex. You want him, too.”

I lean to the right allowing the pillow to miss my head and hit the wall behind me. “I can’t.”

“Hey, it’s just an idea. If you want to touch his man meat, there’s nothing stopping you.”

“Eww, did you just say man meat?” I cringe outwardly at the thought.

She shrugs, nonchalantly. “I hear he’s pretty big.” Taylor holds out her hands as if she’s measuring Preston’s dick.

“Oh, my God. Stop it. And how would you know how big Preston is? It’s not like you’ve seen it.”

“I asked around for you. Figured we should get as much dirt on him as we can... in case you change your mind about him.”

I shake my head at her and sigh. “I can’t think of him like that. Ugh. He’s my dad’s favorite player. And his mom invited me to learn from her. I mean, how cool is that?”

“Yeah, that’s pretty awesome. Coach is like your spirit animal.”

“I know. She’s so incredible. I would kill to have a mom like Preston’s. Mine was a complete embarrassment to all women. A nasty home-wrecking whore.”

She laughs, checking herself out in the mirror once more. “How do I look?”

I wink at her. “Hot.”

She flicks her dark hair over her shoulder and smiles.

Taylor hands me the bottle of vodka from the counter, and I gladly take my fair share.

“Everyone on campus is coming here to see the dance-off when I don’t even know how to dance.”

Taylor snorts and takes the bottle from my hand, raising it to her lips. “You’ve got moves, Bex. They come out when you’re drunk. All you have to do is get on that bar, shake your ass, and push out your tits.”

I laugh. “I hate you.”

She blows me a kiss. “You love me.”

Preston, Tucker, Drake, Trent, and Jamie wait for us in the parking lot at The Sixth Floor. A group of girls, who I assume we are dancing with, crowd around them. I sift through them until I reach Preston. He stops talking to Drake, his eyes now fixed on me. His mouth falls open slightly as he takes in the sight of me.

I never wear clothes like this—at least not in public. Tight spandex shorts and tops are reserved for working out or practices. Never for weekends. And definitely not around guys like Preston.

“Damn, Bex.” Preston steps forward, his right hand falling to my waist. He closes the distance between us, the air between us thick with tension. He studies each of my curves, his gaze falling over every inch of my body. “You look... hot.”

I smile, and it’s not even the slightest bit forced. “Thanks, Parker. You’re not so bad yourself.”

Spending the day with Preston has lowered my walls. He’s not as much of an ass as I had thought.

“Shannon,” Jamie says to a girl with long, blonde hair. “This is Bex.” He points to me. “And her friend, Taylor. They’re the girls I was telling you about.”

“Oh, hey.” Shannon strolls over to us. “You two are such lifesavers. We were ready to bail on the contest until Jamie told me you could fill in for our friends.”

“I don’t know how to dance,” I admit.

“Yes, you do.” Taylor smacks my arm. “Bex is being modest.”

“Okay, fine.” I hold up my hands. “But if we lose, don’t blame me.”

Taylor invades Shannon’s personal space, already acting as if they’re best friends. “So, what do you need us to do?”

“It’s nothing special. Just have fun. We have a few moves we were planning to do. But we don’t have to do anything choreographed. Move your hips to the beat and do whatever feels natural to you.”

Preston comes up from behind me placing both of his big hands on my hips. My entire body hums from his energy. He dips his head until his lips are so close, his breath on my earlobe. He sways my hips, rocking me from side to side. “Nothing to it, Bex.”

Do that again.

I don't want him to stop touching me, and now that he's all over me, I know tonight is going to end with me in his bed. I want him so badly my pussy clenches from the promise of his hands on me, his cock filling me up. I haven't wanted a guy this much since Kellan. And that was a long time ago.

I look up at him, haunted by his beautiful blue eyes. "Easy for you to say. Maybe you should get up on the bar and shake your ass for money."

He laughs. "For five hundred bucks, I would."

"I think I need a drink," I admit. "I had some vodka before we left the dorm, but it wasn't enough for me to do this."

His hands on my bare skin send shivers down my spine. A blaze of heat licks my stomach as his fingers graze my navel. Without my permission, a soft whimper escapes my lips. *Is he doing this to get me to focus on him instead of the dance competition?* Well, it's working.

"I'll be right there... watching you. Look at me and no one else."

"Okay." I suck in a deep breath. "Let's get this over with."

When we step inside the club, the bass is thumping, the music vibrating beneath my four-inch heels. I look like a giant in these. I'm well over six feet tall with them on, which makes me stick out even more. The other girls in our group are on the petite side with the exception of Taylor. She's almost as tall as me and built like an athlete.

"We have to check in," Shannon informs us.

Preston slips his fingers between mine as we move through the mass of people. A prick of electricity stings my fingers. His calloused skin is so rough against mine, and I can't stop myself from wondering how his hands would feel on other parts of my body.

After Shannon confirms our spot in the competition, I untangle my fingers from Preston's, already missing his warmth.

I smile. "Wish me luck."

He gives me a crooked smile that sets my insides on fire. “Good luck. Remember what I said. If you get nervous, look at me. And no one else. It’s no different than playing in a game or a tournament. You’ve had thousands of people watch you over the course of your college basketball career.”

“True. But I’m good at basketball. That comes natural to me. Dancing doesn’t.”

“It’s one dance. No one will even know you were up there after tonight. The money is for charity. That should give you more incentive to win.”

I flash a reassuring grin at him. “Thanks, Preston.”

He winks. “Anytime.”

I turn away from him now following Shannon and her friends to the back of the club. A bouncer ushers us into a large open room with vanities on one wall where a few girls are seated. Others stand behind them fixing their hair or makeup in the mirror.

I recognize some of the girls, and I have no idea why.

“Do they look familiar to you?” I ask Taylor, motioning to the girls in the right-hand corner of the room.

She tilts her head to the side, taking her time to look them over. “Yeah, I know them. Those are the girls from Kappa something or other. I can’t remember the full name of their sorority.” Taylor glances around the room, her eyes landing on another team of girls in the center of the room.

“Hello, have you not seen all the lights out there?” a girl says from behind us, talking loudly to her friend. “They’re filming this for the senior project. It’s in high def.” She tugs on the girl’s arm helping her to an open chair. “C’mon, I need your expert blending skills. This concealer is being a real bitch. I don’t want to go out there looking like a pumpkin.”

I shudder at the mention of the senior project. *Will I be included in this footage?* For my sake, I hope not. *How would I explain this to my dad?*

I feel so out of place around these girls. My childhood was spent at either an ice rink or on a basketball court—not at Neiman Marcus. They are the kind of girls Preston would date—beautiful and made up like Barbie dolls.

Shannon introduces us to the girls in our dance group, seven in total. I can't remember any of their names. Mostly because I know I won't need to after this dance is over. We will go our separate ways after tonight.

Once it's our turn, a bouncer leads us out of the room and down the creepy back hallway. He pushes open a door that leads to a long bar, the one we're expected to dance on. He helps each of us onto the bar. There are so many people in the crowd.

Why did I agree to this?

I shouldn't have bet Preston. But why not? I should have won. H-O-R-S-E is my jam. It should have been a slam dunk. But Preston had other plans, and with a mom like his, the game was probably already in the bag for him before I even knew it.

I squint when the bright lights hit me in the face now realizing why the girl in the dressing room was so concerned about her makeup. Poles line the bar, each of us stepping forward to grab hold of one. I glance over at Taylor, my body shaking from fear. No amount of alcohol could have prepared me for the throng of drunken idiots staring up at me.

Recalling Preston's encouraging words, I scan the crowd for him. He's three rows back from the edge of the bar when his eyes find mine. I bite my bottom lip trying to contain my nerves. He must notice my reaction because he taps Jamie on the shoulder telling him to move forward.

Preston's friends follow his lead, and I can't take my eyes off him. Because of Preston, I don't care about the people in the audience. The only person who matters is staring back at me, keeping me grounded.

I smile, and this time I feel more confident like I can handle this. One dance. One song. And it's for a good cause.

An announcer, with a microphone in hand, stands at the center of the bar. He introduces us as House Theta. Once the song starts, the girls next to me sway to the beat. And I freeze up. Staring at them in horror, I tell myself to move, but I can't budge. Then, it hits me. I look worse standing up here, frozen in place, so, I find Preston again.

His eyes burn a hole through me. He licks his lips as if he likes what he sees. I'm dancing for him—and only him. Moving my hips to the beat, I go with the flow, allowing the rhythm to take over. Preston inches through the crowd until he's standing below me. I drop to the bar shaking my ass along with the rest of the girls.

I laugh, and once I do, I can't stop. This is fun, way more fun than I had realized. All I had to do was lighten up and lower my guard. But everything comes to a screeching halt when someone drops a glass. My shoe collides with a puddle of spilled liquid, and I lose my balance. The sudden disruption causes me to fall forward.

Except my body never hits the floor. Preston's strong arms wrap around me, his muscles tightening as he holds me. The scent of sweat, musk, and laundry detergent fill my nostrils. He smells so manly I want to stick my tongue out and lick him.

"You okay, Bex?" he whispers into my ear, his voice deep and sensual.

"No, I think I might die from humiliation. I told you this was a bad idea."

He brushes a strand of hair away from my face, inspecting me. "You were killing it up there. What happened?"

"Someone spilled their drink. I slid on it and couldn't grab the pole in time to steady myself." I run my hand through my hair, frustrated with the turn of events. "They're going to lose all because of me."

He sets me on the floor keeping his hand on my hip. "Don't worry about winning. No matter which team wins, the money will help fund a good cause."

“Yeah, but I feel like I let everyone down.”

“Nah. They’ll get over it. Shannon’s pretty chill. And at least you held up your end of the deal. Now, I know you’ll follow through with any future bets we make.”

“This is the last one,” I say, not sure if I mean it. Because I don’t want this to be the last time I hang out with Preston. “No more dares.”

“You’re no fun, Bex Bryant.” He tilts a bottle of beer to his lips and takes a sip.

I grab it from his hand and gulp down the remainder of its contents. “I’m tons of fun.”

“Prove it,” he challenges.

“How do you expect me to do that?”

“For starters, you can dance with me.”

“How about a drink first?”

He nods. “Deal. What are you having?”

“Whatever you’re ordering.”

“And then you’re mine,” he growls.

A ripple of pleasure shoots through my body.

I’m his.

Chapter Eleven

PRESTON

Rap music cranks through the speakers suspended from the ceiling of The Sixth Floor. The bass vibrates beneath my feet sending a tremor up my legs. My dick is semi-hard, and it's not from the sea of half-naked women which surrounds me because all I can see is Bex. She has no idea how sexy she can be without even trying.

Her anxious stares and nervous lip biting only make her more real. More my type. Most girls care about my name and what I have to offer them. Not Bex. I find myself lowering my guard around her, telling her things I wouldn't confess to other girls.

For a split second, I even consider what it would be like to date her. Then I remember her dad's rules. And his warning. I can't jeopardize my spot on the team. She deserves better than me.

Bex slides her fingers up my arm, and now she has my undivided attention. Her skin is soft against mine. Flames lick my skin everywhere she touches, her fingers slowly navigating my bicep. She's rough around the edges, but there's a softer side to her. A side she keeps hidden.

I lick my lips, and the corners of her mouth curl up into a smile. Taking a sip from the beer in my hand, I suck down the last of it before setting it down on the bar.

"You promised me a dance," I remind her.

She nods. "How could I forget?"

I take the beer from her and chug the rest of it, leaving it on the bar.

“Hey, I was drinking that,” she shouts over the music, and then smacks my arm.

I grab her hand and pull her into my chest, dragging her far enough into the crowd that we’re in the middle of the dance floor. Tilting her head back, she stares up at the bright strobe lights shining from one side of the room to the other. I watch as she admires the light show above us. She’s so beautiful I could look at her all day.

Hooking my arm around her back, I close the short distance between us. She presses her palms to my chest. Her bright blue eyes slice right through me. I lose myself in Bex. In this moment, nothing around us matters anymore. Not the sweat-slick bodies rubbing against us or the wave of heat that rolls through the club like a thick fog.

When I look at Bex, I no longer see what we’re doing as wrong. I like that we’re forbidden to be together. Knowing there’s a risk of getting caught makes being with her even more exciting. I think she likes it too.

A tiny smile crosses her lips as she slides her hands further down my chest stopping at the hem of my jeans. Her fingers linger. My cock thickens the longer she touches me. My skin pricks with electricity when Bex slips one of her fingers below the waist of my pants.

Fuck, I can’t stand it anymore.

What is she doing to me? I’m two seconds away from bending her over. Her slow exploration of my body stops, and I instantly miss her touch. She steps back almost bumping into the girl behind her. Making eye contact with me, she sways her hips to the music.

She wants me.

She wants me to watch her.

I want her.

I couldn’t look away even if I tried.

Because there's nothing I want more than Bex.

Raising her hands above her head, she inches toward me as she rocks her hips to the now techno beat. My mouth falls open. I can't believe my eyes. Bex Bryant has transformed into a different girl. She's confident, more in charge of her body. This isn't the same girl who fell from the bar. Not even close.

I reach down to fix my growing erection, and her eyes follow my hand. Her expression changes as if she's hungry and needs me to satisfy her craving. Bex turns around with her back facing me. She rubs her ass on my thigh. As if to intentionally torture me, she takes her time moving her tight ass up and down my leg, making her way closer to my cock.

I'm rock-hard now and definitely going home with blue balls if she keeps this up. But I don't want her to stop. She leans back, her head on my chest, and peeks up at me without breaking stride. Reaching behind her, she grabs my hip, using me for support as she bends forward. She knows what she's doing and doesn't care.

Dropping low, she pushes her ass into me. I take that as an offering and palm her backside with my hands. For a girl who doubted herself about the dance contest, Bex sure has moves. And she sure as hell knows how to work each of her killer curves.

Moving one hand to her bare stomach, the other still on her ass, I bring her back to my height. In these heels, she's only a few inches shorter than me. She's so damn tall. I've never dated a girl I couldn't tuck under my arm.

I lean forward to whisper in her ear, and she stills from my breath on her skin. "Keep grinding on my dick like that, and I won't be able to stop myself."

Bex tilts her head back so that our eyes meet. Sweat dots her forehead, glistening on her skin. "Stop you from doing what?"

"You know what," I growl, tracing my fingers over her well-defined ab muscles. "I'm trying to follow the rules."

“Maybe I want to break them.” I stare at her, confused, and she continues, “Just for tonight.”

Is she serious?

Well, fuck me.

Literally.

Chapter Twelve

PRESTON

After a few more drinks and too much friction from Bex's tight ass, I can't take it anymore. I have a hard-on that will not quit. And she knows damn well what she's doing to me. She can feel my erection digging into her ass.

Surprisingly, she gets even bolder and reaches behind her back, raking her fingers down my chest until she finds my very hard cock. Since the minute I saw Bex, I wanted her. As much as I try to deny it, I'm only lying to myself. I grow even harder for her, filling her hand.

Needing a distraction, I dip down to kiss her neck. She squirms in my arms, and a soft moan escapes her lips. Bex hasn't told me to stop. She's pretty much challenging me to break the rules for tonight. I flatten my tongue, running it along her neck, making sure to lick every inch of her skin.

"Make me stop," I whisper into her ear.

She shakes her head. "Don't... stop..." Her words come out in ragged breaths.

Adrenaline rushes through my veins. The feeling is better than the high I get from a buzzer-beating breakaway. When I apply more pressure by raking my teeth along her skin, she whimpers. It's so fucking sexy I could nut in my boxers.

Bex takes my hand, moving it from her hip to her stomach. She keeps going, inviting me to touch her. Her nipples are like daggers poking through her thin spandex top. I twist one of

them between my fingers, and she squeals. And I'm dead. Because it's the sexiest fucking thing I've ever heard.

Cupping her chin in my hand, I hold her in place, long enough to plant a trail of kisses along her jaw. She locks onto me knowing this is it. There's no turning back. Bex nods as if granting me permission. I pull down her bottom lip with my thumb, and she sticks out her tongue. Her wet heat coats my finger, igniting a fire inside me.

I lick my lips. She does the same. And then my lips crash into hers. There's so much intensity behind the kiss Bex stumbles backward. But I'm there to catch her, pinning her against my chest. With each flick of her tongue, Bex consumes me. She owns me. And I claim her in return.

Our slow exploration of each other's mouth turns into a heated debate for which of us can have more power over the other. And why am I surprised? Bex isn't like the girls I normally hook up with. She wants to be in control. She's used to doing things her way. But she doesn't realize I'm always in charge.

I take her lip between my teeth and suck on it, tugging at her delicate flesh. She slides her hand to the back of my head, commanding control once more. And I fight her. Because this back and forth between us is turning me on too much to stop. She's so damn feisty. Not like I expected anything else from Bex.

I sweep my tongue into her mouth, and she lets go, melting into me. Her body relaxes against mine as if she's finally given in. We stay like this for what feels like hours until our lips separate.

She's panting, barely able to catch her breath.

"Wanna get out of here?" I ask her.

She nods. "As if you had to ask."

irty minutes later, I pull up out front of the house I share with my teammates. The old Victorian has three floors, a covered porch, and a massive yard. For once, it's not littered with beer bottles or cigarettes from people passing by on their way to Greek Row.

"Wait here," I tell Bex, running my hand up her thigh. "I'll come around and get you."

She frowns. "I don't need help getting out of the car, Parker."

"You looked kind of dangerous in those heels on our way out of the club."

She chuckles. "That's because I'm not used to them."

I remove my hand from her leg and open my car door. "Just let me help you, okay? The pavement is cracked in certain parts along this street. I don't want you to get your heel stuck in one of them and break your leg."

"Aww." She holds her hand over her heart and smiles. "That's sweet, even for you."

I shrug. "I have my moments."

After I switch off the ignition and push open the door, I make my way around to the other side of the car. I hold out my hand for Bex, and she takes it, allowing me to help her up from the bucket seat. She cups my shoulders using them to stabilize herself.

"I think I'm good," she says, her lips inches from mine.

Fuck, I'm not.

Our eyes meet and electricity skates along my skin. Ignoring her comment, I slip my fingers between hers and lead her toward the house. I wasn't kidding about cracks in the pavement. A girl fell out front last year after one of our parties and broke her tibia.

She staggers even with me holding onto her. We only had a few beers. Bex isn't drunk. For a girl who's so light on her feet on the court, she sure as hell seems out of her element in heels.

Worried she'll twist her ankle, I lift Bex and sling her over my shoulder as if she weighs nothing.

"Hey." She hits me playfully on my back. "Put me down, Preston. I can walk on my own."

"I'm sure you can. But I'm not taking any chances with you. How would I explain this to your dad if something happened to you while you were at my house?"

She groans. "Okay, fine. If it makes you feel better."

"It does."

I jog up the front steps of the old Victorian and then set her on the ground to retrieve my keys from my pocket. Once inside, I survey the situation. None of my teammates are in the living room. Or the dining room. Weird.

The kitchen is empty. Then I remember they went to a party at one of the fraternity houses.

I reach into the refrigerator to grab two bottles of water and a carton of strawberries. Kicking the door shut with my foot, I move toward the island in the center of the kitchen. Bex waits for me with a devious look in her eyes.

"Hungry?" I place the food and drinks on the counter behind her, intentionally reaching around her so she can't move.

She smirks. "You going to feed me?"

I lift her up by her ass, ripping a loud scream from her lips, and set her down on the counter. Moving between her legs, I push them wider making room for myself. Bex moans when I rub her thighs. Her entire body trembles. She's so responsive to my touch.

I lift a strawberry from the carton and hold it up to her mouth. She sticks out her tongue to lick the fruit.

"Fuck, you're killing me," I hiss.

She bites into the strawberry, eating it so slow I can't take my eyes off her mouth. The second she finishes it, my lips crash against hers. Our tongues work in harmony, and the

remnants of the strawberry tastes good in my mouth. She smells so sweet I want to lick every inch of her beautiful body.

She sits back ending my exploration of her mouth, and pulls her top over her head, dropping it on the counter. And she's not wearing a bra. Her breasts are full, more than a handful, her nipples hardened peaks. I lick my lips liking what I see. She's perfect, all mine. At least for tonight.

Bex leans forward working on the buttons of my dress shirt. She flips them open one at a time, her eyes fixed on my chest. I shake it off and let it fall to the floor. Her delicate fingers make contact with my skin, and my dick grows harder against my jeans. The physical agony she's putting me through makes me work faster.

I retrieve a condom from my wallet and then strip my boxers and jeans, now working on getting rid of Bex's clothes. When I slip my fingers beneath the band of her shorts, she lifts her hips. In one quick motion, I remove her panties and shorts throwing them behind me.

Resuming my position between her legs, I bend down to suck on her nipple, taking it between my teeth, nibbling on it while I massage her other breast. She moans so loud I can't think straight. Kissing my way to her mouth, I open her legs wider and push two fingers inside her wetness. And I'm officially dead because her pussy is so fucking sweet. So damn wet.

"Preston," she purrs against my lips. "Ahh, yes... keep doing that."

I smile at her words, her pleasure my primary focus. If all we have is tonight, I want her to remember me for the rest of her life. I want her to realize one time will not be enough. Because I'm not so sure I can have sex with Bex once. The closer we become, the more I need her in my life.

"Oh, my... I'm gonna..." Her words die off in her throat.

"Yeah, that's it, baby." I add another finger, my pace quickening. Dipping my head to kiss her neck, I mutter, "Your

pussy feels so fucking good. Come for me. Strangle my fingers like they're my cock."

She moans in response, her mouth open and her head tilted up to the ceiling. Her body tightens then trembles. Bex rocks her hips against my hand, and my fingers push in further filling her completely. Her orgasm shakes through me, heightening my pleasure. My dick is rock-hard and digging into her thigh. She finishes seconds later with a chunk of my hair fisted in her hands.

With her juices coating my fingers, I raise them to my mouth to taste. "Fuck, Bex. You taste as good as you feel. I said it would be one time, but I don't know if I'll ever get you out of my head."

"You know the deal, Preston."

She has a smart-ass look on her face, so I wipe it away by pulling down her bottom lip and smear her juices across it.

"I'm not good at following rules."

Her eyes flicker with acknowledgment. In this moment, she doesn't give a shit about rules or deals. Neither of us do.

"Taste yourself," I order, holding out my fingers to her.

Hesitant, she sticks out her tongue and licks her lips. A seductive look reaches up to her blue eyes.

"That's a good girl." I fist my cock in my hand, rubbing it along her slick folds, and she stares down, taking in my size. Her eyes widen, and she bites her bottom lip.

Desperate to be inside her, I reach for the condom on the counter and roll it down my length. Her lips part as I inch into her, the look on her face so sexy, I hope I don't come on the spot.

"You feel so..." Closing my eyes, I can't even get the words out.

"Good," she whispers.

"Yesss... so fucking good." I rest my forehead against hers, pushing through her inner walls, stretching her out.

“You’re so wet for me. So fucking tight. It’s like fucking a... virgin.”

“I’m not,” she whimpers, one eye closed as I fill her. She digs her fingers into my shoulder and chokes out. “I can’t believe I’m pucking Parker.”

I almost laugh at her comment assuming I heard wrong and the beer has gone to my head.

She feels amazing, soaking wet and tight, milking my cock with her pussy. Gripping her hips, I slam into her, and she screams. Every time she says my name, I fuck her harder, faster. I can’t get enough of her pussy. I try not to think about how good it feels, or how much I never want to stop, because I need to last.

When I can’t take it anymore, but I don’t want to come yet, I pull out of her and flip her over. Holding her thighs apart, I take my time, making slow deliberate movements. I watch my cock slide out of her dripping wet pussy. I palm her ass with my hands and spread her wider. She looks at me over her shoulder and bites her bottom lip.

The carnal look in her eyes fuels my hunger. Slowly, like a ball of string unraveling, Bex loses control. And it’s perfect. The sexy sounds she makes. How tight she grips my cock with her pussy. The moans I rip from her lips.

I’m lost to Bex Bryant. So fucking done. And when I come, I know it won’t be this one time. I have to make her see that once will never be enough. For either of us.

Chapter Thirteen

I creep down the stairs in front of Preston wearing his Strickland Senators ice hockey T-shirt. His last name is on the back along with his number—eighty-five. It even smells like him. His musky, manly scent fills my nostrils, and I know I'm screwed when I take one big whiff. I'm becoming too comfortable around Preston. He makes me want things I never thought of before, which is dangerous.

Doing my best to keep quiet, I take my time going down the stairs hoping no one is in the living room. No such luck. Several pairs of eyes land on me. Preston's teammates stare at me hard, their gazes intense. Because they know me. Realization crosses their faces, a few of them winking over my shoulder at Preston.

Ugh, what was I thinking?

"You never saw me," I tell the room full of half-dressed hockey players. "I was never here. Got it?"

A few of them nod while two others grunt in acknowledgment.

But the hot blond with insane leg muscles begins to slow clap. What are we in an eighties movie right now?

"Way to go, Parker," the annoying clapper says. "Coach Bryant's daughter."

Another guy whistles. "Banging Coach's daughter is better than a hat trick."

I think over his comment for a second and realize he's not talking about a hat trick in hockey, more like Preston having sex with the three girls and want to run.

Oh, my God get me out of here.

I stop at the bottom landing and shoot Preston a warning glance.

"Bex is just a friend," he tells them. "Don't open your fucking mouths around Coach."

"You got it, Cap," a dark-haired boy says.

Preston is the captain of the men's ice hockey team. Most of his friends either call him Cap or Prez, which doesn't make sense to me since there's not a 'z' in his name.

Preston hooks his arm around my back and whispers in my ear, "You might as well stay for breakfast now that most of the team knows you slept here."

I cringe at the thought of anyone finding out about last night. The last thing I want is to become one of Parker's puck bunnies. Nope, not happening.

I laugh. "I'm kind of scared of you cooking."

He smirks. "I can't cook. But Shannon does. She's been here every morning for the last few days."

I tip my nose in the air taking in the scent of what smells like bacon. "I guess I can hang out for a few more minutes."

He cocks an eyebrow at me. "You guess?"

"Last night was a one-time thing," I say under my breath.

"You mentioned that already. Several times last night. Every time I—"

I hold out my hand to silence him. "Don't finish that sentence." Turning to face him, I continue, "We can't do this again, so don't get any ideas."

"You're impossible, Bex." He slaps my ass and pushes me further into the room. "C'mon, girl, I'm starving. Get your sweet ass in that kitchen."

I chuckle at his comment and walk alongside him to the kitchen where we find Shannon cooking up a storm. She spins around from the stove, spatula in hand. A crowd of gargantuan hockey players are seated at the island where Preston fed me. Fucked me.

Thinking about last night and what we did on the kitchen island causes my wetness to pool between my legs. Preston was amazing. At everything. It was literally the best night of my life, one I will never forget.

“Hey, Bex,” Shannon lilt. “You have no idea how happy I am to see another woman right now.” She points the spatula in Jamie’s direction. “These guys have been giving me hell all morning.”

“No, we haven’t,” Jamie says.

“Yes, you have,” she challenges, with a smile. “There’s way too much testosterone in this kitchen right now.”

“If by giving you hell you mean admiring you from afar, then I guess I am.” Jamie licks his lips. “Turn around so I can admire you some more.”

She laughs at his stupidity, shaking off his comment, and glances at me. “See what I’ve been dealing with? Anyway, you hungry? I made enough bacon and sausage for you and Parker.”

I rub my stomach. “I can eat.”

Her face brightens. “What kind of eggs do you want?”

“Scrambled,” Preston and me say at the same time.

“Oh, look at you two,” Shannon says. “How cute? Pretty soon you’ll be finishing each other’s sentences.”

“Ah, no... we’re not together,” I spit out.

She looks at me, then Preston, and smiles. “Well, you should be.”

“Unwritten Coach rules,” Jamie says, and Preston looks as though he wants to choke him for mentioning it.

Because Preston knew that was between us. Except he didn't keep his word.

"You told them?" Annoyed, I take a seat at the circular table in the corner of the kitchen.

"Yeah, sorry." He pulls out a chair and slides it over until our legs are touching. "They're like my brothers. None of them will say a word. I promise." He says the last part staring into my eyes, and I believe him.

"What unwritten rules?" Shannon asks Jamie.

I let out a frustrated sigh and then give Preston the okay to inform Shannon of my father's rules. Everyone in the room stares at me, and it's super weird.

"Hmm..." Shannon says. "How come your dad has these rules? Did you hook up with one of his players or something?"

I look away from her for a second, considering my next words. Too many people are staring at me, this situation making me uncomfortable.

"Something like that," I mutter.

"Really?" Preston chimes. "You never told me that."

"It wasn't anyone on his college team, so I didn't think it was important."

"Does he still play hockey?"

I nod.

"For a college team?"

I nod again.

Preston scrunches his nose. "Do I know him?"

I cross my arms over my chest. "Yep."

"And you're not gonna tell me," Preston says.

"Nope."

"Can I at least get a hint? What team does he play for?"

"Why do you care, Preston? It's not like we're dating. We're barely even friends."

The entire room goes silent, all of them now looking at me in equal bewilderment as Preston. I reach out to touch his arm, and he sits back in his chair, dodging me.

“Hey, I didn’t mean to be so rude. I’m sorry, okay? I just don’t want to talk about it. Not now, anyway.”

“Did he hurt you?” He lowers his voice to a whisper and cups my knee in his big hands. “Because if he did, I will destroy him.”

How do I answer that question?

“Can we talk about this later? Maybe when no one else is around?”

Or never. That would be preferable.

He forces a smile for my benefit. “Sure. How about I feed you then walk you back to the dorms?”

“Sounds good. I have practice this afternoon.”

“Me, too. Your dad is all about us being on time.”

I return his smile. “He hates it when people are late.”

My dad also hates when people defy him. Like we did last night. Over and over again.

Preston drops his intrusion of my past—at least for now. It’s only a matter of time before I have to tell him about Kellan. And when he finds out the truth, he will lose his shit.

“**S**top acting like Kobe and pass the ball, Bryant,” Coach Vaughn yells at me.

Whenever I hog the ball, my coach tells me that I’m living up to my last name and acting like Kobe Bryant. His comments make me laugh every time.

I shake my head and chuckle, dribbling the ball once more before I pass it to Taylor. She catches the ball and palms it in her hands. She pivots her left foot and then lowers her stance,

leaning into the girl behind her. Making some room, Taylor bounces the ball. She twists her body in an awkward position as she spins, and then grabs hold of the ball again to make the layup. Our three-man team wins.

Coach Vaughn blows the whistle. “Okay, ladies, huddle up.”

We gather around him and await his next instruction. Sweat slides down my face and runs into my eyes. Using my jersey, I wipe my forehead and cheeks. The gym feels about a hundred degrees with how hard we’ve played today. Or maybe it’s the hangover kicking my ass. I’m probably sweating out the alcohol from last night.

“Bryant, you have to pass the ball this weekend. If you want to be a champion, you have to act like one.”

I sigh. “I know, Coach. Sorry, I’m a little off my game today.”

He nods. “You can say that.”

“I’ll be on my A game,” I promise.

“I hope so,” he says, and then his eyes shift to the rest of the group. “Okay, ladies, I want to see the last two teams on the court right now.”

The six of us, who were on the court, walk over to the bench, dead tired. We’ve been going at it for hours nonstop and with little breaks.

Mental note—*no more drinking the night before practice.*

I never do stupid shit like this. I also never hook up with disgustingly sexy hockey players either. So, there’s that. I have to purge Preston from my system... if possible.

“You okay?” Taylor asks me.

I take a sip from my water bottle. “Yeah, I’m fine. Just tired. Late night.”

“You look like hell.”

I roll my eyes at her, and then drizzle some of the water over my head. “Thanks a lot. You know, we all can’t be like

you and drink all night and crush it.”

“My hangover cure works every time. You should stop doubting my methods and try it sometime.”

I stick my tongue out. “Gross. Blended raw vegetables and protein powder? Nah, I’m good.”

“It’s more than that.” She shrugs. “Don’t knock it until you try it.”

“I’d rather not drink. Like ever again.” I plop down on the bench next to Taylor letting out a loud groan. “That should take care of the problem.”

“So…” She gives me an odd look. “What happened last night with you know who?”

Taylor knows better than to say his name around the rest of the team.

“What do you think happened?”

Her eyes widen, and she covers her mouth with her hand, surprised. She slowly lowers her hand, speaking between her fingers. “You guys hooked up. Wow! How was he? Does he live up to his reputation?”

I nod. “Oh, yeah. In every way.”

“Lucky girl. When are you seeing him again?”

“It was a one-time thing. He knows the deal.”

She raises her eyebrows. “Are you insane? You need to make it a permanent thing.”

“Things got weird this morning in front of his team.” I keep my voice low enough, so the other girls on the bench with us can’t overhear. “He asked me about Kellan.”

“You told him?”

“Well, no, but Shannon was there. She made us all breakfast. My dad’s rules came up, and when Shannon asked about them, she guessed the reason behind them. He looked like he was going to jump out of his skin when I told him he knows the guy.”

“What did you tell him?”

“It was awkward. I kinda yelled at him in front of his friends and then brushed it off like I would tell him later.”

“Are you going to tell him?”

“No need to. We’re not together. I don’t owe him an explanation about my past. It’s none of his business.”

“If he knew the truth, he would probably beat the shit out of Kellan. Wouldn’t that make you feel better?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. It was so long ago. I’m over it now. There’s no reason to dig up the past. I just want to move on with my life.”

“Yeah, I get that.” She lifts a towel from the bench and wipes her face. “If you never get close to anyone, you never have to tell them anything. Isn’t that the Bex Bryant way?”

“It’s for the best. Don’t you think?”

She frowns. “If you say so.”

I say so.

Chapter Fourteen

PRESTON

Bex is across the cafeteria with her teammates, but she has no idea I'm here. If she does, she hasn't shown the slightest indication. She doesn't want a repeat, or so she says.

After I fill my plate with grilled chicken and vegetables, I pay the cashier for my meal and head over to the table in the corner of the cafeteria to sit with my friends.

"About time," Jamie says, peeking up at me. "Where have you been?"

"I stayed behind to talk to my professor."

His eyebrows rise. "You in trouble?"

I set my tray down on the other side of the table from Jamie, sitting next to Drake. Trent and Tucker are missing for some reason.

"Nah, nothing like that." I lift the fork from my plate and dig into the broccoli. "He wanted to talk to me about my last paper."

"Did you fail?"

I shake my head. "No. He wants to use it as an example for future classes and asked me if I was okay with him sharing it."

"And here, I'm supposed to be the smart one in the family," Jamie deadpans.

I roll my eyes at him. "You wish."

At the end of the table, a few girls are picking at their salads. Some of my teammates must have called them over. I've never seen them before.

"Who invited them?" I ask the guys.

Drake follows my line of sight. "They're with Tucker and Trent."

"All of them?" There's at least six girls. "Where is Trent and Tucker?"

"You didn't see them on your way up here?"

I shake my head, and he continues, "They're dealing with some chick they were both hooking up with."

I cock an eyebrow at him. "At the same time?"

"No. They weren't fucking her at the same time, like in the same room. She thought Tucker was Trent. I guess she didn't know they are identical twins."

The Kane twins are known on campus for swapping places—and not just in class.

I laugh so hard it shakes the table. "You've got to be kidding me. How is there a girl left on this campus who doesn't know the Kane twins by now? They've played this game with how many girls?"

Drake shrugs. "I was wondering the same thing. It's common knowledge at Strick U. Maybe she's a transfer student."

"Or a freshman," I add.

"I'd love to hear their conversation," Jamie says, taking a sip from his water bottle. "Can you imagine her reaction? But your dicks looked the same. How was I supposed to know?"

Drake snorts and soda sprays from his nose.

With a disgusted look, I wipe it from my arm and onto my track pants. One of the girls at the end of the table squeals, stealing my attention. She's a knockout blonde with long hair past her shoulders. Her clothes are so tight they look like they would be a challenge to remove. She catches me staring in her

direction and smiles. I turn away from her, uninterested, because for once, I don't care about another meaningless hookup.

The only girl I want is across the cafeteria showing off. Bex is out of her seat, dressed in mesh basketball shorts and a fitted Under Armour tee with both hands raised in the air. She pivots her left foot, pretending to fake out an opponent, and then demonstrates a jump shot. Her feet leave the floor, her form perfect as she makes the imaginary shot.

My face hurts from smiling. I'm in awe of her and now considering going over there. But I don't want a lecture about how Saturday night was a one-time thing. She's told me so in every text message. I should accept it and heed Coach Bryant's warning. But I don't care. I keep telling myself he will understand. That he will make an exception for his favorite player.

"You look like a creeper, Parker." Drake snaps me back to reality.

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

He points at Bex. "You like Coach's daughter."

I laugh. "No, I don't."

"She slept at the house," Jamie says. "In your bedroom. Don't give us that shit about being friends because you don't have any friends that are girls."

"I do now," I challenge.

I hate pretending like we're friends when all I want to do is rip Bex's clothes off every time I see her.

"I call bullshit," Drake says. "Man up and go over there."

"I'm good right here." I shovel a forkful of chicken into my mouth, avoiding Drake's gaze.

"We've known you for how long?" Jamie asks. "Oh, wait, your entire life. You don't think we know you well enough by now to see you've got it bad for Bex Bryant."

“Keep your voice down,” I growl. “Do you want everyone in the cafeteria to hear you? Coach will lose his fucking shit if he finds out.”

“She did more than sleep in your bed,” Jamie smirks. “I share a wall with you, remember?”

“I didn’t think anyone was home.”

“You two were fucking all night and most of the morning. It was hard to miss the show you put on for the house.”

I’ve been denying I had sex with Bex for days, but these guys know me better than anyone. Even if Jamie didn’t hear us, he could read the lies on my lips and see the deception on my face. We’re too close for him to miss the signs.

“Keep that information to yourself,” I spit back, annoyed. “What happened this weekend doesn’t leave our house.”

Jamie holds up his hands. “No argument here. I don’t want you to lose playing time over a girl.”

“Me either,” Drake says. “No girl is worth fucking up your career.”

An awkward silence passes between us where we eat our food, too busy chewing to speak. And it’s nice. The interrogation about Bex was getting on my nerves. All it would take is one person to overhear our conversation and tell Coach Bryant I betrayed his trust. I already feel guilty about what I did. But being with Bex felt good. It still does.

Bex spins around, and our eyes meet. I haven’t been able to steel them away since I first noticed her in the cafeteria. She raises her hand and waves.

Her simple gesture tugs at something inside me. A wave of nerves shoots through my body, and my mouth goes dry. Why does she do this to me? I smile in return. She licks hers focusing on my face.

Before I know what I’m doing, I get up from the table.

“Don’t do it,” Jamie warns.

I ignore him and stroll over to Bex's table as if I'm drawn to her like a magnet. She has this strange hold over me. And now that I know how she feels, how she tastes, and the sexy moans she makes when she comes, I need more. I can't control myself.

"Preston," she says, crossing her arms over her chest. "What can I do for you?"

I want to kiss the smug look from her face and then bend her over this fucking table. She's killing me. I never knew I could be so drawn to someone, so addicted to being around her. But I am.

"Can I talk to you for a second?"

She thinks over my question and nods. "What's up?"

I grab her elbow and tug hard enough to get her to follow me away from her table. She locks onto me, her eyes burning into mine. I want to kiss her right here in front of the entire cafeteria.

I lead her in the direction of my table. "I need to see you again."

"We had a deal." Her voice is low. She's careful not to speak too loud with everyone watching us. "What part about one-time did you *not* understand? You should be used to hooking up with girls and forgetting about them the next day. This shouldn't be any different."

I place my hand on her shoulder, and I can feel watchful eyes on me. *But who the hell cares?* What I want to say to Bex needs to be said before I go crazy. She has to know how I feel.

"I meant what I said last week. I don't want to stay away from you. And now that we—"

"Don't finish that sentence. Not in public." She sighs. "I like you, too, but for so many reasons this can't work."

"Name one."

"For starters, my dad will murder you if he finds out."

“What does it matter if you’re with me or some other guy on campus?”

She turns away from me, and I slide my hand under her chin to guide her eyes back to mine.

“You’re making a scene,” she says. “Everyone will know there’s something going on between us.”

“Maybe I want them to know.” I drop my hand to my side when she shakes me off. “If you were my girl, I would never hide you. I’d want everyone to know you are with me.”

“But I can’t be your girl, Preston. You know how this will end. Even if we see each other until the end of the school year, that’s where it will end. You’ll get drafted into the NHL and leave me behind. It happens all the time. I don’t want to be another statistic.”

“You never told me why your dad has these rules to begin with, and why you go along with them?”

She grinds her teeth. “I’m not ready to have that conversation.”

“I want to know you, Bex, but you’re not making it easy for me.”

“Everything comes easy to you,” she counters, and then her tone changes. “We can be friends like we talked about before. Let’s see how that goes.”

“Friends hang out together,” I remind her. “They don’t ignore each other’s texts and calls and run away from them on campus.”

She laughs, most likely getting a kick out of what she’s been doing all week to avoid me. “I’m well aware.”

“Come to this party with me on Saturday.”

She bites the inside of her cheek. “Where?”

“The Delta Sig house.”

Her eyebrows lift. “A frat party? That’s not really my scene.”

“Humor me.”

She sucks in a deep breath and lets it out. “Okay. Fine. Can I bring Taylor with me since this isn’t a date?”

“Sure, invite whoever you want since it’s a non-date.” I laugh. “It sounds so fucking stupid saying that out loud.”

She smiles. “You looked adorable saying it.”

“Men are not adorable. That’s something you say about an animal.”

“But you are...” she coos, “... adorable.”

“I don’t think friends are supposed to say things like this,” I challenge.

“I suppose you’re right.”

I dip down to whisper in her ear, “I guess I shouldn’t tell you how all I can think about is your tight, wet pussy. Or how hot you sound when you moan my name.”

She clears her throat. “Um... probably not.”

“Say it. Please.”

“What?”

“My name.”

“Preston,” she breathes.

“Fuck, you’re making me hard.”

She takes a step back from me. “Then stop doing this.” Bex motions her hands in front of her. “All of this. You. It’s so distracting.”

I laugh at her comment. “Touché.”

“I don’t see how we’re going to be friends,” she confesses.

“Me either. But we can try. We can be friends with benefits. No attachments. No breaking your last rule. What do you say?”

Taylor calls Bex’s name from the other side of the cafeteria ending our conversation. She flags Bex down and yells about it being time for practice.

“I have to go,” Bex says. “I’ll see you around, *friend*.” Her mouth curves up slightly when she says the last part.

“Smart ass,” I mouth.

She winks, and then she’s gone.

Bex must be enjoying my slow, painful torture. Women are so hard to read, and Bex is like decrypting an unsolvable cipher.

“Dude, you are so fucked,” Drake says to me when I take my seat at the table.

“Tell me about it,” I mutter.

Chapter Fifteen

The week blows by in a blur of practices, late night texts from Preston, and tons of homework. Preston was equally busy with little time to talk. Our schedules are similar which makes it easier to align our non-date nights. Like tonight.

“Are you sure this dress isn’t too short?” I ask Taylor, who leans over to check out my backside.

“Nope. Your ass looks perfect in this dress. Parker will definitely approve.”

I shake my head, laughing. “I’m sure he will.”

Taylor chose a short, tight bandage dress from her closet paired with red heels. She even made me wear makeup. I feel so unlike myself in this outfit and layers of eyeshadow and mascara. I’m like Taylor’s very own Barbie doll. She knows I hate picking out clothes, so she offers to do it for me.

My mom was never around to teach me simple things like how to dress. She wasn’t even there when I got my period. I thought my dad was going to have a nervous breakdown when he had to deal with me crying on the bathroom floor freaked out by womanhood. But we got through all the weird, awkward times. Taylor helped me through the rest.

“This must be the house.” Taylor points at the last house on Greek Row.

A crowd of people pour out from the old Victorian. Much like the house Preston shares with his teammates, it has high pillars, a long, covered porch, and several floors. Except the

lawn at the Delta Sigma Phi house is littered with trash—plastic cups, crushed beer cans, and even a lacy bra are on the lawn.

Interesting.

We walk past a group of drunk girls in short skirts and tight tops clasping red Solo cups of beer.

“I saw Parker with the twins,” a tall blonde says to her friend, slurring her words. “I couldn’t get anywhere near him.”

My Parker? What twins? Fucking hookers.

I attempt to eavesdrop on their conversation as we stroll down the walkway to the house. My mind drifts to a thousand different places. I’m a little jealous when I think of Preston with another girl, let alone two of them. Friends shouldn’t be this jealous even though we’re not technically friends.

I still haven’t given Preston an answer. I’m afraid to plunge head-first into this arrangement and lose myself and my heart in the process. I know from previous experience that hockey players, especially ones as hot as Preston Parker, are bad for me.

Once the line moves, I climb the stairs and come to a halt when I spot Preston on the porch. He leans back against the house, tipping a cup of beer to his mouth. His usual gang of guys surround him with Jamie on his right. Shannon is latched onto Jamie as if she’s afraid to let him out of her sight.

Preston glances over at me. His entire face illuminates. He looks sexy in dark jeans and a fitted black tee that hugs his muscular frame.

I bite my bottom lip, and he notices. Laughing, he walks to me and hooks his arm around my back. I take in the scent of his delicious, manly scent. He’s intoxicating.

“I was afraid you wouldn’t show.”

“I said I’d come.”

“Hey, Taylor,” he says, now acknowledging her. “You remember Drake, Trent, Tucker, Jamie, and Shannon.”

Oh, right. Those twins.

How stupid of me to think Preston invited me to a party where he was hooking up with other girls. I almost laugh when I realize my mistake.

At the mention of their names, his friends look over at Preston. They wave at Taylor and me, and we do the same in return.

“They’re with me,” Preston tells a blond-haired boy sitting on a barstool by the door taking money from people.

He acknowledges Taylor and me with a nod, and then hands Preston two plastic cups. A silent exchange passes between them.

Drake walks over to us and stands next to Taylor. “You were at The Sixth Floor last week, right?”

Taylor beams. “Yeah. I was in the dance competition with Bex and Shannon.”

“So, ladies, what can I get you?” Preston holds up the cups and Drake takes one of them from his hand.

“They have beer, vodka, rum shooters, and I think there was a little bit of Cuervo left the last time I was in the kitchen,” Drake says, his eyes fixed on Taylor.

“I’ll have a beer,” I tell Preston, who’s holding my cup.

“Same for me,” Taylor chimes.

“After you.” Preston holds out his hand for me to enter the house before him.

Drake and Taylor are behind us.

Preston startles me when his big hand lands on my bare shoulder. I move through the dense crowd swept away by the electricity dancing along my skin, allowing the music and Preston to entrance me.

Once we reach the kitchen, Preston spins me around. He strokes the side of my face with his thumb, his blue eyes fixed on me. His dark shaggy hair falls onto his forehead, and I reach up to sweep it away. He smiles and not one of his usual

cocky smirks. A real smile that sets off every nerve ending in my body.

“To answer your question,” I say. “Yes.”

He hands the cups to the guy behind the bar to fill. “Yes to what?”

“What you asked me the other day in the cafeteria. I never gave you my answer.”

“You didn’t have to. I already knew what you would say by your reaction.”

I cock an eyebrow at him. “Is that so?”

He lifts our beers from the bar and thanks the bartender with a slight tip of his head. “You’re not the easiest person to read, Bex, but I’m getting used to your tells.” Preston hands a cup to me. “Drink up.”

“I don’t have any tells,” I shoot back.

He sips the foam from the top of his cup. “Yes, you do. You just don’t realize you’re doing it.”

I chug a good amount of my beer telling myself I need to slow down. Coach Vaughn will not give me a break tomorrow if I show up hungover again.

“So, what do I do? Enlighten me, Preston.”

He smirks, running his fingers down my bare arm. “See these little bumps. Every time I touch you, the same thing happens.”

“Have you ever considered I might be cold?”

He laughs. “Nice try. It’s like ninety degrees in this house. You’re not cold.”

“I wouldn’t call goosebumps a tell. That’s ridiculous. Everyone gets them.”

“You’ve always responded to my touch. Even that day in the locker room.”

He’s right. No sense in denying it.

“I’m attracted to you. So what? That doesn’t mean anything. I bet most of the girls in this house would have the same reaction if you spoke to them, let alone touched them. You know you’re like a walking orgasm. It’s not news to you.”

He laughs, almost spitting out his beer. “I plan to give you a lot more of those.” I narrow my eyes at him, and he adds, “Orgasms. Lots of them. I’d do anything to hear you moan my name again.”

“Wanna dance?” I have to change the subject before someone overhears our conversation.

He knows my dad would kill him, and yet Preston doesn’t seem to give a shit who hears him.

He licks the beer from his lips. “Any excuse to touch you.”

I smile, and it must be contagious because Preston does too.

Looking over my shoulder for Taylor, I spot her in the corner of the room with Drake. His hip digs into hers, his arm is on the wall behind her head, caging her in, and their mouths are inches apart. They look cute together. But he’s such a player. All of the guys on the hockey team are with the exception of a few who have long-term girlfriends.

I wish Taylor would stay away from Drake. But I’m not one to judge or offer advice when I can’t shake Preston. He’s on my skin, in my head, and slowly creeping into my heart. This is bad for both of us—especially me.

Slipping my fingers between his, I drag Preston into the living room to dance. We sift through the crowd and create a spot for ourselves by the stairs. He leans back against the railing, his strong grip on my hip as he pulls me into his chest. I rock my hips from side to side, swaying to the beat of the pop song. Preston lowers his head until I feel his breath on my neck. His tongue wets my skin, his teeth grazing along my sensitive flesh. I can’t believe he’s doing this in front of people.

Where’s my willpower when I need it? I should stop him and take a few seconds to get some air. Because I sure as hell

need it around Preston.

“Let’s take this upstairs,” Preston whispers in my ear, his voice deep, smooth. His teeth nibble my earlobe, and I still in his arms.

I’m powerless. My mind is rendered useless around him. His hand lingers on my hip and then slides up my stomach. His intoxicating scent fills my nostrils, and I close my eyes. Rubbing over his growing erection, I give him the answer he needs.

Preston clutches my wrist and leads me upstairs. We travel up another flight of steps. He seems like he knows the layout of the house as if he’s looking for a particular room. At the end of the hall, he opens the door to what looks like a game room.

Couches line most of the space, several flat screen TVs are on the wall. Gaming chairs are on the floor in front of the largest TV. Controllers and game consoles are scattered in front of a table. An old school Pac Man machine is in the corner of the room.

“What are we doing in here?”

Preston locks the door behind us. “I can’t wait another second.”

Before I can protest having sex in a frat house, Preston lifts me up by my ass pushing my back into the wall. He cups the side of my face with his hand. Our mouths are so close the heat from his breath warms my lips. A sudden chill rolls down my arms pointing my nipples. They’re painfully sore and begging for his mouth.

Preston doesn’t waste another second. He leans in and sucks on my bottom lip. His kisses are slow and deliberate, so sensual, before he invades my mouth with his tongue. Now, he’s more forceful, aggressive. The Preston Parker I can’t seem to deny.

I slide my hand from his neck to the back of his head to deepen the kiss because no amount of closeness is ever enough when it comes to Preston. He growls into my mouth. I moan into his. It’s pure perfection, apart from the location. But I

could care less. I'm so wet for him, my juices are sliding down my inner thigh.

We stay this way for a while before he walks over to the couch with my legs wrapped around him. He lowers us to the couch, and I'm on top straddling his thick, muscular thighs. I love his body, every inch is toned perfection.

He reaches behind me to unzip my dress and peels down the top. His eyes light up when he sees I'm not wearing a bra. Without hesitation, he grabs my breasts in his calloused hands and shoves his face between them.

I moan as he peppers my skin with kisses, and he grunts in response. He says he loves the sounds I make. Well, he's ripping plenty of moans from my lips right now.

His thick cock pokes my thigh through his jeans. I want him inside me again so bad, my pussy clenches from the promise. Pushing up his shirt, I smooth my hand over his stomach. Once I get my hands on him, I can't stop myself from touching every part of him.

He stops sucking on my nipples long enough to sit back to allow me to pull his shirt over his head. Next, I work on the button of his jeans because I want these off too, no clothing separating us.

I slide from his lap to step out of my dress and panties, leaving them on the floor by my feet. He raises his hips to remove his jeans and boxers, his eyes watching my every movement. My breath catches in my throat when his hard cock springs free. He's so long and thick I'm salivating.

I drop to my knees, making room for myself between his legs, and wrap my hands around him because he's too big to fit in just one. He makes a hissing sound and closes his eyes for a split-second. Leaning forward, I stick out my tongue to make contact with his sensitive skin.

"Damn, Bex." He fists my hair between his fingers. "I want to fuck your mouth."

Staring up at him, I comply with his request taking him in inch by inch. He growls. Preston rocks his hips, greedy for

more of my mouth. And I give it to him because I like seeing the carnal look in his eyes. I love listening to the sounds he makes. Most of all, I love being the one to do this to him.

When I feel his cock pulse in my mouth, he tells me to stop before he comes. And then he's lifting me into his lap again, quickly rolling on a condom before he slams into me.

"Preston," I whimper as he stretches me out, filling me completely. My palms fall to his chest, my nails digging into his skin.

Preston does the same to my hips as he moves with me controlling the rhythm. He glances down at his cock sliding in and out of my dripping wet pussy. And when his eyes meet mine once more, there's a fire brewing behind them. One look from him ignites a deep-seated hunger inside me.

He doesn't make his usual dirty comments. Not like last time. I've never seen him so focused, so determined.

"Preston," I whisper, and he bites his lip. I say his name again, and he grunts dragging his teeth along his lip again. "Keep moaning my name." He grips my ass cheeks with his hand and fucks me harder.

I do as he says, and he quickens the pace. A wave of cold flushes through my body replaced by an intense heat that licks my skin. My hold on his cock tightens, and his eyes flicker with acknowledgment. He knows I'm about to come and rubs my clit, with a cocky smirk on his face, stealing an earth-shattering orgasm from me.

"Fuck, that was hot," he whispers, pushing his cock deeper, still pressing his thumb to my clit. He makes slow, steady movements that cause my insides to clench. "Come for me again, Bex."

It doesn't take long before I'm screaming his name at the height of my climax, and Preston joins me.

Chapter Sixteen

BEX

I'm two weeks into my friends-with-benefits arrangement with Preston. Two of the best weeks of my life. I smile when a text message lights my screen and know I'm totally screwed because he has me already.

Preston: Someone misses you.

Bex: Look at you getting all mushy.

Preston: I was talking about my dick.

I laugh so loud I snort.

Bex: You're an idiot. What are you doing?

Preston: Thinking about you.

Bex: Wanna study with me?

Preston: Is that code for sex? :)

Bex: No, silly. I'm in the library.

Preston: Mmm... library sex.

Bex: No way! Not happening. Too many people around.

Preston: That's what makes it so much fun. Never stopped you before. Anyone could have walked in on us when I fucked you on my kitchen counter. You were purring in my ear. Begging for it.

My nipples harden from his dirty talk making me all too aware of how much I wish study was code for sex.

Bex: You're so bad.

Preston: You like it when I'm bad.

Bex: You got me there. Come to the library.

Preston: So we can be bad together.

Bex: So we can study.

Preston: Right. :) If you say so.

Bex: You coming or what?

Preston: I hope so *wink, wink*

Bex: Keep it in your pants.

Preston: That's impossible to do around you. I'll be there in 20.

Bex: I'll be waiting.

Twenty minutes later, Preston strolls down the aisle toward my table, all muscle and swagger. Track pants hang low from his narrow hips, his T-shirt tight against his thick chest. Did he wear this on purpose?

Ugh, I'm dying over here.

My ovaries are going to explode, and it will be his fault. He looks good, too damn tempting.

I smile up at him as he pulls out a chair and sits next to me. His large frame fills up every inch of space around me. So does his manly scent. He smells like freshly dried laundry, his musky cologne, and sweat. By the looks of his forehead, he ran over here.

“Why are you out of breath?”

“It's all you, girl.” He smirks. “You take my breath away.”

I laugh and then nudge him in the side with my elbow. “Yeah, right.”

“You kinda do. But that's not the reason. I ran across campus to get in some cardio. I was also trying to dodge this chick I hooked up with last year. She's a clinger.”

“Nice.” I shake my head. “This is the Preston Parker everyone knows.”

He leans in so close our lips are almost touching. “I’d never run from you.”

“You say that now because this is new and still fun. I’m sure you’ll be running from me by the end of the year.”

I have to face the reality of the situation. No matter how good the sex or how much I like him, we have no future. Our paths will never cross after graduation.

His smile fades. “You’re impossible, woman. Would you just go with the flow?” He presses his thumb to my temple. “Stop overthinking everything.”

Before I can answer, his lips are on mine invading my mouth. Our tongues collide, and it’s like a silent war with each of us pushing and pulling for domination over the other.

Someone clears their throat from a distance. I break away from Preston, sinking back in my chair. The librarian shoots a pointed stare in our direction. Using her hands, she motions for us to move our chairs apart. I scoot mine along the carpet in desperate need of some distance from him.

“How come you’re all the way up here?”

I shrug. “No one ever comes up here. That’s why I like it. I can focus on my homework or study for a test. The dorms are too noisy.”

“I have the same problem at my house. Too many guys under one roof. It gets a little crowded.”

“I really have to study,” I confess. “I wasn’t joking about that part.”

He slides my open textbook along the desk toward him. “So, what are we studying?”

“Business ethics.”

“I thought you were a sports management major.”

“I am. We’re learning how to negotiate sports contracts and how to deal with the ethical obligations in those contracts.”

“Ahh, I see. Like the dickhead agents who lure prospective clients with cars.”

I steal the book back from him. “Exactly.”

“My mom can’t stand those kinds of agents.”

“I can’t either. They use dirty tactics to gain clients.”

“I would never sign with someone who did that.”

“Isn’t your mom going to manage your career?”

“I don’t know. My family is already so involved in my life I’m not sure if I want her micromanaging my career, too.”

“What about JP?”

“Maybe,” he says. “We’ll see. I haven’t gotten that far yet. My mom assumes she’ll handle everything... because that’s what she does. I wouldn’t mind having someone outside our family.”

“No one else will ever have your back like family would.”

He moves his hand from the table to my thigh and squeezes it. “Yeah, you’re right.”

We sit in silence for a while, and I pretend to study even though Preston is too distracting. His fingers skate along my thigh, his delicate touch too much for me to stand.

“Are you doing this on purpose so I’ll change my mind about library sex?”

The dimple in his cheek pops. “Is it working?”

“Yes.” My cheeks redden. “But I do need to study. For real. I have a test tomorrow that counts for twenty-five percent of my grade. Don’t you have practice or something else you can do?”

“Nah, I’d rather bother you.” He laughs. “I don’t have practice until tomorrow morning. I’m so ahead on my managerial accounting class that I finished all of my work in the lecture hall.”

“I’m sure you could find hundreds of things to do other than sit in a library.”

“Yeah. But you’re here. So, unless you plan on relocating to my bedroom, I’m staying here until you tell me to leave.”

“You can stay as long as you stop distracting me.”

“You’re an A student, Bex. I’m sure you’ll ace this class whether I sit here with you or not.”

“You’re skating dangerously close to the line we were never supposed to cross,” I joke.

He cocks his head at me. “Oh, yeah. And how so?”

“We spend a lot of time together. Some would consider this dating with how much we hang out.”

“I don’t think so.” He scratches his jaw, thinking it over. “I’ve never taken you on a date. McDonald’s doesn’t count.”

I chuckle at his comment. “If you took me to McDonald’s for a date, we would not be dating anyway.”

He laughs, and then tucks a loose strand of hair behind my ear. “I’ve never liked being around another girl as much as I do you. You make it so easy, Bex.”

“And you make this very complicated for me.”

“How so?”

“Because you make me want to break the last rule. We’re so close to doing it, too. You know it as much as I do, don’t you?”

He nods. “I thought it would be easier to be friends with benefits. But I like you a lot more than I thought I would.”

“Me, too,” I confess.

“You never told me what happened. What made your dad come up with these rules? Tell me, Bex. Please. I want to know everything there is to know about you.”

I bite my lip, nervous. “Only a handful of people know this story. Will you promise you won’t freak out if I tell you? And you can’t tell your friends.”

His expression darkens. “What happened to you?”

“Please, Preston. Promise me.”

He covers my hand on the table with his and nods. My entire body trembles from the fear taking over.

What will he think of me after I tell him?

Will he be able to look at me the same way?

He glances down at my trembling hand and grips it tighter. “It’s okay, Bex. I got you. It’s just me. You can tell me anything.” His tone indicates he’s telling the truth.

I can trust him which is why I want to tell him. He should know why we can’t be together. Why my dad would kill him for being here with me.

“When I was in high school, my dad coached the ice hockey team. Kellan Lehane was his star player.”

His jaw clenches at the mention of Kellan. He knows him, played against him the first game of the season.

“Kellan was my dad’s favorite... just like you are now. I was shy, kept to myself. I had friends, but I wasn’t popular. Not like Kellan. Everyone loved him.”

Preston grips my hand. His anger shakes through me.

“We dated for a few months. My entire life changed when I met him. All of a sudden, everyone knew my name. I had all these new friends. He made me feel special like I was the most important person in the world.” I hesitate with the next part, choking down the bile rising from my stomach. “Kellan was my first. I was so in love with him. Or at least I thought I was. It was more lust than anything.”

“Please don’t tell me he hurt you,” Preston whispers, his voice deep and serious. “I will fucking kill him if he did.”

A single tear falls from my cheek, and he wipes it away with his thumb. “Just let me finish. This is hard for me to tell you.”

“We all have a past,” he says. “It’s how we take those painful lessons and change our future that defines us.”

“I’m so afraid of how you’ll react and what this will mean for us after you know the truth about my past. I don’t want any

of us to go away.”

“It won’t,” he promises.

Sucking in a deep breath, I prepare myself for the rest of the story. I’ve tried to block it all out for years.

“He took my virginity. It was nice. So, don’t get any ideas. He didn’t rape me, but what he did afterward was... horrible.”

Preston hooks his arm around me, still shaking, and pulls me to him. I’m not sure who needs this hug most—him or me. He seems more on edge.

“It’s okay,” Preston says, softly against my ear. “You can tell me. I won’t let him hurt you.”

“He took pictures of me. I was naked in some of them. In my bra and panties in others. He said he would erase them from his phone. But he never did. Instead, he uploaded them to porn sites and social media.”

Preston grinds his teeth together trying to hold it together. He looks like he’s about to Hulk Smash the desk into pieces. His eyes are watery, and I can see the pain in them. He really does care. That’s what makes our situation so complicated.

“My dad was able to get the pictures taken down from Instagram and the other sites because they violated child pornography laws. But some of the pictures are still out there on websites that don’t have to comply.”

“Why the fuck not?” he growls. “They shouldn’t be allowed to post your picture on a website without your consent. And you were a minor.”

“My dad tried. He sent complaints, talked to lawyers, and some of the sites refused to acknowledge our requests. The domains are registered in countries where there’s no jurisdiction. They can do whatever they want.”

Preston takes a deep breath staring out the window. “I’ll find a way. Let me talk to my dad.”

“No,” I almost shout. “You can’t tell anyone, Preston. Please.”

“If there are naked pictures of my girl on the Internet, I have to do something about it.”

“I’m not your girl.”

He leans back in his chair, shoving his hands through his hair, tugging at the ends. “I’m not allowed to help you. So, what can I do? I have to do something. You shouldn’t have to live like this knowing some pervert online is looking at you.”

“It’s not your responsibility, Preston. This is all my fault. I never should have allowed him to take the pictures.”

His face scrunches in anger... pain... sadness? It’s hard to get a read on his mood. He’s like a storm of emotions.

“This is not your fault, Bex. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I trusted the wrong person.” Another tear slides down my face. “I was so stupid.”

“No, you’re not.” He cradles me in his arms, his breath warming the top of my head. “I can’t believe Lehané did this to you. I’m going to kill him.”

“It’s not worth it.” I stroke his arm with my fingers. “Don’t do anything stupid for me.”

“I would do just about anything for you, Bex. That’s the problem.”

He has my heart. Regardless of the past, no one but Preston has the power to destroy it. My heart breaks, piece by piece, because I was never supposed to fall in love with him. He was never supposed to be mine.

Chapter Seventeen

PRESTON

My stomach clenches every time I look at another picture of Bex online. I have to get her pictures taken down from these websites. Seeing her in pain crushed me. No one should have to endure this.

I did a Google image search and found seven images of her. She was naked in three, in a red bra and panties in the other four. It's easy for me to understand why Coach Bryant has rules, ones Bex would have followed whether he told her to or not. But those rules were in effect before she started dating Kellan Lehane, which is why she feels so guilty about seeing me behind his back.

I scroll through the list of e-mails I've sent over the last two weeks, none of which have received a response from the webmaster. From what I've learned, they don't have to comply. Removing an image is at the discretion of the domain owner. E-mail isn't enough. Lawyers can't help.

Lehane will pay for what he did the next time our teams cross paths. He's a right winger for Boston College where my grandfather coached years ago, and my father played in his day. The names John and Alex Parker mean something at that school.

Unsure if this is the right move, I lift my cell phone from the bed and call my dad.

"Hey," my dad says on the second ring. "Everything okay?"

“I don’t know.”

“You never call this late. What’s going on?”

I look at the clock and realize it’s eleven-thirty at night. “Sorry, I couldn’t sleep. I wanted to ask you something. Do you still have connections at Boston College?”

“Why?” He seems confused. “Do you want to transfer? I don’t think that’s a good move this late in the year.”

“No, I want to stay at Strick U. Can you get someone thrown off the team?”

“What are you talking about, Preston?” His tone grows serious. “Even if I could, why would I want to do that?”

“Because one of the players did something to someone I know. He needs to pay for what he did.”

“What did he do?”

“I can’t tell you. I promised I wouldn’t say anything. Isn’t there something you can do?”

“You would need cause to have him kicked off the team. Unless he has a problem with his grades or drugs, I’m not sure what they could do to him. I can’t make a call and ask the school to remove a player from their roster.” He sighs into the phone. “Have I spoiled you that much that you think I can solve every problem with a phone call or money?”

“It was worth a try, right?”

“What’s going on, Preston. Talk to me.”

I push my laptop to the side and lean back against my headboard. “I wish I could tell you, Dad.”

“Are you in trouble?”

“No, of course not.”

“Is the person you’re protecting?”

“No, but—”

“I can’t help either of you if you don’t tell me what’s going on.”

“I shouldn’t have called this late. I hope I didn’t wake you and Mom up.”

He laughs. “Are you kidding? Your mom is still in her office. She’s been in there for the past five hours.”

“She’s such a workaholic.”

He huffs. “Tell me about it. She’s still the same woman I married.”

“Hey, Dad, one more thing. How did you know you were in love with Mom?”

“Your mom was like a tornado.” He chuckles. “She rolled into my life when I needed someone to shake it up and get my ass back on track. But she was the best thing that ever happened to me. I wouldn’t have had the chance to hold up the Stanley Cup if it weren’t for her. She saved me. Because of her, I had the career my dad pushed me toward my entire life.”

Like you’re doing to me.

“But how did you know?”

“Hmm...” He pauses for a second to think it over. “I knew there was something special about your mother the day I met her. She was so dominant, so different from any woman I’d ever met. She knew what she wanted and took it. Most people sit around and think about what they’re going to do, but your mother acted on it. I was in awe of her. She inspired me to be a different man. There are so many reasons I fell in love with her.”

“What did it feel like? How did you know for sure?”

He hesitates for a second and then continues, “When we split up, I had a lot of time to think about everything that had happened with us. Your mom was afraid to see me because she thought Mickey would fire her and that our relationship would ruin her career.”

Mickey Donoghue, my dad’s godfather, started Donoghue Management Group, known as DMG, where my mom is now the owner. Mickey left the company to her before his death a few years ago. Now, JP works there with her.

“Being apart from your mom gave me a lot of time to reflect. I knew I loved her because I couldn’t stand to be without her. I was in physical pain when we were apart. It was like a piece of me was missing without her. And that’s how I knew I had to do anything to get her back. The things I did... they were so embarrassing some of them. But they were worth it. Look at what I have now because of her.”

My dad might be a total bruiser on the ice, but he’s such a sap when it comes to my mom. The more time I spend with Bex, the more I want that with her. I want all of her. Not just a hookup or friends with benefits. I want her to be my girl.

“Why are you asking me this?”

“There’s this girl,” I admit.

“Are you talking about Bex?”

“Yeah.” I blow out a breath of air into the phone. “I can’t shake her. It started off as friends, and I don’t know what to do now.”

“The way I see it, you have two options,” he says. “Tell her how you feel or break it off.”

“Breaking it off isn’t an option. I see her almost every day, and when she’s not with me, I’m texting her or talking to her on the phone.”

“You need to keep your head on straight,” he warns. “Unless she’s the one, you can’t allow her to come between you and your career.”

“I know,” I spit back. “Thank you for the reminder. It’s all about my career, one I don’t even have yet.”

“You won’t have one with that attitude,” he counters, his voice stern. “It will happen. I know it will. You’re better than me, and I went pro right out of college.”

“I’m not better than you.”

“You are,” he challenges. “What’s it going to take for me to make you see that? Don’t throw away everything we’ve worked for over a girl. Got it?”

“Yeah, Dad, I got it.”

“If you need me to come down there and work with you, say the word, and I’ll be there. We can go over to Skate Zone if you want. Get in a little quality time. I haven’t seen you in a while.”

“Our schedules never line up.”

“I’m home now, but only until tomorrow morning, and then I have to fly to Vegas.” A beat passes between us before he adds, “I’ll be home for Thanksgiving. No matter what. You should bring Bex with you. Your mom really likes her. She said she reminds her of herself.”

I gag. “Oh, God. Please don’t say that.”

He laughs. “You can’t ignore the similarities.”

“I’m not dating Mom,” I yell into the phone. “Stop it. That’s gross.”

Dad chuckles. “I’m just giving you a hard time. Any woman who’s like your mom is a keeper. Trust me. And this Bex sounds like she is, too. Just promise me that nothing will get in the way of your career?”

“I promise. I need to get to bed. We have practice at six o’clock.”

“All right, you better get some sleep.”

“Night, Dad.”

“Night, buddy.”

The line goes dead leaving me with the realization that I am falling in love with Bex.

How did this happen?

Chapter Eighteen

Laying in Preston's bed, naked and glistening with sweat, I curl up next to him trying to catch my breath.

He kisses my forehead, and my skin burns from his lips. "Come home with me for Thanksgiving."

His words take me by surprise. I roll onto my back to look at him. "I think that counts as dating."

"I don't care," he huffs. "I haven't been with anyone but you since we met. Most people would consider that dating. Unless you've been hooking up with other guys behind my back," he says the last part with a cocky smirk.

He damn well knows I haven't been with anyone but him.

"How am I supposed to explain to my dad that I want to ditch him on Thanksgiving to eat with you?"

"Because you're going to bring him."

My eyes widen. "Oh. He would... love that."

"I thought so. I know he's a big fan of my dad and my uncle. Everyone is coming to my house."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but your mom doesn't seem like the Suzie Homemaker type."

He laughs. "She's not. My dad is cooking."

"Should I be scared?"

“Nah, he’s the best cook I know. He makes this pineapple stuffing that’s so good you have to come just to try it. He only makes it on Thanksgiving.”

“My dad might stroke out if I tell him Alex Parker is cooking turkey dinner for him.”

“So, you’ll come?”

I bite my lip, considering his offer. “I would love to, but I have to ask my dad.”

“All this talk of food is making me hungry.”

I sit up, balancing my weight on my elbow as I look over at Preston. “What do you want to eat? We can go to the cafeteria. Or order a pizza.”

He pinches my nipple between his fingers and smirks. “I want you.”

“You already had me.”

“Not all of you.” He beckons me with his finger. “Get over here. Ride my face. I haven’t tasted your pussy yet today.”

“You’re so romantic.” I get on my knees about to comply with his order, when he grips my hips and pulls me on top of him. He slides down the mattress, far enough that I’m now straddling his face.

“Mmm...” I whisper, using his headboard to steady myself.

He’s going to town on my pussy, licking and sucking until I practically black out from the pleasure. I fist his hair in one hand, weaving my fingers through it. He peeks up at me, his eyes wide as he takes me to the point of ecstasy.

Preston rolls his tongue over my clit and pushes three fingers inside my wetness, spreading me open. The tiny bit of stubble on his chin scratches me, making it even more intense. He laps up my juices, his tongue moving at a rapid pace, tearing a scream from my lips. I come so hard my entire body shakes, and I rock forward.

Preston lifts me up, kissing my clit before he lowers me down his body. He's hard again, his cock lengthening against my stomach.

"I'm still hungry," he says. "I can never get enough of you."

"I hope you never do," I confess, terrified I've said too much.

"Me, too." He rubs his cock along my slick folds. "Did you start taking your pills yet?"

"Yeah. We should be good."

He smiles, and then lifts me up just enough for him to push his thick cock in me. "I think it's safe to say we're not just friends anymore."

My eyes close from the instant pinch, which subsides with each thrust of his hips. "No, not anymore. Definitely not friends."

"I never wanted to be your friend," he growls.

I press my palms to his chest, riding his cock harder, quickening the pace. "I never wanted to be yours either."

He licks his lips and makes a hissing sound when he slams back into me, his cock filling me up. I lean forward, and Preston grabs the back of my head. Our lips meet, and when they do, my head spins from the intensity of his kiss. He consumes me, devours me with his tongue.

When I'm with Preston, I forget about rules and my messy past. He makes everything better. One day at a time, he heals all the old wounds. What we have is complicated but so perfect. Right now, he's mine. And I'm his. If only it could last forever.

After we go another round, we're both spent and starving—this time for actual food. Dressed in shorts and one of Preston's hockey shirts, I follow him downstairs. Some of his

teammates are in the living room. A few of them turn around when our feet hit the bottom landing.

“Do you two ever do anything other than fuck?” Drake asks, with a cocky smirk.

I look at Preston fighting laughter.

He laughs. “I think it’s time I take you out, don’t you?”

I can’t stop smiling. “You want to take me on a date?”

“That’s what I said.” He kisses the top of my head, holding me close. “I’m not in the habit of saying things I don’t mean. I’ll make a reservation for a real restaurant. You know, like cloth napkins and candles and shit.”

I laugh. “Way to sell it, Parker.”

He shrugs. “What do you want from me? I’ve never had a girlfriend before. Just girls I fucked.”

“Real classy,” Jamie says. He looks at me, amused. “Bex, I wouldn’t blame you if you ran the other way right now. This one is a piece of work.”

I steal a glance at Preston, smiling. “I’m not going anywhere... as long as my dad doesn’t find out.”

Preston’s smile turns into a frown. “Let me take care of your dad.” He focuses his gaze on Jamie. “Bex is coming to Thanksgiving with Coach Bryant.”

“Sweet. I’ll be there,” Drake says. “Bring Taylor with you.”

“I don’t know for sure,” I interject. “I still have to ask my dad if he wants to change our usual plans. You guys know better than anyone how much he hates change.”

They grunt in answer.

“What about Taylor?” Drake asks.

“Taylor is a definite no. She flies home to California every year for Thanksgiving. Why? You like her?”

Drake shrugs. “She’s okay.”

Jamie throws a pillow at his head. “Don’t lie, bro. I’m getting sick of hearing about Taylor.”

A hint of red touches Drake’s cheeks. “Whatever.”

Preston threads his fingers between mine and leads me into the kitchen. It’s vacant, much like the first night we were together, until Jamie and Drake come barreling in behind us.

“Do you know how to cook?” Jamie asks me.

“Not unless you want mac and cheese from a box,” I deadpan.

Jamie looks at Drake.

They both shrug.

“That works.”

“No,” Preston says. “Make your own damn food. Or get Shannon back so she can cook for the house again.”

I look at Jamie. “You’re not talking to Shannon anymore?”

“I don’t know,” he mutters. “She’s kinda crazy.”

“But he misses her,” Drake says. “Hell, even I miss her. She makes the best pancakes. Now that Shan’s gone, we have to eat at the cafeteria.”

I hold my hands up. “Well, don’t look at me. I’m not going to be your mom replacement.”

Jamie gives me a disgusted look.

“Shan is wifey material,” Drake says. “This idiot is too stupid to realize.”

“Enough about Shan,” Jamie growls.

Preston opens the refrigerator, scanning the shelves. “Ignore them, babe. I do.” He removes what looks like leftover chicken enchiladas from the fridge. “Stop asking my girl to make shit for you,” he tells Jamie. “If you want someone to baby you, then go beg Shannon to come back.”

I take a seat at the kitchen island, leaving the end stool for Preston, and glance at Jamie. “What did you do?”

“It’s complicated.” Jamie sighs. “You know how women are. Pain in my ass.”

“Hey, I’m right here,” I remind him.

Preston preheats the oven and sets the container of Mexican food on the counter.

“You okay with enchiladas?”

“Yeah,” I say. “I’ll eat whatever.”

His eyes illuminate, and a sick thought crosses his face. I know him well enough to read his dirty thoughts. I smile in response to our silent exchange.

I stare at him wondering how we got to this point. Now, I have to work up the courage to tell my dad the truth. That I’m madly, head over heels in love with the star of his team. He will be crushed.

Chapter Nineteen

PRESTON

After the hostess shows us to the private room I booked at Luciano's, Bex slides into the massive booth next to me. Her bare leg brush against mine, and I can't help but touch her. Tiny bumps dot her legs, so responsive, as always. I slide my other arm across her shoulders, and she rests her head on my chest for a second.

She scans the large room. There's a long oak bar on one wall, more tables and booths on the other side. Our table is lit by candlelight and the dim chandelier hanging above us. My parents love this restaurant. It's their spot. And I thought, with Bex, that maybe it could be ours too. I find myself wanting to have things with her, things we share together. She makes it so easy to be with her yet still so difficult with her dad not knowing about us.

"I can't believe you did all this for our first date," she beams.

"It's a special occasion." I press my lips to hers, leaving her with a soft kiss that causes her to moan when our lips separate. "Plus, I wanted some privacy."

"We definitely have that."

I squeeze her knee, my fingers traveling up her inner thigh. "We could have sex in this room, and no one would even know. No one would care even if they caught us."

She smiles. "Maybe we should eat dinner first before we christen this room."

I run my hand through her hair and kiss her lips. “Or I could make you the meal instead.”

She chuckles. “You’re such a bad boy.” She cups her hand over my growing erection. “And so are you,” she tells my dick. “Both of you need to settle down.”

I laugh at her comments.

Our waitress enters the room through the French doors, breaking up our conversation. Familiar with the menu, I order for both of us. Bex doesn’t protest. Everything in the restaurant is served family style, which makes it easier to order.

“Good choice,” Bex says after the waitress leaves us. “I’ve never had someone order for me before. It takes all the thinking out of the equation.”

“My parents get the chicken parmigiana with penne pasta and salad every time we come here. I guess I’m a creature of habit.”

“Or you just don’t like change,” she counters.

“Maybe.” I shrug. “But if that were true, we wouldn’t be here right now. I’ve never kept a girl around for more than a few days before I met you, and with some, even that was too long.”

“I wish I could say I’m surprised.”

“I was a walking stereotype before we met, huh?”

She nods. “You bet your ass you were. When I ran into you, I thought you were such a pig.”

“I still am,” I quip, slipping my hand into her panties.

“You know what I mean,” she whispers. Her face twists into a painful expression when I shove my fingers inside her.

“Always so wet for me.” I dip my head down to kiss her neck as I fuck her with my fingers.

“Preston,” she moans.

“That’s it, baby.”

She tightens her grip on my fingers, holding them in a vise as she comes all over them. I raise them to my mouth to suck her juices. And in record time. Because the second I lick my fingers clean, the waitress strolls into the room with our salads. The air stinks of sex and Italian food.

She sets our salads in front of us, refills our wine glasses, and then disappears once more.

“That was a close call,” Bex says. “How awkward would that have been if I was in the middle of coming when she opened the door?”

“I guess it would have given her something to think about later.” I wink. “Because I wouldn’t have stopped trying to make you come.”

“You have no problem doing that.” Bex lifts her fork and digs into her salad, speaking between bites. “What time do your parents want my dad and me to come over for Thanksgiving?”

“Whenever. Everyone usually comes over for the kickoff of the first game. So around noon or so.”

She nods. “Who’s playing this year?”

“Bears and Lions, Redskins and Cowboys—”

“Ugh, I hate the Cowboys,” she interrupts.

“As any self-respecting Philadelphian should,” I say.

She laughs. “You sound like my dad.”

“Falcons and Saints are the late-night game,” I add. “I don’t know if you guys will want to stick around for that, but it’s kind of a house rule. No one leaves until the games are over.”

“I have to spend twelve hours at your parents’ house?” She stuffs her mouth with lettuce. “That’s a long-ass time. Turkey dinner with my dad usually consists of one of those take-out meals you can order from the supermarket followed by football and pumpkin pie. The night usually ends with him passed out on the couch, snoring.”

“Has it always been just the two of you?”

“Pretty much. My mom left so many years ago I can’t even remember what it’s like to have her around. Not like I would want her there anymore. But I did when I was younger. My parents are both only children, and so am I, so I never had aunts or uncles around. Grams passed away a few years ago. She would come over and help me cook until she got too sick to stand in the kitchen.”

“I’m glad you’re spending the day with us.” I cup her knee with my hand. “My family is big. You are warned. They will ask you tons of questions, probably hug the shit out of you. There might even be some kissing from my aunts who will die when they see you.”

“This is really that big of a deal for you? You never had a girlfriend in high school?”

“No. Just girls I hung out with. Nothing serious. Hockey has always been my number one priority. Every coach I ever had told me to focus on being the best and not to worry about settling down with a girl. My parents reinforced that, drilled it into my head.”

“I can see that,” she mutters. “Your schedule is so hectic. It doesn’t leave much time to date.”

“If anyone gets it, you do. That’s why this works so well with us.”

“Yeah,” she agrees. “It does make it easier that we have similar practice and game schedules. I wish I could see more of your games.”

“I’m coming to your game against Villanova. We don’t have a game that weekend, and of course, my mom is going since that’s her alma mater.”

“Don’t go making me nervous.” She bites her lip. “So, your whole family will be at my game?”

“Pretty much.” I pat her arm to soothe her concerns. “No pressure.”

She laughs. “Yeah, none at all.”

My parents' living room is packed to the brim with family. The scent of turkey wafts through the air. All the men are on the couches drinking beer and yelling at the football game taking place on TV. This is normal for Thanksgiving.

Even though my mom doesn't cook, she's in the kitchen. Aunt Sydney and her daughter, Chloe—Drake's mom and sister—sit on stools next to Aunt Kennedy and her daughter, Ava—the Kane twins' mom and older sister. Between the four families in this house, our parents have twelve children. None of them are related to me by blood. But they're still my family, the only one I've ever known.

I introduce Bex and Coach Bryant to everyone, and they look overwhelmed as if they need to remember all of their names. It's a lot for anyone to take in.

Coach Bryant squeezes my shoulder. "Thanks for inviting us, Preston. This is a nice change of pace for us. Bex hasn't had a home-cooked meal in a long time."

"Yeah, this is nice," Bex says. "Thanks for having us."

She's pretending as if we're friends and that my mom invited her for dinner. But keeping my shit together, without spilling the beans, is not easy. I almost slipped three times since they arrived.

Coach Bryant scans the room and then locks onto me. "Where's your brother?"

"JP had a client emergency to deal with. He won't be here until dinnertime."

"I would hate to work on a holiday," Coach says.

I shrug. "Missed holidays are normal in this family. My parents were on the road a fair amount when I was a kid."

"That must have been tough on you and your brother."

I shrug. "Not really. My aunts and Uncle Jameson were always around when my parents were out of town. We made it

work.”

“That’s what makes our team so special.” He smiles. “You guys play like a family on the ice. I have a good feeling about this year.”

I return his smile. “I do, too. I want to end this season on a good note, make it easier for the NHL to draft me.”

“I have no doubt you’ll make it,” he assures me. “You’re just like your dad.”

“Thanks, Coach.”

I feel horrible for dating Bex behind his back. But staying away from her wasn’t an option. She stole fragments of my heart, taking pieces over time, collecting them until all of it belonged to her. Now, she has the power to break it.

There’s only one thing in our way, one thing keeping us from being truly happy. I have to get the balls to tell Coach Bryant about us. Now, if only I can find the courage to do that.

Hours pass by with lots of drunken yelling and football bets being taken before Mom calls us into the dining room for dinner. We sit in our usual places, saving the spot next to my dad for JP. Normally, I would sit next to my mom, except holidays are different. My aunts gab about girly crap with my mom, and I hang out with Jamie, Drake, Tucker, and Trent. Since we’re all the same age, we tend to stick together.

But with Bex and Coach Bryant here, the group has expanded. My dad made some room for Coach Bryant on his side of the table, welcoming him into the family. Bex is on my right in the middle of the table with my usual crew. It’s a full house, only one seat open and that belongs to JP.

My mom glances up every so often, looking for JP. She didn’t want to start dinner without him, but everyone was starving. We’d run out of snacks an hour before, and we were slowly getting drunker and more irritated.

“Bex,” my mom says. “How would you like to help me out with Philly Clean this year?”

Philly Clean is a youth basketball event my mom has sponsored and helped run every year since she started working at DMG. The players from the Sixers work with kids on ball handling and various skills, and all of the proceeds go to Philly Clean, a charity that helps drug addicts get off the streets and get clean. My grandparents were addicts, both of them dying from drug overdoses, which is how my mom ended up in foster care. It's also the reason she met Jameson.

Bex's eyes go wide. "Are you serious?"

Mom nods.

"Yeah. Uh... I would love to." She smiles so wide her teeth are showing. "Thank you."

Her excitement radiates off her. I love that she gets along with my mom. Things between us could never work out if she didn't.

"I hear you're a big Dante Fisher fan," Mom says to Bex.

"The biggest," Bex replies, smiling.

"Bex has posters of him on her bedroom walls," Coach Bryant says.

Bex turns beat red, shooting her dad a warning look down the table. "Dad, c'mon. Don't embarrass me. Please."

The table erupts into laughter.

"If you come, you'll get to meet him." Mom finishes chewing her food. "Dante, I mean. He's helping out with the kids this year."

Bex squeals, covering her mouth with her hand. "Shut. Up." She fans herself with her hand. "Sorry, that's not what I meant. I didn't mean for you to shut up. I'm just... wow! Like I have no idea what to say. Dante is so—"

Mom waves her hand. "I know what you mean. No need to worry. Even after ten years of retirement, he's still the same player I signed out of high school. He's arrogant, and a little much to take in all at once." She points at my dad. "This one was the same way. Actually, all three of them were."

She's referring to Tyler Kane and Carter Donovan, who are sitting at the table laughing.

"Tyler was the most arrogant player I'd ever met," Aunt Kennedy chimes. "He was infuriating. Trying to get an interview with him was like pulling teeth."

"Hey, babe, you got more than interview." Tyler winks at her.

Ava, Tucker, and Trent make gagging sounds. The second oldest of the Kane's, Tyler Jr., who everyone calls Tye, is missing this year.

"Daddy, that's gross." Ava, the oldest, flicks her long blonde hair over her shoulder. "People are trying to eat."

"Hey, princess," Tyler says, "I didn't say anything wrong."

Ava sips from her wine glass. "It was implied."

She's gorgeous, a fashion model who travels around the world for work. All of the Kane's have the same blonde hair, blue eyes, and light features. Their mom has dark hair, all of them the spitting image of their dad. If Ava wasn't like a sister to me, I would have been all over her years ago.

"So, how did you two meet?" Ava looks down the table at Bex and me.

"I ran into him in the locker room," Bex admits, her cheeks flush.

Ava gives her a funny look. "Like the men's locker room?"

Bex nods.

"Oh, now this I have to hear. Sounds juicy."

"More like horrifying," Bex says. "My dad told me to meet him after practice. I didn't realize the guys were still in the locker room, and well, let's just say that was kinda awkward."

Coach Bryant shakes his head. "Needless to say, Bex found the side entrance to my office after that day." He looks right at Bex. "No more entering through the locker room."

“No, definitely not,” Bex says. “That’s one place I never want to walk through again.”

Everyone at the table laughs.

In the middle of dinner, JP shows up. He strolls into the dining room, his black coat dusted with snow.

“Sorry, I’m late.” JP bends down to kiss my mom first, followed by my aunts. “I got stuck in traffic on my way back from New York.”

“Take off your jacket, baby,” Mom says to him. “You’re getting snow all over the table.”

She still talks to us like we’re little kids even though we’re grown-ass men.

JP removes his coat, leaving it on a chair in the corner of the room. Dad stands up to hug him, and then pulls out the chair next to him. With JP across from us, he stares at Bex, wondering why she doesn’t look familiar. I haven’t talked to him in so long he doesn’t even know I have a girlfriend now. He also has no idea it’s a secret.

Fuck.

“And who are you?” JP asks Bex. “I don’t think we’ve met.”

“Bex Bryant,” she lalts.

His eyes travel from Bex to me. “I can’t believe Preston has a girlfriend. Would you look at that?”

Bex’s expression turns to stone. She stares at JP, unblinking, unmoving as if she’s frozen to her chair. Coach Bryant picks up on her reaction, and his eyes narrow as if he’s just now understanding why he was invited to dinner.

“Bex and Preston are friends,” Coach Bryant says.

“I know my brother, and these two are definitely more than friends.” I shoot him a look to stop him from going any further, but he keeps going. “How come you didn’t tell me, little bro? I haven’t heard from you in over a month.”

Because I was too busy fucking Bex in every place on and off campus I could find.

Coach Bryant makes note of Bex's awkward silence and my nervous fidgeting. "Is there something going on between you two?"

Who should answer? Bex or me?

"Coach," I start. "I was gonna talk to you about this."

He seems confused, but clearly understands I went behind his back. Thanks to JP, my favorite coach is now about to hate me. He holds the keys to my future in his hand. If he wants, he can take it out on me, bench me whenever he sees fit. *Would he do that?* I sure as hell hope not, or I can kiss my hockey career goodbye.

"My bad." JP fills his plate with food. "I didn't know you guys were..."

He doesn't even know what to say, none of us do.

"How was the weather in New York?" Mom asks JP to change the subject.

"Worse than it is here. They had at least two more inches."

The conversation returns to normal with Coach Bryant shooting devious stares in my direction. He shakes his head at Bex and me, disappointed. She looks as though she wants to crawl under the table. I move my hand to her thigh, slipping her fingers between mine.

"It will be okay," I say under my breath.

"I hope so," she whispers.

For a split second, I wonder if this will ruin our relationship. The thought of returning to a life without Bex guts me. I hate the powerless feeling associated with being in love. It rips you apart from the inside out.

Chapter Twenty

My dad drives in silence, his hands clutching the steering wheel so tight his knuckles are white. Fear shakes through me the further we drive without speaking a word. He hasn't been this quiet since my mom left. For weeks after she was gone, he sat in the living room staring at the TV with no sound.

"Say something, please," I choke out the words. "I know you're mad. So just get it over with. Yell at me. Tell me that I've made a horrible decision. But don't ignore me."

"How could you, Bex?" His face scrunches in anger. "After everything that happened with Kellan."

"Preston is nothing like Kellan. He's decent and good. And he cares about me."

"He might care about you now, but what happens after graduation? That kid is the real deal. He's going to be a star... just like his dad."

"Look how everything turned out for his parents. They seem happy. Just because his dad was a pro hockey player doesn't mean he's an asshole. What Preston does for a living doesn't define him."

"His dad was known as the king of puck bunny scandals before he met Coach. He didn't settle down with her until he'd hit rock bottom. Once Preston gets a taste of the life and is traveling around the country, he won't have time for you. I don't want you to get left behind."

“Why? Because Mom did it to you?”

His expression turns to pain, maybe sadness. “Watch it, Bex. At least I didn’t run away when the times got tough. I stuck it out. I did the best I could to raise you. All I want is what’s best for you. And it’s not Preston Parker. Maybe five or ten years from now I would change my mind, but you’re both so young.”

I cross my arms over my chest, my jaw set hard as I stare out the window and watch the cars pass us by on the highway. “I’m in love with him, Dad. There isn’t a thing you can do to change that.”

He sighs. “You might think you’re in love with that boy, but love fades. Time and distance will change how you feel about each other.”

“I know I broke your rules, and I’m sorry.”

“Honey, you were in bad shape after what happened with Kellan. I didn’t know what to do back then. All I want to do is keep you from getting hurt again. You are my number one priority. If you’re in pain, I will feel it, too. And I would do anything to take it away. You have no idea how much I wished I could back then. I thought that by coming to Strick U instead of Boston College, I could help you somehow.”

“Kellan was an exception. A jerk. Just because he plays hockey doesn’t mean every guy who does is like him. You were a hockey player, and you’re nothing like him.”

“I know,” he groans, shoving a hand through his hair before placing it back on the steering wheel. “I don’t want you to get hurt again. I just wish you would have told me. We used to talk all the time. Not so much lately.”

“Because I’ve been keeping this a secret from you since the start of your season. I didn’t want it to have an impact on how you coached or how you felt about Preston. I didn’t want him to get benched over it. Hockey is important to him.”

“I would never bench my best player because of his personal life. Not unless he was partying all the time and failing out of school.”

“Do you think you can accept Preston and me? I’ve never felt this way about anyone before. I thought I loved Kellan, but that was lust. Our relationship wasn’t based off anything real. But with Preston, it’s like I can be myself. He gets me in ways no one does.”

His frown slowly turns into a tiny smile that tugs at the corners of his mouth. Even in the darkness, I can see it. “If this is what you want, and Preston makes you happy, then I’m okay with it. But I plan to talk to him. He better treat you good. You tell me if he gets out of line.”

I chuckle at his overprotectiveness. “I will, Dad. Promise. You will be the first to know.”

Chapter Twenty-One

PRESTON

C oach Bryant leans his forearms on his desk and locks eyes with me. “We’re at Boston College on Friday night. I need you focused. No playing house with my daughter the night before. You got it?”

I stare at him, confused. “Yeah, sure. Got it.”

“You know about Kellan Lehane, right? Bex told you.”

I nod. “Yeah. She told me everything.”

“Listen, kid, I like you. You’re a great player. I have no doubt you’ll go pro. But Bex is not some puck bunny you can play with until you leave for whatever team drafts you.”

“I’ve never thought of Bex that way.” My tone is defensive, sincere.

Bex has never been a sex toy to me. From the start, I saw more with her, wanted more.

He flashes a closed-mouth smile. “Good. That’s good to hear. I worry about her. After what happened with Lehane, I don’t want to see her go through it again. You’re the first guy she’s dated since the incident. He did a real number on her and made her life a living hell. If you think there’s even a chance you will break her heart, I beg you to cut ties right now. I’m not sure if she can handle more heartbreak.”

Without hesitation, I say, “I would never hurt Bex.” And I mean it.

“You say that now, but things will change for you after graduation. This is only a temporary situation for you, where for Bex, this is her life.”

I cross my arms over my chest, annoyed. “I understand your concern.”

“The fame goes to a lot of players’ heads. You don’t know it yet, but it could happen to you, too. One day you’re a nobody, just a big fish in a small pond, and the next, your face is on TV, in newspapers. You’re getting interviewed by ESPN and signing deals with Gatorade and Under Armour. That changes people.”

“It won’t change me,” I promise because I honestly don’t think going pro will make a difference. “I grew up with famous parents. I’m already adjusted to this lifestyle.”

He sinks into the leather chair, his hands folded on the desk in front of him. “I’m not trying to give you a hard time. You’re a good kid. I know you are. I’m just worried about Bex.”

“You have nothing to worry about. I would do anything to protect her.”

“Do you love her?”

“Yeah. I do. I just haven’t told her yet, but I think she knows.”

“For both of your sakes, I hope this works out.”

“Me, too,” I admit. “I never knew how empty I was until I had Bex in my life. It’s like something was missing before, and with Bex, now I feel more complete.”

“You’re playing better.”

I smile. “She’s rubbing off on me.”

His expression mirrors mine. “She has a way of doing that.”

“Yes, she does.” I place my palms on the arms of the chair and push myself up to my feet. “Mind if I hit the showers, Coach?”

He waves toward the door. “Go ahead. Make sure you get some rest for the big game. The bus leaves tomorrow morning at eight o’clock sharp.”

I tip my head to him, and then get the hell out of his office as fast possible. His lecture wasn’t as bad as I had expected. Still, it was awkward as fuck.

Later that night, Bex is in bed with me, curled up in the crook of my arm. Her bare tits are pressed against my side, her hard nipples poking me. She runs her hand down my chest feeling her way to my already hard cock.

“Again?” She laughs. “You have some killer stamina, Preston.”

“I’m a hockey player. It comes naturally.”

“Yeah, but...” She fists my cock, stroking it gently in her delicate hand. “You still get breaks between line changes. But in the bedroom—”

“I could go all night, woman. You know that.” I cover my hand with hers, helping her jerk me off. “This feels so good, baby,” I hiss. “But I’d rather come inside you.”

She giggles, and before she can respond, I roll on to my side just enough to flip Bex onto her stomach. Getting behind her, I spread her legs apart, and pull her ass to me. I give her right cheek a playful smack that causes her to yelp followed by laughter.

“Preston, what are you doing?” She laughs again. “You’re so bad.”

“Do you like that?”

She hesitates. “Yeah, I think so.”

I lean forward pressing my lips to her skin to kiss the pink mark left behind from my hand. “All better?”

“Ahh, yeah,” she whispers. “All better.”

Now, I'm laughing at her change of heart.

Slowly, I inch inside her, breaking through her inner walls, causing her to moan. She whimpers, same as she does every time I first enter her. Once she adjusts to my size, she relaxes. She becomes putty in my hands, her body moving along with mine, our rhythm so in sync.

She turns her head to the side staring back at me. Her cheeks are flushed. The pink from her face spreads down to her arms. I'm hot too. Heat licks my skin from the uncontrollable fire burning inside me. She does this to me. A few soft moans, my name on her lips, and my cock is throbbing and begging for release. Holding her hips, I fuck her harder. She likes it this way, craves it. I tap her ass again, just to test the waters, to see if she will moan for me again. And she does. She's into this, and I'm so fucking into her. Her pussy is so tight, so damn wet I wish I could bury my cock inside her forever.

It feels too good when I'm with Bex. I get lost with her, so damn lost I forget to come up for air. Until she screams for me, purrs my name. She begs me to go deeper, fill her up with my cock.

"Oh... my... God... Preston." She chokes out each word until she's breathless and gasping for air.

I reach around her to touch her clit. With each slow, circular movement I make with my thumb, she trembles. Her pussy clenches around my dick.

"Yesss," she whispers.

"Fuck, woman," I groan. "You're strangling my dick so hard." Still rubbing her clit, I work harder, move faster, about to explode from the pressure. "You're killing me. I'm about to come."

I don't want to, but she's making it too damn hard.

"Me, too," she whispers, her voice shaky.

She's so close I can feel it. Our tempos are almost never perfectly aligned, but this time, she's there, teetering on the

edge with me about to burst. And she does. Her body convulses just as my cock pulses.

After we finish, I lean forward and run my hand over her back before I pull out. I watch as our juices slide from her dripping wet pussy and down her inner thighs. It's so fucking hot my cock perks up again. But I need a break.

Coach gave me orders to follow and those include getting some rest. Something I will never get with Bex here.

I wrap my arms around Bex and lower her to the mattress cradling her against my chest. We're out of breath, our bodies slick with sweat. My room stinks of sex and Bex's citrus-scented body wash.

I kiss her breast and she stirs, cuddling up to me. "Want to get a shower with me?"

"Is that code for more sex?" she asks.

"No, not this time." I brush a strand of her hair off her forehead and plant a quick kiss on her lips. "I need a shower. For real. And we need to get some sleep. I have to get up early tomorrow. We're driving up to Boston in the morning."

"I wish my dad would let me come with you guys."

"No girls on the team bus," I inform her. "It's like no girls in the locker room."

She raises her hand to her mouth. "Oops! Been there, done that."

I shake my head, laughing. "You're a real rule breaker, Bex Bryant."

"So are you, Peter Preston Parker. What a name? Try saying that ten times fast."

I roll my eyes. "Sometimes I seriously think about changing my name."

"I like Peter. There's nothing wrong with your first name." She chuckles, sitting up. "Okay, Peter, let's get you in the shower." Bex holds out her hand to me, and I gladly slip my fingers between hers.

“Call me that again, and you’ll pay for it, woman.”

“Oh, yeah?” She throws on one of my old shirts that stops mid-thigh, looking so fucking sexy in it. “What are you gonna do about it, Preston?”

I follow behind her, stepping into a pair of boxers. “Deprive you of sex.”

Her lips part, and her mouth opens slightly. “You wouldn’t.”

I open my bedroom door and hold it open for her. “Test me and find out.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “I don’t believe you. You can’t even go without sex for a day.”

“In addition to stamina, I have incredible willpower. You’ll be begging me for sex by the time I’m done icing you out.”

I lead her down the hallway and check to make sure the bathroom I share with Jamie is clean before I drag her inside. She sits on top of the toilet lid watching as I turn on the shower and fidget with the knobs until I have the perfect temperature.

Bex licks her lips as I remove my boxers. “I can’t believe you’re mine. This still doesn’t feel real.”

Her words take me by surprise. “Why?”

“Because I never thought you’d like a girl like me.”

I drop to my knees in front of her and place my hands on her thighs, staring into her eyes. “What kind of girl is that? Beautiful, smart, caring, athletic, sexy... I can keep going if you want.”

She smiles and then reaches up to touch my face. “You’re so perfect. It’s like you always know the right things to say when I need it.”

“What’s wrong?”

She sighs. “I was just thinking about tomorrow’s game.”

“Are you upset because of Kellan Lehane?”

“No... I don't know. It's weird, don't you think? I know it bothers you. My dad hates playing his team because of it. You've been so sweet and never said anything about it, but every time you mention Boston College or Kellan, you get this insane look on your face like you're about to Hulk Smash everything around you.”

“I'm not gonna lie. That's how I feel. I want to beat the shit out of him. I want to make him pay for what he did to you. I even asked my dad to pull a few strings to get him kicked off the team. But even he can't make that happen.”

She strokes my cheek with her fingers. “It won't change the past, Preston. I don't want you to do anything stupid that could jeopardize your career.”

“I won't, baby. I promise.” I pull her down to me, kissing her so hard I'm breathless by the time our lips separate.

As much as I want to destroy Kellan, I have to keep my word. That's what you do for someone you love.

“Now, get your sexy ass in that shower,” I command, and she squeals with delight.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“I can’t believe you talked me into this.” Taylor clutches the steering wheel so tight her knuckles are white. “Why does Boston have to be so damn far?”

She hates driving, but at least she has a car. I have a license and haven’t driven more than a few hundred miles since I got it my senior year of high school. And the fun part... Preston has no idea I’m surprising him. He thinks I’m staying behind waiting for him to come home on Saturday.

“It’s not that far from Philly.”

She gives me an annoyed look. “We’re three hours into a five-hour drive that has turned into longer because of traffic. You better get the best sex of your life or an engagement ring out of this.”

“Maybe you’ll get the best sex of your life instead.”

She cocks her head to me. “What are you talking about?”

“Drake will be there. Duh, silly. He has a crush on you. He asked me about you a while ago.”

She huffs. “Yeah, I know. I’ve talked to him a few times, but he’s acted like a pig every time. So, now I ignore him to see how much it wounds his precious ego.”

I laugh. “Are you into him?”

“Hell, yeah. Have you seen him? I mean, my God, it’s like he bottles up sex and carries it everywhere with him. His arms, those legs... don’t even get me started. He’s like a wall of

muscle I want climb. Drake's so hot. But guys like him are used to getting what they want, and because of that, he'll never get me."

"You are such a cock tease." I chuckle. "Do you ever have sex with guys or just torture them?"

She switches lanes, her eyes focused on the congested road. "Depends on the guy. They have to work for it. I'm not handing out my donuts to everyone who wants them."

I snort at her comment. "Donuts? Seriously. You don't even eat them."

"I love them. I just don't eat them."

"Wouldn't that make Drake the donut in this situation? You want him, but you won't eat him."

She laughs, smacking the wheel. "Good one, Bex."

"You should try Drake's donut. Maybe you'll like his frosting."

She snorts. "Damn, Bex, look at you. Preston has made you into a dirty little skank."

We laugh uncontrollably until my stomach hurts and I'm gasping for air. She's right about Preston changing me. He's so bad sometimes, and I want to do every bad thing with him.

I grab the bag of Cheetos on the floor, stuffed inside my bag. I tear the package open taking a handful of cheesy goodness, and hold out the bag to Taylor. "Want one? I hear Cheetos have lots of nutritional value."

She shakes her head. "You've been misinformed. They're all carbs and chemicals."

I show her the bag. "Look, it says made with real cheese."

She giggles. "Right. If you so say. And saturated fat and who knows what else. Why are you eating those things?"

"You can't go on a road trip without proper snacks."

She shrugs. "I'm good. I got one tasty donut waiting for me in Boston."

We break out into a fit of laughter, cracking jokes about the guys all the way to Boston.

We enter the rink and find seats closest to the Strickland Senators bench. Preston still has no idea I'm here. I can't wait to see the look on his face.

"It's cold as a witch's tit in this place." Taylor zips her North Face jacket and shivers. "How can you be so comfortable in here?"

"I'm used to it."

"I don't think I could ever adapt to freezing my ass off. I prefer sunshine and margaritas by the pool."

"That's because you grew up in California. If you were raised in Philly, you would be used to the cold."

"I've lived in Philly for the last three winters. I doubt I will ever get used to it."

"You got your early acceptance letter to UC Berkeley. You'll be back to warmer climates in no time."

She frowns. "I'm gonna miss you next year."

My sadness mirrors hers. "I'll miss you, too, Tay. But we have to grow up and become adults."

"I am an adult," she says. "But not like a real adult. I just look like one."

I chuckle at her silliness. "I don't want things to change."

"Me either." She pats my arm and nods in the direction of the players skating onto the ice. "Maybe you'll end up with Preston in whatever city selects him."

"Wouldn't that be nice?" I smile at the thought of spending the rest of my life with Preston.

Even though it hasn't been that long, I have a gut feeling about Preston and me. We're going to make it. I just know it.

“You could be a hockey wife.” She wiggles her eyebrows at me. “That would be fun.”

“I can’t follow him around from city to city. If you rely on a man for everything, you won’t have anything if he walks away. I’m not saying Preston will leave me, but anything can happen. I have to at least get my foot in the door at a sports management agency or do something sports related. Otherwise, my four years of college will be a complete waste.”

“You have a very hunky admirer waiting for you to notice him.” Taylor points at the glass.

A very shocked Preston stands on the ice, his gloved hand pressed to the Plexiglas, lips parted. I wave, and the corners of his mouth turn up into a smile. He tilts his head to the side gesturing for me to meet him where the players exit the ice.

“I’ll be right back,” I tell Taylor.

Preston waits for me, the door propped open, dressed in full gear. He pulls out his mouth guard and says, “What are you doing here? I thought you were staying home and hanging out with Taylor.”

“I am with Taylor. Just not at home.”

“I can’t believe you drove all the way up here. It’s a long ride to only stay the night.”

“I wanted to give you a good-luck kiss.” I lean into him, pressing my chest to his, and take his bottom lip into my mouth.

He parts my lips with his tongue, palming the back of my head with his glove.

“Young lady, what are you doing here?” My dad’s voice pulls me from my Preston-induced coma.

Preston straightens when he sees my dad and says, “Coach. I was just—”

“You’re just practicing, Parker. Get your ass back out there and stop kissing my daughter.”

“You got it, Coach.” He winks at me, and then he skates off.

“Hey, Dad.” I give him a sheepish wave hoping he doesn’t yell at me. “I thought it would be a nice surprise since this is Preston’s last year on the team and your first year as head coach. Plus, Boston isn’t super far.”

“You should be home studying or working on your ball handling skills... not chasing after boys.”

I suck in a deep breath and let it out. “I’m not chasing after Preston. I want to be supportive. I’m here for you, too. Not just for Preston.”

He smiles. “Okay, well, go take your seat and stop distracting my players. Parker needs to stay focused. This is a big game for us.”

“I know.” I pat him on the shoulder. “Good luck.”

When I turn around, I lock eyes with Kellan Lehane. Fear floods my veins, adrenaline rushing through my body. He mouths something to me I can’t make out, and I’m not sure I want to know what disgusting things he said.

Seeing him fuels my rage making me wish Preston would rearrange his face. If only I could get his attention. Because I want nothing more than to see this asshole hurt the way I have for so many years.

Chapter Twenty-Three

PRESTON

Lining my stick up with Kellan Lehane's, I take away his shot forcing a fight for the puck. He can either pass it, and hopefully fuck it up, or let me take it from him. I'm the best defenseman in Division I hockey. He knows it. This puck is mine.

I nudge him with my left elbow, pushing him into the boards as he attempts to maintain possession. "I had her first," he says, throwing me off my game. "Bex Bryant."

I stagger back at the mention of her name giving us some distance.

His eyes lock onto mine for a split second. "You heard me, Parker."

I elbow him in the side. "Fuck off."

I promised Bex I wouldn't start a fight and that I would keep my cool around Lehane. And now she's here watching my every move. I can feel her eyes on me, hear her soft voice in my ear, telling me to back down. This dickhead makes it so hard not to lose control.

He's goading me, taunting me to make the wrong move. Lehane deserves a beat down for what he did to my girl. *What kind of man would I be if I didn't do something about it when the asshole is right in front of me?* This is my chance. A penalty is worth it. Isn't it?

Tucker appears at Lehane's other side helping where I am failing. Because I'm blowing it, my head totally fucked from

what he said. I need all the assistance I can get. No one on my team knows about Lehane and Bex. They have no idea how much I want to beat the shit out of this stupid motherfucker.

I clench my jaw in anger, the pain from biting down on the mouth guard causing my jaw to pop. It does that sometimes. Ever since I fractured my cheekbone during a game in high school.

Tucker steals the puck from Lehane skating away in a frosty blur. But Lehane is not going anywhere. As he attempts to go after the puck, I push him into the boards, slamming him face first with my glove on the back of his head. I don't care about the penalty.

Fuck, this feels good.

The referee calls a penalty on me—five minutes for boarding. And the linesmen pull us apart, one of them tugging on my jersey until I willingly skate over to the penalty box. Jamie looks at me and shrugs as if to ask why I would do something so stupid. I wish I could share this with him. For so long, I've wanted to tell someone in hopes I could find a solution for Bex.

Now, Boston is on the power play giving them a slight advantage over us for the next five minutes. I fucked my team, but I don't regret it. We'll make up the minutes. Our team has an eighty percent penalty kill percentage... but that's usually with Jamie and me on the ice together.

I strip off my gloves and sit on the bench in the box, my anger radiating through me. I never allow anyone to fuck with my head during games. I'm always the calm, centered player on our team. Because I have to be. That's why I am the team captain. But now I need someone to put my ass in check.

Coach Bryant glances over at me, his jaw set. He shoots me a warning look that says, *Knock it the fuck off before I bench your ass*. This game means a lot to him, to all of us. We need this win. The Frozen Four is so close, our team right there on the finish line. I have to keep it together.

Not until the third period am I on the ice again with Lehane. Tucker looks to me having just enough room to slap the puck to me. Tied 3-3 with Boston, we need this goal. I can't go home with my head hung low and a point in the loss column.

Lehane is on me this time, right on my ass, sweeping his stick in an attempt to take the puck from me. He's a dirty player. I've seen him do sneaky shit dozens of times without the refs catching him. I switch the puck to my weak side, and Lehane swings his stick at my leg, the move clearly intentional.

I'm waiting for the referee to take his head out of his ass and call a penalty for slashing. The bastard gets away with it like he does everything else, which only fuels my rage.

I pass the puck to Tucker with just enough clearance to sail past Lehane's skate. Tuck takes the shot, and with seconds left on the clock, the horn sounds, blaring through the event center.

I raise my arms in the air to celebrate our win about to join my teammates, when someone punches me in the back with their glove. Spinning around, I shove Lehane. Stumbling backward, he smirks. He removes his gloves dropping them to the ice. I do the same because I'm not backing down from him.

As we square off, he points to the stands—where Bex is sitting next to Taylor. “I still remember her perfect pink nipples. Her tight pussy. She's a good fuck, isn't she?” I want to rip the stupid grin from his lips. “Your girl can suck a cock like a whore on—”

Before he can finish his sentence, I land a punch to his jaw. I keep swinging, backing him up against the glass as I dodge his fist. He gets a good hit on me, on the right side of my nose that sends a shooting pain through my face. Our teammates surround us. The linesmen try to pull us apart.

Even though we won the game, I can't let him win. He can't disrespect my girl and then walk away. My fist connects with his nose, then his jaw, each punch more powerful than the

last. The final shot forces his eyes shut, and he stops swinging at me.

His blood covers my skin, coloring my knuckles. I can't feel my hand anymore. *Is it broken?* The fight ends with Lehane sinking to the ice and me accidentally elbowing a linesman in the face. Reality sinks in.

What did I do?

Lehane might have cost me everything. My position on this team. My future in the NHL. No one is going to sign a player with a bad track record and fucked-up hand.

Dr. Clarke, the team doctor, slides the curtain over and steps into the bay where I've been waiting in the emergency room. He's treated my injuries before, but this time, he wanted x-rays to confirm his suspicions.

"Do you want the good news or the bad news first?" He sits in the chair next to my bed.

"Bad news, I guess."

He nods. "I spoke to the attending physician. Your X-rays confirm you have three broken knuckles and a slight fracture. While this isn't a life-changing injury, it will impact your ability to play hockey for at least the next month."

"What about the Frozen Four?"

"I'm sorry, it doesn't look good for you."

I can't decide whether I want to scream, cry, or punch something. "What's the best-case scenario?"

"Maybe three weeks if you're lucky. But I don't want to push it."

Staring down at my splinted fingers, I can't believe how much my hand has swollen in the last hour. This isn't the end of the world. But it sure feels like it right now.

"Does Coach know?"

“Yes.” He leans forward, resting his elbows on his thighs. “I stopped by the waiting room. The entire team is out there.”

“Is Bex here?”

“Yeah. She knows, too.”

“Can I leave?”

“Not yet. They need to take care of your hand first.”

“Can I see Bex?”

He pushes himself up from the chair. “Let me see if they’ll allow her to come back and sit with you for a while.”

“Thanks, Doc.”

He disappears into the busy room leaving the curtain open a crack. I lean back, my eyes pointed up at the ceiling and pray for a miracle. What if the bones shift during the healing process? What if I can never play hockey again? I try to block out the pain. It’s something fierce, the intensity growing with each second that passes.

I refuse to take any pain medication. My dad had addiction problems early on in his career. He loved the bottle, clung to it like it was his last hope. I won’t get in the habit of using something as a crutch. Aspirin will have to be enough.

A few minutes later, Bex steps between the hole in the curtains, with a sad look on her beautiful face.

“Hey,” she whispers, approaching the bed. “How are you feeling?” She slips her fingers between those of my good hand. Her warmth leeches into my skin.

“Okay,” I lie.

“You look better than the other guy,” she jokes. “Kellan’s nose is broken, shattered in two different places. You broke his jaw, too. They have to wire it shut.”

“How do you know all this?”

“Because he’s here. He needs surgery.”

“Good. I hope that fucker remembers me every time he drinks his meals from a straw.”

Bex climbs into bed with me, and I make room for her. “There’s more.” Her voice is shaky, her body trembling. “Right before Dr. Clarke came out to find me, Kellan’s teammates started a fight with yours. They were all out in the waiting room shit talking back and forth when the doctor told Kellan’s coach about his injuries. The nurse had to call security to break up the fight. I think a few people are hurt. I’m not sure who, though. I snuck through the door with Dr. Clarke to get out of the way.”

“Fuck. This is a real shit show, huh?” I shake my head, blowing out a frustrated breath of air. “I didn’t just fuck up my career, I messed shit up for the whole team. Some captain I am.” I hang my head in shame, now regretting my decision.

It’s one thing for me to suffer in silence. But it’s another for the team to get roped into my mess.

Bex runs her fingers down my arm, leaving a trail of heat in their wake. She stares into my eyes. Hers are watery, with so much sadness in them. “You can’t take the blame for other people’s actions, Preston. You didn’t make them do a thing.”

“Our teams wouldn’t be out in the waiting room, beating the shit out of each other if it weren’t for me. This could have serious implications for the team.”

“I saw the whole thing. From where I was sitting, it looked like Kellan was egging you on, so you would hit him back.”

“He was,” I growl. “The shit he was saying about you made my blood boil. I couldn’t stand hearing him talk about you like that. Like you were trash. Like you were his. It made me sick.”

“You didn’t start the fight, though. He did. Anyone could see he punched you in the back after you guys scored. The game was over. He was always a sore loser.”

“I hope the league sees it that way.”

“Me, too. My dad is afraid they will suspend you for the remainder of the year.”

“It’s possible.”

“But he started it. Doesn’t that count for something?”

“Not necessarily. He’s having surgery because of me. The NCAA will take his injuries into consideration.”

“My dad said Kellan will probably get the same penalty as you. He’s not sure. He has to make a few calls.”

“Speaking of calls, would you mind talking to my dad for me. Let him know I’m here. I can’t bear to have a conversation with him right now. He’s going to be so pissed.”

“My dad already talked to him.”

“What did he say?”

“He wasn’t happy.”

“What am I gonna do, Bex?” I rest my head on her shoulder, taking in her sweet feminine scent. “I am so fucked.”

“No, you’re not. We will get through this together.”

“Easy for you to say,” I growl, and something snaps inside me. “Tonight’s game might’ve been the last I ever play.”

“Don’t overreact.” She raises her voice to match my dark tone.

“How do you expect me to act? I feel like someone is holding me underwater, like I’m drowning and have no way of swimming back to the surface.”

“I’m here, Preston. Whatever you need.”

“You weren’t supposed to be here tonight. If you weren’t at the game, Lehane wouldn’t have seen us together. I wouldn’t have gotten into the fight. None of this shit would have happened.” I close my eyes, disgusted with myself for being a dick. “Can you just go?”

She looks like she might cry. “Are you serious?”

I nod. “I need to be alone. I have to think things through.”

Her cheeks flush. “Please don’t hate me for this. I love you.”

I don’t know why, but I can’t say it back. Everything hurts. My hand. My heart. I want it all to stop. I wish I could take it

all back.

As I roll onto my side, Bex hops down from the bed. She leaves without another word, and I close my eyes wishing I would have taken the pain meds the doctor offered. Because I want to be numb.

Chapter Twenty-Four

An entire week has passed since I left Boston. Seven long days without a word from Preston. He hates me. Preston blames me for everything. And he should. Because the fight was my fault.

My dad is pissed about Preston's suspension. He won't say it aloud, but he knows I'm to blame. If I could turn back time, I would. I would have stayed the hell home like I was supposed to.

I knock on Preston's front door, and Jamie opens it.

He forces a smile, but it's obvious he's not happy to see me. "Preston is sleeping."

It's a lie. I can read it on his lips, see it in his eyes. Every time I've come to see Preston, he's *sleeping*. Right.

"Can you relay a message for me?"

Leaning against the door frame, Jamie shoves his hand through his shaggy brown hair. "Yeah. What do you want me to tell him?"

The last time I was here, I spoke to Drake. The time before that Tucker. I still haven't received a return call or text from Preston. He hasn't been to class in a week. From what I can tell, he hasn't left this house at all.

"Tell Preston I'm sorry. I shouldn't have involved him in all of this. This is my fault, and now he's paying for it."

“Wait... what?” Jamie’s eyebrows rise in confusion. “What are you talking about? Why is this your fault?”

Surprised, I say, “He didn’t tell you?”

He crosses his arms over his thick chest. “Tell me what?”

“Oh.” I bite my bottom lip. “I assumed he told you since you two are like brothers. What did he tell his parents about the fight?”

“That he reacted without thinking. Lehane and Preston have never gotten along. They’ve always gone after each other on the ice. But never like this. So, you’re saying you had something to do with the fight.”

“Yes,” I whisper. “I wish I could take it all back.”

“Bex, spit it out. What’s going on? Preston won’t talk to me, and now you’re being all cryptic.”

“Sorry. I don’t mean to be.”

I can’t share my past with Jamie. It was hard enough to let Preston in. Even though he’s close to Preston, I’m not comfortable telling Jamie about what brought us to this point.

“Let Preston know I came by, would you? Ask him to call me. If he’s feeling up to it.”

“Sure.” He clutches the door, about to close it when he says, “Your dad probably told you already, but Preston is suspended for the rest of the season, which means his college career is over. He’s upset right now. I don’t know what I would do if it were me, but I do know he’s not taking it well. He worked his ass off his entire life to get here, and now it might have been for nothing.”

I wipe a fallen tear from my cheek. “I can’t even imagine what he’s going through.”

“He’s a hot head. He just needs time. Okay?”

“Thanks, Jamie.”

He flashes a closed-mouth smile and then shuts the door, leaving me on the porch in tears.

I run away from the house shielding my face with my arm. I don't want anyone to see me like this. I'm a mess.

When I finally stop on the next street over, I bend over to catch my breath. The tears keep coming, coating my face, refusing to stop. My heart aches for Preston. I wish I could take away his pain, transfer all of it to me.

Chapter Twenty-Five

PRESTON

My life is over. I've fucked up everything. All because I broke my own rules. I lived by the idea that hockey and women don't mix. My dad drilled it into my head from the time I hit puberty. The second I started looking at girls, he was all over me, up my ass to stay focused. Because he could see how easy it would be for me to go astray.

Jamie knocks on my bedroom door even though it's open. He strolls into my room like he owns the joint and plops down on the edge of my bed. The mattress dips beneath his weight.

"Bex was here. Again. When are you going to man up and talk to her?"

"I don't want to deal with anyone." I prop myself up on the stack of pillows behind me to get comfortable. "You're lucky I'm talking to you."

"Prez, I know this feels like the end of the world, but your hand will heal, and when it does, you can still play hockey."

"You don't know if that's true. The doctor said anything can happen. We won't know for sure until I heal if I'll have the same range of motion in my hand. And what pro team will want someone who was suspended by the NCAA for violently attacking another player? I have no fucking shot of ever making it pro now."

"With your dad's connections, I'm sure he can find you a team."

“I don’t want to play for some farm league or in fucking Russia. This was the dream. You, me, the guys, and the NHL.”

“You’re too good to get passed over. Something has to come from this.”

“You don’t know that,” I challenge, not meaning to be an asshole to Jamie. “Sorry. It’s not your fault. I’m so fucking mad I can’t even think straight. I keep replaying that night over and over in my head. I fucked up so bad that no number of apologies or money can fix what I did. I have to live with the decision I made for the rest of my life.”

“Bex said to tell you she’s sorry for getting you involved. What was she talking about?”

Pinching the bridge of my nose between my fingers, I sigh. “It’s not my story to tell. Sorry. I can’t go into it.”

“You fought Lehane because of Bex?”

I nod.

“You have to give me something, bro. C’mon.”

“I wish I could. Bex doesn’t want anyone to know.”

“Maybe I can help.”

“No one can. What Lehane did to deserve that beating won’t change my suspension.”

“Are you done with Bex?” He presses his palm to the mattress, shifting his weight. “She’s a good girl. You would be stupid to push her away.”

“Like you did with Shannon,” I retort.

He sighs. “Things with Shan are complicated.”

“So is my relationship with Bex. I need a break. From everything and everyone. I don’t want to talk about my suspension or my career. I just want to be left alone. She’s a reminder of what I lost. I don’t blame her, but I don’t want to see her right now. I need time to process.”

Jamie pushes himself up from the bed. “I’ll leave you to it, then.” He opens his mouth, hesitating with his next words.

“Don’t shut everyone out, Prez. We all want to help you. It doesn’t have to be like this.”

“There’s nothing anyone can do for me.”

He lets out a breath of air, irritated. “Okay. You know where to find me if you want to talk or play *Mage Wars*. I beat level fifty-five last night. You should have seen this wizard I had to face. I called my dad after I beat it to curse him out for making the game so fucking hard.”

I laugh for the first time in what feels like weeks. “Did you have to answer another riddle? I hate those fucking questions.”

“Nah, this time I had to save up enough magic dust to break through an enchanted fortress. I must’ve died at least a hundred times before I figured out how to defeat the mages in each room.”

“What rooms?”

He sits back down, his face glowing. Jamie’s happiest when we talk about video games or computers. And, of course, hockey too.

“After you defeat the giant that guards the enchanted fortress, you have to steal the magic from the mages in each room.”

He goes on and on about the game and elaborates in great detail about how he won each level.

I listen without interrupting him. Sitting here with Jamie, shooting the shit, I know I messed up with Bex. Like Jamie, she’s one of the good things in my life. But at this moment, all I can see is the bad.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Sitting on the floor of my bedroom, I flip open my textbook. Taylor slides along the area rug until she's next to me, book in hand.

"The assignment is on page two hundred and twelve," I tell her.

"You know you can talk to me, Bex." She pats my knee with her hand. "I know this is hard on you."

"Right now, all I want to do is get through this exam and hopefully pass the class with a B."

"You have an A."

"I don't know how long I'm going to keep it if I don't get my shit together. I haven't been focused over the last two weeks."

"I hate Preston for what he did to you. But I kind of love him for defending your honor."

"His intentions were sweet." I peek up from the book, a few tears falling from my bottom lids. "I was happy to see Kellan get his ass kicked by Preston. It's what happened afterward that's the problem. Preston may never get into the NHL because of the fight. And I will have to live with the fact that it was all because of me. Because I dated an asshole who did horrible things to me."

"This isn't your fault, Bex. Don't blame yourself. I've watched you do it for close to four years. You are the victim."

Kellan did those things to you and without your permission.”

“I feel responsible, you know. Like, if I never told Preston about Kellan, then everything would be perfect right now. I told him I loved him, and he rejected me. He asked me to leave the hospital. He hasn’t returned any of the calls or texts I’ve sent over the last two weeks. His friends won’t tell me anything. My dad is in mourning over this. Everyone is treating me differently.”

“I’m not.” She cups my shoulder and pulls me into a hug. “Whatever you need, I will be here.”

My cell phone chimes, and Taylor picks it up. She gasps. “Oh, my God. It’s Preston.”

I jump into action and rip the phone from her hand. Clutching it between my fingers, I hold onto it for dear life, devouring every word.

Preston: Can we talk?

“**T**hat’s it?” I look at Taylor, deflated. “No sorry for being a dick. Just... can we talk?”

She frowns. “Maybe he wants to tell you in person.”

“He could have called. Not texted. Two weeks of silence should be ended over the phone.”

Taylor shrugs. “You know how guys are.”

“Unfortunately, I do.”

“So, what are you gonna do?”

I stare at his message. Why am I so disappointed? Did I think he would say more? But I deserve more. After two weeks of ignoring me, he could have made a grand gesture, at least attempted to make things right.

“No.” I drop the phone to the floor and push it away from me. “He made me wait. Why should I run back to him with open arms? If he wants to talk, he knows where to find me.”

She laughs. “There’s the old Bex Bryant I know and love. You’ve gone soft since you got together with Preston. I’m happy to see you’ve returned.”

The library is so quiet I can hear myself breathe. Late at night, no one is ever around. I prefer it this way. Even the librarians seem to disappear into the dark recesses of the building.

It’s creepy silent, so I pull out my earbud headphones. Angry punk rock music fills my ears. With each second that passes, I become more relaxed, more focused. I lift my cell phone from the table to switch over to another playlist. And when I do, another text comes in from Preston.

I ignore it, same as I have done for the past three days. He hasn’t earned an immediate response. Not after he kept me waiting. I think of his hockey T-shirt, the one I stained with mascara from crying so much on it. I clung to his shirt all because it smelled like him. Because no matter what he said, or how he acted, I still love him.

I hate how pathetic I am because of Preston. By shedding tears for him, I allowed him to have power over me. Not anymore. I call the shots in my life. It will not be dictated by a man ever again.

Dismissing his message, I return back to my music library to choose a new playlist. This time, I go with something more upbeat, but still angry. Joan Jett’s voice penetrates my ears, the sound a welcome relief. I turn the page in my textbook, my eyes pointing down at it.

My thoughts drift to Preston for a second instead of my book, and I curse him for it. He was always a distraction. Even without him in my life, he still gets under my skin. Because he’s a part of me. He’s the love of my life.

I try to be strong—because that’s how I was raised. My father was never emotional and had no clue how to raise a girl after my mother left. His response to everything was to slap a

Band-Aid over it and get back on the court or the ice. But no number of bandages can close the wound left open by Preston.

Another text pops up on my phone. I stare at it and sigh, pushing the phone away with my fingers. *What's with all the text messages?* He could have called or showed up at my dorm room. I'm holding out until he decides to man up and apologize the right way.

By the time I finish my reading assignment, I receive another text. This time I read it.

Preston: I can see you ignoring my texts.

I roll my eyes at the phone and consider responding. *Nope, not gonna happen.*

Another text comes in.

Preston: I can literally see you rolling your eyes at me.

I huff, now glancing around the vacant loft that occupies the top floor of the library. No one is up here with me. He's just messing with me. Or so I think.

Preston steps out from the row to my left. He looks gorgeous in a pair of tight jeans and a fitted dark tee that stretches over his muscles framing his thick chest. He shoves his hand through his hair to push it off his forehead looking like a GQ model.

My stomach clenches, my nipples hardening from his simple gesture. No matter how much I want to hate him, I can't ignore the feeling I get when I'm around him. He's always had this effect on me.

Pretending as if I don't care, I lean back in my chair and cross my arms over my chest. "What do you want?"

“Don’t be like this, Bex.” He approaches the table and stands there, towering over me. “I’m sorry. You have no idea how sorry I am. I know there are no words that can make up for what I did to you, but I have never been sorrier in my life.” He drops to one knee next to my chair and tugs at my hand.

I allow him to take it, and he weaves his fingers between mine. Electricity pricks my skin. Tiny bumps travel up my arms. He glances down at my hand and then brings it to his mouth to plant a kiss on my skin. It’s soft and sensual, more delicate than he’s ever been.

“I love you, Bex. I’ve known that I love you for a while now. I should have said it back to you at the hospital. I never should have pushed you away. My biggest regret isn’t fighting Lebane or getting suspended by the NCAA. It’s losing you.”

Tears fall from my eyes, and he wipes them away. We stare at each other. Preston waits for me to respond, and I wonder what to say. But I have no idea what to do.

Because I love him.

I’ve missed him.

I want him.

I need him.

“Say something, Bex.” His voice is deep and modulated, so smooth it soothes me.

“I’m still mad at you. How do you expect me to trust you when you walked away as soon as times got tough? I’m afraid you’ll do it again.”

“I won’t.” He massages my hand with his long fingers, and it feels so damn good. “I promise to never shut you out again. I want you to be part of every aspect of my life. The good. The bad. The in-between. I want you to be there for all of it. And I want to be there for you. I really do love you, Bex. So fucking much it hurts. I feel like someone’s digging a knife into my chest when I’m not with you. I haven’t been able to sleep. I can’t eat. At first, I thought it was because of hockey, but I now know it’s because of you.”

“You’ve made the last few weeks of my life miserable, Preston.” I try to hold his gaze but have to look away. He blots more of my tears with his thumb, forcing me to look at him again. “I don’t know what to say or what to do. I’ve been through a lot over the years. I can’t take anymore.”

“I know, and I’m here for you.”

“I’ve lost my mother.” I continue, “Was humiliated my last year of high school and part of college. I still have to live in shame over those pictures on the Internet. I can’t even have a social media account because I’m so afraid someone will make the connection. It’s like I have to hide from everyone. I never had to that with you. But then you pushed me away. It was like you were ashamed of me. Like you couldn’t stand to look at me because of what Kellan said to you.”

“Never,” he whispers. “I could never be ashamed of you. I kept my distance because I’m an asshole. I needed time to grieve the loss of my career without realizing what I was doing to you in the process. I took you for granted thinking you would be there when I was ready. I’m sorry, Bex.”

I cup his cheek with my hand and sigh. He kisses my fingers first, covering each of them with his mouth. I suck in a deep breath hoping to find my willpower. Which seems to have disappeared on me. Because I can’t fight him. He’s too intoxicating, too hard to resist.

Preston must see the desire in my eyes because he lifts me up from the chair. His eyes burn through me, his fingers leaving a harsh burn in their wake. My entire body comes alive from his touch. He knows it. Preston was probably banking on my physical reaction to him.

“I love you, Bex,” he whispers against my mouth. “Please forgive me.”

“I love you, too,” I whisper, and then his lips are on mine, his tongue invading my mouth.

Without breaking the kiss, I sit back on the table, and he makes room for himself between my legs. He explores my thighs with his big hands and slowly makes his way to the hem

of my shirt. His hand dips beneath it, and I whimper when he cups my breast over my bra.

“I missed you so much, Bex.” He says the words softly, under his breath.

“I missed you, too.” I’m panting and flushed from our intense kiss. And I want more. “I want you inside me.” I tug at the bottom of his jeans, my eyes fixed on his. “Right here. In the library.”

“Aww, baby,” he growls. “This is like my dream come true.”

I laugh pulling down his pants enough to grab his thick cock through the slit in his boxers. “Sex in a library is your dream?”

“No, but watching you step out of your comfort zone is.” He strips away my shoes, followed by my leggings, and then he gives himself a few pumps before he inches into me.

Resting my head on his shoulder, I moan from the ripple of pleasure that rushes through me. “Preston,” I mutter.

He thrusts his hips. “I missed this, too.”

“Yes,” I moan, both agreeing with him and enjoying how good this feels.

My fingernails dig into his back as he fucks me hard and fast on a desk in the reference section of the library. This is so dirty. So damn hot. And so unlike me. I am way out of my comfort zone, but I don’t care. For once, it feels good to live in the moment.

When I moan again, he covers my mouth with his, smothering the sounds escaping my lips. He’s not going for distance this time—not when we’re in public. Preston reaches between us, his thumb rolling over my clit as he rocks into me. My muscles tighten around him, the sensation so intense waves of pleasure penetrate my entire body.

Preston finishes right after me, his performance record-timing for us. Still inside me, his mouth separates from mine.

He slides his hand to the back of my head, a smirk turning up the one side of his mouth.

“You’re it for me, Bex. No matter what happens, it’s you and me against the world.”

I believe him. The anger I had earlier is no longer there replaced by nothing but love for Preston.

I smile, my heart swelling with joy. “You and me,” I whisper, and then he kisses me.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

PRESTON

Bex curls up on the couch next to me sipping hot chocolate from her mug. We spend most nights this way now that my schedule has freed up. I flick through the movies on Netflix unable to decide. It's been so long since I didn't have a schedule to follow.

"Would you pick a movie already?" Bex nudges me in the side. "You're so indecisive."

I smirk. "Not when it comes to you."

She sets her mug on the table and then climbs into my lap with a sexy look on her beautiful face. "Pretty soon you'll have to make another decision."

Bex straddles my legs and throws her arms around my neck. I live for these moments. And not because I'm hard and can't stop thinking about sex.

"Oh, yeah?" I cup her ass in my hands and squeeze causing her to squeal. Her reaction makes me laugh. "What decision?"

"Which team do you want to play for next year?"

I stare at her, confused. "What are you talking about?"

"My dad got a phone call earlier. I begged him to let me tell you."

"Who did he talk to?"

She smiles so much her gums are showing. “An NHL scout.” She jumps, clapping her hands. “Can you believe it? They talked about the fight with Kellan. He was a little concerned about your anger issues.”

My dad assured me I still had a shot, but after getting suspended, I wasn’t so sure I would ever have another chance to play professional hockey. I’d assumed he was telling me what he thought I wanted to hear.

I’m still in shock.

“Pinch me,” I tell Bex.

She giggles and grips the skin on my forearm between her fingers. “This is real, Preston. The Penguins want you.”

My mouth drops. “Are you serious?”

“Why don’t you look excited anymore?”

“Because my dad is the head coach of the Flyers, and the Penguins are our rivals.”

She shrugs. “It will make for interesting dinner conversation.”

“Uncle Tyler won’t be happy either. He’s the Flyers’ GM.”

“Who cares? They’ll get over it.” She hugs me so hard I can’t breathe. “You earned this, Preston.”

Stroking the side of her face, I lean in to kiss her, our lips almost touching when my teammates barrel through the front door interrupting us.

“She’s full of shit,” Tucker shouts. “I didn’t get her pregnant.”

“Me either,” Trent says.

Bex’s curious look mirrors mine. I set Bex on the cushion next to me and look over my shoulder at Tucker, Trent, Drake, and Jamie. They drop their hockey bags on the floor by the door and stroll into the living room.

“You both fucked her.” Drake laughs. “How stupid can you two be?”

Jamie plops down on the couch across from Bex and me. “Get a paternity test.”

“But they’re identical twins,” Bex says. “They have the same DNA.”

I can’t stop laughing. “This is awesome. Best. Day. Ever.”

The rest of the guys fill up the couches in the living room.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“Some girl is claiming one of the twins got her pregnant,” Jamie says.

I shake my head. “Is this the one who found out you two were tag-teaming her?”

“We weren’t tag-teaming her,” Tucker shoots back.

“She had sex with both of you, right?”

They both say yes.

Jamie shoves a hand through his messy hair and sighs. “Which of you assholes are telling your dad?”

“Fuck that,” Trent says. “I didn’t knock her up. I used a condom.”

“Me, too,” says Tucker.

Bex leans forward with elbows on her knees, staring across the coffee table at the twins. “Okay, so why did both of you have sex with the same girl?”

“It was an accident,” Tucker explains. “Sort of. I didn’t know Trent was already hooked up with Jemma. She pulled me into a classroom a few months ago, and I just went with it. People mix up our names all the time, so I didn’t think anything of it.”

Bex fights a smile. “You had sex with some random girl who didn’t even know your name just because she wanted to?”

“There’s not much to understand,” Drake says. “That’s pretty much how it goes.”

“Right,” Bex mutters. “You guys are such whores. I forget Preston used to be like you.”

I laugh, pulling her back against my chest and kiss her forehead. "I still am, babe."

She sighs. "Yeah, but you're my whore."

The room erupts into laughter.

"I love you," I whisper so only she can hear.

Bex smiles and mouths, "I love you, too."

Epilogue

BEX: THREE MONTHS LATER

This moment is surreal. I sit across the conference table from Preston—right next to his mom, who is also my new boss. Coach offered me an internship at her firm, DMG, right after I graduated from Strickland University. I have six months of shadowing Preston’s mom before I can speak to clients alone. But at least it’s a start.

Preston clutches the pen in his hand peeking up from the contract his mom negotiated with the Penguins. He smiles at me, a smile so wide it reaches his eyes. We have an unspoken bond, one that doesn’t require us to exchange words. His eyes tell me he loves me. That he’s glad I’m here with him on the biggest day of his life.

I smile back motioning with my head for him to sign the damn contract. He’s been staring at it for so long as if he can’t believe it’s real.

As part of the deal, Preston has to be on his best behavior, obviously. After the fight with Kellan, the Penguins’ general manager was concerned he had behavioral issues, but the GM wasn’t going to allow one incident to get in the way. Like my dad, he knew a star when he saw one. Preston plays like his dad—maybe even better. They would have been fools not to want him.

Preston’s contract was my first foray into the sports world. And if all goes well, it won’t be my last.

“Go on, honey,” Coach says to Preston. “Sign it.”

His dad sits next to him, a ridiculous grin on his face. He's so proud of Preston, it oozes from him filling the air with his love.

"This is the first of many." His dad slaps him on the back. "Wait until the big money starts rolling in."

Preston has never cared about the money. It was always about the notoriety and living up to the Parker name. That's all he's ever wanted—to make his parents proud of him—and he has.

As Preston signs the contract, I can't stop smiling. Everything's worked out for him in the end. The guilt I felt for so long over his suspension gutted me. I hated seeing him in pain and unable to play with his team.

Preston drops the pen on the table and slides the papers in front of his mom. She glances at them making sure he didn't miss a spot.

JP walks into the room. He stands in the doorway looking like a million bucks in a three-thousand-dollar suit. The men in the Parker family are seriously hot as puck.

"Is it official?" JP asks Preston. "Is my little brother now sleeping with the enemy?"

Preston laughs. "Yeah. I signed my life away for less than a million bucks."

I laugh because Preston has a hell of a lot more money than that in his trust fund. Rookie contracts are small, nothing like what the more established players make.

"You'll get there," JP says. "It just takes time and numbers. Keep your nose clean and your head in the game, and you'll be pulling in seven figures in no time."

"You just want the commission," Preston jokes.

JP shrugs. "I'm a selfish bastard. What can I say?"

Preston smirks. "That you are, brother."

JP angles his body to stop a woman passing by in the hallway. She's a tall blonde with a toned, athletic body. Her

short skirt reveals her muscular legs.

“Hey, baby girl, think you can get me a coffee?” JP removes a hundred-dollar bill from his pocket. “Run down to Starbucks—”

“John Michael Parker,” Coach yells. “What do you think you’re doing?”

He gives his mom the cutest little boy smile that Preston has also perfected when he’s in trouble.

Coach points at the woman. “You don’t recognize her?”

JP studies the woman’s body, his eyes eventually landing on her face. He likes what he sees, that much is evident in the way he appraises her. “Did we, you know, have sex?”

I laugh so hard I snort. Because the more I look at her, I realize she’s not some woman from the secretarial pool, and her skirt is way too sporty for work. She’s Andrea Banks, one of the best tennis players in the world.

“She won the US Open, you idiot.” Coach shakes her head. “Andrea, I’ll be with you shortly. I’m so sorry about my son.”

“I’m fine,” Andrea says. “No worries.”

“John, take care of our newest client and please don’t hit on her.”

JP flashes a wicked grin at his mom and then looks at Andrea again, this time noting his major mistake. He holds out his hand to her. “I’m John Parker, but you can call me JP.”

She smiles as if he didn’t just treat her like a secretary and shakes his hand. “How about that coffee, JP?”

He wiggles his eyebrows, a simple gesture that reminds me of Preston when he gets his way, even though he shouldn’t. They disappear down the hallway together, and Coach sighs loudly.

“How did I end up with two boys who are exactly like their father?”

Alex leans his elbows on the table, holding her in his clutches. “Because they learned it from me, sweetheart.”

Even my skin tingles from the intensity between them. Like father, like son. This man still has it. That something. Even at his age.

She shakes her head at him, somewhat amused. “At least Preston turned out okay. He found himself a good girl. I can’t say the same about John. That boy is hopeless.”

“He needs a woman like Bex,” Preston says. “She changed my life.”

“Your mother changed mine,” Alex chimes.

I reach across the table to touch Preston’s hand, and he slips his fingers between mine. His heat warms my skin. “And you mine.”

Coach shuffles the papers in her hands, the sound of them tapping on the table drawing my attention to her. “Bex, I was thinking you could work remotely after your internship is over.”

I withdraw my hand from Preston’s to sit back in my chair. “You want me to work from home?”

I’m so confused. *Is this a nice way of firing me?* My stomach knots at the thought of leaving a place I love so much. When I’m at DMG, I feel at home. I was meant to become a sports agent.

“Yes.” Coach continues, “But I was thinking you could do it in Pittsburgh.”

My mouth falls open in shock. “Are you serious? But don’t I need to be here with you and JP?”

She shakes her head. “You’ll still have to travel to meet clients with either JP or me. I’ll also expect you to come into the office once a month, but you can live with Preston in his new apartment for the remainder of the time.”

“Thank you.” I practically jump out of my chair to hug her, and she laughs patting me on the back.

“You’re welcome.” I sit back in my chair, and she adds, “Exceptions can be made for family.”

My heart beats a little faster from her words. After idolizing this woman for most of my life, she's taken me into her home, into her office, and now calling me family.

"Family," I whisper.

Preston locks eyes with me and nods.

"Did you know about this?"

His cocky smirk is a dead giveaway. "I wanted it to be a surprise. Now we both get what we want."

"I already have what I want," I confess, feeling like a total sap even though it's true. "I have you."

Love you, baby, he mouths, and I say it back.

Our love was never perfect, but it's ours, something no one will ever understand but us. And I wouldn't have it any other way.



Have you met all the players?

Drake and Taylor's book

[Players Keep Score](#)

Trent and Jemma's book

[Players Always Win](#)

Tucker and Samantha's book

[Players Break Hearts](#)

Jamie and Shannon's book

[Players Love Hard](#)

Also by Jillian Quinn

Campus Players Series

Players Break Rules

Players Keep Score

Players Always Win

Players Break Hearts

Players Love Hard

Face-Off Series

Parker

Kane

Donovan

Jameson

Face-Off Elite Series

[The Player I Love to Hate](#)

[The Player I Want to Keep](#)

[The Player I Want to Date](#)

[The Player I Hate to Love](#)

For a complete list of books, updates, and new releases, visit

JillianQuinnBooks.com

About the Author

Jillian Quinn is the international bestselling author of sexy, sporty romances. Born and raised in Philly, Jillian currently lives in sunny Florida, where she's penned all of her romance novels while hiding indoors from the sweltering Southern heat.

For more information about her books, visit her website at JillianQuinnBooks.com.