

RAVENWOOD UNIVERSITY

About
Us

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Emily Rayard

About Us

*College Hockey Romance (Ravenwood
University)*

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Sometimes, we need more than one bedtime story.

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Chapter 1

“Zoey?”

My eyes blink, glancing at the freshman with a pinched frown. My face flushes as I refocus on the task at hand. It’s been nearly a week since I blew up my life. I couldn’t think straight. My life used to be simple: graduate top of my class in high school, get into a reputable engineering undergrad all paid for by scholarships, get into grad school, and land a badass aerospace job. All the while having fun and finding the love of my life. Currently, I’ve accomplished most of my academic goals, but my love life just had to implode like a dying star. Now I wasn’t having fun. The love of my life is actually an asshole, and I don’t even know who I am anymore.

My eyes move toward the three-by-three matrix on my student’s worksheet, my mind automatically moving in a familiar pattern as I assess her work. Why can’t my life be like linear algebra, predictable when you follow a set of rules?

“We will use the induction hypothesis here for this, but first we need to compute several powers of A .”

The Frowny Freshman sighs miserably, her hands running through her hair.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself.” I plaster on a cheery grin. “You are so much better now than when you first started.”

“You think so?” she asks.

Nodding, I flip to the beginning of the workbook. “Look, the beginning was a mess. See all these mark ups?” Then I proceed

toward the middle and end of the book. “Now here is where I felt you really took off. Now I barely have to mark anything up.”

She nods, the lines on her face relax.

“That’s progress, my friend.” I smile at her. “Now, let’s move on to the next.”

As the freshman continues to work on the next problem, I take a sip of my coffee from my mug. I grimace when my lips find coffee grounds. The coffee pot is empty, and it made little sense to make any more. Break is starting, the Ravenwood Tutor Center is empty, cold. The room’s dull lighting and decade-old carpets are in need of replacement.

When I look back at my mug, I realize it’s the same mug that Eddie had given me on my birthday.

Fucking Eddie.

How did I let myself get into this state? Zoey in high school would be so disappointed. I set down the gray mug and stare at it, remembering the moment I got it.

“You have so many weird mugs. I thought you’d like a normal one for professional places,” Eddie had said when I opened the gift. The mugs came in a set of four, like the kind you would find in a chain store. I thought little of it and now the reminder holds coffee grounds and a foul taste.

My freshman is vigorously erasing her solution, starting over again. We are the only two people in the center today. I was one of the last upperclassmen willing to do last-minute sessions. This particular freshman was willing to pay me extra to help get ahead of next semester. Many of the students at Ravenwood already left, save a few stragglers like us. Summer left this morning and my flight was a red-eye.

Despite the emptiness of the university, I can’t help but glance at the door. Waiting for my heart to pound and my stomach to drop when Tripp Montgomery makes an appearance. He is supposed to be here to do a session with his student.

“Okay, I’ve finished,” my Frowny Freshman announces with hope in her eyes. Holding my breath, I pray I don’t crush it. My hands take over her workbook, glancing over and following her solution. The student is silent, likely praying that she got it right. Relief washes through me. I reward her with a bright grin.

“Soon, you’ll be teaching me!” I high-five her, warmth filling me as the Frowny Freshman becomes the Smiley Freshman.

“Thanks, Z,” she says, relief in her voice. “I think I’m getting it, at least I’ll be ahead this time next semester.”

The clock is digital and red, the only colorful thing in the room. It changes to three in the afternoon and my student scrambles to pack her things and leave.

Glancing at the door, I try to listen for telltale signs of other students. Of Tripp. It’s dead silent.. Maybe it’s a good thing I don’t see him right now. He had scheduled a reservation in one room for his tutor’s session today. It is already thirty minutes past the time. It wasn’t out of the realm of possibility he or his student canceled.

My anxiety gnaws at me as I reset the private study room. I receive a buzz on the phone and it’s a payment from the freshman. A nice little Christmas bonus for the last-minute session.

Shutting off all the lights and locking the door, I take one last glance before walking down the hall and into the cold air. It’s not logical to linger. He or his student would have been here by now. Tripp was lucky that cancellation didn’t matter to him. It’s not like he is hurting for cash. He once told me he occasionally gets paid in pastries. As a legacy and beloved center of the Ravenwood Ravens hockey team, he’s likely either flying home first class to his family or at one of the winter break parties in the mountains.

“Hey Zoey.” My heart nearly stops as I find George Hopkins jogging to catch up to me. He’s tall, with a boyish grin that is more endearing than classically handsome. His hair is coffee-

colored, just like his eyes. He falls into step with me. Looks like we were both heading to our cars.

“Hey, George.” I’m plastering on another smile, trying to pretend that all is right in my world. Snow dusts the grounds of Ravenwood campus as the tall oak trees, bare for the winter, create a deserted atmosphere. My breath puffs out in front of me and I am briefly excited to get to warmer weather in Arizona with my family.

“How is your secret project?” I ask, looking ahead.

George beams at my question. “In progress.”

“No hints, huh?” My eyes steal a glance as George shakes his head.

“What are you up to right now?” he asks suddenly. Ever since Eddie had dumped me nearly a month ago, George was becoming more chatty with me ever since. He is a fellow tutor monkey like I am. George is a brilliant engineering student and we share nearly the same science and math classes.

“Have to head home to pack. I got a red-eye tonight,” I say, pulling my puffy coat closer around me. The wind was picking up and I notice the tips of his ears and cheeks getting red from the cold.

“Wanna go swing by a party before you take off?” George grins. “It’s at the hockey house; Tripp told me about it.”

“Oh.” I shrug. “Is that where he is? I saw he booked a room.”

“Yeah, he told me he canceled.”

My throat dries and my thoughts latch on to the revelation. Did he cancel because of me? Did that mean he definitely regretted what we did?

“He said you’re invited,” George adds. “And it’s a small party.”

I bite down on my lip, anchoring myself from the confusing feelings wreaking havoc in my chest. If he invited me, he would have told me.

“I’ll pass, honestly kind of pooped,” I say.

“You sure?” George’s demeanor dims. He shoves his hands in his pockets in disappointment.

“Yeah.” My smile is weak. I’m finally in my car and all I want to do now is bury myself under my blanket.

“Okay, well, have a good one, okay?” George says, moving toward me. I realize he wants to hug. Instead, I gave him a light pat and an awkward wave as I scramble to get in my car.

My phone connects to the Bluetooth and I play my eighties playlist. It’s overused, but I’m focusing on Whitney Houston instead of the humiliation invading my body.

The music and singing continue when I pull into the apartment I share with Summer. I wash my gray mug and place it among my collection of mugs. It was a stark contrast to the lewd designs or pop culture memes all over my other mugs. Thanks to Summer, the place is clean. All I have to do is drag my clothes out of my closet and dump them in my suitcase. There was no reason to hang out in the apartment and before I’m tempted to confront Tripp myself, I book my ride to the airport.

Relief washes over me when I finally get in the ride share taking me out of town. Worry tries to invade, but I push it away and focus on the excitement of seeing my family. I don’t care that I’m hanging out at the airport for nearly three hours before my flight. Getting out of Ravenwood is for the best. It’s time to clear my head, to get myself together and reset.

The airport restaurant is swamped, people chatting excitedly about the holiday. It’s a miracle I snag a spot and pluck the drink menu. My eyes skim over the options and I grimace at the intruding thoughts of prior events. Regret feels like a lead weight in my chest, and I swallow the despair I created by a moment of self-destruction.

Self-destruction was a bad day, and a broken heart. Self-destruction has jade green eyes, sandy blonde hair and one

dimple that only appears when he smiles. If only I had known better.

What have I done? Why did I fuck Tripp Montgomery?

Chapter 2

Family time is just what I needed. A happy distraction, I even get a new tattoo from my brother's shop. The dreary east coast sky was in the background of my mind as I spent Christmas in the Arizona desert. Of course, reality was waiting for me at Ravenwood.

When I stroll out of the yoga studio on campus, I didn't expect to run into Eddie. Of course, it would happen. It's a small school and a small town. Eddie, my ex, has his arm around a girl that I recognize from his accounting class. It has been nearly two months since we ended things for good.

Of course, she is beautiful, with a sweet smile and eyes that seem all too ready to worship him. She is the type of girl who he wants to be with. I feel a sharp pang in my chest and hurry to the other side of the street before they spot me.

Tears blur my vision and I hate that I still have shaken feelings inside. Following a familiar route, my feet move toward the local coffee shop, Black Feather. My hands scramble to put on my headphones, listening to a remix of *Prince*, letting the beats pound into my ears as I try not to think about the break-up conversation I had with Eddie. The one where he essentially wanted to change everything about me. That I am a flawed thing and couldn't possibly fit in his version of me, his version of our future.

It's the smell of the Black Feather cafe that pulls me out of the memory. Tanya, the owner, is an older lady with purple hair and concern written all over her face.

“Z?” She waves her hand in front of my face. “Are you okay?”

Like a doll, I plaster my best smile. “Yeah, sorry. I spaced out there.”

Tanya frowns. “You’re not thinking of your turd of an ex?”

Laughing, I nod my head. “Unfortunately.”

“Oh, sweetie.” Tanya moves around the counter, giving me a hug. “Fuck that guy.”

“Thanks.” I sigh. “I was doing well until I just saw him with his new girl.”

Tanya already knows my coffee order, already putting it together.

“Just give it time.”

My brain knows she’s right. I settle in the seat that lines the windows, watching as people walk up and down the street. Even though the cafe music is upbeat and my body is tired from yoga, I still have the energy to be in a bad mood.

The sad thoughts drift to Tripp, the other thing. Sleeping with him happened and I have yet to talk to him. Even though we could have called or texted, I could not bring myself to do it. Shame creeps up into my cheeks every time I look at his contact. My cowardice does the rest, and I deleted his contact because it felt better to banish him that way.

It’s not like Tripp was hankering to text me either. He had been just as silent, just as MIA. However, we were coworkers at the Tutor Center and eventually we will have to answer for what we did.

My mind thinks about that night. The traitorous part of me craves him. The sex was incredible, perversely enjoyable. My heartbreak, our truce and our tension from arguing for the last two years brought out something inside me. That night, I wanted to feel anything else but misery, to let me do what I wanted, and he let me.

Now, Tripp is likely celebrating for finally conquering me. Likely never wants to see me again. I hate that idea. Despite our petty arguments, he is a constant in my life, just like Summer. The days leading up to that moment, I saw us finally becoming friends.

“Z.” My spine stiffens and I turn slowly.

Speak of the devil. I recognize the deep timber of his voice. My eyes turn to find Tripp’s pale green eyes and for once, I can’t read him.

“We need to talk,” Tripp says, his tone serious. My body immediately reacts. Of course, my hind brain notices how gorgeous he is. Light stubble has appeared on his firm chin since I last saw him.

My body wants to run, to shrink into dust and disappear forever. I can feel my face heat as he continues to stare at me, his jaw and shoulders tense like he is about to deliver bad news.

“Let’s walk,” I suggest. Gathering my things and courage, Tanya shoots me a look as we walk outside into the bitter cold.

We are silent. A first for us. When we first met, he tried to seduce me, to manipulate me into taking his student in the evenings so he could go on a date. A date that was important to him. Of course, I knew better based on all the rumors about him. The moment he slept with her, I never heard of her again. After I spectacularly gave him my mind, we’ve clashed since. We bickered constantly in our shared classes, our teachers made sure to never assign us together.

Tripp matches my pace, hands in his jacket. Still tense and staring hard ahead. The grim look is something I’ve never seen in his usual shit-eating smiles.

My anxiety bubbles up and I can’t take it anymore.

“Look. We are two grown adults. Do we need to talk about what happened?” I blurt out.

Tripp stops and turns to me, eyes wide as I continue.

“I know you probably regret what happened, but I’m perfectly happy forgetting about it.” My hands stuff themselves into my jacket pockets, clutching the fabric inside.

Tripp remains silent, watching me.

“Can we just go back to what we did before?” I ask softly, filling the silence. “Pretend you hate me again?”

Tripp is frowning. His eyes are hard and angry.

“You want to pretend what we did didn’t happen?” He scoffs.

“Well, I mean, do you regret it?” I blink, and for once in my life, I can’t predict where this will go.

“Do you regret it?” he counters, scanning my face.

His question hangs in the air. The crazy thing is, I don’t regret it. Not one bit. Because that night, I felt so much like my old self. Felt like a goddess and I really enjoyed fucking his brains out, being in control. That night, he looked at me in a way Eddie never did. Like I was his past, present, and future. He made sure I knew I was the one causing his blissed out face he made when he came.

“I don’t.” My voice is small and I fill with dread, my brow sweats despite the cold. The admission speaks volumes, and I hate that.

Tripp suddenly moves in front of me and leans in, his voice just as soft. “I don’t either.”

My feet freeze in place on the sidewalk and I stare at him like I’m in the presence of a magical creature. If I move just a little closer, our lips would touch. I can feel his breath fan my face. The tension between us changed in an instant. It’s hot, electric, and if I don’t look away, I am going to fall into madness.

“Zoey,” he starts, his eyes falling on my lips. He never uses my name like that. In that way, like he’s trying to pray to me. “Zoey. Zoey.” A smirk appears, dimpling his cheek, the same one that drives me crazy.

Shuffling back, I try to gather all rational thoughts. Too bad they're already out the window and miles away.

"Tripp. I need to understand. You don't regret what we did?" I marvel at how steady my voice is.

Tripp shakes his head, and his grin continues to grow.

"Okay," I squeak and start walking down the sidewalk, leaving him behind.

"Wait. Where are you going?" He moves in front of me.

"Home," I reply. My mind needs a minute. Too much happening all at once in one afternoon.

"Let's talk about this." He continues to follow me.

"Listen, I'm glad you don't regret it, but it can't happen again."

Tripp nearly stumbles to his feet and his mouth drops.

"Why not?" His hands find my shoulders. "Talk to me, Z."

I try to strangle the frustrated sigh as I meet his gaze. "Look, I'm in no position or shape to be doing that with you."

"Quite the contrary, little demon. I say you are in excellent shape and have quite excellent positions." He winks. Old flirty Tripp is back and I roll my eyes.

"Seriously?" I rub my face.

"Look, I'm just checking to make sure you're okay. I'm not looking for a girlfriend, I just want to make sure that you didn't ..." He starts slowly.

Ah, he was worried. Worried I was reading too much into something. Worried that I didn't understand what was going on. I knew him, his lack of commitment. I knew this the day I met him. He has a revolving door of dates and a reputation with the ladies. He was the guy that was going to be the forever bachelor, the guy who would likely get bored in a relationship.

“God, you make yourself sound like your god’s gift to women.” My eyes roll hard, wondering if it ever occurred to him I was using him just as much as he was using me at that moment. “I know it was just a one-off thing that just happened and I’m not expecting flowers and chocolate.”

Pausing, I level my gaze at him. “I’ve just gotten through a breakup. I have no intention of dating.”

Tripp visibly relaxes. For a moment, I realize he was just as anxious about that night as I was.

“So we are back to being friends?” I want to get home as soon as possible. To be alone and to turn this strange day around.

“Yeah,” he says, grinning. “But if you ever need ... a late night friend ...”

My pulse spikes, and my pussy is enthusiastically consenting to this. My brain is wracking at the thought of doing it again.

“Are you serious?” My brows shoot to my hairline. “Why? I thought you were worried about me falling for you.”

“Because, darling, I have a reputation to uphold and needs.” He says it like it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

“I’m not following and I’m getting concerned that you’re suffering from all those hits to the head on the ice.”

“Z—sweetheart—you rocked my world that night. Like I didn’t expect it at all and I can’t have a reputation where I got bested in bed,” Tripp says, his voice serious again.

“What do you mean?”

“I let you have your way with me and frankly, I was unprepared that I was dealing with someone who can give it as much as she got.”

“So?” I say, my brow furrowing. I truly believe he’s gotten hit in the head too many times. “I got off, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, but only once. You did not get the Tripp you deserve,” he says. His glass-green eyes are honest. My god, the ego of this

insane, beautiful man.

“Wait, you would have sex with me again because you didn’t have time to best me?” My head spins, my brain is telling me this is a stupid idea. My body craves him again. Craves that feeling he gave me.

“Yes.” Tripp nods enthusiastically. “I can’t stop thinking about it. I think you were disappointed that night.”

“Oh, my god, Tripp. You’re out of your mind.” I pull up my phone.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“Pulling up the best neurologist in the country. You’re so fucked in the head.”

“I can get you easily as fucked in the head if you’ll let me,” he grins.

Rolling my eyes again, I continue down the path. Almost wishing Tripp never wanted to see me again, now he had me. “I know I made you my little bitch that night, but I didn’t expect you to get all bothered about it.”

Tripp moves in front of me, that fucking dimple deepening, taking the bait. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. I made you my bitch that night.” I meet his gaze. Delight fills when I find the same smoldering look from that night. The one holding promises of a good time.

“Sweet Z. I know I was surprised by discovering a sex goddess, but I was also trying to be a dignified gentleman,” he says, taking a step toward me. “You know, helping you through that broken heart of yours.”

“Oh?” I hold his gaze, meeting his intensity. “Was it when you were on your knees begging for me to let you eat me out, promising me many things? Is that your definition of being a dignified gentleman?”

“I said pretty please didn’t I?” Tripp licks his lips, his attention toward mine. The outside world didn’t feel cold anymore as his eyes transform from pale green to jet black.

Shaking my head, I tear my gaze away from him, glad to spot my car as I stroll across the parking lot. “Well, it was fun while it lasted.”

“Just think about it,” Tripp says quickly.

“Excuse me?”

“We are friends, we know each other’s lines, we’ve indulged in some benefits. Let’s be friends with benefits.”

“Tripp, that seems like more of a commitment than you would usually be into.”

“But it’s one I’m willing to try out.” He shows no signs of relenting. My brain weighs the pros and cons.

“I’ll think about it,” I say finally.

“Okay.” Tripp nods. “No pressure. If it happens, it happens.”

Chapter 3

I'm staring at the ice, munching on popcorn, mulling over Tripp. The crowd around us is excited, the energy electric and ready to watch their team play. Summer got up to the concession stand again to get another beer when hers spilled from trashed fans. It's been a couple of days since I last spoke with Tripp. I had hoped that I would have figured it out by now. All the options lead down a path of unpredictability, misery, and potential once in a lifetime pleasure. Summer scores me a last-minute ticket from Duke, seating us in the front row. I've been to a handful of Ravenwood hockey games and I never had seats like this. There is chaos around me and somehow I can tune it out as I continue my internal debate.

Summer returns with her drink and another person behind her, a girl. She is beaming at me as she plots herself next to me. Summer is happy, glowing, madly in love, and I can't help but feel a little jealous. Here I am thinking of entering a friend with benefits situation with the campus golden boy that had unspoken terms and conditions. Reflecting on his dating history, which is pretty well known, I haven't heard of Tripp in a relationship or even a situation-ship. This was some unknown territory, likely a rare opportunity before he ended up becoming a famous hockey player.

Summer appears in front of me, her eyes glowing with excitement. "Z. I want you to meet our new photographer for the paper!" The girl she dragged over is beautiful, with olive skin and thick, wavy brown hair. She looked more like she belongs in front of the camera than behind it.

“Elena Vidal.” She sticks her hand out with a bright smile.

“Zoey Elliot, but you can call me Z.” She has a firm handshake, and she acts like she was raised to not half ass anything.

“So, Summer tells me you are the go-to girl for math tutoring,” Elena says.

“Yup. I can tutor for all math.”

“Good, because I’m ready to dump money. I already can see my math grades tanking this semester,” she says. We continue to chat and I find her hilarious. Elena just transferred at the beginning of the semester from L.A. Her personality and confidence remind me of myself before Eddie.

“We should go to a show sometime. I can score us some tickets at Jade’s Oasis when I’m shooting promos for them.” Elena nods happily.

“Hell yes. I’m always down for shows.”

“Well, I gotta go back,” Elena says as announcements roll in. “Nice to finally meet you, Z!”

Elena bounces off happily as we wave goodbye.

“Have you chatted with Tripp?” Summer asks as she pilfers a handful of my popcorn.

“No.” I move the popcorn out of reach of her greed.

“Didn’t you tell me a few months ago to get dicked down or something to that effect?” Summer laughs.

“So?” My fingers flick popcorn at her.

“Take your own advice,” she says. “Tripp isn’t at all that bad. What I gather from Duke is that he is more than he lets on and a great friend.”

“I don’t think that matters. I think it’s a get-it-out-of-your-system kind of thing.”

“Is he in your system?”

My lack of reply is the answer she needs.

“You’re not ready for a relationship and have no interest in dating. Neither is Tripp, so why not?” she asks.

The crowd suddenly roars around us as the Ravenwood Ravens hockey team gets on the ice. It’s not hard to spot Tripp immediately. His smile is wide and he waves at the fans. Summer quiets as she spots Duke. Ever since they got together, it’s like they have been connected telepathically. His eyes seem to find her among the thousands of people around us.

Summer smiles, peace settling on her features, softening her as a million little things exchange between them despite the distance and silence. Here I am, a little voyeur, wondering if it will ever be me.

“Tripp is eating this up,” Summer says suddenly, turning to me.

“Of course he is.” It sounds mocking, but I’m grinning at the energy that he has on the ice. Excitement fills his face, like he was born for this. It was like the look he had that night.

It was a mystery why Tripp thought he didn’t live up to his reputation that night. My brain tries to understand his perspective, but it only shows how oblivious he was to how amazing I felt that night. He didn’t know it was what I needed to realize I’ll be okay.

The game starts with an explosion of ice and quick movements. It’s intense and fascinating. There’s no doubt how well they work together. Tripp wasn’t wrong about how amazing he is on the ice. He earned his bragging rights in that respect. I had always thought Tripp was an ego, making it all about him. Surprisingly, he’s an excellent team player. He passes to his teammates even though he could have made the shot, sharing the goals. Duke is brutal on the ice, his take downs hard, and I flinch with each contact.

The goalie is Adam, my mind realizes. He seems to struggle the most, his timing costing points. Adam Florence is usually a

quiet guy outside of the ice. It's strange to see the notoriously quiet, awkward man come alive and get pissed on the ice. Tonight, he is the one starting most of the fights. Here he is a different person, almost asking for a beat down.

"He's not doing so well." Summer leans in. People boo as a player from the opposing team gets another goal. One of the Ravenwood defense men got a good punch in on the opposing team, earning time in the penalty box.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Apparently, something happened between him and his girlfriend." Summer says.

"The high-school sweetheart?" If memory serves correctly, I remember he had a girlfriend he had been with forever. Through bits and pieces of conversation, we know she is a beauty pageant winner in North Carolina. Adam is always seen glued to the phone, chatting with her because they both attend different colleges. Many of the girls here admired his commitment but hate he wasn't available.

The game continues, and we are ahead. The puck flies toward Adam from a coordinated attack. My fingers dig into the seat, wondering if it's going to make it in. His reflexes have to be the stuff of mutants. He blocks it with a leg, but it goes flying and the trajectory is toward Elena. Her camera is through the small hole in the Plexiglas.

The puck hits the lens with a sickening crack and I see Elena go down.

"Oh shit!" My body tenses and I flinch.

Summer looks over at her, and Elena is on the ground. People are quietly trying to spot her.

The camera on the screen turns to her spot from my angle. I can see she is picking up the pieces of her lens. When she realizes the video is on her, she pops up, smiles awkwardly as she stands,

giving a thumbs up to the camera, showing proof of life. The crowd roars. Relief is shown on the player's faces.

Then it's intermission. Duke skates past Summer, sending her a wink before heading down to the locker room. At the moment, the Ravens are behind by three points. This doesn't outright discourage the crowd, but tension vibrates through the stands.

I glance down at my phone, debating if I should get another snack. The line looks long already.

"Z?!" Tripp is knocking on the glass. His green eyes are wide, almost electrified. His hair is a mess when he takes off his helmet. He is sweaty and still unfairly handsome.

Waving awkwardly, he continues to grin widely like a lunatic. The girls around us turn to me, their eyes flicker a bit of hostility and envy.

"Oh hey, fancy seeing you here," I say.

"If I'd know you'd come to the game, I would have decked you out." Tripp eyes me up and down at my lack of Ravenwood sports gear, then replies with a sly smile, "You still look good."

I ignore his comment. "I didn't know I was coming to the game. Summer got me a last-minute ticket."

"Tripp," the coach calls from behind. Tripp moves down. Summer has disappeared and I decide to snag more snacks as the line finds a lull.

"Z," Tripp calls again as he continues to delay his journey back toward the locker rooms. "You should go to the Hockey House on Saturday for the post game party."

"Celebrate? Or is this going to be a pity party?" I can't help but to tease him. My heart leaps at the way his eyes glint with challenge and amusement.

"Will you go if we win?" he asks.

"There will be a higher probability if that is the case."

“Then it’s done. I’ll catch us up and when we win, you go. No take backsies.” He is grinning even as his coach is shouting at him again.

“Deal, Montgomery.”

Chapter 4

Elena Vidal looks at me like I grew two heads. “Your ex did what now?”

Summer, Elena, and I drown on Saturday morning on cheap mimosas. It’s a rare moment. However, today I can’t help but feel breathless and distracted as I have to attend a celebration party at the Hockey House tonight. The Ravens pulled through at the last minute, Tripp working his ass off to catch up and ultimately putting them in overtime and winning the game in the first minute. The moment he scored the goal, his gaze found mine as the team surrounded him and shot a wink and smirk that sent sparks straight to my core.

“We are just so badly incompatible. I can’t believe I was with him for so long. Part of it is my fault.” My hands rub my eyes. Clarity in a relationship has never hit so hard after a period of time and girl brunches.

“He is a tool. Like, to his core.” Elena peers at me. “How did you tolerate his bullshit for so long?”

“How does any girl tolerate any sort of guy bullshit?” Summer quips.

“Fuck, we are all just idiots, aren’t we?” Elena says.

I nod in agreement as we simultaneously groan in chorus.

“So I guess you guys are going to the Hockey House tonight?” Elena polishes off her quiche as she glances between us.

Summer nods. “I think I’ll be there a little on the later side. I want to finish my article.”

“I have to cover some sort of faculty dinner thing,” Elena says. “Then I have a hot date.”

“The TA?” Summer winks, and Elena nods with an excited wiggle. “You know it, but have fun for me, will ya?”

Fun is an understatement. The moment Summer and I arrive at the Hockey House, it’s already in full swing with music blasting and the student body practically overflowing the house. Despite the game being only a few days ago, the energy of the win hasn’t dimmed, and it’s rather infectious. Summer immediately spots Duke, and like magnets, they collide.

“Hey Z.” Duke beams with a smile. It’s disconcerting to see the formerly unsmiling enforcer showing off a brilliant, relaxed smile. Leaving them absorbed with each other, I wander around, stopping to say hi to a couple of acquaintances and even chatting with George for a while. I’m in the mood to flirt with him a little, trying to suss out his secret project. However, his friends show up, distracting him, and I wander some more.

Spotting Tripp isn’t hard. He’s settled himself in the kitchen, regaling a gaggle of ladies with the story of the winning shot.

“And then I saw my opening, and I took it,” he says. Leaning against the frame, I study him. He has everyone wrapped around his finger. It is the Tripp way, easy to get caught in his gravitational pull. Perhaps that was why, deep down, I resented him at first. The guy who can get anything and everything his way with a charming compliment or a look. Perhaps it’s also why I keep inching closer and closer to him, too tired to resist.

Tripp’s green eyes find mine, and his smile grows as the gaggle of ladies are disappointed with his attention being zeroed in on me. “You made it.”

“A promise is a promise.” I can’t help it, smiling back at him. This new level of our friendship is rather pleasant, though I’ll never pass up the opportunity to antagonize him.

“However, I thought this was a party. I can’t find the drinks anywhere.”

“Well, then let me fix that, little viper.” Tripp grins wider as he breaks free from his shield of admirers and escorts me somewhere in the bowels of the maze that is Hockey House. It’s a room dedicated to any sort of drink one wants, manned by a freshman who barely looks like he graduated high school.

With drinks procured, I thought Tripp would let me roam free.

“You know, I think the team has found their lucky charm,” Tripp says, watching as I take a drink of my canned seltzer.

Scoffing, I roll my eyes, “I don’t believe in luck.”

“Don’t need you to, rain cloud.” Tripp and I find a quieter place in the house where the student body is watching a poker game unfold.

“You can pretend it’s all probability and test that theory by coming to the games more often,” he says.

“You can’t always expect me to come to your games.” My fingers fiddle with the can tab to deflate the bit of restlessness inside. “Besides, it might give people the idea that I’m dating someone.”

“Or that you’re just a big hockey convert.” Tripp’s eyes roam my face. He seems surprisingly sober at this time of night at a party that’s been going on for a while.

“I’m not quite convinced about this hockey business, Montgomery.” I reply airily. “It’s a lot of fun, but I’m not about that violence.”

“It’s all showmanship, doll,” he says. “It’s practically expected.”

“Fine, then the next time I go, you can’t get into a fight the whole game. If you do that, then I’ll consider getting a jersey and coming to the home games.”

“Done,” Tripp adds with a smirk and leans in. “And if you’re a good girl with perfect attendance, maybe I’ll hook you up with one of my own jerseys.”

My throat swallows a large amount of seltzer, trying to strangle the involuntary breath of air he caused by calling me a good girl. The heat lights every part of me and my baser side wants to see what he'll do if I encourage him a little more.

"You okay, sweet cheeks?" He cocks his head. "You seem a little flushed."

"I'm fine," I say, determined.

Tripp studies me, like really studies me, in a way that makes me squirm, but wants to let every part of him open me up like a present.

"You wanna get out of here?" he whispers. My heart is hammering in my chest and my mind is screaming, *fuck yes*.

With the willpower of a saint, I hold his gaze. "Are we tapping into the benefits part, Tripp?"

Tripp nods. "Only if you want to, gorgeous."

A beat and we are still staring at each other, the world fading into the color of strobe and the heat of the party. My thoughts drift to the first time and how much I adored the way he made me feel powerful after a shitty day. This time would be different, almost unknown, but it was more intoxicating.

"I thought about it." My teeth graze my lips. I can't believe I'm doing this. "And I think, yeah."

Tripp looks at me in wonder. His face lights up. "If I had known hockey talk was going to get you all riled up, I would have given you a ticket ages ago."

"Don't make me regret it, Montgomery." It's hard but I'm trying to look bored. To hide the maddening excitement that takes up residence in the pit of my stomach.

"Don't worry, darlin, this time I'm ready for you," he says.

"Tonight?" I cock my head, trying to tame the wildfire exploding through my body. "Here? Closet? Bathroom?"

“For what I have planned, it’s going to require more time than a quickie.”

“You talk a lot of game, Montgomery.” I shake my head, moving away from him. Tripp doesn’t let me go easily. He pulls me toward him and leans in. My nose takes in a mix of man and an undertone of spice and I want to wrap myself in it.

Tripp’s hand is warm on my skin and we are so close that our noses nearly touch. His green eyes darken, pinning mine as he breathes the sweetest threat. The kind that destroys your resolve and shoots heat in every part of you.

“No game darling, I fully intend to ruin you, like you ruined me,” he speaks like it’s an absolute truth.

“You don’t owe me anything.” My voice is barely a whisper as my head feels light.

“I owe you three orgasms, minimum. So get ready. You’re mine tonight, Elliot.”

He lets me go in a daze. I can’t focus on anything else tonight, instead just watching Tripp. With a smile, I know he’s going to make good on his promise.

Somehow, we make it back to my place without touching each other. Tripp is unusually silent and for a moment, as we’re walking up to my apartment, I have creeping doubts. That he realizes this was a bad idea.

Before I can open the door, I turn to face him. His face is unreadable, his jaw hard.

“Last chance to back out.” I laugh, but it comes out breathless, and I feel rather exposed under his gaze.

“Open the door, Zoey,” he growls and I comply quickly.

It feels like stepping into a new reality. His large hand urges me inside, and the moment the door closes behind him, I’m pinned against it with a thud. His lips crash onto mine and the insolent side of me kisses back just as hard and ravenously.

It isn't romantic.

It isn't gentle.

It's all brutality and hunger.

With my last bit of coherence, I have no problem letting my feelings take control. Tripp nips on my bottom lip briefly before moving down across my jaw, his hands gripping my hips against him. My underwear is already obscenely wet, my core throbbing.

"You really thought I was going to back out?" His lips are over the sensitive spot on my neck, his voice rumbling against my overheated skin.

"Just had to double check. I know I intimidate you." He nips at the soft spot on my neck.

"Oh Zoey." He takes a moment to pull back, his hand snaking to cup my face, his pupils blown, and he looks ready to feast, "You are going to pay for all that snark that seems to make up your whole DNA."

"That's a lot," I tease, my hands tracing the hem of his jeans, my fingers lightly brushing against the skin on his abdomen. "And what would be my first punishment?"

"Well." His voice cracks as my hands move up his shirt, "First, I'm going to take you to bed."

With swift movement, I squeal as he throws me over his shoulder like I'm nothing.

"What the hell?"

"Be a good girl." He smacks my bottom, sending a jolt of pleasure and pain through me like a live wire. "Which one is your bedroom again?"

Giggling, I direct him to my door and he quickly deposits me on the bed and tears his shirt off and unzips his pants, loosening the fabric around his large bulge. I barely have enough time to get my pants off and get a semblance of control before he's back on me. He holds my hands above my head, pinning them against

the mattress. Our kiss is fierce, teeth clashing and our tongues swallowing all our moans. His body moves up to briefly help me out of my shirt and bra.

He stares down, his mouth open, panting as he stares and stares. I watch in fascination, my breath hitching as his hands stroke down my sides, tracing my tattoos. Swallowing hard, I can't help but arch my back to his touch, hungry for it.

"You are so fucking sexy," he says, almost to himself. My confidence soars, flooding me with much-needed warmth. His hands finally move to my breasts, his thumbs tracing the bars pierced on my nipples, the sensitivity causing me to moan loudly.

"These are amazing." He continues to massage and tweak them and the warm band in my belly tightens, desperate to snap.

"Fuck." I groan as his mouth replaces his hands on my left breast. Then moving to the next, giving equal attention. My hands snake down between us where my underwear is embarrassingly wet and I want nothing more than to feel him. Hoping to egg him on.

"I want you inside me."

"Not yet, doll. I'm not done playing," he growls at me, taking my hand away.

He cuts off my whining with a kiss again. It's all rather unfair, so I raise my hips, desperate for some friction.

"Z, you are something ..." he hisses. His voice is desperate, and I know I'm close to breaking his resolve.

"Please," I pout.

With a tortured look, he shakes his head, "Not yet, princess, but because you said please, you get a little reward."

Gasping, I feel his fingers find my clit.

"Fuck, you are ready for me," he whispers, awed.

Nodding, I stare up at him and I feel my mind wanting to break. His movements are leisurely, so sweetly cruel I've never

wanted release so badly in my life.

“Say what you want, pretty girl.” He continues to rub maddening circles, marveling at the desperate pants he is pulling out of me.

“Please, I need you inside now.” My voice breaks.

Tripp nudges my legs wider and I prop myself on my elbows. His boxers are off, and I lick my lips at his cock. It’s hard and leaking and I wonder how I got that inside of me last time. Grabbing a condom, he slips it on his length. He watches me, looking pleased at my ravenous look. Kissing me again, it surprises me how gentle he is. He leans his forehead against mine.

“I want you to watch,” his voice rumbles, breaking through my haze. My head bobs numbly. I am in a state that I’d do anything he asks as long as he fucks me.

Rubbing at the entrance, I swallow as he pushes.

“Relax,” he croaks, inching in more. My gaze fixes between him splitting me open and his blissed out face. The stretch is everything. Feels too good, and I want more.

“Are you still watching, sweetheart? See how well you take me?” he pants and I moan as he drags in and out. Throwing my head back, my body is floating into a different planet, letting more of my feelings take control. He is at an agonizingly slow pace, deciding to torture me in this delicious way. The hot band inside me is tightening more and more.

“Fuck,” he whispers. When I look at him, his mouth parts, mesmerized, watching where we meet and back on my face.

“Faster, please,” I beg, needing release, knowing it’s going to destroy me for good.

“If I do that, beautiful, it’s going to be all over too quickly,” he laughs shakily.

“I’m close, I promise.” My voice is high pitched and I clench around him, hoping to spur him on.

“Sweet Jesus,” he hisses. It causes him to involuntarily snap his hips against me and I want more.

“Just let go,” I grit out, moving my hips up, feeling him go deeper.

“Oh Z, not sure if that was a good thing to say,” he says before he crashes his lips on mine again. There is no gradual pace, no time to adjust as he snaps his hips against me. Knowing I’m going to feel every bit tomorrow, my body celebrates. His movements punch out my breath and it doesn’t take long before that band inside snaps and shatters. My mind suddenly is nothing and all I feel is wave after wave of pleasure. My body is barely coming back together as he’s still making me shake violently against him. As he fucks through my orgasm, he then grinds as deep as he can, letting out a moan so broken it sends thrills through me, igniting the heat again. As awareness settles and the high equalizes, his body is heavy on me. He turns us on our sides, our legs tangled, and I’m staring at the wild look on his face. He is trying to control his breathing. For once, he has nothing to say, no snarky quip, no teasing, no praise and somehow neither do I.

Chapter 5

My day had started out fantastic. In the last couple weeks, the energy in my life was more balanced, refreshed. My yoga session made me feel limber and strong. Mostly it was because of having slept with Tripp. That night I let him over-deliver on his promise of several orgasms, bolstering my confidence and freeing me from the dark cloud. After that night, we returned back to our busy lives. With newfound energy, I researched grad schools and requirements all over the country and beyond, narrowing down my list. My school work was getting praise and the students I tutored were thriving. Of course, that all came crashing down when I let Eddie ruin my day.

Now, I'm sitting alone at the cafe, trying not to cry despite the free coffee sent my way.

Steadying my breath, I can barely respond to Summer over the phone, trying to soothe me. The day gets only worse when Tripp slides into the chair in front of me.

"Z ..." Tripp is frowning, his face serious.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, wiping away the tears. "I thought you were at an away game?"

"Got back today. Duke overheard Summer talking to you and sent me." His brow creases. "Is it the asshole, Eddie?"

I don't mean to flinch in front of him, but I'm trash at hiding my emotions.

He catches it and a dark cloud settles on his features with a chill in his voice. "I see."

It's a strange thing. Tripp was once my villain who reveled in causing chaos, particularly mine. Now he's here because Duke told him I was upset. My mouth tightens a bit more, not sure where to start, what to say, or even what to feel.

"Excuse me." Crying is at the top of my list of hated human functions, especially in front of someone. Especially in front of Tripp.

The thing about heartbreak is it somehow makes you feel you've lost your chance. I had thought the mourning period of what could have been was over, but it had snuck up on me. As I splash cool water on my face, my mind still replays the Eddie encounter. It started out with a casual *hello. How are you?* Then foolishly telling him about my excitement about grad school. His last comment made it feel like a sucker punch to the gut.

"It's fine to have ambitions, but I'm worried you'll be alone for the rest of your life."

When I return to the table, Tripp is still there. His jacket is off, and under it is a forest green henley that shows off his muscles. He's made himself at home in my little private place with a fresh cup of coffee, waiting for me.

"You don't have to talk if you don't want to," Tripp says. "I'll just be here for a bit, okay?"

Nodding, I take a seat and let the silence fall as I take a sip of my coffee. Tripp takes a sip of his. Anger settles in place of my distress and I want to take it out and I know how.

"This is stupid," I mutter, chugging my coffee dry. "Wanna go to my place?"

Tripp raises a brow, studying me. Then stands and puts his jacket on. He offers his hand and I can only stare, waiting for his answer.

"Come on, take it." He wiggles his fingers. "We're not going to your place."

“Then yours?” I continue to eye him and realize I haven’t been to his place yet.

“Nope,” he says, shaking his head.

“You promise you will not make me cry this out? I’d rather do anything else but that.”

“Cross my heart, baby.” He grins. “Just so you know, nothing wrong with crying.”

Taking his hand, he senses my hesitation, so he quickly encloses it. His warmth is soothing. Tripp and I are outside. The air is chilly and the sudden temperature change distracts me from my emotions.

“What are we doing?” Our hands remain held as he takes me to the parking lot.

“You’ll see,” Tripp says, pulling his keys out. He helps me in his Ford Bronco. Déjà vu briefly fills me, reminding me of our first time sleeping together. We are driving out of town and Tripp is singing off key to the radio, not at all prodding me for conversation.

“What is this place?” My head swivels around when he parks in front of a bar settled in front of the ocean. I can hear the loud music inside. I follow Tripp, my curiosity superseding my grumpy mood.

Tripp takes my hand again as we head to the entrance.

When we walk in, my mouth drops. It’s an eighties cover band night at the bar, I realize. Neon, spandex, and wilder hair make up some of the crowd. Laser lights dance around us as the band covers *Africa* by Toto. The energy is infectious and I take it all in. The shock is slow to fade.

Tripp leads me through the thick crowd, and we end up at the bar. We order drinks and my mind is still trying to wrap around what the hell I’m doing here with Tripp, of all people.

Tripp, the guy who tried to pawn off all our chemistry lab assignments and expected me to let him off easy on our lab finals.

The guy who tried to flirt his way out of taking his shift at the tutoring center.

The guy who wanted to fuck me because he thought I deserved better than the first time.

The guy who taunts and meets my banter whenever I throw it at him.

The guy who sat with me at a coffee shop because I was sad.

He stands here, handing me a glass of water and a beer, his head bobbing to the music.

“Come on, rain cloud, you gotta loosen up here.” He bends next to my ear.

Prince starts next, and I stare at the crowd. They are having fun and it looks enticing.

“First off, how do you know I love eighties music?” I ask. “I don’t remember telling you any of that.”

“Because that’s all you play when you’re at the Tutor Center,” Tripp replies. “And when you’re driving.”

My mind wracks when he could have heard it.

“You play music really loud when you think you’re alone, you know,” Tripp supplies. His light green eyes twinkle in the kaleidoscope of color.

My face heats. If he heard me play my playlist, then he must have seen me dancing in my car.

“Don’t worry, doll, I can keep a secret.” Tripp turns to the band, his head bobbing and smiling.

“How did you know about this?” I gesture to the show. My body is relaxing, and it joins the beat of Whitney Houston. We move toward the middle of the crowd.

“A girl I know told me that this bar does throwback themes. Today just was eighties night. Plus, I’m in the mood to dance.” Tripp is on-beat and a decent dancer. Of course he is.

“Just have fun. You’ve had a stink face for far too long and it’s a shame that douche canoe put it there,” he says in my ear. The douche canoe in question, of course, digs up feelings again and my breath hitches.

“I don’t make a stink face,” I shout over the music.

Tripp raises a brow. “Look, despite what you might think, baby doll, your pretty eyes don’t lie.”

I roll my eyes hard. “How perceptive of you, must have taken a lot to take yourself away from the mirror for you to notice.”

Tripp winks as he goes back to dancing to the beat. “That’s my girl. Come on, let’s go have fun together.”

True to his word, Tripp is always the epitome of fun, which adds to his charm and his ability to get away with most things. Throughout the night, I even laugh. Hard. I won’t forget his antics on the dance floor.

It is an unexpected turn of events as I glance at the clock on my phone. I can’t believe how late it is. After stuffing ourselves with food truck tacos, we head back, pulling up at a brick building at the edge of campus. There is a boutique store with large windows covered with flowers.

“Where are we?” We stroll in through a door that leads to a staircase.

“Duke is at Summer’s and your place. Probably having sex everywhere. You’re staying at mine tonight,” he replies as a matter of fact.

“Okay.” Nodding, I follow him up the stairs.

“Don’t worry, I don’t expect us to do anything tonight,” Tripp adds. “Besides, I’m pooped.”

I wasn't sure what to expect for Tripp's place, but I didn't expect him to have a whole loft apartment that came out of a design magazine.

It's brick and wood, with pieces of furniture that were probably worth more than my tuition.

"Huh, I expected you to have at least three sexy posters as wall art." I glance around as he flicks the kitchen light on and heads to the fridge.

"I'm not a savage. I have two, and they hide in my room," he replies as he moves us to his living room.

Despite Tripp's personality, I find his place rather adult. My eyes take in everything, curious about his space and finding it unexpected. He has photographs everywhere on one wall, all beautiful places in the world. Some I recognize, some I don't. Scribbled in the white borders of each photo are dates and coordinates.

"Wow." Staring at the large print of the aurora borealis painted above the frosty mountain. "These are beautiful."

"Thanks." Tripp hands me water and an ice cream bar. "I took them."

My head snaps toward him. "All of them?"

"Yup." Tripp nods. "Traveling with family or solo. I enjoy taking photos."

"Holy shit." I'm surveying it, and my smile grows.

"Yeah, it's a hobby."

The wall is littered with candid photos of people, some old, young—characters that are part of a story.

"A woman got me into it," Tripp says.

"Did you sleep with her?" I wink. Tripp's face falls, the joke not landing.

“Despite what you think, I don’t want to sleep with everyone.” He takes a bite of his ice cream bar and plops on the couch.

“I know. I’m messing. You don’t have the stamina,” I tease as I join him. My body melts in luxury and I want to nap here every day.

“Little viper, do I need to remind you of my stamina?” He grins.

“I thought we weren’t going tonight. You did say you’re pooped, enforcing my previous statement.”

“Listen here, Miss Sass.” He dives toward my feet, tickling them, making me squeal.

“I can rally.” He grins as I giggle under his assault of my feet.

“No.” I catch my breath. “I think today was a lot.”

“No worries.” He smiles, going back to the last bit of his ice cream bar. Despite my statement, I notice his tongue grazing over the melted ice cream.

“Can I ask?” Tripp starts. “What happened with you and Eddie and what made you cry?”

The break-up was sobering and made me question myself. Most of my life, I knew what I wanted. What the plan was, being flexible to adjust, and who I was. When I fell in love with Eddie, we were different and I was ready to take on the challenge because I always believed anything could work if two people were on the same page.

“Well.” I sigh. “Our expectations and futures don’t match. He wanted me to move back to his hometown with him as he takes over his father’s business. Wanted me to be someone else that I wouldn’t recognize.”

“You? Squirreled away in a small town with that guy?” Tripp raises a brow.

“I mean, eventually I’d like the kids, but my career felt like a footnote in *his* plan.”

Tripp shakes his head, “No. You are not the kind of woman to be a footnote. He definitely had no business with a badass like you.”

His words wrap around my soul. Somehow, when it comes from him, it feels different, but it feels good. However, the moment I feel this suddenly became scary, the things that stirred inside me hit me like a hurricane. The thought flashes in my head like a warning. I like this Tripp Montgomery. My first reaction is to hide now, or better yet, run. This feeling is all terrifying and exhilarating. Tripp finally got under my skin.

“What made you stay?” he asks.

“I thought we could compromise on what we wanted, figure it out, but it was naïve.” My lips purse and I glance down, hoping he doesn’t see what I feel. “We had assumptions about each other and honestly, he was an asshole about it.”

“I understand that,” Tripp says. “Completely.”

“What happened?” Swallowing hard, I need to change the subject. We are facing each other and I dare to stare back. This Tripp is so kind and when we became friends, I’m blown on how much we are alike.

“It’s stupid.” He shrugs.

“Come on.” I am gentle, like he was with me. “You were never chicken shit with me.”

Tripp’s eyes meet mine and I’m stuck. I witness the struggle of finding what he wants to say.

“Eh, I had a girlfriend once,” he starts. “High school, dated the last two years. We got into different schools, but I was ready, planning to work it out while in college.”

Certainly would have been a sight to see. A committed Tripp, fawning over one girl.

“She broke it off on graduation day.” He frowns.

“Why?” My voice is loud. What a shitty thing to do.

“What you see here is almost the same person in high school,” he says casually, but old hurts aren’t easy to hide. “I may have inflated myself, thinking being a player would make me cool. In truth, she was the first one I slept with.”

“Oh!” The surprise makes me lean forward in awe.

“I didn’t tell her when it happened.” He must have caught the look I gave him. “Remember, I was young and stupid.”

“So, because I planted in everyone’s head that I was this guy, she assumed I would cheat on her.”

“Ah.” It makes sense, his outgoing nature. How everyone seems to be drawn to him naturally. The persona he built for himself. There would be a level of insecurity that an incompatible partner would experience.

“Anyway, fake it till you make it,” he sighs and I wonder how many people know this part of him.

“So, you became a bit of a player.”

“We ended the same way you and Eddie ended,” he says, bitterness lacing his voice. “People we liked assumed and were assholes about it.”

This Tripp is vulnerable and I desperately want to reach out to him, to hug him, but I don’t.

“You take the bed,” Tripp says suddenly. “I’ll take the couch.”

“I can’t kick you out of—”

“Nope!” Tripp shakes his head. The easygoing, fun Tripp makes a comeback, like the conversation never happened. “Wouldn’t be gentleman-like. Take the bed and no arguing, little rain cloud.”

Tripp takes me to his loft. It has a massive bed with a walk-in closet that is surprisingly sparse. He hands me a hockey jersey

and shows me the bathroom before disappearing back down the stairs. When I finally change and clean up, I melt into the enormous bed and I mull over Tripp until I can no longer fight sleep.

Chapter 6

I wake up to the heavenly scent of bacon. My mouth waters as I try to fight to sleep in. Of course, my stomach rumbles loudly and I can't ignore it anymore. When I pad downstairs, the smell is stronger with a mix of coffee.

"Mornin, sunshine!" Tripp is standing in his kitchen with nothing but boxers and a cooking apron with a cartoon female body on it.

Tripp stills as his gaze lingers on me and I self-consciously pull the hem of his jersey to cover as much of my very exposed thighs as possible.

"Did you sleep okay?" he asks, taking a big gulp of his coffee. I barely make a coherent sound as I try to tear my eyes away from the broad muscles that peek out from the apron.

I settle on the bar stool in front of him. "Can I help?"

Tripp shakes his head vigorously. "Nope, no guests allowed in the kitchen."

"Here's some coffee and water." He slides the cups toward me and I take it gratefully. Tripp tears his attention away to focus intently on the eggs.

"Not gonna lie. Your bed is the most comfortable one I've ever been in. No wonder the ladies want to sleep with you," I tease.

"Actually, you're the only one who's been here," Tripp says. "I don't take girls home."

My mouth shuts as my mind tries to wrap around that revelation. Every moment with Tripp feels like a whiplash of things I didn't know about him.

"I got you something when I was at the away game. I was going to bring it to the Tutor Center." He places a small bag in front of me. My brows shoot to my hairline as I stare at him.

"Is this a souvenir for our time together?" I tease, opening the bag.

Inside, I gasp in delight. My fingers grasp the handle of the mug. It's in the shape of a naked woman with boobs and all.

"To add to your *robust* collection." Tripp is grinning as I laugh. "That first time I was over at your place. I haven't been able to look at mugs normally again."

"*Tit's* perfect, thank you!"

Tripp places a plate of food in front of me and silence falls between us. My grin is permanent even as I take a bite and I groan at the burst of flavor.

"Shit, it's good," I sigh. Tripp is still silent. His face is unreadable but trained on my face. I wonder if he regrets bringing me back to his place.

"I'll finish up and I'll get out of your hair." My face heats. He likely wants to get back to his life and I'm intruding on his day.

"No, no, take your time, Z," Tripp finally says, his face breaking into a smile.

"Scared me for a second. You were so quiet, I thought you were having a stroke."

"No." Tripp doesn't meet my eyes when he refills my coffee. "I was just thinking how good you look in my jersey."

I freeze for a beat. My eyes finally blink, then he bursts out laughing as I flick eggs at him.

"I'm not gonna lie, Z. I like this new breakthrough with our relationship."

My lips break into a smile. I do too. “I mean, we are kind of friends with benefits?”

“I’ll even make us friendship bracelets.” Tripp leans over with a goofy grin. My heart leaps a little at his proximity.

“I’m still going to roast you.” I say. “And not let you get away with things.”

Tripp’s face is dangerously close to mine, and I fight the urge to look at his lips.

“I won’t have it any other way.” His voice is warm. It tugs at me like it’s trying to lure me closer. My phone buzzes, rescuing me from Tripp’s gravity, but it’s cut short as he plucks the phone from my hands and nuzzles into my neck.

“I need you,” he murmurs against my skin. “Now.”

Funny, I need him, too. Yesterday was an emotional vampire, and my body is practically fluttering under his touch.

No words can even spill out of my mouth before he makes his move. He catches my lips by crashing his on mine, crowding me against the counter.

The urgency between us explodes, scattered, clumsy, and frantically delicious. Tripp’s green eyes darken. His hands and lips can’t seem to get enough. I match his fervor, our teeth colliding when we kiss, and he can barely get me on the counter and between my legs.

Something clatters behind me, the plates scratching across the island counter and glass rolling and crashing on the floor. Tripp is quickly tugging his boxers down. Not caring about the damage we’ve caused to his kitchenware that is probably worth more than my car. I’m adjusting myself over the edge of the counter. He disappears briefly to grab a condom.

He says nothing when he comes back, only his breathing grows heavier and his hands move under his hockey shirt, searching for my skin. Relief touches his face when he finds my breast.

My hand roams on his hard body and I yank his apron off. I whimper when fingers pluck at the piercing on my nipple.

We still haven't spoken a word, as I need more of him. He shoves the jersey over my breasts, answering my prayers. His eyes greedily rake over them and his hands encircle my ribs, moving me closer.

His target starts with my clavicle before moving down, his kisses and licks trailing to my breasts, his tongue rolling, flicking on the piercings. I can't contain the moan that tears out of me. It sends more heat down my spine and to my core. I let out another desperate moan as he moves to the next nipple.

"I'll never tire of this," he murmurs sweetly as I arch into him. His fingers shove aside my soaked panties as he pushes easily in.

"You are already so wet for me," he smirks. "I bet this was soaked when you first met me."

"You wish," I growl, nipping his bottom lip playfully.

"Come on," he teases, his fingers stroking that spot, making my breath hitch. "Surely you've had some thoughts on what you wanted to do to me."

"I'll never tell." There is no way I can lie to him. I've definitely had thoughts before I started dating Eddie officially. He's slowly dragging his fingers over that spot. I'm grinding against his hand desperately.

His fingers pluck at the piercing again when he strokes me and I'm blown away at how close I am to coming so quickly.

"Wanna know a secret?" he whispers. My breathing is irregular, short and I'm close. "Did you know you were in my head a lot?"

"Because I piss you off all the time?" My smile grows and my knuckles turn white as I grip the counter. He pulls his fingers out, the blunt head nudging at my entrance.

“Oh yes, but I also thought about fucking you,” he whispers. My brain shorts as he splits me open during his confession. Words are no longer coherent as he pulls my legs around him, barely leaving any space anywhere. He grinds into me as my fingers dig into his shoulders. The pace starts brutally, frantic, and my nails dig in, barely able to hold on. His eyes are hooded as they roam between my face, breasts, and where we are connected. Unlike last time, neither of us last long, our ends hitting us out of nowhere. I lose any semblance of awareness as I scream his name. Tripp’s legs threaten to give out, so he slowly takes us to the floor to catch our breaths.

“Come to my birthday party,” he says between breaths, brushing away the hair that clings to my face. He’s still inside me and I’m still clutching to him.

“Your birthday. I didn’t know you were getting old. No wonder I spotted some wrinkles.” I gasp at the playful spank to my bottom in retaliation.

“You won’t be able to handle my silver fox era,” he laughs in between heavy breaths.

We move to the couch, cuddling in the afterglow as I stare at my mug.

“Thank you for the mug,” I sigh, tracing the outline of the boob.

“You’re welcome. They remind me of your boobs.”

My hand playfully smacks him in amusement.

“Now, I need to find one that looks like your penis.”

“Good luck finding a mug large enough for that.”

“Unbelievable.” Our laughter fills the living room and I feel a lightness settle in my bones.

My phone buzzes, breaking the quiet of the moment, and I realize the time I need to get home before my appointment at the

tutor center. Quickly, I throw my clothes on, Tripp, being unhelpful, watches me scramble, amused.

“You could help me find my other shoe,” I bite out as he lounges back, looking very satisfied. He’s still shirtless, his muscles on display for additional distraction.

“I enjoy watching you running around,” he grins.

Rolling my eyes, I finally spot my errant shoe.

* * *

I practically stumble home with a dopey grin on my face. My legs are still shaking from our “breakfast”. Summer looks up from her laptop, pausing from her furious typing as Duke is making her sandwich.

“Why are you so smiley?” Summer wiggles in her seat.

“Nothing,” I reply, grabbing my mug. It’s one of the plain ones. The boring gray one. Before I realize it, I collect all the ‘professional’ mugs in the cupboard.

“What are you doin?” Duke eyes me.

“Should’ve gotten rid of these ages ago.” The sweet sounds of the ceramic breaking and clattering in the garbage can is music to my ears.

I pull out my real mugs, my collection, tucked away in the back cupboard. The first one being my favorite, a design of hippos in dirty positions.

“Good for you.” Summer’s eyes are bright. “I’m glad you didn’t get rid of those.”

Digging through my bag, I pull out the gift from Tripp. Proudly, I clean and place it among the collection.

Duke sees it and laughs. “I was wondering who that was for.”

“Oh, you were with him when he found this gem?” I chuckle.

“Yeah, he spent nearly an entire afternoon in three stores looking for the perfect one,” Duke says, stealing a knowing glance at Summer.

My heart flickers as I stare at the new mug. I can’t imagine Tripp looking for something so thoughtful.

“Are you going to Tripp’s birthday party later this week?” Duke asks, sitting next to Summer, placing an arm behind her chair.

“Yeah,” I say. “And I have an idea for a present.”

* * *

The gift settles in my hand as I look up at Hockey House. There is a massive amount of people here and a sign for Tripp. A gaggle of people are entering the house, the sound of the music loud and upbeat.

“You look nervous.” Summer weaves her arm through mine, looking at me with concern.

“I don’t know why,” I reply, looking at my gift wrapped in newspaper and twine because I didn’t want to buy gift wrap.

“You know, I will say, you seem happier. Even that run-in with Eddie didn’t last as long,” Summer says as we stroll toward the house.

It’s true; I am much happier these days. “I guess Eddie was more of a suck on my soul than I realized.”

“I think it helps that Tripp helped you get your fun back,” Summer says.

“Don’t give him too much credit.” I laugh. “We’ve enjoyed it for what it was.”

“I know, but when you two are together,” Summer starts, “It’s like something else.”

Duke arrives at the entry before we can step in, giving Summer a searing kiss. I want to know what she means and I’ll

ask her later.

“There you are, kitten.” Duke smiles.

“Hey, Duke.” I wave.

“Z.” He grins. “Tripp is in the other room.”

Tripp is decked out in a birthday sash and a crown fit for a bridal party. Instead of mingling, he’s in the corner with Adam. Dark circles are under Adam’s eyes and they’re red from who knows what.

“You’re going to be alright; why don’t you just hang. Have fun and try not to think too much about it,” I overhear Tripp say as he grips Adam’s shoulder.

Adam’s dark eyes land on me. Tripp follows his line, breaking into a grin when he sees me.

“Z, my darling, do you have any words of wisdom that you can impart to my friend here?” Tripp asks.

“Sorry?” I ask, moving toward them, amused.

“Z here has had a serious heartbreak of her own and look at her now. Still standing and smoking hot,” Tripp says, the wink sending flutters through me. Then his gaze flickers to the bag in my hand and I send him a knowing smile.

Adam grimaces. He clearly is not in the mood to have a conversation like this.

“Fuck off, Tripp, you’ve got your girl here now. Go enjoy the party and just leave me be,” Adam says, taking a deep drink of his beer.

He said, *your girl*. My mind blanks and I wonder what Tripp has been saying about me to his friends. I wonder if we are not seeing what everyone else does.

“Go away for a moment.” Shooting a glare at Tripp, he shrugs. It’s a quick moment, but I swear I see panic flaring before he rushes off to talk to another group of people. Blinking, I shake my head and focus back on Adam.

“Do you really want advice?” I ask. At first, I thought Adam to be rude, but now I can see he is simply shy, awkward, and aloof. He is handsome and displays confidence on the ice more than he does in real life.

“Sure.” Adam shakes his head. His dark eyes are distant. I’m not sure if he’ll really hear me.

“Time,” I sigh. “Time will pull you out of the rose-colored glasses and show you a lot about the person you were with. One day, you’ll realize that the person you thought you knew wasn’t there at all.”

“What if the person is still the one you want even after some time?” he asks.

“If it’s meant to be, then it is. Until then, try not to make yourself a martyr. There are billions of people in this world. It’d be a shame to keep yourself unhappy for the sake of one person who isn’t willing to give you what you deserve.”

Adam’s eyes meet mine thoughtfully before a burst of cheering erupts behind us. Elena has arrived and is toasting a group of the hockey players with her kombucha can. Her hazel eyes find me and she makes her way over.

“Did you give it to him yet?” She is buzzing with excitement. During my shopping trip, I ran into her and spent the afternoon chatting and looking for the perfect gift Elena was the life of the party. Like summer sunshine without a care in the world. A sharp contrast to my current companion.

“Not yet.” I feel my face heat. I haven’t missed that I’m the only one who brought a present to Tripp’s birthday.

Her gaze falls on Adam, who looks away quickly. “Hey, you’re the guy whose puck nearly killed me!”

Adam blinks before a tinge of pink appears on his cheeks. Clearly he remembers, too. His shoulder tenses as if he is bracing for a verbal attack. My brow raises, interest drawing me to this interaction.

“I got an excellent shot from that, you know, wanna see?” Elena beams her sunny smile at him and Adam looks terrified at her attention.

I take this opportunity to abandon them, knowing someone like Elena will do Adam’s dark cloud some good.

Finding the birthday boy is hard as the crowd grows. Summer and Duke are happy in their own little world. Duke being protective and actually laughing and smiling with his peers. Now and then I can catch them looking at each other when the other isn’t looking. The softness of love has made them such cute saps.

Tripp’s laughter is loud in the kitchen. A gaggle of ladies with hearts in their eyes surround him. His voice is loud and he’s eating up the attention. I overhear one of them asking where he had been and if rumors were true that he had someone special. Watching Tripp, he blanches at the question and shakes his head. “Nope, no one. Maybe later tonight, I’ll find someone.” He winks.

My stomach curdles unpleasantly. It shouldn’t bother me, but it does. I know what we have wasn’t what people thought, and the reminder was a bigger blow than I had expected.

Tripp moves out of the room, not before his pale green eyes land on me and then at the gift in my hand that I’ve been carrying around for far too long. Tripp’s brow furrows and, like a stranger, he continues to talk to another group of people. My chest twinges and the unpleasantness in my belly grows.

I decide to give him space, my confidence plummeting. Summer and Elena are talking excitedly and I step into the safety of their circle.

“Did you give him his present yet?” they whisper at the same time.

“No.” I can’t help but frown, the hurt a dull ache.

“Honestly, I think I might give it to him another time.”

“What?” Elena blinks, her brow pinches in confusion.

“Yeah, he seems like he doesn’t have time at the moment,” I say.

“Bullshit.” Summer looks behind me, trying to spot him.

“I mean, I’m the only one who brought a present.” My lips thin. “I feel kind of stupid.”

“Uh, Z, you idiot, it’s pretty clear you guys have a deeper connection than he does with all these people in the house together. He’s going to love it,” Summer quips, determined.

“He’s kinda busy with everyone else. I think it’s clear it’s not true.” I run my hands through my hair. The party has lost its luster, and I’m feeling ready to go home so I can think about how people are perceiving us. To process how I feel about it.

“Tripp!” Elena calls, waving him over. Tripp hesitates when he sees, but slowly makes his way.

“There you are! Mr. Social Butterfly.” Elena smiles, making room for him.

“Are you ladies having fun?” he asks politely.

“Z got you a sweet present,” Elena says, ignoring him while watching his features.

“Oh, that’s awesome.” Tripp glances at the gift and his mouth seems tight. Unease morphs into twisted anxiety and I suddenly want to leave.

“I can just leave it somewhere later,” I reply quickly. Elena’s and Summer’s gazes narrow, clearly sensing something strange.

“Uh yeah, give it to Duke. He’s going to DD home.” Tripp looks for Duke, who is nowhere to be found.

“You don’t want to open it?” Elena blurts out, eyes darting between us.

Tripp’s lips thin, and his jaw hardens with determination as he looks at me. “Let’s talk.”

Elena and Summer quietly exchange worried glances before Tripp leads me away from them through the crowd. My heart spikes, and my vision blurs and sounds tune out the surrounding people. It feels worse than when Eddie and I broke up, and I can't understand why.

"Z," Tripp starts, searching my face. "I fucked up."

"What do you mean?" We are in an empty hall, away from the crowd. Shame fills me, then mortification.

"I shouldn't have given you that gift." Tripp sighs. "I don't want you to think much of it and you didn't have to get me a present."

It feels like I've crashed, and I've been pinned down. Like a trapped animal, I want to leave, chew my arm off and hide.

"It's just a present as friends ... I." The words die as I stare at the present in my hand.

"It's okay I know," Tripp says softly, his green eyes locking on the gift and I swear I see some emotion there. "People are kind of getting this idea about us."

"I know." I force a bright smile. Why is this hurting? "Think of it as a thank you gift. I think this will be goodbye for a bit."

"Goodbye?" Tripp's brow shoots up.

"Yeah, I think we had fun, and it's time I focus on myself."

"Z, I feel bad that my gift is seen as more than it should have," he says. "It was just something friendly, nothing romantic. It doesn't mean I don't want to be your friend."

My laugh is hollow and short. "I'm confused. What is it you want?"

"Just us to be ... friends," he says. "I realize lines are blurred a bit."

Like a puzzle finally clicking in the right spot, I know I was an idiot. I was idiotic because, in this fucking moment, I want it

to be something more. This was the moment. I should laugh to assure him it is just a friendly thing. But I don't.

"Do you ever want it to mean something?" I ask slowly, searching his face to ferret out the truth. Needing to hear it from him to reinforce myself that this needs to stop.

Tripp pauses a moment, his shoulders tense. "Z, you know me. I like what we have. I think it's easier this way, without expectations." He chooses his next words carefully.

"Do you?" he asks quietly.

"I ..." My breath is trapped under the truth that hangs between us. Silence fills the gap between us. He nods, miserably.

"Z." Tripp's voice is low, steeled even. "I think we should end this for now."

"I think that would be wise, Tripp." The silence that follows is like being cocooned in a black hole. Everything is pulling in nonsensical directions and I can't hear or feel anything.

Tripp doesn't respond and, like a strange robot, he shoves a smile on his face.

"No big deal. Okay?" he replies. He sticks his hand out and I take it and I feel only numbness.

"Goodbye," I somehow manage, and it settles hard into reality.

"I'll see you around? As friends?" The hope in Tripp's voice makes me want to scream. So I don't reply.

Chapter 7

It was for the best. The mantra needed to be on a t-shirt, mug, and sticker. I was an idiot to fall for Tripp. For believing that maybe a little part of him was falling, too. Another mistake and this was all my fault.

Logic and hypothetical ruminations take up space in my brain to soothe my bruised heart. My grad school applications could take me anywhere in the world. Supposedly, Tripp is destined for Seattle, that he had already signed to play for a pro-team. So it wouldn't have worked out. His last real relationship went to ruins because of distance. There was so much going on in my life and there were several opportunities in my future.

Tripp said he wasn't the type to have a girlfriend. Wasn't the guy that was going to be tamed, especially when he started playing professionally? That was okay and what I wanted and felt was okay. A hiccup and another hard lesson. Right?

Logic and hypothetical ruminations can only do so much.

The few weeks of hard focus and taking on extra tutors have also helped for my grades, bank account, and my soul. Tripp lives in the periphery of my sight. At least, I try to keep him there.

It wasn't possible to avoid him all together. It was hard to see him. Flirting constantly with girls, especially our co-workers. Tripp is at the other end of the Tutor Center. Sitting on the desk, looking up at a girl with his charming smile. The same one I had grown used to.

Shifting in my seat, I turn to avoid looking at them. Trying to focus on my homework. My phone blows up from Elena, asking

if I'm interested in extra tickets to a concert.

"Hey Z!" George moves next to me, sitting down on the desk. I look up, seeing him smiling down at me.

"You are the only person I know that is going to appreciate this," George says, wide-eyed.

"I did it," he laughs manically.

"What?" I lean back, looking up at him like he's lost his mind.

"My secret project!" The energy makes me grin as he moves in front of me.

"You finally going to tell me what it is?" I ask.

"I built a life-sized trebuchet!" George gesticulates as he goes off on his specs before finally asking. "Wanna check it out? I'll even let you launch something. Maybe that asshole ex of yours."

"You're serious?" Highly amused, he whips out his cellphone, showing me pictures. Confirming it can definitely launch humans easily.

"Holy cow, you did it!" I am actually impressed.

"I'm having some friends over later. You should come." George winks.

When I search his face, I know he's sort of asking me out. In a safe way, in a way that doesn't have that nervous pressure when someone asks you out.

"Sure," I say, bestowing him a smile. George grins widely.

"Perfect. I'll text you the details."

George's student shows up, and he disappears into one of the private stalls.

I turn back to my homework, and put my headphones on. My eighties playlist is helping me focus. It isn't long until I sense someone taking a seat across from me.

“Z.” Tripp’s green eyes lock on my face and I nearly flinch. My heart flutters and I break into a sweat.

“Hey, Tripp.” Bring on the nerves and face him head-on.

“How are you?” he starts carefully.

“Good, and you?” I’m wondering where this is going. What is the point and where is the girl he was just with? Tripp glances hard at George and his student. George is enthusiastically writing things on the board.

“Do you need something?”

Tripp’s jaw hardens, and his eyes narrow. “Don’t you miss me just a little?”

At that moment, my comprehension is slow. Wondering if I need to get my hearing checked. Tripp bursts out laughing, “Don’t answer that.”

Whatever his game is right now, I’m too tired to play.

“It’s good to see you, Tripp, but seriously. Do you need something?” He senses I have no humor left for him.

“I kind of miss getting my ass kicked by you.” Tripp leans in. I can’t tell if he’s being serious right now.

“It is what it is, Tripp.” I sigh. “We’re moving on.”

“With George, I see.” He raises a brow, making a face.

“Maybe,” I reply.

Tripp frowns. “Seriously?”

“Why not?” I shrug, refusing to believe that he cares.

“Let’s hope he’s not a shit head like Eddie.” Tripp chuckles.

“I mean, he already isn’t. He has a trebuchet.”

“Z, you don’t get starry-eyed for a guy who has a siege weapon,” Tripp tsks.

“Maybe I want to get sieged by his,” I quip.

Tripp chuckles hollowly, but his smile doesn't meet his eyes. "There is my little viper."

"It's good to see you, Tripp," I say sincerely, glad that my next student arrives to end this conversation.

Tripp moves away. I can still feel his gaze as I settle in the private room with my student. Maybe one day, the feelings will be nothing but a memory and we'll laugh at the past. In my heart, I doubt it. One day we'll be flung to different parts of the Earth, lost to the flow of life. As my student works on practice problems, the thought saddens me. More than it should.

* * *

One hangout with George eventually turns into a couple of dates with George. He's kind, and he's gentle. Most of all, he's safe. He appreciates who I am and is just as enthused about my dreams. We haven't slept together yet. I decide to wait a while to make sure. He doesn't seem to care.

Summer and I end up going to a hockey game. The season is closing and the end of the semester is looming ahead. George comes with me, never having been one for sports. One thing I appreciate about him is his willingness to try new things.

"Should I wear a jersey for Duke? Or maybe Tripp." George grins as he makes our way to our seats.

"Only if you actually like hockey by the end of this," I chuckle. We sit beside each other and share snacks.

Tripp has been scarce, even at the Tutor Center. His schedule is changing. I wonder if it is because of the hockey season becoming more intense toward its ending. They have been ranking up the college league.

The crowd buzzes with excitement in anticipation of the game. Elena is back at her usual spot, her camera through the Plexiglas, and she is flirting with a handsome guy. Elena isn't shy with dates and she provided stories and entertainment for all her

bad ones. Throughout the semester, we have grown close and have provided lots of fun.

When the team comes out onto the ice, there is a palpable energy. The crowd roars with so much excitement that even George joins in on the fray. Tripp comes out, but unlike his usual tour with his million-dollar smile and excitement for the game, he looks subdued. The spark in his pale green eyes looks tired. He isn't smiling, but focuses hard on his opponent. Duke even looks worried. When the game starts, it's brutal.

The away team is good, so good that they are nearly head to head by the end of the first period. The Ravens are working hard; Tripp isn't doing as many passes as he usually does and has instigated more fights than any of the other players.

"Jesus, Tripp," Summer sighs, her hand on her face. Tripp snarls insults at the other team. He's livid, even taking his anger out on Duke. Duke narrows his eyes as he tries to have a conversation with him, but Tripp instead stalks away.

"He's not in a good mood," George comments as he stuffs his face with popcorn.

Tripp is traded out for the moment, his eyes glued to the game. He ignores the fans behind him, trying to get his attention. It's not like him at all. Worry grows in the pit of my stomach.

"Well, he might just be having an off time." I take some popcorn, trying to keep my eyes on the players on the ice. Hoping they get ahead at some point. Duke plays hard, and he even takes a few solid hits that make Summer gasp and cringe.

"He'll be okay; he's built like a tank," I assure her, taking her arm. Summer bites her lip despite this, her eyes searching him.

There is levity during the breaks in the game. The entertainment balances out the intensity. It comes as a surprise that the kiss cam makes an appearance. It just never occurs to me it would land on George and I.

I stare up, seeing my surprised face plastered on the screen. George grins in delight and then turns my chin almost forcefully. His lips collide on mine and it takes a moment for me to kiss him back, but I do. It's rushed and awkward as I tear away, heat invading my face as the crowd whistles and shouts.

Summer turns to me, her eyes wide, wondering what the hell happened. George eats up the back pats from the surrounding guys, and I suddenly am not sure if I actually enjoyed that. I also hate that I'm questioning it.

The game resumes, but just when I thought it couldn't get more intense, it does. Tripp gets back on the ice and not even seconds on, he's taking on a massive player. Gloves and helmet off, beating the shit out of him and getting the shit beat out of himself. It takes both teams to tear them apart. They both land in the penalty box, earning a resounding *boo* around the stadium.

Tripp sits in the box, blood streaming down his face from a cut above his eye. As I stare, his gaze lands on mine and I turn away like it burns my soul. He receives a washcloth and minor medical treatment, but he's out for the rest of the game. Ruining his opportunity to catch up on the points.

"This isn't good," Summer groans.

"What the fuck is his problem tonight?" I mutter, my hands still trembling.

"Honestly." Summer bites her lip. "I think it's you."

Chapter 8

The loss was brutal. I don't see Tripp at the Tutor Center anymore. Word has it he is taking a break to focus on his studies and hockey.

My thoughts continue to be jumbled. Messy. Enough that I end things with George soon after that game. George understands, and it's more mutual than I realize when he reveals he felt we were more friends than lovers.

It still doesn't solve the cluster fuck that is Tripp.

"I'm telling you, Z," Summer says. "He's not doing okay."

"Well, what am I supposed to do about it? He has made it clear what he wants. Besides, there could be more going on than just me."

"Well, he hasn't been out and about like his usual self." Summer and I sip on our coffees at the Black Feather.

"Duke is worried about him. Tripp won't even talk to him right now."

"I'm worried about him fucking up his dream. He needs to get a grip." I stare out the window. The dreary sky blankets the campus and everyone seems to be sluggish.

"I know, which is why I think you should talk to him."

"Let me think about it. I'm finally over Eddie, you know, and I think he might need some space to sort himself out." Crossing my arms, I know it's a decent plan. I don't believe I, of all people, could have a productive talk with Tripp.

“Are you going to the show tonight? With Elena?” Summer changes the subject.

I nod. “I think it’ll be fun.”

“Well, have fun for me. Duke and I are going to get away for the weekend. He’s still recovering from that wicked hit to the ribs. I’m still surprised he had broken nothing.”

“He’ll enjoy you playing his nurse.” I wink as Summer’s face blushes.

* * *

Elena and I arrive at the venue before the doors open. The venue is next to the bar where Tripp had taken me for eighties night. The memories bubble to the surface. Instead of pain and longing, it’s pleasant and I smile.

“This is going to be fun, just us two!” Elena bounces happily.

“Are you sure I’m okay hanging backstage with you?”

“Of course!” Elena replies, offering a wide smile. “We are in the best spot in the whole place. Plus, the drummer is stupid hot.”

Laughing, I help her with her gear, fascinated with her process. Elena is a hard worker and the definition of hustler. She has no problems getting what she wants, and she does it in a way that makes people *want* to do it for her.

The crowd piles in as the doors open. The security takes their place and nods my way in acknowledgment. Elena is in her element as she photographs the crowd coming. She is adjusting the light on her camera and focusing on the job.

When the band starts, I can’t help but join the energy of the crowd, dancing backstage and getting lost in the fun. While it isn’t my favorite genre, I enjoy it all the same.

Elena is a pro, somehow able to enjoy the show and get photos of the band and the crowd moving quickly and nimbly.

It's when the opening band finally ends their set that I head to the bar to get water for the both of us.

As I head toward the part of the bar where workers can bypass the crowd, I hear my name.

"Zoey?" I stop in my tracks, turning. It's Eddie. Eddie is nursing a beer and has a girl next to him. She looks confused as she looks at us.

"Oh, hey!" I smile, at least try to ease the awkwardness.

"Sophia, this is Zoey," Eddie says slowly. His eyes are a little hazy. He typically never gets intoxicated. In fact, it's a rare event.

"Hi." Taking her hand, I shake it. Seeing Eddie feels strange, like he's a distant memory that I can now see objectively with little feeling.

"We dated," Eddie says smugly. Sophia frowns and shifts nervously in her place. I cringe at his admission and wonder why he felt the need to mention our past.

"What are you doing backstage?" Eddie asks curiously, looking behind me.

"I'm with the photographer," I reply.

Eddie raises a brow. "Cool."

I am about to turn and say goodbye, hopefully for the last time ever. Until Eddie opens his mouth some more.

"You know, I kind of expected it," Eddie says.

"What do you mean?" I ask. Sophia frowns, taking his arm, trying to pull him away. Eddie's face morphs into a sneer. All civility gone.

"That you would go back to being, you know ..." he starts.

"Being what?" Crossing my arms, I pin a glare on him. His eyes trail along my body. I'm wearing thick tights and a high-waisted skirt. It's not overtly revealing, but sensual to my taste. I am fighting the disgust that latches under my skin.

“Back to being this ... loser.” He purses his lips. The words would have hurt if I cared. Instead, I laugh. He isn’t worth the time.

“Well, it was good to see you. I see you are still being, you know ...” I mock his words. “Bothered.”

“Bothered?” He is so loud that people around him eye him warily.

“Clearly. You are still wanting to dictate my life. Sophia, if you are okay with me taking up real estate in his head, then good for you.” I turn toward the mortified woman next to him.

“Shut the fuck up, whore,” Eddie spits out.

“Second thought, Sophia, if you want to get away from him, you can join me backstage,” I offer to the girl. Her mouth drops in shock at Eddie’s words. Clearly, she hasn’t seen this side of him.

“Don’t listen to this slut.” Eddie grips her arm. My eyes zero in on how hard he has her. Immediately, I regret my words.

“Dude, you’re being an ass. Let her go. She has nothing to do with this.” Sophia wrenches her arm out of his grasp.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Sophia says to him. She rubs her arm, hurt in her eyes.

“Seriously,” I say. “We aren’t compatible, that’s fine, but you shouldn’t be a fucking dick.” I wonder what on Earth I ever saw in him?

“Fuck you,” Eddie hisses. Sophia gasps, as if seeing him for the first time. I can’t believe that was once my future. Eddie had never acted like this, but I guess a few drinks brings out the worst in him.

“I think I’m going to go,” Sophia says, putting as much space between herself and him.

“Wait!” Eddie pleads with her. “I’m sorry. I’ve clearly had too much to drink.”

“I’ll say,” someone says. Eddie freezes, turning to find Tripp glowering down at him. Looking very much ready to beat him down.

“Why don’t you call someone and get out of here before you really regret this night?” Tripp is someone no one wants to mess with. Especially if they’ve witnessed him on the ice. His pale eyes are sharp and ready.

Eddie takes a step back. However, he doesn’t have enough sense to leave.

“Fuck off, I can talk to my ex if I want,” Eddie says. He immediately regrets it when Tripp takes a step toward him, his jaw hard, promising a lot of pain.

“If you go anywhere near her, I promise I will happily tear you apart and present it to her on a gold platter.” My mouth drops. Tripp is a menace, and he’s always delivers on his promises.

“You can have her. She’s nothing but a skank, anyway,” Eddie spits out. His spite continues to grow as I roll my eyes, looking bored.

“No need to get mad that you can’t handle a girl like her.” Tripp gives him a devilish smile.

“Oh, fuck you.” Eddie pushes him away, which only makes Tripp smile wider.

“Thank you.” Tripp smirks, “Z here wouldn’t have given me a chance if she didn’t experience being with the worst scum on the planet. Guys like you are here to remind girls what they are worth.”

“Z, this isn’t over!” Eddie calls.

“Uh, it was over like months ago, Eddie!” I retort. “It’s pathetic.”

“Sorry you fucked up. Enjoy your shitty life!” Tripp adds. Eddie is livid and looks ready to charge. Luckily, Tripp ignores

him and focuses back on me.

“Time to go, sir.” Security finally makes their appearance, taking Eddie’s arm before he can launch at Tripp.

“What? I did nothing!” Eddie yanks away.

“You’re being an asshole,” Elena pipes up from behind the massive security guys. “Plus, you’re too drunk and making people uncomfortable.”

“Thank god.” Relief washes over me when Elena moves next to me.

“Elena.” Tripp nods with a smile.

“Tripp,” Elena says, turning to leave but not before adding, “Don’t fuck this up.”

Elena winks at me as I send a glare. What the hell did she get me into?

Tripp shoves his hands in his pocket. Golden Boy’s confidence fades, replaced with apprehension.

“Zoey,” he starts.

Crossing my arms, I sigh, “Tripp, what the hell?”

“I want to talk ... about us,” he says.

Chapter 9

Tripp POV

Z stands like an angry goddess. One that I'm all too ready to worship. Her arms cross across her breast tightly and I know I'm going to have to work hard to get her to open up. I still can't help but to get lost in her eyes. That always keeps me under her spell.

It's time, time that she knew how far gone I am. Z leads me backstage to a quieter part of the venue. I miss her. Ever since I let myself shatter her into a million pieces like an idiot, I could never get her off my mind.

"Z." I breathe in her scent. It's sweet like vanilla and soft. Like her. "I want to say I'm sorry."

Z continues to hold my gaze, not betraying any sign of emotion.

"I fucked up, because I was terrified. Terrified that you mean more to me than I can imagine."

The confession is the scariest thing I've ever done. However, the more words that spill out of me, the heaviness I've felt for too long starts melting. When she brought my birthday present, the realization crashed into me. She had been the only one to give me something. Everyone assumed I already had everything I wanted. The little gift made me realize how far gone I am for her. So naturally, I ran away. Scared that she was going to be like my ex. It didn't help that my closest friends saw what I felt for her before I even could acknowledge it.

“Then why did you say those things?” Z asks, gently. I fight the urge to bring her into my arms, to feel her and let me whisper all my confessions into her skin. When I had finally gotten the guts to open the present, it was a Polaroid camera. Vintage, with packages of film ready to make memories. It really hit home how much I fucked up.

“Because I was this person for such a long time. It was the first time I realized I can change. That I need to stop being afraid. That I have feelings for you.” I fucking tried, tried so hard to move on. Life went downhill like it was angry with me, as if it wouldn’t allow me to move on without her.

“Why? Why are you so scared? I accept you for who you are and what you want to be. Why are you telling me this?” I know the hurt in her voice is all my fault.

“Because I’m tired of being that person. I see you embracing who you are and not afraid to go after what you want despite how terrifying. I’m not you, I’m a coward.” He frowns.

“What do you want, Tripp?” Her voice is quiet like a flutter in the wind. “What do you really want?”

“To be with you, to be by your side through all the craziness life offers until one day we are sick of each other,” he says.

Her lips twitch, just barely. “You think you’ll get sick of me?”

“I won’t, but you might,” I reply. My chest suddenly freezes up and my throat feels tight. Remembering that the last time I confessed my feelings to someone, they laughed. Laughed in my face and reminded me it would be too hard. Too hard to make us worth it. That I would be the one to fail us.

Z sighs and I brace myself for the worst. “Tripp, I want to, but so far, the first reaction I got when things got real was you running away.”

I swallow hard, seeing the hurt reflecting in her eyes. “How do I know you won’t do this again?”

My heart thuds and I hate seeing the broken trust for the first time. All because I took the easy way once again.

“Because I plan to spend the rest of my life proving it to you,” Tripp says. “I want to be there for everything. You kicking ass in grad school, seeing your satellites or spaceships that you build discover aliens.”

Z’s brow furrows. She is fighting the emotion. It makes her eyes glassy, and I know how much she hates to cry.

“I know it will take time, but I’m ready now. Ready to show you,” I say, and it’s true. I will not let her slip through my fingers again.

Ever since I met Z, she didn’t take the bullshit I fed her, didn’t let me slack off at my job at the Tutor Center. When I antagonized her, she gave it as good as she got. Those are only some things that make me wild for her. She makes me want to be better, to reconsider things I thought didn’t deserve.

“I don’t know, Tripp.” Z’s voice is apprehensive, but she has every right to be. I’m the one that actually fucked up my chance with her. “Are you sure about this?”

Z invaded my heart before I even realized it. Before I could even push her out, she had already become part of me and when she was gone; it was like the lights in the entire world went out.

“I don’t know what the future is going to be like.” Taking a step forward, I have already memorized every feature on her face. “I know with certainty that I will always belong to you.”

Z sniffs, her nose turning red, and I can see the hesitancy finally collapse under the weight of what she feels. It’s the same ones that I have, that I always had for her. It’s intense, bright, and full of her like she belonged.

“Well, darling?” I press my forehead on hers, finally feeling her on my skin.

“Okay.” She looks up, her cheeks glistening with stray tears. When I finally get to kiss her, I know I’ll never tire of it. I’ll never

tire of her softness, her sweet moans, and the taste of her. Because she is all the names I've given her. Z, my viper, my goddess, my darling, my little rain cloud, my princess, my sweetheart and my love.

The End

Epilogue

Tripp POV

My eyes search the crowd where family and friends sit. As I lap around, anxiety builds in my chest when I don't see her yet. It's when I take my position, I see her. Zoey settles quickly in her seat, her smile wide as I spot her in my jersey with my name on the back.

Longing shoots through me when I see her. It is the first time in three months and one of the last of the long-distance trips. After graduating, we have maintained a hot, heavy, long-distance relationship while she is in grad school at MIT and I'm in Seattle. The distance was no match for us. We were terrified at first, but we were more determined to make it work.

I let go of the tension as peace settles in me, ready for the game. Zoey's gaze remains glued to me throughout the game, and I can't wait to hold her.

The game ends with us winning and the chaos seizes us, putting us in a frenzy of excitement. Of course, when I finally get to her, I mark her with my kiss. Holding her in place, exchanging a promise that I don't plan on letting her go. I have a surprise for her later.

"You are amazing." We are finally alone in the car. I turn to stare at her, not believing she is here with me. She still looks at me like I'm her universe and I hope she knows that I'm hers, too.

We get home and I shove her inside my apartment. It is the perfect balance of us inside. She has her naughty mug collection here. My photos explode everywhere and now feature her. The

little Polaroid camera she got me is tucked away in a special box with our more intimate photos sessions. I rush her inside the bedroom and I'm tearing off the jersey I gave her. Rediscovering my favorite parts of her.

Wasting no time, she yanks off her top and bra, getting naked in record time. I've missed her a lot, and we've finally got a date for when she'll move permanently with me, now able to do her grad courses online and remotely.

"Tripp," she mewls. Her body responds only to me. I don't plan on taking my time yet. I just want to feel her squeezing around my cock.

My lips lick, bite, and kiss all of her. I pull her down and around my waist.

"Fuck, I've missed you," I mutter against her lush lips. It's been a couple months since I actually felt her. Since I had to satisfy myself way too many times with my hand, her photos, her voice, and things reminding me of her. Pulling back, I watch as I push my cock through her folds, letting the image of her blissed out face burn in my head.

My resolve breaks loose as she squeezes around me, and I groan, trying to take back control. As hard as I try, I can't help but grip her hard against me, rutting into her like a feral animal as we both chase our highs together. It was a miracle that she came first; I was not a second after, my vision nearly going out as I emptied inside her, filling her and refusing to waste a drop.

Panting, I roll her to the side, selfishly keeping myself inside just a little longer.

"Don't laugh, but I did something," I finally say.

Z's laugh is rich and I can't wait until we live together permanently.

"Is it a new sex toy?" She winks. "Or more lingerie?"

"Oh, those are just stocking stuffers. I got those things, but it's not the main event." I grin as her eyes darken. It never gets

old seeing that from my girl.

She hasn't seen my back yet. Turning around, I hear her gasp and then she's silent. "What do you think?" Suddenly I'm nervous, wondering if it's a mistake.

It is a tattoo, like my photo collection. My skin has dates and coordinates about us.

The first date and coordinates is the first day I met her at the Tutor Center.

The second date is when we became friends, which coincided when it went from admiration to obsession and her fucking my brains out.

The third date is when she went to the first game.

The fourth was when we officially started dating.

The fifth is the official move in date we have set.

"These are beautiful," I hear her sigh and voice crack with emotion. I flip over, wiping the tears from her face.

"Z." I kiss her cheeks. "I plan on putting on more dates."

I am rewarded with that smile that always gets me, "Thank goodness you have plenty of space and it's actually tasteful."

"Well, Duke did talk me out of putting your face there." I laugh at her shocked face. Giggling, I take her in my arms, feeling peace settle like a favorite blanket. What she doesn't know is that the next date is the date I'm going to ask her to marry me.



About the Author

Emily writes fun, bite-size, and spicy romance stories. She loves living in the mountains and going on adventures with her husband.

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About You

<https://a.co/d/055yQ93L>

I'm done being perfect.

I'm done with the rumors that my ex started.

I'm ready to reclaim my life.... with the broodiest, most intimidating enforcer and right winger of Ravenwood University's hockey team. Duke Burnham.

Summer had done everything right. The right school, the right major, the right reputation and the right boyfriend. That was until **she catches her boyfriend making out with a freshman.** Now the right everything is the wrong everything and her reputation tanks.

Now, Summer has an unusual opportunity to **right the wrong in her life and seek revenge on her ex.** It includes **fake-**

dating Duke Burnham, the **enigmatic hockey player** with rumors and a reputation of his own. Summer is game, **no strings, no worries and just a lot of fun, especially in bed.** Will this be the ticket to getting her groove back? Or will the lines blur and she still finds herself at **rock bottom**?

*About You is a **short and spicy InstaLove** story between an independent, smart **girl-next-door** and a **broody, touch-her-and-die hockey player.***