



Puck You Not (Rustin University)

Author: *Brynn Paulin*

Category: Sport

Description: He was trying to write someone else but ended up in my inbox instead.

Of course, I answered to let him know I was not, in fact, who he was looking to contact. Then he wrote me back, again and again. He doesn't know who I am, but I sure know him. He's the star captain of our university's hockey team and soon to go pro.

Just for that, I should stop answering him.

Because I'm just the mousy, slightly nerdy girl who sat next to him in Shakespeare class last year.

Because he has no idea who I am.

Because I might just have a giant crush on him.

Because there is no place on earth where I fit into his world. Not even a little.

Because I just couldn't stop writing. Now, he wants to know who I am. I sure won't ever tell him who it is behind the keyboard—even if he owns my heart. I puck you not...

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:23 am

How It Started...

For the love of God, man! Your gear! You know the rules. Turn in your crap in the condition you received it—and not smelling like crap .

Pick it up and fix it by Friday afternoon or you'll be fined. And this time the fine will be the equivalent of replacement.

P

— . — . —

From: To: Date: April 15, 2024 Subject: RE: Gear

P...

I don't know who you're trying to reach, but it's not me. I certainly wouldn't turn in—what is it? Some kind of equipment?—whatever it is, in stinky condition.

Not a heathen,

A

— . — . —

From: To: Date: April 15, 2024 Subject: RE: Gear

Seriously Aiden. Ha-ha. Not funny. Get your ass over here. I can barely stand to be in the equipment room with your crap.

P

— . — . —

From: To: Date: April 15, 2024 Subject: RE: Gear

P

Not Aiden.

A

— . — . —

From: To: Date: April 16, 2024 Subject: RE: Gear

This isn't Aiden Varnum?

P

— . — . —

From: To: Date: April 16, 2024 Subject: RE: Gear

Nope.

A

— . — . —

From: To: Date: April 17, 2024 Subject: RE: Gear

Shit. Sorry. Do you KNOW Aiden?

P

— . — . —

From: To: Date: April 17, 2024 Subject: RE: Gear
— Still not Aiden

Nope. And I'm guessing he's a smelly guy. I am neither smelly nor a guy.

A

— . — . —

From: To: Date: April 17, 2024 Subject: RE: Gear
— Still not Aiden

Great. Sorry to bother you. And generally (in case you do know him and just aren't saying) he doesn't reek. Not that I go around sniffing him. That's really not my thing. But his week-old, unwashed gear is rank.

Again, sorry to bother you, A.

P

— . — . —

From: To: Date: April 17, 2024 Subject: RE: Gear
— Still not Aiden

No big deal. This is the most excitement my abysmally empty inbox has gotten lately—besides inappropriate spam, of course. But we don't talk about those messages in email club.

I hope you find Stinky Aiden. Maybe, you should check with the registrar's office since you ended up with a wrong email address.

A

— . — . —

From: To: Date: April 20, 2024 Subject: Not
Aiden

Hey Not Aiden,

Just wanted to send you a message and let you know I found him. In case you were wondering how the story ended.

It ended with him taking care of his gear, a shitton of Fabreeze to remove his stink from the general area and a big fine. Yes, I still fined him, and no, I don't feel bad about it. I don't want to deal with this again next year.

P

PS: I choked on my Monster when you reference Fight Club.

— . — . —

From: To: Date: April 20, 2024 Subject: RE: Not Aiden

You still fined him? Harsh. But I'm sure you were feeling disgruntled after dealing with that smell infiltrating your space.

So...you're the captain of one of the teams? Which one? I mean...I guess I could look up this Aiden guy.

A

PS: I don't even want to know what you were doing with your monster that you choked on it.

— . — . —

From: To: Date: April 20, 2024 Subject: RE: Not Aiden

Drinking a Monster ENERGY DRINK! I don't even want to know what you were thinking.

You could look him up but you probably wouldn't find him. Apparently, I spelled his last name way way wrong, too. Plus he wasn't "official" on the team this year. You don't get officially listed unless you get play time. Nice try.

So what does A stand for?

P

— . — . —

From: To: Date: April 20, 2024 Subject: For Me to Know

Sorry, that's confidential. Don't you know you shouldn't give personal information to strangers on the internet—especially those who lurk uninvited in your inbox like questionable cyber stalkers? You could have nefarious intentions.

A

— . — . —

From: To: Date: April 21, 2024 Subject: RE: For Me to Know

Nefarious? You're an English major, aren't you?

Also, I think your email dated April 17, where you said “No big deal. This is the most excitement my abysmally empty inbox has gotten lately” was an invitation. So...you invited me here.

Are you saying I shouldn't write? Rude.

And no. I have no nefarious plans. Not yet anyway.

P

— . — . —

From: To: Date: April 21, 2024 Subject: RE: For Me to Know

Well, since you completely side-stepped my question—you thought I didn't notice, huh?—let me think about which sports might be turning in their gear right about now. Hmm, what sport could you be the “capt” of?

A

— . — . —

From: To: Date: April 21, 2024 Subject: RE: For Me to Know

Wait. You yell at me about email stalking you, then you write me back?

Never said I was a captain of a sport.

P

— . — . —

From: To: Date: April 21, 2024 Subject: RE: For Me to Know

I am an enigma. Also, genius, getting “play time” and “gear” suggest it's a sport.

I never said you couldn't write. I just said I wouldn't give you private info.

A

— . — . —

From: To: Date: April 21, 2024 Subject: RE: For

Me to Know

Okay, smartass, but it could also mean chess or the aeronautics competition club.

P

— . — . —

From: To: Date: April 21, 2024 Subject: RE: For Me to Know

Pretty sure it's not that. Try again. Chess wouldn't result in stinky gear. At least, I don't think so. I mean, what in God's name would Aiden be doing with those chess pieces?

DON'T answer that!

Also there is no aeronautics competition club at Rustin U. Try again.

A

— . — . —

From: To: Date: April 21, 2024 Subject: RE: For Me to Know

Fine. It might be a sport.

Keep it secret. Keep it safe.

P

— . — . —

From: To: Date: April 22, 2024 Subject: A LOTR reference?

Be still my heart. A Lord of the Rings reference? My estimation of you has risen slightly, Captain.

A

— . — . —

From: To: Date: April 22, 2024 Subject: RE: A LOTR reference?

I'm not a dumb jock. I've read the trilogy a few times...and seen the movies more than a few. I know about more than just [sport name redacted].

P

— . — . —

From: To: Date: April 22, 2024 Subject: RE: A LOTR reference?

Point to you. I should feel ashamed of my assumption. I should but I don't. Still, my noncommittal opinion has shifted in your favor.

Tell me you've read The Hobbit, too, and I'll forget you called me a stinky boy.

Later,

A

— . — . —

From: To: Date: April 22, 2024 Subject: Victory

Read it. Grumbled about the wide scope of license taken with not one but THREE movies.

Obliviate activated.

And I throw a triumphant fist into the air! Don't You...forget about...

P

— . — . —

From: To: Date: April 22, 2024 Subject: RE: Victory

A Harry Potter reference? A Breakfast Club reference, too? I may perish from the shock.

Okay, P. You win this round. 2 points to Gryffindor.

A

— . — . —

From: To: Date: April 22, 2024 Subject: RE: Victory

Should I tell you now that I'm a Slytherin and not a Gryffindor?

P

— . — . —

From: To: Date: April 22, 2024 Subject: RE: Victory

Honestly...that's not a surprise.

It's okay. You can keep your measly points. I'm sure you won't get more. ;)

A

— . — . —

From: To: Date: April 23, 2024 Subject: RE: Victory

Aw, thx. Did you just wink face me?

P

— . — . —

From: To: Date: April 24, 2024 Subject: Gotta Go. Happy Summer!

A wink face? Maybe. Are you emoji-averse? I've heard that's a thing. I'll leave you alone now to process your wink-face feelings during this difficult time.

Anyway, I'm off to my last final exam for the semester then I'm heading home. Have a good summer. Avoid stinky gear. Read a book. Don't get attacked by sharks. Send good vibes my way while I deal with my family who'd rather I was at school for the rest of their lives.

Enough about them. Have a good summer, P.

A

— . — . —

From: To: Date: August 20, 2024 Subject: Welcome Back!!

Hey, A,

Way to deny me the last word last spring.

Hope you had a great summer, survived your family only mildly scathed, didn't get sunburned too many times, and only contracted poison ivy once or twice.

I wanted to let you know I did not, in fact, get attacked by sharks. Had a close call with a T-Rex on Isla Nublar. But I'm safe and sound and currently studying advanced calculus.

P

— . — . —

From: To: Date: September 4, 2024 Subject: RE: Welcome Back!!

Thanks for the warm welcome back. Sorry I didn't see your email until now. I was still recovering from a debilitating case of poison ivy (just kidding).

Really, I've been busy finding housing since my place for this year fell through. Found an apartment to share and I'm getting settled. I think my roommate is a little crazy, though—and not in a good way.

I'm glad you didn't get a shark bite.

But now a Jurassic Park reference? I'm beginning to believe you spend all your time at the movies.

A

— . — . —

From: To: Date: September 6, 2024 Subject: RE: Welcome Back!!

Hey, I read. It was a book first. And also, I'd like to point out: Takes one to know one. You've recognized every one of my references.

So... Don't you think, after all this time, we should exchange names.

P

— . — . —

From: To: Date: September 4, 2024 Subject: RE: Hey

You first.

Truly,

A (and I'll start off your guessing with a hint: It's not Annie, Angela, Addison or Abby.)

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:23 am

Avalon Warner

How It's Going...

God's sake, Avie. You can't write Parrish into your fiction.

Leaning back against the headboard of my bed, I scowled at the fantasy manuscript I was writing between homework assignments, classes and my work on campus.

I didn't have time for subconsciously inserting my pen pal crush into the action, but sure enough, my hero had shaped up to be disturbingly close to Parrish Locksby.

Only, my hero wielded a sword rather than a hockey stick.

My phone went off next to me as I contemplated my problem, one I didn't really want to fix, and I scowled over at the screen.

I only had fifteen minutes of writing time left before leaving for class that morning, but the caller was my older sister, Meredith.

That meant, I needed to answer, or she'd call me thirty-seven more times.

After hitting save on my document, I reached for the cell and answered a split second before she'd go to voicemail.

"Hi, Mer," I answered.

“What took so long?” she grouched, without greeting. She’d never been a morning person.

I closed my eyes, quietly sighing. This was why I wrote fiction.

“I was saving my work before answering.” She didn’t need to know it wasn’t schoolwork, so I didn’t clarify. All my sister cared about was me getting top grades, graduating with honors then getting a job and never coming home.

I wished that was a joke, but since my parents died, my older brother and sister both saw me as a hassle who’d held them back from moving forward with their lives.

Excuse me for only being twelve when my mom and dad had been in their accident.

Though they’d never said so, I’d been an ‘oops baby’ when they’d thought they were done with kids.

When we’d lost our mother and father, my brother was twenty-two and my sister was twenty.

They’d shuffled me between them and never let me forget what a burden they’d taken on by keeping me—or letting me come to stay with one of them during the summer breaks from university.

“What’s up?” I asked when she didn’t say anything.

“Do you have a job yet?” she asked.

“Not yet.”

I heard the annoyed breath she huffed out. “I take it, you don’t have a place to stay

after graduation, either?”

“No...” I said, dragging out the word. “It’s only March. I don’t know where I’ll be working after graduation, so I haven’t started looking for apartments.”

“Well, you can’t come back here,” she snapped.

“I wasn’t planning on it.”

She’d already been vocal about her ‘duty’ being done as far as I was concerned, and that she’d done more than should be expected of anyone. I pitied her future kids, if she ever had any.

“And Ben’s job is sending him to Brazil for work. He’ll probably be there for a year, maybe more—”

“I wasn’t planning to go there, either,” I interrupted. “You guys have been crystal clear.”

“You don’t need to be snarky.”

My eyes widened as I drew in a long breath and held it. Snarky? She had no idea how I’d minded my temper and kept my opinions to myself for the past ten years.

“Did you need anything besides that?” I asked calmly, clenching my hands into tight fists in my lap.

“Yeah. Did you take mom’s jewelry with you when you left in the fall?”

“No. Nothing besides what I’ve always had.” I actually had precious little of my parents’ things. Since my siblings had been older than me, adults, they’d taken first

pick of things and sold most of the rest.

“Do you have her wedding ring?”

“I’ve had it since I was twelve. You know that. You gave it to me because neither you nor Ben wanted it as a reminder.” The way she’d dropped it onto my dresser, after the funeral, depositing it as if it were a piece of trash, would be burned into my memory forever.

“I want it back.”

My breath caught in my chest, and I couldn’t form words past my shock.

“Avalon, did you hear me? I want Mom’s ring.”

“No. No, you—“

“Avalon, you owe me—”

“I don’t,” I snapped. It was all I had besides pictures. After the way she’d discarded it, and I cherished it all these years, I wasn’t giving it up.

“How dare—”

“Goodbye, Mer,” I said and disconnected. Maybe, it was cowardly, but I turned off my phone. She could leave me all the messages that she wanted, but I wouldn’t hear them right now.

Turning to sit on the edge of my bed, I leaned forward, resting my forearms across my legs and dropping my head forward. I may have just burned a bridge with my sister, but that bridge had been on its last legs after I’d returned to school this year.

“Avalon!” My door slammed against the wall as my roommate, Sheena, burst into my room, and I shot upright, seeing her waving around a container.

Jesus, if it wasn’t my family yelling at me, it was my roommate. I was going to be late for class.

“What, Sheena?” I asked wearily. This was bound to be another of what was far too many confrontations we’d had since the end of August.

“Why did you eat the last of my strawberries?” she yelled.

“I didn’t.”

“Well, where are they then?”

“I don’t know. Maybe, you ate them—or one of your friends ate them,” I said.

“They didn’t. I didn’t,” she insisted.

Annoyed with life, I threw my hands into the air, standing and packing up my things to go to class. Thank God, I had my shift at the library tonight.

“You owe me strawberries,” she insisted.

“I don’t owe you anything,” I replied. “You eat my food all the time.” So much so that I never bought anything refrigerated and kept a small stash of food hidden in my room. Otherwise, I ate on campus. “And besides that...I’m fucking allergic to strawberries. And you know that, too.”

My phone pinged, and I gritted my teeth in frustration. I’d thought I’d turned it off! Hastily, I glanced at it before shoving the device into my pocket. An email from

Parrish. Thank God. After this morning, I needed a distraction.

I slung my backpack over my shoulder then stood and stared at Sheena, waiting for her to leave my room.

She stared back for a long moment then finally huffed and stormed out.

I heard the plastic bowl clatter into the sink in the kitchen, sounding a lot like she'd whipped it into the stainless-steel basin.

"Jesus," I hissed under my breath. Today was a total avalanche of crap and it was only morning.

I didn't bother to glance over at her as I marched out, knowing I'd probably bring her a container of strawberries just to smooth over her temper later on.

As soon as I was outside the apartment door, I pulled out my cell and thumbed open my email.

— . — . —

From: To: Date: March 17, 2025 Subject: One Month Left

Did you just call me out for Nickelback? C'mon, someone has to like them. I'm a big fan of Burn It to the Ground . It's great for amping up pregame.

Which reminds me. We're eleven months into this back and forth game, and you're still giving me crap?

I think I'm in love.

Also, I'm not losing this bet.

I'll figure out who you are before April 15. That's our one year mark.

I don't lose.

P

— . — . —

I grinned. We'd made a bet over him figuring out my name, but I had news for him. This time, jock or not, crush or not, he was definitely going to lose. Because Parish Locksby, captain of the hockey team, and dorky Avalon Warner...yeah, no. That wasn't happening.

Still, I couldn't stop smiling at his email. I would definitely keep having fun and pretending he really could love me. While it lasted, anyway.

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Avalon

I think I'm in love.

I sighed. Though I'd tried to forget him writing that, putting it off to a glib response, the words lingered in my thoughts. If only they were true. With my crush on him, I could easily return the sentiment.

I knew that. He didn't.

The disparity of our social statuses hadn't stop me from emailing him back and forth a few times a week, ever since last April—barring the summer break, of course.

And each of his short messages had managed to make me smile.

I loved bantering with him. Being anonymous gave me free rein to be completely myself, something I had never been comfortable doing with another guy.

It was ridiculous, really, this addiction to him. Daily, I'd stalked my inbox like a starving lioness after her prey. I waited anxiously for every email from Parrish Locksby.

Because, yes, I knew exactly who he was.

After about the third time he'd written me, I'd conducted an investigation, and it had taken me less than fifteen minutes to suss out who was on the other end of the messages. It hadn't been difficult to determine the identities of the university's team

captains. Only one had the initials PL.

Parrish Locksby. Ice hockey captain. And drop-dead gorgeous with the cocky little grin he'd sported in his official team pic.

And I knew him. I mean...kind of. We'd had class together our sophomore year.

I'd about fallen off my chair when I'd pulled up his profile to verify it was who I remembered. His photo had been updated since we'd been in the same Shakespeare course. But yeah, he was the guy who'd sat beside me for almost every session.

And this was who I'd been corresponding with?

Yeah... One look and I'd known I wouldn't be revealing my identity.

The guy had All-American god written all over him.

I wouldn't have been surprised if girls swooned when he passed them, just like the silly girls in *Beauty and the Beast*, who'd practically fainted as Gaston had walked by.

Some guys would react the same, too. No judgment from me.

When we'd had Shakespeare 201 together, I'd certainly heard plenty of ill-suppressed sighs whenever Parrish had entered the room—usually a few minutes late since it was an eight a.m. class, and apparently, he worked out first thing in the morning, even during the off-season.

He'd always come in fresh from the shower, his hair slightly damp.

My teeth sank into my bottom lip while I imagined running my fingers into his thick

light brown hair.

It looked coarse, yet I would bet it would still be like soft, silky ropes under my touch.

My breath caught when I imagined those whiskey-brown eyes peering down at me, making my heart race while my palms flattened over his powerful pecs—

And...this was why I wrote in my spare time and why Parrish starred as the dragon warrior in my novel, even though I hadn't meant to write him onto the pages.

My brain often galloped off into flights of fancy before I realized it.

That I'd inserted myself into this particular fantasy should concern me, yet I had to admit, my thoughts spiraled that way more than they should.

Daydreams were the only place where Parrish would adore me while I stood in the embrace of his steely arms. Hockey gods didn't notice hot-mess Plain Janes.

Not that I was all down on myself. I was fine with who I was. I just happened to be a realist. Ordinary. And clumsy. And awkward. I wasn't remotely close to being the glamorous perfection of the puck bunnies who panted after the men on the Loggerhead's hockey team; that was all.

Take today for example. I'd been hurrying across the quiet library when I'd noticed a loose thread on my cardigan sweater.

My attention caught up in the snag, I'd tripped over my own feet, stumbled then careened into the steel book truck, full of books to be reshelfed.

It had crashed onto the tiled floor, books going everywhere and me falling on top of

it, while students stared and a couple documented my folly with their phones.

Clumsy. Awkward. Hot, hot, hot mess.

“You’re staring off into space again, Babes.”

The bench where I sat, enjoying the warm March afternoon, vibrated from a heavy weight dropping down beside me.

“Hey, Nash.” I tipped my head to look over at Nash Higgins, the guy who was arguably my best friend here at Rustin University.

Probably my best friend ever. He and I had similar backgrounds.

We were both on our own with no family support.

He had no one back home, as far as I knew.

I only had my older brother and sister, who were pretty glad I was away at college and forever out of their hair.

“You okay?” he asked.

“You heard?” It was a big campus. I’d hoped that word of my latest mishap wouldn’t go past the small late-morning crowd in the library.

“Peters was there doing research,” he said, naming one of the guys from his computer science lab. “So...you okay? He said it was...”

“A train wreck?” I offered, heat creeping up my neck. “My bruises have bruises, but my pride sustained the worst damage.”

“I’m sorry, Babes.”

“I’ll live. Only about a month left ‘til graduation, right?”

“Right...” He winced. “Still coming over to study this evening?”

“Yeah, I’ll bring pizza. Will Porter be there? Should I plan on him?”

“Nah. He’ll probably be off doing something with the guys from the hockey team. The season might be wrapping up soon, but they’re all up in each other’s business all the time. Plus they have that Frozen Four thing coming up.”

“Up in each other’s business, huh?” I teased, trying to ignore my immediate inclination to quiz Porter about his teammate, Parrish. He was sure to know details I couldn’t get from the school website or the Rustin News.

“Not like that, you perv. Porter might be gay, but he doesn’t dip with his team.”

“No?”

“Shut up.” Nash shoved me lightly, but not hard enough to knock me off the bench. I laughed. I knew he had a thing for Porter, but they weren’t together. Yet. As far as I knew, I was the only one in the know about Nash’s crush on his roommate. Porter certainly had no clue.

Nash and I both had our secrets, and both, apparently, had a thing for hockey players, it would seem.

“I’ll come over around seven. With pizza and statistics.

” I groaned out the last word. Nash was a computer science guy, so numbers were his

jam.

The class was cake for him. Me? I was an English major, and I wanted to murder my adviser for advising me to take the math class.

If not for Nash, I would have dropped it within a week.

Well, if not for Nash but also because I needed the math credits toward my graduation requirements.

Thankfully, my bestie since Freshman orientation was helping me through that mess.

“So why were you staring into space? Were you fabricating more fantasies about your wrong email guy?”

I rolled my lips together, grimaced, then shrugged. “Maybe. Or maybe, I was writing. In my head. Writer’s do that, you know?”

“Mm-hmm,” he said, sounding skeptical. At least, I hadn’t told him that I knew my pen pal’s identity.

Especially because Nash probably knew the hockey team’s captain since he and Porter had been roommates for a couple years.

With that kind of info in his back pocket, Nash would try to orchestrate a hookup for me and Parrish.

Yeah, I so wasn’t giving him details.

“Did he write you again last night? He did, didn’t he? Are you holding out on me?”

I looked down at my feet, pushing one through the grass. “We may have messaged back and forth a few times last night....and this morning.”

“Did you ask his name yet?” Nash demanded.

“Nope. Not since the fall.”

“Has he asked yours?” He sounded incredulous, refusing to believe Parrish and I were still anonymous.

I side-eyed him. “A few times.”

Again, I’d withheld some info from Nash. God knew, if I let on that there was a bet between me and Parrish, Nash would be hacking into my email then backtracking the connection to Parrish. I didn’t know how he did that. I just knew he could.

Nash chuckled. “Look at you being all coy. I want to hear every detail about it later.” He stood and hefted his backpack onto his shoulder. “I’ve gotta get to the computer lab.”

“Yeah, I need to head back to the library. To study this time. My Egyptian mythology paper isn’t going to write itself.”

“Are you sure? I have an app for that.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, glaring.

He lifted his hands, laughing as he walked away. “I know, I know. No Rise of the Computers allowed. I was only joking. You’re just so easy to rile up.”

My death stare only made him laugh harder.

“Go slay some cyber-demons and keep your AI far, far away from me, and maybe, I won’t get olives and ham on your pizza,” I growled.

He mimed a gag then slapped a hand over his heart and lifted the other into the air. “I’ll be good. Promise.”

Spinning, he jogged off toward the computer tech building.

I shook my head while I watched him go. It was too bad we had zero attraction to each other.

Well, that and the fact we both liked guys.

Other than that, we were basically birds of a feather, both a little nerdy.

Both outside the orbit of the most popular people on campus.

Wallflowers. Both doing our best to get through college and make something of ourselves without support from our families—and despite our families, truth be told.

Still, Nash was exactly the type I could see myself with when I finally paired up for the long term. Someone like Nash. But not Nash. I wanted a full romantic and physical relationship someday.

Gathering my things from the bench, I realized the sky was clouding over. It was getting a little chillier, and I didn’t have a coat with me. Slinging my bag over one shoulder and shoving my phone into my back pocket, I started toward the library, halfway across campus.

As I hurried, I was wholly unprepared for a body slamming into me from behind, tackling me onto the grass and tumbling with me down the shallow incline beside the

path.

Somehow, as we fell, the larger frame wrapped around me and tried to protect me during our tumble.

Ineffectively. I still stopped with a jarring thud, a heavy weight atop me.

“Shit! I’m so sorry. I wasn’t—” The guy broke off as he pushed up on his hands, the rest of him still sprawled over me. “I wasn’t looking, and I... Are you okay?”

I licked my lips and swallowed, trying to get words to form as my lips moved, but no sound emerged. Stunned, I stared up into a pair of wide, whiskey-brown eyes.

Parrish. It was Parrish Locksby. Sprawled over me as if all my daydreaming had materialized him. Every hard, solid inch of him pinned me down. His legs tangled with mine on the cold, slightly damp grass. His groin pressed against mine.

Holy hard ridge, Batman.

That was his dick pressed up to me all up close and personal.

“I... It’s... I... It’s okay. I’m okay,” I managed.

“No, it’s not okay.” He shook his head. “I shouldn’t have been running backward and yelling over to my friend. Shit. Are you sure you’re okay?”

My chin trembled into a nervous nod, but I couldn’t get words past my constricted throat. I couldn’t banter with him like I did on email. Not while I inhaled the dark notes of Parrish’s cologne and the heady scent that was all him. Plus that...ridge.

His brow furrowed, and I knew he was sizing me up, taking in my Plain Jane-ness.

Summing me up. Forming a judgment. It was exactly why I'd never revealed my name to him. I was just an ordinary, awkward girl outside his echelon, computer screens and the wide expanse of the internet separating us.

Or so I'd thought. Yet, here we were, face-to-face, chest-to-chest, and breathing each other's air.

I might never recover.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:23 am

Parrish Locksby

This girl had the most beautiful violet eyes I'd ever seen. I'd never thought that was a real eye color, but hers were genuinely a gorgeous dark violet shade. This close, I could tell she didn't wear contacts. The violet was natural.

But her eyes were wide with shock, the perfect bow of her rosy lips slightly parted while she stared at me, the great big oaf who'd tackled her.

And I felt her gaze deep inside me, so deep it was as if she could see clear into my soul while she gaped up at me like a deer in a freight train's headlights, stunned and unmoving.

Meanwhile, I registered every curve of her tiny body beneath me, and though I should move, I just couldn't.

I didn't. Not yet. Not until I'd saved the sensation into my memory banks.

"I...ah... The grass is a little wet," she murmured finally.

"Shit. Sorry." Damn it, what was I doing?

I jerked to my feet and reached down, offering her my hand so I could haul her upright.

A sizzle burned through me when she placed her small, cool hand in my much larger one.

I pulled her to her feet, and she stumbled into me, her palms slapping into my abs.

My dick twitched in reaction. I wanted to feel those splayed fingers on my bare skin, and I wanted to keep her right here against me for as long as I could. She had me transfixed. Until that moment, nothing but hockey had ever done that to me.

Despite my baser instincts, I grasped her shoulders and braced her half an arm's length from me until she was steady, fighting back my arousal at the fingers still curled against my abs.

"Okay?" I asked quietly.

"Yeah." She yanked back her hands, as if suddenly realizing she was touching me.

"Uh, thanks."

"Don't thank me. I'm the asshole who slammed into you and landed us in a ditch. I'm Parrish, by the way."

The tip of her little pink tongue dabbed across her lower lip. She nodded, and her teeth sank into that same flesh she'd just moistened. Those violet eyes, so full of intelligence, flashed with humor, though she didn't speak.

Christ, she probably already knew exactly who I was. Most people around campus did.

"And you are?" I asked, hoping to barge past her apparent shyness.

"Uh..."

I raised a brow at her. She had to think about her name? Had she hit her head when we'd fallen? Did I need to take her to the campus clinic.

“Avalon,” she whispered. “I’m Avalon. I...uh... I have to...go. You got me all wet. I mean—” She broke off, her face going a fiery red while her words shot another burst of arousal to my dick.

Yeah, my brain went right to sex. Shit, I couldn’t wait to make her slick and wanting. And I would. In all my time here at Rustin, I’d never had such an immediate need.

Her hand waved beside us. “The grass. I meant the grass. It’s still wet from last night’s rain.”

“Right,” I breathed, not even trying to keep the husky growl from my voice. I knew nothing about Avalon, but I knew she’d be in my bed. As soon as I could manage it.

Still, I sensed I needed to give her a second to breathe.

Reaching down, I grabbed her backpack from where it had gone flying onto the ground near us.

Crouching, I gathered the books and notepads that had spilled from it, wincing at how damp they were, and tucked them inside, beside her laptop, which was thankfully inside a protective sleeve.

Her eyes quickly shifted to the side when I straightened, and she made a point of looking at the asphalt path where we’d collided. If possible, her face had grown redder.

Was she checking me out? That was a good sign.

Look all you want, babe.

“Here you go.” I thrust the bag toward her. “I’m sorry again for not paying attention.

That's not exactly how I like to tackle a girl."

Her lips formed an O, her eyes going wide again. "I suppose not. I wouldn't exactly be who you'd target, anyway, right? I mean..." She shook her head, already backing up the incline as fast as if the grass was on fire. "I... Bye!"

"Avalon—"

But she was already sprinting away as her statement settled in my brain, stunning me a second time.

What was that? What did she mean by that?

Jesus, I might be a jock, but I wasn't the stereotypical type who tried to get into every girl's pants.

Few of us at Rustin were—at least on the hockey team.

Did she think I was a player? Damn it. Without doubt, her assumption would make it more difficult for me to execute my plan to make her mine.

I was about to follow her when a flash of pink caught my eye. Glancing down, I noticed a cellphone in a sparkly case on the grass a few feet from where her other things had fallen.

Score!

A smirk curled my lips. Fate had devised a trajectory my beautiful Avalon couldn't dodge. I scooped up the device, making my own plans. She'd have to see me to get this back. And I'd turn that meeting into a date. And that date would turn into many more.

I slipped her phone into my pocket, considering my options for getting in touch with her again.

Avalon... There couldn't be many students at the university by that name. I'd be stunned if there was more than one, truthfully.

Pulling out my own phone, I brought up my email app to write to AV, the only female I could think of to ask. Most of the other women I knew were puck bunnies who'd rather flash me than help me find my girl.

— . — . —

From: To: Date: March 18, 2025 Subject: Do You Know?

Hey... This is a longshot, AV, but I figure since you're a female you might know the person I'm looking for.

I just ran into this beautiful girl—I mean literally RAN INTO HER.

Tackled her even. She ran off before I could get more than her first name—which BTW is more than I've gotten from you.

But that's a different problem. Anyway, do you know a girl named Avalon?

I don't have her last name. But I DO have her phone. I need to find her so I can return it.

At the very least.

P

— . — . —

I stared at the message, which seemed desperate and lame, even to me, but I didn't care that much.

AV214 and I were still anonymous. Until now, that had itched like an ill-fitting uniform, but now, I was thankful for it.

I could be borderline pitiful, and she wouldn't know it was the captain of the university's hockey team.

I just hoped my secret pen pal had some intel that could help me.

“You okay, man?”

I glanced up from where I'd been staring at my phone.

My teammate, my left winger, Porter George, stood on the paved path, peering down the incline at me.

With a dark eyebrow raised beneath his equally dark mop of hair, he eyed me curiously.

Yeah, I probably looked as if I'd taken a few too many hits to the head with a puck.

“Yeah, I'm good. Just sending an email.”

“Is this the new hot place to do that?” He nodded toward the grass and hugged his hoodie tighter around him. “If it doesn't have good Wi-Fi, the trend probably won't take off. And it's cold as fuck out here.”

I blew out a scoffing breath. “This isn’t cold.”

Porter was a South Carolina boy, born and bred. He wouldn’t survive one winter up in Michigan where I’d been raised. He’d better hope he wasn’t picked up by the Red Wings. Or one of the Canadian teams, come to think of it. Or any northern team, for that matter.

“Says the guy who puts on cargo shorts as soon as the temps get above freezing,” he grumbled.

“I do not.”

“If that’s your story...” His eyes rolled. “But seriously... Why are you down there?”

“Stretching.” I joined him on the pavement, unwilling to explain that I’d tackled a woman then she’d taken off like a shot. The guys would make unending jokes about that.

“If that’s your story...” he repeated.

“It’s the only story you’re getting.”

He snorted.

“Fine. So how’d the interview go this morning?” he asked.

Side by side, we headed toward the student center at the middle of campus near the library and administrative offices. I’d been on my way to meet Porter there when I’d seen Grady, one of our other players, and running backward, yelled over to him about tomorrow’s weight training.

And slammed into my future.

“Eh. You know...” I shrugged. “Usual stuff. All the things we say without actually saying anything. The team’s great.

Frozen Four will be great. It’s been a privilege to play for Rustin, and I look forward to seeing how they do with next year’s up-and-coming players.

” I grimaced. “Everyone’s asking me about going pro, though.

They don’t care about the other shit. They just want to know why I didn’t sign with a team yet, drop out here then finished playing out the season as a pro.

I mean, yeah, signing early would have eliminated one of the required contract years before going free agent, but it’s not the route I wanted to take. ”

“Same.”

No, we weren’t really the same. I came from a strict, highly conservative family that expected me to fall on my face and never make anything of myself, including getting my degree.

Which made me more determined than ever to graduate.

Porter on the other hand came from a super wealthy background.

If he decided to never set foot on the ice again, his future was still set.

My future was not, and it was about more than just me.

I had to succeed. I had to, so I could support my three younger siblings after I rescued

them from the cult-like life I'd managed to escape.

“Frankly, I still don't know what the fuck I'm going to do,” he continued. “And I know, I know . I have to decide soon. Like yesterday.”

“Are you considering not going pro?” I asked in disbelief.

He stuck his tongue into the side of his cheek and glanced around.

“There are circumstances,” he finally said.

He didn't have to explain. I knew he was gay, and he wasn't sure how that would fly with the teams looking at him.

“Yeah...” I had circumstances, too, though mine were very different. “I understand circumstances . That's a good way to put it.”

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Avalon

Sitting on Nash's couch while he dug in the fridge for a couple bottles of water, I opened the mail program on my laptop and devoured Parrish's email. Again.

Beautiful . He'd called me beautiful. Me? I found it hard to believe. But...how many other girls could he have tackled today?

And I was missing my phone. Until he'd written, I hadn't realized I'd lost it. I'd dug around in my backpack, sure he couldn't have it. No dice. It was gone. Crap.

That meant Parrish had it. I'd have to find a way to meet up with him, because I sure couldn't afford to replace my cell.

But it also meant he'd called me beautiful.

Me.

Mind. Blown.

— . — . —

From: To: Date: March 18, 2025 Subject: RE: Do You Know

P,

I've met a girl named Avalon once or twice, though I'm not sure we're talking about the same woman.

You might want to try being at the same place at the same time tomorrow.

A lot of us are creatures of habit. Maybe, you ran into her near the lot where she parks, so that was her normal path through campus.

A

— . — . —

Which was a whole lot of crap. Yes, we all had habits, but schedules changed day to day. Mine did. Still, I could definitely make sure to be in that same place tomorrow afternoon. Just so I could get back my cell phone, of course.

“That doesn't look like you're figuring out the statistics problem,” Nash said, coming back with a water.

“Thought we were taking a break to eat,” I countered, quickly shutting down my email, and in my haste, almost knocking over the water he'd just set beside me. With lightning fast reflexes, he rescued it before it splashed all over his books.

“Sorry,” I muttered.

“Hey, what's a night without some mishap?”

“Ugh...I hate that I'm such a klutz,” I groaned.

He sank down beside me and knocked his shoulder into mine. “I love that about you. So...?”

“So...what?” I asked.

“Were you writing him?” Nash asked, nodding toward the laptop I’d just pushed aside. His lips quirked up on one side, telling me he already knew the answer.

“Um, well—” I tipped my head, giving a half shrug.

I wasn’t inviting Nash into this situation again. It was fine when Parrish and I were just writing one another, but now, after we’d collided, literally... Well, I just didn’t know that I wanted to share the details.

“I need to figure out Sheena and the whole apartment situation,” I said, diverting the topic. “She was being a complete bitch this morning, threatening to kick me out again.”

“Why?”

“Honestly...” I huffed out a frustrated breath. “She’s psycho? I don’t know. Today, she accused me of eating the last of her strawberries.”

“She does know you’re allergic to them, right?” Nash asked, his eyebrow raised, his expression clearly judging my roommate. Best bestie ever.

“I’ve told her. Whether or not she’s processed that... Who knows? I’m just trying to get through the next month and a half until graduation, then I’m getting the fuck out of her life.”

“You could stay here,” he offered. “You know you can couch surf here for the rest of the semester. Porter wouldn’t care.”

“If she keeps it up, I might have to take you up on that. Out of necessity rather than

preference. She's gotten more and more unpredictable, since she broke up with her last boyfriend. Who knows if that's even the reason—"

I stopped as Nash's roommate, Porter, strolled into the living room from his bedroom.

Once he appeared, it didn't matter what I was saying anyway.

Nash's attention zeroed in on him, and he tracked his roommate's path from his bedroom to the pizza boxes on the counter.

Since I'd known I'd be spending most of the evening here, I'd purposely brought a couple in case Porter was home, after all.

"Help yourself," I called when he opened and closed both boxes to see what I'd brought.

"You guys haven't even eaten any yet," he said, grabbing paper plates from one of the cupboards.

"We're about to," Nash told him.

"One of the guys from the team is coming over in a few minutes. I should probably call Just Pizza and order a couple more."

Before he could pull out his phone or we could say anything, a knock rapped on the door.

"Huh, speak of the devil," Porter chuckled as he went to answer. A few moments later, he was back with Parrish on his heels. I couldn't believe it. I came to Nash's place a couple times a week and I'd never run into Parrish, but today of all days...

I ran my hand over my hair, hoping my braid wasn't ragged with escaping tendrils.

Parrish's eyes immediately lit on me, and I dropped my arm, curling my fists in the hem of my oversize sweatshirt. I started to shrink down then realized it was too late. He'd already seen me.

"Avalon," he exclaimed, staring at me until he shook his head as if coming back to himself. He pointed at me. "Hey! I have your phone."

"You do?" I asked, pretending surprise. I had a bet to win, and telling him I was his pen pal wouldn't do.

Wishing I was more graceful, I clumsily unfolded from behind the coffee table where Nash and I had studied, and stood to face Parrish.

I smoothed down my Rustin Loggerheads sweatshirt and forced myself not to knot my hands in the fabric again.

"Yeah," he answered. "But I don't have it with me. Maybe when you're done here, we can go get it."

"She's done," Nash cut in, and I swung my attention toward him, staring at him wide-eyed while silently screaming, What the fuck, Nash?

"Nash!" I protested.

"What?" he said, all innocence. "You finished your assignment, and we weren't making more progress on the other work. You don't have the stats class again 'til next week, so we can pick up on it tomorrow." His eyes flicked over to Parrish then back to me. "Or when you're free again."

He smirked, knowing damn well, I wouldn't make a scene. The glare I shot at him promised I'd deal with him later. I glanced back to the other two men. "Aren't you two going to hang out?"

"Nah, Parrish was just picking up a book he needs." Porter looked over at Parrish. "Give me a sec, and I'll grab that. Then you can take Avalon to get her phone."

Planning Nash's murder, I gathered my books and laptop while Porter left the room. Maybe it was just me, but tension seemed to zing around the room like rogue ping-pong balls in a wind tunnel. Goosebumps lifted on my skin as Parrish studied me, my awareness of his proximity making my body tingle.

"Traitor," I muttered at Nash while I bent near, stuffing my things into my backpack.

"You love me," he laughed.

"Right now, that's up for debate," I growled.

He made a kissy noise at me. "Text me later? Once you have your phone back and all? You're welcome."

Parrish's eyes narrowed on us as I straightened. His jaw clenched, his gaze flicking between Nash and me.

"What?" I asked. Didn't he want to take me with him? "We don't need to go get my phone. We can meet up tomorrow. You don't have to—"

"Here's that book," Porter interrupted as he returned. He handed over a spiral-bound book with a depiction of a hockey game on the cover. "You can keep it. I have a spare."

Parrish nodded then looked over at me, his gaze bouncing between Nash and me again. “Ready?”

“Yeah. Sure,” I agreed, grabbing my heavy backpack off the table. Parrish took it from me before I could sling it over my shoulder. After quick goodbyes, I followed him outside to the hallway then downstairs to the sidewalk.

My stomach growled as I walked, reminding me I hadn’t eaten any of the pizza I’d brought to Nash’s place. And since that was my meal money I’d budgeted for today, I’d have to make do with a granola bar later. I suppressed a sigh. A granola bar and crazy Sheena. Not the night I’d planned.

“My car’s the blue one over there,” he said, indicating to an older-model crossover parked four spaces from the door, beneath one of the lot lights.

“You drove?”

He shrugged. “I don’t live close, and it’s too cold to walk tonight. I take it you didn’t drive over.”

I shook my head. “Don’t have a car. I either walk or Uber everywhere. Mostly, I walk since I live near campus. Nash was going to drive me home tonight, though.”

“He your boyfriend?” Parrish asked, opening the passenger door for me. As if we were on a date...

It’s not a date. Get a grip, Av.

“Nash?” I laughed. “No. We’re just friends. He’s my best friend.”

Parrish nodded, his expression relaxing. Was that why he’d glared at Nash? He’d

been worried about that?

Silently, he put my backpack on the backseat then circled to the driver's seat.

"So...he'll kick my ass if I'm not a gentleman?" he said, starting the car and pulling from the parking space. Warm air blew from the vents, a welcome perk on this chilly night. Nash's car wouldn't even have warmed up by the time we got to my place.

"You'd be lucky if that's what he did," I laughed. "More likely, he'd hack into your accounts and screw up your life."

"I consider myself warned."

We fell silent, and my stomach growled, the sound cutting through the quiet. Heat crawled up my neck in a prickle.

"I haven't eaten dinner," he announced. "Can I take you to grab a bite? On me, since I dragged you away from Porter and Nash's before you had any pizza."

Considering I'd spent my budgeted dinner money on the pizza back at Nash's, then hadn't eaten any of it, I'd be a fool to say no. "Sure?"

He grinned. "Great. I live off campus in the other direction, and there's a diner I like, halfway between here and there."

"Great," I echoed, an entirely different sensation overtaking any hunger pangs as butterflies took off in my middle.

After all these months of anonymous conversations, I was having a date with Parrish.

Sort of. I'd take what I could get, though.

One evening with Parrish? Maybe, it would extinguish my crush on him. Somehow, though, I doubted it.

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Parrish

There was something about Avalon. Talking to her was just so easy, as if we'd been friends for months and hadn't just met today.

"I mean...come on," she said, waving a fry at me as we talked about movies and books, "Legolas wasn't even in The Hobbit. Peter Jackson's dramatic license with those movies is breathtaking."

I nodded, spellbound by the gorgeous girl sitting across from me, her violet eyes flashing with intelligence while she dissected the movie.

Suddenly what she said sank in, hitting me as hard as a speeding freight train.

Memories from other conversations pricked my awareness.

What were the chances? Talk about a twisted seven degrees of separation.

She'd been two people away from me this whole time.

"What?" she asked as I stared at her, taking in her beautiful eyes, the pale skin with freckles across her nose, and her dark brown hair in a long, thick braid over her shoulder. She was gorgeous. Cute. Adorable. And mine. She was mine.

She made a face. "Don't tell me you thought all of that was in that little tiny book."

"You know I don't," I said, a slow smile curling my lips. I slouched back against the

booth's red-vinyl seat and studied her in triumph. Avalon was my AV. This was the woman I'd been talking to for a year. And I'd just won our bet.

"What?" she asked again with a small laugh. She reached for her napkin. "Do I have something on me?"

"You owe me beers and wings at Tarragon —and a naked dance in the Rustin Fountain."

"Oh...shit," she whispered, her eyes widening. She'd been caught, but there wasn't a trace of surprise in her stare.

"Yeah," I said, the word rumbling with amusement. "Gotcha, AV."

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, well, I've known who you were since your third email. It wasn't difficult to figure out which team captain is PL. And I don't care if you think you won, I'm not getting naked in the Rustin Fountain."

"A fully clothed dance then?" I pushed. My lip sucked between my teeth as I studied her. "Maybe, wearing something white and cotton."

"Well, you're a perv. Good to know."

"Fine. Just the wings and beer then," I laughed softly, and she joined me. "So...were you actually planning to meet me in the same place tomorrow?"

"Of course. I want my phone back." Her eyes told me something else. She wanted more than that. So did I.

"I meant what I said in the email today," I told her, letting myself admire her again. My God how had I gotten so lucky?

“That you have my phone?”

I swallowed hard, my palms growing damp.

Yeah...I was going to put myself out there, go there with Avalon.

Regardless that I was captain of the hockey team and had plenty of groupies—or puck bunnies as they were called—I didn’t date a lot.

Didn’t have time for that bullshit. Even this impromptu dinner was an anomaly.

But Avalon aka AV was different. This afternoon, she’d gotten me hard with a single look from her violet eyes, a problem that had sprung up again the moment I’d seen her in Porter’s apartment tonight.

And then when she’d been chatting with Nash, obviously chummy with him, I’d been ready to attack him with one of my hockey sticks.

Or Porter’s since his collection was closer.

“That you’re beautiful. You really are. And now, knowing you’re the girl who’s kept me captivated for the past year—”

“Eleven months,” she offered then winced. “Sorry. I... Big mouth. Works without me thinking sometimes. Obviously.” She cupped a hand over her lips then circled the other, telling me to go on.

“—Who’s kept me captivated for eleven months . Fuck, Avalon. You better not have a guy—”

She dropped her hand. “I don’t.”

I nodded, feeling out of control at the very thought of another guy touching her or kissing her tantalizing mouth. “Good. ‘Cause I’m keeping you.”

“Keeping me? Uh, don’t I have a choice?” she squeaked with a small breathy laugh.

I shook my head. “Nope. I won the bet.”

“The bet was for beer, wings and fountain dancing,” she countered.

“The last of which you’ve told me you’re not going to do, so I’m choosing another prize. I’m gonna kiss you tonight.”

Avalon’s breath caught. She stared at me, her tongue flicking out to moisten her lips. Her wide eyes seemed to spark as she studied me, her pupils trying to overtake the violet of her irises.

Still, she grinned as she pushed away her plate and leaned back in the booth.

“I sure hope I have mints in my purse, then. I had onions on my burger.”

“Not to worry—I have some in the car. Plus, I had onions, too. I didn’t know I’d get to start cashing in on our bet today.”

She laughed. “Don’t count your kisses before they...” She trailed off. “Well, I was going to say hatch, but that doesn’t work.”

Sliding from the booth, I threw enough money for our tip on the table, since I’d already paid.

I offered her my hand, and she took it without hesitation.

As she slid from her seat, her eyes locked on mine while electricity zapped between us again.

There it was, that connection that happened whenever I touched her.

“Thing is,” I said, keeping her hand securely in mine as we walked from the diner. “One of the things you learn in sports is mental simulation.”

“Like fantasy?” she asked as I held open the car door and she climbed in.

“No. It’s rehearsing what’s going to happen.

How the stick will connect with the puck.

How the team will execute plays. How you’re going to feel in my arms. And trust me, I’m counting our kisses and they’re very, very good.

” I shut the door then jogged around to the other side to get in.

After starting the car to get it warming up, I looked over at her.

“It’s a step-by-step run through. The way my hand will skim up your arm.

The way my mouth will slant over yours. The way I’ll hear the sweet little sounds you’ll make.

How I’ll feel your sighs and they will prompt me to go deeper and taste more of you.
”

“Holy crap, Parrish,” she whispered, shifting in her seat and crossing her legs. As she squirmed, my hand gripped tighter on the steering wheel where I’d rested it casually

earlier. My God, I wanted those long legs clenched around me.

I smirked. "Playing sports teaches you a lot."

"So what now?" she asked, fiddling with her fingers.

"Well..." I reached over to grab one of her hands, bringing it to the center console for me to hold.

"First, we can stop at my place and I'll grab your phone.

Then we'll put my number into your phone.

Then I'll drive you to your apartment and we can investigate how well I visualized that kiss.

And...about five seconds after you make it inside, I'll text you about date number two. "

Her teeth sank into her lip as she studied me for a moment, an array of thoughts crossed her eyes, then she smiled shyly. "Okay. I like the sound of all that."

"Okay," I agreed.

We talked about our families on the way to my place.

I told her about where I'd grown up but didn't mention that my parents had disowned me over my choice to pursue a career in hockey, that they'd told me I'd amount to nothing.

At the same time, she mentioned her parents had died a decade ago and she'd been

raised by her older siblings.

Beyond that, she was vague about their relationship.

I squeezed her hand, and we fell into comfortable silence for a few minutes after that—until I swore aloud when I pulled up to the big old house I rented along with seven other guys.

Over a dozen cars were parked nearby, signaling an impromptu party I didn't know a thing about. Fuck, I hadn't been gone that long.

I sighed then lifted Avalon's hand to my lips. "Stay here, yeah? I'll be right back. One of my idiot roommates must have decided a Tuesday night is the perfect time for a kegger."

Annoyed, I ran inside, swimming through the sea of people—far more than the cars outside had indicated—to get to my room. Thankfully, I always locked it, otherwise God knew what I'd find inside on my bed.

After snatching up Avalon's phone, I relocked the door then hurried back outside. One of my roommates stood beside her door, chatting her up. Of fucking course.

"You should really come inside, darlin'," Jackson said, his arm leaned on the roof as he bent toward the window she must have opened to talk to him.

"Back off, Jack. She's mine," I growled.

"Yours?" he scoffed in disbelief. "Since when do you have a girl?"

"Since her. Now back off before you find out where I can shove my hockey stick."

He took a few steps away with his hands up, but he didn't look all that worried.

In fact, he laughed at me. "So violent," he scoffed.

"She must be pretty special for you to get all up in your feels like that." He looked over at my girl.

"Are you sure you don't wanna ditch the Neanderthal and come inside with me? "

"Very sure," she said. "I'm with Parrish."

Jackson sighed heavily, but I knew him. He'd find a willing coed as soon as he walked through the door of our house. "Fine. You two have a good night."

"He's interesting," Avalon said when I settled back beside her and handed over her cell. "His Texas accent comes and goes."

"'Cause he tries to hide it. Get a few drinks in him, and he's as South Texan rancher as they come. Forget about him. Let's get out of here before someone else hits on you."

"I... They won't but...okay. So...I didn't know you lived in a frat house."

"That? No," I laughed. "That's not a frat house. A couple years ago, me and a bunch of guys I know rented the place rather than do campus housing. Then when the guys who were seniors left, a couple new ones came in. It's a revolving door, and despite that party, it's definitely not a frat."

"That's cool. I live in one of the quad-plexes a little less than a quarter mile from Nash. I only have one roommate, but I swear she has seven personalities, so it could be eight of us there, too."

“That sounds...challenging,” I said, heading back toward Porter and Nash’s apartment.

“You have no idea,” she sighed. “She’s...a lot, but like I’ve mentioned in our emails, I had trouble finding a place this past fall when my other apartment fell through. Not much time left until graduation, though. I can deal with her until then.” She pointed. “Up there you’re going to turn right.”

For the next couple minutes, I followed her directions to her place.

“What the hell,” Avalon muttered as we approached.

I followed her stare to the pile of things strewn on the grass.

“Why’s all that stuff in the yard?” I asked slowly.

“That bitch...” she whispered, shaking her head as she stared. When she took a shuddering breath, I had a feeling she was crying—or trying hard not to.

I pulled to the curb, and she got out of the car just as a girl with long blonde hair, an abbreviated tee, and tiny shorts came out with a laundry basket. She dumped the contents onto the lawn.

“What are you doing, Sheena?” Avalon yelled as I rounded the car, taking in what was apparently her life discarded on the lawn.

At least, it was somewhat contained. Immediately, I started calculating if it would all fit in my car.

Probably. I drove a crossover with plenty of room in the back for my hockey gear.

If I shifted my stuff out of the way, I should be able to pack in Avalon's life.

No way was I leaving her here, homeless.

"You're out," the blonde sneered, she kicked at a pile of Avalon's clothes. "You're the worst roommate I've ever had."

"You can't do this! I didn't do anything wrong! I've always paid my rent and my part of everything. You know that. But then you dumped all my stuff in the yard? What the hell!" Avalon argued.

The other woman crossed her arms, still holding the laundry basket's handle in one hand. "Your name's not on the lease. I can do whatever I want—and I want you out. You're so... you. Boring and so..." She waved her red-tipped fingers at Avalon. "Ew."

"Hey, now," I protested, anger rolling through me. How dare she! No one should talk to Av like that.

The roommate ignored me, still spouting her shit at my girl. "Tilly needs a place, and she's moving in."

Avalon's mouth dropped open. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah. You're out," this Sheena chick said as I came up beside Avalon and put my arm around her trembling shoulders. "Who are you?"

"Avalon's boyfriend."

"Pfft. Klutzy, here? Klutzy, nerdy Avayuck doesn't have a boyfriend, and if she did, he certainly wouldn't look like you."

“Baby, you didn’t tell her about me?” I asked Avalon, tipping up her face. My lips brushed over hers. Then I brought my mouth to her ear. “Don’t worry about this troll. You’re coming home with me.”

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Avalon

When Parrish called Sheena a troll, I almost laughed.

It was laugh or cry at that point, and my despair was trying to win.

Sheena had stood there sneering while Parrish and I had packed up my stuff.

I'd refused to let my tears fall while Parrish helped me load my things—mostly clothes, papers and books—into his car.

Breaking me would only fuel her nastiness.

Thankfully, there were a few baskets and my suitcase amongst the items Sheena had tossed out, and my clothing wasn't in jumbled piles on his backseat.

I was doubly thankful that my mom's ring and my personal documents were in a fire safe at Nash's. Even at the beginning of the school year, I hadn't fully trusted Sheena, and clearly, I hadn't been wrong.

Though I'd told him he could take me to Nash, we'd gone back to Parrish's house after my stuff was in the car.

He never let go of my hand all the way there.

Maybe, he knew I was one sideways glance from falling apart.

Who knew? All I knew was an untethered feeling of being whipped about in a storm when I'd thought I was anchored.

How quickly things could change, but I should have seen it coming.

Parrish didn't try to offer a bunch of platitudes, just silently offering his resolute presence once he was driving away from my old apartment.

My heart just about burst, thumping wildly in my chest, when he'd brought my hand to his lips, pressing a kiss on the back, and simply said, "It'll be alright. "

But would it. I was homeless with a month and a half of school left.

With turmoil roiling inside me, I followed him through the back door of his house, so we could avoid most of the party.

He led me into a short hallway then to his room.

When he turned the lock behind us, the sound of it had been loud in the silence that had fallen between us, though with the revelry out front, the house wasn't quiet at all.

He set down the basket of things he'd carried inside for me, then turned, taking a deep breath. We faced each other, both standing beside the bed. How had I gone from studying at Nash's to this, all within the space of a couple hours?

"I can sleep on the floor," he offered. "I'd just go take the couch in the living room but..."

But the party was still going strong. It was loud and crowded, and I actually had no idea how either of us would get any sleep tonight. Thankfully, I didn't have class until noon the next day.

“Don’t you have conditioning in the morning? I remember when we had Shakespeare together that you had some sort of training in the morning.”

“We had Shakespeare together?”

“Yeah.”

“I must have been more fucked up that semester than I’d thought.

Must have been if I didn’t notice a goddess like you in the class.

In my defense, I had a night class that year.

I was there late, then had to get up ass-early for conditioning, then rush to class.

It’s a miracle I even learned anything about The Bard. ”

“You learned he was called The Bard.” I spared him details and didn’t mention that he’d usually sat right beside me, since there was always an empty seat. “So...do you have to be to the rink in the morning?”

“Yeah. We’re getting ready for the championships. I have a half-practice at six,” he answered on a yawn. I suspected he was usually in bed by now.

“Then you can’t sleep on the floor. I’ll—”

“No fucking way,” he interrupted. “There’s no way on earth I’m letting you sleep on the floor while I take the bed.”

His jaw had gone hard again, and his eyes narrowed, telling me I’d have a fight on my hands if I tried to argue.

“Look...” I sighed, at an impasse because I wouldn’t let him take the floor, either. “Porter and Nash trust you, and I know they’d both kick your ass in their own ways if you did something I don’t want. So...why don’t we just...share your bed. It’s a queen, right? We’ll do fine.”

“You’re sure?” he asked, uncertainty and a trace of hope in his tone.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah,” he echoed. “So... There’s something else, before we climb into bed together.”

A shiver cruised down my spine at the rumble in his voice.

“You have weird appendages?” I teased, because we’d gotten way too serious.

“Depends on what you call weird,” he laughed. “I promise to keep my big appendage away from you—for tonight anyway. But I also promised you something else.”

He stepped closer to me, his hand coming up to cup the side of my face.

My breath caught as he pulled me toward him.

His lips slanted over mine in a brush, just like earlier when Sheena had watched us.

But this time, it wasn’t a fleeting touch.

He growled, his mouth pressing more firmly, demanding entrance as I sighed and opened for him.

My arms slipped around his neck. His fingers cupped my cheek before they slipped

back to thread into my hair, forcing my braid to unravel.

Parrish splayed his other hand on my lower back and jerked me into him.

Our bodies aligned, touching chest-to-chest—well, my chest to his upper abs and the ridge of his cock pressed into my belly.

My nipples tightened into aching points and arousal ebbed through my body in waves, my center growing wet and tingling with need.

I went to my toes to get closer, fingers pushing up into his hair. It was just as soft as I'd imagined it to be. Only...I'd never imagined his smell. Fresh, masculine, with a hint of crisp sea air, but holding something dark that crept down into my soul.

Parrish's ironlike hold clamped me to him, taking control, but it didn't frighten me. I wanted exactly what he was delivering. His mouth plundered mine, but it was more than kissing. It was devouring. It was owning.

I moaned, my foot hooking on his calf while I leaned into him. Parrish's fingers inched down, curling into the upper curve of my ass.

A gasp ripped from me when he reared back. "We have to stop. God, I don't want to, but we have to. We have to or I won't be able to keep my promise."

Promise? What promise? Disoriented, I stared at him.

He set me back from him, but the wild look in his eyes screamed what he really wanted. And it wasn't to stop. He wanted me, and it gave me courage.

"It was okay?" I asked. The words held a multitude of questions. Was the kiss okay? Did he want more? Was he disappointed? Would we kiss again? But that was my

insecurity speaking.

“Everything I imagined,” he confirmed, ghosting his curled fingers along my cheek. Needy for touch, his touch, I leaned into the caress.

“Here, here, for mental simulation,” I murmured. My entire body felt flushed, and we were both still panting. If him getting on his kissing game with mental rehearsal led to this, I was all for it.

Parrish chuckled. “Here, here. Thank fuck those lips are mine now.”

“Just imagine what it’ll be like next time.”

“Or after weeks of kissing,” he suggested. “Baby, you can bet I’ll be fantasizing about that.”

My heartrate ramped up again, my pleasure centers sparking back to life after barely just calming. He was thinking of weeks with me? No complaints.

But how had my life turned upside down in less than a day? A day with a really shitty start? Everything before now was worth it.

“We should go to bed,” he murmured. He cupped my cheek, his eyes on my mouth while his thumb traced my bottom lip. It still tingled from his kiss, and I wanted more.

“Let’s,” I agreed, imagining what he’d feel like in me. He was so powerful and big.

“Just to sleep,” he asserted as if reading my lusty thoughts. He probably did. I wasn’t great at hiding my feelings.

“Okay,” I grumbled, fighting a pout. He was right. We should wait.

“Fuck, but I want to make out with you, though. Can’t. My big appendage will get ideas I can’t cash in on. Not tonight.”

Fair enough. I wasn’t the kind of girl to leap into bed with a guy she’d just met. Though technically...I supposed I actually was getting into bed with him. I almost giggled at the thought, a sure sign I was overtired.

Parrish raised an eyebrow at me. “Do you want the wall side or this side?”

“You have to be up early for practice, so I guess, the wall?” I said, though it sounded like more of a question.

He nodded. “I’ll probably be back before you have to get up.” He walked over to a door I’d thought was his closet and pulled it open. “I pay more for my room than most of the other guys do. Only a few of us have our own bathrooms.”

“Nice.” I was glad I wouldn’t need to venture down the hallway to communal facilities. Eight men, one bathroom? Ew. Thankfully, Parrish’s looked sparkling.

“You can use it first while I find something to wear as pajama pants.”

Which meant he usually slept naked or just wore his underwear.

I shouldn’t want to explore that when I was trying to calm my worked up libido, but I did.

I really did. What was going on with me?

Parrish had released a part of me I didn’t recognize.

I didn't hate it, but I needed to lock it down before I scared him off.

God sake, get yourself under control, Avie.

"Thanks," I blurted. Grabbing what I needed from the laundry basket we'd carried in, I dashed into the bathroom. It smelled like him—fresh, outdoorsy, masculine—and I almost groaned. Though tempted to linger, I rushed through what I needed to do.

When I came back, Parrish took my place in the bathroom, and I climbed into the bed, scooting close to the wall, turning my back to where he'd sleep. When he was finished, Parrish flipped off the light on the bedside table then slipped beneath the blankets beside me.

"Thanks, Parrish," I said into the dark. "I don't know what I would have done tonight if you weren't there to help me."

"You're welcome. But don't sell yourself short. You would have called Nash. It would have been okay."

"Yeah," I said. "You're right. But...I'm glad it was you."

A hand curled on my elbow, gentle, reassuring. "I'm glad it was me, too."

"I kinda feel bad for Sheena, though," I said, wryly.

"You do? Why?" he asked, shock heavy in his voice.

"Nash is gonna decimate her."

"Maybe. She'll deserve it, though. And Porter's dad is close friends with the school's president. That might not bode well for her, either," Parrish offered.

“No, it might not.” But Sheena hadn’t done this to Porter. And her stunt wasn’t on campus or related to a university class or organization, so it might not endanger her status at all.

“Is she always like that?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Why?” The question was filled with disbelief, as if he couldn’t imagine someone being so...like Sheena.

“I don’t know. She’s constantly accusing me of things, taking my belongings, flying off the handle about weird stuff. This morning she was screaming at me for eating the last of her strawberries—”

“But you’re allergic to strawberries,” he said, obviously remembering that from our emails.

“Yup. And she knows that, too. But I guess she’s in the past, and I should see that as a good thing and forge forward.” That’s what I’d been doing since I was twelve.

Not wanting to discuss my ex-roommate further and knowing Parrish needed to get some sleep before practice, I lapsed into silence.

Sleep didn’t come easily. Staying still, I stared into the darkness and tried to acclimate to having someone in bed with me—and to the noise.

I certainly couldn’t block out the raucous laughter and yells from the main part of the house.

Behind me, Parrish made a low sound in his throat, then I felt arms go around me and

he pulled me toward him. I squeaked, and my free arm flailed out when my back hit his chest.

He captured the limb loosely under his muscled bicep.

“Relax. Go to sleep,” he murmured, pressing a kiss to the back of my head. That was it. No groping. No grinding against me. He just held me, and I quickly realized he didn’t plan to do anything but that. He shifted his arm to around my waist, freeing the limb he’d briefly captured.

Tension drained from me, then his warmth, and the steady rise and fall of his even breathing lulled me into feeling safe. Safer. Secure. With no worries for a few hours.

His heat soothed me, and soon, I floated into that state between sleep and wake, drifting...drifting... Until I encountered dreams of Parrish and everything else faded away.

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Parrish

“This is bullshit,” I complained, skating laps around the rink, my limbs burning with fatigue and the rest of me begging for caffeine.

“Better than suicide drills,” Porter said, blades digging into the ice as he sped along with ease, his JetSpeed hockey stick sweeping back and forth in front of him as if he were dribbling a puck.

“Yeah, I was just up too late. Feel like hammered shit.”

“Hot date? Wait...weren’t you with Avalon?”

“Yeah, her roommate kicked her out last night. She’s crashing with me for the time being.

” For as long as she wanted actually, but I didn’t say so to him.

Avie and I had to discuss it first, and I needed to convince her to stay if she proved reluctant.

Last night with her in my arms...? Perfection.

The only thing better would have been the assurance she’d be there every night.

And sex. But that was a different thing altogether.

“That bitch did what?” Porter exclaimed. “Fuck. Can’t even say I’m surprised. Every time I turn around, she’s doing something psycho to Avie. Nash is going to lose his shit when he hears this.”

“That’s what Av said.”

“Maybe, she can wait until tomorrow to tell him, if she hasn’t already.”

“Why?”

He looked around. “I need a plus one for my parents’ anniversary party. Tonight, I’m asking him if he can pretend to be my date for Saturday evening.”

My brows raised, not that he could see it with my helmet on. “Good luck with that.”

“Gonna need it. But my cousins are rabid about matchmaking, so I’m desperate. But if he’s worried about Avalon, he’ll want to be taking care of her—”

“Say no more, I’ve got you,” I told him as the coach whistled and sent us all to the locker room.

“Thanks for taking care of Avie, too,” he said. “I know Nash is her best friend, but she’s gotten to be almost like a sister to me over the past couple years. I’ll throw gloves with anyone who screws with her.”

And I considered myself warned with that. Porter would never hit a woman, but he’d brawl with me if I hurt his friend. He needn’t worry. Hurting her was the last thing I intended.

“I feel like she’s the one,” I told him quietly as we headed for our lockers, each set up like a stall with narrow walls between them. “I just need her to feel it, too.”

“Dude,” he scoffed, dropping his stick into his cubby and yanking off his helmet. “You met her last night.”

“Not really. It’s a long story, but we’ve been talking since last year.”

He froze and turned wide eyes on me. “Wait...” he crowed. “Are you the anonymous pen pal? Oh my God! That’s priceless.”

“Not so anonymous. She knew who I was almost the whole time,” I confessed.

“She did not!” he exclaimed. “That little sneak. She had us believing she had no idea. Nash is gonna give her hell.”

I laughed. “Maybe, don’t tell him yet. Get your whole gay for me thing out of the way first.”

“Yeah, good plan,” he agreed.

Grabbing what I needed, I headed for the showers.

It was still pretty early, and I wanted to get back to my house before Avalon woke up.

I sped through my clean up, then raced toward home, stopping along the way for coffees and pastries, both sweet and savory varieties, from Midnight Java, the local coffee place.

I had no idea what she’d like, if she even drank coffee, but I crossed my fingers it was the right move.

Eventually, I’d know exactly what she liked. I’d learn everything about her.

Luck was with me, and Avalon was still sound asleep when I slipped into my room.

I wasn't shocked. It had been a late night, and she'd had trouble sleeping with the party going on—my house mates and I would definitely be having a talk about that.

An unannounced party on a Tuesday night just wasn't acceptable.

Several of us were on Rustin's sports teams and actively training.

A problem for later. I didn't want to bother with any of them right now. My only focus was on the woman sleeping in my bed.

I sat on the edge of the mattress.

"Good morning, Sleeping Beauty," I said quietly, caressing her cheek with my curled fingers. Avalon jerked, tensing. Almost immediately, she seemed to remember where she was and realize it was me beside her. She relaxed and made a soft sound, burying her face in the pillows.

"Parrish," she whispered, her voice rough with sleep.

"I brought coffee and food," I offered in the same quiet tone. It seemed in keeping with the moment, an unfamiliar intimacy surrounding us. Unfamiliar but right.

She hummed, turning onto her back and opening her eyes. She peered sleepily over at me, smiling softly. "You didn't have to."

Leaning in, I brushed my lips over hers. "I wanted to. Sit up, and I'll bring over the food. We can have a picnic on the bed."

Scooting upright, she leaned against the headboard and tucked the blankets around

herself. I handed her a coffee then grabbed my own and the two bags of food. I offered the latter to her, as well.

“I didn’t know what you’d want,” I explained.

“This is sweet of you,” she said.

“Can be sweeter,” I said. “Stick around.”

She bit her lip and glanced around my space. “I think I’d like to, but I can’t impose on—”

“Stop,” I interrupted. “You’re not imposing. You can stay as long as you want—to the end of the school year, even. If you can put up with me and with the guys, that is.”

“Won’t your roommates be mad at you having a girl move in?”

“Nah. Hell, Egland’s girlfriend stays over most nights. She might even live here, for all I know.” I shrugged. “I’ll introduce you to all of them later, so they’ll be cool when you come and go.”

She nodded and pulled out one of the egg, cheese and sausage pastries. “I love these.”

“Phew,” I breathed, exaggerating my relief. “I didn’t know what to get.”

“Well, you scored with this.”

“Can I score again and take you out tonight? On a planned date rather than an impromptu stop at a hole-in-the-wall diner.”

“Yes. I’d really like that. Parrish, thank you again for—”

I pressed my mouth to hers, stopping her words. “Don’t thank me. I like having you here.”

Avalon smiled shyly, tucking a long strand of her hair behind her ear. “I like being here.”

“Good. Now, tell me about your day. Hopefully, our schedules will mesh up.” Watching her, I took a sip of my coffee. We’d mesh up alright, even if I had to adjust my own day to make it happen.

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Avalon

“Holy crap, that’s Parrish Locksby,” my coworker, Denny, breathed. He’d just arrived to relieve me from my shift at the library’s circulation desk.

I looked up from placing my notebook in my backpack. “You know him?”

“Pfft...” he scoffed. “Of course. Captain of the hockey team, second year running, headed to the pros? Just about everyone knows him. Never seen him in here, though.”

“I’m sure he reads and studies,” I laughed, amused by Denny’s obvious hero worship. He was usually someone obsessed with Dungeons & Dragons and a good twenty-sided die. I’d never seen him star-struck over a jock.

“He’s heading over here,” my coworker hissed. “Let me help him when he gets here.”

I waved a hand. “I just finished my shift, but I don’t think he’s here for help.”

Denny rolled his eyes at me. “Well, then why is he here?”

He cut off as Parrish reached us. Parrish grinned at me, his avid gaze eating me up, making me kinda wish I wasn’t wearing my gray cardigan and tweed pants. He didn’t seem to mind, though.

“Hey, sexy librarian. You about done here?”

“Yeah,” I answered.

“This isn’t a hook-up place. Don’t talk to her like that,” Denny butted in, sounding annoyed.

“Denny, it’s okay,” I said. “He’s—”

“No, it’s not.” He glared at Parrish. “I thought you were cooler than that.”

Parrish’s brows rose, but his amusement was clear. “I think you got the wrong idea. I’m picking her up from work, not trying to have a hookup. She’s my girlfriend.”

Girlfriend? A warm flush flooded through my body, and I couldn’t stop my wide smile. If I was his girlfriend, then Parrish was my boyfriend. Right?

He reached over the desk to snag my backpack.

“Girlfriend?” Denny echoed.

“Yeah. Is there a problem here?” Parrish asked. His arm slung around my waist, tugging me close to his side.

“No problem,” I cut in. “Parrish, this is my coworker, Denny. We’ve worked together for a couple years now. He’s kind of protective...apparently. Denny, this is my...um...” I swallowed, feeling like I’d dropped into one of my manuscripts. “Boyfriend. This is my boyfriend, Parrish.”

Parrish thrust his hand out to the other man. “Nice to meet you.”

“Yeah! Wow!” Denny said, pumping Parrish’s hand and forgetting his momentary animosity. It seemed as if he deemed everything well in the world again. “Nice to meet you! I didn’t know Avalon was dating anyone. I don’t like it when guys pick on her.”

“Pick on her?” Parrish echoed, his voice darkening.

“Yeah...some assholes like to play jokes—”

“It’s only happened a couple times,” I cut in. “It’s nothing.”

But Parrish looked pissed. He suddenly looked like he’d fight all my dragons and I wondered if this was what his competitors saw before he and his hockey stick kicked their ass.

His arm tightened around me. “It’s unacceptable. You tell me if that happens again.” He turned his glare on Denny. “Or you tell me. Give me names.”

My coworker nodded, wide-eyed. “Will do, man. Um, you guys have a good night. Avalon, I want details later. You’ve been holding out on me.”

I smiled weakly, but Parrish was already leading me away. He pressed a kiss to the top of my head.

“I thought you were going to wait for me at the car,” I said.

“You ashamed of me?” he teased.

I huffed out a single laugh. “No. Of course not.”

“I missed you. I figured I’d come get you.”

I kinda wondered how that was possible. He’d had class, practice, then a team meeting while I’d been working.

“Do you need to go home before we grab dinner?” he asked.

I glanced down. Maybe.

“You look amazing...my sexy little librarian,” he said as if reading my thoughts, but then I was learning that Parrish was super good at reading people. That trait probably served him well on the ice.

“We can go from here,” I agreed as he opened the car door for me, and I slipped inside. “What did you have in mind?” I continued once he slid behind the steering wheel and started the engine.

“Tarragon.”

“Oh...” I couldn’t afford that until I got paid. They might serve wings and beer, but to say Tarragon was pricey was an understatement.

“For our date. Not to collect on the bet,” he said, guessing my thoughts. “Honestly, you’re sleeping in my bed. I feel like I’ve gotten my prize already.”

A flush rose through me.

“Are you for real?” I asked, the words escaping my big mouth before I thought to stop them.

“What?” he laughed in disbelief.

“I’m...sorry. It’s just... Look, I’m not all down on myself.

I’m smart. I’m talented, and I know I’m a good person.

But, I’m not usually people’s first choice.

Or second. There's a reason why jerks like to play jokes on me at the library, like Denny mentioned.

I'm just... It just...surprises me." I finished on a whisper when I saw how white-knuckled Parrish's fingers were on the steering wheel.

He didn't say a word. He swallowed hard. Then he veered into a parking spot since we hadn't yet left the parking lot. He slammed the gearshift into park.

"Get out," he growled.

Dread dawned through me, and I didn't move. Couldn't move. I stared at him, wishing I could take back my words. "I... Parrish..."

"Get out," he repeated.

My whole body went cold. With numb fingers, I grappled with the door handle, fumbling before I opened it then climbed out.

Shit, I'd really screwed up. Tears were filling my eyes, blinding me as I turned to get my backpack from the backseat and slammed into a rock-hard chest. Parrish's arm went around my waist, crushing me to him, and his mouth slammed over mine. Demanding. Possessive.

Both his hands came up, cupping the sides of my neck, his thumbs holding my face right where he wanted it. When he suddenly pulled his mouth away, I gasped

"This is not a game for me," he rasped, his lips so close they brushed mine when he spoke. "I'm not playing with you. I'm not ashamed to be seen with you, to be with you. I will fucking stand here kissing you until you melt, until every damn person on this campus sees how for real I am about you."

I whimpered as his mouth sealed over mine again, pressing my lips open for him.

I moaned, lifting into him while his tongue slid against mine, claiming, taking, and making it clear that he wanted me and he wasn't afraid of anyone else knowing it.

I was boneless before he stopped kissing me again, leaning his forehead against mine and staring into my eyes.

"We all clear?" he asked.

"Clear," I agreed.

"Good. Let's go." He reached around me and opened the car's door. It was only then I realized there were quite a few people nearby, some openly watching, some pretending not to, and one or two not so covertly taking pictures or video.

Parrish apparently saw what I did, but he didn't seem to care. He brushed his lips over mine again. "Let them look. You're mine, and they can all fuck off."

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Avalon

“I’ve seen nuns hustle faster than you guys. Get the lead out! Go go go!”

I wasn’t sure what the coach was yelling about.

Players tore past me in a blur as the team raced from one side of the ice to the other, the sound of blades scraping across the ice loud in the empty stadium.

It thrilled me. And I was riveted to the men doing cardio conditioning laps.

They weren’t even running plays, but excitement vibrated through me as I watched the action on the other side of the glass.

Until that morning, I’d never been to a hockey game—or an ice rink, to be honest. That this wasn’t actually a Loggerheads game didn’t dull the experience.

I couldn’t believe the speed with which these men moved.

How they didn’t all die with the way their hockey sticks swung around in front of them stunned me.

I would have tripped over the end of the thing and been stabbed by the handle inside of five minutes.

My eyes were glued to Parrish. He was a big man, powerful, but he looked so much bigger in all his gear, several inches taller on his blades. My superman on skates. He

commanded the ice just as easily as he did my body, and I was complete putty in his hands.

Like last night.

After dinner at Tarragon , we'd headed back to the house and gone directly to his room. We'd only run into one of his roommates on the way, so I still hadn't met most of them, but yesterday, it was the last thing on either of our minds.

We'd barely cleared the door when Parrish had me on the bed, his big body looming over me as his stormy eyes met mine, igniting fires inside me.

"I want you," he'd growled.

"Yes," I'd agreed. I'd been ready since his accidental tackle. That aside, our kiss against his car had left me on edge.

I'd ripped at his shirt while he unfastened one more button on my blouse then yanked it and my cardigan up and over my head. Then we were chest-to-chest, save for my bra. His hands and mouth caressed everywhere they could touch while his hips wedged between my legs.

Even now, my thighs pressed together when I recalled how we'd moved together.

By the time his mouth returned to mine, I'd been ready to rip off the rest of our clothes and really feel him everywhere.

If only.

I frowned, my focus shifting back to the goalie who'd tackled some guy to the ice. I jumped to my feet, transfixed as Parrish and Porter tried to break it up and the coach

yelled.

It was too much like the turn last night had taken, pandemonium erupting before Parrish and I could have sex—well, except for the extra people, obviously.

Just as Parrish had skimmed his hand to the button of my jeans, a fight had broken out in the house.

And escalated. When we'd heard something shatter, Parrish had sworn profusely and climbed off the bed.

After a quick, hard kiss that left me breathless and wanting, he'd stormed away to deal with the brawl.

Meanwhile, Nash had called me all freaked out because Porter had asked him to be gay for the night this weekend. My friend was worried his roommate would discover his secret and the subsequent crush he'd been harboring.

I'd spent over an hour talking him through it. By the time we ended the call, the yelling hadn't subsided in the other part of the house.

I waited.

I scrolled on my phone.

I got ready for bed.

Still, no Parrish.

By the time he'd finished mediating, and they'd apparently had a house meeting, too, I was asleep.

I had no idea when he'd slipped into bed, but he didn't wake me until this morning, and that was only because he'd promised I could come watch practice.

To my extreme crankiness, there'd been no time for more than a couple kisses.

No lie, I was bitter.

The morning kiss was not enough, even if it had made my toes curl and my entire body ache with need. I wanted him. I wanted to feel him over me. In me.

With our schedules, there was no prayer of us hooking up until tonight, though.

We both had classes, and I had my shift at the library.

After that, I was meeting up with Nash while Parrish had practice—though why the team was having a second practice today, I didn't know.

He'd said something about it being just watching film, whatever that meant.

A tap on the glass in front of me startled me, and I jumped, realizing I'd been zoned out as I'd thought about last night.

Parrish smiled at me from the other side of the barrier.

Both his hands, one wrapped around his hockey stick, rested on the glass while he gave me the lopsided grin I loved, his eyes heating me up.

"Fifteen minutes," he said, but I more read his lips than actually heard him. Then he pointed, indicating for me to meet him up on the concourse outside the rink. We'd discussed that earlier.

I nodded.

“Fifteen minutes,” I mouthed back. Satisfied with my answer, he skated off. I returned to my seat and leaned back, imagining a hockey-playing hero in one of my books. Wouldn’t happen, since I wrote romantasy, but I could ponder. I’d barely settled when my phone trilled with a text. This early?

I pulled it from my backpack, figuring it must be Nash, and saw I actually had a pair of missed messages. One from my brother, Benedict, and one from Sheena. Seriously? I opened my brother’s first, figuring it would be more palatable.

Ben: Do you need money? Your roommate texted me to tell me that you didn’t pay your rent.

I stared at his words, open-mouthed.

That troll! And honestly, of all the big bitch balls.

What was wrong with her? She knew my brother could request money from the trust set up for me after my parents’ death.

I didn’t understand the logistics of it, and I’d never requested any of the money that would come to me when I graduated. Sheena knew about that access, though.

Me: No. I do not. I paid my bills, and she’s lying, which is pretty shitty of her. She kicked me out of the apartment, even though I’d already paid my part for the month.

Me: I have proof.

I added the latter, because I knew he’d ask. I could just imagine the annoyed look on his face as he dealt with this.

Ben: She kicked you out of the apartment. What did you do?

Seriously? He just assumed it was me being the problem?

Me: I'm fine. Thanks for asking.

Annoyed, I didn't wait for him to answer and thumbed over to Sheena's message, which I figured would be just as annoying.

It was a picture of Parrish and me kissing against his car. Hot. But the nasty name she called me in the text beneath it wasn't so great.

"Everything okay? I thought you were going to meet me out on the concourse?" Parrish said from behind me. When I glanced up, he was looking over my shoulder. "Send me that pic. But...what the fuck? Who said that to you?"

"Sheena." I stood, shoving my phone in my pocket while Parrish scooped up my backpack.

"What's her hangup with you—besides her being batshit?" he asked.

"No idea. She texted my brother and told him I didn't pay the rent this month.

Basically demanding money from him. That was the other issue I was just dealing with.

Too bad for her, I have proof she's lying.

My name might not be on the lease, but I always went down to the leasing office and paid my portion.

I have the receipt and a debit showing on my account.

I think she's just miserable, so she makes everyone else miserable, too. ”

“Misery loves company?” he quipped.

I shrugged then leaned into his side as he wrapped his arm around me. “ Company is wondering if we have time to grab a coffee before class.”

“Definitely. My company can have anything she wants.”

I chuckled, setting aside the annoyances for now and focusing on my man. “Remember you said that later. Watching you in action got me all worked up—particularly that stretching thing you did, where you looked like you were humping the ice.”

“Should I be affronted at being objectified?” he teased. He didn't seem offended, instead pulling me tighter against him.

I peered up at him, so happy he was mine. Everything else faded away when we were together.

“Will it get me another of those hot kisses against the car?” I asked.

He pressed his lips to the top of my head. “Like I said. Whatever you want.”

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:23 am

Avalon

“So you’re fucking the captain of the hockey team, now?”

Having just finished a text to the man in question, I froze, before I slowly turned toward Sheena.

She’d been blowing up my phone with nonsense all day, and I’d ignored her.

Unfortunately, I hadn’t seen her approach the table at Midnight Java where Nash and I had spent the afternoon studying after my library shift.

Extra unfortunately, everyone around us had heard her accusation, too.

“Excuse me?” I asked, my tone low with outrage as I stood.

“That’s who was with you the other night and helped you pack your shit. That’s who you were practically fucking up against a car yesterday. You think I don’t know who he is? Everyone knows who he is.”

“Wait? What?” Nash asked.

“Oh, that’s rich. You don’t know? She’s fucking Parrish Locksby,” Sheena informed him, sneering. “Pictures of them are all over social media.”

“I’m not—”

“So what if she is?” Nash cut in, surprising me because he tended to be less confrontational, shying away from most social interactions, save for people he was close to. He turned to me. “What does she mean that Parrish helped you to pack?”

“Oh, I kicked her loser ass out a couple nights ago,” Sheena informed him before I could answer.

He stood, a slow fury dawning across his face, his posture practically hulking out. “You...did... what?”

Rounding the table in a flash, my klutziness thankfully on break, I grabbed his arm before he could step toward her. That was the last thing we needed. I didn’t want Nash getting in trouble because Sheena was nasty.

An arm went around me, holding me back, too. Parrish. I couldn’t believe his timing. I hadn’t realized he was so nearby when he’d texted to see where I was.

He pressed a kiss to my cheek.

“Hey, babe. Hi, Nash,” he said, greeting us. “What she means is, when I pulled up to drop off Avie after our date, Sheena had dumped all Av’s stuff out on the lawn.” His hand tightened on my waist, the only portent of his tension. “So I took care of it.”

“So what is this you have going on?” Sheena asked, snidely, waving her hand around in a judgy manner, her disgust written on her face. “A pity fuck for the ugly duck? Because why would you be with her? She’s so...”

“Sweet? Kind? Smart? Beautiful?” Parrish offered. “Inside and out. And if I were you...I’d shut the fuck up before everyone finds out exactly how ugly you are.”

“How dare you!” she exclaimed.

“How dare you ?” he growled in a low, dangerous tone. Sheena clearly didn’t recognize the thin ice beneath her.

“Are you threatening me?” she shrilled.

“Fuck’s sake,” I muttered and pulled away from Parrish to step between the pair. “He’s not threatening you.” I glanced around pointedly. “But could you just stop? You’re making a scene.”

“I will ruin you,” she yelled at me. What was her problem? I just couldn’t fathom why she was like this. It made no sense.

“And I will report you for harassment if you don’t stop blowing up my phone, stalking me and contacting my family.

” I didn’t know if she was following me around—or why —but she never came to Midnight Java because she thought only losers hung out there.

Still, morbid curiosity wanted to know how she intended to ruin me , but Parrish nudged me farther away from my ex-roommate, placing himself closer to her.

“Well, that escalated fast,” Nash deadpanned.

He turned to me, moving so he was shoulder-to-shoulder with Parrish forming a wall between me and Sheena.

I hoped she would leave when she realized we wouldn’t engage with her anymore.

“Is she always like this? I knew she was bad, but damn, she’s kinda a psycho bully. ”

I winced. “Usually not so public about it.”

Despite how it had come about, I was really glad I didn't share an apartment with Sheena anymore, but I couldn't help the trickle of fear at her words. I didn't have a bunch of secrets, but had she gone through my things? Gotten into my passwords or private journal?

"Do you need to couch surf for a while?" Nash asked.

"She doesn't," Parrish practically growled, his fingers locked around mine. "I've got Avie covered."

Sometimes, literally.

A tremble rolled through me, my pleasure centers coming to life—though in truth, they'd perked up the moment Parrish had made himself known a few minutes ago.

I sent him a small smile, remembering all the kissing and exploring we'd done over the past few days. Were things moving fast? Yes. But in essence, we'd been learning about each other for almost a year. So, really, it wasn't that fast.

"You're sure?" Nash looked back at me, clearly wanting to hear the answer from me and not my protective boyfriend.

"Yeah. I'm going to stay with Parrish until the end of the semester."

"Longer," Parrish rumbled, sending another thrill of arousal through me.

"I knew you were fucking him," Sheena sneered.

Nash turned his glare on her. "You're still here? God sake. Take a hint, Satanic Barbie. Go do your evil elsewhere and leave Avalon alone."

She flipped her hair then crossed her arms, lifting her chin in challenge.

“Look,” I said before she could start spewing more crap. “I let it go when you dumped all my stuff on the lawn, even though I’ve paid more than my share of the expenses. But you going to my brother and sister and lying...?”

Because yeah, I’d gotten texts from my sister today telling me she didn’t have time for my bullshit problems.

“That’s unacceptable,” I continued.

“None of it is,” Parrish muttered.

I didn’t acknowledge that and just focused on Sheena. She needed to be dealt with once and for all, so she wasn’t a shadow looming over me for the rest of my time at Rustin.

“ But ...” I drew out the word for emphasis.

“If you don’t stop, I’ll go to the administration about you.

There’s no reason for you to harass me. Just leave me alone.

It’s not your concern what I do. It’s not like Parrish is your boyfriend or that you’re in any way connected to the hockey team.

I don’t think you even met Parrish before the other night.

So if I’m with him or if I’m not with him, it doesn’t matter to you.

What I do or do not do with him isn’t your concern. ”

“He’s a star, heading for the pros and you’re...” Her scathing gaze raked over me. “A nerdy mouse. And you’re dating out of your weight range. Literally.”

A collective gasp seemed to go up around us, and I swore Nash and Parrish turned to stone.

The verbal blow knocked me back in mortification, tears pricking my eyes.

Sure, I wasn’t rail thin. And my hair wasn’t a cloud of golden corn silk around my shoulders.

It was a muddy dark brown that tended to get in my way, so I always kept it in a long braid that hung over one shoulder.

And no, I didn’t dress in expensive, fashionable clothes.

When I wasn’t at the library working, I lived in jeans and T-shirts or sweatshirts.

I had exactly two nice blouses and one nice dress.

I didn’t glide; I usually tripped. I wasn’t part of the popular crowd.

But...with Parrish, I’d forgotten all that.

“Nash,” Parrish said quietly.

“Yeah?” my friend snapped.

“Will you grab Avie’s stuff and bring it to my car?” Parrish didn’t wait for a reply before he swung me over his wide, muscular shoulder.

“Sheena...and I mean this with my whole being,” he growled, his tone deadly. “Fuck off and never speak to Avalon again. Because if you do, you’ll be the one ruined.”

She sputtered, and almost before I realized what was happening, he pushed past her and was out the door of Midnight Java . A cheer went up behind us, and Sheena yelled.

“Parrish!” I cried when we were on the sidewalk and the door closed, muting the cheer behind us. “Put me down! I’m too—”

“Don’t you dare tell me you’re too heavy,” he growled, not slowing as he strode toward the student lot where he’d parked his car. His free hand smacked over my ass. “You’re fucking perfect, and that girl is just a jealous bitch. She wishes she could be as great as you.”

“That was fantastic!” Nash exclaimed. I craned my head to see him jogging toward us with his backpack over his shoulder while he carried mine. Parrish took it from him, not slowing a bit or showing any sign of his burden being too heavy.

It was only at the passenger side of his car that he set me on my feet. His hands came up to cup my face, and he leaned in. “You should be sleeping with the captain of the hockey team.”

“I mean...technically I am,” I murmured, caught in the tractor beam of his gaze. Every ion of my body was drawn to him, my pulse thrumming through my veins and tension pulling in my core.

He slowly shook his head. “You know what I mean.”

“I do.”

“So do I,” Nash piped in. “And frankly, it’s too much information. Babes, call me later. I want all the blow-by-blow of what went down—without any private TMI details. Bye, Parrish. Take care of my girl or you’ll be sorry.”

Parrish broke our gaze to glare over my shoulder at Nash. “She’s my girl.”

Nash scoffed but took off the other way, heading back toward his apartment.

“Tell me there’s nothing between you two,” Parrish said. “I don’t want to be a jealous ass.”

“No can do, hockey god,” I said, and Parrish’s grip on my waist tightened. I curled my fingers on his cheek. “He’s my best friend. I love him, and he has a huge place in my life. But romantically. Not a thing. Also, he won’t admit it, but he has a massive crush on his roommate.”

“Porter?”

“Yup.”

Parrish laughed, the sound almost evil.

“What?” I demanded.

“It’s just too perfect. Porter asked him to be his fake date to some thing he has to go to. And Nash has a crush on him. I can only imagine how that will go.”

“For one, Nash is freaking out. I had to talk him off the wall last night. But, right now, I’d rather imagine how things will go for us. Did you mean what you said in there? About me? Us?”

“Every word. You’re perfect. And you’re perfect for me. I mean, fuck, my dick’s been hard since I tackled you the other day.”

“Maybe, you should see a doctor about that,” I teased. But I couldn’t help biting my lip, trying to hide my smile at the idea I’d done that to him.

“No,” he said, tugging me to stand between his legs, my chest flush against his, as he leaned back against the side of his car. “I think I just need to see more of you.”

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Parrish

“Well, hello again, beautiful,” Jackson said as Avalon and I walked into the house through the kitchen door.

He was leaning against the counter, sipping coffee, probably because he had his regular bartending gig tonight after his early evening class.

His dark eyes scanned over Avalon, appreciation on his face.

Normally, that would have pissed me off, but today, I hoped it gave confirmation to what I told my girl. She was gorgeous.

Still, I narrowed my eyes at my house mate, my arm tight around Avie’s waist. “She’s still mine, Jack.”

“Yeah, well...” He looked over at her. “When you get tired of this over-muscled, lug head, I’ll be around.”

“Um...thanks?” she said then looked up at me. “I probably won’t need to take you up on that—”

“Not in this lifetime,” I replied, my voice rumbling as my possessive side bristled at the idea of him edging in on my woman.

Avalon’s hand trailed along my lower spine then into my back pocket.

Her fingers flexed on my ass cheek and distracted me from my irritation.

Tipping my head toward her, I pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

“S’okay,” Jackson said, waving away the conversation. “I have a line-up at work.”

“You’re not gonna find Miss Right that way,” I told him.

He laughed, lifting his cup to his mouth again. “No, but I’ll find plenty of Miss Right Now and her sisters. And that’s just fine with me. I’m not settling down any time soon—if ever.”

“Good. Just remember Avalon isn’t one of your Miss Right Now candidates,” I warned him.

She grinned up at me. “You sure about that? ‘Cause I thought...”

“Definitely right now,” I assured her. “And later and next week and next month... For me only .” I glanced over at Jackson. “Avie is staying here until the end of the semester, so behave.”

He toasted me with his cup and nodded. “Welcome to the house, Avie .”

“Thanks. See you later then,” she said, taking my hand.

“Later,” he said, watching as we left the kitchen. Peering over my shoulder, I raised an eyebrow, and he shook his head at me. “You know I play, but I don’t poach.”

“I know. See you later. Have a good night.”

“You, too. And don’t forget the walls are thin in this old place.”

Yeah, last night had sure proved that when it ruined my plans.

The last few years, I'd enjoyed the summers when most of my house mates were away for the break.

Only a few of us stayed behind, and every August when everyone was back, I considered getting my own place, but it didn't take long to get used to the constant noise.

I certainly didn't want anyone hearing the sweet sounds Avie would make when I claimed her.

As I followed her through the living room then into my bedroom down the hallway, I considered rearranging my furniture, so the bed was on the opposite wall.

Then we were alone in my room with the door shut, and I stopped thinking of anything but my girl.

She stood beside our bed, biting her lip. Her fingers clasped together at her waist as I dropped our backpacks onto the chair beside me.

"I hope you know everything she said is bullshit." I didn't say Sheena's name. Av knew.

She frowned, huffing out a quiet sigh. "Was it? I'm not very..." She pulled at her sweatshirt. "There's nothing glam or posh about me. And I trip over my feet or knock into things more often than most people do. I really am klutzy and I have the bruises to prove it."

"I don't care. None of that matters to me—not negatively. You're perfect just as you are. Besides, there's nothing fancy about me, either."

She lifted a brow. “Okay, Hockey Captain.”

I shook my head. “Really. I’m just a guy who’s good at his sport.

I, uh, I grew up in a really strict family in Michigan—not a cult but probably as close as you can get.

I’ve always been good at hockey. My parents didn’t like that, but they let me play—in exchange for me doing extra chores or doing additional studies at church while I kept straight-A grades.

Backfired and they were irate when I got the scholarship to play hockey here. ”

“Oh...Parrish...”

I shrugged off the sympathy because I knew I was better off.

“They disowned me. Which is neither here nor there, really. My point is... I don’t bother with the popular crowd as Sheena implied.

My brother and two sisters still live in the circumstances I escaped.

I just want to go pro, so I can get them out of there before they’re forced into marriages they don’t want and locked into that group . ”

Her hand skimmed down my arm, and she squeezed just above my elbow. “No judgment, but that sounds kinda like a cult, Parrish.”

“Like I said... It’s probably as close as you can get.” Why were we talking about this? I wanted to get naked with Avie and—

“Are you still in touch with your siblings?” she asked, derailing my lust-filled thoughts. If I had my way, they’d be her family soon, too, so she had a right to details.

“Yeah. I can’t call them or send anything to the house, but my old coach helps me to get in touch with my brother.

He and his twin sister are eighteen this summer, so what I do with my life is critical to them right now —same with my sister who’s almost two years older than them.

So far, she’s managed to dodge the bullet, but... ”

“She won’t be able to for much longer,” Avalon guessed.

“No. Does that scare you off? If I have my way, they’ll all be living with me two months from now?”

“No. It’s admirable really. You care so much about your siblings.

I...” She huffed a humorless laugh. “I don’t really have much in the way of family.

Like I told you the other night, my parents were killed in a crash when I was twelve.

And as far as my siblings go, it’s the opposite for me.

My older brother and sister basically juggled me between them until I left for college.

I’ve gone back there on the summer holidays, but they’ve made it pretty clear I’m an inconvenience to them.

While I was finishing high school, they kind of put their lives on hold because they

were taking care of me, and they resent me for it.

They both act like... Well, they both made it clear they didn't care if they heard from me after I returned to school this past fall. ”

“Baby, I’m so sorry.”

She looked away. “Most of the time it’s okay. It is what it is, right? I have Nash and through him, I have Porter, too. They’re good friends. And I figured out how to be on my own a while ago. Like almost ten years ago, if I’m telling the truth.”

I stepped closer, cupping her face. My thumbs brushed over her cheeks. “You’re not alone anymore.”

“No,” she agreed, slipping her arms around my waist and moving closer, scant inches separating our bodies. Her sugary vanilla scent filled my senses, and my mouth watered to taste her again. She lifted to her tiptoes, her front pressing to mine. “And Parrish? Neither are you.”

“No. No, I’m not.” Leaning in, I pressed my mouth to hers, my lips coaxing hers apart.

Avalon sighed audibly, her arms moving up to circle my neck. “I know it’s early, but...can we go to bed?” she asked. “Before something happens to get in our way again?”

A growl rolled up my throat, and I scooped her up into my arms. Climbing onto the mattress, I settled her in the middle and crawled over her to kneel above her on hands and knees.

“Your wish is my command. I’d like nothing more than to go to bed.

Right now.” I brushed my lips against her ear then nipped the lobe.

“That is, nothing more than getting you naked, then fucking you until you scream, until you forget what it’s like to be without me inside you. ”

Avalon

I gazed up at Parrish with need flooding through me.

My body trembled with electric arousal. It throbbed in my core, agreeing to his words.

Anxious to feel him, I started unbuttoning his shirt, sort of unable to believe we were here so soon, yet feeling as if I'd waited forever.

And I knew him. For over a year, we'd bantered and teased a lot, but we'd also shared our likes, dislikes, hopes and dreams. What he'd told me today only deepened our connection.

And I wanted him. So much. This could be the biggest mistake of my life, but if it messed up things, I knew I could stay with Nash and his roommate.

"You're so beautiful. I can't believe you're mine," he said, breaking through my thoughts. "I can't believe..."

"What?" I asked, my breath catching at the end.

"That I got so lucky when I fucked up that email and then again when I tackled you accidentally. Usually, I'm not so lucky like that."

"You are, though."

“I mean a lot of people think I am, but I’ve worked hard for everything. That’s not luck.”

I couldn’t help the naughty grin that curled my lips. “I could make you work harder for—”

My offer was cut off abruptly by his hungry mouth covering mine, demanding and possessive.

His lips pushed mine open, his tongue exploring, tangling with mine.

I moaned, arching beneath him, my breasts feeling so achy and full, the tips hard against my suddenly too-small shirt.

Need flooded through me, and I whined in complaint when he sat back and left me without his mouth.

But my disappointment didn’t last long as he reached behind his neck and yanked his shirt up over his head. I swallowed hard, watching the play of the muscles he’d revealed as he tossed the garment over the side of the bed.

Holy cow, hockey did a body good. I knew he had wide shoulders and slim hips, and I’d felt all of that hard magnificence against me, but actually seeing the firm planes and carved ridges that came from hours upon hours on the ice. Who knew eight packs actually existed in the wild?

My God, I was the luckiest girl on campus. In the state. Maybe, even the whole country. Because I knew all that fit perfection would give me the kind of pleasure that could make a girl scream. I’d definitely be hard-pressed to keep quiet so anyone else in the house didn’t hear me.

And Parrish wanted me. Me?

“Parrish, I... I’m...” Words didn’t come as my gaze tripped over his rounded pecs then stumbled down to the peaks and valleys of his hard abs and his flat belly that disappeared into the loose waistband of his jeans—jeans that couldn’t hide the prominent ridge behind his fly.

Which strangely was what startled me back to what I’d started to say. “What Sheena said—”

“Is bullshit,” he interrupted. His chest lifted with heavy breaths, determination hardening his features, and I halfway wondered if this wasn’t what his opponents saw—only less naked.

Then his eyes narrowed slightly, and his fingers closed around my hand. He brought it right to his arousal while he stared at me and pressed my palm to the ridge. Without thinking, I curled my fingers around the shaft, and he groaned a low sound of pleasure.

“What part of this don’t you understand?” he asked, squeezing my hold tighter. “Haven’t you noticed I can’t stop myself from constantly touching you. Whenever you’re in the same room as me, I can’t stop looking at you, admiring you. You’re everything I want.”

I swallowed, taking the leap past my insecurities and into his care. “I want you, too.”

“Good. I think it would fucking kill me if I had to stop and walk away right now. And I would. I’d walk away if you said stop. Because even if I wouldn’t want to, I’m not that kind of guy.” His fingers traced my cheek, his thumb tugging over my bottom lip.

“I’m not going to tell you to stop. I want you, Parrish.

” Yeah, I’d said that before, but it seemed to bear repeating.

I’d heard stories about athletes getting accused, true or not, with these things, and I wanted to assure him.

“I’m probably halfway in love with you, but you can pretend I didn’t say that if it scares you. ”

A wide grin stretched his lips, his happiness filling the room.

“You should probably know I’m at least halfway in love with you, too.

It probably happened when you yelled at me in email about pineapple pizza.

Or when you went on the extra long rant about the eagles just showing up at the end of the Lord of the Rings movies without even being mentioned in the nine hours before their appearance. ”

“It was a travesty and gross misjudgment,” I muttered, heat flooding my face. That was me, completely nerdy that way.

He chuckled and dropped a kiss on my nose. “You’re adorable.”

I grimaced. “That seems like a downgrade from earlier.”

“Nah.” His hands skimmed along my waist to catch on the bottom of my sweatshirt.

“You’re completely sexy, too.”

I snorted. “Let’s not oversell.”

“I had no idea you were kinky, baby, because you’re definitely asking for a spanking.”

My breath caught again, my eyes widening. “Parrish...”

His brow lifted, and he continued pushing up my sweatshirt, revealing a torso that was far softer than his.

“Oh,” he said, the sound half sigh and half groan.

“I knew you’d be perfect.” His mouth pressed to my belly, and he trailed lingering, heated kisses up to the edge of my lacy bra.

When he lifted up slightly to shove my top the rest of the way off, his heavy gaze remained glued to my chest. I’d never been so thankful I wore frilly bras and panties beneath my plain clothes.

As soon as my shirt joined his on the floor, his mouth descended to one of the pearled nipples that poked against the fabric of my bra. He drew hard, sending threads of electric pleasure pulsing directly to my core.

“Oh!” I breathed. “Parrish...”

My fingers speared into his hair and held him there as he sucked and nipped.

His tongue lashed over the hardened tip, rasping the fabric over my areola in the process.

Then suddenly the barrier was gone, him yanking down the cup, and we were skin to skin, nipple to mouth, and everything I’d ever worried about slipped away as easily as a mist under the heat of bright sunlight.

My mind blanked to anything but the pleasure, fully focused on what he was doing. Parrish moved from peak to peak then back while tension coiled tight in my belly. My orgasm loomed close, bearing down on me. How could it be so fast? Right there? It wouldn't take much to push me right over the edge.

Then Parrish wedged himself between my jean-clad thighs, dropping down from how he'd knelt over me, and ground himself against my center.

"You taste so good. I could suck on these hard, little nipples for hours."

"Oh...oh God, Parrish. Yes," I choked out as I moved against his erection, damning the clothes that kept us apart.

"That's right, baby," he growled. "Take what's yours."

He thrust harder against me, somehow forcing the fabric between us to rub against my swollen clit.

Each grind shot surges of energy flickering through me until all at once, I was on the pinnacle.

The lashes of arousal coalesced into one rolling wave, crashing over me, dragging me under the wash of release.

I screamed, but Parrish quickly sealed his mouth over mine, catching my cries and keeping this moment private between us, keeping the sounds of my pleasure as only his.

Parrish

Feeling Avalon fall apart under me was worth every moment of frustration over the past year. Worth every second of the past few days when she'd been within my grasp, yet not. And I'd done this. I'd given her an orgasm, and I wasn't even inside her. Score one for the hockey player.

Slipping a hand beneath her, I unclipped her bra then peeled it away, revealing all of her perfect tits.

Was I surprised that the firm mounds with dusky-pink nipples would fit into my hands as if her breasts were made for me?

No. She was put here for me...and in my opinion, everything about her was just perfect .

As she came down from the first of many orgasms I planned to give her between now and morning, I opened my pants then shoved them off. Kneeling over her again, I caught her gaze while my fingers lingered over the fastening of her pants.

“Yes,” she said before her teeth sank into her lip. She lifted her hips to assist me as I shucked off the jeans then froze, just staring down at her. Without thought, I dropped my hand to my cock and fisted it, jacking along it. Avalon followed the movement with her stare.

Pushing up on an elbow, she reached a hand toward me. “Can I?”

“No.” I moved out of her reach.

“What?” she gasped, starting to move away.

Caging her with my hands and knees again, I stopped her and stared down into her wild, hurt eyes. “Baby, if you touch me, we’ll be done. That’s the last thing I want. I want you to come again while I’m deep inside you, with you squeezing the life out of me, taking every bit of my cum.”

The hurt transformed to a shy smile, and I knew I’d said the exact right thing.

“Okay,” she agreed.

“Now, be a good girl and let me look at this gorgeous prize I’ve been given.”

The small breath she sucked in told me I was still saying the right things.

Her pupils had blown so wide that I could barely see the violet-colored irises.

Holding her gaze, wanting to see what I did to her, I leaned in and caught her nipple in my mouth, sucking hard and turning the dusky pink to a dark flush.

Avalon grabbed at my shoulders and arched into me.

“Parrish!” she cried quietly.

“Shh...” I admonished, moving to the other breast to give it equal treatment. “We don’t want anyone else to hear your sweet sounds. Those are just for me.”

Except...I suddenly wanted to make her scream, just to make it clear to everyone that she was mine. Every asshole in this house needed to know Avalon was mine .

And I was hers—something she proved while she ran her hands over me.

Though I'd stopped her before, she managed to trail her fingers over my cock, her thumb sweeping over the precum that had formed on the tip.

I groaned, gritting my teeth as I shifted out of her reach.

She grinned and brought her thumb to her lips, sucking it into her mouth to taste me. And clearly to be naughty.

“You are such a bad girl,” I growled.

“What are you going to do about it?” she asked. She had a point. There were many, many things I wanted to do, but few I'd do our first time without a discussion beforehand. Still...

“Maybe, I should put you in the corner while I stand behind you and make you listen to me jacking off before I come all over your sweet little ass,” I ventured.

Her eyes widened as she sucked in another sharp breath. “You'd...do that?”

“You like kink, baby girl?”

“I...I wasn't sure...didn't know... Um. Until now. But I think I do. Some,” she stammered out.

“Good to know.” I nipped at the underside of her firm breast then kissed my way down her torso and across her soft belly, so different from mine, so perfectly different.

I paused just above her trimmed mound, pressing my lips there while Avalon pushed

up on her elbows again to watch me.

I loved the connection, that we were present with each other.

Her lips parted when I pushed her thighs wide for me, giving my mouth access to her pussy.

“This is all mine,” I growled, cupping her. “You know why I’m the captain of the team?”

“Because you’re bossy?” she breathed, but she didn’t make it sound like a bad thing.

“No, brat. Because I command the ice. If I choose, I command whatever space I’m in. I’m going to command this pussy and be the captain of it.”

“You think?”

“I know,” I asserted, parting her plump mound and covering her inner folds with my mouth. I took a leisurely sweep through her creamy arousal before getting down to the business of making her fall apart.

“Oh,” she breathed, her head dropping back.

The position added a delicious arch to her back, and I wanted to explore devouring her breasts while she was like that.

Later. Now...I zeroed in on her clit and suckled on it like I had her sweet nipples.

Avalon’s legs trembled and squeezed around my shoulders, and I took a moment to push them wide roughly before my hands returned to her apex.

“Keep them wide and be a good girl for me.”

“By conventional definition, being a so-called good girl would mean I have them shut,” she teased in a breathy chuckle, but she kept her supple thighs parted for me.

“Not in this bed,” I countered.

“Fine, I’ll take one for the team, Captain.”

“You’ll take one from only the captain.”

“Yes, Captain,” she hissed. The words turned to a cry when I nipped at her swollen clit.

I traced her slit with my thumbs before pressing one of them against her slick opening.

Slowly, I pushed it inside, my cock throbbing at the squeeze of her walls around the digit.

She’d be tight as fuck around me. I pumped my thumb in and out of her while continued to torment her sensitive nub.

When she started to shake, I pushed in my other thumb, thrusting the two together, rubbing over and squeezing against her G-spot, pulling her walls wider when they seized in ripples of reaction that matched the way her body shook, quiet, choked gasps falling from her lips.

Fuck me, she was gorgeous. A masterpiece. And all mine.

Rising over her while she trembled, I grabbed a condom from the side table and

rolled it on as quickly as I could. My dick pressed to her opening, and she wrapped her legs around me.

“You really are a captain,” she whispered.

“Captain of you, baby girl,” I growled.

She bit her lip, nodding.

“Ready?”

“I’ve been so wet and ready since you slung me over your shoulder earlier.”

Smirking, I pushed forward. The smile slipped away when my tip was less than an inch inside the tight clench of her pussy.

“Fuck,” I breathed. “God, you feel so...fucking good. I’m gonna have to live here. You know that? We’re never leaving this bed.”

“I have my job at the library tomorrow,” she panted. “And you know Nash will come looking for me if I don’t check in.”

“If you can say another man’s name while I’m inside you, I’ve failed.”

She giggled, and I loved that we could be like this. “He’s gay. No worries.” She shifted, trying to take more of me. “This doesn’t feel like failure. Unless you don’t start moving. I need you. All of you.”

I couldn’t disagree with that.

Leaning in, I kissed her as I pumped my hips forward—not to mute her cry but

because I needed it filling my chest when I drove in to the hilt, powering my way through her tight as fuck walls that squeezed tight around me and felt like home.

Words and thoughts fell away as we got lost in the sensations.

My hand behind her neck, my forehead to hers as we stared into each other's eyes, our breaths mingling.

I pounded into her. Claiming, taking, giving.

And when she came, I followed right along with her, falling into a rightness, a bliss, I had never experienced even once before that very moment.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:23 am

Avalon

A muzzy blanket surrounded me as I drifted halfway between sleeping and waking, safe in Parrish's arms. His stamina on the ice transferred to his endurance in bed.

I'd lost count of how many times I'd come as we'd had sex.

Around two, we'd taken a break to eat, Parrish raiding the kitchen and bringing back sandwiches, fruit and water.

Then we'd gone at it again, as if a switch had been flipped and we couldn't switch it back.

Or didn't want to. We'd both been alone for so long, and what we found was a gift I'd never expected.

And now, peace filled me as I lay within the circle of his embrace as he spooned behind me.

Warmth filled me, and I didn't want to leave this intimacy anytime soon.

Except, I knew he had practice in a couple hours, and I'd need to head to my campus job at midmorning.

Such was the plight of a girl who only had a scholarship and a student loan to cover school and a few basics.

Beep-bee-bee-boop-bee-doo-wee .

Wrenched from my semi-sleep state, I sighed, frustrated by the R2-D2 chirp that had sounded from my phone to notify me of a message. It was across the room in my backpack, and I didn't want to move. I closed my eyes again, determined to ignore it.

Beep-bee-bee-boop-bee-doo-wee .

Shit.

Grumbling quietly, I disentangled myself from Parrish.

He slept like the dead and hadn't stirred at the noise from my cell, which made me a little worried about his practice in a little while.

After crawling off the end of the bed, I scrabbled around for my shirt.

Coming up with Parrish's first, I slipped it on then found my panties, dressing in them too before my phone sounded again.

Digging through my bag, I found it. The display lit up the room as I squinted at it to see who was texting me.

It wasn't a text.

Huh? My lock screen said it was a tag from my sister on social media.

Weird. She never tagged me. Standing, I flicked open the app then stared aghast at what I saw.

My eyes started to burn as I took in the post with almost everyone she knew tagged.

Pictures...of her wedding. To a guy I hadn't known about.

Hell, I hadn't even known she was dating.

My brother smiled in the background of a couple of the pictures of what appeared to be a small but fancy ceremony.

The fuck...

My ass hit the bare floor hard as I dropped onto it, unable to comprehend the level of callousness before me. I'd talked to both my siblings over the past couple days, yet they had so little disregard for me that I was learning about my sister's wedding via a social media post.

"What's wrong?" Parrish asked urgently from the bed.

Instantly awake, he shot upright and was climbing from beneath the blankets before he'd finished speaking.

He rushed to me, not noticing or seeming to care that he was naked and erect again.

He scooped me up and carried me back to the bed, sitting on the edge with me cradled in his lap.

"I like how you pick me up like it's nothing," I whispered into his chest while I burrowed in. I wasn't alone anymore. I had Parrish. We had each other.

"It is easy, but it's not nothing. You're precious to me," he said into my hair before he pressed a kiss to my crown.

I huffed a watery laugh.

“What?” he asked.

I offered him my phone, and he looked at the screen.

“I don’t understand? Who is that?”

“That’s what woke me. The notification from the post. The woman in the wedding dress is my sister. The guy in the background, in the gray suit, is my brother. She just posted the pictures and tagged me on social media. She got married, and this is how I’m finding out.”

“Baby,” he whispered, his arms tightening around me.

“It’s... I know how they are, how they resent me. I told you about it. But God, they must actually hate me. To...exclude me so...fully. It hurts to see how far they’ve pushed me out of their lives.” I sniffled, my nose reacting to the tears burning in my eyes. “It hurts.”

“It’s an asshole thing to do,” he rasped. “Not telling you then just tagging you. I know she’s your sister, but what a bitch. There’s no excuse... I’m so sorry, Avie.”

A tear rolled down my cheek, my chest tight from the loss I hadn’t realized until that post. “I knew I was on my own, but I didn’t think I’d been disowned, that I don’t have a family.”

“You do. You do have a family. Not your blood family, but you do have the family you’ve made.

You have Nash and Porter who would both kill for you...

and you have me, if you’ll have me. I’m not planning to go anywhere.

Then you'll have my brother and my sisters, too.

It'll get kinda crowded, kinda fast. We'll need a big house. ”

His words were so sweet, and I shook as they loosed the sob crushing my chest. I cried, clinging to him, his hand rubbing my back while he whispered to me.

I didn't know how long it was until I started to settle, but I heard the catch in his voice, the tremble of his emotions while he told me I wasn't alone.

“You're not alone. You have us,” he rasped, and I knew it wasn't the first he'd said it.

My hands clenched on his sides, my face still buried between his pecs. My breathing hitched while I tried to regain control.

“You're not alone. You have us,” he repeated.

I nodded. “You're right. I'm sorry. You're right. It still...hurts.”

“I know, baby. I know.” His hand smoothed along my back. Up and down. Up and down. “I wish I could make it go away.”

“I know.”

“What can I do for you? How can I help?” he asked. “Do you need me to call Nash?”

That he'd offer up my best friend, a guy, spoke volumes. He'd do whatever I needed, give me whatever I needed. All I needed, though, was him.

I shook my head. “No. I just want you. Can I go with you to practice again this morning and watch? Get my mind off it?” I asked. Really, I just didn't want to be

away from him until I had to work. My sister's surprise wedding was a blow I wouldn't easily shake off.

"Yeah, you can come. I liked having you there yesterday." As if on cue, his phone alarm went off. Still holding me, he reached down for his pants and grabbed the cell to turn it off. He tossed the device onto the bed but made no move to let me go.

"Are you going to comment on the post?" he asked.

"She tagged a ton of people along with me. I could say something about how horrible it was to find out this way and let everyone know how shitty she is to do this to her sister. But no, I don't think I will.

"I shook my head, not believing this turn.

"If she doesn't want me in her life, I'll take the hint.

I might be younger, but I can be the bigger person.

She'll regret it later. Maybe. But I won't. "

"Well, you could eviscerate her without even making it obvious. You have a way with words. You sure kept me hooked on your emails for a year."

I laughed, despite my sadness. "Well, I am an English major, and spoiler alert: we write a lot. Plus I write other stuff—something my siblings have told me for years is ridiculous."

Actually, my brother had point blank said, don't expect us to support you while you chase rainbows .

Clearly, he'd been trying to tell me something else, too.

"What do you write?" Parrish asked.

"Don't laugh, okay?"

"I wouldn't...unless. You're not writing some sort of Draco and Hermione fanfic, are you?"

"No, I'm not writing Dramione fanfic. I write romantic fantasy—romantasy. Dragons. Warriors. Magic. That sort of thing."

He stilled, and when I looked up at him, he was staring at me, his awed gaze full of interest. "I want to read it."

"Maybe." I shrugged. "When do you have to get to the rink?"

"About twenty minutes. Want to shower together?" He stood, putting me on my feet, then held out a hand to me. After dropping my phone onto the blankets near his, I clasped his fingers.

"Yes." Maybe, we had time for more than just getting clean. A girl could hope.

His eyes scanned over me. "I like you in my clothes. You should wear one of my jerseys today. Show everyone you're mine."

"Okay." I followed him into the bathroom and admired his sculpted ass while he reached into the shower to turn on the water. He smirked when he turned and caught me staring. Oh well, it wasn't a secret I found him mouthwatering. Thankfully, he seemed to feel similarly about me.

He reached for the shirt I wore and skimmed it off. “Do you wanna go house hunting with me this weekend?”

“What? Where?” I asked in surprise as I shimmied out of my panties. “Don’t you need to wait and see what will happen with pros?”

He shook his head. “Baby girl, we’re going to Charleston.

The Lynx are ready to sign me as soon as I graduate.

I start training this summer. That’s the deal my agent worked out so I could finish college first. And that’s when I’ll get my signing bonus.

Truthfully, I could already be playing out the season with the Lynx, but I needed to prove something to my family.

My parents said I’d be a worthless jock. And I’m not.”

Shaking my head, I stepped close and loosely wrapped my arms around his waist. Going to my toes, I pressed a kiss to his jaw then leaned into him, my breasts flat to his chest as he held me there.

“You’re not,” I echoed vehemently.

“I’m glad I didn’t drop out to play. I wouldn’t have found you, if I did.”

A cloud of icy dread washed through me at the thought. Thank God, he’d been stubborn and needed to prove a point.

Parrish smiled softly before his forehead tipped to mine. “So...? Charleston this weekend?”

Because we would be together...which meant I'd live in Charleston, too. "Yeah."

"And you'll come with me to Michigan in June to get my brother and sisters? The girls will definitely want a female presence to support them, someone to show them life outside of that existence."

It didn't pass my notice that he'd totally shifted my attention from my sister's surprise wedding and onto our future, giving me the distraction I'd asked for—giving me so much more. He was scheduling our future and making it clear we were together in it.

"Yes. I can't wait to meet them," I agreed.

His grip around me tightened. "And after graduation? Do you have a job lined up, or can you move with me to Charleston?"

"No job yet."

"You can write. Show your family, just like I'm showing mine. Or..." He winked. "Be my trophy girlfriend...eventually my trophy wife."

"Parrish," I laughed.

"I mean, look at this cute ass. Total WAG material."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "I am not twerking."

"WAGs are wives and girlfriends." He kissed me quickly before pulling me into the shower and pressing me up against the cool tiles. "Don't worry, baby girl. I'll get you up to speed on all the hockey lingo."

I wrapped my arms and legs around him as he lifted me. “All I care about is you.” His arousal pushed into my folds, and I groaned. “You’re gonna be late for practice.”

“Don’t care. The extra laps will be totally worth it. Now, take the captain’s cock like a good girl.”

A thrill went through me. “Whatever you want, Captain.”

And as he thrust, showing me exactly what he wanted, I saw stars...and the unexpected bright future lain out before us.

Who would have guessed a misdirected email from a stranger would land me with the man of my dreams? Not me. But wow, was I thankful it had.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:23 am

Avalon

Three Months Later

Nerves tumbled around in my stomach as Parrish drove his new Expedition SUV, which he'd purchased with his signing bonus, toward his former high school in his home town.

The parking lot was empty, except for two pickup trucks, one shiny and new while the other was older and covered in mud.

Four people stood near the fronts of the vehicles.

Parrish gripped my hand. "That's them, along with my old coach."

"Are you ready for this?"

"Yeah." He nodded as he said it. "Ready for a long time."

Still, his hand trembled, and I felt the emotions he tamped down while he tried to hold himself together for this reunion with his siblings.

It was something I'd never get, but as I'd talked to Parrish, and Nash, about the shitty things my sister and brother had done to me over the years, I felt less like I'd ever want to see them again.

We were too different, and for my peace, I'd have to love them from far away.

Parrish and I could give all our love to his brother and sisters, instead.

“I’m glad you had a break in training this week, so we could come here right on the twins’ birthday,” I said as he pulled up in front of the trucks.

The girls both wore long skirts with white blouses, their hair, the same light brown as Parrish’s, hanging in long waves to their waists.

His brother had dark brown hair, freckles, and a slighter build than my man, but otherwise, he looked like a younger version of my boyfriend.

“Yeah,” Parrish agreed. “That was really lucky.” He took a deep breath then released it. “Let’s go get our family.”

He hopped out of the SUV, and I followed, hanging slightly back. I watched as he strode confidently to his siblings and pulled them all into a hug for the first time in years.

“I knew you’d come back for us,” the younger of the two girls, Sutton, said into his shoulder.

Her older sister, Winslow, openly cried while their brother, Thatcher, blinked his glassy eyes, but didn’t let the tears fall.

Moisture burned my own eyes as I watched the reunion.

After the long group hug, they parted, and Parrish reached to shake his former coach’s hand.

“The pros, huh?” the man said, looking like a proud parent. And I supposed if anyone besides Parrish had a hand in getting him to where he was, it was this man who’d

fought so hard for him.

“Yeah. Thanks to you. I never would have made it if you hadn’t seen the spark in me way back when.”

His old coach waved that away, though we all knew it was true. “Just send me tickets to a game sometime, but right now, you best get on your way before anyone notices these three aren’t where they said they’d be.”

“Consider it done.” Parrish reached his hand for mine. “This is my girlfriend, Avalon. Future fiancée.” He grinned at me then glanced to his sisters. “Girls, get in the SUV. Thatcher and I will get the bags.” He looked over at his old coach. “What about the truck?”

Coach indicated to the lot’s security cameras.

“Those damn cameras just haven’t been working, but tomorrow morning, I’ll happen to see this truck here and call the cops.

” He raised a brow. “The keys are in it, and they all wrote letters to explain why they’re leaving.

Since they’re old enough to do what they want, there’s nothing illegal.

I still think you should get out of town before your dad and his cronies try to stop you, though. ”

“We’re on our way.”

“What do you need me to do?” I asked.

Parrish hooked his arm around my neck, pulled me to him quickly, and pressed a kiss to my temple. “Just hop in and wait with my sisters.” He started to pull away then paused. “Hey.”

“What?”

“I love you. Thank you for coming with me.”

I stared after him as he sprinted over to the older of the two trucks and grabbed a couple duffel bags.

Shaking my head, I did what he’d asked. After retaking my seat, I turned to look back at the girls in the second row.

Winslow twisted her fingers in her lap while she looked around nervously.

She jumped when the bags dropped into the back.

Sutton was grinning and practically vibrating.

“I’m Avalon,” I said, though Parrish had introduced us outside. “You’re Winslow and Sutton, right?” I looked at each girl as I said their names.

“That’s us!” Sutton said. The door next to her opened, and her twin climbed past her, carrying a small wiggly dog. He went to the bench seat in the third row while Parrish said goodbye to his old coach and hugged him.

“You got everything?” I asked Thatcher, who was getting his pet settled on his lap. So...we were getting a dog, too? Okay. This family was getting more complete by the moment.

His grin and excitement matched his twin's. "Yeah. We didn't bring much. Just what we could fit in a couple bags. And Speck."

He pet the dog as he said Speck, so I figured that must be the pup's name.

"No problem," I said. "We'll go shopping once we get to Charleston."

"I want a haircut when we get there," Winslow suddenly put in. "Super short. A pixie cut. That's what they call it, right?"

"Right." I looked at her gorgeous hair but figured those tresses had stories I didn't want to know. "We'll make it happen. Whatever we need to do to get you settled, going to college, whatever."

"So you and Parrish are going to get married?" Thatcher said right as his brother got behind the wheel and started the car.

"That's what he says," I told him as Parrish called, "Yes."

"He hasn't asked me yet," I continued. "So we'll see."

"But you live together?" Winslow asked, her eyes lighting with interest and her fear seeming to fade a little as the vehicle started moving.

"Yes. We have a house together." A mini-mansion of a house that was way bigger than I thought we needed, but with five adults—and a dog, apparently—it would be nice to have space. Parrish could afford it, and when I'd graduated, I'd gotten my small trust, so I could help.

"And we're living there, too?"

“Yes,” I told her. “It’s a big place. You’ll each have your own rooms, and there’s a nice family room, a gym and a pool.”

“No way. Wow,” Thatcher breathed.

“I don’t suppose you have a book I can read?” Sutton asked suddenly. “Fiction, hopefully.”

“Actually...” I reached down to my feet to grab the three canvas bags stashed there.

I handed one to each of Parrish’s siblings.

“We brought you each your own tablet and earbuds. The tablets are charged and loaded up with music, a couple movies and a bunch of books. Parrish said you’d know how to use them because of school. ”

All of them nodded and very politely thanked us before digging into their bags like it was Christmas.

I’d also packed them with snacks for the trip, though we’d definitely get more during the fourteen-plus hour drive home.

Thankfully, Parrish had rooms reserved for us about seven hours from here—at the same hotel where he and I had spent last night.

He smiled over at me once his brother and sisters were settled and engrossed in their media. “You are marrying me.”

“Think so, do you?”

“Yes, Avie, I do. I was thinking... The beginning of September, before preseason

begins.”

“Parrish, that’s less than three months away.”

“We can make it small. These three, Nash and Porter and some of our other friends. We’ll hire a planner, have it at the house. Our yard is plenty big for one of those event tents.”

“You’ve thought through everything,” I said quietly.

“More than you know.”

“What do you mean?” I asked suspiciously.

“You’ll see,” he promised.

“But—”

The GPS interrupted me, telling Parrish to turn onto the highway.

Admittedly, I breathed a sigh of relief once we were on the interstate, and then Parrish did one of the things he did best—he distracted me by turning the conversation to something else.

It wasn’t until hours later when his siblings were settled in their room adjoining ours, and we were alone, that the subject was revisited.

“Do you think they got enough to eat? Maybe, we should take them for dessert or something,” I said as I closed the curtains of our third-floor hotel room.

Parrish didn’t say anything. When I turned to see if he’d dropped off to sleep in the

chair where he'd been sitting, I gasped. He was right behind me, on one knee.

"It's not the most romantic of places, but I've been carrying this around for weeks, waiting for the right time. And, baby girl, I can't have you doubting me or wondering if we'll get married. Not anymore. I need you to know—"

"I knew," I interrupted. "I mean... I was waiting. But I knew you'd ask sometime."

"Well, I'm asking now. Avalon Warner...will you marry me? Be my wife?" He held up a sparkling ring, a large diamond surrounded by several smaller diamonds.

I nodded. It had been him for me since the day he'd rescued me from my crazy roommate's eviction. Honestly, it had been him for me since our third email. We just hadn't known it.

"Yeah. Yes. Yes, Parrish. I want to marry you more than anything."

He stood and slipped the ring onto my finger, then in total Parrish fashion, turned me over his shoulder and carried me to bed.

"Let's celebrate," he said, coming down over me.

And we did.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:23 am

Parrish

Three Years Later

The ice rasped beneath my skates as I raced across the ice toward the goal, ready to help drive the puck into the net or create a diversion so one of my wingers could do it.

We were second line so we didn't get as much ice time as the first line, but that didn't mean we couldn't get the job done.

And with the game tied and seconds to go, it was time to score.

From the corner of my eye, I saw my left winger, Bakeman, breaking free from the defenseman blocking him.

I immediately shifted into position to assist. The puck flew my way, and I took it and headed toward the net, Bakeman and the right winger, Warner, flanking me.

I spun and passed to Warner while Bakeman skated behind the net.

The puck came back to me and before the other team's goalie could clock Bakeman's position, I passed to him and my teammate sent the puck flying right past the goalie's shoulder. Score!

The horn for the goal sounded followed immediately by the horn to end the game.

We won!

I immediately sought out Avalon, who sat in the middle of the lower bowl of seats, along with the other WAGs, who were all on their feet cheering. She pointed at me, yelling Yeah! and I tapped my chest then pointed back.

Then I was swept away with the team celebration as Bakeman slammed into me, then several of our teammates joined the fray.

In triumph, we headed for the lockers to clean-up and do interviews.

The sport's reporters usually focused on our captain and the scorers for the night.

Since I'd only assisted, I figured I was probably in the clear.

I just wanted to find my wife and work off some of the adrenaline from the game.

As amped up as I was, it would probably take a lot, but Avalon was always happily willing.

Thankfully, this was a home game, so Avalon and I could head to our house—alone.

We were enjoying that right now. Following in our footsteps, Thatcher and Sutton were attending Rustin University and were in their second year. They'd just left to head back there a month and a half ago.

Winslow still lived with us, but she was gone most days of the week, working as a nanny for one of the tech bros Charleston catered to. Because of that, she wouldn't be around when Avie and I got home. In fact, we probably wouldn't see her until the weekend.

Anxious to leave, I made sure no one needed me once I'd cleaned up, then I headed

down to the area where family and guests waited for the team.

Avie charged toward me, and I caught her up against my chest, swinging her in a circle.

“You did so great!” she exclaimed.

“You’re not tired of it by now?” I teased.

“Never.”

“Ready to head home?” I asked, setting her back on her feet.

“Always.” She laced her fingers through mine as we headed out, saying goodbye to some of the other WAGs, as well as some of my teammates who were filtering into the waiting area behind me.

Despite her once thinking she didn’t fit in, Avie had meshed seamlessly into this life as easily as if she’d been born into it.

The other wives loved her, and I couldn’t be prouder of my woman.

“You want to get some takeout?” she asked once we were in the SUV.

“Hmm,” I growled. “I could eat.”

“Takeout,” she reiterated.

“Nah, we have leftover chicken and rice in the fridge. I just want to get home. The Wings always run us ragged.” Really, I just wanted to get her into bed and run her ragged. It was the very best way to work off all my amped up energy.

“Uh-huh,” she said, her disbelief evident. After three years, she knew how wired I was post-game. “That was a great goal at the end, though, yeah?”

I blew out a breath. “Yeah, pulled that one out. I thought we might end up in overtime.”

We chatted about the game, and I asked what she’d done all day, since most of my day had been filled with the pre-game skate and a long nap before I’d had to be to the arena three hours before game time.

“Oh, you know,” she said as I pulled into our garage and the door closed behind us. “I wrote. Sent a few emails to my publisher. Took a pregnancy test.”

She hopped out of the SUV before I fully processed what she’d said.

“What?” I yelled, chasing after her. I caught her just a couple steps past the mudroom door and scooped her up, cradling her against my chest.

“Parrish!” she cried, laughing. “Put me down. You just played hours of hockey!”

“No way. Repeat what you said, baby girl,” I demanded, striding toward the stairs and up to our bedroom suite.

“What part?” she teased, wrapping her arms around my neck.

“You know what part.” We’d been trying for almost two years, and after the first couple months, she’d never volunteered that she’d tested.

I still knew. And if I was home, I held her extra tight on those nights.

If I wasn’t in town, I sent flowers or some other surprise gift.

I didn't know what else to do when I couldn't be there.

I hated when she was sad and disappointed.

"I'm a couple months late, and I took a pregnancy test this morning."

A couple months? That meant... Maybe...?

Her eyes lit up, and I knew the test's result from the happiness rolling off her, a small smile on her lips.

"And it was positive?" I ventured.

"It was. I have a doctor's appointment on Monday morning."

Filled with hope, with awe at my woman, I slowly slid her down my body to her feet then cupped her face. My lips brushed over hers. She slipped her arms beneath my suit coat and splayed her hands on my back while we kissed.

"I love you, Avie," I whispered. "You're the best mistake I ever made. I'm so glad my email never made it to Aiden and went to you instead."

"Me, too, Captain Hockey God. Me, too. I love you so much. Now, I think...you should take me to bed for some really good sexing. Work off some energy."

I agreed. And so I did. And with no assist, I made the biggest score of the night. With my perfect wife.

Thank you for reading!