



The Trade Up (Boston Rebels #1.5)

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Category: Sport

Description: The Trade Up is a short novella (15K words) that's part of the Boston Rebels hockey series.

hockey player + nerdy girl

one night stand turns to more

he falls first

instalove

Nothing rattles me.

My entire hockey career, I've been known as the guy who doesn't fight. I've never had trouble keeping myself in check because not only do I have Zen-like control over my mind and emotions, but when it comes to fighting, I'd always have an unfair advantage. I'm trained to be deadly with my hands, and I know better than to use my skills against unsuspecting victims.

But when my team, the Boston Rebels, have an away game in Seattle, I come face-to-face with my dream girl, Ashleigh. She's an even bigger Star Trek fan than I am, is about to start a PhD program in Astrophysics, and she's got a body to back up that sassy mouth and smart mind.

The nighttime tour of Seattle that she agrees to give me quickly turns into the hottest night of my life. I'm supposed to be leaving the next night, but I don't want to say goodbye. So the next morning, I give her a jersey and tickets to our game, hoping she'll come so I can see her one more time before I have to get on the plane and head back to Boston.

Little do I know that her ex plays for Seattle, and when he starts harassing her, I want nothing more than to knock some sense into him. But Ashleigh hates fighting, and the only thing I want more than to put him in his place is a chance at more than just one night with her.

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Chapter One

ZACH

“You’ve gotta stop fucking skating away like that,” Drew Jenkins says when the inevitable conversation comes up during talk of last night’s game in San Jose.

“Why?” I ask and bring my coffee cup to my lips. It’s stale, and probably only still warm because it’s been sitting on a hot plate for hours. It doesn’t matter—there’s no time of day, or substandard quality of coffee, that will keep me from drinking it.

“Because it pisses the other team off and makes you look like a pussy,” Patrick Walsh says, his voice hoarse after all the yelling he did on the ice last night. Our alternate captain is known for two things: being a family man, and his non-stop commentary on ice during games. His mouth moves as fast and as often as his skates.

“Hey, keeping a level head when a two hundred pound asshole comes crashing into me doesn’t make me a pussy—it makes me mentally tougher than him.”

Drew laughs under his breath. “He didn’t come crashing into you, you fucking checked him from behind.”

The smile tugs at my lips. “It was a clean hit. Not my fault that he can’t keep his shit together and handle it like a professional.”

“Watch out for Clark tomorrow night,” Walsh says. “You did the same thing to him when Seattle was in Boston last month, so he’s going to be out for blood this time

around.”

“Let him,” I say with a shrug.

I love playing against guys like Clark who let their emotions lead them, because for me, hockey’s as much of a mental game as a physical one.

I’m one of the fastest defensemen in the league, but what really sets me apart are the mind games I can play against my opponents. It’s the mental edge that got me to the NHL as a 19-year old, and it’s the reason I’m on the first line of the Boston Rebels now, only seven years later.

Even here on my new team there’s a sense of awe at how easily I keep my emotions in check. Nothing ruffles me. It’s taken a lot to get me to this point—a lot of training and hard work, and a lot of therapy and self-care, too.

“Why didn’t you go out tonight, anyway? You’re not locked down like the rest of us,” our captain, Ronan McCabe, says as he gestures around the table at the other players who are all married or have kids. “I’m surprised you’re not out with Colt, partying it up and looking for the ladies.”

Our goalie, Colt, is literally the most notorious player in the NHL. The Contacts app on his phone has hundreds of numbers with names like “Nashville Suzanne, alley behind the bar,” or “Minnesota Misty, gives great head.” Tonight he offered to set me up with “Seattle Annabelle, reverse cowboy expert,” but I passed on his sloppy seconds.

It only took me until the end of my rookie season to tire of the stream of puck bunnies who follow us around after the games. I don’t know how guys like Colt, now in something like his fifteenth season, still get off on hooking up with a different girl in every city—sometimes even a different girl every night in the same city.

“The non-stop string of women isn’t my scene,” I say and glance to my right when movement catches my eye. The first thing I notice are her muscular legs beneath the mid-thigh hem of the 1960s-style pale blue waitress dress she’s wearing.

“Hey guys, your waitress Dee had to leave early tonight, so you’re stuck with me till the end,” she says. Her voice is genuine, and she’s awfully chipper for a waitress at a late-night diner at 10:00pm on a Sunday night.

I glance up at her face as she eyes our table, littered with half-empty plates, and asks if there’s anything else we need. “Dessert menu, maybe? More coffee?” She nods toward my cup.

“I’d look at a dessert menu,” Walsh says.

My eyes slide up her torso to her name tag. Ashleigh . And right next to that, her uniform is littered with pins, the largest of which is a Starfleet insignia badge from the first season of Star Trek.

“You got it,” she says and turns to leave.

“Hey Enterprise,” I call out, and she turns back toward me with one eyebrow raised above her kaleidoscope eyes—they’re green at the edges, aqua moving toward the center, and a pale blue around her pupil. I’ve never seen eyes I couldn’t look away from, until now. We stare at each other for a moment before I clear my throat. “I’d have taken you for a Voyager girl, not The Original Series,” I say, because Voyager is known for its strong female captain, Kathryn Janeway, and the season attracted a large fan base of women. “And I’ll take another cup of coffee, please.”

She smirks at me. “Funny, I’d bet you were introduced through Discovery,” she says, referencing one of the newest series and thereby insinuating that I’m a recent fan, “and never made it back to The Original Series. But let me grab you that cup of

coffee anyway.”

“What the hell was that?” Walsh asks when she walks away.

“Just some Star Trek talk.”

“Dude, are you a Trekkie?” Drew laughs.

“Actual fans prefer the term Trekker,” I tell him.

“Do you, like, go to conventions and stuff?” Walsh laughs. “Do you have a Captain Kirk uniform that you dress up in?”

“No, I don’t have a uniform.” I roll my eyes and intentionally don’t mention all the Comic Cons and Star Trek conventions I’ve attended.

“If I’d have known there might be hot chicks like that hanging out at Star Trek conventions, I’d have started going to them a long time ago,” Drew says.

“I bet Audrey wouldn’t be a fan of that.”

“I meant before Audrey, obviously,” Drew says.

“Well believe it or not, hot girls can like Star Trek too,” I say.

“Preach,” Ashleigh’s voice comes from right next to me as she reaches out to refill my coffee with what thankfully appears to be a fresh pot. I glance over at her, and a self-satisfied smirk curves her full pink lips because she just caught me calling her hot. I find it even harder to look away from those lips than her eyes. “And even pretty boys in backward ball caps,” she says, with obvious distaste, “are allowed to enjoy the show too.”

I press my hand to my heart, and say, “Did you hear that? She thinks I’m pretty.”

My teammates make the taunting sounds you’d expect from middle school boys. Because our booth is raised, Ashleigh and I are practically at eye-level from where I sit on the end, and so it’s hard to miss how her cheeks grow pink. “Don’t worry,” I say quietly as I lean toward her, “they’re more mature than they seem.”

“Doubtful,” she says under her breath. Then she looks over at Walsh, who’s dark eyebrows are scrunched together as he studies the menu in his hand again. “You decide what you want?”

“I’ll take a piece of the five-layer German chocolate cake, to go,” he says, looking up with a big grin. “Sounds like the perfect breakfast food.”

“Oh yeah, that’ll be a great start to tomorrow,” our captain, McCabe, says to him.

“I burned like four thousand calories today,” our alternate captain says. “I’ll have cake for breakfast if I want, okay Mom?”

“Anyone else?” Ashleigh says with a laugh, taking the menu Patrick hands her.

“Just the bill,” I tell her.

I can’t quite read the look she gives me before she turns back toward the counter along the back wall of the diner, but I could swear that it looked a little like disappointment.

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Chapter Two

ASHLEIGH

After delivering drinks for another table, I drop the empty tray on the counter, then turn to the refrigerated case along the wall and gently slide a slice of the German chocolate cake into a takeout container. I turn back toward the counter and startle when Star Trek Guy is standing on the opposite side of the counter less than two feet in front of me, with his arms spread wide and his large hands resting on the countertop.

His hoodie is tight, so I don't miss his muscular chest and arms. With his hat on backward and the ends of his hair peeking out, he looks younger than he probably is.

"So, you're truly a Star Trek fan?" he asks.

"Why would you doubt that I am?" I close up the container with his friend's cake.

"Lots of people are fans of a particular series or movie, fewer people are true fans." He says it as if he's inviting me to join a secret club, rather than questioning my qualifications.

My chest and shoulders shake with silent laughter. He has no idea how much that show influenced the trajectory of my life. "How do I know you're really a Star Trek fan?"

He leans toward me, just slightly, and his voice comes out low as his warm breath

skims across my cheek. “Try me.”

I know he’s talking about me testing his Star Trek knowledge, but somehow those two words come across as distinctly sexual. Or maybe it’s been too long since I broke up with my ex, Colby, and I’m just sex-deprived.

“Okay,” I say the word slowly as I think about what I could ask him. “What is the name of Section 31’s dangerous AI?”

He rolls his eyes and one corner of his mouth turns up. “Really? You’re going to start with a total softball like that?”

I shrug my shoulders and raise my eyebrows as I wait for his response.

“Control.”

“What area of space did Enterprise NX-01 spend most of its time exploring?” I ask.

“The Delphic Expanse. Star Trek: Enterprise was an underrated masterpiece.”

At least I can tell he’s watched multiple series. Let’s go for something a little more challenging. “Alright,” I say, thinking up the most obscure trivia I can remember, “what is General Order 7?”

He stands up straight, and suddenly he’s towering over me. He has to be over six feet tall, but I don’t feel threatened by the way he looms so large, like I sometimes felt around my ex. Somehow, Star Trek Guy reminds me more of a gentle giant.

He tucks his hands into the pocket of his hoodie, and says, “No Federation starship may visit Talos IV. That’s according to Captain Pike, who despite being burnt to a crisp in The Original Series, has the best hair ever in Strange New World.”

I can't hold in the laugh, because damned if he's not right. Anson Mount, who plays Captain Pike in *Strange New World*, has hair that's spawned its own fan club within the Star Trek fandom.

"I guess you really are a Star Trek nerd," I say as I print out the check for his table and slip it into the bill presenter, wishing that this knowledge made him less attractive instead of more. "My uncle, who introduced me to the show, always said it was for smart people. So congrats, I guess you're smart."

He laughs. "I don't know about that. But I am fascinated by science, astronomy, and the concept of space travel."

Probably not as fascinated as I am by it, I almost say. But I doubt he's over here chatting me up late at night because he's interested in hearing about my graduate school plans.

Flirting with a girl because you think she's cute and you're both into Star Trek is one thing. Learning that she's going to get a doctorate in aerospace engineering so she can work on emerging space technology is another. And besides, I don't know for sure yet that it's going to happen for next semester, so I don't want to jinx myself by telling him.

I glance at the way BOSTON is written across the back of his hat, sitting right along his forehead, and I recognize the blue and white color scheme of the block lettering. I nod my chin toward his hat. "So, you're a hockey fan?"

"You could say that," he says.

"Are the Boston Rebels your favorite team?"

"They are now. I grew up as a Toronto fan."

“Why’d you switch allegiances?”

His eyebrows dip as he appears to consider the questions. “A lot of reasons, I guess. Are you a hockey fan?”

“I didn’t grow up with hockey,” I say, “But I’ve watched some games—”

“Order up for six!” Jefferson, one of our line cooks, calls from behind me.

“Gotta go do my job,” I say, relieved to be escaping the conversation before having to admit that the main reason I started following hockey was that my ex, Colby, plays for Seattle. I stack the take-out container with the cake on top of the bill presenter and hand them over to him. “Here you go.”

I turn and grab the two plates for table 3, ignoring the way they burn the tips of my fingers. And then I walk away, pretending like I can’t feel his eyes as they track my every movement.

I have no business flirting with a cute guy in my diner. I just got out of a toxic relationship with a pro hockey player who carried himself with the same air of confidence. Even if this guy does seem more emotionally stable than my ex-boyfriend, and he appears at least as interested in my brain as he is in my body, he could still turn out to be like Colby in the end.

I drop the plates off for the couple at table 6 and then glance over at table 3 where the four guys sit as I head back toward the kitchen.

That pull of attraction to Star Trek Guy, and my inability to take my eyes off him, have me almost running face first into the swinging door when I fail to put my hand out as soon as I should, but luckily I slip into the back without causing a scene.

I pull out my phone and bring up my email, hoping to see a new message from the chair of the AeroAstro graduate program at MIT.

“Stop checking your damn email,” Jefferson calls out when he sees me scrutinizing my phone.

“I can’t help it. I need to know if I got the funding.”

“It’s only December 14th,” he says. “You said they’d let you know by the 16th.”

I glance around at the string of multicolored outdoor lights hanging around the top perimeter of our kitchen. They’re up year round, but they feel particularly festive as we approach Christmas—they’re big and gaudy and feel exactly like the type of lights someone would string along their roofline.

“Right,” I say. “By December 16th, so it could be sooner.”

I was supposed to start my PhD program a few months ago, but when my uncle got sick last spring, someone had to take care of him and help run the diner. So I did what I needed to do for the man who took over raising me when my parents died—I deferred my enrollment so I could be there for him like he’s always been there for me.

It meant they offered my funding to another student, but I don’t regret it.

Since I can’t take on the debt that would come with this PhD, I need to wait to start the program the next time a fully-funded research opportunity presents itself. The head of the department told me there might be another research grant opening up in the spring, and if it comes through, it means I’m moving across the country in a month.

“It’ll come through when it comes through,” Jefferson says as he wipes his forearm across his forehead while standing over the hot griddle. “I know that’s not the answer you wanted, but just relax. It’s almost the holidays.”

“Yeah.” I sigh and reach out to rearrange an ornament hanging from the tinsel strung above the prep area beside me. “There’s nothing to do but wait.”

When I return to the front of the diner, only StarTrek Guy is left at table 3.

“If your friends stuck you with the bill,” I tease, “you need better friends.”

“Like you?” he asks, raising an eyebrow. With his pale eyes, sharp jawline, and sandy hair, not to mention all those muscles, he reminds me of exactly the type of guy I should be avoiding post-breakup with Colby.

“We’re not friends.”

“Not yet,” he says with an air of cocky confidence that should be a turnoff, but the boyish grin makes him endearing instead.

I don’t know why I’m flirting with him. I’m planning to move across the country for grad school, so there’s no reason to get involved with anyone here in Seattle. I don’t need those kinds of complications in my life. Leaving my uncle behind is already going to be hard enough.

“I told them to go,” he says. “We just flew in tonight and we have to be up early tomorrow for—” He glances around. “—work.”

“Oh, you’re not from here?” Suddenly he’s even more attractive.

“No. And this is my first time in Seattle. So tell me, if you only had tonight and

tomorrow, what would you do?”

I tap my index finger on my chin as I think.

“Okay, so tonight the sky is really clear. You should head to Kerry Park in the Queen Anne neighborhood. It has the best views of downtown Seattle, and the ferries going across Elliot Bay look like little streaks of light across the water. It’s only about a mile from here.”

“And what do I do once I’m there?”

“There’s a viewing area, and you just admire the scenery. There are some really beautiful houses in Queen Anne that are all lit up right now for Christmas, and from Kerry Park you can see the lit Christmas tree on top of the Space Needle.”

“They put a tree on top of the Space Needle?” He sounds doubtful.

I laugh. “Not like an actual tree, it’s...you just have to go see it.”

“I feel like I need a tour guide. And the way your face lit up when you were talking about the Christmas lights and the view—you seem like the perfect person for the job.”

I roll my eyes. “Like I’d take a perfect stranger somewhere in my car.” He’s cute, but I don’t really know him.

“We can take an Uber. Or walk if it’s really only a mile.”

“Yeah,” I laugh. “It’s a mile uphill and it’s pretty cold out. You don’t appear to even have a jacket.”

“It’s above freezing. Trust me, I don’t need a jacket.”

“Hey, I value my appendages, but if you don’t...” I shrug. He looks so damn sure of himself that I almost want to keep him out on that viewing platform long enough that his balls shrivel up.

“So how soon are you off work?” he asks, glancing around the almost empty diner.

Am I agreeing to this? I think I am, even though I’m not sure why. A few weeks without a boyfriend, and suddenly a hot guy who likes Star Trek has me throwing caution to the wind?

“I just have to close out the tab at table 6,” I say, nodding my chin toward the table across the room.

He hands me the check presenter stuffed full of cash from his table, gently sets his big hands on my shoulders, and turns me toward table 6. A shiver of anticipation runs down my spine when he leans in and says, “Let’s get going, then.”

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Chapter Three

ZACH

The sighs escaping Ashleigh's parted lips as she glances at the Christmas lights of the 19th century homes have me trying to think of anything except what kind of sounds she'd be making if we were naked.

I'm failing at blocking out that thought, however, which makes me feel like an asshole. I can't help how attracted I am to her—I mean, besides the fact that she's gorgeous with that light brown hair, those blue-green kaleidoscope eyes, and her killer legs...she loves Star Trek as much as I do.

But, I'm confident she did not agree to show me one of her favorite places in Seattle because she wants to sleep with me.

"The viewing area is right there," she says as she points to a grassy patch along the sidewalk. "We just need to find a place to park."

I glance over where she's pointing, surprised the viewing area is right off the road and that there are still people milling around, even at this time of night.

She eases her car into an open parking spot on the side of the road. "You really don't need a jacket?" She asks as she unbuckles her seatbelt and zips up her jacket over the leggings and sweatshirt she changed into before we left the diner.

"I run hot," I say. "I grew up in Canada, so this isn't even close to cold." As we get

out of the car and walk the block back to the park, I tell her a little bit about Toronto.

“It’s a great city—” My jaw falls open when we pass the last house leading up to the park, and Seattle’s skyline comes into view. It’s not only the buildings glowing in the darkness, or the Space Needle with its twinkling lights in the shape of a white Christmas tree, or the bay spreading out at the edge of the city—it’s the expanse of darkness on the other side that allows the skyline to shine in a way that leaves me almost speechless. “Wow...this view is spectacular.”

“You should see it at sunset,” Ashleigh says as we approach the railings at the edge of the viewing area. She steps slightly in front of me, and points to the right of the buildings where I’d noticed the darkness. “That’s Mt. Rainier,” she says, and I dip my head lower so I can see exactly where she’s pointing. But that’s a big mistake because the air is filled with the scent of her hair, and the tropical smell has me imagining us on a beach with very little clothing on. I need to get a hold of myself, because my body is reacting to hers in unexpected ways. “And at sunset, the sky gets an orangey purple hue and the white cap of the mountain glows against it, and it’s just stunning beyond the lights of the city.”

“I’d like to see that someday,” I say and sense her stiffen, as if she hadn’t realized I was this close. I stand up fully so I’m not crowding her, but I don’t step away.

“You should come back tomorrow at sunset,” she says, her voice low.

“Can’t. I’ll be working.” Part of me wants to tell her what my job is, but the other part wants to know that she could be interested in me for something besides the fact that I’m a professional hockey player.

I’m probably jaded because I’ve dated so many women who were in it for the money or the fame, but it becomes real hard to know if someone likes you for you, or if it’s because of what you could give them with a professional athlete’s salary.

“I guess you’ll have to visit Seattle again another time.”

“Will you be my tour guide again if I do?”

I watch her throat bob as I stare down at her, unable to tear my eyes away despite the amazing view in front of me. “Sure.” The word is not even remotely convincing, so I use the tip of my pointer finger to gently turn her face so she’s looking up at me over her shoulder.

“That sounded like a big ol’ lie. I thought we were friends.”

“ You said we were friends. I never agreed to that.” Her smile is weak, but her voice is flirtatious. “And I might be moving soon.”

“Oh yeah? Where are you headed?”

“I’m going to grad school.”

“Mid-year?”

“Maybe. I was supposed to start this fall, but I had a family emergency.”

I have so many questions. “Everything okay?”

She sighs and turns her head forward, looking out at the city. “Yeah, it is now. My uncle has been like a father to me, and he was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes last spring. He was really sick, and getting his diet under control and his medications working right were a top priority. There was no one else to help take care of him but me. So I deferred.”

“He’s doing better now, though?”

“Yeah, he’s stabilized. And the diner made it through the summer even when he couldn’t be there, but now he’s mostly back to work.”

“He owns the diner where you work?”

“I don’t work there,” she says.

I can’t help but laugh. “All evidence to the contrary.”

“I just came in tonight because your waitress’s kid got sick and she had to go home. She texted me in a panic so I filled in for her. Usually when I’m there, I’m helping my uncle with payroll, scheduling, supply orders—that type of thing. But I used to waitress there in high school and summers during college.”

“I’m glad you were there tonight,” I say, right as a shiver runs through her. “You cold?”

“Yeah, I didn’t think I’d be standing around outside tonight, so I didn’t bring a heavy coat.”

I glance down at the lightweight down jacket she’s wearing. “You’re welcome to my body heat, if you want it.”

For a moment she stands there frozen, but eventually she leans back against me. When I wrap my arms around the front of her where she’s folded her arms across her chest, she sighs. “You weren’t kidding about running hot.”

A small laugh rattles my chest. She has no idea what her proximity is doing to me right now.

“This view—” My words ruffle her hair as my breath skims across the top of her

head, and she shivers in my arms. “—reminds me a tiny bit of home.”

“Yeah?”

“My mom is a professor at the Ontario College of Art and Design, so growing up we lived right there. If you’re standing at the main building on campus, you have an amazing view of the CN Tower, but you get views more like this one from some of the parks along the waterfront.”

“Hmmm.” Her ribcage vibrates along my abdomen, and with her body pressed up against mine she’s about to find out just how much that sensation, with her in my arms, turns me on. “What’s your mom teach?”

“Sculpture. She specializes in metal and bronze.”

“Oh! Did you notice the Changing Form sculpture?” she asks as she turns, pulling away from me, and points to a steel sculpture several yards to our left.

“I didn’t,” I tell her. I’d been so focused on the view as we approached that I hadn’t noticed the big circular brick steps leading up to the rectangular metal base of the statue. It’s mostly open with big circular cutouts, but the top piece of the statue is cylindrical. “Why’s it called Changing Form?”

She grabs my forearm, and tugs me toward the statue, explaining the top part was originally movable, so the sculpture could change form, but it ended up being welded together for safety reasons. “Its other name,” Ashleigh says, “is the Kinetic and Volumetric Space Frame, which makes my physics-loving heart happy.”

“Your heart loves physics?”

“My bachelor’s degree is in Aeronautical & Astronautical Engineering.”

“That’s amazing,” I say as we take the steps up to the statue. “And I’m a little intimidated, to be honest.”

She lets out a small laugh and says, “I get that a lot.”

I run my hand along the smooth frame of the statue. “My mom would love this,” I tell her.

“Here,” she says, digging her phone out of her pocket. “I’ll take a picture of you with it so you can send it to her.”

“Alright,” I say, stepping inside the base of the frame. Even though I hate having my photo taken, my mom will love this and it’s thoughtful of Ashleigh to suggest it. I turn and grip the sides of the oval cutout, smiling right as her flash nearly blinds me. “And now I’m seeing spots,” I mutter.

“But it was worth it, because look...” she says, handing me her phone.

The picture is terrible. The light reflects off the statue so you can’t really tell what it looks like, but I’m front and center smiling, and my mom will love that. “It’s perfect.” I use her phone to take a photo of the statue by itself, and with the light from the city behind me the statue sort of glows.

“Can I send these to myself?”

As a general rule, I never give my phone number to women. For obvious reasons, I communicate strictly on a DM basis on social media. But I don’t want to explain that to Ashleigh, so when she takes her phone and opens a new text message and hands it back to me, I try not to consider that I’m breaking this rule for her.

Instead, I type in my number, attach the photos, and send. Then I hand her phone

back to her, pull my own phone out, and respond to the message.

Zach:

Hey, it's Zach.

Ashleigh:

Oh, so you have a name?

I glance over at her. "I didn't tell you my name?"

"Nope." She holds up her phone so I can see the contact info she must have saved the second I handed the phone back.

First name: Star Trek .

Last name: Guy .

"You could change it, you know," I say.

"Nah. It fits."

We walk down the steps and back toward the railing of the viewing area nearer the city. "I'm going to name you Ashleigh Seattle, then."

"I bet your contacts are full of girls with first names and the last name is just the city where you met them." That comment gives me pause, but I guess anyone who travels for work could use that strategy—it doesn't mean she knows I'm a professional athlete.

I hit “save” on her contact info, then go back to the screen with my complete list of contacts. I hold up the phone so she can see.

“You have like eight contacts. Is this a new phone or something?”

“No. As a rule, I don’t give my number out to people.”

She eyes me skeptically, one light eyebrow lifting higher than the other. “You gave it to me.”

“Yeah, well...you felt worth breaking my rule for.”

“Zach,” she says my name on an exhale, and pauses, her eyes locked on mine. I step toward her, noticing for the first time that she has some barely visible freckles across her cheeks and the bridge of her nose. “You don’t even know me.”

“Yeah, but I want to know you.” I have no idea why I’m being so honest with her right now, except that this is the first time since I’ve been in the NHL that I’ve met someone who I feel like I could really connect with. It’s not just Star Trek or that she knows a thing or two about hockey, it’s also the way she deferred grad school to take care of her uncle, and her interest in science. I’m fascinated by her brain and her big heart, not just her body...though I’d like to get to know that part of her better, too.

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Chapter Four

ASHLEIGH

“Y ou probably say that to all the girls,” I say with an awkward laugh.

He takes one small step forward, just enough that he’s solidly in my space. I have plenty of room to back up if I want to, but I stay put. His deep voice is quiet when he says, “I think the contact list on my phone is proof that I don’t.”

“You’re only here for one more day,” I remind him.

“I could come back. There’s this amazing technology called airplanes that lets you cross the country in mere hours.”

I tilt my head back so I’m looking up at him. This close, I can see the sandy stubble that covers his jaw, which wasn’t there a couple hours ago when I first noticed him in the diner, and a faint scar across his right eyebrow. I want to know how he got that scar, if he’s as close with his mom as he seems, which season of Star Trek is his favorite, and what he does for work.

But mostly, right at this moment, I want to know what he looks like with his hat off, and if his body is as defined as it appears under his hoodie and joggers. And even if I never get answers to my other questions, even if it’s only one night, I want to explore this attraction with him.

“Transporters would be a lot more efficient,” I joke, referencing the teleportation

devices made famous by the mis-quote of Captain Kirk, who never actually said “Beam me up, Scotty.”

“And yet I’d be willing to sit for hours on a commercial flight just to see you again.” He bites his lower lip and all I can think about is what those lips would feel like on mine. The thought has me licking my own lips and I don’t miss the way his eyes register the movement. “You’re shivering,” he says, reaching out and running his hands up and down my arms.

I didn’t even notice. “I probably need someone to keep me warm,” I tease as I step forward so my body is flush against his.

He wraps one arm around my lower back, anchoring me to him, and his other hand sweeps along my jaw as his fingers thread into the hair behind my ear. And then he’s dipping his head toward mine and I’m closing my eyes, but instead of his lips meeting mine like I expect, I feel his cheek scratch against mine and his breath caresses my ear. “The things I want to do in order to keep you warm would be highly inappropriate out in the open like this.”

I’m pretty sure a strangled whimper slips out of the back of my throat.

“I live right around the corner.”

“Are you serious?” he asks, pulling back and tilting my face up to his.

“I am.”

“And are you inviting me over?”

I take a deep breath. This could be the most reckless idea I’ve ever had, but I’m pretty sure I won’t regret one night with him.

“Yeah. I think I am.”

Zach holds my hand tightly in his as we walk back toward my car. As we approach the driver’s side door, he puts his hands on my hips, spinning me around to face him while he backs me against the car.

“Are you one hundred percent sure you want to take me back to your place? Because if you’ve changed your mind, you can say so. Or if you’d rather go to my hotel, we can do that.”

I reach up, putting each of my hands on the side of his neck and running my thumbs along his jawline. I am throwing all caution to the wind because suddenly I’m downright ravenous for him. I don’t know where he’s staying, but I know it’ll take longer to get there than to get back to my place.

“I want you to come over.” I lean up on my toes and press my lips to his.

As I predicted, his lips are soft. He sucks my lower lip between his and gently nips at it with his teeth, which has me opening for him as he sweeps his tongue into my mouth. His hands move from my hips, up my sides, and then one hand is on my jaw and the other is in my hair tugging my head backward gently as he takes command. He kisses me like he wants to possess me, and it’s working. I want to give myself to this man and let him own me, even if it can only be for one night.

My arms snake around his neck and suddenly his arm is sweeping under my ass and lifting me up. I wrap my legs around his waist as he presses me back against the car door, and the small amount of friction as the hard length of him presses against me has me groaning into his mouth.

“Shit,” he mumbles as he pulls back, and we stare at each other wide-eyed, realizing that we’re standing under a street light in view of anyone walking or driving by—not

that there are that many people around this late at night. “We need to get out of here.”

I drop my legs to the ground, but as I do my body slides right along his dick, so he reaches down to adjust himself. His other hand moves behind me and opens my door, ushering me into my seat with a quick, “Let’s go.”

When he climbs into the passenger seat, there’s no way to miss the fact that he’s huge and hard. I let out a small chuckle as I watch him carefully buckle himself in, and when he glances over at me I nod in the direction of his dick and say, “Looks like you’ve got a little problem there.”

“Nothing little about it, sweetheart,” he says. “Now drive.”

About thirty seconds later we’re pulling into the driveway, and he’s letting out a low whistle. “Nice place.”

“The house isn’t mine,” I tell him. “I used to nanny for this family and there’s an apartment above the detached garage—that’s where I live.”

I ease my car into my garage space, then lead him back out and up the stairs along the side of the garage. I note him taking in the pool in the backyard and the same view we just saw from Kerry Park. When we walk into my space and he takes in the wall of windows along the back, he asks, “If you have this view from your place, why do you go to the viewpoint at the park?”

I set my keys in the tray on the countertop of the island that divides the kitchen and living room. “You asked me where you should go, and it wasn’t like I was going to suggest my living room.”

“And yet here we are,” he says, taking a cautious step toward me.

I reach out and grab his sweatshirt, pulling him toward me, and then I look up at him where he's stopped only inches from me. "Yeah, here we are."

He reaches out and traces the line of my cheekbone with the back of his fingers, then uses his thumb to tilt my chin up further. And then his lips are on my neck, trailing soft kisses from behind my ear to the hollow between my collar bones, while he unzips my jacket and slips it off my arms and tosses it to the side. Now that I'm in my warm house and he's kissing my neck, I'm already burning up. So I grab the hem of my sweatshirt with both hands and lift it over my head, forcing him to step back a bit as I do.

Then his lips meet my collarbone and his tongue traces the line from one end to the other, and his hands are skimming up my abdomen on the way to my breasts. I take his hat and toss it to the side, and his sandy hair falls forward against my chest, so I thread my fingers into his hair and tilt his face up to look at me. He looks less boyish without his backward ball cap, or maybe it's just the hunger in his eyes as he stares into mine, looking like he wants to devour me.

He reaches over his head with one hand, grips the back of his sweatshirt, and pulls it over his head. His t-shirt starts to come with it, but before he can reach down to pull it back on, my hands are gliding up the ridged plane of his abdomen and pushing his shirt over his arms and head with his sweatshirt, and I'm left trying not to drool as he stands before me, his eight pack on display. But more impressive are his shoulders and arms, because every single one of those muscles is cut, too. Even his forearms, and I'm a sucker for built forearms.

"Holy shit," I say on an exhale. "Do you work out every day?"

"Yeah," he says. "I do." And then he's kneeling down at my feet and untying my boots. He grips my calf gently as he uses his other hand to slide my foot out, and the care with which he does this is somehow the most sensual thing anyone's done for

me. How he looks at me and how he touches me—it seems almost reverent. He feels like someone who'd take care of me, both physically and emotionally, instead of just using me.

Once my shoes are off, he remains on his knees, sliding his hands up my outer thighs until they rest at the waistband of my leggings. He hooks his thumb in, and looks up at me. "May I?"

"Please do," I say, hoping he doesn't notice the wet spot that's already soaked through my thong and onto my leggings.

He slides them gently down my legs, where I step out of them, and then he looks up at me again, his eyes sliding along the length of my legs, over my abdomen and chest, and up to my face. "Jesus, you're gorgeous," he says. "And smart, and—" He lets out an exhale. "—I don't know...but..." His eyes track lower, and he reaches out and rubs his thumb along the soaking wet fabric of my thong. "Excited?"

"Take off my underwear and find out."

One corner of his mouth curves up as he says, "Yes, ma'am." Then he rips my underwear down my legs quicker than I can blink, and he lifts one ankle to help me step out of them, but then he slides that leg over his shoulder and his face is at the junction between my legs. He hasn't taken his eyes off mine, and though I can tell he's waiting for me to invite him to continue, I'm unprepared when he says, "Tell me what you want."

"You."

"You're going to have to be more specific," he says, and he's so close his warm breath caresses my center, which aches for him.

“I want you to touch me.”

He leans forward and circles my clit with his tongue several times, and then pulls back as he looks up at me. “Like that?”

“God yes.”

“And then?”

I’m so unused to a guy asking me what I want, or caring about what I need, that I almost don’t know how to verbalize it. “And then I want your fingers inside me,” I say as my muscles clench in anticipation of being touched.

He reaches one hand up and anchors my thigh on his shoulder as he leans forward and runs his tongue over and around my clit again. He reaches his other hand up and holds out two fingers for me to suck into my mouth, so I pull them all the way into the back of my throat, slide them out a bit to circle my tongue around them, then slide them to the back of my throat again. Between my legs, Zach groans against me. And then he’s pulling his fingers out of my mouth and repositioning them between my legs.

“You sure?” he asks as he looks up at me, and I appreciate that he keeps checking in.

“I’m more than sure, so you don’t need to keep asking.” The words come out as labored breaths.

He slides both his fingers into me at once, filling me entirely before he begins stroking me with deep, sensual thrusts. He fastens his lips around my sensitive bundle of nerves and sucks my clit into his mouth, running his tongue over it as he does, and I almost fall to pieces right there. When he does it again, while simultaneously stroking me deep inside, I feel my orgasm coming on. I’m almost embarrassed by

how quickly he's finishing me off, but then he looks up and says, "That's a good girl. Come for me."

The heat that floods my body at his words of praise leaves me seeing stars, or maybe it's the way my pussy is gripping his fingers with the rhythmic pulsing of my orgasm, or the way his mouth is back on my clit, bringing me more pleasure than my body feels capable of accepting. When the full orgasm finally tears through me, the waves of sensation flood my senses and my entire body shakes. He's the only thing holding me up.

When I open my eyes, he's looking up at me from between my legs and my hands are fisted in his hair. "Sorry," I say, letting go, "I didn't realize I was holding onto you like that."

"Don't apologize," he says as he lowers my leg back to the ground and stands slowly, pressing me between his body and the island behind me. "I didn't mind one bit." He kisses the bridge of my nose. "Quite enjoyed how you screamed my name."

Did I? I have no recollection of that, but I was coming so hard, who knows what my body was doing.

He tilts his hips forward, running the hard length of his erection along my abdomen. "And I fully plan on hearing it again." He plants his hands on my hips, easily lifting me onto the island, and I almost yelp as my ass hits the cold stone. But I barely have time to register the goosebumps before he's cupping my breasts, gently stroking his thumbs across my nipples where they're peaked beneath the lace fabric of my bra, and warming me back up.

He reaches behind me and unsnaps my bra faster than I could do it, and slides it down my arms. His mouth descends to take one of my nipples in his mouth, and while his warm tongue laps against the sensitive flesh, his hands are at his waist pushing his

joggers off before he pulls my nipple deeper into his mouth. My core is already clenching again, the need to have him fill me takes over.

And then I glance down, where his massive cock stands at attention. My alarmed intake of breath makes a laugh roll around in the back of his throat—it's a low, feral sound that turns me on immeasurably.

“You’ve been hiding that in your sweat pants?”

His mouth leaves my breast as he stands. “I told you it wasn’t a small problem.”

He looks so self-satisfied I want to knock him down a peg. I consider telling him I’ve seen bigger, but that’s a bold faced lie and implies I’ll have no issue taking all of him, which I’m not certain is true.

“I don’t see how that is going to fit in here,” I say, sliding my hand between my legs. I run the pad of my finger over my clit, which is still wet from his mouth and my orgasm.

“It will. That’s right,” he encourages, adding his free hand on top of mine to help set the pace, “let’s get you good and ready.”

He leans forward, taking my other nipple in his mouth and sucking greedily, which has my core spasming almost immediately with the need to be filled. “I need you inside me,” I tell him, and his eyes snap up to mine but he watches me as he continues to destroy my nipple with pleasure.

Then he says, “let’s make sure,” and switches to my other breast, rolling his tongue over that nipple until I’m literally moaning under the intense feelings rolling through my body.

“Zach,” I grind out his name, “now.”

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Chapter Five

ZACH

Her tone leaves no room for argument. She's done being teased, and she's ready for me. I reluctantly remove my mouth from her, loving that I've got her halfway to coming again so quickly.

I hold her hips where she's sitting on the edge of the counter with her legs spread open. "Don't move." Then I reach down and quickly locate my wallet in the pocket of my pants, and pull out a condom.

"Let me," she says, holding her hand out for the foil packet.

I watch her tear it open, then I step up between her legs and she reaches out, gripping me with one hand while she positions the condom at my crown and rolls it down my shaft. I've never seen anything hotter than her hands on my dick, until she positions my head at her entrance and scoots her ass forward on the counter so I'm pressed up against her entrance—and that, by far, is the hottest thing I've ever seen.

She leans back with one hand behind her on the counter, wraps her other hand around the back of my neck, and says, "be gentle."

I slide into her slowly, carefully watching her face for any signs of discomfort. But she just grips my dick from inside her and growls, "not that gentle." And as I slide fully into her, she closes her eyes and lets out a contented sigh followed by "so good."

“Hey,” I say, reaching out and cupping her jaw. “Eyes on me while I’m inside you.”

Her eyes fly open in response and a feline-like smile spreads her lips. “Yes, sir.” Her tone is light and she’s joking, but damn if it doesn’t do something to me to hear those words fall from her lips.

I grip her hips, spreading my fingers across the smooth skin of her ass, and pull her forward so I’m as deep inside her as possible. And as I pull back, thrusting into her over and over, all I can think about is how I want to own her pussy—I never want anyone else to feel her from the inside, because she already feels like mine.

“Holy shit,” she whispers a few minutes later, and the way her eyes roll toward the ceiling, I know how close she is to coming again. I stop moving and her eyes fly back to mine. “Don’t stop now,” she insists.

I hold her hips still even as she tries to move, seeking the friction of my dick on her inner walls. “I’m not ready for this to be over,” I tell her.

Her fingers tighten around the back of my neck. “I thought the whole multiple orgasms thing was a myth, and now I’m pretty sure it’s not only possible, but about to happen for me. So don’t you dare...fucking...stop.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say, and her laugh makes her entire body shake, the movement reverberating down my dick so that I couldn’t stop myself from fucking her if I tried. “Multiple orgasms, coming right up.”

And then my hips are meeting the back of her thighs as she pulls her knees up to my rib cage and leans back on her elbows. “Fuck, yes,” she whispers. “Oh my god.”

The sight of her like that, her tits bouncing with each thrust, her heels on the edge of the counter, her full pink lips saying my name as her eyes widen in surprise, and then

her muscles spasming around me as her orgasm hits and she screams out—this is the girl of my dreams.

I don't stop until her orgasm ends and her body practically goes limp. And then I pull out of her, lifting her off the counter and turning her back to me as I place her feet on the ground, her long legs spread and her ass tilted up as I bend her over the counter. Goosebumps erupt across her back as her chest hits the cool stone, but then I push into her, loving the way the moonlight streaming through the second story windows allows me to watch our bodies meeting.

But I'm too far from her, so I lean down, resting an elbow next to her so my chest presses against her back. "Tell me how you want me to finish you off."

"I'm half dead," she says. "I don't think I have another orgasm in me."

"The fuck you don't," I growl into her ear, as I take my free hand and bring two fingers to her mouth. She pulls them in greedily. "That's right," I say, "suck those fingers like you're sucking my cock." The way I have her pressed between me and the counter while I'm inside her ensures I feel her resulting moan with my entire body. She circles my fingers with her tongue and sucks them into her mouth until they hit the back of her throat, her tongue runs along the length of them as she sucks on them again and again. "Good fucking girl," I say in her ear, and her muscles clamp around my dick with those words of praise.

I pull my fingers from her mouth and slide my hand along her hip and across her lower abdomen until my fingertips meet her clit, and then I'm rolling it back and forth, circling it with gentle pressure. She lifts her head, turning to find my lips with hers. The kiss is rough and desperate, and her hips start to move rhythmically against mine as our tongues tangle and my fingers glide over her clit. Her apartment is filled with the sound of our bodies meeting, her soft moans of pleasure, and the growl I let out when she pulls her lips from mine to whisper, "Yes, Zach, like that."

And then I'm sinking my teeth into her shoulder, nipping gently as I trail my lips along her trapezius on my way to her neck where I run my tongue along the cords of muscles there. "Oh fuck," she whispers, her back going rigid as her next orgasm comes on suddenly.

I grip her hip as I increase my pace, determined that we finish at the same time. The sensation at the base of my spine spreads like lightning up my back, down my legs, and into my balls. I pour myself into her as she screams, "Yes, oh my God, yes!"

And as I watch her writhing beneath me, her body overcome by pleasure, I can't help but growl out "Mine." Because no one has ever seemed more perfect to me than she does at this moment.

* * *

Light is already streaming through the windows when I wake up and panic, thinking I must have overslept. I grab my phone off the nightstand, and thankfully, my alarm isn't set to go off for five more minutes, so I slip out of bed, grabbing my boxer briefs as I go. When I return from the bathroom a minute later, Ashleigh's sitting up in bed with the sheet wrapped around her chest and anchored under her arms. Her eyes are wide as she stares at her phone screen.

"What's going on?" My voice is scratchy from lack of sleep.

She looks up at me and her eyes are full of tears.

"Oh no," I say, crossing the room quickly and kneeling on the bed next to her. I cup her face in my hands, wanting to fix whatever's wrong. "What happened?"

"My funding came through. I'm officially going to get my PhD."

“That’s amazing.” I use my thumbs to wipe the tears that stream from the corners of her eyes. Why is she crying? “You never told me where you’re going.”

“MIT.”

I sit back on my heels, my hands dropping to my thighs, and stare at her. “Are you for real?”

She tilts her head slightly to the side as her eyes slide up the length of my body and land on my face. “Yeah, why?”

I pray that when I break this news, she’ll feel the same thing I’m feeling—hope.

“You’re going to be in my city. Well, you’ll be in Cambridge, on the other side of the river from Boston, but still?—”

Her eyebrows are furrowed together in confusion. “I thought you lived in Toronto?”

“I grew up in Toronto. When I was nineteen, I moved to Philadelphia, and I’ve been in Boston for about six months.”

“Why’d you move to Boston?”

“I got traded. I play for the Boston Rebels.”

I’m completely unprepared for the way she draws back in horror, whispering, “Tell me you’re kidding.”

“No, why?” I didn’t want her to like me because I played hockey, but I wasn’t expecting her to have this kind of adverse reaction, either.

“I don’t date hockey players.”

“As a general rule? Or because of a bad experience?”

“Yes.”

“So you’ve dated a professional hockey player before—” I don’t know what to do with this jealousy coursing through my veins. Of course she’s dated other people. But someone I play against? Or maybe even worse—with? “—and the experience was bad enough that it’s turned you off hockey players forever?”

She presses her lips between her teeth and nods. “He was fucking terrible.”

I already want to kill him and I don’t even know who he is.

“What happened?” My words are gentle even though every muscle in my body is tense with the need to pummel this guy. And I’m known for not fighting.

“Imagine being constantly cheated on and belittled. He also used his size to intimate me into backing down every time we had an argument. Even though he never hurt me, I never felt safe with him.”

“Ashleigh,” I say, reaching out and running my knuckles down her bare arm and lacing my fingers through hers. I’m relieved when she doesn’t pull away. “You know that just because he played hockey and was an asshole doesn’t mean all hockey players are assholes, right?”

She looks away, and I hate that her view of me has changed so drastically because of the sport I love.

“Have I, at any point, made you feel unsafe or made you feel like you can’t trust

me?”

She shakes her head no as she looks back at me, locking those beautiful blue and green eyes with mine.

“Because I’m not that kind of guy, and I think you already know that,” I say. “I want to stay and talk more about this, but I can’t be late to practice. Can we meet up, maybe for lunch?” It would have to be quick, but I should be able to make time in between practice and my routine before the game.

“My shift at the Science Museum starts at 11AM, so I don’t really get a lunch break. I’d suggest dinner, but...”

“I have a game,” I finish when she trails off. “And then we’re heading straight to the plane and flying home.” Normally I don’t mind our overnight flights back to Boston. The airplane is comfortable and I can fall asleep anywhere, and it’s nice to wake up and be home rather than wasting a day traveling. But right now I’d give anything to be spending one more night here.

We stare at each other for a moment, and I’m relieved to find that she looks sad at the prospect of not seeing me again. It’s a nice contrast to the look of horror she had a moment ago.

“I have some time off around Christmas,” I say. “Maybe I can come back here and see you. It’s only a couple weeks from now. And then you’re moving to Cambridge, when? In like a month?”

“Yeah, most likely.”

“This wasn’t just sex for me, Ashleigh. And I think you felt more, too. Just tell me this isn’t over,” I say, desperate to know I’ll see her again and not caring if I come off

as needy. I don't want to leave any room for her to question how I feel.

She pauses and my heart sinks, but then she says, "We'll figure it out. You have my number."

"Come to the game tonight," I say, squeezing her hand.

"Zach," she says, and I can tell she's declining the invite in the way she says my name. Then she shakes her head and says, "My ex will be there."

"Who is he?"

"Like I'd tell you when you're about to play against him."

"I just want to know whose ass I need to kick."

"See, that's the thing about hockey players. You think everything can be solved with a fight."

"I meant I was going to kick his ass by outskating him. If you want to know what kind of player I am, you should do a quick online search. I think you'll see that not fighting is kind of my brand."

She rolls her eyes like she doesn't believe me. "I'll do that."

The shrill sound of my alarm fills the space and we jump apart. "I really have to go." I'm sure she hears the regret in my voice—I don't want to leave but there is no way I can be late to practice.

She tilts her head up and gives me a kiss. "Good luck tonight. Don't be a stranger."

As much as I hate walking out her door and up the driveway to get into the car I ordered, I leave filled with hope. I've never once met someone who I had such an instant connection with, and I think it's possible that this thing between us is just the beginning.

I hop in the back of the car and as the driver heads toward my hotel, I pull out my phone.

Zach

How do you feel about spending Christmas in Seattle?

Mom

Why Seattle?

Zach

I just met someone special. I want to see her again. And I want you to meet her.

Mom

Woah. That's a huge thing to drop in a text this early in the morning. Call me and we'll talk about it.

Zach

I'll be home tomorrow. I'll call you then.

Mom

Okay, love you. Good luck tonight. I'll be watching like always!

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Chapter Six

ASHLEIGH

“Care to tell me why Zach Freaking Reid just dropped this off for you?”

I glance up at my best friend from college and current co-worker, Blake, where she stands in the doorway to the Science Museum’s break room with a rather large white box, tied with a thick blue ribbon, in her hand.

“Uhhh, Zach was here? And how do you know who he is?”

“Yes, and he introduced himself. But I’m a hockey fan so I’d have known him anyway.”

I feel a little stupid that I had no idea who he was. I didn’t follow hockey growing up, and even though I watch it now, it’s not like I know all the players or would recognize most of them off the ice.

“Sooo...?” Blake prompts.

I bite the corner of my lip, then tell her, “He might have spent the night at my place last night.”

“You slept with Zach Reid?” she yells, then closes the door behind her quickly.

“Alert the entire museum, please.” I roll my eyes, annoyed that she isn’t being more

discreet about it.

“He just showed up here and asked that this be delivered to you, so I’m sure everyone already suspects there’s something going on there.”

“Why didn’t he just give it to me himself?” I wonder aloud.

“He had a car waiting for him and seemed a bit rushed. I happened to be walking by the front entrance and heard him asking Shelley to give this to you, so I introduced myself as your best friend, and he gave it to me instead.”

“Thank God,” I say. Shelley’s the nosiest person alive. She probably would have opened the box herself if Blake hadn’t been there.

I hold my arms out and Blake crosses the room and sets it into my outstretched hands, saying “Alright, what’s in there? I’m dying to know.”

I pull the thick satin of the blue bow and lift the lid to the box. And then, I stop breathing.

“Oh shit,” Blake says and then lets out an awkward laugh.

Together we stare down at the Boston Rebels jersey, neatly folded so REID is prominently displayed, and the two tickets to tonight’s game that sit atop it. Beneath the tickets is a flat notecard, and I slide it out to read the message scrawled across it: In case you change your mind...

I stare at it in stunned silence.

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. I really want to see him again, but if I go tonight I’d have to see Colby too.”

“Good, let Colby see you in Zach’s jersey. It’s exactly what the asshole deserves. And Zach’s known as being one of the nicest guys in the league, which you deserve.”

“I’m not looking to cause drama. These are front row tickets. What if Colby sees me and makes a spectacle?”

“Colby won’t be expecting you, so he probably won’t even notice you’re there. But if he does and he starts shit, then hopefully Zach actually throws a punch and knocks him unconscious.”

I think about what I learned this morning from searching him up online. He wasn’t joking that his “brand” is based on not fighting. Apparently some of the fans hate that about him, but I read article after article about how he made it into the NHL so young by being a smart, tactical defensive player, and how his ability to keep his own emotions under control while getting under his opponents’ skin might just be the key to his success.

What if my being there tonight actually backfires and Zach loses his cool?

“I can see Zach again at a different time. He floated the idea of coming back here for Christmas,” I say and Blake’s eyes bug out of her head. “And, my funding came through for my PhD this morning, so I’m moving to Boston next month. He wants to keep seeing me once I’m there.”

Blake sighs. “You’re living my dream life, girl. You really like him, don’t you?”

“There’s just...I don’t know, we just had this connection I’ve never had with anyone else before. And the sex was...out of this world.”

“I see what you did there, rocket scientist.”

I laugh because it was unintentional. “Not only did he give me three orgasms, he’s a huge Star Trek fan, too.”

“So...the sex was amazing, he’s a nice guy, he lives in Boston, and he’s a Star Trek fan. How have you not married him already?” she asks. “You’re really going to let Colby get in the way of you seeing Zach again before he leaves?”

“I want to be there to support him. But wearing his jersey? That means something.”

“If you don’t feel ready for that step, you could go to watch him play and not wear the jersey, you know.”

“I think you just want to go to the game with me,” I tease.

“You know I do. And if the only thing holding you back is the possibility you’ll see Colby, I hate to see you give him that control over you.”

“I don’t want to make things awkward for Zach if Colby starts running his mouth.”

“Does Zach know your ex plays for Seattle?”

“Yeah.”

“And he still brought you his jersey and tickets, so he must be okay with the possibility of your ex finding out. Zach’s a big boy. Why don’t you let him worry about Colby? Because I have a feeling that for him, the only thing worse than an encounter with Colby is you not showing up.”

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Chapter Seven

ZACH

“Y ou looking for someone in particular?” Drew asks when he notices my eyes flick to the empty seats on the other side of the glass. I’m supposed to be warming up, but I can’t stop looking for Ashleigh.

“Nah,” I say as I drop down to the ice, spreading my knees to stretch my inner thighs.

“You sure?” he asks.

I stick my right leg out sideways and slide down into a deeper stretch. “Positive.”

A Hmm rolls around in the back of Drew’s throat. “Too bad, because two women just sat down in the seats you’ve been eyeing.”

My head flies around before I stop myself from looking. Sure enough, Ashleigh and that girl, Blake, who I gave the box to earlier at the museum, are standing at those seats taking their jackets off. Their eyes aren’t focused on the ice yet, so I take a second to note that Ashleigh’s wearing my jersey. Given what she told me about her ex, I know what it must have taken for her to put that jersey on and show up here tonight.

I’m pretty sure she is going to be the love of my life.

“Let’s go,” Drew says. “You need to get your head in this game. Knowing she’s here

is great. Getting distracted by her, not so much.”

“Okay.” I agree because he has much more experience in this area than I do, given that Audrey comes to all his home games. But as I pop up onto my skates, I turn and head over to the wall, tapping on the glass with my fist as I skate by. Ashleigh’s head snaps up, and I throw her a wink over my shoulder as I skate away.

Drew and I practice taking some shots, then I find Tomberlin, my defensive pair, and as we stand there talking strategy, I hear a commotion behind me.

“Fucking take it off!” Clark is yelling into the stands. And that’s when I notice the panicked look on Ashleigh’s face as the two hundred pound winger bangs his fist on the glass in front of her. I no longer have to wonder who her ex is, or why she didn’t want to see him tonight. Colby Clark has a reputation for having a short fuse, which my teammates reminded me of just last night.

I make it to his side in one second flat. “I highly suggest you not speak to her that way,” I say, keeping my voice low and level.

“Or what?” he spits the words at me.

“Or you’ll answer to me.”

His lip curls as he looks at me, then he looks over toward Ashleigh and that’s when he seems to notice the 08 on her sleeve. He looks at my sleeve, then his eyes meet mine.

“You’re going for my sloppy seconds, eh?”

He’s just trying to push your buttons, I remind myself. Don’t give him that kind of power.

“She’s not sloppy anything, and it’s your loss.” I keep my voice casual, like I’m talking to an irate toddler about to have a tantrum. “But every time we play each other now, she’ll have my name on her back. I hope you enjoy that as much as I will.”

“You’re so fucking dead, Reid.”

I laugh in his face. “Keep telling yourself that.”

I know I’m egging him on, and I hope I’m not pissing Ashleigh off by doing so. But based on what she told me about him, he deserves to feel both shame and regret for the way he treated her.

“Clark,” one of the Seattle players calls out, “get over here!”

He eyes Ashleigh one more time, then skates away. I move up to the glass, where she’s shrunk back in her seat.

“Hey,” I call to her with my hand on the glass. She leans forward, her hand meeting mine. “I’m glad you’re here. And I’m sorry he’s an asshole.”

She gives me a weak smile and I blow her a kiss, which at least brings out her real smile.

“I have to go, but meet me out back after the game?”

She nods. “Okay. Good luck tonight.”

“Baby, you being here is all the luck I need.”

* * *

We're six minutes into the second period and down by one goal when Clark and I are close enough during a face off in Boston's defensive zone that he's able to start talking shit. We haven't been on the ice at the same time much during this game, so it's no surprise he's running his mouth now. He's pissed off about Ashleigh, and I know he'll be coming for me. I also know that Drew will try to slap the puck to me so I can take it behind our net and hopefully pass it back to him on the other side.

The minute the puck hits the ice, Drew gets control of it and backhands to me. I take it behind the net as planned, but Clark is waiting for me. It's a classic opportunity for a turnover, but I easily send it along the boards past him because he's not trying to get control of the puck, he's skating straight toward me. I manage to move out of the way so that the body check he'd intended for me ends up with him slamming himself against the glass and looking like a damn amateur.

Clark turns back toward me, throwing his gloves to the ice. His hands are fisted and the adrenaline makes his whole body shake like he's about to explode. Normally I'd have skated away before it could get to this point, but we're here now and we're doing this.

I drop my gloves before he reaches me, and when he takes his first swing I turn slightly so that he misses. Ten years of Aikido training and a fifth degree black belt means I know better than to fight—the damage I could do to my opponent, even on skates, is too substantial. One of the foundational practices of Aikido is using your opponent's momentum and strength against him, and Clark's inability to make contact with me twice in a row is escalating his rage.

He spins back toward me, throwing a punch that has his entire body weight behind it, which I easily block with my elbow. When his fist makes contact with the hard pads covering the area, the cracking sound of his finger bones is audible over the cheers of the crowd watching us fight. His face pulls back in a grimace as he draws his hand back to his body, and I swivel so I'm behind him, wrapping my arms around his chest and immobilizing him.

“If you ever speak to Ashleigh again,” I tell him, “I’ll break your other hand, too.”

I want the threat to linger in his mind, preventing him from going anywhere near her during the month or so until she moves. I’ll talk to her about getting a security system installed, just in case, though.

Clark doesn’t even protest as the referee pulls him away. He’s cradling his hand to his chest and I should probably feel bad, but he literally did this to himself. I hope he enjoys his six weeks off while his hand heals.

I bend to scoop up my gloves and stick and happily accept my time in the penalty box.

* * *

Our team leaves the arena triumphant. Not only is that another win and two more points toward the playoffs, but it solidifies our early-season lead in our division. The Rebels have had some bad luck over the last couple years, always starting the season strong and then not quite making it to the playoffs or being eliminated in the first round. The players insist this year feels different, even while our coaches tell us not to get too cocky.

There’s a mass of people outside the arena, held back by metal barricades lining the path to the bus that will take us to our plane. There are more Rebels fans here than I’d expect for an away game, and far more of them calling my name than usual. I guess that’s what happens when you take out one of the most hated players on the opposing team.

But I’m not reveling in the attention—my eyes are busy scanning the crowd, and anyone who isn’t Ashleigh hardly registers. And then I see her...she’s standing near the end of the barricades closest to the bus, one hand holding back her long hair as the wind picks up and the light snowflakes swirl through the air. My first thought is how

beautiful she is. My second is that I wish it was enough snow to strand us here for the night, but I know it's not.

I pick up the pace, leaving my teammates behind as I beeline straight toward her. Dropping my bag on the ground at my feet, I take her hand and pull her up against the metal bars, pressing my lips to hers quickly. I have no idea how she feels about public displays of affection, so even though I want to kiss the shit out of her right now so I can tuck that feeling away in my memory until I see her again, I pull back.

"Meet me by the bus?"

"Aren't there security guards there to prevent that?" She gives me a knowing smirk.

"There are security guards there to prevent fans from trying to board the buses, not to stop us from saying goodbye to people we care about."

Next to Ashleigh, her friend sighs as she watches us together.

"Thanks for delivering that package to Ashleigh earlier," I say, turning toward Blake.

"Will I see you when I'm here again? I feel like I at least owe you a drink."

"Depends," she says, glancing at Ashleigh and then back to me. "When will you be here again?"

I look at Ashleigh and ask, "Christmas?"

"I think we can probably work that out," she says.

"I'll be back in a little over a week, then. We'll take Blake out for a thank you drink," I say. "Also, I'm bringing my mom because it's the holidays and she'll want to meet you."

“Does your mom even know I exist?” she laughs.

“She sure does.” I love the way her eyes widen in shock at this admission. “And she’s going to adore you. We’ll make plans as soon as I get back to Boston,” I glance over my shoulder and almost the whole team has boarded the bus. “I have to go. Meet me by the bus?” I nod my chin toward the open door, a few yards to my left.

She nods, so I grab my bag, carry it over to the driver loading bags in the undercarriage, and then meet her at the end of the barricades.

“I hope you’re not mad about my fight with Clark,” I say once I’ve pulled her close again. It occurred to me during my time in the penalty box that she might be upset, but I couldn’t let myself worry about it until now. “I know how you feel about fighting, and it’s not my norm.”

“I know it’s not,” she says. “Per your request, I did a fair amount of internet stalking this morning.”

“Good,” I say, leaning down to press a kiss to the top of her head. “I didn’t think there was anything that could draw me into a fight on the ice,” I admit, “but seeing him yelling at you was enough to tip me over the edge.”

“I’ll be glad when I don’t live in the same city as him,” she says, then leans forward wrapping her arms around my waist.

“How do I already miss you?” I ask.

“This next week can’t go fast enough.”

“I’ll get back here as soon as I can, but it’ll be a quick trip. Before we know it, though, you’ll be back in Boston,” I say, already wondering about floating the idea of her moving to Boston a couple weeks early and staying at my place while she hunts

for housing close to campus. Maybe I'll bring it up at Christmas.

"Call me when you land?" she asks, looking up at me.

"It'll be like two in the morning here."

"I don't care. I will happily wake up to talk to you." She presses up on her tiptoes and slides her lips along mine, then says, "I think your whole team is waiting for you."

I glance over my shoulder, and sure enough, about half the team is pressed up to the glass watching us like they're damn children.

"I guess I better go." I know she hears the same sadness in my voice that I hear. I'm usually so happy to go home after being on the road.

"Hey," she says, leaning up to whisper in my ear. "Maybe that call should be a video call? I'll already be in bed with no clothes on."

Then she steps away, a tiny private smile on her face as she walks backward toward the crowd, eyes still locked on me. And suddenly, I can't wait to get back to Boston after all.

THE END

Want more of Zach's teammates? The Boston Rebels series begins with Drew and Audrey's book *Center Ice* .