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**ALL IN**

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I spin on my cracked leather stool and take in the college football game playing on the gigantic TV behind the bar. “Ugh, I thought I’d never have to watch a Falcons game again after graduating from Kingston.” I snarl a little. Ladylike, I know. But that’s what watching Caleb Stewart get a touchdown does to me. “Why the hell are they playing reruns from last year’s game, anyway?”

“It’s just the highlight reel,” my friend and co-worker Lance says as he angles his head, like he’s going into work mode, but I’m in no mood to be analyzed. As a social worker, I prefer to do the analyzing, but he’s a social worker too, and it’s in our nature to evaluate those around us. Still, I wish he couldn’t read me so well. He arches a questioning brow. “It’s not so bad, is it?”

Oh, it’s bad. It’s so incredibly bad, but I don’t want to get into my past with him. It only depresses me. So does the fact that it’s the holiday season once again, and come New Year’s Eve, I’ll have no one to kiss when the ball drops.

“Are you a football fan?” My gaze moves over Lance’s fancy, square-framed glasses, to the perfect way the collared points of his dress shirt stay tucked into his sweater. He lifts his glass and I grin at the delicate frosty drink in his hands. I love the guy, I really do. He took me under his wing when I started work at the behavioural clinic right after graduation eight months ago. But he’s so damn astute, and I prefer to leave my past in my past, yet he somehow always has a way of making me spill my thoughts and worries. Not this time, buddy. Not this time. I resist the urge to mimic the motion of zipping my lips and tossing the key away.

“I don’t mind looking at their tight ends,” he teases and takes a sip of his strawberry daiquiri, the highlights in his hair glistening beneath the Christmas lights strung across the ceiling.

I laugh at that. “Yeah, well, there’s one tight end I never want to see again.” I grumble and gulp my margarita, unable to take my eyes off one particular player’s perfect backside. I hate the guy. Loathe him, actually.

*Then why the hell are you staring so damn hard at the TV, Peyton?*

“Look at him. He thinks he’s God’s gift to women,” I mumble under my breath, and snarl a little more as I force my focus onto my friend. I’m sure even the plastic reindeer he has pinned to his ugly Christmas sweater can see right through me. Bah humbug! I really hope my mood improves before Beck and Eden’s oceanside wedding tomorrow.

Lance’s brows furrow as his gaze goes from me to the TV back to me again. “Who?”

I snort. “Caleb Stewart, of course.” I wave a hand toward the screen. “Do you see anyone else on that field that thinks he’s the cock of the walk?”

Dear God, why would I use Caleb and cock in the same sentence?

Do not think about Caleb's cock!

Do not think about it.

Dammit, too late. I'm thinking about it. Not that I have a visual buried in the depths of my memories, or anything like that. I've never seen it, nor do I want to. Okay, well, maybe back in college I thought about it a time or two, but that was eight long months ago.

Douchebag Caleb never gave me a lick of attention in college, yet he slept with every girl who looked his way. Every girl but me, that is. Bitter? Nah. Not much anyway. I mean I might have put on a bit of weight, living off campus food, but I wasn't a troll or anything. Still, he only gravitated toward model-thin cheerleaders, and honestly, I should be happy I never slept with him. Why would I ever want to be with a narcissistic asshole like that?

"So you like him, huh?"

I take in Lance's wry grin. "No, I don't like him." I sit up a little straighter and square my shoulders when he raises his brow. "Oh, please. He's a bastard. I hate everything about him."

"Doesn't seem that way to me."

"Your spidey senses are off this time, Lance."

"Spidey senses?" he says with a laugh.

"Can we please just talk about something else." I wave to the bartender, and he looks my way. "Would you mind turning the station?"

“Ooh, someone’s got it bad,” Lance says with a little finger wave.

I glare at him. “I hate him, end of discussion.”

Wait, how did Lance get me talking about Caleb? I’m about to ask, when a deep voice beside me cuts me off.

“Why don’t you tell me what you really think?”

I spin, and the second I come face to face with none other than the man who’s been living rent free in my head for far too long, my blood drains to my toes. Lance makes a squealing noise behind me, and I reach behind me and try to whack him but only get air.

I swallow. Hard.

Speaking of hard. My gaze leaves Caleb’s perfect, chiselled face, and travels down to take in the blue sweater that showcases broad shoulders, a tight chest and a perfect eight pack. Well, I can’t really see the eight pack. That’s just my stupid imagination at play.

“What...what are you doing here?” I ask him.

Silence hangs heavy for a moment, taking up space between us. “Nice to see you too, Peyton.”

I snort. “I’m surprised you remember my name.”

“Why wouldn’t I remember?” He sidles closer and his warm scent curls around me. I nearly sob as it seeps into my skin and caresses every erogenous zone. I quiver from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. “You’re far from forgettable.”

As his gaze moves over my face, embarrassment jumps in to replace arousal, and I’m glad the bar is dimly lit. I’d hate for him to see the heat coloring my cheeks red as my mind goes

back to the night I had a little too much to drink and seduced him. Seduced him? Okay, more like threw myself at him like I was one of his beloved footballs. Little did I know he was going to deflect, and I'd fall to my ass, mortified. Okay, I get it. I'm not your type. Move along.

"What exactly are you doing here, in this bar?" I ask again. Lance and I hit up the place every Friday because it's close to work and I don't believe in coincidences, and come on, this is kind of a big one, don't you think?

He shrugs and holds his beer up in salute. "Needed a drink."

Lance clears his throat, giving me a reprieve from Caleb's gorgeous blue eyes. "This is Lance, my friend and co-worker," I say, trying not to sound as breathless as I feel, but fail miserably. Lance extends his hand, a huge smile on his face as he and Caleb shake hands. I stare at his big, stupid hand, and no way on the face of this earth am I going to spend one second imagining what it would feel like caressing my body. Not right now, anyway. Not while I'm sitting at the bar.

Tonight, however...

Caleb turns his attention back to me. "I'm in town because it's Christmas. I'm home to visit with the family, and of course Beck's wedding tomorrow."

My mouth drops open. "You're going to Beck and Eden's wedding?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world." His eyes leave mine, travel downward to take in my blouse and dress pants. What, does he like what he sees? Well, screw him. He didn't want me when I was chunky, which means he can't have me when I'm thin.

"I didn't know you kept in contact with Beck."

With his eye still lingering around my midriff, I'm about to tell him my face is up here, not on my breasts or between my legs when his head lifts, a sexy grin tugging at the corners of his kissable lips. "We go way back. Buds for life."

They played football together at Kingston, and I was friends with Beck's girl Eden, but I didn't realize the guys stayed in touch, especially after Caleb went off to play for Chicago.

"You'll be there too, right?"

Is that hope I see in his eyes?

"Yeah, I'll be there." A small grin touches his mouth, and I hate—HATE—that he's looking at me like I'm a sheep that wandered into the lion's den. "Lance is my plus one."

Lance makes a sound, and I reach behind my back and pinch him to shut him up. Caleb glances over my shoulder, the smile gone from his face.

"Oh, I didn't realize you two were..."

He lets his words fall off. "Yeah, we're a couple." I glance around and don't miss the way the women in the room are staring at Caleb. Heck, why wouldn't they be staring? I put my elbow on the bar and brace my chin on my hand, like I don't have a care in the world. "Who will you be bringing?"

"There was this one girl I was hoping to go with," he says, his blue eyes back on mine, eliciting shivers deep within my body. He picks up his beer, takes a long pull from the bottle and slams it back down. "But it appears she's already taken."

Dear God, is he talking about me?

"I guess I'll see you there," he says, and turns away.



I resist the urge to say not if I see you first, but I'm not twelve years old. Okay, that might not be the entire truth. I don't say it because my words catch in my throat as I take pleasure in his sexy swagger. Dear God, how am I going to make it through the wedding tomorrow knowing he's going to be there? My gaze drops to his sweet backside, and arousal races through me like a runaway freight train.

Dammit.

"Want to tell me what that was all about and why I'm getting dragged into this thing between you guys?" Lance asks.

"What thing?"

"This thing called hate." He snorts and holds one hand out as he looks at the ceiling. "I'm surprised it didn't set off the sprinklers."

"I hate him, Lance," I spit out with conviction, but from the smirk on his face, it's easy to tell he's not buying it.

"Yeah, he hates you too. If hating you means wanting to eat you alive."

That might be the case, but Lance has no idea how much Caleb embarrassed me back in college. But we're not in college anymore and he obviously likes what he sees—now. Maybe I could have a little fun with that. A little revenge for dissing the curvy girl. Maybe I'll show him exactly what he missed out on and leave him hanging like he left me. I grin. Oh, this is going to be so much fun.

**W**ith the wedding vows over and the reception in full swing, I maneuver through the happy crowd and lean against the bar. The scent of pine fills the air as tiny white lights sparkle on the dozen or so Christmas trees spread throughout the country club. I take a swig of my beer, and search the dance floor. My heart picks up pace when my gaze settles on Peyton as she laughs with her friends. She's lost weight since college, and while I miss those curves—spent many nights visualizing my hands on her while I abused my cock—she's still as gorgeous today as she was then. Her dark hair is a bit longer, and my fingers itch to tug on her curls until her mouth opens for mine.

My gaze leaves her face, travels downward to take in a tight blue dress that showcases long, sexy legs and lush breasts. A groan I have no control over crawls out of my throat, and her head slowly turns my way, like she can feel my eyes on her. I don't avert my gaze. Nope, I continue to stare, despite the fact that she's practically snarling at me. I tip my bottle her way as my cock thickens, the way it always does when I'm

near her. Heck, who am I kidding? It's thick even when I'm not near her. I've wanted her for so goddamn long now, even back in college when she wanted to hook up with me. When I turned her down.

Yeah, hard to believe that, right? Who would have thought that I, Caleb Stewart, would turn down the hottest girl on the face of the planet? I admit it. I used to be a man-whore, who slept around. A lot. While I liked sex—still do—I hated how the girls only wanted me because I was a baller. Fuck, as soon as they had me, they moved on to the next guy and there was a part of me that was so goddamn afraid that Peyton would do the same thing. What I wanted was a real, honest-to-God relationship with her, so when she tried to hook up with me, I actually rejected her advances.

Not my best move. I just didn't know how to handle it, or her. Never in my life have I wanted anyone the way I want her, and after graduation, I've been nothing but fucking miserable. So miserable, I'm driving my teammates crazy. They don't want me coming back to Chicago from this Christmas break without putting a ring on her finger. I found out from Eden where Peyton liked to hang out, and I went to that bar last night to find her. What I found instead was a woman who hated me. Jesus Christ, I really fucked this up, didn't I?

But I thought if I didn't sleep with her, we could get to know one another. Lessons learned taught me that sex ruins everything. But turning her down backfired too, because every time I tried to talk to her at Kingston, she went the other way and threw herself at my friends, like she was trying to prove a point—she no longer wanted me.

Is that what she's doing with Lance too? Because no way on the face of this Earth are he and Peyton a couple. How do I

know that, you ask? Oh, just that Lance is staring harder at Dean, one of Beck's groomsmen, than he is at Peyton. Bringing him here had to be another way to prove she's moved on.

But has she? I don't know. All I do know is the second I saw her at the bar, sparks flew. Christ, we were lucky we didn't burn the place down. I damn well plan to fuck some sense into her this weekend. Hey, turning her down didn't work, and maybe sex won't ruin things between us. Maybe it will make it better.

That thought makes me uneasy because sex has never been the answer for me before. It's almost like I'm cursed. Once a girl is with me, she goes on to find true love with someone else. Christ, they even made a movie about a guy like that. In the end, he got the girl, but this isn't a Hollywood fairytale where happily-ever-after is a foregone conclusion. No, this is the real world, and I'm only going to get one more shot at proving to Peyton I'm the guy for her.

I smooth my hand over my tie when one of the bridesmaids comes up to me. "Hey Caleb," she says, and I smile at her. She's gorgeous, and in the past, I would have gone for it. Now though, I'm not interested.

"Hey Nathalie," I say.

Her hand goes to my tie and she runs it between her fingers. "Are you spending the night?"

I look past her shoulders, feel Peyton's eyes burning into Nathalie's back. If she hates me so much, why does she care who I'm talking to? "I just love the idea of us all staying in yurts, don't you?"

“Yeah,” I mumble. Camping—or rather glamping—has never been my thing, but Beck and Eden are outdoor enthusiasts, and the yurts they set up are hardly roughing it. I dropped my overnight bag into mine earlier, and from the plush bed and lighting, the pillow and blankets, the yurt is luxury to the extreme. Not to mention they’re lined up on a hill overlooking the water. Listening to the waves lap will put anyone to sleep, although sleep is the last thing I have on my mind tonight.

Nathalie blinks up at me. “Do you know which one you’re in?”

“No,” I say. It’s a lie. I checked out every nametag on every tent, but I don’t want to mislead her, and let her think I’m inviting her in. I’m not. But that terse one-word answer isn’t deterring her from pressing her body to mine.

She giggles and nibbles on her bottom lip. “When you find out, let me know, okay?”

“Sure,” I say, not wanting to hurt her feelings. But tonight, there is only one woman I want in my bed, and she’s currently wrapping herself around Dean. Bolts of anger zap through me. Oh, hell no. “If you’ll excuse me.” I step around Nathalie and head straight for the dance floor.

“Hey Dean, Nathalie is looking for you,” I say, and he gives me a confused look. I’m not sure why that would confuse him. He’s a great looking guy and has even caught the attention of Peyton’s plus one.

“Oh yeah.”

I gesture to the bar, and he rubs his chin as he follows my gaze. Giving him little choice in the matter, I practically step

between him and Peyton, blocking her from his view. “I’ll take over here.”

He steps away from us, and giving her little choice, I put my hand around her waist and drag her to me. Fuck, the second her body meshes with mine, my cock thickens and blood rushes from my brain, but I need to keep my shit together. I need to do this right tonight.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Peyton asks, her lips pinched thin.

“Dancing with you.”

“I was having a nice time with Dean.” For a second, I think I’m going to get a knee to the nuts but then her demeanor changes—like a switch just went off inside her brain, making her forget she hates me—and she puts her arms on my shoulders. I breathe in her enticing vanilla scent as I pull her closer, my mind going on a journey, imagining her lush body naked beneath mine.

“Fuck yeah,” I murmur.

“What?” she asks.

I snap out of my lust-drunk stupor. “You don’t think Lance will mind, do you?” I ask, as I dip my head and take in her gorgeous eyes.

“He might.” She nudges her chin up. “He is the jealous type.”

I lift my head and spot Lance chatting with a couple of guests. I resist the urge to call her on her bullshit. No way is he her guy. She’s using him to get back at me. But whatever I did in college, it wasn’t meant to hurt her. Call me an idiot, call me a dumb jock. I might have been all those things, but

my only intention was to figure out a way to keep her around, long term.

“You look beautiful,” I say, and slide my hand to the small of her back. She stiffens, and I’m not sure what she just mumbled under her breath but it sort of sounded like my nuts, and castration shears.

The song changes, becomes faster and she tries to break from my arms. I hold her to me, caging her with my chest and hands. A breathless little sigh escapes her lips, her reactions letting me know that while she might not like me, she still wants me. My heart beats a little faster at that realization, and I take a slow breath, calculating my every move. I put my mouth next to her ear, and she quivers when I exhale.

“You’ve always been the prettiest woman in the room, Peyton.”

“Caleb,” she says, her voice a breathless whisper, and I inch back, take in the arousal in her eyes. I push against her, and her lips part when I let her feel my cock. Yeah, I want her to know exactly what she does to me.

“What?”

“I...I...”

Before she can get the words out, the music stops, and the lights brighten—a rude assault on my night vision. I blink against the bright starkness, and when she puts her hand over her face, I pull her against me, bury her face in my chest.

“Give your eyes a second to adjust,” I say. I hold her to me, her body so small against mine. It’s all I can do not to pick her up and take her straight to my yurt.

“Okay, single ladies,” Eden says, holding her bouquet up. “Let’s see who’s wedding we’ll be attending next.”

I put my hands on Peyton’s shoulders and inch her back. “You’d better get down there.”

She frowns. “I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“Let someone else catch it. Someone who has a chance of being next.” She snorts. “Let’s not waste it on me.”

I brush her hair from her face. This woman has no idea just how special she truly is. As a social worker, she’s always giving, but who’s taking care of her? Possession races through me. Goddammit, I want to be the guy who’s always there for her. The guy she laughs with, cries with, falls into bed with each night and more importantly wakes up to each morning.

“You don’t think Lance is going to ever pop the question?”

A laugh bubbles up inside her, like I’d just made the funniest joke on the face of the earth. When I raise my brow—questioning why that’s so funny if she’s dating him—she quickly pulls herself together, obviously remembering her ruse, and straightens her shoulders.

“Maybe. I guess I should get out there.”

I give her a nudge and she steps away from me. “Go,” I say.

All the single girls line up behind Eden, and the music starts playing as she tosses the bouquet straight into Peyton’s hands. Peyton gasps, her gaze flying to mine, and everyone claps. Beck steps up to Eden, twirling her little blue garter around his finger.



Peyton points at me, and then to the guys lining up to catch the garter. Her expression says one thing: if she had to do it, I have to do it too. I grin, smooth my hand over my tie and step into the line. Beck tosses it, and like the good running back I am, I jump up and catch it, because no way on the face of this earth is any guy in the room sliding that slip of material onto Peyton's leg. I snatch it from the air as want and need careens through my blood. The guys clap and I turn to Peyton, catch the way her chest is rising and falling rapidly. Yeah, I get it. I'm short of breath too, knowing what's coming next.

"Okay, you two," Beck says, and grabs a chair for Peyton to sit, and when I glance at him, he has a smirk on his face. I guess he and Eden must have put two and two together when I asked where I could find Peyton last night and something tells me Eden threw her bouquet to Peyton on purpose. Beck slaps me on the back. "You know what to do, my man."

Oh, I know what to do, and once I get Peyton to my bed, I plan to use all the moves in my playbook to prove I'm the guy for her and come morning I plan to show her how good we can be together outside the bedroom. I just pray to fucking god it works, and she doesn't run off with one of my buddies after sleeping with me.

Peyton crosses the floor. Her steps are slow, like she's having a hard time putting one foot in front of the other, and when she sits, putting her left leg out to me, I sink to my knees in front of her. Laughter fills the room, but all I can hear is her labored breaths. I slide my hand around her calf and lift her leg. She swallows, and the sound caresses my aching balls.

I slowly remove her sexy black heel, and ever so slowly slip the garter over her foot. Using my thumb, I caress her smooth legs as I take my time sliding the silk up her thigh.

My hand goes under her dress and the wedding guests go crazy. I don't take my eyes off Peyton as I go higher and higher, waiting for her to stop me, to protest, but all she does is widen her legs, allowing me to stretch the fabric over her silky thigh. The heat of her sex reaches out to me, and I damn near bite off my tongue as my dick thickens even more. A little moan escapes her lips, and the lights dim again, giving us a measure of privacy. I throw up a silent prayer to whoever is in charge of lighting and brush my thumb over her pussy.

She gasps, and I take my hand back, feigning innocence as I fix her dress, and stand. She glances up at me, and I hold my hand out to her. She takes it and everyone claps as I pull her to her feet, and align her body with mine.

"Get a room," someone yells, and I grin as the music level rises and everyone begins to mingle again.

I put my mouth to her ear. "You have two choices. You walk out of here with me, or I carry you. Either way, in five minutes, you're going to be naked in my bed."