



Coming Apart at the Seams: Riley O'Brien & Co

By Jenna Sutton

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From the author of *All the Right Places*, a sweet and sexy romance about finding the right words and the perfect fit...

Love can take some time to break in...

Teagan O'Brien, heiress to the Riley O'Brien & Co. denim empire, is anything but a spoiled rich girl. She's worked hard to secure her place in the family business and can hold her own, in and out of the office. Only one man has ever been able to get under her skin—sexy football star Nick Priest. Years ago they crossed the line from friends to lovers, but he left her heartbroken. Since then, she's been determined to keep him at arm's length—no matter how tempting he looks in his jeans...

Nick has fortune, fame, and looks that make most women hot and bothered. But he doesn't have the woman he really wants. He knows he screwed up when he walked away from Teagan, and now that he has a second chance, he'll do whatever it takes to win her over—no matter how tongue-tied he gets...

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Editorial Review

Review

"A story of second chances that sizzles off the page!"—Tracy Solheim, author of *Sleeping with the Enemy*

"Jenna Sutton crafts a sweet and sumptuous read."—M.J. Pullen, author of *The Marriage Pact*

Praise for *All the Right Places*

"Sexy, sweet, [and] fun."—Tracy Solheim, author of *Sleeping with the Enemy*

"Delightful!"—Lori Wilde, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Back in the Game*

About the Author

Jenna Sutton is a former award-winning journalist who traded fact for fiction when she began writing novels. Surprisingly, the research she conducted for her articles provided a lot of inspiration for her books. She lives in Texas with her husband.

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Praise for All the Right Places

Berkley Sensation titles by Jenna Sutton

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Chapter 1

San Francisco—Present Day

Blunder. Gaffe. Misstep. Error. Snafu. Although plenty of words described the huge, life-altering mistake Nick Priest had made, none of them quite conveyed his stupidity. He'd had a chance with Teagan O'Brien, but he'd blown it. That was his biggest regret, and he had a lot of them.

As he stared at her across the ballroom, he had to remind himself to breathe. Her long, red dress clung to her curvy body, just tight enough to make every man in the room wish his pants were a little looser behind the zipper.

She reminded him of a starlet from the 1950s with her abundant breasts, narrow waist, and round hips. He'd had the pleasure of shaping those hips with his hands, tonguing her rosy nipples, and sinking into her luscious body, although pleasure didn't really describe what he'd felt when he had been with her.

She laughed, her deep blue eyes glinting in the light from the chandeliers, and her date leaned closer, licking his lips as he got an eyeful of her tits. Nick clenched his hands into fists, barely controlling the urge to ram the fucker's head into the wall.

For more than a year and a half, Nick had been trying to persuade Teagan to give him another chance. But she hated him with all the passion she'd given him during their one and only night together.

He thought about approaching her but discarded the idea. She had become a master at avoiding him, and she would find a reason to excuse herself immediately.

Forcing himself to relax, he settled more comfortably against the wood-paneled wall. He wasn't trying to blend in. He knew that was impossible.

His face and form were highly recognizable from years of playing pro football, and most recently, appearing in commercials for Riley O'Brien & Co., the nation's oldest designer and manufacturer of blue jeans. Since he'd thrown his lot in with the company, he had figured he ought to attend the annual holiday party. Plus, he had known Teagan would be here.

This wasn't the first O'Brien celebration he had attended. He'd known the family for about fifteen years. He had played football with Quinn O'Brien at the University of Southern California, and he had formed friendships with both Quinn and his younger brother, Cal.

The O'Brien brothers were Nick's best friends, two of his favorite people. But his absolute favorite person was their little sister, Teagan. He'd known her almost as long as he had known Quinn and Cal, and before he'd messed things up, he and Teagan had been friends. Best friends, in fact.

He let his gaze wander the ballroom of the Westin St. Francis in downtown San Francisco. With its lavish holiday decorations, it could have been any company party. But the huge photo banners hanging from the ceiling made this one unique.

Every black-and-white image showed a different view of Riley O'Brien & Co.'s signature blue jeans. He was pretty sure the jeans-clad ass in the photos was his own.

He chuckled wryly. The banners proved what he'd always known: he was nothing but a giant ass. He had no doubt Teagan would wholeheartedly agree with that assessment.

Teagan's date touched a curl that had fallen to her shoulder, and Nick growled under his breath when the fucker stroked the smooth skin of her upper chest. He would rather take a direct hit from a 350-pound linebacker than watch that loser put his hands on her. Hell, he'd rather be buried under the entire defensive line than suffer the torture of watching another man paw the woman he wanted for himself.

Moving his gaze from her body, he focused on her face. Her full lips were painted a deep scarlet that matched her dress, and he took a moment to remember the taste of her mouth, addictive in its sweetness.

Her wavy dark hair was pulled into an elaborate updo, emphasizing her graceful neck and smooth shoulders, which were bared by her strapless dress. Years ago, he'd had his mouth on that supple skin before he had trailed his tongue down into her creamy cleavage.

"Priest."

Jerking his head toward the voice, he was surprised to find Quinn standing next to him. Nick mustered a smile for his old friend, clasping the hand he offered and slapping him on the back.

"It's good to see you," Quinn said. "I'm glad you could make it."

Nick hadn't been sure if he would be able to attend the party. His schedule had depended on whether his team made the playoffs. But they'd lost their last three games, dashing those hopes.

Although it didn't reflect well on him, he hadn't cared much that his team wasn't heading to the playoffs. He was ready to move on, and although he had yet to announce it publicly, he'd decided to retire. He had given enough of his life to the game, and it had given him what he had needed in return. Now he needed something else.

He needed Teagan.

A waiter passed with champagne, and Nick plucked a crystal flute from the tray. "Congrats. Times two," he said, tapping his glass against Quinn's highball.

Only days ago, Quinn had officially taken over as president and CEO of Riley O'Brien & Co. More important, he'd become engaged to Amelia Winger, a sweet little thing with a real talent for fashion design.

"Thanks," Quinn said, a big grin on his face. "I'm a lucky man. A *very* lucky man."

His happiness was almost tangible, and Nick experienced a stab of envy, not because the other man didn't deserve to be happy, but because he wasn't. Far from it.

The two of them slouched side by side with their backs against the wall. The party was in full swing, the band wailing away and the dance floor packed. Hundreds of people milled around the ballroom, the men dressed in dark suits and the women garbed in cocktail dresses. It was one of the few times Riley O'Brien & Co. employees had to dress up. Usually, they all wore Rileys and T-shirts.

Quinn scanned the crowd, visibly relaxing when he spotted his redheaded fiancée. The look on his face was a

mix of pride, possession, and adoration. The guy obviously was head over heels in love with his future bride.

Pulling his attention from Amelia, Quinn looked toward Nick. "Listen, Priest, I need to talk with you about something important."

He tensed. As far as he knew, the O'Brien brothers were still unaware that he and Teagan had hooked up.

He nodded, silently directing Quinn to continue. He preferred to say as little as possible so he could hide the severe stutter that had plagued him since childhood.

Quinn was one of the few people who knew about his speech impediment. They'd spent too much time together over the years for the other man not to notice, but he'd never said anything about it. Nick wondered if they were drawn to each other by the simple fact that Quinn talked too much and Nick didn't talk enough.

"I've persuaded Amelia to have a short engagement, and we're in a hurry to nail down the wedding plans."

Nick stifled a grin. He had little doubt how Quinn had persuaded Amelia.

"Cal is my best man, and I'd like you to be my one and only groomsman."

He studied the groom-to-be. He knew it wasn't manly to admit it, but he loved Quinn like a brother. It would be an honor to stand beside him as he made his wedding vows.

Of course, he didn't tell Quinn any of this because it required too many words. It was too much effort to get his brain and his mouth to work together. They were enemies.

"Okay." He focused on shaping the sound that caused him the most problems. "W-w-w-when is the w-w-w-wedding?"

"The first Saturday in March." Quinn sighed. "Ten long weeks away."

Nick chuckled wryly. Compared to the time he'd spent chasing Teagan, ten weeks was nothing. A hit from the kicker instead of a thumping from a linebacker.

"When are you heading back home?" Quinn asked.

Nick shrugged. He had played for the Tennessee Titans for the past two years, and he currently lived in an upscale suburb outside of Nashville. But now that the season was over, nothing prevented him from staying in San Francisco as long as he wanted. As long as it took.

Quinn narrowed his eyes. "Where are you spending Christmas?"

"Not sure."

"With your dad?"

He laughed, the sound shaded with bitterness he didn't bother to hide. "No."

"Why don't you stay and celebrate Christmas with us? You know Mom and Dad would love to have you." When he didn't reply, Quinn punched him on the shoulder. "And Amelia and I are having a New Year's Eve-slash-engagement party. You can't miss that."

Quinn had unknowingly given Nick the perfect opportunity to spend more time with Teagan. It was more than he could ever have hoped for.

* * *

Teagan's feet hurt, her head pounded, and her face ached from the fake smile she'd pasted on hours ago. She grabbed another glass of champagne from a passing waiter and downed it in one swallow, hoping the alcohol would dull the pain.

It had been a huge mistake to bring Evan to the company's holiday party. In the span of three hours, he'd transformed from a man into an octopus. What else could explain the sliminess she felt when he touched her?

Evan had seemed like a decent guy when she'd met him at an ugly Christmas sweater party. He and his sweater, a truly hideous garment that illustrated the twelve days of Christmas, had caught her eye.

When he'd asked for her number, she'd given it to him without a thought, and she had forgotten about him until he had called a few days ago. He'd asked her out, and she'd suggested they attend the party together.

She hadn't wanted his company, not really. But she had been afraid Nick would be here, and she'd thought a date would be a good buffer.

Teagan didn't trust herself to be within one hundred miles of Nick. No matter how hard she tried to force her body and mind to work together, they just didn't agree. Her mind knew best. It wanted to stay far away from him. But her body . . . oh, it wanted him so badly.

His hard kisses, his hot caresses, his deep thrusts.

It had been years since they'd been together, but she remembered it like it was yesterday. She remembered everything—his taste, his scent, his size.

Warmth trickled between her legs, and she scowled. She *hated* Nick Priest. She hated him for breaking her heart. She hated him for not being there when she had needed him most.

She hated the way her body came alive when he was near. She hated the way her mind always found its way to him when it was left to wander. And most of all, she hated herself for letting him get to her after all this time.

She shifted on her heels, using the pain to force her thoughts from Nick. She looked around the room. Where was Evan?

She wanted to leave, and she needed to let him know she intended to take a cab back to her place. She planned to go home and enjoy a long soak in the tub, and she wasn't up to fending off octopus man.

Teagan rubbed her forehead with the tips of her fingers but stilled when someone came up behind her. She knew without looking that it was Nick. She instinctively recognized his scent and the heat of his body.

Stiffening slightly, she tried to move away from him. But he moved closer, placing his hand on her waist to stop her. He leaned down close to her ear, and his breath made her shiver.

"Stay," he ordered quietly.

"I'm not a dog," she snapped.

He chuckled softly. “Stay,” he repeated, dropping his hand to her hip and squeezing lightly to emphasize his command.

A flash of energy traveled from his fingers to all the nerve-rich places on her body—her nipples, her clit, her lips. Desperate to get away from him, she jerked sharply and stumbled into Amelia.

“Whoa!” Quinn exclaimed as he caught his fiancée against him.

Teagan blinked in surprise. She hadn’t even noticed her older brother was nearby. He glared at her, his protective instincts on high alert.

“Be careful, T. You almost knocked over Amelia.”

She managed to squeeze out an apology, and Nick, damn him, resumed his place behind her. He loomed over her by several inches even though she wore five-inch heels. His height made him one of the best wide receivers in the NFL.

Amelia stared over Teagan’s head, her brown eyes speculative. “Nick, I thought I’d see you here,” she said, a faint Texas twang in her voice. “How have you been?”

“Fine,” he answered, drawing out the word, his baritone rumbling through Teagan’s body.

“I was sorry to see you guys didn’t make the playoffs,” Amelia said. “But there’s always next year.”

Teagan felt Nick shrug. “Not for me.”

At his announcement, Teagan, Amelia, and Quinn all chorused “What?” in varying volumes. Teagan’s definitely had been the loudest.

She jerked away from Nick, and this time, he let her go. She spun to face him, and even though she struggled to digest the bomb he’d dropped on them, she noticed how his expensive black suit outlined his broad shoulders. The dark color made his blond hair look even lighter, and his French blue dress shirt showed off his tan.

“What are you talking about?” she asked, staring into the face she dreamed about almost every night.

He was gorgeous—beyond gorgeous.

He knew it, of course he did. But unlike a lot of extraordinarily handsome men, he didn’t seem to care much about his looks.

“I’ve decided to . . . umm . . . retire,” he said.

She gasped. “Why?”

“It’s time.”

“What are you going to do?” Quinn asked.

“Not sure,” Nick replied, running a hand through his short hair.

Her hands itched to touch the silky strands. He’d cut his hair since she had seen him a few weeks ago, and

the color seemed to change depending on the length. Right now, his hair was a mix of honey and caramel, and as it grew out, it would turn lighter, almost the shade of morning sunshine.

Quinn cocked his head, staring at Nick with a calculating look. He turned toward Amelia.

“Juice,” he said, using his nickname for his bride-to-be, “did you know Priest has a degree in American history from USC?”

Amelia smiled, showing the sizable gap between her front teeth. “No, I didn’t know that.”

“Priest, you didn’t know my Grandma Violet, but she was an interesting woman. Kind of eccentric. She was ten times richer than my Grandpa Patrick, maybe even a hundred times richer. The O’Briens made their money by clothing prospectors, but her family actually found gold.”

Teagan stared at Quinn. Why was he talking about Grandma Vi? Was he drunk?

Nick narrowed his eyes. “And?”

“Well, you see, Grandma Violet set up an endowment to create a museum that celebrates the history of Riley O’Brien & Co. and the role it played during the California Gold Rush. And that endowment money has to be used by 2017.”

Teagan sucked in an appalled breath. *He wouldn’t! Would he?*

“What would you think about heading up that project? Laying the groundwork for the museum?” Quinn asked Nick. “It would be part of the company’s charitable foundation, which falls under Teagan’s purview. She’d be your boss.”

Nick slanted a cunning look toward Teagan, his light green eyes glowing like peridots. He smiled slowly.

“I’m in.”

Chapter 2

The only way Nick’s night could get any better was if it ended with his hands and mouth on Teagan’s body and his cock buried deep inside her. In the span of an hour, his best friend had asked him to participate in his wedding, issued him an invitation to spend the holidays with the O’Briens, and offered him a new job with their family company.

Quinn had just given Nick every excuse he needed to be around Teagan almost twenty-four/seven. He was so elated he wanted to hug the other man, but he gave him a fist bump instead.

While he struggled to hold back a grin, horror filled Teagan’s face. He had no doubt she was hastily evaluating ways to get out of working with him, but there was no way in hell he’d let that happen. He was going to occupy all her time until she allowed him to occupy her heart again.

Quinn leaned close to Amelia and grabbed her hand. “Let’s dance,” he suggested, leading her to the dance floor and leaving Nick and Teagan alone.

Teagan looked up at Nick, her blue eyes shadowed and her face pale. “Please don’t accept the job,” she

requested huskily.

He didn't respond. He knew she was upset, and it made his conscience twinge. But he reminded himself that he didn't want to hurt her ever again. He was trying to make things right. He truly believed neither one of them would ever be happy unless they fixed what had gone wrong between them.

He'd written letters to her—he'd lost track of how many—trying to explain . . . asking for another chance. He'd bared his soul in those letters, but she had sent them back, unopened. She had ignored his texts and emails, too. No surprise there.

"I don't understand what you're trying to accomplish," she continued, shaking her head in frustration. "Why are you doing this? Why won't you leave me alone?"

He sighed. There were a lot of things he'd like to say to her, but he knew that even if he could get his mouth to work, she wouldn't listen. He couldn't even blame her.

"I can't."

She narrowed her eyes. "You can't what?"

His heart pounded in a hard, fast rhythm, and he knew the more anxious he became, the harder it would be to speak. He rushed to squeeze out a sentence.

"I can't leave you alone."

She laughed bitterly. "Yes, you can. You have before."

He winced. She was right. He had behaved badly in the past.

Teagan stared into his eyes for several moments, and he tried to let her see how sorry he was and how much he loved her. She squeezed her eyes shut, and when she opened them, the pain in her gaze made his stomach cramp.

He couldn't stop himself from reaching for her. He drew her close, pulling in a lungful of her perfume, the light floral scent at odds with her bold personality. For a moment, she stood within his arms, his hands on the upper swells of her ass and her head against his shoulder. He savored the feel of her soft, warm body, imagining what it would be like to hold her like this whenever he wanted.

Abruptly, she stiffened and pushed against his chest, forcing him to release her. "I don't know what you want from me." Her voice rose. "What do you want?"

I want you. I always have.

"You."

Her eyes widened. "No."

"Yes," he countered firmly. He didn't want there to be any doubt in her mind about his intentions.

She backed away from him before turning on her heel and rushing out of the ballroom. Shoving his hands in the pockets of his suit pants, he stared up at the glass ornaments hanging from the ceiling, debating whether he should go after her.

He was tired of this bullshit. He was tired of chasing Teagan and tired of her running away. They weren't playing tag. This wasn't a game to him.

She wasn't a game to him, and she needed to know that. He was miserable without her, and he had a feeling she was just as miserable without him.

He rushed to the door, and once he was through it, he looked up and down the wide corridor. It was empty except for a waiter, and he stopped the guy as he walked by.

"Red dress?"

The guy stared at him for a second before pointing to his right. "Down the hall, turn left. Good luck, man."

Nick jogged down the corridor, following the waiter's direction. There was a fine line between persistence and stalking, and he knew he was close to crossing that line. Hell, he might have already crossed it. The thought made him sick to his stomach, but the thought of his life without Teagan made him even sicker.

Hooking a left, he saw her leaning against the wall about thirty feet away. She turned her head as he approached, her eyes widening in alarm. Straightening, she put her hand out like a traffic cop when he was close enough to touch her.

"Teagan—"

"I'm not interested in hearing anything you have to say," she interrupted fiercely.

He growled. Even when he wanted to, he couldn't get a fucking word in edgewise. She was just like her brother: she talked too much. He wished she'd shut the hell up for just one goddamn minute. He had been trying to explain his shitty behavior for eighteen miserable months.

"We're not friends. We're not lovers. We're nothing. *Nothing!*" she continued loudly.

He didn't want to have this conversation in the hall. Encircling her wrist with his fingers, he tugged her down the corridor. He jiggled the knob on the first door he came to, but it was locked.

Shit.

"Let go, Nick. Right now!"

Teagan tried to slow their progress by pulling against his grip, but he continued down the hall. He didn't want to hurt her, but he couldn't—wouldn't—let her go.

Never again.

"Nick! You asshole! Let go of me!"

He tried the next door, and thankfully, it swung open. The light from the hallway permeated the darkness of the room enough for him to see it was a linen closet.

Perfect.

Pulling Teagan inside the room, he slammed the door behind them. He turned her until her back pressed against the door, and he faced her.

Darkness cloaked them, but he didn't need to see. He could feel her, smell her, and hear her all around him. She panted lightly, and those little gusts of breath made him think about the sounds she made when she came. Blood rushed to his cock, and he shook his head in an effort to focus.

He wanted to talk to her, and he needed every bit of brainpower he had to force the words out of his mouth. He pressed his tongue against the back of his front teeth, an exercise that sometimes helped when he had a hard time speaking.

“I—”

“I hate you.” Tears made her voice thick. “I hate you.”

A crater of sorrow formed in his chest. There was no way she hated him as much as he hated himself.

He moved closer until her full breasts flattened against his chest. Finding her face in the dark, he brushed her tears away with his thumbs. She gulped, and he dropped his hands to her waist before leaning down to nuzzle her hair.

He pressed his lips against her ear. “Shh,” he murmured over and over.

This wasn't the first time he'd soothed her tears, and he wished he wasn't the cause of them now. Finally, her breathing calmed, and she stopped crying. He started to move back, but she turned her head, and her lips grazed his. She gasped, and the feel of her soft lips sent a jolt through his whole body.

Clenching his fingers in the silky material of her dress, he opened his mouth against hers, tracing her lips with his tongue before easing it inside her mouth. He moaned as her tongue slid wetly against his.

The first time he'd kissed her, so many years ago, he'd nearly eaten her alive. He'd been so hungry for her, and his hunger hadn't abated since then. If anything, it was worse.

He sucked on her tongue, and she brought her hands up to his shoulders, pushing at his suit coat. He let go of her to shrug it off and dropped it to the floor.

Her hands were at his waist, pulling his dress shirt loose from his pants before reaching beneath his cotton undershirt to run across his stomach. He groaned against her mouth, so relieved to feel her touch once again.

Bringing his hands to her face, he tilted her head so he could kiss her more deeply before pulling back to trail his mouth across her cheek and down her smooth neck. He sucked lightly on the fragrant skin before turning his attention to her pulse, pressing his tongue against where it beat in her throat.

His heartbeat thundered in his ears, the blood racing through his body to pulse in his cock. He was hard—harder than he'd ever imagined he could be—because of her. She'd always had this effect on him, even when he hadn't wanted her to.

He didn't know if she had any idea what she did to him, but she could very easily bring him to his knees. In fact, he was ready to beg.

Gripping the material of her dress, he slowly pulled it up until he could feel the smooth flesh of her thighs against his fingers. He knew it was only a matter of time before she came to her senses and pulled away from him, and he needed a taste of her before she did.

Since their one magical, horrible night, he'd dreamed about putting his mouth on the sweet spot between her

legs again. The taste of her had tormented him for years.

He knelt in front of her, wishing the light were on so he could see the dark hair covering her mound and the pink folds of her pussy. He ran his hands up her inner thighs until he reached the edges of her panties.

The fabric felt flimsy, insubstantial, and he used both hands to pull on it, hoping he could tear it from her body. Much to his displeasure, the material held. Frustrated, he gave her panties a hard yank, using the same strength he employed to grab an uncatchable football out of the air.

Teagan gasped as the fabric ripped but didn't say anything. For once, she was silent, and he felt like roaring in victory.

Moving closer, he raised her leg so it rested on his shoulder. He nuzzled her springy curls and pulled in a deep breath, trying to memorize the smell of her arousal.

Using both hands, he pushed back her plump folds with the tips of his fingers. He found the place where wetness flowed from her body, and he lapped it eagerly with his tongue. She tasted like all his favorite flavors, sweet and spicy, tart and tangy. He couldn't get enough, and he had to force himself to calm down, to take his time with her.

She held his head against her, panting loudly. "Oh, God, I forgot how good your mouth feels," she breathed.

He replaced his tongue with two fingers, sliding them in and out of her body, and focused his attention on her clit. He sucked lightly on the hard little nub until Teagan clenched her hands in his hair and began to rock against his mouth.

As he continued to plunge his fingers inside her, he swirled his tongue around her clit, back and forth, until she chanted his name. He bit down lightly on her nub, and she cried out, her internal muscles pulsing around his fingers.

He stayed with her until the very end before removing his fingers and mouth. Dropping her leg to the floor, he rose to his feet.

Would an orgasm make her more willing to listen? That hadn't been his intent, but he could always hope.

"Please let . . ." he said, but she cupped her hand around his erection, and the rest of his words died in his throat.

Please let me explain.

She fumbled with his belt, somehow managing to unbuckle it in the dark. Popping open the button on his pants, she unzipped his fly and pushed her hand inside his boxer briefs.

"I want this," she demanded, wrapping her hand around his cock.

His heartbeat thundered in his ears. He wanted to be inside her, but he hesitated because she had said "this" rather than "you."

She squeezed him lightly. "Now."

Grabbing his wallet from his pants, he pulled out a condom. He ripped open the packet, the sound loud in the small linen closet, and sheathed his cock. Stepping between her legs, he hooked his arms under her ass and

lifted her against the door.

She wrapped her legs around his waist, and he found her mouth in the dark as he eased inside her. She was swollen from her orgasm, and he groaned as her hot flesh enveloped him. Even though she was wet, she was extremely tight.

“Nick,” she panted against his lips. “Too much.”

He sucked on her tongue as he nudged into her with tiny pumps of his hips, making sure he didn't hurt her. By the time he was completely inside her, he dripped with sweat, his dress shirt and undershirt clinging to him.

Gripping her ass in both hands, he pulled out completely to thrust into her. They both moaned at the friction, the wet slide of his cock against her folds as it entered her pussy.

He'd never felt this kind of pleasure, not even the first time they had been together. Back then, he hadn't realized how he felt about her, but now he did, and that made everything better—and worse.

She pulled back from his kiss with a gasp. “More,” she demanded.

Squeezing his eyes shut, he tried to hold back his orgasm. He shifted her higher to get a better grip on her ass and plunged into her, using all the muscles he'd honed from years of being a professional athlete. He set a fast, deep rhythm that rubbed his cock across her clit with every thrust.

She whimpered. “Oh, I'm coming again,” she whispered, surprise coloring her voice. She let out a low moan as her pussy vibrated with deep clenches.

He gasped as a trail of fire spread from his spine into his balls before erupting from his cock. His knees buckled as he came, pleasure crashing over him in waves, and he barely managed to hold on to her. After several moments, he pulled out of her snug body, letting her feet drop to the floor.

He rested his face in her hair, trembling in the aftermath of the most intense sexual experience of his life. His eyes stung with emotion, and he was pathetically grateful for the darkness.

He wished he could stop time. He wanted to stay here in this moment, cocooned in this small space, her taste in his mouth, her scent in his nose, and her cries of pleasure echoing in his ears.

She pushed against his chest, forcing him backward, and he tripped on his underwear and pants, which were pooled around his ankles. Catching himself against one of the shelves, he groped around until he found a towel and removed the condom.

He quickly pulled up his underwear and pants. He didn't want to have this conversation bare-assed. He was forced to leave his trousers unbuttoned and belt unbuckled, though, because his hands shook—the same hands that had been steady and sure enough to catch more touchdown passes than any other wide receiver in the NFL, regardless of the pressure he'd been under.

He felt Teagan move and heard her searching for something in the darkness. Seconds later, the overhead light flickered on. He blinked against the brightness, and when his eyes finally adjusted, he sought out her face. Her eyes were red and smudged with mascara, and lipstick was smeared around her mouth and chin.

She looked horrible—and beautiful. The only thing he wanted in this world or the next.

They stared into each other's eyes, and as she opened her mouth to speak, he wanted to fold his hand over it. He wanted to beg her not to ruin this moment. Instead, he clenched his jaw and waited. He could tell by the look in her eyes her words would eviscerate him.

"This was a mistake," she said flatly.

And with that short, simple statement, she threw them into the past.

Chapter 3

Boston—Four Years Ago

"He thinks he's God's gift to women," Bebe Banerjee complained before raising her wineglass and taking a big gulp of the California merlot.

Teagan snorted. "I know," she said, agreeing with her best friend's assessment of their boss, Jasper Benjamin Donaldson the Fifth.

She and Bebe were in Teagan's condo for their weekly "wine down." The night of whining and wine drinking was a tradition they'd begun shortly after they met nearly three years ago.

Teagan and Bebe were one year away from finishing a four-year program at Harvard University that would allow them to obtain both a law degree and an MBA. They were spending the summer interning at one of the most prestigious law firms in Boston.

It was a decision Teagan was beginning to regret because working for Donaldson was awful. It was worse than getting a Brazilian bikini wax while having a root canal while wearing too-tight stilettos.

Pure undiluted torture.

"He's such a douche," Teagan added, using her brothers' favorite insult. She usually winced when she heard it, but the description was so vividly appropriate she had to use it.

She deepened her voice to ape Donaldson. "Call me JD, girls. It's not just my initials, you know. It stands for *Juris Doctor*."

Bebe broke into peals of laughter, a bright, melodic sound that made Teagan smile. She'd been beyond lucky to meet the other woman on the first day of orientation at Harvard.

Bebe had quickly become Teagan's best friend, not just a convenient friend in a strange new city. She trusted her like she had never trusted another person outside of her family.

At first glance, the two of them had little in common. Bebe was Indian, and she had lovely olive skin and golden eyes, quite a contrast from Teagan's almost ghostly white complexion and blue eyes.

Her friend's almost-black hair was shiny and lustrous, and she always wore it in a low bun. She literally never let her hair down.

Unlike Teagan, who edged toward plump, Bebe was slender. And even though Teagan was only average height, just a few inches over five feet, the other woman was much shorter, almost diminutive in stature.

Bebe was the first in her family to be born in the United States. Her parents had emigrated from their native India to further their medical careers. Her father was one of the foremost infectious disease experts in the world, while her mother was a well-known heart surgeon practicing at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore.

Once you got past their drastically different appearances and backgrounds, though, Teagan and Bebe had a lot in common. Like Teagan, Bebe came from a family of overachievers.

Bebe had two older brothers who were the source of considerable parental pride. Both of her brothers were physicians who not only boasted medical degrees but PhDs in their respective fields, and they had already made their mark on the medical community.

Bebe, meanwhile, was a huge disappointment to her parents because she favored law and business over medicine. As a result, Bebe was driven to prove her worth. She constantly strived to achieve more academic and professional success so she could get her family's attention, if not their approval.

It was something Bebe and Teagan had in common. While Teagan definitely was not a disappointment to her parents, it was hard to shine in Quinn's and Cal's shadows.

It was maddening how easily everything came to them. Her older brothers had achieved athletic and academic success with minimal effort. And it didn't hurt that they were both blessed with good looks. Teagan had heard her friends sigh over Quinn's smile and Cal's eyes for most of her life.

In fact, she had little doubt her modest popularity in high school with other girls had more to do with her hot brothers than her own sparkling personality. Whenever her brothers were around, Teagan felt invisible. They sucked all the air out of the room with their big personalities.

Bebe's laughter trailed off, and her expression turned serious. Teagan raised her eyebrows at the abrupt shift in her best friend's mood.

"I'm worried about you, Teagan."

"Worried?" she echoed with surprise. "Why?"

"JD isn't harmless. His family is more than wealthy. They remind me of the Kennedys. They're powerful and influential."

Teagan tilted her head, digesting Bebe's words. In San Francisco, the O'Brien family was well known, wielding considerable political and social influence because of their wealth and roots in the community. But this was Boston, and Bebe was right about JD and his family.

Bebe met Teagan's gaze over the rim of her wineglass, her eyes serious. "You're a challenge to him. In fact, I doubt anyone has ever said no to him." She paused, making sure Teagan was paying attention. "I don't like the way he looks at you. It's rapacious."

Teagan laughed. Bebe had an impressive vocabulary, and she routinely threw around words that would win triple points at Scrabble.

Bebe frowned. "Please don't laugh this off. You need to be careful."

Realizing Bebe was truly upset, Teagan sobered. "Beebs, I think you're worrying for no reason. I'm pretty sure he's like this with all the interns. Don't you remember that third-year, Lydia, saying she had trouble with him?"

Bebe nodded. “I remember. But you still need to be careful.”

Despite Bebe’s warning, Teagan wasn’t worried about JD. He was a snake with no fangs—slippery but ultimately harmless.

“JD can’t hurt my career,” she reminded Bebe.

Unlike a lot of interns, Teagan wasn’t worried about what she was going to do after graduation. Once she had her degrees in hand, she had every intention of taking her place in the family company. Her dad had promised there would be a place for her when she came home.

Quinn and Cal already worked for Riley O’Brien & Co. Quinn would probably end up taking over the company once their father retired, but Teagan didn’t expect that to happen anytime soon.

Her father loved Riley O’Brien & Co., and he enjoyed working. More than likely, he wouldn’t retire for another twenty years, and even then, he’d probably still come into the office just to make sure his kids kept things on track.

“I’m not talking about your career, Teagan. I’m talking about you . . . your person.” Bebe took another sip of her wine before continuing. “I think you should wear different clothes to work.”

“*What?*”

She always dressed professionally, and she couldn’t believe Bebe would find fault with her work clothes. Bebe continued as if Teagan hadn’t spoken.

“Pantsuits with jackets that button all the way to the neck maybe.”

“Seriously, Bebe?”

“Yes, seriously.”

“What was wrong with what I wore today?”

The navy cropped Michael Kors jacket with big white buttons and a matching sheath dress was one of Teagan’s favorite outfits. The length of the skirt was modest, falling just above her knees, and the rounded neckline of the dress showed no cleavage.

She’d finished the outfit with red sling-back pumps and a red beaded choker. She had thought it was a perfect mix of professional and stylish.

“It wasn’t ugly enough. Or loose enough. And it showed your legs.”

Teagan was mortified Bebe thought her clothes were too tight and that she showed too much skin. No matter what she wore, it was hard to minimize her DDs unless she hid them under a baggy T-shirt, and she didn’t think that would cut it at Price, Latham & Donaldson.

“So you think my clothes are too tight? Too revealing?”

She was vain enough not to want to go up a size. She already was in the double-digits. Unfortunately, she had Grandma Vi’s body shape, voluptuous on a good day, chunky on a bad day.

Teagan supposed she should count herself lucky she didn't take after her great-great-grandfather, who'd been nearly seven feet tall with a fifty-inch waist. His mountainous physique had probably come in handy back in the rough-and-tumble days of the Gold Rush.

"No! You're missing the point!" Bebe exclaimed. "I think JD is a predator, Teagan, and he's fixated on you. That's why you need to do everything you can to make him shift his attention *away* from you." She pointed at Teagan. "And it would also help if you would keep your mouth shut."

Teagan sighed. She'd never been very good at that.

* * *

The view of the Charles River from Nick's new condo was nice enough, especially on this sunny summer day, but he wished he could still see the Rocky Mountains from his windows. Unfortunately, Denver was no longer his home, and the Denver Broncos were no longer his team.

He'd spent seven years playing for the Broncos after they made him a first-round draft pick right out of college. He had hoped he could spend his entire career there, even though he'd known it was unlikely.

When it came right down to it, players were commodities. They weren't people—they were just arms and legs, hands and feet, to be sold to the highest bidder—and the Boston Colonials had made Denver an offer for Nick it just couldn't refuse.

He shook off thoughts of the trade. It was done, and there was no reason to think about it anymore. He needed to accept that he was back on the East Coast, only a few hours from where he'd grown up.

Only a few hours from his father.

Thoughts of Simon Priest filled Nick with a bitter mix of anger and disappointment. His father wore many hats: academic, economist, author, and speaker.

Officially, Simon taught economics at Syracuse University, but when Nick had been in high school, his father had authored a book on global economic drivers that had caught the attention of the mainstream media. Almost overnight, he'd become one of the most-sought-after interviews on cable TV networks like CNN and MSNBC.

Over the past decade, Simon's renown had grown, and he spent the majority of his time presenting at global economic conferences. He excelled at the very thing Nick didn't: talking.

From the moment Nick had been diagnosed with a speech disorder in kindergarten, his father had treated him as a body without a brain. In fact, most people treated Nick that way. Because he didn't say much, they assumed he was a dumb jock. Most of the time, he agreed with them.

His stomach growled, and he headed into the kitchen and grabbed an apple off the counter. He hadn't eaten lunch, and he was starving. He wished the food fairy had stopped by and filled the refrigerator with delicious, healthy meals. Unfortunately, he didn't have a food fairy, although he was scheduled to interview four personal chefs this afternoon.

The first candidate was supposed to arrive—he checked the time on his mobile phone—right now. His phone buzzed to let him know he'd received a text, and he popped open the screen to read the message from his agent, Elijah Farris.

“Don’t forget interviews. One p.m. Paulette Andrews.”

Elijah was awesome. He went above and beyond to help his clients. Along with Quinn, he was one of the few people who knew about Nick’s stutter, and he was very protective of Nick’s privacy.

Without question, the lack of privacy was the thing Nick hated most about being a professional athlete. He didn’t mind the pressure to win, the fickle fans who cussed you one moment and loved you the next, or the aches and pains from having a 300-pound man throw you to the ground.

But he definitely didn’t like living in a fishbowl. It was hard enough for him to speak without worrying that millions of people were going to hear him sound like an idiot.

That was why he turned down interviews and said no to endorsement deals that would require him to speak, regardless of the millions of dollars he would make. And he had to be careful the people he hired wouldn’t turn around and sell some salacious story to the media. He could see the headline now: P-P-P-POOR PRIEST CAN’T SPEAK.

He wasn’t the only NFL player who had a speech impediment. Darren Sproles, a running back with the Philadelphia Eagles, served as a spokesperson for the Stuttering Foundation, a national nonprofit. But his stutter wasn’t nearly as bad as Nick’s.

Just then, the doorbell rang, and Nick made his way across the shiny hardwood floors to the door. As he opened it, he automatically shifted his gaze downward, expecting the personal chef to be shorter than he was.

Surprisingly, he was almost eye to eye with the older woman in front of him. Her stick-thin body was clad in baggy black-and-white-checked pants and a red smock with “Chef Letty” embroidered on it.

He looked down, half expecting to see heels, although that would have looked pretty weird with her chef outfit. But no, her big feet were covered in those ugly clog shoes that doctors and nurses favored, so that meant she was probably a couple of inches over six feet.

Smiling, she held out her hand. She had big teeth to go with her big feet. Her blue eyes were bright, and her silver hair was styled in a modified crew cut.

“Letty Andrews,” she said with a heavy Boston accent.

Nick shook her hand, and as usual, he didn’t bother to introduce himself. Letty’s gray eyebrows rose at his silence, probably in disapproval. He knew people thought he was rude, but if he didn’t have to talk, he wasn’t going to.

He gestured for her to come in, and she reached into the hallway to grab the handle of a rolling suitcase. He eyed it with trepidation.

Is she planning to move in? I haven’t even hired her yet.

Letty sailed through the door ahead of him, and he got a whiff of something spicy. Saliva burst in his mouth, and he swore his teeth elongated at the thought of eating whatever smelled so good. He laughed under his breath, imagining himself as a vampire scenting fresh blood, and Letty turned to look at him, a curious expression on her face.

Ignoring her unspoken question, he led her to the kitchen and pointed to one of the chairs surrounding the rectangular wood table. “Ha . . .” He stopped and cleared his throat, a trick he used to hide his stutter. “Have

a seat.”

Tilting her head toward him, she gave him an assessing glance before pulling the suitcase toward the table. As she leaned down and grabbed the tab of the zipper, he noticed it opened from the top.

“It’s a rolling insulated bag, not a suitcase,” she explained, clearly reading his mind.

The moment she flipped open the top, the spicy smell he’d noticed earlier poured from the bag. He dropped into the chair closest to it, almost drooling.

Letty pulled a red cloth placemat from the bag along with a white china plate and a set of silverware wrapped in a white cloth napkin before arranging everything in front of him. As she removed a small bud vase with a white daisy from the bag and placed it on the table, she slanted an amused glance toward him.

“You can’t enjoy a meal without a nice table setting.”

Nick barely heard her because his eyes were fixed on the bag, eager to see what delights she’d brought. Taking several aluminum containers from the bag, she deposited them on the table in front of him. She popped the tops off the containers, and pointing to each dish, she described the food within.

“Roasted chicken with asiago polenta. Crab cakes with spicy rémoulade. Pan-seared flank steak with mushroom sauce. Sautéed shrimp with wasabi cream. Poblano mac and cheese. And chocolate mint bars and peanut butter pie for dessert.”

Nick knew he probably resembled a cartoon character with his eyes bugged out of his head and his tongue rolled out of his mouth. He licked his lips, unsure where to start.

Letty chuckled. “Allergies?”

He shook his head.

“Anything here you don’t want?”

He shook his head again, and she dished up spoonfuls from every container, filling his plate to the brim. She unwrapped his silverware before handing him the fork and placing the napkin in his lap.

“Eat,” she ordered as she sat down.

Spearing a shrimp on the tines of his fork, he brought it to his mouth. A world of flavors and textures hit his tongue: the slight sweetness of shrimp, the hot bite of wasabi, and the smooth silk of cream.

“Umm,” he moaned. “Good.”

She frowned. “Don’t talk with your mouth full.” She made a *tsking* noise. “It’s rude.”

Nick narrowed his eyes at her bossiness. They’d known each other for less than ten minutes, and she thought she could tell him what to do? He swallowed and wiped his mouth with his napkin.

“You’re hired.”

The oven timer sounded at the same time Teagan's phone rang, and she sprinted across the room to grab the phone.

"Hello," she said as she rushed back to the oven. She didn't want her double-fudge brownies to burn.

"Hey there, baby girl."

Her father's strong baritone rumbled across the line, and her heart expanded. She was a daddy's girl through and through, and she loved it when he called her out of the blue.

"Hi, Daddy," she replied, holding the phone against her shoulder so she could don an oven mitt. "What's up?"

"Oh, I'm just driving home from work, and I thought I'd call my favorite daughter."

She laughed. "Funny. As far as I know, I'm your only daughter," she said as she pulled the brownies out of the oven.

He chuckled. "As far as I know, too. How was your day?"

"Pretty good."

She was lying, just a little bit. Despite her efforts to keep her head down and wear ugly clothes over the past several days, JD continued to pursue her. She'd had the misfortune to be alone with him in the elevator today, and he'd backed her against the wall and tried to kiss her. She was going to have to be very careful not to be alone with him.

Grabbing a knife, she stuck it in the brownies to see if they were done. It came out clean, so she turned off the oven and put the brownies on the stove to cool.

"Learn anything new?" her father asked. "Do anything fun?"

They were the same questions her dad had asked her every single day of her life since she was a little girl. When she'd been a teenager and sullenly answered *no* to his queries, he had speared her with his blue-gray gaze.

"That's your fault, baby girl," he'd said.

Not a day went by that she didn't think about his response. It was a reminder that she was responsible for her own happiness.

"I did learn something new, and I'm about to do something fun."

"Oh, yeah? What do you have planned? A boy?"

She laughed. "Daddy, I'm twenty-six years old. I don't date boys anymore. I date men."

And then she laughed when she realized that she didn't sound very mature, since she still called her father "Daddy." But if all daughters had fathers as fabulous as hers, they'd call them "Daddy," too, no matter how old they were.

"Well, now, that's good to know. But you still haven't told me about your daily dose of fun."

“Brownies. Fresh out of the oven.”

He laughed. “Teagan, honey, if you think brownies are fun, maybe you need to go out with a boy. A bad boy.”

A hard knock on her door distracted her. She frowned. It was seven o’clock on a Thursday night, and she wasn’t expecting anyone.

“Daddy, I need to go. Someone’s at the door.”

“Make sure to check the peephole. I love you.”

“Love you, too,” she replied before disconnecting the call.

She reached the front door and, heeding her father’s advice, leaned up to peer out the peephole. She blinked a couple of times, certain she was seeing things because it looked like Nick Priest stood on the other side of the threshold.

He raised his fist and banged on the door again, and she jerked in surprise. *Why is Nick here?* She hadn’t seen him for a couple of years.

Her first thought was something was wrong with Quinn, but then she discarded that idea because she’d just been on the phone with her dad. If something had happened to her older brother, he would have told her immediately.

After unchaining the lock, she disengaged the deadbolt and pulled open the door. “Nick, what are you doing here?” she exclaimed, reaching up to give him a hug. “I’m so happy to see you!”

He hugged her back, a light squeeze like he always gave her, and she leaned back to look at him. God, he was gorgeous. He must have sold his soul to the devil, because no one could be so handsome just by the luck of the draw.

He smiled down at her, his even, white teeth flashing against his bronzed skin. Golden stubble covered his lower face, and his light green eyes sparkled. His hair was almost down to his shoulders, so blond it was the color of corn silk.

“I can’t believe your hair.” She tugged on a strand. “You look like you should be on the cover of a romance novel or in a pirate movie. Arrgh.”

Laughing softly, he cocked his head toward the interior of her condo. “Inside.”

She stepped back and waved him in, enjoying the view as he walked ahead of her. Yes, Nick was Quinn’s best friend, and no, he’d never once shown any interest in her as anything other than his best friend’s little sister.

But that didn’t mean she was blind. The man was physically perfect, at least in her opinion. And his choice in jeans was perfect, too. She got a weird thrill as she saw her last name sewn on the fabric hugging his butt.

She pulled her gaze from his tight behind and ogled his broad shoulders, which were covered in a plain black T-shirt. Too bad it wasn’t tighter. She wouldn’t mind seeing some hard muscles outlined in soft cotton.

He stopped near the kitchen, his nose twitching like a rabbit’s. Crossing her arms over her chest, she raised

her eyebrows.

“Let me guess . . . you want me to share my brownies?”

His only response was a smile. She’d known this man for more than a decade, since Quinn had brought him home from college the summer between their freshman and sophomore years. Over time, Teagan and Nick had figured out a way to communicate even though he barely talked.

At first, she’d thought Nick was shy. She had been sure he’d warm up once he got to know her and her family. But eventually she realized he wasn’t shy at all. He just didn’t like to talk.

His silence didn’t bother her. She’d grown up with two brothers who talked too much, and it was kind of nice to be around someone who listened more than he talked.

Beckoning him into the kitchen, she headed over to the stove, where the brownies were cooling. She grabbed the knife, and as she cut two big pieces, Nick came up behind her and leaned over her shoulder.

He was focused completely on the brownies, and she would bet her last dollar he didn’t even realize he was pressed so tightly against her she could feel the heat from his chest and his breath against her hair. He might be oblivious, but she noticed.

Teagan wasn’t ashamed to admit she found Nick attractive. Heck, every female who had gone through puberty felt a little quiver of longing when faced with his hotness. But there was nothing between them. There never had been, and there never would be.

From the first moment she’d met Nick, Teagan had known he was way out of her league. That knowledge had prevented her from crushing on her brother’s best friend. It also had made it possible for them to become friends—buddies who hung out when the opportunity arose.

She elbowed Nick in the ribs to get him to step back, and he grunted a little before moving away from her. Grabbing a couple of napkins, she wrapped his brownie and handed it to him.

“Milk?” he asked, his expression hopeful.

She shook her head in amusement. They’d fallen back into their old habits pretty quickly.

“You’re like a five-year-old,” she teased as she poured him a glass of milk.

Nick shrugged, clearly not offended by her assessment. He took the milk and brownie and waited on her to lead the way to the living area.

She sat down on one end of her navy velvet sofa and tucked her legs under her. He plopped down next to her, taking up way too much space. With a sigh, he propped his tennis shoe-clad feet on her coffee table. After placing his napkin-wrapped brownie on his flat stomach, he broke off a piece of it and popped it into his mouth.

“What are you doing here?” she asked again.

He turned his head, and their eyes met. He swallowed before answering, “Traded.”

Quinn had told her Nick had been traded to the Colonials, but for some reason, it hadn’t really dawned on her that they’d be living in the same city. “Right. I forgot. How long have you been in town?”

He made a humming noise. "Seven days."

She cocked her head. "Are you counting the days or something? Why not just say a week?"

He took a big gulp of his milk and waved his hand around the room. "Like your place."

"Me, too. Although I probably paid way too much for it."

"You can afford it," he noted with a shrug.

He was right. Thanks to Grandma Violet, Teagan was an heiress. Her grandmother had divided her estate equally among her grandchildren, and they all had trust funds in the millions.

"When I got the news I had been accepted to my program, I planned to rent an apartment near campus. But the rental housing in Cambridge is horrible."

"Spoiled," Nick noted, giving her a big wink.

She laughed. "You think I'm spoiled?"

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