

## Memorial Day weekend – Preston

I won't do anything illegal or immoral. Just hanging out. No big deal." Muttering to an empty room, I grabbed an Indianapolis Colts sweatshirt and opened my bedroom door to scope out the hall. Right toward Mom's and Dad's room, left toward my brother Patrick's.

The hall was empty. Good.

I found Mom in the kitchen rinsing the supper dishes. "Hangin' with the guys tonight, Mom. Won't be too late." Not that an almost seventeen-year-old should have to report his every move to his mom, but considering what I'd put my parents through last year, it wouldn't kill me.

"Okay, Preston." She tapped my arm with wet fingers. "Have fun."

I zipped toward the front door, hoping to avoid Patrick's older brother advice.

"No big deal." More muttering, to convince myself there was nothing wrong with a night of hanging out with the guys. As I jabbed the key into the ignition, I scanned the front of the Jacoby family, ranch-style house.

Patrick filled the doorway, his arms crossed, a menacing glare shooting from his narrowed eyes.

I jerked away from his obvious disapproval and backed onto the street in my hand-me-down Honda Accord that would scream *middle class* in Jake Nelson's east side neighborhood.

Zach Tate's description of the latest hangout did nothing to ease my conscience. "A huge house, lots of booze, and practically non-existent parents. The best setup ever."

My plan was simple—keep a Mountain Dew drink in my hand at all times, maintain a low profile, leave before the pairing off began. Simple and harmless.

I parked behind a brown Dodge Durango at the end of the block so I could take off without a hassle then yanked a couple of cans from the six-pack I'd stashed in the car.

The front door opened as I strode up the wide, stone walk.

"Jacoby!" Zach's booming voice must have echoed through every room of the huge house. His fist slammed against mine as he jerked his head toward the preppy looking guy behind him. "You know Jake."

"Glad you could make it." Jake bumped his fist with mine.

Zach slapped my back. "You've been missed, buddy."

Not three feet inside the door, half of Madison High's in-crowd saluted me with their drinks of choice, welcoming me to the weekly bash.

So much for that low profile.

"Here." Zach thrust a beer in my face.

"I'm good." I waved the can of soda in my sweaty palm, popped the top, and chugged it.

"Dude." Dark, shaggy hair grazed Zach's shoulders as he shook his head. More disapproval. But of a totally different kind.

I pushed past him and maneuvered to a corner of the dining room.

"Hey, help yourself." As he passed by, Jake jerked a thumb toward the kitchen.

"I'm good, thanks." I guzzled more of my drink.

"Your loss." He scooped up two cans and three bottles from a countertop lined with Coors and Budweiser and the rest of the boys—Jack Daniel, Jim Beam, and Jose Cuervo. The smell of alcohol hung in the air, a scent that still appealed to me in a huge way. But that part of my life was done.

With a death grip on my soft drink, I mingled and ordered myself to relax. A study of the crowd revealed a few new faces, but mostly regulars.

"Bout time you showed up." My best buddy, Connor Johnson, socked my shoulder. "We're up the next round of euchre."

I shook my head.

"Uh, yeah, we are." His normal, cocky grin challenged me. "Dude, it's euchre. Didn't ask you to chug shots. Besides, I'm done with losing. Haven't been on a winning team since you stopped showing up a couple of months ago."

"Sure, whatever." Our long history of partnering gave us an edge, and we almost never lost.

I sank into the fancy dining room chair across from him. After our second win, he thrust his fist across the table to knock with mine. "That's what I'm talkin' about. Good to have you back."

I'd missed hanging out. And some of the other stuff, too.

When we hopped up for the next round of players, I pulled the other can of Dew from my pocket and tried to fade into the background.

Rob Finney pulled me aside. "So, you came alone, right?"

"Yeah, but—"

"Several possibilities in there." He nodded toward the other room. "Heard your name come up a couple of times already."

"I'm gonna take off before—"

The lights dimmed, and the noise leveled off immediately.

"Too late, dude." He chuckled as he hustled off toward a smiling blonde.

Time to make my escape. I was almost to the front door when Connor blocked my way. A petite strawberry blonde followed several steps behind him.

"Bree came alone tonight, too."

Bree Masterson's light blue eyes met mine. Her thin, shiny lips pressed together, then eased into a shy smile. "Hi . . ."

Connor fiddled with his backward IU hat, darting glances between me and Bree. He motioned her closer, then disappeared.

I scanned the room. Hushed whispers had replaced loud conversations, and a slow, romantic song pulsed from the whole-house sound system. Couples snuggled on couches and chairs, wedged into corners, or stretched out on the floor.

My attention returned to Bree. Pale, smooth skin peeked from her low-cut t-shirt. Another section of exposed skin between the short shirt and her jeans sped my mind to places I didn't want to go. My pulse hammered. Forcing my eyes up, I shook my head to clear the images.

She inched closer, and I caught a whiff of vanilla.

Her nearness, that scent, the soft skin of her exposed belly—it was all too much. I grabbed her hand and led her to the corner of the living room and an empty chair-and-a-half lounge thing.

Her body brushed against my arm as we settled into the comfy chair. As she pressed close in the small space, reality jolted through me.

I sucked in a ragged breath. “Bree . . .”

“Even you get nervous, huh?” Her breathy whisper turned to a soft giggle.

I leaned forward to put space between us. “So, you're a freshman, right?”

She frowned, and her eyes narrowed. “Yeah, but I’m older than almost everyone in my class.”

I gave her a vague nod. “We can just talk. We don’t have to do anything.”

She inched closer, stretched out her legs, and kicked off her shoes. “I don’t want to talk.”

I was about five seconds from caving. I glanced away from her obvious eagerness. Not helpful. Some pretty intense making out was going on around us already.

Bree’s fingernail traced a path down my arm, and my resolve crumbled. What was the harm in a little kissing? I slipped my arm around her shoulders.

She turned toward me and leaned her soft, warm body into my chest. Her sweet scent surrounded me.

My gaze strayed from her bright eyes to her lips, then back to her eyes which were practically begging. I brushed my lips across her silky cheek, then found her mouth.

She kissed me back without hesitation. Her lips tasted like strawberries instead of alcohol.

Desire pulsed through me, and I pressed her closer. My hands roamed across her back. *She’s a good kisser.*

I flattened my palms against her lower back—on bare skin. Her short shirt had shifted up. Heat surged through me. The making out intensified past a little kissing.

Light blazed across the room. “Parents’ ETA thirty minutes!”

I eased my mouth away from Bree’s neck. “What?”

Groans, complaints, and lots of swearing echoed around us.

“Wrap it up, guys. Mom’s not feeling well so they’re coming home early. Sorry.” Jake hurried to the next room where he shouted his apologetic instructions.

Bree stroked my chest. Her eyes sparkled with what I recognized as an “I really, really like you” expression. She smiled and touched my right cheek where a dimple would have been if anything about this situation brought a smile to my face.

What had I done? I gently pushed her away and swung my legs over the edge of the lounge.

Voices rose in panic as the seconds ticked by.

“Get the people upstairs!” Jake yelled.

Connor sprinted up the stairway, trash bag gripped in his hand.

As if in slow motion, I pulled out my phone and tried to focus on the blue numbers. Nine fifty-seven.

Bree leaned toward me, but I pulled away from her.

"Bree, where are you?" A panicked female voice called out.

"I'm in here." A dreamy smile covered Bree's face as she pulled the phone from my hand, tapped in something, then closed my fingers around it. "Call me, okay?"

My head nodded without my consent.

"There you are! Let's get out of here." A tall brunette tugged on Bree's arm.

She leaned against me and kissed my cheek.

The brunette tugged again. "Come on!"

With a last look of longing, she was gone. A string of partiers followed her out.

"Preston, we could use some help here." Zach strode by, a trash bag in each hand.

"Yeah, sure." My mind still in a fog, I carried bottles of alcohol to the liquor cabinet.

Rob and Connor stashed the garbage while Jake ushered out the last of the crowd. His footsteps pounded through the house as he surveyed each room for evidence of a party.

"I think we're good," Zach announced. "Five minutes to spare."

Jake returned and headed for the liquor cabinet. "Thanks, guys." He locked the cabinet door and stuffed the key in his pocket. "My parents will be gone again in a couple of weeks. How 'bout a rain check?"

Zach clapped Jake on the back. "Sure thing."

"Later, guys," Connor called on his way to the door. He waved his hand in front of my face. "You comin'?"

"Yeah."

The cool night air smacked me like a slap to the face.

"Next time—"

"No next time, Connor." I stared straight ahead. "I'm not coming back."

"We'll find you someone better—"

"I said I'm not coming back."

Connor stopped at his Jeep.

I kept walking. So much for thinking I could just have a good time hanging out with the guys and skip all the other stuff.

I was not about to go down that road again. So why had I even risked it?