

CHAPTER 1

Derek

Getting caught wasn't part of the plan. Pulling off a prank so epic that it'd be talked about for decades was. I'm standing with five of my friends in Headmaster Crowe's office listening to him rant for the past hour about how our latest prank embarrassed not only him but the trustees and teachers of this "prestigious boarding school" as well.

"Anyone want to fess up?" Crowe asks.

Jack and Sam are freaking out. David, Jason, and Rich are trying to hold back their laughter. I've been called into the headmaster's office more than a few times since I transferred here, so this is nothing new to me.

During finals week at Regents Preparatory Academy in California, seniors pull a prank on juniors. It's tradition. This year, the seniors managed to put blue dye in our showers and removed all the lightbulbs from the common areas of our dorm. It was only

fair that we returned the favor, but on a bigger scale. The seniors had been waiting for us to raid their dorm, and you could tell they were on edge all week. They had lookouts posted at all hours, ready to defend their territory.

My roommate, Jack, came up with the brilliant idea of greasing three baby pigs from his uncle's farm and letting them run loose in the senior dorm. Sam said we should let the pigs run loose during graduation instead. I admit it was my idea to number the pigs . . . 1, 3, and 4. It took six of us to pull it off. The processional music was our cue to set the pigs loose.

I thought we'd gotten away with it, too, until all of us got summoned into Crowe's office an hour ago.

Crowe's assistant, Martha, peeks her head into the office. "Mr. Crowe, number two still hasn't been found."

The headmaster growls in frustration. If Crowe weren't such a dick, I'd tell him to call off the search because there is no pig number 2—that's part of the joke. But he's the kind of guy who doesn't give a shit about the students. All Crowe cares about is making sure everyone knows he's got the power to hand out detentions and fire teachers at his whim. I've seen him abuse that power more than once during the past year.

"I did it," I blurt out, exaggerating my Texas drawl because I know Crowe cringes at the thought of a redneck attending his precious school. More than a few times he's called me out for saying "reckon" and "y'all." I *reckon* I did it just to annoy the guy.

Crowe stands in front of me. "Which of your buddies here helped you?"

“None of ’em, sir. I did it all on my own.”

He shakes his finger at me. “When your father hears about this he will most certainly be disappointed in you, Derek.”

My spine stiffens. My dad, otherwise known as Commander Steven Fitzpatrick, is on another tour of duty. He’s in a submarine for the next six months, completely cut off from the rest of the world.

I briefly wonder how my new stepmother, Brandi, is doing now that my dad is deployed. Our setup is perfect. I live here until I graduate, and my dad’s new wife lives in a rented house near the naval base with her five-year-old kid she had with some ex-boyfriend.

News of my pig stunt isn’t likely to reach my dad. And if Crowe thinks I’ll be disappointing Brandi, that’s a laugh.

Crowe hunches his shoulders and gives me one of his many practiced scowls that make him resemble an ogre on steroids. “You expect me to believe that you *stole* one of our school vans and transported *four* pigs to the graduation ceremony, greased them up, and set them loose all by yourself?”

I glance at my friends and signal for them to keep their mouths shut when I realize that more than a few of them are about to fess up. No reason all of us should get in trouble just because Crowe lacks a sense of humor.

I nod. “I acted alone, sir. But technically I didn’t steal the van. I borrowed it.” There were three pigs and it took all six of us to pull it off, but I’m keeping that info to myself. I wait for him to slap me with detention and order me to wash floors or bathrooms or something humiliating. Whatever. Detention during summer

session will be a piece of cake since less than 20 percent of the school population stays on campus.

“The rest of you gentlemen are dismissed,” Crowe declares. He takes a seat in his big leather chair and picks up his phone as my friends file out. “Martha, call Mrs. Fitzpatrick and inform her that her stepson has been expelled.”

Wait! *What?*

“Expelled?” I practically choke on the word. What about a warning or detention or suspension? “It was a harmless prank.”

He carefully hangs up the phone. “Expelled. Actions have consequences, Mr. Fitzpatrick. Despite numerous warnings about your cheating, drug use, and pranks, you have again disobeyed our rules and proven yourself unworthy to be a student at Regents Preparatory Academy. Obviously this also means you will not be invited to rejoin us for your senior year.”

I don’t move or say anything. This is not happening. I can count a dozen other students who’ve gotten caught pulling pranks and have escaped without so much as a warning. I accidentally left my notes on the floor during a test and Mr. Rappaport wrote me up for cheating. And the drug accusation . . . okay, so I went to a party with a few friends and came home wasted. I didn’t mean to puke on the statue of Regents’ founder after I found out someone slipped XTC into my drink, and I sure as hell wasn’t the one to post pics of me puking on the school website. A certain senior on student council was responsible for that one, although he never got caught because nobody would accuse a guy whose dad donates a crapload of money to the school every year.

“Since you’ve already finished your finals, I’ll be lenient and allow you to receive full credit for your junior year. As a courtesy to your father, I’ll also grant you forty-eight hours to remove your belongings from campus.” He starts writing on a piece of paper, then glances up at me when he realizes I’m not moving. “That will be all, Mr. Fitzpatrick.”

Lenient?

I walk to the junior dorm as the absurdity of my situation sets in. I’m being kicked out of Regents and have to move back home. With my stepmother, who lives in her own, clueless world. This is bullshit.

My roommate, Jack, is sitting on the edge of his bed, shaking his head. “I heard Crowe say you got expelled.”

“Yep.”

“Maybe if we all go back there and tell him the truth, he’ll rethink—”

“If your dad finds out, he’ll make your life a livin’ hell. The other guys’ll be in the same boat.”

“You shouldn’t take the fall for this alone, Derek.”

“Don’t sweat it,” I say. “Crowe had it in for me. This just gave him the excuse he needed to kick me out.”

A half hour later Brandi calls. My stepmother’s heard the news from Crowe and will drive the three hours from San Diego to Regents tomorrow. She doesn’t yell or lecture me or act like she’s my mom. Instead, she says she’d try to convince Crowe to change his mind about expelling me. As if that’s gonna work. I doubt Brandi was a member of her high school debate team. I don’t have

much faith in her persuasion skills. To be honest, I'm not even sure she graduated from high school.

In the morning I'm still figuring out what the hell I'm gonna do when campus security knocks on my door. They have specific orders to escort me to the headmaster's office immediately.

As I walk across the quad with campus security flanking me, I'm all too aware of whispers from students I pass. It's not often someone gets expelled. I walk up the stairs to the front office, where photos of former students who became famous athletes, astronauts, congressmen, and business gurus are proudly displayed on the Wall of Fame. If it were two years ago, I might have imagined my own picture on the wall, but not anymore.

When the door opens to Crowe's office, my eyes focus on the woman sitting in front of his desk. It's Brandi, my dad's wife of eight months. She's fourteen years younger than my dad (which means she's twenty-five, only eight years older than me). Her orange stilettos match her oversize orange earrings dangling down to her shoulders. Her dress looks two sizes too big, which is definitely out of character. Every time I've seen her she's worn tight-fitting, low-cut outfits like she's about to go clubbing. She looks out of place in this office full of mahogany and dark leather.

Brandi glances at me when I walk in, then returns all her attention to Crowe. "So what are our options?" she asks as she fiddles with her earring.

Crowe closes the folder on his desk. "I'm sorry, but I see no options. *Heinous* crimes involving animals are not tolerated at Regents, Mrs. Fitzpatrick. Your son—"

"Stepson," I correct him.

Crowe regards me with disgust. “Your *stepson* has finally crossed the line. First, I’m told he’s quit all extracurricular activities. Next, he’s been rumored to attend parties with alcohol and drugs. That’s in addition to the cheating on tests and defacing school property with vomit. Now this prank with live farm animals. We’ve been patient with Derek and sympathize with the challenges he’s faced in recent years, but that does not excuse delinquent behavior. We have a duty at Regents Preparatory Academy to mold our young students into productive citizens and future leaders who are responsible for their community and environment. Derek obviously no longer wishes to be part of that proud tradition.”

I roll my eyes.

“Can’t you just assign him community service or have him, like, write some kind of apology letter thingie?” Brandi asks, her bracelets clinking as she taps her brightly polished fingernails against her purse.

“I’m afraid not, Mrs. Fitzpatrick. Derek has given me no choice but to expel him.”

“By expelling him you mean, like, he can’t come back for his senior year?” A speck of sunlight shines on her wedding band, a stark reminder that she’s married to my dad.

“That would be correct. My hands are tied,” Crowe tells her, which is a complete lie. He makes the rules and changes them on a moment’s notice to suit his needs. I’m not about to call him out. It won’t change anything, so why bother? “The decision has been made,” Crowe continues. “If you’d like to appeal to the board, most of whom witnessed the debacle yesterday at the graduation ceremony, you’re free to fill out the appropriate paperwork.

Although I warn you the appeals process is lengthy and a positive outcome is unlikely. Now if you'll excuse me, we still haven't located one of the animals that your stepson let loose and I have to do some very extensive damage control."

Brandi opens her lips in a last-ditch effort to persuade him, but closes them with a sigh when, with a flick of his wrist, Crowe motions for us to leave his office.

Brandi follows me back to my dorm, her stilettos clicking on the sidewalk. *Click, click, click, click.* I didn't notice back in the office, but she's definitely gained weight since I last saw her. Doesn't she care that everyone is staring at her and her ridiculous outfit and big blond hair with overly long extensions? Knowing her, she probably doesn't even realize the scene she's causing.

My dad sat me down before he announced they were getting married and said Brandi made him happy. That's the only reason I haven't completely written her off.

"Maybe," Brandi says, her cheery tone carrying across the quad, "this is for the best."

"The best?" I give a short laugh as I stop and turn to her. "What's *the best* about it?"

"I've decided to move back to Chicago to live with my family," she says. "Since your dad's gone for six months, I figure it's the best thing for Julian. He'll be starting kindergarten in the fall, you know." Brandi gives me a big smile.

I think she expects me to jump up and down clapping in excitement at her big relocation news. Or smile right along with her. None of those things are about to happen.

"Brandi, I'm not movin' to Chicago."

“Don’t be silly. You’ll *love* it in Chicago, Derek. They’ve got snow in the winter, and in the fall the leaves are, like, the *coolest* colors—”

“Come *on*,” I say, interrupting her Chicago-is-all-that speech. “No offense, but we’re hardly family. Y’all can move to Chicago. I’ll stay in San Diego.”

“Yeah . . . about that . . .” She bites her bottom lip. “I canceled the lease. Another family is moving into the house next week. I was gonna tell you, but I knew you had finals coming up, and since you’d already planned to stay on campus all summer I, like, didn’t think it was urgent.”

A feeling of dread settles in my stomach. “You’re sayin’ I, *like*, don’t have anywhere to live?”

She smiles once again. “Sure you do. In Chicago, with me and Julian.”

“Brandi, come on. You don’t honestly think I want to move to Chicago for my senior year.” People move from Chicago to California, not the other way around.

“I promise you’ll love Chicago,” she gushes.

No, I won’t. Unfortunately, there’s no one I can stay with in California. My dad’s parents are dead and I heard my mom’s dad died a while back. My mom’s mom . . . well, let’s just say she lives in Texas and leave it at that. No chance in hell I’m living with her. “I don’t have a choice, do I?”

“Not really.” Brandi shrugs. “Your dad left me responsible for you. If you can’t live at the academy, you’ll have to stay with me . . . in Chicago.”

If she mentions the word “Chicago” one more time I think my

head might explode. This is not happening. I hope I'm living in some kind of realistic nightmare and I'll wake up any minute.

"There's one more thing I haven't told you," Brandi says as if she's talking to a toddler.

I rub the back of my neck, where a knot is starting to form. "What?"

She puts her hand over her stomach and says in a high-pitched, excited voice, "I'm pregnant."

No. *Fucking*. Way.

She can't be.

I mean, it's physically possible, but . . . the knot on the back of my neck is throbbing in earnest now, threatening to burst out of my skin. This is definitely a nightmare.

I want her to tell me she's kidding, but she doesn't. It was bad enough my dad married the bimbo. I expected him to realize eventually that marrying her was a mistake, but now . . . a baby permanently seals the deal.

I'm gonna be sick.

"I wanted to keep it a secret until you came home for the Fourth of July," she explains excitedly. "Surprise! Your father and I are expecting a baby, Derek. I think your being expelled is a sign that we're all supposed to be together in *Chicago*. As a *family*."

She's wrong. My being expelled is a sign, all right, but not that we're supposed to be together in *Chicago* . . . it's a sign that my life is about to implode.