
TAKING HIS TIME

Shepherd's Creek, Book Two

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

Prologue

Damien Commenzar was something of an asshole. Geraldine had been aware of this fact about her brother for a long time. Being good-looking and athletic had allowed Damien to get away with a lot when they were kids, and his belief in his own infallibility grew with age. This unerring self-confidence had been Damien's greatest asset before he'd moved away from Shepherd's Creek, and from the way he was talking to her now, it didn't seem that he'd changed all that much in the four years since he'd left.

It was bad enough that she'd lost her father just weeks before, bad enough that his will had revealed he was leaving Damien more than half of what Geri had made their family's gym into, and bad enough that she had no idea how to fight that plan of inheritance.

Did he have to be an asshole too?

"I want what's mine." Damien's deep voice came through the speaker on the desk phone slightly tinny.

Geri tried—and failed—not to wish he sounded like this all the time. A flaw like an annoying voice might have gone a long way toward curbing Damien's massive ego.

"It's not yours, Damien," she said evenly. "The gym was Dad's, and he would have wanted me to have it. How can you not know that?" She made sure she spoke clearly through her fury, trying not to let emotional tears spring to her eyes.

"How can you say that, when he left most of it to me?" Damien demanded.

"Because I'm the one who's been running it!" Geri cried. "Dad's will was years old, and you know he would have changed it after all I've done for Shape. You pissed off to Broderick to be a big shot, but I've been managing things here since before Dad even got sick!"

"Fifty-five percent, little sister," Damien reminded her. The smugness in his voice made her want to throw a punch, preferably at his head.

"You don't just get to demand whatever you want now he's gone!" Her voice was growing thick as her face heated, and she hated it.

"I'm coming home," Damien spat. His voice was full of so much venom that Geri half expected her skin to start sizzling. "Dad knew that. He wanted me to take over, and that's why he left me fifty-five percent of the gym."

"You don't even know how it works anymore," Geri protested. "You haven't been here in years. Why would he want you to have anything to do with it?"

"Because he didn't believe in favourites, Geri. Or have you forgotten that part about our beloved father?"

She could clearly remember their dad's rumbling voice as he'd said those exact words every time someone asked if he was proud of Damien's appearance on some fitness TV show or Damien's featured active wear collection. 'I'm equally proud of my children. I don't believe in favourites.' The memory made her heart hurt, especially now she knew it wasn't true. He'd split ownership of the house the opposite way—fifty-five percent of it went to Geri, and forty-five to Damien—but surely, he would

have known that she didn't care about the value of the property now for sale. She'd lived and breathed Shape since the moment he had become unable to manage it himself, and still, he'd left the control of it in Damien's grasping hands.

"There's nothing for you here," Geri heard herself say. She hated how weak her voice sounded. "Go back to your fame and leave me alone." She instantly knew she had gone too far.

"How *dare* you," Damien's snarl came clearly through the phone. "Shepherd's Creek is my home too, Geraldine. He was *my* dad too. And you don't get to dictate what happens now he's gone."

"Don't you have enough yet?" She could barely keep her tears from her voice. "Can't you be happy with being the one with *everything* and just leave me this?"

The next words that came through the phone made her shake. "You'd better fucking lawyer up. I want what's mine, and I'll see that I get it."

As the tone that indicated the end of the call sounded, Geri put her head down to the desk and smacked her forehead against it several times. In his whole life, she wasn't sure Damien had ever been denied something he decided was his.

But she'd be damned if she was going to let him take what belonged to her.

Chapter 1

The gym smelled like sweat, citrus, and mint. The sweat smell actually wasn't a bad thing, in Nate's opinion—the smell was just part of the old building with its high ceilings, exposed brick walls, and well-frequented equipment. It was a clean smell, a mark of how hard the gym's patrons worked, much better than if the whole place had smelled like industrial cleaner and none of the grip bars on the machines had been marked with the placement of a thousand hands. It was a stark contrast to his workplace, which was borderline sterile, clean, and unmarked by the passage of time or the million contracts that passed across his desk. The gym, his refuge in the cold winter months when running was an issue with the whole asthma thing, was much more comfortable. He didn't have the background worry that he would somehow upset the equilibrium of the place by leaving evidence of his humanity around the way he did in the office.

Nate was a control freak. He knew that. Everyone knew that. It made him particularly good at his job as a lawyer, because he was detail oriented. But it also meant that he left his hyper-organised office exactly the way he found it every morning, not a

coffee mug or a manila folder out of place. The organisation soothed him most of the time, so it had been a surprise the first time he walked into Shape and found that the slightly worn gym was as comfortable as an old pair of jeans.

"Five more reps," Eric grunted from his position at Nate's head, where he was spotting.

"Jesus, five?" Nate gasped, shaking out his burning arms as he set the bench press bar back into its cradle.

Despite the angle, Eric somehow managed to fix him with a blank look that brooked no argument.

"Fine, fucking five," Nate griped. He lifted the bar once more. Training with Eric was not too different from the time he trained for a marathon. It was about endurance, though this was in the form of weights training that made his muscles scream rather than running laps around the township of Shepherd's Creek. He'd started coming to the gym with his brother more out of convenience than anything else—it was good to have a spotter, and Nate's schedule meant he was at the gym at extreme hours more often than not. The lack of people training near midnight meant Eric preferred the same times. What had started as an issue of convenience had quickly become routine, and their text conversations at the moment usually had more talk of PBs and weights versus cardio than anything else. Eric wasn't much of one for talking, but he was always able to grunt out a few words to push Nate beyond what he'd attempt if he were training alone.

Eric was also built like a bull and could smash Nate's lifting records with ease, so his version of training was more like the kind of boot camp Nate didn't have time to attend. For this reason, Nate didn't think Eric had much use for him as a spotter, but his older brother still maintained the pretence that Nate's presence was as useful to him as the reciprocal. It was as close to admitting affection as the two of them regularly came.

Nate lifted the bar from the cradle and forced himself

through another three reps. His arms shook as he shoved the weight away from his chest. "You're killing me."

"If you can talk, you're not pushing hard enough."

He felt his back trying to arch against the bench as he lifted the bar up once more. "Fuck off, man."

"Harder than running in circles, isn't it?" Eric noted with a hint of amusement.

Nate finished his final rep and let his arms fall out to the sides in a crucifix pose. "I won't be able to write tomorrow. I have two big projects in the works and I'll be in a full body cast."

"Move," Eric said, ignoring his gripes as he loaded more weight on to the bar. "I'm up."

"Anyone who's up for kickboxing," a cheerful voice rang out over the workout sounds filling the room, "Class is starting in five minutes. Come on into the studio and we'll get the warmup going."

Nate risked a glance over at the woman speaking as he lurched up off the bench. Geraldine Commenzar, the fiercest woman he'd ever met, despite being one of the tiniest. She ran the gym with an iron fist and, judging from the way she ran kickboxing classes and put her personal training clients through their paces, could have kicked his ass without breaking a sweat.

She was also so hot she should have been illegal. Which was definitely not the reason Nate took her kickboxing classes whenever he got the chance. Sure.

He glanced at Eric. "Might duck into the class. Need some cardio."

His brother quirked an eyebrow upward. "Can't handle the heat?"

"I ran a marathon when you could hardly make it up the hill by the dam," Nate complained. "I can sprint circles around your ass."

"I'll get Arthur to spot me," Eric said, as close as he would come to endorsing Nate's decision. "Head out in a few."

They bumped fists. "I'll see you later, man. Tomorrow night, maybe around ten?"

Nate wasn't much of a kickboxer, partly because he regularly missed the classes Geri ran—he was rarely in the gym during hours anyone would be running a class. He'd heard about the classes from a couple of Geri's clients in the change rooms, bulky guys more of Eric's school of fitness maintenance, and decided to give it a go. A bit of cardio, a bit of strength training; what could go wrong? He'd presumed his fitness level, honed from hours working out his stress on the treadmill, would set him in good stead. It had fallen far short of Geri's sky-high requirements. He'd left the first class just about shaking from exhaustion, his muscles burning. Since then, he went to every class he had time to attend, even if he had to go back to the office afterward. The way the exhaustion silenced the constant repeat of his to-do list in his head was well worth the loss of sleep that came from making up his billable hours into the early mornings.

Geri waited until the room was almost full to start the warmup. Nate tried not to focus on the way her Lycra clothing hugged her small body. The little trainer was hot as hell—anyone would have recognised that. But he was here to keep his stress levels down, not go on the trawl for diminutive, beautiful women. Since Jared and Rex, the other two Castlereagh brothers, had settled down with their respective women—Jared, some years ago with his wife Ivy, and Rex, a year past with his girlfriend Alannah—there had been a subtle but noticeable push for Eric and Nate to find partners of their own. But who had time for that when they were working their way up the chain to partner? Nate had been at his firm for almost five years, and his impeccable work had pushed him up the ladder faster than most junior lawyers, but he still had a long way to go before he could have the kind of time needed to commit to any kind of relationship. Not that he was necessarily sure he wanted one, to be honest. Seeing Jared and Rex settle down was great, but his life didn't have space to

revolve around another person, especially not if it came with the kind of drama that had preceded Rex and Alannah finally coming to terms with their feelings for each other. Although since they'd come back to Shepherd's Creek, Nate would reluctantly admit he almost envied the way they were so effortlessly at home in their relationship.

"Get those knees up, Susie!" Geri chirped from the front of the room. She hadn't even broken a sweat, Nate noted as he swiped his forearm over his forehead. Was it hot in the room, or was it just him?

Geri turned to address the entire class. "We're not going to push too hard today, because I know a few of you are injured. Let's grab the pads and get started."

They paired up, and Nate positioned to absorb the blows of his partner. He glanced at the clock—forty-five minutes to go until he'd have to head back into work to finish up the tasks he'd abandoned for the gym tonight. He squared up more firmly—he needed this workout, needed to be shaking from exhaustion by the time he got back to the office so he could actually concentrate on the million and one tasks waiting for his attention. His muscles were already shaking from his workout with Eric, but it felt like Kyle was hitting harder than usual, knocking him back a step each time. Nate shook out his arms and repositioned to take the blows.

Kyle paused in his movements. "Are you all right, man? You look a little shaky."

"I'm good," Nate assured him, but he felt his breath catching in his throat, the hallmark of an asthma attack preparing to roll over him. "Just give me a sec." He jogged over to grab his inhaler and breathed deeply. The sense of constriction didn't immediately abate, but that was the case sometimes. He'd give it a minute.

"What's going on, Nate?" Geri's voice came from behind him.

He turned to face her and tried to fix a comforting smile on his face. "Just my lungs having a tantrum."

"Take a breather," she instructed him. "I'll take over with Kyle."

"Don't let him flatten you," Nate croaked out and took another drag on his inhaler. The tightening of his throat was getting worse, he realised as he leaned back on the wall. Maybe the inhaler was empty? He shook it, but the cartridge sounded full. The room started to spin, and he sank down the wall. He tried to take a gulp of water from his bottle, but it stuck in his throat. He coughed, and the sound hardly left his mouth. Suddenly, Geri and Kyle were there, and the other people in the room were crowding close, and he couldn't breathe, he couldn't fucking breathe.

He was barely aware of Geri's voice as she pushed his head between his knees. "Just breathe, Nate," she was chanting. "Just slow down, just breathe with me." She pressed herself against his arm so he could feel the cadence of her breaths, and he tried to force air in and out of his lungs, rocking back and forward slightly with the effort. Kyle crouched down in front of him and yelled something about an ambulance. He was careless of the sweat that dripped off on to Nate and Geri, and something in Nate wanted to protest that Kyle was getting her dirty, but he just grabbed for Geri's hand and felt her squeezing his in time to her breathing. The pressure of her fingers cut through the fog of panic in his head, and Nate found himself clinging to her until the room slowly stopped spinning.

"Just breathe, Nate," Geri said, and the warmth of her at his side took up every part of his focus, his lungs fighting to work in time with hers. "Nate, please. Just breathe."

GERI HAD ONLY BEEN in an ambulance twice before, and it

had never been a good thing. The first time had been when Ira started having her seizures, before they had a real diagnosis. The other was with her father, and look how that had turned out. It always ended with the doctors, who never had good news, and a trip home that consisted of a relative in pain and Geri herself fighting to hold back hysterical tears that she could only let out in the privacy of the shower, hours later.

Being in an ambulance with Nate Castlereagh was no different. The silence was heavy, weighing on her shoulders. She didn't know the man well—he was a regular at the gym, so she saw him a few nights a week if she was working until close, and she'd ogled his butt a time or seventeen when he was using the squat bar. Other than a few heated daydreams centring around him asking for her personal training services and taking their sessions in another direction entirely, she hadn't had much to do with him.

Not the case now, though. She could feel herself constantly clenching her hands into fists and relaxing them, as she always did when she was stressed. Nate was sitting up, and he'd discarded the oxygen mask they'd tried to put on him. His face was still pale, though that did nothing to detract from his good looks. Yeah, Geri might have had a little bit of a crush on the man. But that definitely wasn't the reason she'd decided to ride along to personally ensure his health. That was just so she knew she hadn't hurt him as his kickboxing instructor. Right.

"This is totally unnecessary," Nate said. "I'm fine now."

"I'll feel better when you get checked out," Geri said slowly. "That didn't look like an asthma attack to me. It wasn't responding to your inhaler."

"Sometimes that happens," Nate protested.

"I'd just like you to get checked out, please. I don't want a lawsuit filed against my gym *by a lawyer*."

The small hospital that served Shepherd's Creek was almost empty, and a doctor saw them quickly. Geri wondered if she

should leave, but no one suggested it, even when they were taking Nate's blood. Frankly, she'd feel better when she knew she hadn't had a hand in almost causing Nate Castlereagh to wheeze himself to death, so she stayed.

They sat in a pair of uncomfortable chairs at right angles to the doctor's workstation in the examination room. The woman had glossy dark hair cut in a bob and slim hands that she folded on the desk as she spoke to them. Despite the pallor of Nate's face that contrasted with the bright spots of colour on his cheekbones, Geri could see the doctor looking him over with blatant appreciation. She was suddenly aware of her sweaty workout gear and ran a hand over her frizzing hair in an attempt to smooth it into some sort of order.

"I have good news and bad news," the doctor said bluntly. "The good news is you didn't have a heart attack."

"Jesus," Nate said. "That's the good news?"

"The bad news," the doctor continued, "is that it also doesn't sound like asthma. I think you might have had a panic attack."

"What?" Nate and Geri said together.

"Was kickboxing stressing you out that much?" Geri heard herself continue. She snapped her mouth shut and bit her lip. *Too much, Commenzar. Cool it down.*

"I did not have a panic attack," Nate said in a tone that brooked no argument. "It is ridiculous to suggest that I might have had a panic attack. Sometimes my asthma just doesn't respond to the inhaler."

"That's the thing," the doctor said. "It could be that stress induces your asthma, or it might be that you've been having some lower-grade panic attacks for a while. Is there anything that's been triggering stress for you lately?"

"I'm a lawyer," Nate bit out. "Of course, I'm stressed. I have a stressful job."

"There you go, then," the doctor said, sounding highly impressed with herself.

"I was working out. I had an asthma attack. Exercise is a trigger for asthma!"

Geri laid a hand on his arm. "Nate."

She could almost feel him rein in his frustration. "Can I just have a new prescription for my inhaler, please? If I'm going to keep having these, I need to be prepared."

The doctor cycled them out of the room fairly quickly after scribbling Nate a prescription, though Geri wondered if she might have tried to slip him her number. She certainly held the handshake longer than was strictly necessary, much longer than she held Geri's own hand.

"What do we do now?" she asked Nate once the door closed behind them.

"I go back to work," Nate said, apparently entirely serious. "I have things to do."

"You've got to be kidding me," Geri said. "Nate, you just collapsed from a panic attack. The last thing you need to do is go back to your stressful job."

He wrapped a hand around her arm and guided her to the side of the waiting room, out of the way of the other two people who had arrived since they'd disappeared with the doctor. The man in the corner was holding a heavily bloodstained tea towel to his hand but appeared to be listening intently, despite his obvious injury.

"Geri," Nate said seriously, "I'm in the middle of two big projects. I don't have time to worry about this kind of thing."

"And if you don't?" Geri asked. "What happens if you don't worry about it, and it gets worse?"

"It's not going to get worse. It was just an asthma attack."

"I think we both know that's not all it was," Geri insisted. "Stress is a trigger. You're in the middle of two big projects. You can't ignore the fact that anxiety could have played a big part in this, or it's only going to balloon. And how much use will you be

at work if you can't sit still for ten minutes without wheezing into a paper bag?"

Nate's stony expression lasted a few beats more before his eyebrows dropped down and he bit down on his lower lip. Geri tried not to let her eyes linger there for too long.

"I can't do anything about anxiety, Geri," Nate continued. "Stress is just part of my job. There's no cure for panic attacks, and if I'm having them, then it'll compromise my ability to work, just like you said. I can't think about it right now."

"There is a cure for anxiety, though," Geri said. "I do it at the gym all the time. I have a degree in counselling, you know."

Nate paused. "What?"

"I run all the meditation classes. We have relaxation tanks upstairs. They're specifically designed for people with anxiety."

"I don't have time to float in a tank full of other people's piss, Geri," Nate snapped.

Geri felt her hackles rising. "You need to nip this stress in the bud is what you need. Don't think I haven't seen you coming into the gym at all hours of the night looking more wired than the Energiser bunny. You work out to get rid of your stress. I'm just saying I can help you find better ways to do that."

Nate paused for a beat. "And just say I decide to do it," he said slowly. "How am I supposed to fit that into my schedule?"

"You take time to work out. I'm sure you can take time to care for the mental part of your health too, if you prioritise it." At the tight look on his face, she relented. "Someone's at the gym from five in the morning until midnight. Sometimes it's me. I could definitely find time to help you with this, Nate."

"And what's in it for you?" His brows twitched. "Sorry. That's the lawyer in me."

"It's *okay*. There is something you could help me with, actually."

"Hit me with it."

Geri heaved in a breath. "I haven't told anyone about this, so you can't spread it around."

"Call it client privilege. We'll say I'm exchanging your services for mine." He hesitated. "Informally, of course. I can't provide legal advice outside of the firm."

Her mind blanked through the second part of what he was saying as her brain zeroed in on the idea of exchanging some very specific services with Nate Castlereagh. "Um, what?" she said after a moment.

"Just tell me, Geri."

"Do you remember my brother Damien?"

"He does TV shows now, doesn't he? Followed in your dad's footsteps?" His face softened. "I'm sorry for your loss, by the way."

Geri tried to fix an appropriately appreciative smile on her face. "Yeah, that's him." She made herself take a deep breath. "My dad didn't think to update his will since before he got sick, and it left fifty-five percent of the gym to Damien, so now we're co-owners. I said I'd buy him out with the proceeds of the sale of Dad's house, but he won't accept it. He's trying to sideline me and turn it into just another piece of the Damien Commenzar brand. And he doesn't even care about all the changes I've made, the ways I've made it so much more than a workout space. He just wants to add to his empire."

"And you need a lawyer?" Nate asked.

"Ideally."

"I work with contracts, Geri. I don't think I've ever worked a deceased estate."

"But you do know the law. You could help me."

"You should get a solicitor," Nate said, not unkindly. "Someone who can actually manage a case like this."

"I just want you to take a look at it," Geri protested. "So I know if I should find a solicitor. So I know if I can fight him."

Nate fixed her with his cool blue gaze, and Geri tried not to pant at the intensity. "I can't promise you anything."

"I don't need promises," Geri said immediately. "I just don't want to drop four grand on a down payment for no reason."

"And in return, you think you can help me with this..." he paused, "...anxiety thing?"

"I can definitely try." She laid her hand over his where it rested on the wall. "Please, Nate. I think I can help you, and I could really use your help too."

Her eyes fixed on the muscles of his jaw working as he mulled it over. Eventually, his mouth relaxed. "Fine. I'll need a few days' notice if I'm going to take time off in the middle of the day."

"Were you not listening? I just said I'm at the gym at all hours. I can work around you." Geri heard herself make the offer and wondered dimly what she was doing. *It's so I can keep the gym. This is for a good cause.*

"I could do tomorrow morning."

"So soon?" Geri squeaked. "It's almost midnight."

"No time like the present," Nate said. "And you can bring me any documents you have about your father's estate at the same time."

"All right," she said slowly. "What time can you do?"

"You said you're there from five? Let's make it five-thirty." He stepped away from their position in the corner. Dimly, Geri registered that the man with the bleeding hand had been taken in for treatment. "Do you want to share a cab back to the gym?"

"You move fast, Castlereagh," Geri muttered.

"Gotta keep up, short stuff," Nate said, and—*oh, god*—actually winked at her. Geri wondered if she might faint.

"Don't you need sleep?" she protested. "Maybe you'd be less anxious if you ever managed a few hours of shut-eye."

"No more than a gym owner who works from five until midnight." He pulled out his phone and dialled. "Come on, Geri. It's just a taxi. And I'll see you in the morning."